



Blue Horizon
Book One

BLUE HORIZON, BOOK ONE

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Written with the assistance of
Eileen Blasingame and Steve Carter

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Dedication

This book – and the series – is dedicated to all of my Readers over the years. I have appreciated the kind remarks and reviews on this body of work and many of the friendships I have made along the way. These stories were written primarily for myself, but I'm glad to have had you along for the ride.

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Introduction

"Say, I could write a story..."

Be careful what you suppose, because it can sometimes take on a life of its own. Such is the case with the furry space opera, *Blue Horizon*.

Blue Horizon is the story of an interstellar freighter with an anthropomorphic crew, and while life on a cargo carrier is generally supposed to be quiet, it isn't always so for this particular vessel and its crew.

It started off simply enough. Steve Carter and I had been instrumental in helping Mark Barnard produce the first two issues of *Midnight Sonata*, but due to Mark's increased workload in the commercial comics industry, the publication was discontinued to allow him time to work on his more important projects. As *Midnight Sonata* had been my first foray into Furry Fandom, I sorely missed the opportunity to write anthropomorphic stories.

In 1996, Eileen and I decided to start working on our own stories and cast of characters, just for the fun of it. She began sketching drawings of the characters we created and I started off with the first of two stories. We had no intention of making the project into a publication -- it was meant merely for our own enjoyment. We often discussed our tales and the characters over dinner or while out driving around, and before we knew it, the crew of the interstellar freighter *Blue Horizon* began to come to life on their own.

We pitched some of the stories to Steve as a friend and he was immediately taken with the ideas and characters we had been using. His involvement took off and he even took the liberty of writing the next two stories, allowing our first real "fan" to step in and show his appreciation. Steve and I had worked together before and it felt natural to show him what we had done thus far.

In 1998, Eileen and I were married, and after much insistence from both Eileen and Steve, we put together a *Blue Horizon* website on Geocities, a free Internet community later that year. I was hesitant and actually resistant to going public with our project, having had prior experience running an *ElfQuest* fandom chapter for six years, but I agreed to give it a try.

In November 1999, the site was moved to Blasingame.net after Yahoo and Geocities merged and intrusive advertising banners set in, but it wasn't advertised to furry fandom in general until January of the following year. Tigress.Com and FurNation.Com allowed us to set up a "doorway" on each of their servers to allow folks to find us when they might not be able to otherwise, and then in 2001, everything was transferred to a new domain that I set up specifically for our online projects, FurStuff.Com. However, I soon realized that not all of my projects are "furry" related, so I adopted a new domain, Dennier.Com, which is broader in its content. FurStuff.Com was dropped and the domain name is no longer owned by me.

Over time, we had a regular readership that kept expanding by leaps and bounds, and the nice comments we'd gotten in email and on our message board helped to encourage us to continue at times when things got slow. For those who have joined our adventures for the first time, we welcome you aboard our ship, the *SS Blue Horizon*.

– Ted R. Blasingame
1998

P.S.

This book of tales represents the first of four volumes containing the adventures of the *Blue Horizon* that were written from 1996 through 2009. The series never actually had a formal

end, but when I moved on to other projects, my imagination took different avenues. Dennier.Com eventually came to an end of its own and all my stories were moved to a free webhosting archive. *Blue Horizon* was one of the most satisfying projects I've ever been involved in and although friends met through the endeavor have come and gone, there are those who still remain. Through the years as I've read back through these adventures, I've often seen errors I would like to correct and some things that I would like to change, but then during a lull in which my Muse had taken a vacation on current projects, I decided to go back through the *Blue Horizon* series and make the revisions I've had in mind. This book now reflects those corrections, changes and additions, and this revised edition supersedes all previous versions.

– *Ted R. Blasingame*
2014

BLUE HORIZON
Book One

DRUG RUNNING

By Ted R. Blasingame

SS Blue Horizon PA1261

Captain's Journal

Happy Anniversary. According to my calendar, it has been six years to the day since my business partner and I began this endeavor. My crew and I have had many ups and downs over the years, with slow days and times of adventure, joy and heartache, and although there are things I sometimes wish I could do over to change the outcome, time moves on and we are the result of our experiences. Happy Anniversary...

I took on a new crewmember today during a supply delivery to New Gate on Kantus. Renny Thornton is one of the most athletic-looking guys I have ever met and I would be hard pressed to guess his speed in a full-out run. Since the death of my navigator copilot during a pirate raid on my vessel a few weeks ago, I have been shorthanded. All members of my crew must be able to navigate and fly the Blue Horizon, but no one is as skilled as Jiro Brannon was. I miss his friendship and counsel terribly.

Mr. Thornton responded to my local advertisement for a navigator the same day it hit the markets of New Gate, and brought with him some impressive credentials. As my ship was being stocked with cargo for delivery for our next customer, I talked with Renny at Sheward's Rest, a local café I like here. He has a gentle personality, but it is easy to see the power of his coiled muscles at his disposal should the need for aggression arise. I was quite taken with his photographic memory of star charts and territorial boundaries that I decided I need look no further to fill the vacancy, so I have contracted him to my crew. He has gone back into New Gate to retrieve his belongings before our departure time.

True to my first officer's skill as liaison to our customer, Taro has managed to secure a full cargo of pharmaceuticals for delivery to the capitol city of Alucara on Alexandrius for Ryu Industries. However, if I know my supply officer correctly, Samantha has likely already started fixing the books to retain a morsel of our cargo for later trade. I don't condone the under-table dealings she is known to our crew for, especially knowing her family background, but she always seems to work magic when we need something that cannot be obtained through regular channels. I do reprimand her on the rare occasions she is caught, but tend to ignore her activities for the most part. It gives me a greater peace of mind if I don't know all her plans.

Like Jiro, Samantha has been with me from the beginning, although she had to leave us for a while following her first year as a charter member of the crew. The details of that situation and departure will remain unwritten in this log with consideration to her family ties, but I am thankful that she was later able to return to us. Despite some of her questionable activities, she's been a great asset to my business, as well as one of my closest friends.

Durant is happy now that he has cargo in the hold to put in order and catalog for the flight. His attentiveness to numbers and detail often puts the load master at odds with Samantha's meddling, but the two always seem to find ways to deal with it. Durant is a likable fellow when he is not bored or messed with.

Sparky has not yet returned from leave. As usual, she's always the last to get back and she never seems to be around for mandatory cargo detail. Her usual excuses center on her need to replenish the food stores, but the dishes she concocts for our varied tastes have often diffused anyone's objections to her absence while we are moving cargo.

Patch is complaining again about the condition of the parts in the engine room. Samantha has already supplied him with the best items she can get her hands on, so he should be happy, but nothing ever pleases that guy, I suppose. Except for complaining. I think he actually enjoys it. She even bought him a new box of fine cigars imported from Earth to help ease his mood, but sometimes even that does not placate him.

On the other hand, Pockets is thrilled with a new set of energy transducers that has found its way into our engine room. I have yet to see a purchase document cross my desk, so I suspect the little filch got them from the manufacturer's warehouse last night; I would bet that Samantha had a hand in that deal. He is currently down somewhere in the bowels of the engine, happily installing them with his moody brother. I have never seen siblings so consistently opposite in personality as the Porter brothers.

There has been no word on the whereabouts of the Savannah Hunter. Armando Jensen seems to have been keeping low these days since I blew the whistle on a potentially dangerous transaction with the black market of Nalirra he had in progress. It had the potential to eliminate clearances for all commercial transports through the area; that is a major route and more cargo carriers besides us use that way to move their goods. Armando and I have never had much love for one another, but I am sure this has done wonders for his opinion of me. I don't think he knows it was me, but with his resources, I cannot be too sure. After we have delivered our pharmaceuticals to Alexandrius, we will be swinging over to Earth to have the Blue Horizon fitted up with a stronger defense system. Pirates are getting to be more of a concern these days. Even Armando's Sakura-class freighter has had to outrun raiding ships. For the sake of his business and crew, it was a good thing he had the engines of the Savannah Hunter upgraded last year.

Merlin Sinclair, Captain

Although he might bear a name derived from human kind, Merlin bore only a scant resemblance to that race. When he stood upright, it was on bipedal legs with plantigrade feet. He had two arms ending in hand-like paws with short fingers and opposable thumbs, and he possessed sentient intelligence, but beyond this design, Merlin's engineered race was primarily *lupine* in origin. The wolf's fur was predominantly gray with a subtle blend of brown and black, but his muzzle, throat, belly and the underside of his arms were white. His bushy gray tail ended in a white tip and his eyes were framed by a mask of gray with a nebulous band of white between them.

He was three hundred years removed from genetic manipulations by Terran scientists, when humankind from Earth first spread out among the stars and needed hardy settlers to tame the habitable planets they discovered. The DNA of the first to become *Furs* was tweaked to give humans a number of attributes originally associated with native Terran animals as a step-up enhancement to make them hardier when settling the new and alien landscapes of other habitable worlds. They succeeded for the most part, but some of the distance colonies failed and others were forgotten until later generations rediscovered their altered brothers and sisters.

At this day and age, however, there seemed to be few adventures for the varied and united populations to experience beyond the mundane, especially since many of the colonies had adopted familiar cultures, traditions and architectures of what they had known on Mother Earth. Despite that each had progressed on their own paths since leaving the home planet, there

were still so many similarities across the united worlds that things remained familiar from place to place. Merlin Sinclair, however, had long since discovered that while life on board an interstellar freighter shipping freight across the galaxy *should* be mundane, it was rarely so.

The wolf capped his pen and set his journal on the office desk in front of him. Its cover was made of dyed Terran cowhide and was worn from excessive handling. Keeping a journal of his travels was a common tradition long held by ships' captains of all the worlds he had ever visited, whether they commanded ships that sailed the seas or the void between the stars, but instead of recording everything onto a personal slateboard datapak tablet, he preferred using pen and ink on a physical book. He was proud to uphold the custom, whether or not he planned to show his entries to anyone. He had long intended to transcribe them into electron form for safer keeping, but despite the free time he usually had during the voyages between worlds, he had never taken the time to do it. For the time being, Merlin continued to put ink to paper just as it had been done in the days of the earliest explorers.

He set the journal aside and readjusted his tail through the slotted opening in the back of his chair. He was dressed in a pale blue shirt with short sleeves and a pair of dark gray trousers with a single gold stripe down the outside seams of the legs. All the fabric was lightweight and airy, serving to be more decorative than functional over his natural fur. He often preferred to go barefoot, but while on board a ship out in space where the environment always seemed cold no matter the heating system, he donned black jackboots designed to fit his feet. The boots were currently on the floor beneath his desk so he could curl his toes in the soft carpeting. Beside him on the tiny desktop of his quarters was his one true vice: a steaming cup of coffee. He picked it up just as his first officer walked in through the open door of the office he called his den.

"Yes?" he asked; there was a distinctive *thrum* within the timbre of his low-pitched voice. He lapped up a bit of his coffee and fixed his golden eyes on the red fox's slateboard.

Taro Nichols absently smoothed down the wrinkles of her lavender blouse before she glanced through the information on the handheld data device in her hands. After a brief moment, she looked down at the seated wolf. "Durant says our cargo is secure and the bay doors are sealed," she said in smooth tones. "Samantha has replenished our air supply and the ship will be pressurized for the voyage as soon as everyone is on board and all systems are ready."

Merlin nodded and took another lap from his cup. "What else?"

"Pockets said the new transducers are online and have tested out satisfactorily. However, Patch doesn't trust them; he said he would keep an eye on them during takeoff. He mumbled something about the part not matching up right during installation and having to modify it."

She looked back to her notes again and then glanced quickly into the corridor behind her. "I probably should have mentioned this first, but there's a cheetah at the main hatch asking to see you," she added when she looked back at him. "You know I don't like to let strangers on board as we're preparing to leave, but he claims he's a new employee."

"Renny Thornton," Merlin said as he set his cup down so he could put on his boots. "I hired him this afternoon to fill Jiro's vacancy." He stood up, snared a blue and white naval captain's hat from a wall peg, and placed it on his head between his ears. It was a human-made item that he fancied, being captain of his own ship.

"But, Jiro..." Taro caught herself before saying more.

"I know, Taro, I know, Jiro hasn't been gone long. He was my best friend, but I need a good navigator. I can't just wait until we reach Alexandrius in three weeks to fill the position." Merlin gently put an arm up across her shoulders and then led her out of the room. "Mr.

Thornton has the qualifications for the job and he's also a nice guy." He smiled and added, "Would you show him to his cabin to stow his belongings? He can settle in after we've taken off."

"Sure, Captain. Where should I quarter him?"

"Put him in Jiro's room."

Taro stopped and swallowed as she looked down at her sandaled feet. She flicked a piece of imaginary dust from her tan pants and then glanced up again. She resumed walking and held the slateboard to her chest. "I see. Okay, I'll bring him up."

"Are you okay with this?" Merlin asked.

Taro gave him a weak smile and nodded her head. "I still have a hard time believing Jiro's gone, that's all. I'll be all right."

The wolf nodded and gave her a gentle hug. "How soon can we be off?" he asked.

Taro looked quickly at her slateboard before answering to give herself a brief moment to recompose her emotions. "I can file a departure window with Port Control as soon as Sparky returns."

The lupine captain looked thoughtful and adjusted his hat as he moved toward the control room. "Assemble everyone in the galley when she gets back. I want to introduce everyone to our new navigator before we leave."

"Aye, sir."

Merlin stopped at a blue door painted with the image of a golden ship's wheel and watched the vixen walk away. Jiro had been liked by the crew, even the eternally grumpy Patch, but Taro had taken his death the hardest. It was no secret that the two of them had been lovers, but the captain always made it a practice not to pay attention if crewmembers wanted to get together as long as it did not interfere with ship's operations. No one had seen Jiro die, but Taro had been the first to find him just before the pirate raiders had finally been driven from the ship.

Merlin shook his head sadly and turned away. They all had to let Jiro go, and that included himself. He had known Jiro the longest, and the two of them had started the business together. It was hard to believe he was gone and there were moments when he would turn to say something to his friend, only to remember he would never be there again.

He walked into the bridge control center and switched on the lights of the small semicircular room. Three stations lined the forward curved wall: navigation, communications and engineering. Each bore a set of instrument panels that arced in a generous semicircle around a plush swivel seat. Another station resided in the center of the room for the pilot, located directly behind the Com terminal. The captain did not necessarily have his own seat, except that Merlin *was* the primary pilot. Whoever flew the ship at the time occupied that spot.

Three large window panels covered the curved forward wall and all had near-invisible circuitry built within to bring up video displays whenever needed. The back wall of the small bridge contained stations for environmental control, the library computer and the sensors, and the remaining walls were lined with more instrumentation. The entrance to the bridge was at the starboard aft corner of the room, and the door to the Head was in the port-side aft corner. During a routine flight, there were rarely more than three people on the bridge and never less than one at all times.

Merlin stepped over to the center seat and leaned over the panel without sitting down. He keyed in a few commands and the left viewing screen came to life to show the interior of the cargo hold. He smiled when he saw Durant scribbling information onto a slateboard with a

claw tip as he stood beside a tethered pallet of plastic crates. If all went well, this shipment should finance much-needed upgrades to some of the systems on aboard.

Taro led a lean cheetah dressed in black slacks and a tan shirt with a large duffel over one shoulder through the narrow passageways of the ship. She paused near a door that bore a plate with her name inscribed onto it, but went on to the next. Her companion glanced at the name on the door they stopped at and asked, "Jiro Brannon?"

Taro pushed the door open and turned on the light for him. "He was... a friend," she said with a sigh. "I will have a new name plate made up for you; this is your room now, Mr. Thornton. Jiro is no longer with us."

"Please call me Renny," he requested. "I respond to it more readily." He smiled and tilted his head slightly to the side. The cabin was tiny, consisting of nothing more than room for a bed in front of a built-in bookcase, a desk and chair, closet and a personal lavatory with an all-species squat toilet.

The fox returned his smile with an effort and shook the cobwebs from her thoughts with a twitch of an ear. She gave him a second, more detailed look and decided that he was fairly handsome. "I'm Taro Nichols," she said. "Everyone pretty much goes on a first name basis here, so you can call me Taro." She led him into the room past a pair of potted trees with wide leaves, and her earlier show of melancholy was gone when she added, "Except for Leo Durant. Never, *ever* call him by his first name. To him, you address him as *Durant*."

"I'll remember that. Was he the raccoon with the cigar?" Renny asked as he ran a hand through the fur on top of his head.

Taro chuckled. "No, that was Patch. *He's* grumpy all of the time, but you will get used to him. Durant is a grizzly bear, our load master and ship's accountant."

Renny set his duffel on the bed and leaned against the small desk beside it. "May I ask you something about the captain?"

"What is it?" the fox answered suspiciously.

"When I met with him this afternoon, he seemed like an easy guy to talk to, but that was during a job interview. What's he like to work for?"

Taro gave him a smile, feeling more at ease. "You have nothing to worry about, Renny. Merlin is one of the most easygoing bosses you will ever meet. He's pretty informal about ship's operations, but this *is* a business so the end result of every delivery is making money. When he has to make an important decision, he will make it. He has an open-door policy and you can discuss anything with him, but his word is final. He *is* our boss and he expects his commands to be obeyed, so don't ever challenge his authority; he considers himself to be the alpha wolf of his crew." She turned toward the door and stepped out into the hall. "He spent five years in the Dennier military and knows what strict discipline is, but wants his own ship to be as comfortable and informal as it can be and still function."

The ship's intercom chirped and Taro walked a few steps down the corridor to a panel set into the wall. She tapped a button and said, "This is Taro."

"Taro?" said a small, squeaky voice. "*Samantha* said you wanted to talk to me."

The fox looked over at the cheetah as he stopped next to her. "I just needed to know when you returned, Sparky," she answered into the panel. "Merlin's calling a meeting of all personnel in the galley before we launch."

"*When?*"

“Now that you are back, as soon as everyone can assemble.”

“Can you spare fifteen minutes for me to put away the food stores I brought back with me?” the lynx asked.

“Okay. It’ll take that long for everyone to assemble anyway.” Taro clicked the same button again to break the connection and then tapped another one next to it for ship-wide broadcast. “Attention, all hands,” she announced. “Gather for a crew meeting in the galley in twenty minutes. Find a stopping point in whatever you’re doing. Merlin wants to see us all together before we launch.”

The fox shut off the system and then turned to her companion. “You can settle into your quarters later, Renny. The boss wants to show you off to everyone.”

Merlin looked up from a box of books at the announcement and frowned. He had not thought Sparky would have returned so quickly and had started to unpack an armload of new mystery novels. The long distances between the various star systems in the Planetary Alignment often provided for boring periods that he frequently spent immersed in stories of suspense. He had picked up several new books in a series by his favorite author in New Gate just after his meeting with Renny. Like his journal, he preferred the physical feel of a printed book over the more common electron books he could have loaded onto his slateboard.

He set the books he held back into the box and turned toward the closet. He wriggled out of his blue shirt and tossed it into a recessed wall hamper. From the closet, he withdrew a beige pullover sweater and shrugged into it. Its loose-weave fabric fit loosely as he liked it, and he straightened the kinks out of the sleeves. He smoothed down the fur on his head and then plucked his captain’s hat from a wall peg as he scooped up a slateboard before heading out of the room toward the galley.

Renny felt a lump in his throat as he watched the various crewmembers gathering into the small galley. It was the only place large enough to assemble all eight of the ship’s personnel where seats were provided. The recreation deck was of ample size, but it would take too much time to clean up the long unused area just for a meeting. The hold was currently loaded with cargo and the bridge was hardly large enough to accommodate everyone. A long countertop spread across the majority of one side of the room with the kitchen behind it.

On the wall opposite the door to the room was a clear window that faced aft of the ship. The current view overlooked the dockyard of a huge warehouse and beyond to the edge of the New Gate community. The glass polarization was presently shut down to allow the noon sun to pleasantly warm the room and provide light for several pots of ivy hanging from the ceiling. The wall opposite the kitchen displayed a large painted mural that depicted the *Blue Horizon* in flight against the backdrop of an indeterminate blue and green planet. A signature in the bottom right corner identified the artist as Jiro Brannon.

The cheetah sat to the left of Merlin at the end of the room’s single long table. Taro sat on the captain’s right, chatting idly with a female Border collie he had not yet met. Across the table from him was a short female lynx. She wore an apron with the cartoon face of a smiling kitty saying “yum”. He deduced this was Sparky, the one who had spoken to Taro over the intercom

concerning the food supplies. She slowly enjoyed a cup of mint tea and studied him with interested green eyes.

Seated next to the lynx had to be the one Taro called Durant. The grizzled bear was larger and taller than anyone else on board and was talking pleasantly to a diminutive raccoon seated next to him. The coon's green coveralls had pockets sewn onto practically all available spaces on the front and sides, and it appeared there was something in each of them.

Everyone looked up when another raccoon entered the room and plunked himself down at the last empty chair beside the collie. He chewed on an unlit cigar and looked rather inconvenienced. He wiped his hands on his patched and greasy coveralls and then nodded to the wolf. All eyes went to Merlin when he cleared his throat and then unconsciously adjusted his hat.

"Okay, crew, you know we've been short-handed for a while, so I want to introduce you all to our new navigator and copilot," he said. "This is Renny Thornton."

Renny smiled nervously and gave a nod of his head. "Hello," he said.

Merlin looked at the newcomer and put a hand on his own chest. "Just to make it official, I'll start the introductions with myself. I am Merlin Sinclair, the owner and captain of the *Blue Horizon*. This vixen next to me is Taro Nichols. She is my second-in-command, communications officer, and our liaison between customers. Next to her is Samantha Holden, our supply officer and computer whiz." Sam smiled widely and waved her fingers at the cheetah. "If there's anything you need, she can get it for you."

The lynx reached across the table and touched Renny lightly on the arm. "Whether it is legal or not..." she chuckled.

"Hush!" Merlin scolded. "Renny, meet Ivy Sparks."

"Sparky," corrected the lynx.

"She's our Environmental specialist and ship's chef. If she has the ingredients, she can prepare practically any dish for you."

"Practically?" Sparky looked up at the captain with twitching whiskers.

Taro laughed and said, "Well, there *was* that fire you caused last year trying to fix that wonder meal you'd kept bragging to everyone you could make!" Chuckles echoed around the room and Sparky shrugged her shoulders.

"Okay, *practically* any dish..." Sparky conceded with a smile.

Merlin gestured to the raccoon seated next to Samantha. "The guy with the cigar is Jasper Porter. He's our chief engineer and mechanic, and as you can tell from the repairs to the work clothes no one can convince him to throw away, we call him Patch." Chuckles started up again and the raccoon merely snorted with a nod toward the cheetah. At first glance, Patch looked put out, but Renny noticed the hint of a smile behind the cigar.

"Across the table from Patch is his brother, Jerad Porter," Merlin said next.

"I'm Pockets!" the raccoon exclaimed cheerily in a distinct country accent. This started another round of chuckles, which included the coon's own giggles.

"He thinks he's a mechanical wizard and is rather enthusiastic about life in general," Merlin added with a grin. "Then we have our imposing load master and business accountant, Durant."

"Imposing?" Durant repeated in a gentle voice. "C'mon, boss, I'm not even as grumpy as Patch." The raccoon looked sideways at the bear, but otherwise didn't comment.

Merlin grinned and said, "Stand up, Durant."

The grizzly got to his feet and Renny noted that the bear's small ears were shy an inch from brushing the ceiling. Sparky touched the cheetah's arm again and pointed to Durant with

her other hand. "Now *that's* imposing to short critters like me and Pockets!" she laughed in a small, squeaky voice.

"Patch, too," Pockets added.

Durant sat down and patted the lynx on the head with a grin. She leaned against the cuddly bear and purred loudly for him.

Merlin glanced at the display on his slateboard and then back to his new navigator. "That's everyone, Renny. No one around here is given to big speeches, but if there's anything you want to say to this mob, go right ahead."

The cheetah smiled back at the group and then told them, "I'm pleased to be here, I'm glad to have the job, and hope I can fit in." He looked embarrassed at the attention, but added, "I tend to get along with people well and don't mind helping out if you need me for something."

Taro reached around Merlin and took Renny's hand. She glanced at him coyly and twitched an ear. "I have something you can help me out with, kitty..." she said softly.

Samantha whacked her on the shoulder. "Taro! Give the guy a chance to get used to us first!" Laughter spread around the room again and Merlin knew the meeting was over. He reached out and pulled the fox's hand away from the cheetah.

"Sorry, you two, but Renny's about to be initiated into his position," he said with a canine grin.

"Initiated?" the cheetah asked as his tail twitched in trepidation. He swallowed when sudden visions of running through a line of the crewmembers armed with wooden paddles jumped into his head.

The wolf stood up and replied, "I'm the primary pilot for the *Blue Horizon* and usually handle our launches when we leave port, but I'm going to give that job to you today. I know from your résumé that you have experience piloting an *Okami*-class cargo carrier."

"That's right," Renny replied, "and it's one of the reasons why I applied for this job. I flew the *SS Argentina* for the Leaway Moving Company of Tanthe for a little over a year."

"When did you work for them?" Durant asked.

"Six years ago. It was my first real job after flight school."

Patch removed the cigar from his teeth and said in the same country accent of his brother, "If the ship you flew then was new, you were flying the same model as the *Blue Horizon*. It should still be familiar to you, even after five and a half years."

"Actually, it was older than this one. The *Argentina* was one of the first *Okami* ships off the assembly line," Renny replied.

"That old, eh?" Patch mused. "There have been a number of design changes since the original *Okami* vessels. The most significant difference being the ship's bridge."

"That's right," the cheetah remarked. "Energy-based shielding was weaker then, so the bridge was located in the *middle* of the ship, with the crew cabins surrounding it, and then the cargo bay wrapped around those. This kept the living crew shielded from most of the harmful stellar radiations. There were no windows at all; everything was operated internally by sensors and external cameras."

Patch nodded. "The *Blue Horizon* is a G-model. I'm surprised a twenty-year old A-model was still flying."

"Well," Renny said with a nod, "once we set her old bones down on a landing pad, there were times when we wondered if the *Argentina* would be able to take off again. I think they scrapped her not long after I left the company."

Merlin put a hand on the cheetah's shoulder and said. "I'll go over ship's operations with you before we actually take off." He looked at Taro and added, "See if you can arrange to move launch our window with the Kantus Port Authority to fourteen hundred. That will give us two hours to get the ship prepped to start our next delivery run and so Renny can refamiliarize himself with the controls."

"Where does this shipment go?" Renny asked.

"To Alexandrius," Samantha answered, "My home world."

"We're carrying pharmaceuticals for delivery to Alucara, the capitol city," Durant added.

"For my competitor, I might add," Samantha said with a casual wave of her hand.

"Competitor?" the cheetah asked.

The canine gave him a smile. "I own the controlling interest in Holden Pharmaceuticals," she replied in answer. "It was my father's company." Renny was about to ask her why someone with money enough for that was working on a freighter, but decided he would save the question for a time when he knew her a little better.

"Have you ever been to Alexandrius?" Durant asked.

"No," Renny admitted, "but I have the star charts memorized for the usual routes."

"Memorized?" Pockets asked.

Renny smiled and Merlin replied, "Our new navigator has an eidetic memory. He remembers everything he reads."

"Wow..." Pockets drawled.

Merlin waved his arms at his crew and said, "Okay, *shoo*, all of you! We have to get ready. The flight to Alexandrius will take three weeks and you'll have plenty of time to visit with Renny after we're underway."

The crew began to disperse, but before anyone made it out the door, Sparky announced, "I'll have supper ready around seventeen hundred."

Pockets made his way toward her and asked, "Are you making anything special tonight or are you taking requests?"

Sparky smiled at him and tickled his ear with a finger. "I have a couple of dishes in mind, but I haven't settled on anything specific just yet," she answered. "Once we've had our new navigator around a few days, then I'll whip up something special for him. What's your request?"

The raccoon grinned widely and wrung his tiny hands together. "Baked Jinkles?" he asked hopefully.

The lynx laughed and nodded her head. "I should have known. Okay, you got it. Jinkles it is."

"Jinkles?" Renny asked, "Isn't that a Ganisan breakfast food?"

"Not if they're seasoned and baked just right," the chef replied.

"You're the greatest, Sparky!" Pockets scampered out of the galley and headed to his workstation in the engine room with his brother.

The lynx glanced up at Merlin and handed him two strips of flimsy yellow plastic. "Here are printouts of the invoices on the groceries, Captain," she said. "The grocer's electron system was faulty so he printed them out instead of transmitting them to my slateboard. I forgot to give them to Durant."

"I'll take care of them," the wolf replied.

Sparky glanced over at the cheetah as Merlin began an explanation of personnel duties and studied his lean form and great height. He was every bit as tall as Taro, who towered over

everyone else but Durant. Renny noticed her gaze and smiled down at her. Merlin paused in his instructions and curiously watched the two felines. Sparky crooked a finger at the cheetah and Renny leaned over to place his ear near her mouth.

Sparky whispered something to him and then licked his cheek very gently. With a giggle, she turned and headed into her kitchen and it was then he saw a small red bow tied to the lynx's stubby tail. Renny straightened up and turned to the wolf. "Are all the females on this crew usually this friendly to newcomers?" he asked.

"Not usually," Merlin said dryly as he turned to lead them away. "I think you're a hit. Now, let's get up to the bridge where there aren't any distractions, and we'll go over the pre-flight checklist."

Half a block away from the docked *Blue Horizon*, a jaguar with midnight black fur sat in a booth at a crowded outdoor café on the edge of the spaceport. He wore the brown armband of a courier and his golden eyes fixed upon the saucer-shaped cargo carrier. A diminutive lemur sat across from him, waiting expectantly for instructions from his companion. The jaguar shifted his gaze back to the red eyes of his informer and nodded. He dug a few credits from a shirt pocket and laid them on the table. The lemur scooped up the gold coins and then disappeared through the crowd.

The feline twitched his whiskers and picked up his lunch check. He glanced back at the *Blue Horizon* once more before he stood up and then walked casually to the cashier.

"Port Control has cleared us for launch, Captain," Taro announced.

"Okay, Renny. She's all yours," Merlin said to the cheetah over his shoulder. He sat at the navigator's station while the other was in the pilot's center seat.

Renny's pulse quickened as he energized the engines of the fully laden cargo carrier. He was in the spotlight of attention of the bridge crew and knew everyone else on board was conscious of his actions. He was in control of the second-most critical phase of flying any ship, taking off; the first was landing. He had no doubt he could fly this vessel; he'd flown one before, but he also prided himself on his ability to fly just about any make and model ship in the Planetary Alignment due to common standardizations. What made him nervous was the knowledge of being scrutinized as the newest member of an established crew.

The cheetah emptied his mind of such thoughts and immersed himself in his job. The *Blue Horizon* had been cleared for launch. He checked his readouts and smiled to himself. Energy buildup was at one hundred percent and all thrusters fired equally. A green light glowed brightly and the cheetah moved his hands smoothly over the controls. He held a pair of inverted, L-shaped guidance shifts firmly and then depressed a thumb switch on the right-hand grip.

The *Blue Horizon* rose quickly from the landing platform and left New Gate far behind in a matter of seconds. Merlin was impressed. The inertia compensators worked so well and the launch had been so smooth, that had he not seen the city disappear from view in the vidscreens or saw the readouts of his instruments, the wolf would not have known they had even left the dock pad.

He glanced over at the Com station and winked at Taro. She smiled and gave him a thumbs-up sign. The red fox put a hand to the earpiece of her headset and spoke softly into the microphone. It was a query from an incoming pleasure cruiser that passed a kilometer to their starboard. She turned to the cheetah, who looked at her wonderingly.

"Turn on our running lights, Renny," she advised.

"Oops," he muttered. He clicked a switch near the guidance shifts.

"Not too bad for your first time out with the *Blue Horizon*," Merlin said. "We'll be coming up fast on the Kantus moon. Five hundred kilometers past that worthless hunk of rock, engage the LightDrive engines and push them up to half speed. Maintain that until we're out of the star system."

"How long will that take?" the cheetah asked.

"Roughly six hours from our present position out to free interstellar space. Can you handle that?"

Renny smiled. "Not a problem," he replied.

Taro touched a pad on the engineering console next to her and then spoke into her headset mike on ship-wide broadcast. *"The ship's artificial gravity has automatically enabled and is reading normal. Once we are beyond planetary traffic, the LightDrive engines will be engaged for cruising speed, but inertia dampers are active and mobility is now safe. You may now shed your harnesses and move about."*

Merlin unbuckled his seat harness and stood up. He leaned against the edge of his panel and crossed his arms. "Good job, Renny," he said approvingly. "That was a smooth launch."

The intercom chirped. The wolf reached for the panel behind him and clicked the open circuit. "Merlin, here," he said.

"Captain," Patch's drawl sounded from the overhead speaker, *"Reporting in, the new energy transducers fluctuated a bit during launch, but they're well within limits. I suspect they're from an Okami H-model."*

"Where did Pockets get a brand new transducer?" the wolf asked.

"I asked him the same thing, but all he does is smile at me."

"Typically suspicious. Okay, Patch, keep an eye on the readings and let me know if anything gets out of tolerance."

"Aye, Captain."

He closed the connection and turned to the fox. "Keep watch up here for me, Taro," he said. "I'm heading down to have a little chat with Pockets."

Renny yawned widely and arched his back in the seat, swishing his tail through the slotted opening. Five hours at the controls of the ship with no excitement would have been boring had it not been for Taro's company. He had learned a great deal about her background and found her phenomenal strength fascinating. Taro was from Hestra, a rather large rocky planet with a high gravity and a predominantly mountainous terrain. In *system normal* gravity, she surpassed most species in strength and agility, including their larger crewmate Durant.

They shared an interest in athletic activities and the cheetah looked forward to spending some off-duty time with her. He checked his instruments and yawned again. Taro had left to get them something to drink and he was presently alone on the bridge. He knew that once they had left the star system, their speed could be pushed up full and then the autopilot could be

engaged for routine flight. Until then, however, someone had to be right at the controls constantly.

Renny studied the panel before him and saw a touch pad he had missed earlier. He smiled and tapped it slightly. The cabin lights dimmed as he adjusted the control further so that most of the illumination of the room now came primarily from the instrument panels. All three window panels were clear at the moment and the darkened bridge made the starlight beyond seem brilliant. He preferred it that way. Now if he only had some music to play.

The door to the bridge slid aside and Taro walked in with two drink cylinders and a large bag of pretzels. She handed a soda to the cheetah and returned to her seat. "Nice lighting," she commented with a smile. "Are you trying to set a mood?"

Renny looked up suddenly at her and felt his face flush beneath his fur. "Not at all," he managed to reply. "I just like looking at the stars from a darkened room when on the bridge."

"Ah... Anything happen while I was gone?"

"No, all's quiet." The words were barely out of his mouth when the Com panel beeped. Taro picked up her headset and tapped a button.

"This is the *SS Blue Horizon*," she stated. "What can we do for you?" She listened a moment and then nodded to herself. "Please hold while I get the captain." Taro sighed as she tapped another control and then waited for Merlin to connect in the intercom.

The panel chirped and Taro opened the connection. "*This is Merlin.*"

"Captain, we have a communications link from the SPF. They want to talk to you."

"SPF? Okay, I'll take it here in my den."

The fox made the necessary routing adjustments on her panel and then turned back to the cheetah.

"What does the Spatial Police Force want with the captain?" Renny asked.

"I'm not sure," Taro replied, "but I would guess it probably has something to do with Samantha."

"Why? Does she have a record of getting into trouble with the police?"

Taro smiled and shook her head. "Sam has connections on all worlds of the Planetary Alignment to get the supplies we need. Sometimes she'll go through underground routes to obtain hard-to-get items." The vixen lapped some of her diet soda and added, "She's never actually gotten caught, but that doesn't mean she won't at some time."

"Does that have anything to do with her ownership of Holden Pharmaceuticals?"

Taro chuckled. "No, that firm is legit, I assure you." She stood up and moved to stand beside him at the controls. "Holden is the largest pharmaceutical company in the PA. Samantha has enough money to buy a fleet of ships like this one."

"Then why...?"

"She inherited the business and other family assets when her folks died in a car wreck years ago, but she does not really enjoy life in an administrative office. She tried the management scene for a while and jumped at the chance to get out of that environment, though she still connects in for required shareholder meetings." Taro leaned closer to him and traced a finger through his head fur, giving him a shiver. "She and Merlin have been close friends for nearly fifteen years, and she enjoys traveling with him. That's why she's here."

"Does that mean that she and he..."

"Uh huh..." Taro whispered as she moved an arm across his shoulders. "Relationships are inevitable on long voyages like the ones we're always on."

Renny looked up into her eyes and swallowed quietly. Sparky had said something similar to him in the galley before they had taken off.

"I'm Merlin Sinclair, captain of the *Blue Horizon*. What can I do for you, officer?"

A high-pitched male voice answered from the wolf's com terminal. The *Blue Horizon* was not equipped with video communication so the conversation was audio-only.

"Captain Sinclair," the voice replied, "I'm SPF Sergeant Randal Stokes. I am conducting an investigation of a theft at your last port of call at New Gate on Kantus."

"How can we help you?"

"Three energy transducers for an Okami-class cargo carrier were taken from the Eaglebright Electronics warehouse last night."

The wolf frowned and shook his head. The conversation he'd had with Pockets and Samantha just after liftoff had confirmed his suspicions that their newly acquired transducers were stolen from the manufacturer. He had not expected the SPF to zero in on them quite so quickly, however.

"Are we supposed to have them, Sergeant?" Merlin asked in a neutral voice. "I have a shipment consisting solely of pharmaceuticals to deliver. We're scheduled to deliver no equipment parts on this load, and my ship is in good working order."

"True, but uh, you do have an Okami vessel," the officer replied hesitantly.

"What model do the missing transducers go to?" the wolf asked.

"Uh, my reports say they were for an H-model ship."

"Sir, if you check our records, you will note that the *Blue Horizon* is a G-model. We would not be able to use them," Merlin explained, hoping the sergeant was not aware of technical specifications on a cargo ship. "As far as I know, the components are not backward compatible."

"Ah, I don't know about such things, Captain," the officer admitted. "I don't think they are... However -"

Merlin sensed the other's growing confusion, so he pushed his tactics a bit. "How many Okami vessels were docked around New Gate?"

"Uhm, thirty-four. They're fairly common ships."

"How many of those are H-models?"

"Uhm, I'm not sure."

"And how many have you contacted, including me?"

"Hmm? Just seven so far."

"You may wish to narrow your search to the ships that are capable of using them."

"Yes, you may be right."

"Then I wish you good luck investigating the others, Sergeant. Good day."

"Uh, okay. Thanks. Bye."

Merlin closed the connection and leaned back in his chair with a sigh. Pockets was clearly guilty in this matter, but the wolf had resorted to misdirection in order to keep him on his crew. He respected the SPF, but this was hardly the first time he'd had to cover for his delinquent engineer for one reason or another.

Each of the fifteen worlds of the Planetary Alignment had their own police organizations, but outside of their local jurisdictions, the Spatial Police Force had the authority to take care of any matter called upon in the space between systems. The SPF headquarters resided on the tiny, otherwise lifeless planet of Joplin in the astrometrical center of the combined worlds of the Planetary Alignment. Its sun dim and dying, the planet was virtually

an airless rock of undesired minerals, but it was considered neutral territory by the individual world governments that funded it with a joint account.

The wolf turned back to the purchase orders that Durant had supplied to his slateboard for their cargo. Alexandrius was the richest of the PA worlds and it was a good thing whenever they received orders for delivery there. The businesses there often paid generously and their hospitality was famous. Merlin had a standing policy to allow all crewmembers three days of leave during every planetfall between deliveries and he had never heard a complaint for the rule whenever on Alexandrius.

The wolf heard a muffled *boom* and felt the floor vibrate with it. He looked up in alarm, wondering if they had collided with a small meteoroid, when a tone sounded from his desk panel. Almost at the same time, his intercom chirped. He touched the control and said, "Merlin, here. What is it?"

"Captain!" said Taro's excited voice. "*The fire alarms have gone off in the galley again!*"

"On my way!" He grabbed his captain's hat, bounded out the door, and sprinted down the curving passageway to the back of the ship where the galley resided. When he arrived, Sparky was out in the smoke-filled hallway with Samantha. The lynx was coughing violently and pointing to the galley doorway.

"Pockets is in there," Samantha told the wolf. "He's trying to fight the fire!"

"Get Sparky to Sickbay!" Merlin commanded.

"Aye!"

He pulled his hat down over his muzzle and stepped into the galley. Through the smoke, he saw the diminutive raccoon standing on top of the table with an extinguisher that was just giving out on him. Everything behind the counter was ablaze and the flames were growing out toward the oxygen coming from the hallway. The wolf grabbed Pockets by the collar, yanked him off the table, and bolted out the door. He dropped the mechanic onto the carpet and hit the controls to shut the door. Pockets yelped when he hit the floor and rolled to his feet. Several tools fell out of his pockets with dull thuds. The captain opened a panel beside the door and punched a large red button set into the recess. When he heard a hissing behind the doorway, Merlin turned to face the raccoon.

"Are you all right?" he asked through watery eyes.

Pockets coughed a couple of times and then nodded. "I don't think I did much good in there," he said in a raspy voice.

"Perhaps not, but it was a good effort." Merlin rubbed his burning eyes and gasped, "What *did* she burn in there, a crate of onions?"

"I dunno. I didn't get a chance to talk to her before I pushed her out into the hall and grabbed an extinguisher." Both turned at the sound of running feet.

"What happened?" Durant asked as he stopped beside them.

"Guess..." Pockets quipped as he retrieved his fallen tools.

"One of her experimental dishes?"

"Probably," Merlin answered. "Pockets tried to be the hero and put out a bonfire with a water pistol. I snatched him out before he hurt himself."

"Huh?" Durant looked puzzled. Pockets frowned and snorted.

Merlin chuckled at the raccoon's expression. "The extinguisher he was using was not big enough for the size of fire," he explained. "After I dragged him out, I sealed the room and vented the air into space." As if to punctuate his words, the panel beside the door beeped. He pushed a white button beneath the red one and then closed the panel. Every room module on the *Blue Horizon* was equipped with such a system for fire emergencies that grew out of hand.

The rule was to fight the fire as possible, but if that was not enough, get everyone out of the compartment and then activate it.

Merlin walked to a nearby intercom terminal and called the bridge. "Taro, here," she answered.

"Go to the Engineering station and take a reading on the galley," he replied.

There was a few seconds of silence before she reported, "Air pressure was just reading absolute vacuum, but is now rising toward ship normal. Temperature is twenty-two degrees and also rising. You should be able to go back in there in about a minute."

"Thank you." The wolf clicked off the connection and turned to Pockets. "Go on to Sickbay and check in on Sparky," he said. "Have Samantha look you over, too."

"Aye, Captain."

Merlin turned to Durant at another beep from the wall panel and sighed. "All right, let's go inside and have a look."

Pockets shuffled around the curved corridor toward the forward end of the ship. Sickbay was near the bridge, next to Renny's cabin. He moved in through the open door and found Samantha giving the frazzled lynx a dose of pure oxygen. Sparky gripped the oxy-mask tightly and gulped air with her ears flat against her head.

"Easy now," the Border collie told her.

The feline took a few more deep inhalations and then lay back onto the medical gurney. She coughed a couple more times and looked over at Pockets.

"What happened?" the raccoon asked.

Sparky smiled feebly and said in a raspy voice. "Fynian Wonder Meal."

"Ah, so that was it," Pockets replied.

"Why?" Sam asked.

"I wanted to surprise Renny with it."

"I think you surprised everyone *else*," Taro said dryly. Everyone turned to look at the red fox that had just stepped inside the door. "When are you going to learn that you *cannot* make that dish on board a starship?"

"It worked while I was on leave," Sparky said.

"Did the compartmental settings of the *Blue Horizon* in flight match that of your test kitchen on the planet?"

"Uhm, I don't know..."

"I thought you were our Environmental Specialist," the fox taunted. "Our pressurized mix of air is not probably the best setting for that dish."

The lynx covered her eyes with her hands and sighed. "It had not occurred to me."

"Sparky," Taro said softly. "You've caught the galley on fire twice now trying to make this thing. Before you do it again, I would suggest some extra research into it."

"Agreed," the feline answered.

"Now, are you all right?"

Samantha answered for her. "She took in a lot of smoke and she has a sprained ankle from when Pockets yanked her out of the room and banged her leg on the table."

"Oops," the raccoon said lowly. "Sorry, Sparky."

The lynx motioned for him to come to her as she sat up. She tugged on his arm to pull him close and then licked him gently on the cheek. "Thank you, Pockets. You came to my

rescue," she said with a smile. "I might not have survived at all if you hadn't grabbed me when you did."

Merlin wiped a sooty hand across his forehead and frowned through the lingering haze at the bear. "She really did a number on the kitchen, my friend," he said. "I'm afraid I can't just ignore it like I did last time. Our insurance will take care of most of it, but the rest will have to come out of her pay."

"I'll get Patch up here to help me assess the damage and give you a credit figure," Durant replied gloomily.

"Yeah, well, wait until after we've salvaged what food we can," Merlin said. "We may have to return to Kantus or divert to another port to resupply if too much is lost."

"Okay, boss, we'll get right on it."

The grizzly bear left to get the engineer and Merlin looked at the ruined kitchen. Whatever she had done, Sparky had managed to spread the fire across every countertop and piece of equipment in the place. The flames had been extinguished just as they got to the cooler units, but he was uncertain if they still functioned. The temperature gauges on the door panels had melted. He did not want to open the units until they had alternate coolers in place to put the food into or he would have already looked into them. As the smoke haze was slowly drawn out of the shipboard air, he noticed the damage to the mural on the galley wall with a frown. Something in the chemical extinguisher spray the raccoon had used dissolved most of the paint Jiro had used to create the picture six years earlier. He groaned and shook his head; the cougar had spent three weeks on the mural during the maiden flight for their first customer.

Merlin walked around the table to the blistered countertop. He skirted around its side and stepped into the kitchen. Sparky and Pockets had used four extinguishers on the fire; the empty canisters littered the floor along with an assortment of pots, pans and cooking utensils. The walls were charred blackest near the massive stove and the oven was a total loss, as if something had exploded from within. Despite the earlier decompression and the ventilating fans, a small curl of smoke issued from behind the stove. Merlin leaned over and peered down at a blackened loaf of bread that had resumed smoldering. He found a damp towel in the sink and draped it over the loaf. The wolf straightened up and sighed audibly.

"What a mess," Patch mumbled as he stepped gingerly into the room.

Samantha peeked in behind him and saw the ruined mural. "Ah, no," she whined.

Patch looked over at the wall that had escaped his notice and shook his head. He pulled his eyes away from it and moved to the kitchen.

"Where is Durant?" Merlin asked.

The raccoon knelt down to pick up a broken spice bottle and replied, "He went down to his office to get his slateboard for the damage assessment forms and pricing guide."

"Is Sparky okay?"

Samantha frowned at the damage and replied, "She has smoke inhalation, a sprained ankle and singed fur in places - mostly on her hands. Taro thinks she will be okay with some rest. She's with her now in Sparky's quarters."

Merlin walked back to the long table and motioned the collie to follow him. "Wait here for Durant," he said to Patch. "Sam and I are going to get the recreational cooler units from the upper deck. Don't open the refrigerators until we get back with them."

"Right."

Samantha followed the wolf around the corridor to the lift. When Merlin stopped in front of the bright blue door, he thumbed a button set into the wall at waist level. The panel slid aside and the pair moved inside. He tapped a button labeled "3" and the lift door closed. The cubicle hummed lowly as it moved upward.

The door opened again seconds later and they stepped out onto the ship's recreational deck. There were video panels along one wall, a pool table in the middle of the room, with card tables and library tables to the side. A large curved window faced ship's forward that was equipped with the same near-invisible circuitry as the bridge panels that allowed it to double as a vidscreen for movies or other recorded programs. There was an instrument terminal below it to monitor, though not control, every major system of the ship. Lush blue carpet covered the floor and ceiling, and the walls had light brown wood paneling. There were comfortable chairs and couches dispersed at random around the large room, with a tiny kitchenette occupying a back corner.

The recreation deck was a nice spot to get away from regular ship's operations, but the room rarely saw much use. Everyone seemed to prefer either the galley or their individual cabins for their off-duty activities. In recent months, it had become a catch-all storeroom and things were lying about randomly. Several storage lockers occupied the aft wall for extra equipment such as weights, exercise mats and the articles for fencing. Jiro had been Merlin's only fencing partner on board so the items had not been touched since his death.

The captain switched on the lights, but only four of the eight glow panels functioned. He moved toward the kitchenette, but before he could grab one of the small refrigerating cooler units, Samantha touched him on the shoulder.

"Merlin?" she asked, "May I talk to you a minute?"

The wolf looked over at her. "Make it quick, Sam. This may be all that saves our food supply."

The collie nodded. "Let me pay for Sparky's damages," she said.

Merlin twitched an ear. "I appreciate your offer," he said, "and no doubt she would, too, but she's done this before. If she does not have to pay for her share of the damage herself, then she may be likely to do it again."

"Please, Merlin?" she asked. "Sparky has been saving up for something important to her. This will wipe out a good portion of her savings and I have plenty to spare."

Merlin sighed and put a hand on her shoulder. "If you want to help her out, why not help her with her savings instead? Let her pay for her mistake first, and then offer your generosity to her financial goal afterward. It will amount to the same thing, but she will have learned her lesson."

Samantha nodded. "Okay, I suppose that will work."

"Good," the wolf said. "Now, let's get these down to the galley."

The hours in the control room had seemed longer than the actual time Renny had spent in the center seat. Most of the ships he had served on had an automatic pilot to take over the mundane routine flight after launches and landings; many felt there was no real need for a continued presence on the bridge once the autopilot took over.

However, the cheetah's new boss did not feel as if that were enough. Taro had explained to him that Captain Sinclair felt the necessity to have someone on the bridge at all times, in the event an unexpected emergency cropped up. Autopilots worked well, so long as a stray

asteroid or another ship did not suddenly appear in their flight path. It was rare that such crises happened, but Merlin did not want to take that chance, and therefore required that all members of his crew take a watch on the bridge on a rotating basis. The autopilot *could* be engaged, but the room would be manned at all times. As the new guy on board, Renny had been assigned the first watch, though because of the launch from Kantus and the explosion in the galley he had remained an extra hour beyond the usual shift.

Merlin had relieved him on the bridge moments earlier and had told him to get some rest. Afterward, he was to help Pockets and Samantha clean up the long-unused recreation deck. With the damage to the galley not repairable with what they had on board, they would have to use the small kitchenette in the Rec Room for their meals.

Renny yawned widely as he approached the cabin that had been assigned to him and opened the door. He had not had time since coming on board to do more than stow his duffel inside the room, but the indirect lighting was already on. He leaned in past the potted trees and looked inside cautiously. Taro sat on the carpeted floor in front of an open closet door, a plastic box beside her. The red fox looked up at him with moist orange eyes, but she gave him a smile.

"Hi," he said to her.

Taro wiped her eyes with the back of a hand and replied, "Hello."

Renny squatted down beside her. "May I ask what you are doing in my cabin?" he inquired.

The vixen gestured toward the container in front of her. "No one's been in here to box up Jiro's personal effects since he died," she explained. "I thought I should take care of it so you could set up the room how you wanted it now that it was yours." She held up a small ceramic figurine of a non-sentient cougar and shrugged her shoulders. "I thought I would be finished before you got off your shift, but the memories slowed me down."

Renny frowned and scratched one of his small ears. "Were the two of you close?" he asked quietly. Taro did not respond, but the look on her face was answer enough. "I'm sorry for your loss," he replied softly.

"Me, too," she whispered. She cleared her throat and put the figurine inside the box.

Renny fidgeted for a moment and then stood up. "I'm going to lie down for a while and get some rest," he said, "but you are welcome to continue what you're doing if you are quiet."

Taro looked up at him and managed a small smile. "Thank you," she said. "I'm almost finished anyway."

The navigator nodded and walked to the bed. His duffel had been untouched and he moved it to the floor at the foot of his bunk. He quietly stripped the top blanket from the bed and set it aside. He sat down on the sheet-covered mattress and removed his boots and shirt. A moment later, he fluffed his pillow and then stretched out on the bed, his face to the wall.

Taro looked up from her box and glanced over at the cheetah. She let her mind wander a bit as she let her eyes stare unfocused at the spots in the fur on his back, until she realized her gaze had drifted toward the dark tip of his long, slender tail.

She smiled at a fond memory and turned back to her task. She quickly pulled the last of the small items from the bottom of the closet and sealed them up in the box. She would keep them in her room until the next time their next voyage took them to Pomen, where she would then have them forwarded to Jiro's family.

When she got to her feet, she glanced over toward the bed and saw the cheetah watching her silently with large yellow eyes. He had turned over quietly and faced her. She gave him a genuine smile to let him know that she was okay and he smiled back at her.

Taro set her box on the desktop near the bed and then knelt in front of the navigator. She leaned forward and licked him on the tip of his nose, an action that took him by surprise.

"I've only known you a few hours," she said, "but I am already fond of you."

"Oh?" he asked as he raised his head to look at her evenly. "Why is that?"

"I learned a lot about you just visiting those few hours on the bridge," she replied. "That, and your understanding about me and Jiro."

Renny frowned. "I know what it is like to lose someone close," he said. "Although in my case it was a younger sister named Sophie."

The red vixen nodded, but continued to smile. "I think I will always miss Jiro, but I need to build some new memories now," she said. "Want to help me?"

Renny sat up and patted the mattress beside him. "That sounds like a worthwhile endeavor."

Taro gave her a smile, but narrowed her eyes as she got up and occupied the spot beside him. Without another word, she passed her hand over his chest, slowly running her fingers through his yellow and black fur. Renny wrapped an arm around her and then pulled her close.

The bridge was quiet as the *Blue Horizon* flew through space at her normal cruising speed. The LightDrive engines had been pushed up to full and the autopilot had been engaged an hour earlier. The captain often spent many quiet hours alone on the bridge, usually with his nose buried in a mystery novel or going over manifests, invoices or purchase orders on his slateboard. He was currently looking over the financial data Durant had sent to him earlier and was frowning at the damage figures to the galley.

The stove and oven were not repairable and many of Sparky's smaller appliances had been destroyed. Most of the spices and special seasonings she had acquired throughout the Planetary Alignment were gone and so were most of her dry goods. Fortunately, the large refrigeration coolers still functioned normally, even if the gauges and indicators on the outside of the unit were damaged by the intense heat of the fire. They would still have plenty of food to last them the three weeks to Alexandrius, but it would be somewhat bland without the lynx's spices and other fine additions. The snack stores in the Rec Room lockers would help supplement their meals and the kitchenette there would have to substitute the galley for food preparation.

The wolf glanced at the bottom line of Durant's figures and felt a cold chill. Repair and replacement of equipment and foodstuffs to get the galley back up to operation was going to cost no less than ©56,000. *Fifty-six thousand credits* was nearly the full payment they would get for the delivery of their current cargo to Alexandrius! Durant had already contacted their insurance agent on Dennier, who had informed him that an assessor would meet them in Alucara to inspect the damage. Rough figures showed that the Interstellar Insurance Agency would cover eighty percent of the costs in this case, which would mean Sparky's bill would come to ©11,200.

When Merlin showed Sparky the damage figures, she had nearly fainted over the amount, but she agreed that it was her fault and that she should pay for it. She promised not to attempt the Fynian Wonder Meal on board again, nor any other dish that required *arbor whisk juice* as an ingredient. The high temperature needed to cook with it did not react well with the shipboard atmosphere mixture. Sparky had ©15,000 saved back into her account so she would

at least be able to cover her portion of the damages, but that left her with only ©3,800. As a consolation, Merlin authorized her to go on a full shopping spree to restock the ship once the repairs were completed. In her favor, several of the ruined appliances had been in need of updating anyway, but it was still an unbudgeted expense.

The wolf set the slateboard aside and stretched with a yawn. He got up and walked around the bridge examining readouts, and when he was satisfied that everything was running normally, he picked up a book he'd brought back with him and opened it to his bookmark.

He usually read mystery novels, but this time he had purchased a space-adventure story written on Earth over one hundred thirty years before that world had spread out into the galaxy. He enjoyed the archaic technology in the fictional story and was ready to continue reading. Before he had made it through a single paragraph, however, the Com panel beeped with an incoming call.

He set his book aside and moved to Taro's terminal. He put her headset across his ears and said, "This is the *SS Blue Horizon*. What can we do for you?"

"Captain Sinclair? Is this Merlin?" said an accented voice from the headset speakers.

"Aye, this is Captain Sinclair."

"Merlin! It's me, Arktanis!"

"Tanis!" the wolf exclaimed. "Where in creation are you, old boy?"

"I'm in Corral City on Alexandrius. I just found out ya were heading to Alucara and wanted to know if I could meet with ya there."

Merlin grinned ear to ear and said, "Of course you can! We will be at the Ryu Industries' dockyard at the Chaparral Metro Spaceport on the sixth, barring any delays. What brings you to Alexandrius? The last we'd heard you were still playing soldier on Nalirra."

"Ah, that's what I wanted to meet with ya about, Captain," the voice replied. "My service time has ended and I have a request to make of ya."

It had taken close to four hours, but Renny, Pockets and Samantha had cleaned the Rec Room and it finally looked cozy. The cheetah did not understand why the crew had not used it for so long, but he didn't ask. Since he was now on the payroll and the *Blue Horizon* was to be his home, the navigator felt he would get a lot of use of the place even if no one else did. He had always been physical by nature and he was pleased with the amount of exercise equipment available to him.

Pockets had his nose buried in an open instrument panel beneath the large vidscreen. He had said something about it having broken down some months earlier, but as the room was seldom used, neither he nor Patch had bothered to fix it until now. Samantha had been most adamant about repairs to that particular unit. She had explained to Renny that she was fond of old movies and the large screen was better suited for watching the shows than the small one in her cabin.

Renny walked across the room toward the Border collie and sat down on a barstool by the kitchenette. She had just finished moving the last of their food items from the wrecked galley and was overlooking her handiwork. She set a wipe cloth on the counter and glanced over at the cheetah after brushing stray dust from her black and white fur.

"My first day on board has been rather eventful," Renny told her with a grin. "Is it always like this?"

Samantha shook her head with a smile. "Not really," she replied. "Usually the voyage from one planet to another is real quiet. If you have any hobbies, you will have *plenty* of time to work on them. If you *don't* have any hobbies, now would be a good time to pick up something."

Renny crossed his legs and sat perched on top of the stool with his hands on his ankles. His tail swished lazily as it hung toward the floor. "It looks like I'll be spending a lot of time in this room," he said.

"You like old movies?" Samantha asked.

"For the exercise equipment," the cheetah answered. He looked around the room and shrugged. "How can the captain afford to pay a crew to sit around all the time?" he asked after a moment. "Wouldn't it be cheaper to have him just pay local people at the ports you dock into to unload the cargo for him? It seems like he'd have a perpetually bored crew."

Sam nodded and leaned forward on the counter, her elbows supporting her weight. "Granted we don't really have enough duties to keep us occupied *constantly* during a lengthy voyage, but we have other skills as well," she said. "I keep the ship and crew supplied with needed items and I maintain the hardware and software of the computer system. Durant keeps the books in line and makes sure the cargo is secure throughout the trip. Taro is always in contact with businesses all over the Planetary Alignment, lining up new jobs for us in advance." She gestured toward the raccoon across the room.

"Pockets and his brother Patch keep the ship running and take care of all the mechanical and electronic problems that pop up. Sparky keeps us all fed, but she also monitors the systems to keep our onboard atmosphere balanced and breathable. You are the navigator and keep us on course to each of our jobs, and we all play cargo mover when we land. That is, everyone but Sparky; *she* usually finds a way out of helping us." She looked at him and shrugged her shoulders. "If you think about it, you are probably the one on board with the fewest duties."

"You think I'm not important to the crew?" Renny asked with a frown.

Samantha laughed. "Quite the contrary, kitty. You probably have one of the most important roles among us, making sure we get from one place to the next without flying off blindly into space."

"Kitty, eh?" the feline said with a lopsided grin. "I've been on board less than twenty-four hours and already you're calling me names."

The Border collie snickered. "Yeah, I have nicknames for everyone, and so long as you are going to be one of us, you may as well get used to it."

"Yeah," Renny said with a far-away gaze. "Several on board have already tried to make me feel right at home."

Samantha gave him a mischievous smile. "That would have to be Taro and Sparky, I'd wager."

Renny looked at her in fascination for a moment and then shook his head with a smile. "Half-right," he admitted.

"Taro?"

"Yup."

Samantha nodded. "Don't get too comfortable," she told him. "Sparky will be next."

Renny leaned forward. "When's your turn, beautiful?"

Sam's eyes went wide and she laughed. "Keep dreaming, kitten," she said. "I don't get intimate as quickly as those two do."

"Oh, sorry," Renny said, his head down in embarrassment.

Samantha reached down and cupped his chin to pull it up. "Don't be," she said. "I'm flattered you think me attractive, but at the moment there's only one person on board who gets my full affections."

"Captain Sinclair. Yeah, I know."

"I will assume Taro told you that," she said dryly.

"Right again," he said.

"She talks too much sometimes," Samantha stated with narrowed eyes, "though she makes a good friend once you get to know her."

"What about Sparky?"

"Everybody loves Sparky. She's a wonderful person all around."

Renny recalled the group meeting the day before and remembered something that had been on his mind. "May I ask you a personal question?"

"That depends on what it is, but go ahead and ask."

"Taro told me about your father's business, and that despite your position in such a prestigious company, you would rather fly around the PA in a freighter with your friend, Captain Sinclair."

"That's right."

"Do you get paid working for the *Blue Horizon*, too?" He looked up at her hesitantly, feeling very nosy into her affairs.

Samantha chuckled. "Yes, I do, but only on Merlin's insistence," she answered. "Because of Holden Pharmaceuticals, I don't need his money, but he refused to let me work without pay. So, I take everything he pays me and I put it in a private slush fund for the crew... all without his knowledge, of course." She leaned close and put a finger to her lips. "Don't breathe a word of this to him," she whispered. "I use the money from time to time to help out members of the crew when they get into binds and I find out about them."

"Why wouldn't the captain like it?" Renny asked.

"He's very conscious of my money, even though we've known one another half our lives, and he feels awkward when I use my own credits to do something for his business."

"Ah, I see."

"Oh, and Renny," she added, "You don't have to keep calling him Captain Sinclair. You are permitted to call him by his first name, Merlin."

"Yeah, that's what Taro told me. It just seems a little strange to be on a first-name basis with the boss. It's never been allowed anywhere else I've worked."

"Let there be light!"

Renny and Samantha looked up at Pockets' exclamation and saw the large vidscreen come to life in the middle of an Interstellar News Network broadcast.

"Nice, crisp picture!" the raccoon said jubilantly.

"Yeah, Pockets, but there's no sound," Samantha replied.

The short mechanic reached into one of his voluminous pockets and pulled out a slender remote. He thumbed the button and suddenly the room was bombarded with multi-dimensional surround sound... at a deafening volume. Pockets had to scramble to turn down the sound and then looked back at his crewmates with an embarrassed grin.

"Heh..." he said, "it has not been on in a couple months." Pockets took a quick look around the room and then smiled at his companions. "The recreation deck is almost ready for business," he said. "Looks like all that's left is to clean the carpet and make sure all the circuits function on the vidscreen."

"I'll get the vacuum," Renny volunteered.

Renny finished cleaning the carpet of the Rec Room and smiled when Pockets walked over to him. "I have not seen this deck look so good in a long time," the raccoon said cheerily. "We have not really used it in a while, but with all the lights working and everything straightened up, we just might start recreating in here again."

The cheetah looked around him as he stowed the vacuum in a storage locker. "The *Argentina* did not have a third deck for recreation. I like this."

"Renny, look at this," Samantha said. He and Pockets walked to the forward window and saw what Sam had indicated. The *Blue Horizon* was coming up near an area of space filled with gaseous hazes of blues and greens. Their current course would take them just beyond the edge of it on their right.

"Where are we?" Renny asked.

"It's the Van Conner Nebula," Pockets replied. "There are large traces of chorterium gas in there that diffuses sensors, but it's otherwise harmless." There was a flicker of light near the bottom of the screen, but its origin was out of sight.

Whoom!

The ship rocked to one side and the resounding boom reverberated through the deck plates. "What was that?" Renny exclaimed as he scrambled to stay on his feet.

"Did someone let Sparky into the kitchen again?" the raccoon quipped.

Samantha hit him hard on the shoulder. "Pockets! That wasn't nice."

"Sorry..." The raccoon rubbed his shoulder where she had whacked him. "That *was* an explosion," he said. "All too familiar, if I guess right."

"He's back," Samantha replied, tightlipped. "It has to be Sagan."

"I'm going to the bridge," Renny said as he bolted for the lift. Samantha grabbed Pockets' arm before he could follow and glanced out into the nebula.

The Border collie sat down in a seat in front of the panel and began tapping out commands on the Rec Room terminal. "I've got to be quick!"

The raccoon ran to the fencing closet and pulled out one of Merlin's rapiers. "I don't really know how to use this," he said with a frown, "but I won't be unarmed *this* time!"

"Pockets," Samantha warned, "Jiro didn't know how to use one very well either."

"I know, but one of them nearly broke my neck last time. Never again!"

"All hands, we've got an emergency!" Durant announced over the ship-wide intercom. "*It's the Basilisk!*"

Whoom!

Renny stumbled through the bridge door and rolled onto the carpet as the ship reeled beneath him, giving the inertial compensators a job to do. The grizzly bear's bulk tightly filled the pilot seat as he tried to maneuver the *Blue Horizon* away from the attacking vessel.

"Are they pirates, Mr. Durant?" Renny asked as he moved to the bear's side.

"It's the same ship that attacked us two weeks ago."

"I don't see it."

Durant pointed to the lower right of the right-hand window panel. "Look there. It's black." Renny saw a wedge-shaped shadow emerging from the nebula. The vessel was painted

flat black and had no active running lights, which made it difficult to see against the darkness of space.

"That's the *Basilisk*?" he asked. "The pirates who killed your friend?"

"That's them," Durant growled. "I would recognize that *Manta*-class ship anywhere! We weren't able to outrun them before and they got over half our electronics cargo before they pulled out." He frowned as another ribbon of brilliant energy passed just beyond the *Blue Horizon's* nose. "I don't know how we'll be able to get away this time, either."

"Go into the nebula," the cheetah suggested.

"What? Our sensors won't work in there."

Renny watched the marauding ship draw closer. "Neither will theirs. Go into the nebula!" he repeated. "Fly into it at full speed!"

"Now, wait—"

"Do what he says," said a new voice.

The bear didn't bother to look back at Merlin, but kept his hands tight on the guidance shifts. "Boss, I don't think that's a good—"

"Durant," Merlin said quickly, "give Renny the controls."

The bear turned to look at his captain beside the center seat with a deep frown. "Aye, boss," he said as he vacated the station. Renny jumped into the wide seat and strapped himself in. His hands flew over the controls as he prepared to gun the engines with full emergency power.

"Bridge!" Samantha's voice exclaimed over the intercom. "I'm transmitting a signal to the *Basilisk*. Wait ten seconds and then make a run for it! Mark."

Merlin stabbed a control stud on the console in front of his navigator and broadcast to the whole ship, "Everybody buckle in, *now!*"

The cheetah nervously watched the timer on his station panel. When the eternally long ten seconds had passed, they saw the other vessel slip sideways and fire a shot wildly off their starboard.

"Now, Renny!" Merlin commanded.

The cheetah released the pent-up power and the *Blue Horizon* jumped into the nebula. He fired the forward thrusters to drop their speed to a near stop a short distance inside and then reoriented the ship's direction with sudden, opposite thrusts of the guidance shifts. Once done, he reengaged full power and then asked breathlessly, "Are they following?"

Durant shook his head with a frown and wiped his sweaty palms on his green shirt. "We have *no* sensors, Renny, as I told you. We won't know until we've cleared the nebula."

A white-hot finger of silent fire arced just meters in front of the forward windows and lit up the bridge. Renny jerked the controls to quickly change direction and avoid the incoming fire once again, but the inertia compensators were on a low setting for normal cruising, so anything not tied down bounced around with the sudden jolt. Merlin and Durant scrambled into seats and buckled their harnesses after tripping over one another.

Twice again, Renny randomly changed direction of their axis in evasive action, trying to make the ship a difficult target to hit. Then he straightened her out to fly lengthwise along the nebula's middle, blue and green gases slipping quickly across the *Horizon's* spatial shields. There were no more hits from the attackers and no word from them either. They emerged at full throttle into clear space a few moments later and Renny maintained that speed to put distance between them and the pirates.

"The sensors are back online," Durant said as he scanned from the engineering station. "No one is following."

Merlin released the breath he had held and nodded to the cheetah. "Good work, Renny. Good work. Maintain our present speed for another ten minutes. If we still have no pursuers, drop back down to normal cruising and then readjust our course to resume our original heading." The door opened behind them and Samantha stepped in, looking shaken but rather pleased with herself.

"What did you broadcast to the *Basilisk*?" Merlin asked her.

The black and white collie laughed and leaned against the back of Renny's seat. "I gave them a computer virus," she explained. "I got the idea from a movie. If it worked as well as written, their mainframe should have dumped all navigational charts, records and the central regulation program into oblivion."

Renny looked at her with a frown. "All ships have backups for that," he said.

"Yes, but it will take them hours to reinstall them. My virus also reset their sensor calibrations to random values."

"You had time to write a program for all that?" Durant asked.

Samantha's expression darkened. "I wrote it after Sagan's *last* visit, a present just for him. I had to research the type of operating system his model of ship uses and then it took me a week and a half of coding to get it right."

"I don't imagine he's too happy with us right now," the bear said with a grin.

The feline navigator looked at Sam with a smile and then to Merlin. "I'm impressed!" he said.

"So am I," Durant added. "That was some good maneuvering back there, albeit rather shaky. Where'd you learn to do that?"

Renny shrugged his shoulders. "Nothing but instinct. I was just trying to save our tails."

"*Captain?*" the voice of Patch issued from the intercom.

The wolf touched the control and answered, "Merlin here. We lost them."

"*That's good to know,*" the raccoon said, "*but I have some bad news for Durant, if you know where he's at.*"

The bear moved to the Com station and added his own voice to the conversation. "I'm here, Patch. What happened?"

"*Several of the cargo pallets broke loose during all those jerks and jolts you took the ship through back there. There are several crates of drugs scattered all over the floor down here and some of it looks pretty well ruined.*"

Durant groaned with a helpless glance at the captain. "I'll be right down," he said to the engineer.

Merlin took back the conversation as the load master left the bridge. "Patch, how are the engines down there after that mess?"

"*The engines? They're fine, Captain. Those low-level flares the raiders fired at us didn't damage any of the ship's systems, but I would recommend some hull bonding on the blast sites once we've landed in Alucara.*"

"Why would Sagan use low-level weapons on us?"

"*If he already knew we were carrying drugs, he may not have wanted the cargo damaged while trying to take us. I heard Durant tell Pockets that some of what we're carrying is rather pricey.*"

"That's a good point," Merlin admitted. "That's probably one more thing that saved us, other than Sam's swift thinking with the computer and Renny's quick reflexes on the flying."

"*Anything you need me to do?*" Patch asked.

"Nothing unless there's any internal damage you think needs looking into."

"*I think we'll be okay. All my instruments are reading normal. I'm going back to my music.*"

“Okay, Patch.”

As soon as the intercom connection was closed, Renny looked at Samantha and asked, “Who is Sagan?”

Sam moved forward and sat down at the engineer’s station. “He’s the jaguar who runs that ship we just escaped from. He is rather notorious and not a nice guy. It has been said that he has no honor and would inflict torture on his loved ones to get whatever he wanted. He’s psychotic and there’s quite a reward for his head in a basket – preferably severed.”

“No one knows where he comes from,” Merlin added. “All that *is* known is that his name is Sagan, his ship is called the *Basilisk* and his entire crew consists of jaguars like himself. He showed up three years ago and started raiding ships of all kinds, including one SPF cruiser. At first, he never hurt anyone, but then he and his crew became sadistic and started killing someone with each attack. He’s even been known to take on other pirates.”

Renny started to ease their speed back down to normal cruising and asked, “Nice guy. Is Sagan his first name or last?”

“No one knows,” Samantha replied. “This is the second time he’s attacked us.”

Merlin crossed his arms and scowled. “The guy you replaced on our crew was one of his victims. I keep wishing it had been me who Sagan had gone after with a sword, rather than Jiro.”

“Why?” Renny asked with a raised eyebrow. “You have a death wish?”

The wolf shook his head. “No. I was teaching the fencing arts to Jiro, but he was still just a student. I might have beat Sagan or at the least, driven him away before anyone was killed.”

“Merlin holds a Grand Champion fencing title on Dennier,” Samantha added proudly.

“True, but that was years ago,” the captain replied.

“Years ago, but you still like to practice regularly,” the collie retorted with a smile.

The room fell quiet as the cheetah locked the controls back down on autopilot. No one said anything else for a few moments until Renny looked up at the wolf. “Captain?” he asked. “I’ve always had an interest in swords, but have never learned to use one. Would you be willing to teach me?”

Merlin looked at him, his face unreadable. His tail twitched back and forth as he mulled over the request, and then he gave the cheetah a nod. “Okay,” he said. “Now that the Rec Room is operational again, you can join me there every day for an hour at oh-nine hundred hours.”

Renny smiled and nodded. “I’ll be there, sir.”

Merlin snorted and shook his head. “You can call me captain, boss or Merlin, like anyone else does,” he said with a laugh, “but please don’t call me *sir*. I’m not in the military anymore.”

“Right-o, Captain.”

The intercom beeped and the wolf opened the connection. “Merlin, here.”

“You’d better get down here, boss,” Durant said. “You are not gonna like this.”

“What happened?”

“The drug containers that Patch found broken loose contained Amohalkonicin. It is a chemical element that has to be in a total vacuum environment when it is mixed with other pharmaceutical ingredients. It’s rendered inert when exposed to oxygen in its base form. All but one container of it has been exposed to our shipboard air.”

Merlin groaned and closed his eyes. “Give me a credit amount. How much are we going to lose on the delivery because of this?”

“Boss, Amohalkonicin was the most expensive drug in the whole lot.”

“Give me the amount, Durant.”

"Seven damaged containers at ©3,500 per container comes to... uhm... 24,500 credits."

Merlin swallowed hard and asked in a strained voice, "Is that before or after insurance figures?"

"Before." Durant hesitated and then added, *"I'm not sure what this means, Captain, but all of the Amohalkonicin containers have a small red tag attached to them with a U-shaped arrow on them."*

"Okay, I'll be right down," he said. "I'll have to ask about it when I get in contact with Interstellar Insurance." He closed the connection and then rubbed his eyes slowly. He looked at Samantha and asked, "Who's next on the roster for bridge watch? Durant still had another hour to go for his shift, but I need him to help me with this fiasco."

The collie punched up the roster on the computer terminal and replied, "Pockets."

Merlin looked at Renny and asked, "Would you be willing to cover for the next hour until Pockets comes on duty?"

"Sure thing, Captain."

Samantha waved her fingers at the wolf and added, "Go on, Merlin. I'll maintain scanning for any pursuit by the *Basilisk* and keep Renny company for a while."

"Thanks, you two," the captain said as he left the bridge, wondering what else could go wrong on this voyage, but not daring Fate to ask aloud.

It had been two days since the encounter with the *Basilisk* and Renny was still restless over the incident. The cheetah had never experienced anything like a pirate attack before and got nervous every time he thought about it. His life had not actually been uneventful since he had left the Thornton homestead on the Kantus savannah as a youngster, but he had never had his life on the line before. He had not expected that working on a mere freighter. *Okami*-class ships were probably the most common cargo vessels throughout the Planetary Alignment and were considered little more than ordinary space trucks. An "ordinary" ship should not have excitement, he had always thought, but Renny discovered from the others that while life on the *Blue Horizon* was usually slow-paced and mundane, there were moments when the ship seemed to attract peculiar times.

He was about to shut out the light of his room and try to get some sleep when he heard a faint tapping on the door. With an exhausted sigh, he touched the lock release on his room remote and then said, "Come in."

The panel slid to the side and the ship's cook stood there with a soft smile. She was dressed in an airy white sarong with small purple flowers and tiny green vines, and her feet were bare in the carpeting. She stepped inside and shut the door behind her.

"Hello," she said in a quiet voice.

"Hi, Sparky," Renny replied as he stood up and motioned toward the desk chair. "Please have a seat," he said. The tawny lynx sat down and looked up at him quietly. Her face fur was lopsided where it had been singed in the galley fire, but she had fluffed it in her grooming to fill out the imbalance.

"Uh, what can I do for you?" he asked and sat down on the edge of the bed.

Sparky shrugged her shoulders and tilted her head to the side. "I've not had much time to visit with you since you came on board," she said. "I thought I would see if you were open to some company."

Renny gave her a smile and nodded. "I like company," he replied. "I get too fidgety if I have long periods of time with nothing to do or no one to talk to."

"I brought along some entertainment, if you don't mind," Sparky said to him.

Renny was puzzled, for he had not seen the lynx bring anything into the room with her, but gave her a nod. "Sure," he said.

With slow, graceful movement, Sparky stood up and began to remove her sarong. Renny swallowed as she gave him a seductive glance and then dropped the cotton garment to the floor.

"So, how have you been doing?" Merlin asked his new navigator across the kitchenette countertop. Most of the crew had gathered for dinner and conversation. The only one not present was Samantha, who was currently on bridge watch.

Renny took a quick look around at the other faces gathered around the food and lapped up some of his windroot soda, a Kantan soft drink he favored. "Well," he answered, "everyone's been nice to the fresh blood among them." He smiled as he felt Taro's hand thread around his waist. "Over the past two weeks, I've had the opportunity to sit and visit with everyone at least once." He glanced at Taro and Sparky and added, "Some more than others."

Pockets chuckled and poked him in the ribs. Renny jumped with wide eyes and his knees hit the bottom of the counter. "Don't do that!" the cheetah exclaimed defensively. The mechanic laughed aloud and looked up at his captain.

"We've found out all kinds of things about him," the raccoon said with a grin.

Renny grinned lopsidedly and hopped off his bar stool. "Yeah, I'm ticklish!" he said as he backed away a pace. "Don't get any more ideas."

"He also has a preference for wide open spaces," Patch said around his unlit cigar. "He doesn't like the cramped access tunnels through the ship's double hull."

"Yes, I'm also a little claustrophobic," Renny admitted. "I think that's why Patch conjured up the need for my help yesterday tracking down an errant cable signal among the liquid gel radiation shielding packs."

Patch didn't smile very often, as he seemed to prefer maintaining a grumpy exterior, but he granted the cheetah a thin smirk, which only implicated him to the navigator's accusation.

Merlin chuckled and gestured to those gathered around. "One thing you should have known first off was not to reveal any weaknesses to this bunch that they might exploit."

"Who, us?" Sparky asked innocently. "We'd never do anything like that!"

Renny looked down at her and smirked. "Uh huh... Don't get too comfortable around me," he said to all of them. "I can play that game, too."

Merlin thumped him on the back gently. "I think you'll fit in just fine."

The intercom chirped in Merlin's room. He cracked open a bleary eyeball and glanced over at the digital display on his desk. It was oh-two-thirty in the morning ship-time. He fumbled for his terminal remote and found it just as the signal chirped at him again. He thumbed the intercom reply button and asked in an annoyed voice, "What is it?"

"Sorry to wake you, Captain," Patch's voice said, "but you wanted to know when we entered the Centaurus star system."

"How long until we approach Alexandrius?"

"There are no other planets in their orbits on this side of the Centaurus sun, so we can maintain our speed a while longer."

"Patch..." Merlin groaned.

"Oh-eight hundred hours, approximately."

"I'll be there to take over pilot operations at oh-seven hundred. Full bridge crew is to be there no later than seven-thirty for approach operations."

"Understood, Captain."

"Thank you. Good night." Before Patch had a chance to add anything else, the wolf switched off the intercom, rolled back over, and buried his face in his pillow. The wolf had been having trouble sleeping lately and he had just managed to drift off when Patch's message had come through. He tried to go back to sleep, but Merlin found his thoughts swirling again. He tried to will himself back to sleep, but after twenty minutes, he sat up with a grumble under his breath and fluffed his pillow against the wall to lean upon. He switched on the small glow panel on the wall above his bed and wondered if he should get one of his novels to read. He quickly dismissed that idea. He had too much going on in his head.

Following the recent incident with Sagan, all had grown quiet and routine. Everyone seemed to find common interests in one way or another with their new navigator, though it was interesting to see the odd relationship develop between Renny and Samantha. While Taro and Sparky seemed to have intimate designs upon him, Samantha's standing was different. It had started out as a surprise to the cheetah, but he quickly fell into the game of vocal bantering with her. They traded good-natured insults, calling one another names, and while it sometimes seemed as if they were serious, it was all a harmless game.

The past three weeks had been fairly uneventful, but the wolf had a feeling that was about to change. First, they had to make their delivery in Alucara and he was not looking forward to the meeting with Ryu Industries' agent about the loss of the Amohalkonicin, an expensive base chemical used in tissue regeneration medicines. Even though the fault lay in the pirate attack, the *Blue Horizon* was liable for securing the cargo pallets. The loss was his and Merlin was not sure that Ryu would use their services again following this accident. That was too bad, since he had made a number of deliveries for them over the years. Next, he would have to meet with Mr. Duncan from Interstellar Insurance to discuss the fire damage and then arrange a local shipyard crew for the repairs. The only bright spot to his day would be a reunion with an old friend; he looked forward to seeing him again.

There was a knock on the door and Merlin frowned. "Come on in," he called out. "I'm already awake."

The panel slid aside and Sparky stood framed in the doorway in a light blue sarong with a tray of food. Her fur had grown out nicely where it had been burned and she was well groomed. She smiled at him and stepped inside. The lynx touched the button to close the door before turning back toward the bed and then moved to the captain's side to place the tray across his lap.

"What is this?" Merlin asked with a friendly smile, his nose quivering at the aromas that accompanied her. The tray held all his favorite breakfast foods and a nice, steaming cup of coffee. He picked up the cup and lapped from it first, savoring the flavor and the bouquet.

Sparky twitched her whiskers and shrugged her shoulders. "Today's going to be a full day for you, so I thought I would help you get a good start."

"At three in the morning?" he asked as he picked up a slice of toast with an egg fried into the middle of it.

She laughed. "You can *never* get to sleep the night before a landing, Captain. Everyone on board knows that."

Merlin mocked a deep frown and whined, "I've become predictable..." Both chuckled and Sparky sat on the edge of his bed. She watched him eat, and after a few moments, the wolf arched an eyebrow at her. "Was there something you needed to discuss?"

"Not really," she admitted, "but I wondered if you wouldn't mind some snuggle time when you are finished eating."

"Feeling lonely?" Merlin asked softly.

Sparky nodded her head. "Yeah, I feel like I could use a friend."

Merlin set his cup down and lightly brushed the fur of her left cheek. "You're always welcome in my room, kitten," he said with a compassionate smile, "but after ranting at you about the fire, I would assume you'd want someone else."

Sparky closed her eyes at his touch and then looked back at him. "Well, it *was* my fault the ship's galley was all but destroyed," she replied as he resumed eating. "I'm *supposed* to pay for it, even if it wipes out my savings. Besides, you have always been good to me, Merlin. I could not hope for a better employer, especially one who calls me a friend without it affecting his judgment when I make mistakes."

"This is not the first time someone's had to pull your fur from a fire, you know."

Sparky looked embarrassed. "True, but that first time wasn't my fault."

Merlin finished the last of his toast, eggs and beefsteak and then picked up his beloved coffee cup. He set the tray on the lamp table next to the bed and looked up at the lynx. "As your employer, I have to keep you in line," he said, "but as your friend, you are welcome in my arms whenever you need them."

"What about the others? Do they come to you for hugs, too?"

Merlin gave her a lopsided smile. "Not many," he replied.

"I know Samantha does," Sparky mused. "What about Taro? She's had her own share of trouble."

Merlin took another lap of his coffee and then set the cup aside. He lifted the covers for her and then answered as she gathered her sarong around her to crawl in beside him. "In all the years we've known one another, Taro and I have never slept together, Sparky. She flirts enough with me, but I think she's afraid of compromising the friendship we have since I'm her boss."

"Renny's been sharing a lot of time with her since he came on board," Sparky commented as she snuggled up against him. "He has with me, too."

"See?" the wolf said unsurprised at her confession. "Everyone seems to be happy."

"Almost everyone, Merlin."

The wolf looked down at the feline. "Something the matter?"

She was hesitant to answer, but swallowed and rubbed her head up underneath his chin. "I have plenty of company here, but I miss Roland. He and I have exchanged a lot of messages lately."

"Well, it *has* been nearly two years since he last hired on with us as temporary help. Do you know where he is? Perhaps he can meet us at one of our delivery points and travel with us again."

Sparky looked up at him with a smile. "I was hoping you'd let him join us again."

"Why wouldn't I?" Merlin asked. "He's a good worker, always pulls his own weight when he's with us, and he gets on well with everyone. I like him."

"He is on Dennier," the lynx replied. "He's working for a starship drydock in Lupopolis. He said they are building the prototype of a *Prime*-class transport vessel in a partnership with someone on Earth."

Merlin pulled a slateboard from underneath the meal tray on the nightstand and called up the delivery roster. "After we leave Alexandrius, we're heading to Earth for system upgrades. More downtime... Once that's done, we have to fly empty to Quet, where we're to pick up a delivery of processed micranite to take to Dennier." He set the slateboard aside and did some mental calculations. "We'll next be on Dennier in about three months."

"Three months..." Sparky repeated as she thought about it. "That should be just about right," she said.

"Right for what?"

The lynx looked up at him and then smiled mischievously. "That's a secret," she laughed. "Thank you, Merlin. You're the best!"

"Only when it comes to taking care of my friends," he said as he switched off the light.

She wrapped her arms around his middle and they both slid down to a reclining position. The wolf held her close and then shut his eyes.

The world of Alexandrius loomed blue and bright in the forward windows, both of its small moons full on opposite sides of the world, all on a backdrop of glittering stars. Clouds swirled like ribbons across its surface and the planet's oceans glittered even from the distance of spatial orbit.

Merlin sat in the pilot seat, Taro was stationed at the Com terminal and Renny occupied navigation. Though not required for the landing procedures, Samantha was in the engineering station seat to see her homeworld as they came upon it. Their destination was the capitol city of Alexandrius and it was located on a high plateau near the center of the planet's largest continent, which was visible through the ship's main windows. Five mountain ranges radiated out away from the central plateau as if they were great spokes of a continent-sized wheel drawing the eye directly to the city at its hub even from orbit.

"Adjusting ship's time to Alucara standard clocks," Taro announced over the intercom. "Local time is fourteen thirty-seven." It was standard procedure to set themselves to the clocks of whatever world and zone they were about to spend much time in. Because of the repair work, their stay would be longer on this landing. What the vessel's clocks were set to would remain as standard ship's time until their next planetfall. The ship's systems would reflect the change instantaneously with her reset.

The red fox received a signal in her headset and nodded to herself at the information scrolling across her station screen. "This is the *Blue Horizon*," she stated into her microphone, "Planetary Alignment registry number PA1261. We are coming in on standard approach vector for landing at the Chaparral Metro Spaceport in Alucara." She listened a second and then answered, "Ryu Industries." She received the transmitted coordinates on her screen and as she listened, her fingers glided across her panel to transfer the data to Renny's terminal. The cheetah set about programming the information into the main computer as Taro finalized their approach from the Alexandrius Defense Authority.

"ADA has given us authorization for landing, Captain," she said over her shoulder.

"Good," the wolf replied. "Renny?"

"Transferring navigational trajectory to your panel now."

"All hands, all hands," Taro announced on ship-wide speakers, "landing sequence has begun. Strap yourselves in."

Merlin moved the guidance shifts forward and the ship nosed down toward the blue world. Renny flicked a switch at his station and the forward windows took on an orange hue as the heat shields activated. There was a resistance to the controls for several long moments as the atmosphere thickened with their descent, and then the windows cleared. Renny's eyes grew wide when he noticed a bank of immense cloud formations directly in front of them.

"What kind of clouds are *those*?" he asked.

"Cumulonimbus clouds," Samantha responded. "You've never seen thunderheads before?"

"We never had anything like cumulo... uh, thunderheads in the region where I grew up," he replied. "Our weather was fairly calm."

Merlin adjusted the inverted L-shaped shifts, skirted around the mountainous clouds, and through the valleys between them. "The air turbulence will get worse when we pass through them," he said. "We'll probably get stroked by lightning a few times, too."

"Lightning!" Renny felt the hair on the back of his neck rising, though not from static electricity.

"We'll be okay," Taro reassured him. "Our heat shields will dissipate them before they hit anything vital."

"That's good to know," the navigator replied unconvincingly.

"Here we go!" Merlin exclaimed with a grin. Although dangerous, this was his favorite type of flying. Nothing was quite like the feeling of speed when zooming through an atmosphere. The *Blue Horizon* entered a dark cloud and the windows went black.

"Taro, give me infrared on the video panels," Merlin ordered casually as he dimmed the cabin lights. The first officer complied without answering and then looked over at Renny as the greenish screens showed the boiling clouds, rain and hail chunks swirling before them. The cheetah's claws dug into the armrests of his seat and his ears were laid flat against his head. A small bolt of lightning snaked out above them, but the ship's speed quickly left it far behind.

Merlin checked his readouts, adjusted his course through the thunderheads and then dropped their speed. A heartbeat later, the *Blue Horizon* emerged beneath the clouds into a hard rainstorm. Another bolt of lightning reached up from the distant ground and touched the cloud beside them with a boom that shook the vessel. They were heading westward in the opposite direction of the mass of clouds, so within moments they were out into full sunlight over the central plateau.

The video panel flashed blinding green a moment before Taro switched off the infrared signal and replaced it with polarization. Renny let out the breath he had held and looked back at the smiling wolf.

"What a rush!" Merlin said excitedly.

"If you say so..." Renny mumbled. He turned to the fox to ask a question, but saw her speaking lowly into her headset microphone. He moved his attention instead to the windows and looked toward the ground. They were still a long ways up, but he could see farmlands below them and a vast lake to the south.

"Look there, Renny," Samantha said. The cheetah followed her gaze to the distance and saw a large city on the horizon.

"Is that Alucara?" he asked.

"That's it," she replied, "the capitol city."

As the wolf dropped the ship's altitude further, he also decreased its speed so as not to create an annoying sonic boom to the non-sentient farm animals below them. The city grew larger in the windows and Renny was somewhat disappointed that it resembled most other large cities, even if the central core of skyscrapers seemed impossibly tall.

Taro half turned toward Merlin. "I've made contact with a representative from Ryu Industries. His name is Ashton Vandercliff," she said. "He'll meet us at landing pad 39A." The vixen did not look happy as she added, "He said he got your report on the loss of the Amohalkonicin and says he has some new information that he needs to discuss with you as soon as we've landed."

"Lovely," Merlin replied with a sour expression. He dropped their altitude to twelve hundred feet as they passed over the city and slowed to within flight speed limits.

"There's the spaceport," Taro said.

Samantha released her harness and stood up for a better view of the city, her tail wagging happily behind her. Everything sparkled from the recent rain.

"Sam," Merlin said, "Start equalizing our internal air pressure with that of the city and then begin atmosphere transfer."

"Aye, Captain," she answered as she resumed her seat. "Commencing with smog-transfer." Renny wrinkled his nose at her words, *really* hoping the outside air would first pass through filters. She saw his expression and winked at him with a smile.

Taro engaged a few switches and then spoke over the ship-wide intercom, "Artificial gravity has now been disabled. In another ten minutes, we will be on the ground with full engine shutdown. All personnel report to Durant in fifteen minutes for cargo moving detail. That includes you, Sparky."

Renny studied the vixen in wonder. In private, she was playful, mischievous and even silly, but in dealing with the ship's operations, she was very businesslike and took her role as second-in-command seriously. He wondered how much of her lighter side anyone else got to see. He felt the ship slow even more and glanced out the windows. They were moving beneath the spaceport traffic and on approach to a wide, three-story red building. In large white letters written in Universal Standard across the top of the structure were the words, *Ryu Industries - Alexandrius Division*. The *Blue Horizon* stopped forward movement above a concrete landing pad and began dropping slowly.

Merlin lowered the caterpillar landing gear and set his ship gently onto the pad with the slightest of bumps. He then began shutting down systems on his panel and Renny did likewise. Within moments, only the necessary systems on board were still operational.

The wolf got out of his harness and stretched as he stood up. "Taro," he said, "I have a rather busy day ahead of me, meeting with everyone from Mr. Vandercliff to Duncan from Interstellar Insurance. I will not be around for cargo detail, so make sure Durant gives everyone their pay voucher before they all scatter across the city."

"What is our downtime?" Samantha asked. "The usual three days until our next customer?"

Merlin shook his head. "No, I've arranged for a repair team to rebuild our galley, which must be done before we lift off again. Depending upon how quickly Duncan makes his assessment, we'll probably have nearly two weeks before we can leave."

"I'll make sure everyone's taken care of," Taro said as she and Renny headed for the door.

"Merlin," Sam said after they had gone, "I can get you a good deal on the repair work if you have it done in Belleville. It is not very far from here."

"Your family's home town?" the wolf asked. "Okay, make the arrangements and get back to me after Mr. Duncan has finished with us. Once we have completed our business in Alucara, I can transfer the ship there. Have everyone take a DC with them so I can let them know where to meet when we're ready to depart."

"You can depend on me," the collie said. She gave him a quick lick on the cheek and then headed off the bridge. Merlin needed to gather a few other items before he went down to meet with Vandercliff, so he shut down the bridge lights and headed for his den.

When Taro and Renny stepped off the lift in the cargo hold, they knew something was up. The pair could not see to the open bay door, but they could hear a commotion from that direction. They skirted past pallets and crates around the perimeter of the vast room, and eventually found a small crowd gathered at the cargo ramp. Visible amidst all the bodies of the crew personnel were a pair of sails resembling large tan ears. Taro saw them and squealed in delight, startling her companion. She rushed forward and pushed her way through the others.

"Tanis!" she exclaimed gleefully. She wrapped her arms tight around a short fennec fox and licked his cheeks enthusiastically. When she lifted him up off the ground, Renny saw the newcomer for the first time.

Tanis was short, but his large ears were spread out above him. His fur was light tan with a fluff of white at his throat. He was dressed in loose black trousers and a blue short-sleeve shirt. The one thing that most caught the cheetah's attention was the fennec's glassy black eyes. It was hard for him to distinguish the pupils from their irises, and the eyeballs themselves were reflective.

He did not know who this Tanis was, but Renny suddenly did not like him. Taro was just a little too familiar with this male and no one else seemed to care. Renny let out a sharp whistle and all the talking ceased. He put on a friendly smile and asked, "Would someone please introduce me to this guy everyone else seems to know?"

Taro laughed and set her friend down. "This is Arktanis TeVann," she explained.

"Call me *Tanis*, mate," the newcomer said with a strong accent in his voice and an extended hand.

The cheetah took his hand and nodded. "Renny Thornton," he replied.

Sparky moved to the desert fox's other side and added, "He used to work with us on the *Blue Horizon* a few years back, until the Nalirra military drafted him away from us."

Tanis put his arms around Taro and Sparky and hugged them close. "My service time has expired and I'm a free spirit again."

"So," Pockets asked, "how long are you gonna be around, Tanis? It's good to see you again."

"How long? For as long as ya'll have me," the fennec answered with a smile. "Merlin's hired me back on."

"It's true," Durant spoke up. "The boss had me reactivate Tanis' old account a couple of days ago."

"Hired you to do what?" Renny asked suspiciously.

"Medic and pilot," Tanis replied, "along with the usual cargo moving."

"Speaking of which," Patch said as he lit up a cigar, something he never did in the oxygen-rich atmosphere during a flight, "Someone from Ryu Industries just arrived. We'd better start moving the merchandise."

"Good idea," Durant said.

"Did our pay get transferred to our accounts?" Pockets asked. "I'll need fresh credits for the parts to a project."

Durant nodded as he pulled on a pair of work gloves. "I transmitted the funds to your accounts last night. Just don't forget to take your credicards."

"The captain said he wants everyone take a DataCom with them," Samantha said as she arrived. "That way he can let you know how long we'll be down this time."

"Ya'll be down longer than the standard three days?" Tanis asked.

"Yeah," Sparky answered. "I blew up the galley on our way here, and we've had to use the kitchenette in the Rec Room ever since. Merlin has to get it rebuilt before we take off again."

"Ya did not try to make that wonder meal, did ya?" Tanis asked with a look of surprise.

"Guilty," the lynx admitted. "I've been forbidden to ever make it again anywhere near the ship."

"Where is Merlin?" Patch asked as he unlocked an anti-grav pallet mover from a storage locker.

"He has to meet with Mr. Vandercliff and Mr. Duncan. He will not be able to help us with cargo duty this time," Samantha answered.

"Did someone just mention my name?" The group turned to see a thin black human in a gray business suit smiling at them.

"Are you Duncan?" Pockets asked.

"No," the man replied. "I am Ashton Vandercliff. Is Mr. Sinclair present?"

"Right here," the wolf said from the interior of the hold. He stepped out into the sunlight and everyone saw that he had changed into a standard business suit with an amber tie to match his eyes. He set a briefcase on the ground next to him as he extended a hand to the human. "I've been up in my den preparing everything for our meeting." They shook hands and gave each other a professional smile.

Tanis grinned and gave a wave to the captain, but knew with Merlin that business always came first. The wolf acknowledged him with a nod and then gave the human his full attention. "If you'll show me to your office, Mr. Vandercliff, we'll take care of business while my crew unloads your cargo," Merlin said.

"Of course, this way."

As the pair moved away toward the building, Tanis picked up his duffel bag and set it aside out of the way. He rubbed his hands together and said, "Since I'm a member of this crew again, I suppose I have to work now, don't I?"

Renny slapped the short guy on the back and handed him a pair of work gloves. "That's right," he said with cautious smile. "You can help me. Let's get started."

UNEXPECTED PARTNERS

By Ted R. Blasingame

SS Blue Horizon PA1261

Captain's Journal

All repairs to the galley have been completed and the Blue Horizon is whole once again. Thanks to special favors called in by Samantha to friends in Belleville, the repair bill only amounted to ©27,500, much to the relief of Durant and myself. Sparky and Samantha have spent the last two days shopping for utensils, pots, pans and small appliances we will need, in addition to replacement groceries for the pantry. Everything in the galley is new and state-of-the-art. The only things that were not replaceable were all the special spices and seasonings Sparky had collected from the various PA worlds, though in time that stock will build up again. The two of them purchased nearly all of one store's stock of what they did have on hand, however, so I'm confident none of our meals will turn out bland in the end.

I'd also contracted to have a new automated fire suppression system installed into the galley while the compartment was undergoing repairs and the spent hand extinguishers have been recharged as well. Sparky promises to be more careful from now on, but one can never be sure. This is something that should have been in place during the ship's original construction.

Concerning the loss of the Amohalkonicin, Ryu Industries surprised us. It seems the damaged drug shipment was already oxygen-contaminated and was being recalled from Kantus, indicated by the small red tags attached to the containers. We were given a small penalty for not having the pallets properly secured, and Durant volunteered to pay the tiny amount since it was his duty as load master to check over the tie-downs. I have been assured that we will be contracted for further business with Ryu Industries, so it is a relief to know we did not lose a loyal client.

While the Blue Horizon was in the repair garage, I bought new linens for all the cabins and a few additional items for the Rec Room. I don't handle long periods of leave very well, so after a few days off I returned to the ship and spent my time casually making some little improvements on my own and doing a few small repairs that neither Patch nor Pockets had ever gotten around to fixing. The Atmosphere Filtering System was in need of a big cleansing that took me two days to take care of. There was a lot of loose fur clogging up the multiple filters and some of it was partially disintegrated from various contaminants in the air over time. I will have to speak with Patch to make sure the filters are checked more frequently.

We are still eight hours away from launch, but everyone has already returned from their respective trips during our extended leave. Other than for the repair downtime, I think everyone needed the time away to just get out to do things.

It is great having Tanis back with us, but I think we may have some trouble brewing. During the voyage from Kantus, Renny and Taro spent a good deal of their off-duty time together. I know that Taro has no plans to settle down with any one guy, but I think Renny got a little too used to having her exclusive company. An onlooker would not think that Tanis has been gone for two years with the way he and Taro have resumed their own loose relationship. I can sometimes see jealousy in Renny's eyes when

all three of them are in the same room together, but he hides it well. I only hope it does not affect his performance at work; should that happen, it will be time for counseling.

On the other hand, Tanis does not seem to mind when Taro is with Renny. He knew her well enough in the past to remember she does not hold favorites. Taro enjoys male companionship and play, though she's picky about who she gives her affections to, and I doubt she will ever get very serious with anyone.

Pockets came back to the ship with several crates of miscellaneous parts and electronics that he purchased at a local auction. He loves to tinker with gadgets during his spare time on long voyages and always seems to have some bit of junk occupying a locker in the hold. He said he had a special project in mind that will benefit the Blue Horizon. Sometimes I am dubious of what he may create, but he is skilled and has rarely made anything that has caused us grief.

Patch returned this afternoon, smiling happily. I don't believe I have ever seen him in such a mood in the six years I have known him, but I will not be nosy. He has not volunteered any information on what his vacation entailed, but I suspect he found pleasant distraction in a feminine form if the faint floral scent that surrounds him is any indication.

Durant seems refreshed and, if I may venture to think it, he somehow looks... younger. He has not had much of a vacation in years, despite my frequent recommendation for one. He is easy to get along with and does enjoy his off-duty time, but when at work on the company books, he can be distracted by little else. This downtime seems to have done him some good.

Samantha spent most of her off time with Sparky and dragged the poor lynx all over Belleville and Alucara to show her the sights and do lots of shopping. When Sam had a tub marked for data crystals delivered to the ship this afternoon, her explanation was simply "Old movies." It looks like the Rec Room video panel will get some use on this trip. Her love of old movies over more recent ones is well known among our crew.

We don't have any cargo for this next voyage, and I even offered to extend everyone's leave further since we will have more downtime soon. The Blue Horizon's defenses have been in need of upgrading for a while and the trip to Earth for that purpose has been on the roster for nearly a year. Perhaps the weapons will allow us more protection against raiders until I can upgrade the engines to H-model power class.

Merlin Sinclair, Captain

"Merlin?" Samantha asked as she stepped off the lift into the Rec Room. Renny and the captain were fencing over the exercise mats at the aft end of the deck, and with the collie's distraction, the cheetah jumped in with his attack and scored a hit on the red heart painted over the chest of Merlin's fencing uniform. The wolf looked down at the blunt point of his opponent's sword and frowned.

"What was it you were telling me about keeping your attention on the fight?" Renny said with a grin as he removed his face screen.

"Touché," Merlin replied as he removed his own shield. He nodded and then looked over at Sam.

"Sorry I ruined your concentration, Captain," Samantha said.

"Not at all," Merlin replied. "You just proved a point I had been trying to get across to our navigator. It just happened to be *his* point that got across to *my* anatomy." He glanced down at the slateboard she held and asked, "So what is it you needed?"

She wet her lips and then began. "The Anason Defense Corporation of San Francisco has refused sale of some of the systems you wanted for the *Blue Horizon*."

"Refused?" Merlin asked, puzzled. "Since when do they turn down customers for the sale of their arms?"

Samantha shook her head. "They have not refused to sell us everything you wanted, Captain," she replied, "Only certain items. We're fine and welcome to the updated sensors, shields, Geo21 terminals and Binfurr hand weapons, but we are not allowed to purchase the pulse cannons or shock thread emitters."

"Why not?" Renny asked. "They sell them all the time to those who can afford it."

Samantha walked to a nearby lounge chair and sat down. "Their license forbids sale of them to certain non-military craft. Apparently, those who set the rules on defense mechanisms apparently don't think a mere freighter needs *combat* capabilities."

"I disagree," Merlin said in annoyance. "With our recent brushes with Sagan, I fully intend to fortify the *Blue Horizon*, even if I have to go through unofficial channels." The wolf looked straight at Samantha and pressed his lips together tightly. When the canine did not respond, he glanced over at Renny and handed him his rapier. "We'll have to cut our session short today," he said. "Would you put this away for me? I need to take care of this."

"No problem, boss," the cheetah replied. "I'll make sure it is cleaned and stored properly."

"Thank you."

Samantha stood up and followed the captain to the lift. She glanced back at the feline pilot and gave him a worried look before she disappeared from sight.

Renny frowned and looked down at the two swords he held. "I don't know if this is a good thing," he muttered to himself.

"Merlin," Samantha said as she settled down in a chair in the captain's den. "I know what you are thinking."

"Do you?" the wolf replied. "Yes, I suppose you do." Merlin fell silent a moment as he gathered his thoughts. The collie sat patiently awaiting his words, quietly wondering how this was going to go. "Sam," the captain started, "I know you have a lot of... connections. You've managed to *acquire* things at times when there never seemed a clear way to obtain them."

"Captain... I -"

"No, I don't want to know who or where they are," he added before she could say more. He smiled and waved a hand into the air. "I'm probably better off not knowing your resources. However, I need to ask you this. Can you get the weapon systems I want for the *Blue Horizon*?"

Samantha twitched her whiskers and then answered, "Possibly. I cannot guarantee how soon I can get it or how much it will -"

"Cost is no object," Merlin interrupted. Then he smiled. "Well, cost *is* a concern, but this is an investment to insure the *Blue Horizon* against falling prey to Sagan or any other raiders out there. I hate to keep bringing this up, but Jiro might still be with us if we'd had adequate protection to keep Sagan from getting on board in the first place."

"I'll see what I can do, Captain."

The wolf nodded. "I would appreciate anything you could turn up for me." He glanced over at the chronometer. "Who's on the bridge right now?"

"Tanis took the watch about an hour ago."

“Okay, I’m going to shower and then settle in with a book.”

Pockets smiled and set his soldering iron on a safety rack. He put the remaining band of solder into a container and placed it in a drawer of his workbench. He picked up a voltage meter, placed its leads onto the terminals he had just soldered into place, and then took a reading. The raccoon nodded to himself and put the meter away.

“Truly a stroke of genius,” he murmured to himself. He moved a forefinger to a solitary button recessed into the surface of the saucer-shaped project on his bench and was rewarded with a soft internal hum from the unit. He picked up a molded cover, attached it over the opening of the device, and it snapped easily into place. He turned the disk right side up gently and gave it a loving pat. The saucer was ten inches across with a ring of sensors embedded around the outer circumference of its prismatic blue surface. A domed lens mounted offset on the upper curved surface gleamed with a faint green glow. Three sensor antennae below the *eye* extended out toward each side resembling a set of whiskers.

Pockets then turned toward the computer terminal on his desk and typed in an encrypted command. The screen that appeared prompted him to enter three separate sets of identity codes and passwords. When he was into the system, he loaded a data crystal into the terminal’s reader and then accessed a program. He waited a few seconds for it to load and then smiled when the desired screen appeared. His fingers worked across the keypad and the saucer floated up off the workbench a few inches.

The raccoon grinned and gave the saucer a hard shove. It slid over the side of the bench, but maintained its altitude as it floated toward the far wall of the room. It stopped three inches from the wall and simply hovered in place. Pockets entered a few new commands and the device began floating about the room, its sensors calibrating and registering everything, its single eye missing nothing. Heeding its commands, the unit altered its altitude to float under the bed, over the bookcase and all around the room. Pockets studied the readouts on his monitor and nodded to himself in satisfaction.

The saucer returned to the workbench and hovered beside the monitor, its single eye studying the raccoon. Pockets smiled at it and then initiated instructions to tie it into the *Blue Horizon’s* central computer system. As soon as he finished the last keystroke, the raccoon looked up at the unit and said, “Hello, Moss.”

“Meow!” the unit replied back to him enthusiastically.

Sparky hummed softly to herself as she chopped up several Tanthean vegetables into a steaming pot on the galley’s massive stove. She loved cooking and enjoyed all the preparations. She wore her smiling kitty apron over a loose red tank top and beige shorts. As she merrily worked away, her feline instincts snapped into play. There was movement at the edge of her vision and she looked over at it quickly. She froze as she watched a blue saucer with whiskers float into the room and then maneuver toward her kitchen. Only her eyes moved as she followed its progress.

The disc paused to study her with its single green eye and then continued on to monitor the contents of the stove. It moved around the room, pausing briefly at every readout and indicator on the equipment and then quietly floated back toward the door. Only when it had

gone did Sparky twitch her whiskers. She did not know what the strange visitor was, but she had never seen it before and was not sure she liked it poking into her galley.

She moved to the intercom panel and called up to the bridge. *"This is Tanis,"* the fennec fox's accented voice replied a moment later.

"Tanis," Sparky said in a rush, "do we have a tiny flying saucer on board?"

There was a moment of silence before he answered. *"A tiny flying saucer? I don't think we have any in our stores. Do ya need one?"*

"No, silly," the lynx replied, shaking her head. "I just had one visit my galley. I've never seen it before now."

"What was it doing?"

"It was just looking around, mostly at the equipment gauges. It's blue, about the size of one of my pie pans, has a single green eye lens and... whiskers."

"Whiskers? O-kay... I'll buzz the Captain and see if he knows anything about it."

"Thank you, Luv."

"...that's what she said, Captain."

"Okay, Tanis, I'll look into it. Let me know if anyone else reports sighting the thing."

"Aye."

Merlin looked wistfully at the novel he had to abandon and then stood up to retrieve his hat from a peg on the wall. There was a knock on the door and he tapped it open. Samantha rushed in and then stared back out into the corridor.

"Yes, Sam, what is it?"

"You are not going to believe this, but... I just saw a little one-eyed flying saucer... and it *meowed* at me!"

"Meowed?"

"Like a cat. You don't seem surprised."

Merlin twitched an ear. "Sparky just had a similar visitation in the galley."

"What is it?"

"I don't know, but we need to find out." The intercom beeped again and the wolf clicked the circuit open. "This is Merlin."

"Captain," Renny's voice said, *"I have a small floating disc trapped in my quarters. It opened my door on its own and started snooping around."*

"Is it blue with whiskers?"

"Uh, yeah, with one green eye. How did you know?"

"Others have reported sightings of this UFO," the captain answered. "I'll be right there. Keep it locked up if you can. It might be a surveillance camera someone planted on board."

"Captain! I shut my door to keep it inside, but the door just reopened on its own!"

"Grab it if you can! I'm on my way!" Merlin and Samantha hurried out of the room and ran around the curved corridor toward the cheetah's cabin. The noise of high-speed whirring raced toward them, and both had to flatten against the walls when the saucer flew between them with a frantic, *"Meowwww!"* Renny shot past them almost as quickly, stooped so low that he was practically down on all fours, and the swift cheetah gained on the disc.

Merlin looked at Sam and motioned to the opposite direction the others had gone. "This way! They'll be rounding the corridor toward us again. We'll cut off that thing's escape!" They took off running and almost knocked over Taro, who had just come out of her quarters to find

out the cause of the commotion. They bypassed her without a word and soon heard the chase approaching them again. Merlin whipped off his flight jacket and handed one end to the collie when they stopped. They spread it across the passageway just as the flying saucer came into view. Merlin jumped to the left as the disc tried to dodge around him and snared the thing in his coat, a pocket nearly taking off some of Samantha's fingers in the process.

"Gotcha!" he exclaimed. He fell to floor with his arms tightly wrapped around his captive. Renny zoomed around the corner and almost didn't stop in time to keep from running over his captain. He stepped on the captain's hat, which had flipped off in the commotion, and nearly slipped to the floor.

"Meooooowrrrr!" The bundle emitted an angry squawk, and then Merlin and the thing in the coat floated off the floor a few inches. It started to move down the hallway toward the approaching Taro, but Samantha grabbed the wolf's tail with her good hand and held on.

"Whoa! You're not going anywhere!" she said with a grimace.

"What's going on?" Taro asked.

"Mew, meow-meowwwww!"

"Moss! Stop! Quiet down!"

Everyone turned to look at the raccoon that had just joined them.

"Pockets, is this thing yours?" Merlin asked as the device lowered him to the floor and settled down.

"Yes, it's my newest contribution to the ship," the short mechanic replied with a wide grin. Merlin released the disc and watched it float over to the raccoon. "Captain, I present the MO.S.S. unit, or just *Moss*, to keep it simple."

"Meow!" the thing chirped at the introduction.

"Moss?" Merlin bent over and picked up his scrunched hat. He frowned at the crease in the brim and held it in his hands as he looked back at the raccoon. Samantha rubbed her aching fingers and snorted at the short procyonid.

"Moss stands for *Mobile Sentry System*," Pockets explained, losing some of his smile beneath their gazes. "Its sole purpose is to roam the ship randomly, its sensors tuned to search for any abnormalities beyond programmed parameters, or for individuals who do not match a crew profile. I have it tied into the Geo21 computer to the sensors and security systems."

"Why?"

Pockets stuck his hands in two of his many namesakes and replied, "Patch and I have our time full keeping the *Blue Horizon* functioning and we don't always have the luxury to go around checking everything to see if anything else is *about* to go bad. Moss will quietly float about the ship, monitoring systems on all three levels and alert us to any potential problems before they happen."

"Does it speak?" Taro asked as the saucer floated up to inspect her orange-colored eyes.

"Not really," Pockets said with a smile. "It communicates directly to the Geo21 computer and can display its messages on any terminal monitor."

"Then why the *meow*?" Samantha wanted to know.

"It's just a personal touch since it looks a little feline, primarily to give it the illusion of individual personal expression. I thought it was better than beeps and whistles."

Renny gestured toward the hovering unit and asked, "Can it think? Artificial intelligence?"

"No, no more than the Geo21 system can. AIs tend to develop annoying neuroses, so I've kept this simple. The outward expression is only a small running program to react in basic form to its surroundings. If, for example, it discovered a power relay overheating and saw you

coming down the corridor, it might fly up to you and meow frantically. You may not know what it is trying to tell you, but you'll know something is up enough to check the nearest monitor where it will give you data and video reference."

Merlin nodded his head in thought. "How much will it interfere with our daily lives?"

"Not at all," Pockets answered. "Merely leave it alone to go about its guard duty and you'll soon get used to it floating about in the background, just like any other system on board."

"I don't want it spying on me in my quarters," Renny stated. "What goes on in there is my business, not for the whole crew to witness over its camera."

Taro cuddled up to his side and ran a finger across his chest. "You mean you don't want everyone else to see our adventures together?" She laughed at the expression that appeared on his face.

"Something like that," he muttered under his breath, but loud enough for all to hear.

Pockets grinned and looked up at the tall cheetah. "Moss is tied into the computer's security system and can operate any door or panel to gain access to do its sentry duty. However, all you have to do is engage the lock on any door you want to remain shut and it will keep Moss out just as well as anyone, except in the case of a real emergency."

"Oh, okay then."

Samantha put a hand on the raccoon's shoulder and gestured toward the saucer. "Earlier you said that it was also designed to search for individuals who do not match a crew profile. What did you mean by that?"

"Intruders. Stowaways. Lucas..." he replied with a look at the captain.

Merlin's ears went flat against his head at his younger brother's name. Lucas Sinclair was not the type of guy anyone would want to claim as a relative. He was usually unkempt, broke and out to see what con job he could pull on someone. He was a real dud in most people's opinions and he had been known to stow away on the *Blue Horizon* for free passage to another port to escape some trouble he had gotten into.

Their elder sister Shannon had raised them both after the trio's parents had perished in a violent tornadic storm that hit their hometown, but Lucas had always been a troublemaker and an embarrassment to the family. It was unknown just how he managed to find them for another ride amongst the thousands of ships and billions of lives spread across several planetary systems, but he seemed to have a knack for stalking them. It was too bad he'd never joined the Spatial Police Force; they could have used someone with that kind of talent.

"Okay, you've sold me on that," the wolf said. "What about its power consumption?"

"It's very efficient, Captain. Its power usage is very low, owing to new Tanthean technology, and it will return to engineering to recharge as necessary." It was clear Pockets was proud of his invention. "If you sat on top of it, I'm sure it could lift you and haul you down the corridor if needed."

"It has already tried that," Merlin said with a smirk. "All right, Pockets, we'll give Moss a tryout. Just try to respect everyone else's privacy with it."

"Not a problem, Captain."

"Can it operate in a vacuum?" Renny asked. "At times with our engines standing down, we could have it inspect the external systems, too."

"Hmm..." the raccoon mused as he scratched absently at his left ear. "I hadn't considered that, but I can look into it," he replied.

"Be sure to send a message about it to everyone's terminals, Pockets," Merlin said. "I don't want more flying saucer reports coming in to me every ten minutes."

"Aye, Captain."

Merlin tossed his warped hat onto its peg with a frown. He'd had it for years, but now it would have to be replaced. He settled back onto his bed with his book and had just opened it to his bookmark when there was a knock on the door. *The demands of being a captain...*

"Come on in," he said with a sigh.

Samantha opened the panel and peeked in at him. "Captain, may we talk to you?"

"We?"

"Durant and I."

"Come on in," he repeated.

The grizzly bear followed the supply officer into Merlin's quarters. He looked puzzled as he leaned up against the bookcase. "I don't know what this is about either, boss."

Samantha took the chair at the desk and turned it to face them as she sat down. "I wanted you both in on this conversation since the ship's finances are involved here."

Merlin looked at her with interest. "You have information about the armaments I wanted for the *Horizon*?" he asked. Durant twitched an ear as he crossed his arms. As the ship's accountant, Merlin had told him about his earlier conversation with the Border collie in the event she was successful and funds were needed to make the purchase.

"I've been in contact with Victor Faltane," Samantha said, confirming their thoughts. He's a human on Earth with more... uh, resources... than I have to get unorthodox materials."

"And?" Merlin prompted her to continue when she hesitated.

"He says he's found an arms dealer with the items you requested," she replied. "However, the channels are not quite... official... and therefore a little pricey."

"Forget the shady details of your contacts, Sam," Durant said softly. "What is it going to cost us?"

Samantha fidgeted and looked over at the wolf. "Considering what we're after, he can get them at a good price."

"The price, Sam," Merlin said suspiciously.

"Purchased and installed, the pulse cannons will be ©8,000 each, and the shock thread emitters are ©4,250 each. You wanted four of each, I believe, to cover all points of the compass. That would make it a grand total of ©49,000."

Durant gasped and Merlin made choking noises. The wolf put a hand to his chest and felt his rapid heartbeat. "Couldn't you get us a better deal than *that*?" he asked hoarsely.

"I'm sorry, Captain," Samantha replied. "I checked with three others and this *is* the best deal. If we had been able to go through the Anason Defense Corporation, we could have gotten the entire package installed for ©26,000. My other contacts had prices ranging from ©55,000 to nearly ©90,000."

Merlin looked over at Durant and repeated with a gulp, "Forty-nine thousand credits..."

"We *have* the funds in the company account," the bear said slowly, "but it will severely hamper basic operating expenses and shorten our profit margin substantially, especially after restocking the pantries and repairs made to the galley."

"I've been promising Patch that we'd upgrade the engines soon, but after this, that will have to wait," Merlin replied. "After the new installations are completed, we're due to head out to Quet to make a pickup, but on our way there, we'll be flying empty - which pays nothing. Taro was unable to secure us a delivery of *anything* going that way since nobody wants to go to that dump."

He looked over to Samantha for a long moment before he finally let out a heavy sigh. "Okay, put in the order and coordinate the payments through Durant."

The collie nodded. "I'll have Mr. Faltane arrange to have them shipped from Brandt. If he orders them now, they should arrive around the time ADC has finished installing the other systems."

"Brandt!" Merlin exclaimed. "You didn't tell me they were coming from Brandt!"

"You told me you weren't interested who my contacts went through," Samantha reminded him with a frown. "I don't have contacts there, but Faltane does."

Merlin was shaken, but he finally nodded for her to carry on. Durant departed behind her without a word, leaving the wolf to his thoughts. Brandt had once been a thriving commercial world, but it had fallen to corruption and economic ruin following the depletion of their primary resource, and it was now home to black market and underworld transactions. There *were* honest businesses operating out of Brandt, but there didn't seem to be many. Even the SPF had been decommissioned as having any kind of jurisdiction near that world, so the residents were often tough to deal with. Personally, Merlin had never been to Brandt and had never had a desire to visit the place, but if he could get what he wanted from there, he supposed that it would not hurt to *receive* something manufactured on Brandt.

The wolf suddenly smiled at the irony of it. He would be getting armaments from a place that often supplied raiders for use *against* raiders. Suddenly he felt justified for getting them from Brandt. The systems might be rather expensive, but if they would be used to save the *Blue Horizon* from attack, it would be credits well spent. At least he would not have to go there personally to get what he needed.

Merlin sat back on his bed and picked up his novel, now in a more relaxed mood.

Taro smiled and half-closed her eyes as the evening sea winds blew through her fur. She was walking along a secluded beach, her toes firmly dug into the white sand as the surf washed upon them. Her only garment was a beige ribbon tied in a bow at the tip of her tail and a wide-brimmed straw hat with cutouts for her ears. There was no one else around and all was peaceful.

Due to the seemingly endless repairs the *Blue Horizon* was forced to undergo lately, the crew had gotten several extended vacations. They had been on Earth for two weeks and the vixen's roaming had brought her to this small island in the Gulf of Mexico. She had spent the first few days in the company of Renny and Tanis, but their constant friendly rivalry for her affections had irritated her after a while. Tanis only teased the cheetah to get a rise out of him, but Renny sometimes took his feelings toward the red fox a little too seriously. She had ditched them in the streets of New Orleans and escaped on a chartered boat to this place. She had flirted with the Cajun boat pilot on the trip out, but he had been interested only in her money.

The vixen moved up the beach toward her blanket and sat down on the multicolored fabric beside her ice chest. She noted immediately that the DC flashed an amber diode, indicating someone had tried to contact her unit. The DataComs carried by the other crewmembers were keyed to one another, so she sighed and picked up the device, strongly hoping it was not Renny or Tanis again. She loved them both dearly, but there were times she wanted to be away from them.

Fortunately for her, the call had come from her captain. She activated the unit and then tapped the diode. The device would send a callback tracer to whoever had last tried to contact her. "This is Taro," she sing-songed into the tiny microphone.

"Taro," Merlin's voice came back a moment later, "I hope I'm not disturbing you, but I want to give you an update on the ship."

"Go ahead, Captain," she said in a lazy voice. She pulled the straw hat off her head with her free hand and placed it on the blanket beside her. With the sun setting, she no longer needed it.

"I just got word from the Anason Defense Corporation that the installation of our updated sensors, shields and new Geo21 terminals has been completed. The inspector's examination is tomorrow morning and then the work here is done. I received the new hand weapons from Binfurr Arms and have already secured them."

"Where are you now?"

"I've spent the past week with a friend of mine in Oklahoma City. He's going to fly me back to San Francisco in his private flitter."

"Any word on the special items Samantha ordered for you?"

There was a moment of hesitation before the captain answered, *"I will not go into details over the DC, but her contact gave me directions on where to transport the ship for the further upgrades. He expects the shipment to arrive by tomorrow afternoon, so if the inspection at Anason goes as scheduled in the morning, the Blue Horizon will be delivered to the installation site in time for them to get started. He estimates another four days thereafter for everything to be completed for my thumb print."*

"Has he manipulated the price?" Taro asked suspiciously.

"Actually, no."

"Surprising. Where is the installation site?"

"It is in Tucson. By the way, Taro, where are you? Renny was afraid you'd been abducted."

The fox smiled. "I'm resting in the sand on a secluded beach," she replied. "Tell him he can stop worrying about me. I'm okay and am enjoying the warm sun on my fur."

"That's kind of vague, Taro."

"That's the idea, Merlin."

"Okay, I get the picture," the wolf said with a laugh. *"I won't bother you again until it's time to gather back to the ship."*

"Thank you, Captain. I appreciate it."

The fox clicked off the communication device and set it aside. The sun was setting near the horizon and she wanted to watch it in peaceful solitude.

Sparky and Durant stopped to rest on one of the park benches located along the boardwalk. Several other sightseeing visitors stared at them as they walked by. Although Furs had originated there three centuries earlier, it was obvious some of the humans on Earth were still not used to seeing many sentient animals on their world, especially someone like Durant in a National Park where native grizzly bears were a protected species.

Durant smiled and nodded courteously to the family and then looked down at the Yellowstone pamphlets he had picked up at a booth near the ancient Old Faithful Inn. "I'm surprised to see this many people in the park at this time of year," he said with fogged breath, looking around him. Snow was everywhere but the cleared boardwalks and around the hot spring geysers. Those who were visiting the park were bundled up heavily, although this

particular season the winter had been rather mild. Durant wore only a pair of loose trousers and a lightweight green shirt, plus a light tan bomber jacket with *Blue Horizon* crew patches on the shoulder and chest. He did not seem all that affected by the cold, except he had felt drowsy since they had arrived two days ago.

Sparky, however, was shivering in the cold and constantly stayed close to her rather large, cuddly companion. Her teeth chattered as she tried to speak. "D-D-D-Durant... c-can we g-go?" she asked pitifully. "I-I-I'm not well s-suited for this weather w-w-without my winter fur."

Durant looked down at his diminutive companion and smiled apologetically. "I'm sorry, Sparky," he said. "I'd forgotten that it is early winter here."

"How c-can you f-f-forget with s-snow all around us?"

"I'm sorry," Durant said again.

"L-let's go, please?"

"Okay, back to the Inn we go."

"N-not just to the Inn," Sparky chattered as they stood up and made their way back up the boardwalk. "L-let's go s-somewhere further south, w-w-where it is w-w-warmer!"

The bear picked her up and held the lynx close in his arms for warmth. "How about Florida? It's closer to the equator."

"T-t-that s-s-sounds wonderf-f-ful..."

"Jasper Porter?" A short, redheaded man with bowed legs stepped around the counter to look at the cigar-smoking raccoon before him. He was only a foot taller than the Fur, which only enhanced his own shortness, and he was dressed entirely in denim. His arms were thick and he did not seem to have much of a neck, but his green eyes were piercing and missed nothing around him. "I've been expecting ye," he said with a smile that caused the scar under his left eye to disappear within the wrinkles of his face.

Patch nodded and smiled around his cigar. "Do you have it?"

"Aye, that I do, and it is a thing of beauty, if I do say so myself."

"Good, then let's have a look at it."

The human wrung his hands together and motioned toward the back room. "This way, Mr. Porter," he said. "I do think ye'll be pleased with it. They're not easy to get nowadays and it takes a fine professional to operate one."

Patch flicked the ashes off his cigar into an old ashtray on the counter. "Indeed?" he said, narrowing his eyes at the challenge. "I've not handled one before, but with my skills, it shouldn't take long to get the feel of it."

"Good, good," the shopkeeper said as he led his customer to a long, blanket-covered table. "Those who own one o' these usually has few friends for a while, but when you've gotten the hang o' it, they'll take a keen int'rest in ye, for sure."

Patch didn't wait for the man to draw back the blanket and did the honors himself. He held his breath at the sight of the object and lightly ran his hand over its fine construction. "I came prepared to talk you down in price, Mr. Onion," he said, "but what I see here makes me believe it is worth every credit of what you've quoted me."

The little man raised his eyebrows at that revelation. "In that case, my little friend, you can have it minus fifty credits. I know a good customer when I sees one!"

Patch smiled at the human in full realization that the item had likely been overpriced by just that amount anyway, but he handed him his credicard. "I'll be sure to pay you another visit next time I'm on Earth," he said. He looked back at his new acquisition and was satisfied with the purchase.

Arktanis looked up at the *Blue Horizon* as they stepped into a San Francisco aircraft repair hangar and pointed to the vessel with his left hand. "That's my ship, Jennifer," he said. A human female of seventeen summers stood beside him and absently petted the top of the fennec's head. Her long sandy-blonde hair was near in color to the fox's fur and fluttered gently in the Pacific Ocean breeze. She looked down at him with large blue eyes.

"Would you take me on board?" she asked. "I've never been on a real space ship."

Tanis smiled as she knelt down to look him in the eye. "I can take ya in to look around, but they're still working on it. We cannot get in anyone's way and should not stay very long."

"How about just a quick tour?" she asked. "Just for a few minutes?"

"Okay. Follow me." He started toward the ramp into the cargo bay and the girl followed him with a satisfied smile. She had met the dark-eyed fennec fox at a local park where he was doing magic tricks for a handful of children. She had been fascinated by it all, not because of the sleight of hand performance, but due to his very nature. Earth was the homeworld to roughly half of the humans in the Planetary Alignment – the other half grew up on Kantus, one of Earth's first interstellar colonies to relieve the burden of overpopulation after the discovery of Faster Than Light travel – and although they were an official part of that league of worlds, anthropomorphs – or *Furs* as the humans called them – were primarily *visitors* to their original birthplace.

It was ironic that the Furs had been created so that humanity could move out into the stars, but yet humans stubbornly remained on Earth, letting those Furs populate the other worlds they'd discovered. Even after three hundred years, there were not many Furs living on Earth outside of embassies, most just visitors for business or trade, so the locals tended to notice whenever any were around.

Jennifer's interest in Tanis was fueled by a long desire to see more than just her own world. Her family had money enough that she had already done a lot of traveling all over the globe, but they were uncomfortable with things out of the ordinary so they would never allow her to leave her homeworld to travel among the stars.

She looked up into the cavernous holding area that was currently devoid of cargo. A few workers were boxing up tools and sweeping debris from the floor as they passed. Tanis waved to one of them and led his personal tourist toward one of the main lifts.

"We won't linger down here in the cargo and engine areas," he told her as the red door of the elevator closed behind them. "I'll take ya up to the residential quarters and show ya the bridge, too."

"Cool," she said. It only took a moment to get to the second level and then he led her into a gently curving corridor. He pointed out the different cabins they passed as she translated and read aloud the nameplates written in Standard. "You have a room full of pockets?" she asked.

"No, silly," he answered with a grin. "Our mechanic is nicknamed Pockets. He's a raccoon."

"Durant?"

"Grizzly bear. Our accountant."

"You have a grizzly? Cool! What about Sparky?"

"A lynx. This next room is her galley."

"This is the galley?" Jennifer repeated doubtfully. "It looks more like a cafeteria. It looks brand-new, too."

"A galley is a ship's version of a cafeteria and we've just had it rebuilt after a fire. This is where we eat and the kitchen back there is where Sparky prepares our meals." The mural of the *Blue Horizon* in flight that Jiro had painted years ago was gone now, replaced with a blank wall of blue paint over the repaired fire damage. Tanis pulled her out of the room and continued around the corridor. He took off his flight jacket and carried it in his arms.

"Who is Patch?" she asked as she took up reading the nameplates again.

"A raccoon. He's -"

"Another raccoon?" Jennifer asked.

"Yeah, he's our chief engineer. He is Pockets' twin brother."

"Hey, this door doesn't have a name plate. Who has this room?"

"No one. It is a spare for guests who stay with us during a flight, although that doesn't happen often," Tanis replied. He opened the door and switched on the light. "It's got the same floor plan as the other cabins, so once ya've seen this one, ya've seen the others, only without personal effects."

Jennifer walked in and plopped down on the bed. "Hmm," she hummed, "it's rather comfy in here."

Tanis smiled and twitched his ears. "It has to be. The voyages between worlds take weeks and sometimes months to travel and everyone needs their own private space. It helps to have a comfortable room if ya have to spend long periods of time in it."

"It takes weeks and sometimes months?" she repeated. "Why so long?"

"Interstellar distances are quite vast," Tanis explained. "In the early days of space travel, it took *years* for the fastest unmanned probes to reach other worlds just within the same solar system, and at those speeds, it would take *decades* to travel to another star. Our LightDrive engines are exponentially faster, but it still takes a lot of time to get from one place to another. It would be nice if we had instantaneous travel, but that kind of technology just doesn't exist."

The girl nodded as if she understood, but then smiled thoughtfully to herself as she looked around the room. She stood up and looked to the corridor. "Shall we continue?"

As they walked, she saw that the next cabin was labeled with the name of her companion. "What kind of animal are *you*?" she asked, giving him a closer examination. His tan fur was silky in texture and the fluff of white at the base of his throat stuck out of his shirt like a bunched up scarf. She ran her fingers through the soft fur behind one of his large ears and he smiled up at her.

"A fennec fox," he replied. "My homeworld is Nalirra, in the Roppa star system."

Jennifer appeared confused. "Why do you with fur wear clothing?" she asked boldly. "I wouldn't think with a natural coat of fur that you'd have a need for clothing to protect you."

Tanis grinned widely at her question. "It's yer fault, actually."

"Mine?"

"I meant yer planet," he replied. Taking on the tone of an instructor, he explained. "Although the creation of Furs started on Earth, the other colony worlds have been operating apart for so long that it's sometimes difficult to remember where they began, especially since some of them were abandoned or forgotten for decades. After the Planetary Alignment was formed, the youth of our various planets adopted the wearing of clothing either as a fad or

rebellion against their elders, as most youth do. The trend never really died, however, and as they grew into the adults of our societies, they continued the practice. If ya travel outside yer own solar system, ya will still see many of the elders wearing only their fur, but for the most part, a lot of us who travel off world wear clothing like you do."

Jennifer wrinkled up her nose. "Isn't it hot, wearing clothes over fur?"

"Not with our fabrics. They look similar to yers, but they are much lighter and cooler. Besides, we also wear them loose and they are made to breathe. They're for show, mostly, without having any *real* practical use, although the extra layers are great when shipboard heaters don't always work well enough out in the absolute cold of space."

"Wow... *We* were the cause of that?" she asked.

Tanis laughed and leaned against the wall. "Pretty much," he said. "Not that it is a bad thing, mind ya. The clothes give us the chance to be different from our own species, or similar to others. Take a look at my flight jacket." He held it up for her to see. It was a light brown all-weather fabric with the ship's emblem patch on the left breast and right shoulder. "All the crew members have these. As I've told ya, we're a mixture of species: bear, canine, cheetah, red fox, fennec fox, lynx, raccoon and wolf, but with our similar jackets, we can be similar together."

"How come your things look like ours?" the girl asked.

"What do ya mean?"

"Everything I see looks like it could have all been made here on Earth; nothing looks... alien."

Tanis laughed. "Do yer schools still teach history?"

"Yes, of course. It's required."

"Do they teach about the Great Abandonment?"

"I've never heard of anything called that," Jennifer replied, shaking her head.

Tanis frowned, but then said, "No, I don't suppose that's what they would call it on Earth. Out among the rest of the Planetary Alignment, that's what we call the time when Earth created us Furs to colonize other worlds for them, but then a 'pure human' movement swept through nearly every nation. They all decided we should have never been created and were banned from the Earth. They abandoned all of their colonies and cut ties with them all simply because there were Furs on them. They even dismissed Kantus, even though there was already a great human population building up there."

"That's terrible!" Jennifer gasped. "I think I missed that in history class."

Tanis nodded. "About a hundred years later, things had changed on Earth and a new movement began to contact the abandoned colonies and welcome them back. By this time, however, the surviving colonies had flourished and expanded on their own, having created their own cultures and governments. However, since they had all had beginnings on Earth, many of them were based upon the knowledge and memories they'd taken with them.

"It's been three hundred years since the first Furs were created, and two hundred since Earth and most of the Fur Worlds reunited to form the Planetary Alignment. Each colony world now has its own civilizations, but remember that they were all originally designed after the cultures they remembered from Earth. If things look similar to ya, it's because of that. Not all countries on all the worlds are identical to what ya have here. They are just as varied as humanity itself, but there will always be an overall similarity."

"I guess that makes sense," Jennifer responded quietly. "Some of this sounds familiar, so I suppose I heard some of it in school." She looked up at him with a smile and shrugged her slender shoulders. "I had probably cut classes on the days they covered that."

"Ya naughty girl," he teased with a smile. "It's something ya should probably read up on. Although the Planetary Alignment exists now to keep us all as friends, there were some of the worlds that even now still haven't joined up, harboring resentment over being abandoned for so long. Earth lost track of *some* colonies altogether when records were destroyed by the early pure-human movement; maybe they will be rediscovered someday."

Jennifer was quiet for a long moment as she digested what she had just been told, but then she shook herself and resumed the ship's tour when she spotted the next door sign.

"Right, so who has the next cabin to yours? This person, Taro?"

"She's a fox," he answered.

"What species is she?"

Tanis looked at her strangely. "A fox, I said."

"Oh, sorry," Jennifer laughed. "On my world, we call anyone who is good looking a fox."

Tanis was not sure he understood the reference, but he smiled anyway. "I suppose she fits both explanations, then. She's quite lovely." His eyes took on a far-away look as he added the last. The human girl laughed and peered at him slyly.

"You have something going with her, don't you?" she said in a conspiratorial whisper.

"None of yer business, girl," Tanis whispered back with a wink.

"Can we go to the bridge now?" Jennifer asked. "I'm getting bored reading name plates in a hallway."

"This way, then," Tanis agreed. "The cheetah's cabin is next to hers and then Sickbay," he added as they quickly passed the doors. "Here we are," he said at last when they came to a blue door. It had upon it a large symbol of an old seafaring steering wheel painted in gold.

The door slid aside before the fennec fox could activate the opening control. A gray wolf in a captain's hat looked up at them from the slateboard in his hands and tilted his head slightly to the side.

"Hello," he said. "Friend of yours, Tanis, or a client?"

"Friend." Tanis looked at the girl with a smile and then back to the wolf. "Jennifer Sanderson, this is our fearless leader, Captain Merlin Sinclair."

Merlin gave her a nod and said, "Welcome aboard, Jennifer."

"Thanks, Captain. This is a nice ship you've got," she replied.

"You fixed your hat?" Tanis asked, looking at the smooth brim. There was no sign of the crease.

"No, it's a new one. Please excuse me," Merlin said as he stepped past them, "but we'll be moving the ship shortly for further upgrades." He turned and looked back at them as they stepped through the door. "Tanis, while you're on the bridge, would you call up everyone on the DCs to tell them that Renny, Patch and I will be moving the *Blue Horizon* to Tucson. I'll contact everyone in about four days from with the rendezvous address after the modifications have been completed."

"Sure, boss. Ya need any other help moving the ship?"

"Not really," the wolf said. "We're only flying a relative short distance, but if you want to come along, you are welcome to do so."

"What time are ya leaving?"

"In about thirty minutes." Merlin nodded toward the girl and said, "Have your look around, but I'm afraid your tour will have to be cut short. We'll be sealing the airlocks and pressurizing the ship in fifteen minutes."

"Thank you, Captain," Jennifer replied. She tugged the fennec fox's arm to lead him onto the bridge and the door shut behind them. "Are you leaving with them?" she asked.

Tanis let his left ear droop as he shrugged his shoulders. "I should," he said. "I'm running low on funds for transportation between here and Tucson, so I'll just go along with them now and hang around that place until the ship is ready."

Jennifer put her hand on top of his head and ran her fingers through the silky fur between his ears. "In that case, I think I should head home now," she said. "You still have to call the others and there's not much time left."

"I'm sorry, Jennifer," Tanis said. "I like ya a lot, but I'm afraid we have to part company now. I'll see ya to the hatch, and then —"

"No," the girl said shaking her head of long, blonde hair, "I can find my way out. You go ahead and call your crew." She leaned over, kissed him quickly on the cheek, and then headed back out into the corridor. "It was nice meeting you, Arktanish TeVann!" she called as she disappeared. "Thanks for the tour and the history lesson!"

Tanis put his hands on his hips and frowned. "That was awfully abrupt," he muttered to himself. He moved to the Communications terminal and set to his task.

Merlin Sinclair shaded his eyes and squinted as he searched the cloudless desert sky for the transport that was to deliver the armaments he had been unable to obtain through normal channels. The *Blue Horizon* rested in the sun on the landing pad behind him, and the workers of Lowery's Starship Garage were already preparing the vessel for moving into the old hangar. Patch was inside the ship securing all final systems, though they had landed close to an hour ago. Renny and Tanis had already taken off to see the town.

A short human stood next to him, studying the display of a handheld slateboard that he shielded from the sun with his own shadow. Victor Faltane appeared to be in his late twenties, a man with pale blue eyes, the hint of a new beard, and blond hair that hung just past his shoulders. He was dressed in blue denim jeans, white high-top sneakers, and a white open collar shirt with long sleeves that were rolled up to his elbows. The innocence of his boyish face belied the experiences he had gone through in his career and was often an asset when the authorities came snooping around. Although he had his fingers in numerous pies around the Planetary Alignment, his business of acquisitions was legal. Like Samantha Holden, however, he had special contacts to obtain those hard-to-get items when he needed them. He studied the readout on his display and looked over at the wolf.

"They've just received clearance to drop from orbit, Captain Sinclair," he said. "They should be here in about ten minutes."

"What is the name of the vessel my shipment is coming in on?" Merlin casually asked as he reluctantly removed his gaze from the sky.

"As with you, dear Captain, I don't usually reveal the names of those I work with," the young man replied with a smile. "Everyone seems to prefer it that way."

"I asked only out of curiosity, but what is to keep me from simply reading the name off the side of the ship when it arrives?" Merlin asked dryly.

Faltane raised an eyebrow and nodded. "Nothing. Point taken." He looked back down at his slateboard and answered, "It's a *Sakura*-class freighter called the *Savannah Hunter*."

"The *Savannah Hunter*," Merlin repeated with sudden annoyance. "Armando Jensen..."

Faltane smiled and nodded again. "Oh, you know him?"

"Only too well," Merlin growled; he laid his ears back and his tail swished back and forth in agitation.

"Careful, Sinclair," the man said as he casually pointed a finger at him, "my clients and contacts are of all types and species. Not everyone is exactly on the up-and-up, including yourself, or you would not be dealing with me on this particular delivery."

"True," the wolf admitted, "but Armando and I have a long history, little of which is good."

Faltane lowered his display unit and turned to face his customer fully. "You have about seven minutes before the *Savannah Hunter* arrives. Do you want to cancel your order?" He was serious and the piercing look in his eyes made Merlin uncomfortable. "There will be a service charge for the delivery, of course, but if you don't want the merchandise, I should have no trouble reselling these particular items."

Merlin hesitated only a moment, but shook his head. "No, Mr. Faltane, I'll keep my end of the bargain. I don't have to like who you chose to deliver the goods, but at least I will get what I want."

"A wise decision, I assure you," the boyish human replied. "Now, if you are in the market for a little business of your own, I would like to hire your services once your upgrades have been completed."

Merlin looked at him with renewed, but suspicious, interest. "What kind of services?"

"Cargo delivery, of course. It is nothing out of the ordinary of your usual business. Just a simple delivery at your standard price. Everything's perfectly legal *and* on the up-and-up."

The wolf nodded to him. "Okay, Mr. Faltane, I am interested. After spending the credits for these modifications and those I had done in San Francisco, I could use the extra income."

"I'm glad you feel that way."

"What is the cargo?" Merlin asked, noticing a reflection of sunlight glinting off an approaching aircraft in the distance.

"Heavy equipment and supplies for an industrial complex," Faltane replied, studying incoming data on his reader. "However, I don't think your ship is large enough to carry everything."

"Can you hire a second ship for the other part of the load?"

"That's what I had in mind, Captain. Here comes the other ship, now." Both looked up at the high-pitched whine of atmospheric engines and the frown returned to Merlin's face. The delta-shaped bulk of the *Savannah Hunter* grew in size over the next few minutes as it approached the facility's location. When at last it had arrived, it hovered over a nearby landing pad with flashing green lights around its perimeter.

The vessel was slightly larger than the *Blue Horizon* but a different design altogether. Its sloping, dark green sides were vaned and antennae sprouted out toward practically every point of a three-dimensional compass. Tractor driven landing gear extended as it neared the pavement and a hot wind blew away from the site. Merlin shielded his eyes from blown dust and fell into a coughing fit.

Patch ran over to them as the whine of the newly arrived ship powered down. "Captain, what's *he* doing here?" the raccoon said with a scowl.

"Just doing business, Patch. Just like us," Merlin replied as he tried to clear the grimace from his own face. Armando Jensen, the owner and captain of the *Savannah Hunter*, was the chief competitor to the *Blue Horizon's* business. He was shrewd, cunning, and not above dishonesty to acquire his contracts. He was also the son of a rich corporate executive on Mainor, although he had not been in good standing with his Papa for years. The conflicts between

Mainor and Dennier over mineral rights to the asteroid belt between the two worlds had ended eight years earlier, but threads of animosity for each other still existed. That alone gave Merlin uneasy feelings about Armando besides any crooked business practices the other might have instigated.

Patch snorted and looked up at his captain. "If you don't mind, I'm heading into town to find a tobacco shop for more cigars," he said.

Faltane glanced down at the raccoon. "*The Tobacco Leaf* is in the strip mall near the intersection of Main and West Alameda," he said. "Tell the owner, Mr. Dupre, that I recommended the place to you and he should give you a fair discount."

"*The Tobacco Leaf*. Mr. Dupre. Main and West Alameda. Thanks, Mr. Faltane, I'll look him up," Patch said as he jotted the information down on a small notepad from a pocket. He looked back to Merlin, who only nodded that it was okay for him to leave. The wolf's attention was on the green freighter. Patch snorted again and then wandered off in search of transportation.

The main hatch of the *Savannah Hunter* split apart and opened. A rotund panda emerged and headed directly toward them, his face grim.

"Mister Faltane?" the panda asked as he stopped before them.

"That's me," the man replied.

"I am JW Chon, first mate of the *Savannah Hunter*. Please call your local ambulance. Two of our crew got into a brawl just before landing and one of them was seriously injured. She's in critical condition and needs more medical attention than we can give her on board."

"Oh, brother..." Faltane replied and rolled his eyes. Merlin's face was unreadable at the news, but the panda paid him no attention.

"The captain is interrogating the other one right now and will be out as soon as he's finished with her." Chon shook his head and growled. "I knew those two would get into it over that guy..."

"I'll get on the com right away." Faltane turned and ran to the hangar office, and the panda trotted back toward his own ship, leaving Merlin standing alone in silence. He watched the panda until he disappeared into the green vessel and then turned back toward his own.

The *Blue Horizon* resembled a giant blue flying saucer. The cargo area was two stories high with the rec deck making up a third level. There were no external appendages, not even a few spindly antennae; the systems were all internally housed and more efficient. In his opinion, Merlin believed the *Okami* class of freighter was the best design available. Many space captains argued that an aerodynamic design was not needed to fly through the stars, but Sinclair was well aware that the atmospheric flight necessary to get to his customers down on the various planets required sleek surfaces for airflow. Its two-tone blue paint job pleased the wolf, though it could use touch-ups here and there, but there would be time for that later. They had had too much downtime lately and he was itching to get back to business with paying customers.

He mulled over in his mind about what he had just heard and wondered if a similar result would come of Renny's jealousy of Tanis and Taro. The cheetah did not seem the type to resort to violence, but one could never know when everyone is cooped up in a ship for weeks and even months at a time. He felt fortunate that his crew tended to get along well. With Armando's personality, he could not visualize the same camaraderie on the *Savannah Hunter*.

"Sinclair!" a deep voice boomed behind him. "Chon told me that was your moth-eaten excuse for a ship we landed next to!" Merlin turned around and saw a large maned lion approaching from his competitor's ship. The individual wore only a vest across his broad, golden shoulders and an ornamental belt around his waist. He carried a slateboard in his left

hand, though his other one opened and closed in agitation. His yellow eyes were narrowed in suspicion when he stopped next to the wolf and glared down at him.

"Hello, Armando," Merlin said with a forced smile. "I hear you have crew troubles."

"That's none of your business!"

Merlin tilted his head to the side slightly as he looked up at the towering figure. "True," he said. "However, I believe you do have business with *me*."

"You?" the lion growled. "Why are *you* here?" He looked up as Faltane returned from the warehouse.

"An ambulance is on the way," the human said. "The hospital is fairly close, so they should be here shortly." They could already hear a wailing siren in the distance. Armando returned his attention back to the gray wolf.

"Well?"

"Your cargo is for him," Faltane replied.

"*Him!*" the lion bellowed. "Had I known *that*, I would have never taken the job!"

"Calm down," Faltane said with a quiet, but menacing voice. It was apparent this angelic-appearing man was used to dealing with hotheads. "You needed the money and I had a paying contract for you."

Armando's lips pressed together tightly as he nodded. "Yeah, I needed the money," he admitted. "I would not be in so much debt if someone had not tipped off the SPF of a deal I had with the hyenas..." He glared again at Merlin, but directed his words at the human. "You said you had another job for me after this one?"

"That's right," Faltane answered as he looked off in the direction of the approaching ambulance. "I need both of your ships to deliver a large shipment of industrial equipment to Langlop's Outpost, an island community on Brandt."

"Brandt!" Merlin exclaimed. "I'm *not* going to Brandt!"

Armando grinned widely and slapped the wolf on the back, almost knocking him over. "What's the matter, puppy? Too many bad guys there for you? That's the planet I just came from and we didn't have a lick of trouble."

Merlin scowled and looked up at the lion. "Brandt is the source of most of my problems," he growled. "I don't intend to fly straight toward Sagan's home base."

"I went out of my way to help you," Faltane said calmly. "There are no other interstellar freighters currently available in our solar system. If you will not help me with *my* shipment, you will not get *your* shipment."

Armando crossed his massive arms and merely smiled down at his competitor. He enjoyed watching the wolf get flustered.

"I'm *paying* for that!" Merlin exclaimed.

"I have not yet received payment," the human reminded him. He gestured toward the *Blue Horizon* with a hand and added, "I'm your only source for these armaments, Sinclair. The price I offered them to you closely matches your standard base price for a full delivery to another star system. In the account books, it would have been near an even trade between us, with you making an extra thousand credits on the side."

The ambulance arrived and the Mainoran lion left them to deal with it, but Faltane continued. "Like your friend, Mr. Jensen, I know you need the money," he said. "You flew empty from Alexandrius to Earth, and I am also aware that you will have to fly empty between Earth and your next job. That's a hundred thousand credits you will be out by leaving here without accepting my business, not to mention whatever it will cost you to try to get the armaments elsewhere."

The wolf's ears drooped and he swallowed. Everything Faltane said was true. Samantha may benefit from dealing under the table from time to time, but Merlin made a silent vow to never deal with this man again after this. "Okay," he said slowly. "Like my *friend*, it looks like I have no choice in the matter. I need the money *and* the armaments."

Faltane smiled and nodded as if the outcome had been assured all along. "I will have my team unload the *Savannah Hunter* and get your new toys installed right away. You may need them, flying in to Brandt."

OUT OF THE FRYING PAN

By Steve Carter

SS Blue Horizon PA1261
Captain's Journal

Brandt. The Blue Horizon is on its way to the one place within the Planetary Alignment I have never had a desire to visit. We are fully armed and everything's functional, but everyone is uneasy about this assignment. Our hold contains nothing more dramatic than industrial machinery used to construct low-cost housing, but because of the amount of cargo that needs delivery, my ship was only large enough to contain two-thirds of the equipment.

In addition to ourselves, Faltane hired the Savannah Hunter to deliver the remaining one-third of the shipment to Langlop's Outpost. Armando is currently flying a quarter of a light-year ahead of us, but we have them continually monitored. Due to a violent argument amongst his crew, he had to leave his navigator behind in a Tucson hospital with her stomach muscles stitched back together. Jensen is flying true to course, so I can only assume he either has another navigator on board or his route to Brandt is so well-traveled that he has it programmed into his nav computer.

The profit of a thousand credits we made from the "trade" that Faltane arranged with us did not come to very much. Split nine ways, everyone on board had an extra one hundred credits added to their accounts, with the remaining hundred credits going toward the company funds. Whee, what a deal that was...

As for Brandt, what can be said about a place that used to be a thriving center of commerce and culture, but has fallen to the level of sheltering pirates and cutthroats by the hundreds? When Brandt's main cash crop of the highly conductive Siilv metal dried up five years ago, the entire planet fell into chaos and ruin as what remained of civilization beat a hasty retreat to greener worlds. Brandt is now ruled by the knife and gun; a place of thieves, parasites, prostitutes and who knows what kinds of diseases. It is strange that the Intergalactic Aid foundation chose to put a base of operations on this mangy planet, especially as the SPF no longer has any jurisdiction within the Faya Star System.

Carrying two-thousand tons of industrial and construction equipment aboard this ship, we are to help Intergalactic Aid in its attempts to rebuild this planet in the name of "universal peace and brotherly love." It seems an unusual pursuit for the likes of Victor Faltane, but after our meeting on Earth, I find that I am not interested in what motivates such a man. Who knows; maybe he has a good heart beneath that throbbing capitalist veneer, but I tend to doubt it.

Due to the tense situation as we grow closer to Brandt, I am having all shifts on the bridge posted with two individuals at all times instead of the usual one. I have staggered them so no one gets burned out too quickly and I have included myself in the detail.

This alone would give us enough to worry about on a trip like this, but Pockets' little wonder device, Moss, turned up a stowaway four hours after we shifted up the LightDrive engines. A stowaway. Tanis swears he knew nothing of Jennifer Sanderson's continued presence on the ship, but it appears she has been with us since that day in San Francisco I prepared the ship for delivery to Tucson. She has been living in the vacant cabin next to Tanis, stealing food from the galley. Sparky said she had noticed that some of the food

supplies had been into, but with a crew of nine, most of whom at one time or another hit the pantry for snacks, she had not thought it out of the ordinary. This is one thing that Moss was created for, so we locked her into her cabin and had it sweep the ship for bugs and bombs. Pockets may be carefree most of the time, but he does sometimes have a practical head on his shoulders.

Due to the hostile nature of our destination, I contacted the SPF with hesitation about the girl and discovered that her folks had reported her as missing a week earlier. A cruiser arranged to rendezvous with us in flight and picked her up as we neared the dwarf planet Pluto on our way out of the solar system. She was a nice kid, but I don't favor stowaways. She never apologized for hiding out on my ship, but the call I got from her family a few days later was full of thanks for returning their errant child.

Fortunately for us, Officer Hendricks never once questioned us about our current delivery. I have only dealt with her a few times in the past and that Siamese cat has always had a suspicious nature. She seemed distracted by her new partner, a young and energetic coyote, so perhaps that worked to our advantage. This assignment has made me more than a little nervous when dealing with the Spatial Police Force and a nosy cat would not have been a good thing at this point, even if our cargo is legal, or so Faltane claims.

So far, the flight has been smooth. We are still a week and a half away from Brandt and there has been no sign of Sagan. If we are fortunate, perhaps he is in another star system lying in wait for some other unlucky victim, or dying in pool of blood somewhere from an attack gone wrong. We could only be so lucky. With the new armaments, I believe I am ready for any encounter we may have with him, but I am not anxious to put it to the test.

As we draw nearer to Brandt, there is the strong possibility that other raiders may think of us as an easy target. Either that or we will be thought of as just another pirate, seeing how no other vessel on the up and up would willingly fly into a nest of them. I am not looking for trouble. I only want to deliver my cargo and get my tail out of there as quickly as possible. Faltane seemed to think we would be unmolested flying into Langlop's Outpost, but cautioned us to be careful on the way out.

Armando has taken the loose partnership rather well, and that in itself worries me. Either he has something up his proverbial sleeve, or he is taking it with grace merely because he needs the credits as much as I do. He and I have had a few chats along the way, mostly to needle one another, but at least we're talking. He has quite a temper and has seen his own share of bar fights, including a few brawls with some of my crew. Ever since our initial contact back on Mainor a few years ago, it is no secret that neither of us can stand the other, even if we do communicate from time to time.

The Blue Horizon will still have to fly empty out to Quet, but it's within the same star system and I have my weapon systems in trade for the jaunt to Brandt. The sooner we can be on our way to pick up that load of processed micranite for delivery to Dennier, the easier I will breathe.

Merlin Sinclair, Captain

Durant's brow furrowed as he pored over the numbers in the ledger of the ship's books. He could not put his finger on where a specific discrepancy originated, but he was beginning to suspect it was Samantha's doing. He had caught her before, fixing the numbers to retain a portion of their cargo for themselves for later selling or use, but their present manifest should not have anything in it of interest to her. He abandoned the computer terminal and pulled out a pad of paper and an old calculator. He was far better at finding financial tampering with a pencil than with the computer and set about to begin his search.

Before he could start scrawling, however, an awful alien sound wrenched at his ears. He jumped up from his desk in alarm, almost hitting his head on the low ceiling. "What the...?" he

whispered to himself. He listened intently, his small ears twisting, but the sound was not repeated. The grizzly bear knew he could not have imagined something like that, so he moved quickly to a wall locker and took out one of the new Binfurr rifles they had just acquired. He made sure the clip was full and then opened the door from his office to move out into the hold.

The huge chamber was filled to capacity with tethered massive components of industrial machinery, but a meter-wide pathway had been left around the outer perimeter of the hold. Durant looked each way in the dimmed lighting, unsure of which way to go. He suspected some alien life form had stowed away in the machinery from Earth and was now on the prowl. The bear feared little, but was cautious with the unknown. He took no chances unless necessary. He stood as quiet as the void outside the ship and did nothing but listen.

Then it started again, from his left – first as a low moan and then building in strength and pitch. The sound grated against his ears as it strengthened in volume. Durant’s heart began to quicken. It sounded as if someone were stepping on a small wounded animal with cleated boots and trying to mash it into the flooring.

“Sparky!” he gasped to himself. He moved as quickly as his muscled bulk would allow along the perimeter of the hold, fearful something had gotten his small friend. Each step took him closer to the wailing and his eyes furrowed in anger. He set his teeth together as he neared the doorway to the Engine Room and rounded the machinery with his rifle ready.

What he saw surprised and repulsed him. It was not Sparky who was being attacked, but the diminutive raccoon, Patch. A dark and bloated, many-legged creature was trying to shove an appendage down the engineer’s throat. What he heard was the thing’s ear-wrenching moan as the raccoon tried to squeeze it under an arm, his cheeks puffed out fighting for a breath. Durant lifted his rifle and fired a shot across the top of the creature’s abdomen. The darkness of the chamber made it hard to see, and the projectile missed completely to bury itself in a wooden bookcase in the small office cubicle beyond.

The wailing ended when the alien released the raccoon, but Patch was far from grateful. He looked up angrily at the bear and shouted, “What the blazes are you shooting at me for?” He set the creature on the floor where it made a wheezing sound, but surprisingly it made no attempt to jump back onto its victim or run away. Patch rushed over to Durant and snatched the rifle out of the bear’s grasp, nearly taking off one of the ursine’s fingers in the process. He backed away snarling, hunched over with the gun as if he dared the load master to advance any further toward him.

Durant was clearly confused. “Patch!” he explained, “I heard that thing attacking you!” He looked at the creature that had grown still. “I thought you were dying!”

Patch straightened up and traded the snarl for a look of bewilderment. “What *thing* are you talking about, Durant?” he asked gruffly. “I was playing music.”

The bear pointed toward the thing on the floor. “That was no music I heard!” he replied, “It sounded more like you were being squashed!”

Patch’s scowl returned and he walked over to the bear. He shoved the rifle hard back into Durant’s hands and then stomped back to the item in question. When he picked it up, the thing let out another wheezing groan, its abdomen looking deflated. “This is called a *bagpipe*, Durant,” the raccoon explained with a sigh. “I just picked it up on Earth, but this is the first time I’ve had since our launch to try it out.” He looked over at the bullet hole in his bookcase and then back at the bear. “I haven’t learned how to play it yet,” he exclaimed in a voice nearing a shout, “but I’ll be dipped if I’m going to let you shoot at my instruments when I bring them out!”

Durant put the safety back on the rifle and shook his head. "I've heard you play your other instruments, Patch. You're good, but I have serious doubts that music will *ever* come out of that thing!"

The raccoon merely glowered at him without another word, so the bear left the engineer to his thoughts. Durant had thoughts of his own. If Patch was going to continue to torture him with the bagpipe, he would have to retire to his own quarters to get any work done. His fears were confirmed as he reached his desk moments later when that awful noise began again to set his teeth on edge. The bear groaned and gathered up his work.

A sizzling neon sign read "*Langlop's Outpost*" above a rusty gray door in front of a sickly green office with pale yellow lights. Inside, a tired and bored canine shuffled paper in the semblance of activity, but the liquid ovals of her eyes suggested that she had not been truly alive for some time. She seemed unaware of the movement outside of her office and continually checked the clock on a water-stained wall. Blistered and peeling wallpaper covered the inside, as well as the drooping pages of a two-year-old paper calendar that had never been changed.

Durant cursed to himself as he watched an awkward, aging lift shakily move forward, stabbing the wooden beams of the final equipment pallet again with its metal tongs. The tall, thick mountain lion in the cab did not know a lever from a hole in the ground, he thought to himself. However, now that the cargo was unloaded from the *Horizon*, it was no longer the bear's responsibility. Still, Durant hated shabby work on principle.

Nearby, Merlin stood with the bay master. The gray wolf wore a long, black trench coat that made him look taller and more threatening than he was. It was only pulled out when he wanted to say, "*Skip the conversation. We don't want to be here.*"

The bay master, however, was a sloppy fat dog with greasy overalls whose jowls wobbled when he spoke. The canine addressed Captain Sinclair with an air of annoyance, as though the wolf's business was an intrusion on his desire to punch out early. It was plain, Durant thought, that he was related to someone in power at this port, because no reasonable manager would act like that to an important customer and keep his job for very long. The bear only hoped that Armando had gotten similar treatment with his part of the shipment.

"Hey!" Samantha called, snapping his attention back to the gaping maw of the ship. "Can you give me a hand up here?"

The bear moved up the ramp quickly, eager to get away from the ineptitude that had thronged around him in the form of the cargo bay crew. Samantha wrestled with a clasp on the edge of the ramp without luck. When the towering bear arrived, a simple slap of a hinge connected the metallic circuit and closed the clasp tight. His diminutive friend thanked him, her breath billowing white in the chill of the cargo bay air.

"Have they never heard of heat in here?" she snarled.

"I asked," Durant replied. "Apparently they're waiting for a release form pending their critical need for heat in the loading and unloading section of *Langlop's Outpost*, and the release forms are on backorder. They do everything on paper here, no slateboards at all."

She stuck out the tip of her tongue, "Cute. I want something to drink."

"Looking to drown a few sorrows?"

"Looking to get away from all this mess and unwind."

"Negative on that, Sam," their captain rolled, approaching the pair. "We're not going to be here that long, and there's to be no leaving the ship's general vicinity. I don't want to be here any longer than absolutely necessary."

Durant blinked. "No shore leave, boss?"

The wolf clamped a hand softly on the bear's shoulder, "Not this time around, I'm afraid. You know where we are and why I don't want to take chances. We should not be here for any longer than it takes to unload the cargo and get clearance to leave for Quet."

Samantha sighed heavily. She hated the thought of remaining on a ship she had already been penned up in for weeks. However, her wants did not outweigh the captain's directives.

"I know," Merlin said with a grimace. "But I promise that we'll be taking some extra time off on Dennier once we've made our stop on Quet."

"But that's another month away..." the Border collie whined.

"Quet is only a day away from here," Merlin reminded her.

"I meant Dennier," the Border collie said with a sigh. "Who in their right mind would want to go to Quet for shore leave?"

"That matches my sentiments for Brandt as well," the wolf muttered.

wrench-CRASH! <klang- tinkle>

The three turned as one toward the sound as another weathered pallet was skewered, gears ground and caterpillar wheels spun in a fog of screaming metal. Curses and accusations followed, worker voices raised in anger and outrage.

The captain smiled hard and indicated the panel inside the now-empty hold. Samantha returned the thin grin and slapped the face of buttons, bringing the ramp up and sealing off the trio from viewing the incompetence below.

"Are you seeing this?"

"I am not seeing this."

Sparky whirled a kitchen knife with an aplomb that would have done a surgeon proud. A vidscreen perched atop her prep area, playing out the gentle music and purring voice on a local station she had turned on just for white noise. To her left, trying to read his slateboard news connection to the Interstellar News Network, Arktanix was trying *not* to pay attention.

"I can't believe this," she added, peeling another vegetable. "How can they be doing this kind of thing on a world that's trying to get back on its feet again?"

"I am not seeing this," he repeated.

Sparky crossed the room and took Tanis by the chin, directing his gaze up to the vidscreen. Across the small screen streaked the faces of weeping, starving children, flies swirling around their furry heads as a voiceover spoke of the miseries of the dying babies in nearby countries. Then it showed opulent palaces and obese individuals in too-small suits and glittering finery. A plaintive female voice poured through the speakers like honey:

"While kits and cubs are starving at our back doors, hungrily looking to another day of wondering if survival – if a morsel of food – will greet them the next day, the wealthy and powerful turn their backs in silent disgust. Those who have been blessed with good fortune look away from those whose labor has gone unrewarded. With the rising costs of medical care, we cannot afford not to act to save the innocent – to save the poor and the needy..."

He returned to his slateboard. "I don't like to get politically involved in the welfare of other worlds, Sparky. Didn't ya ever watch *Stellar Journey*? They fell into that trap time and again!"

"Well, we don't have to get involved, Tanis. We can just help them out a little."

"I don't want to go down that road, Sparky."

"You are going to allow those poor, helpless children to starve when we have so much?" she purred.

Tanis looked up from the screen. "If ya want to help, I'll not talk ya out of it, but ya *know* ya'll have to go through the politicians first, and they'll make sure they get their cut of anything ya donate."

Patch rolled out from under a translucent pane of crystal, stabbed fingers into a beat up toolbox, withdrew a shiny chrome instrument, and rolled back the way he had come. Beside him under the pane, his brother roared a Ganisan aria to which the cranky Patch grimaced. The genial brother's voice filled the engineering section, ringing off the liquid crystal tubes and filling the entire area with music. Somewhere outside, a gang of feral dogs would have howled in auditory distress.

"Hah!" Pockets suddenly chirped, slamming a panel shut. The raccoon looked at his brother under the pane and shoved himself bodily out from beneath it, sailing across the floor to a red button on the far side of the room. Pockets slapped it and bounded up from the floor to look at a flashing display of red numerals.

"Fixed it in three hours, thirty-seven minutes!" he called out.

Patch drew himself out from under the pane, wiping transparent grease from his fingers and snarled under his breath.

"I take it you were successful?" rolled a third voice from above. The brothers looked back to the open doorway to see a lean cheetah grinning at them. Renny had stretched himself into a black workout suit and apparently just left the mini-gym in the Recreation room on the third deck. A light dusting of perspiration rested across his nose and the powerful lines of his body pulsed with newly-spent energy.

"We got the LC pipes cleaned out in record time and the jets are in the clear!" Pockets chirped, and then sniffed the air around him. "We need showers!"

Renny gestured for them to follow and the trio was soon ambling toward the lift, talking and jesting with Pockets about plans for a few hours of shore leave.

But halfway around the perimeter of the hold, the trio met up with Samantha.

"You guys heading—*whoa! To the showers, I hope!*"

"Yup," Pockets replied as his brother growled incoherently. "Then later we're heading out onto the town to see what we can get into in our off time."

"Sorry guys," she corrected, "but nobody's leaving the port area. Captain's orders."

"Orders?" the cheetah moaned. "Why not? Shore leave after a world-to-world journey is standard ship's policy."

Sam canted her head slightly, "The cancellation happens sometimes, Renny. This is a hostile place with which nobody has any legal agreements. We're not sure what kinds of trouble you could get into here and the local magistrates are only interested in squeezing all the credits they can out of any trouble they can find. Captain says we stay put. The cargo's been off-loaded and he wants out of here as quickly as possible, but getting local flight authorization is taking

time. Personally, I am going to crash out for a couple of hours. Only the bad guys know when we'll be able to sleep again, you know."

The three grimaced unhappily, Patch snarled another of his creative curses as Samantha pinched her nose and strolled past the small gathering of pungent males.

Twenty minutes later, Pockets stepped out of his shower, dried and groomed his fur, and then wriggled into a fresh set of clothes. The crew was sleeping except for Durant and Sparky sitting lookout on the bridge, and they had two hours to go before they needed to be up and getting ready to disembark. The acquisition of the newer model transducers had aided the ship's abilities, but he and Patch had discovered that maintenance of the new equipment required different tools than what they had on hand. Without the proper implements, the transducers could break down and they would end up hard-pressed to fix them. The Captain's motto of "If you must kill time, work it to death," certainly applied here.

What the heck, it couldn't hurt anything to sneak a look for such tools, could it?

The raccoon pulled open a drawer, withdrew a tattered paperback book, and flipped a few pages to find the one he had dog-eared a few hours before landing on Brandt. He found his location on a simple map in the book and mentally plotted a route to the place he wanted to go.

Pockets threw an overcoat across his shoulders, slipped quickly through the ship and across the deserted cargo bay, then moved through the shadows out the airlock. He took in a breath and looked out over the vista of the forbidden city. The place smelled of cheap liquor and even cheaper companionship. He placed the copy of *Good Places on Bad Worlds* back into one of his cavernous pockets and started down the pavement.

The lights of the city, mostly reds and violets, glittered above his head as pools of spent rain still glistened underfoot – a raunchy street gleaming with sweat. The cool night was staved off in the heat of the city's activity. Wreathed in smoke as he walked along the ruined pavement, his stride caught the industrial pulse as the raccoon moved toward a single outpost. The night seemed to speak with the voice of a thousand mournful saxophones. He thrust his hands into his pockets and started down the street to the Wildwood Bar & Grill.

A light drizzle fell upon the dark city of Langlop's Outpost and the raccoon was getting drenched as he shuffled down the street. According to the book in his hands, the bar should be in this vicinity, but nothing looked even remotely like the map he studied for the fifteenth time. He had not seen any street signs on the last six intersections he had crossed, and what lamps lined the avenue were getting fewer in between. The buildings he stood beside were old and weather-beaten. He had read somewhere that the summers in this particular region were cool, windy and plentiful of rain, and the structures reflected the hostile environment.

Pockets frowned at the obviously obsolete book one more time and tossed it in a pile of rubbish near an over-filled trashcan by the closest building. He walked on into the night another half block and contemplated just going back to the *Horizon*. He took a glance behind him and realized that he had lost his bearings. Had he traveled in a straight line from the ship he might have made it back okay, but he had zigzagged through the streets looking for that particular place and now he was quite lost.

He exhaled rather loudly and stopped in the middle of the wet street. He had seen no one for the past hour and traffic had been nonexistent. He turned around slowly, looking for anything to give him a clue on his whereabouts, but everything looked the same to him. He didn't even find a Com booth anywhere. Normally on shore leave, each of the crew took along a handheld DataCom for emergencies, but since he had slipped off-ship against orders, he had not bothered taking one of the DCs.

He blinked against the rain and focused down an alley. He thought he saw a dim light behind a dumpster, so he moved in that direction. Moments later, he stood before the cracked and barely operating neon sign of *The Overnighter*, a small restaurant bar and inn tucked in between two larger structures. A sign on the door invited him in out of the night and the raccoon stepped inside. Had the engineer not thrown away his guide, he would have noticed that there were generally three classes of bars on this world. The first was host to wealthy businessmen and visiting aristocrats. The second was for college students and professionals. The third was for alcoholics, lowlifes and tramps.

The Overnighter would rate as a class-four establishment.

The air was smoky from various pipes and cigars and the vapors of other vices. Pockets did not waste time trying to see who was in the dimly lighted room and went straight to the counter. A walrus with half a tusk walked over to him, but did not speak. Pockets fished a few credits from his coat, ordered something off the drink slate, and took a seat on a stool as he waited.

An old wire jukebox in the corner next to a staircase quietly played what passed for music across the Planetary Alignment three decades ago, and as the raccoon's eyes adjusted to the darkness, he noted only four or five others in the bar. A mangy cat stood up from a stool near the stairs and Pockets saw that it was beside a com unit. As soon as the feline was away from the booth, he moved to it and solemnly fed it a few coins. He tapped in the number of the city's transfer station and then the ID code for the *Horizon*. He frowned as he anticipated Merlin's response to his predicament and watched as the com unit's dim green lights scrolled by, trying not to notice the emaciated middle-age prostitute that ambled up to him with a face that would have been enticing twenty years earlier. He winced, then turned his head and tried to disguise the fact that he had to cover his nose.

It was Taro who answered the communication. *"This is the SS Blue Horizon. What can we do for you?"*

"Taro?" Pockets said with a breath of relief, *"I'm in a fix and need —"*

"Pockets? Is that you?" the fox asked in confusion. *"Where are you? You're supposed to be preparing the engine room with your brother. We're lifting off in an hour!"*

"I know, Taro," he replied, *"but we've been cooped up in the Horizon for several weeks! I needed to get out for some fresh air and food."*

"You call this air fresh?"

"Well, it does smell strange," he admitted.

"You said you were in a fix," Taro said dryly. *"That can mean too many things on Brandt. What's your problem, other than the pay docking you are going to get for going against the captain's orders?"*

"I'm lost. I can't find my way back to the ship."

"Is that all? Just use the locator on your DC."

"I didn't bring one."

A long pause. *"That's... downright stupid, Pockets. Do you have any idea where you are?"* she asked. *"I'm calling up the latest city map on the monitor."*

"There aren't any road signs around here," the raccoon answered, "but I found a restaurant and inn called *The Overnighter*."

"Get a room there for the night, Porter," Merlin's voice rumbled suddenly into his ear from the com unit.

"Uh, captain..."

"You're in enough trouble as it is for doing this, Porter, but you are lucky you were not attacked, beaten, robbed and left for dead during your night sojourn. I don't want you stumbling around trying to find your way back."

"Aye, captain," Pockets said in a low voice.

"We'll now have to delay our launch and reschedule with the port authority. We will lift off promptly in the morning as soon as you're back here," Merlin said in a dry tone. "We'll discuss your actions after we're on our way to *Quiet*."

"Aye, sir. I'll get back there first thing in the morning."

"Good night, Pockets." The connection broke abruptly and the raccoon could already feel the sting as he hung up the transceiver quietly.

He moved back across the room to the counter and requested a menu. The walrus looked at him as if he had lost his mind. "Menu? The restaurant's next door and is closed for the night. In here, we sell *drinks*. If you want a menu, I suggest you head over to *Greaseburg* down the street."

From across the room, the walrus' outburst caught the eye of a figure in a darkened corner. A brawny cougar noted with interest that the new face was in the last place he should have been. The cougar recognized the competent way the stranger sat upright on the barstool and that his hands were scuffed from work. He caught a glimpse of the raccoon's bright, sharp eyes and realized that sincere intelligence burned behind them. This was no mongrel toiler from a nearby factory.

"Well, do you know where I can get a place for the night, rather cheap?" Pockets asked the barkeep.

The walrus shrugged and hooked a thumb at a dark staircase in a recessed corner with one hand and plopped down a numbered key with the other. Pockets flipped the bartender a shiny coin without a word, snatched up the key and disappeared up the creaking stairs, forgetting his untouched drink. A moment after he had passed, the cougar approached the bar, paid his bill, then followed.

Pockets unlocked the rusty brass doorknob and stepped into a room so small he would have to step outside to change his mind. A single bunk sat in the middle of the room, no larger than a loveseat, and a small refrigerator stood idly beside it. This was a place where transients only stayed for a few hours and it was reflected in the price of the room. The raccoon moved to the bed and crawled across it to open the fridge. Inside was a complimentary bottle of water and relatively clean cup, but the unit had not been on low enough to keep the beverage cold. Pockets pursed his lips, took out the two items, and set the bottle on top of the fridge. He stepped back outside, the memory of an ice machine near the head of the staircase still fresh. As he left the room with his cup, he noticed a powerful cougar standing in the hallway. The cougar shrugged and looked down another direction apparently waiting for somebody. Pockets nodded politely and his action was mimicked by the cougar. This done, he turned the other direction.

As he disappeared around the corner to find the ice, the cougar moved to the raccoon's door and removed a tiny vial from a pocket. He carefully opened the top and then dripped a spot of pale green fluid onto the doorknob to Pockets' room. The liquid spilled down the front and blended with the green tarnish across the face of the brass knob. Then just as silently, the cougar disappeared back the way he came.

Pockets returned to his room with a cup of ice, the last few cubes in the bin. He gripped the knob, turned it and pushed open the door to his room. As he passed the threshold, he felt a hot tingling in his fingers. He peered down at the palm of his hand and was rewarded with flashing spots before his eyes. This was the last thing he saw before he dropped the cup of ice and the world went black as the floor rushed up to strike him in the face.

The raccoon tried to remain still, delirium overcoming him with every twitch of muscle. His head throbbed and his stomach felt ready to heave if he moved an inch. He lay prone on a pile of velvet and satin cushions in a dimly lit room. A number of rough hands had deposited him there some time ago, but no faces had been visible in the bewildering haze fogging his mind.

He had given up demanding an explanation when his slurred words elicited no response from the hands that had carried him and dropped him where he now lay. With what coherence he could muster, he observed himself in a bedchamber with a small, empty table beside him, wood-paneled walls and a huge bed adorned with silk sheets in its center. Apparently, this was an opulent bedchamber of some wealthy person, but he could not understand why he had been brought here. The drugged feeling washed over him again and he felt himself relaxing whether he wanted to or not. His eyes fluttered shut.

An unknown time later, he felt another presence nearby, as well as the closeness of an object to his face. He opened his eyes wide to find a tiny hand waving in front of him. The hand snatched back and he saw a hazy form with large ears draw away from him. It turned quickly and pattered off, followed by the resolute clap of wood as a door closed behind the retreating form. Pockets looked around again and this time saw a glistening chalice and common cup now sat on the table alongside a small vial of amber liquid.

They're going to drug me again, he thought, and resolved to deny them that pleasure. He needed to get to a toilet and didn't care if it was here and now, but the raccoon found that he could not relax enough in his current state of terror.

Merlin Sinclair stepped over a slumped body at the door of the *Overnighter*. The barkeep, now an intense human with a deformed nose, had no information to offer. All he knew was that someone had checked into one of the rooms the night before and was probably still there for all he knew. However, a check of the rented room had revealed nothing but a water bottle sitting idly on top of a refrigeration unit and a few small puddles of water on the floor near an upended cup.

"Any ideas?" he queried the hatchet-faced human standing at the bar.

"Dunno," the man snorted. "Some feller spent the night thar, I suppose. Paid up front and then took off wi'out tellin' anyone."

"Great," the captain growled.

"So what do we do now?" Taro asked, fingering the rifle beneath her long black trench coat.

A small voice chirped from a corner, "Lookin' for your frien'?"

Merlin paid the words no mind – probably another money-hungry tale-spinner like the one they had run into several months ago on their last visit to Kantus. He started toward the door.

"Oh, sorry to trouble you," the little voice called to his back. "Poor 'coon boy in the green coveralls prolly won't live to see the next nightfall, if'n he's still breathin'."

Merlin stopped and did an immediate about-face to see the small squirrel standing before him, an all-too-sure-of-himself grin across his face. "What do you know?"

"I know everythin'. Saw it all, m'self."

"Where is he now?"

"Ahh no," the snide little voice barked, "not that easy. Five hundred or I don' say a word."

Apparently, the bartender noted, this little snit was new to the information-for-hire game. He returned to cleaning stained mugs with a greasy rag, not wanting to watch the display unfold before him.

"I don't bargain, and that's entirely too much to demand for blackmail information," Sinclair growled.

"Sorry 'bout that," the squirrel replied lightly. "Hope he wasn't anybody 'portant."

Sinclair opened his mouth to argue, but Taro turned to the bartender. "Do you rent these rooms by the hour?"

"Sure do," was the response.

She flipped him a coin. "What's it look like?"

He turned the shiny piece over in his fingertips, bit into it. "About two hours, why?"

"We'll take a room," she replied, then whirled the butt of her weapon against the squirrel's nape, sending him to the floor in a heap.

The squirrel, which the bartender had called Kharlie, awoke to find himself strapped uncomfortably into a wooden chair, facing a bedraggled fennec fox similarly bound. The female who had knocked him unconscious stood by the door with a drawn weapon. Movement behind the other chair caught Kharlie's attention as a growling, cursing raccoon withdrew an odd device from an exotic case.

The other's eyes fell on the thing and suddenly went wide. "*No! You can't! Those can't be legal!*"

"Why should I care?" rolled the voice of Merlin from behind the bound Kharlie. "Both of you claim to know where my crewmate is. This is his brother, who obviously has a vested interest in getting him back. Besides, who cares about what's legal on *this* backwoods mud hole?"

The stranger struggled in his seat, limbs pumping helplessly against the ropes as the raccoon calmly and methodically unwrapped a quiver of exotic-shaped pipes attached to a

decorated bag. There was an arcane symbol embroidered into the fabric, and the grisly tail of another animal decorated one of the pipes.

A petite, worried lynx stood in a corner with fear in her eyes. "Sir, we shouldn't do this. It's not right."

The captain shrugged. "No matter. This is *his* vendetta," he indicated the raccoon, who was lighting up a cigar, "so who am I to interfere?"

Kharlie stared at the proceedings in alarm, and then in terror as the cigar-puffing raccoon selected a pipe different from all the others, slammed a hand against the other victim's head to tilt it back.

The fennec fox screamed, "*NO! PLEASE IN THE NAME OF—!*" The raccoon jammed a pipe between his victim's teeth.

What happened next was hard to tell. The desert fox squirmed helplessly against the ropes, convulsing as though in the throes of death. He clawed at the arms of his chair, desperate to escape the torture device as the raccoon forced it deeper and the victim's breath came in short gasps.

But the sound—the horrible screaming of that device filled the room, echoing off the walls like an inescapable nightmare. It was like nothing Kharlie had ever heard before, and to witness such monstrous torment inflicted upon another like him chilled his blood.

"Know what that is?" Taro growled. "That's a *Tanthean Persuader*. It is delivering a finely powdered acid to the insides of his lungs that will eat away at the air sacs little by little for the rest of his life—however long *that* is."

The victim howled, the insidious machine howling with him, the sounds coming from it varied in pitch as the raccoon pressed different areas of the torture-pipe.

"He's going to be breathing his own blood before long," Taro continued, moving over to stroke fingers through Kharlie's head fur. "It should take him about—oh—ten or fifteen hours to die. Have you ever tried to breathe, knowing that with every draw of air you are forcing particles deeper into your tissues, burning you from the inside out?"

The squirrel shrank, "*Okay, look! I'll tell you! Just PLEASE don't put that on me!*"

"Yeah..." she continued. "You *know* you can try not to breathe, but your reflexes will *make* you, no matter what. That's the beautiful part about the survival instinct: *it will not let you die even when you want to.*"

"*I saw him!*" Kharlie begged. "*He was taken by a cougar named Robbins! He's a pirate!*"

That last word sent a ripple of fear throughout the room. For a moment, Tanis forgot to scream and Patch forgot to act. Quickly regaining themselves, Patch pulled the tube from his victim's mouth, allowing a rope of drool to follow it for dramatic effect. Tanis' head slumped against his breast and he mumbled, crying for mercy in hoarse, raspy wheezes. "I wanna put it in him anyway," Patch muttered, approaching the next victim.

"Better talk fast." Taro snarled, trying to hide her shock at the mention of pirates.

"*He took your mate to a shuttle so he could take him up to their ship!*" the squirrel cried. "*It's hovering in space under a cloaking system, but you can find it if you look for a class G spatial distortion!*" Patch loomed over him, a crazed expression in his eyes. Kharlie strained against his bonds. "*PLEASE NO!!*"

"This ship, what's its name?"

"*The Lady of Dreams!*"

Merlin gave his companions a nod.

"Well," said a refreshed Tanis, sitting upright and loosening his own ropes, "I'm glad *that's* over." He wiped his mouth, stood up, turned to the captive and made a short theatric bow.

Patch grinned around his pungent cigar and blew a ring of smoke across the squirrel's forehead. He then wiped the drool from the mouthpiece of his bagpipes with a handkerchief before turning to pack them away.

Taro playfully mussed the fur between Kharlie's ears. "Don't worry," the fox said, "the bartender should be up here in a bit to let you go. Thanks for your time!" She flipped him a coin identical to the one she had paid for the room with. It landed in a fold of his shirt and he stared down at it mutely.

When he looked up, a priceless look crossed Kharlie's face as the *Blue Horizon* crew members promptly departed.

The door across the room slid open again and Pockets steeled himself. In the fuzziness of his vision, a tall, slender form filled the space he could see. It was sleek by design, totally black. Then it stretched an arm to the table and dripped some amber fluid into the chalice. The form knelt down beside him and placed the lip of the chalice at his mouth.

"Drink this," purred a soft, female voice.

Pockets turned his head meekly, straining to clear his vision to get a good look at his tormentor.

"No," the voice scolded, tugging his head back to face the chalice. "This is the antidote to the sedative. You'll be able to move again."

Pockets struggled to resist, but slender fingers opened his mouth and deposited a portion of the bitter, warm liquid on his tongue.

"Listen to me," said the voice, "if I was going to try to hurt you, I could do it right now and you'd be powerless to stop me. If we wait for your system to process the sedative naturally it will take days. I need you fully coherent right now and this will get you that way. Swallow." She pressed his mouth closed and pinched his nose.

Defeated, Pockets did as commanded, swallowing the foul-tasting potion before he might vomit on it. The form stood up again and swirled, pulling off its black covering and leaving a crimson framework in its place. Within seconds, his eyes began to clear, and a warm sensation filled his body before a cold chill rippled through as he recognized the person before him.

A slender vixen, likely over six feet tall, knelt on the cushions. She was the most beautiful vulpine he had ever laid eyes on, but the arc-and-skull-shaped tattoo on the inside of her right ear identified her as *Natasha Khasho*, arguably the most notorious pirate on this side of the galaxy.

"Do you like what you see?" she asked, releasing the ruffled blouse from about her full bosom. She reached behind her back and loosened the constricting leather bodice and allowed herself free; sensual globes trembled beneath the white cotton blouse. She smiled; his gasp told her all she needed to know.

She took the empty cup from the table with one hand and unzipped his coveralls with the other, all the way down to his crotch. Pockets' jaw dropped as she rolled him bodily over onto one side, sliding the cup beneath his middle. Then the raccoon found he could let go of the burning ache in his belly.

As a steady stream exited his body, he felt the warmth brought on by the amber liquid drain away from his head down, almost as though he were a water tank being emptied. When the last remnants of fluid finally passed, she took the cup away, capped it, and set it to the side.

"Now that that's out of your system, we can get down to business." She closed his garments and sat him up on the cushions so he could look around the room to fully appreciate his surroundings.

The place was spotless. Striking art adorned the paneled walls and a bookshelf filled with leather volumes stood prominently in the middle of one wall. Something in his mind told him that these objects were too similar, too fashioned to a particular theme to be looted wares of piracy and treachery.

Scrolls of blueprints lay on a planning table, and the diminutive engineer's critical eye could see enough of one to notice its exotic physical design of a truss. A row of figures and chemical symbols rested at the bottom of the chart, a formula for creating the necessary metal. Then a key turned in his memory: a feat of metallurgy had been expropriated from a Terran several years ago, but there had been some problem re-creating the smelting process because the man had left a key formula out of his journals. What Pockets had heard of that metal could have made the truss work. *If it was...*

"I see you are a technically-oriented man," the fox purred, drawing his attention back. Pockets turned to see Natasha slipping off her blouse.

He nodded silently, finding his tongue unwilling to obey just yet.

"My name is Natasha. Others have called me the Pirate Queen. I need an engineer for my crew." she licked her lips. "Let's see if I can convince you to join me." In a single, swift movement, the fox parted her trousers and whisked them away, pulling a pair of incongruently feminine undergarments off by quick-release fasteners in the process. Now totally bare, she pressed her lips to his in a deep, passionate kiss. Her tongue, it seemed, was willing and ready to obey.

Pockets gasped despite himself, but then wondered—as her fingers demonstrated competence in another form of plunder—why she would try to seduce him into joining instead of just kidnapping him and forcing his labor.

Natasha was about to begin her form of initiating the raccoon into her crew, but a knock sounded on the large wooden door. The red fox frowned at the interruption and said in an annoyed voice, "*What is it?*"

"It's Robbins," a voice called through the panel. "Tim was caught filching from Jacob's cabin."

Natasha rolled her eyes and then looked over at Pockets. "Excuse me, sweetheart. Duty calls." The fox zipped up Pockets' clothing and got up from her knees. She put on a short scarlet robe, retrieved her undergarments and put them back on under it. "Don't think you aren't interesting," she said, "but I've found that this sort of thing has to be dealt with immediately. Don't worry; we'll get back to business shortly."

Pockets' eyes lighted at the thought of filling out all the applications.

"Okay, Mr. Robbins, bring him in," she said.

The door opened and a muscular cougar moved into the heavily-wood paneled room, with his hand gripping the collar of a young mouse of about nine or ten. The First Mate shut the door behind him and released the short boy. A brief moment of recognition followed as Pockets realized the immense cougar was the same behemoth he had seen in the hotel hallway.

Natasha crossed her arms and looked down at the cabin boy. "Okay, Tim, what did Jacob have in his room that you felt you had to take?"

The young mouse glanced over at the raccoon sitting motionless among the floor pillows and stuck his hands in his pockets. "Just some magazines, ma'am."

Natasha hid her smile by rubbing her face in apparent thought. "What *kind* of magazines, boy? We have a large library of reading material on board for you to choose from." She already knew the type of literature Jacobs preferred, but wanted the mouse to admit it to her himself.

Tim studied the thick brown carpeting and mumbled something.

"What was that?" the captain asked.

"*Female Critters of the Galaxy, Exposed.*"

"Tim... you are not old enough, even on *my* ship, for the privilege of reading that material."

"I know, ma'am..." the mouse said, "but..."

"No buts, boy. That makes two rules of *The Lady of Dreams* you have broken today. You *know* I don't tolerate this under my command." She looked down over at the raccoon and gave him a subtle wink before addressing her First Mate. "Mr. Robbins, prepare Tim for discipline."

"Yes, ma'am." The cougar knelt down next to the boy, and placed a hand on his shoulder with a gentleness that belied his imposing brawn. "You know the routine. Strip to your shorts."

Tim didn't bother to hide his nervousness as he slowly complied. Pockets swallowed hard as he listened and watched. He could feel the paralysis drug quickly wearing off and he was able to bend his knees a bit under one of the massive pillows. He didn't know what kind of discipline he was about to witness, but if became too severe he intended to do whatever he could, if anything, to protect the boy. Like most in the Planetary Alignment, he had heard rumors of the horrors of pirate practices. Just how severe would they punish the cabin boy for such a small theft was left up to the raccoon's active imagination.

When the mouse stood before them in his cutoff denim shorts, Robbins easily hefted the youth and carried him to the captain's bed. The cougar retrieved several short lengths of silk cloth from a lamp stand. Tim crawled to the center of the bed and lay out spread-eagle on his back. The First Mate dutifully tied the lad's tail to his left leg, and wrists and ankles to the bed posts.

Natasha smiled down at the raccoon that watched the proceedings silently and knelt beside him to whisper in his ear. "As part of my crew, you will learn that each member of the *Lady of Dreams* is very loyal to me, even after receiving punishment for their misbehavior. Watch and remember."

The shapely fox stood up and approached the bed, lazily swishing her tail. She sat on the mattress next to the mouse and grinned at the youngster. "You may leave now, Mr. Robbins," she said without looking up. The cougar left without a word and Natasha held up a hand and said softly, "Fingers?"

"I'm sorry..." the mouse squeaked.

Captain Natasha extended a finger toward the mouse's side and lightly wrote her name with it into the boy's gray flesh. Tim tried to pull away from her finger, but the ties kept him from moving very far. He held his breath as her ticklish touch continued to lightly caress his ribs, but his eyes were tightly closed. She wriggled a fingertip in his navel and the mouse snickered. She moved her hands back and forth across his ribs on both sides as he giggled and writhed upon the bed, but without any way to stop what she was doing. His eyes were starting to tear up as the sensations continued to build up within him, but just as he was about to cry out, Natasha stopped and allowed him a few heartbeats to catch his breath.

She looked back to the raccoon and laughed when she noticed his eyes straining to peer up over the edge of the bed to watch things from the level of the floor. She hated to lose the small amount of momentum she had started on Tim, but decided to take care of two tasks at once. She moved to Pockets and lifted him off the floor like a limp rag doll. He was smart enough to pretend the paralysis still had a hold on him as she placed him in a cushioned, high-backed chair near the bed. Satisfied he was situated, she moved back to Tim's side.

Natasha smiled warmly and moved to sit between the youth's legs. Pockets was suddenly appalled at what he thought this vixen was about to do to a minor. She surprised him, however, by doing something other than what he'd expected. She sat between the bound ankles and lightly danced her fingers across the smooth expanse of his belly. Tim squealed and tried to wriggle away, but again the ties kept him in place. Pockets squirmed slightly in his seat, remembering the skill of her fingers on his own body. As Natasha continued to tease the little mouse, she reached down with her right hand and drummed her fingertips across the underside of his left knee, then reached over and lightly kneaded the top of the right. The boy squeaked again and lost his composure, finally laughing and giggling aloud.

This went on for two full minutes until Natasha gave up the subtle tactics for a more aggressive move. She leaned back and grabbed the top of Tim's left foot. She tickled his toes vigorously and the boy shrieked and bucked wildly against the silk. As she continued, Pockets saw the pure delight in the vixen's face as she administered her own particular form of discipline to the boy, and marveled at this lady pirate. He found that the paralysis had completely worn off his body, but he sat where he was, transfixed by the proceedings before him. With the ship docked planetside and practically the entire crew out in the city, he knew he should try to escape, but he felt drawn to watch just a little bit more.

Natasha switched to the squealing boy's other foot without the benefit of a breather this time and tickled up and down the pink sole. After several seconds, the squirming youth could only guffaw silently. She looked up at Tim's face and saw tears streaming from the clenched eyelids, so she stopped and moved up to his side. "Are you hurt, boy?" she asked gently. Tim couldn't speak from the chuckles still escaping his lungs, but shook his head as he gasped. "I – I'm ok-kay," he said with a relieved giggle.

Natasha grinned widely and then grabbed his ribs with a new flourish of tickling. Tim shrieked and Pockets was hard pressed not to cover his ears from the shrill pitch and volume. If there were more than the one or two crewmembers he had seen earlier still on board, they were respectful not to investigate the noises from their captain's cabin. Still, he sat transfixed.

The vixen varied her attack points and began energetically tickling the boy all over his upper body. Tim alternately bubbled and howled as her fingertips played well-known spots like a finely tuned instrument, and Natasha laughed as well from her enjoyment. It occurred to Pockets that she must be an exception to the norm as pirates go. She was teasing - not torturing - the boy. Her tempting tactics for employing him into her crew, and her favorite form of disciplinary action, painted a different picture than what the raccoon was used to believing.

Captain Natasha finally stopped her whirling fingers and asked in a heavy breath, "Now, is there any place I've missed?"

Tim weakly shook his head in the negative, but a new voice spoke up.

"I've heard that mouse ears are very ticklish," Pockets said, drawing a long feather out of a nearby vase and passing it to the fox. "Tickle his ears. Maybe his nose, too."

Both Tim and Natasha looked over at the raccoon in surprise to see Pockets standing at the foot of the bed. The fox grinned widely and accepted the plume, "Why, thank you, good sir. I was not aware of that."

Tim screwed up his face in horror, eyeing the feather with particular dread. "Not a feather! Don't! Please, no! I won't look at Jacob's magazines ever again!"

Natasha laughed at him. "I think I know better than that, boy. Let's make sure you don't," she said as she clamped a hand around the youth's chin to hold his head still.

"My business is *none* of your business, Jensen, so you are just going to have to *live* with it!" Merlin snarled, jamming a finger down onto his console to silence Armando's complaints. He looked forward to his tense crew. "Distance and time?"

"We'll be there in a few more minutes, Captain," Samantha reported. "We've got a tenuous lock on the spatial disturbance. That might be our cloaked cruiser."

"Outstanding. Make sure our new weapons are charged and ready. I'll try to resolve this without a conflict, but let's be ready anyhow."

"Aye, sir," she replied as he sulked back into his chair. *Pockets, why did you have to run off like that?* she wondered.

Pockets sat back on the silk sheets as a newly freed Tim gathered up his tunic and sandals, a blush still on his cheeks. Natasha swatted the boy lightly on the rear and sent him out of the room. Robbins stood out in the hall and greeted Tim with a grin and a congratulatory scrabble of the boy's short head fur. Natasha turned back to the raccoon to see an expression she could not quite read.

"You disapprove of my techniques?" she queried, rising to her full, impressive height now that the drug had worn off her prisoner.

"I'm surprised by them, but I don't think *disapprove* is the proper word," he responded.

She looked down at him with the sober composure of a business report. "I don't like to hurt people unless absolutely necessary. Tim was abandoned by alcoholic parents two years ago and I took him in on the condition that he earns his keep, and so far he's done that. He is a good kid but he sometimes goes astray and I have found that little trick to be just enough of an ordeal to get my point across. It also teaches him a valuable lesson in that he can keep going at something unpleasant long after he thinks he cannot. *That* works because it doesn't leave marks. I do not want to have to deal with any charges of abusing minors if some dogmatic outer-rim sheriff finally has some luck."

"And?" the raccoon said with a smile.

"And..." she returned the feather to its vase with a grin, "it's cute to make him *squirm*. Reminds me of what I used to do to my little brother."

"So this is how you handle your crew? You're not quite the vicious pirate that local legend has made you out to be."

"I've gone to a lot of trouble to create the illusion that we're vicious and more degenerate than we really are. It keeps troublemakers off our backs and gives us a reason to turn down people who are just looking for a reputation. We never attack military vessels or private cargo ships unless we are provoked into it. The *Lady of Dreams* only sacks tax ships—extorted alms from the needy to the greedy, and we leave their crews as alive as possible. This is not the information that gets passed to the media, though. According to several worlds we rape

and plunder at random, killing innocents and preventing needed aid to worlds on the edge of starvation."

"But isn't that what happens when you take out a tax relief ship?"

"Not at all. One of the things few know about Intergalactic Aid is that most of the stuff gets seized at the border by the warlords currently draining victim worlds' economies to pay for their palaces and private armies. In turn, the IA wails about how territories are still starving at the expense of selfish enterprises not giving enough of what they've earned to help those in need. This is a form of emotional blackmail that compels the people of ability to submit to further taxation. The IA makes money via kickbacks from the warlords for keeping this vicious cycle going and the problems never end." Natasha sat down on the silk sheets beside the raccoon, now scrubbing his chin in thought.

"What do you do with the money?" he prodded.

"We keep a lot of it and channel some of it back through black market conduits. It doesn't do a whole lot of good to the extorted, but until they're willing to oust the corrupt governments *themselves*, anything we do will prolong the misery and never help."

"Aren't your actions, or more accurately your inactions, just another form of evil?"

"Evil?" she replied in a cold purr. "What do you know of evil? *Evil* is forcing anyone to act in the operation of his own destruction. When we take on a ship, we match them gun for gun: my crew against theirs. They have just as much opportunity to destroy us as we do them. But what they do planetside is a different matter. The IA uses compulsory charity: it works through government action to disarm its victims. If people don't pay the appropriate level of tax extortion, the government goes in quietly and seizes their belongings at the point of a gun. But they'd rather not do that if they can help it, because that costs them so much more time and money to provide the right media spins. So instead they use media pressure to get people to surrender more and more every year, destroying things incrementally."

"A man with a briefcase can steal more money than anyone with a gun," the raccoon mused. "Hasn't anyone ever exposed this?"

"How could they? The IA, through various stooges, controls the widespread media and anyone caught speaking out is locked up in prison for disturbing the peace."

Pockets blinked. "Natasha, Pirate Queen, doing what is *right*."

She chuckled, "When right is outlawed, don't expect those who *know* right to obey the *law*. But then, all that is just a microcosm. The problems are much more widespread than that."

"Hmm," Pockets replied. "All right, I'm interested in learning more about you."

"Good. First, however," she immediately crossed the silk sheets and pressed her lips to his neck, "you have to offer me a tribute of fire and... whatever liquid you see fit."

"Is this your normal initiation?" he asked, backing up on the sheets.

"Well, yes," she nibbled at his chin.

He pushed her gently away. "Look, if you are giving me the *option* of joining you or not, there's something you have to understand. I can't willingly join your crew because I'm bound to the *Blue Horizon* for another couple of years. I'm sure you can appreciate my loyalty to contract."

She pulled back, disappointed but interested. "The *Blue Horizon*, eh?" she repeated with a lopsided smile. "That's the freighter that's been embarrassing Sagan lately."

"Embarrassing?" the raccoon asked with curiosity.

"The *Basilisk* has been the butt of jokes on Brandt about Sagan's inability to take down a common *Okami*-class freighter," the vixen replied. "He's pretty steamed about it."

Pockets shook his head and muttered, "Serves him right. He *murdered* one of us!"

She leaned forward slightly and added, "I've heard it said he keeps stroking the scar on his cheek he got from his last sword fight with your captain."

"Nice. That aside," the raccoon continued, "I can recommend some people in nearby star systems who're free agents. They could help you out."

She withdrew completely, sitting on the bed sheets without a hint of chagrin. "I need an engineer and a gunner."

"Well, over on Earth there's an engineer named Jean Orfèvre who can make or fix anything you can think of. If he doesn't work out, try Mol Mok. He's a lemur on Quet and I believe he's not doing anything in particular. Knowing him, I think he would jump at the chance to work for you."

"And weapons?"

"He'll probably be difficult to find, but I think a Kastani named Jape Devon—"

"No."

The raccoon looked at her with surprise. "No?"

"I'm not going to deal with a psycho."

Pockets paused for a moment, reading the sincere disgust in her face. "I've worked with him before. Devon is rough and he *is* a killer, but he is also a genius and I don't think he's psychotic. He fought in five wars that I know of, and knows battle tactics like the inside of his mouth. He can formulate every form of combustion, chemical and physical, and works *very* fast in a combat situation. He's also the best marksman I've ever met."

"That's not what I've heard. I've heard he leaves people to die in terrible pain after botching kill shots."

"Exaggeration. Devon believes in the one-bullet principle. If he can't kill his prey in a single shot, which is *very* rare, he gives them the option of being left alive or put down. He even took one victim to a hospital by request," he countered.

"And I'm supposed to take that in lieu of countless reports otherwise?"

"What I've seen here does not match what I've heard of you either. *Natasha, Toe Tickler* doesn't have quite the same ring, does it?"

The fox canted her head and twitched an ear. "Touché," she said. "So you really think he's the right one for the job?"

"As I said, if you can find him."

"And what," she added finally, "do you want in exchange for your help?"

Pockets thought for a moment, knowing well that this vixen would not let him go without some form of payment. There was too much justice in her manner of thinking. His eyes moved over to the planning table, and he began to speak.

That moment, an alarm sounded in the hall and the Pirate Queen started. A voice poured through an unseen speaker: "*Captain, we need you at Control, pronto!*"

"Come on," she said as she grabbed her long trench coat and tore out of the room.

"*Status!*" she cried as red lights flashed and warning klaxons sounded. Pockets followed the tall vixen to the bridge of the *Lady of Dreams* to find it a singular technological wonder. Sleek panels along the walls housed instrumentation that he and his engineer brother would have killed to have.

"Visual array is coming up, Captain," Robbins reported as she took the command seat in the middle of the battle bridge. Unused to the new technology, Pockets gasped as a spherical

holographic image floated in space before the bridge crew. This was not like the vidscreens of the *Horizon*, but a fully rendered three-dimensional representation of space around them.

"*Pirate vessel!*" rumbled a voice over the communications units. "*Surrender immediately and prepare to be boarded.*"

"That thing? They have *got* to be kidding," Robbins growled as a pair of joysticks flipped up from his panel and green crosshairs appeared over the face of a blue flying saucer outside.

"No, wait!" Pockets cried, leaping forward to the vixen. "That's my ship and they're just coming for me, I'm sure of it!"

Natasha tapped a pad on an arm console and gestured an invitation to her former captive.

"Captain Sinclair?" Pockets called out.

"Pockets?" It was Samantha's voice.

"I'm okay!" he replied.

Merlin Sinclair's voice crackled across the invisible waves, "*Porter, if they've harmed you in any way I'm going to tear them in half.*"

"No sir! I'm perfectly fine. We just had a..." he looked to the cougar, still tense at the controls, "just a little misunderstanding, that's all."

"*Captain of the ship,*" Merlin rolled.

"This is the captain," Natasha responded.

"*Release my engineer at this moment, unharmed. Do not make us engage you!*"

Natasha almost laughed aloud. "Only one person has ever beaten me in battle and it wasn't you, and it *sure* wasn't in a common freighter." She turned to an equine figure sitting at another set of controls. "Jazz, de-cloak."

A hum followed by a tiny crackling noise, and Pockets saw a shape materialize in the exact center of the holographic sphere.

The bridge crew of the *Blue Horizon* gasped as one when the vidscreen suddenly filled with a long, wedge-shaped ship that was many times their size. The terrible silhouette stirred an ancient memory, but none could precisely place it. Renny Thornton's screen lit up with a flashing green message: *Hammerdine class-G Dreadnought*. Then, painted across the forward decks, like a child's toy in a handful of deadly weapons, a bright yellow *smiley-face* beamed back at them.

Merlin swallowed hard and suddenly regretted his harshness.

"*Blue Horizon,*" Natasha's voice said over the com channel, "*this is the Lady of Dreams. I have no interest in conflict with you. As you can see, we are more than a match for your weapons systems. However, I do wish to return your crewmate to you. Please see that your emergency conduit is available in five minutes. Captain Natasha, out.*"

Natasha. An eerie silence filled the bridge of the *Blue Horizon*. Even though they had prepared for this confrontation, hearing that dread name sent a chill through most of the crew. Renny spun his chair around to face his leader, waiting for instruction. Beside the wolf, Durant stood with a Binfurr weapon in hand and a stony expression. Merlin grimaced and whirled out of his command chair toward the emergency conduit as a small, gray shuttle dropped gracefully from the belly of the *Lady of Dreams*.

The *Blue Horizon* sat quietly in space, Taro and Renny handling the controls at the bridge. In the captain's den, Pockets was receiving the eleventh degree from Sinclair *and* his twin brother.

"That's a *big* ship," Renny commented as the *Lady of Dreams* slowly rotated in space, adjusting its course and preparing for its journey to Earth. "Any idea what she's got under the hood?"

Taro sighed in appreciation and nodded. "Particle Vault; anti-matter engines. According to rumor, Natasha is actually a venture capitalist under a bunch of false names and that she is holding out a lot of new technology until things improve throughout the PA. She does not want anyone else benefiting on her brain."

"So she needed an engineer and Pockets referred her to some people he knew," the cheetah sighed. "I wonder if he got anything in return."

In the next moment, a crackling blue energy surge ringed the *Lady of Dreams* from stem to stern, swallowing it whole and leaving only an unbroken vista of stars.

In the wolf's den, the snarling and shouting had stopped. Humbled, with ears back and tail lowered, Pockets plugged a data crystal into the captain's terminal. Displayed were technical plans that could upgrade the engines to Vault capacity. However, the key instructions were in a scrambled hieroglyphic and it would take another visit with the Pirate Queen to release the cryptography. *If his advice panned out*, she had promised, *the Blue Horizon had just made a very important ally.*

In the center command seat, Natasha passed her eyes over a floating console's scrolling numbers. The readout of the Vault Drive displayed its performance statistics, and she found that the efficiency of the new technology was on the rise. The vault itself had lasted only a microsecond in real time and the *Lady of Dreams* had just entered just outside the orbit of Luna in the Sol system on approach to the blue planet. Incremental upgrades to all ship systems were proving one of the best ideas she had ever had, and her top-notch technical team made her proud.

"Captain," a voice lilted from her right, "we're coming up on Earth."

"Thank you, Mr. Frost."

Natasha moved the console from her way and pulled up the spherical monitor in the center of the bridge. Ringed with white streaks, the surface of the world before them was one of the most appealing in the Planetary Alignment. It was not a shimmering pearl like Argeia or a brooding brown mudball like Quet, but aesthetically it appealed to her.

"Ahead one quarter," she instructed, "Jazz?"

The slender white filly tapped keys before her and the ship's cloaking system engaged, causing the hulking juggernaut to flame in space and then disappear with only a waving distortion in its place. The tall fox stood from her command chair and started toward the hall, absently adding, "Get my shuttle ready."

A stout bobcat at one console noted a small distortion in the starfield before him, but was distracted when the captain arose. He did not want to bother his captain with trivial details.

Robbins followed her down the hall, "You know, there's no real reason to trust Porter's advice. He could have been telling you all that just to get out of here."

"Noted," she added, "but at this point I'm not interested in taking chances on missing out on good people. You ought to have seen the look in his eyes when he saw the schematics for the new truss; positively glued to them."

"That was what I thought when I first saw him, yes. But really, Earth? That's the lion's mouth for us right now. This is dangerous, and the rest of the crew can see that. Why can't you?"

"I'm aware of the danger," she snapped back, "and that's the reason why I'm going."

He crossed his arms over his massive breast. "I don't think that's going to happen," He said with a scowl of disapproval, both as her bodyguard and friend.

"But I do," she countered. "You and Tim will be coming with me, so dress nicely."

"Tim? What if there's trouble?"

"He's a deterrent. I'll pass him off as my adopted nephew or something."

"Good thinking," he added. "Nobody will believe that the *Infamous Pirate Queen* has a soft spot for kids."

"Oh, please," she chuckled. "The little snot almost made away with my bracelet and was hard to capture when I realized it. Someone *that* slippery belongs in my crew."

A hatch opened with a hiss, and Natasha walked in just in time to receive a heavy cuff to the face. The blow spun her, slamming her against the wall before she knew what happened. As she slumped to the floor, Robbins looked past her to see a lean, black form of a jaguar in the lift. At its feet, the boy mouse lay savagely beaten and unconscious with a ribbon of blood running out of his nose and onto the gray metal floor. Even in the low light, the hulking sable cat's eyes flashed a dangerous green.

"*You!*" Robbins growled quietly, menacing. Sagan launched out of the lift, fangs and claws bared for the cougar's throat.

VEXED OF KIN

By Steve Carter

*SS Blue Horizon PA1261
Captain's Journal*

The Blue Horizon has made it safely away from Brandt after collecting our errant engineer from all people, Captain Natasha Khasho, who is more infamously known as the Pirate Queen. The only thing that saved Pockets from a well-deserved horsewhipping was that he brought back with him the schematics to an advanced technology heretofore unseen in anything but fantasy journals. The key elements of Particle Vault Drive technology given him in code cannot be deciphered until the pirate queen proves that some advice Pockets gave to her is proven worthwhile. I don't know how long that will take, but two other members of the crew saw the Vault in action when Natasha's ship, Lady of Dreams, departed from our vidscreens. As far as the rest of the universe is concerned, Vault engines are just a hypothesis right now. Basically, instead of traveling across expanses of space with traditional drives or through a spatial warp, Vaulting allows her ship to momentarily slip out of the time/space continuum and move outside conventional dimensions. Basically, they sit still in a place where time does not work (therefore they don't age and don't have to occupy a few trillion years' worth of their time waiting) while the universe rotates around to meet them.

To put this in perspective as Pockets has described it to me, imagine how much effort it would take to draw a straight line across a piece of paper. Now imagine how much it would take to hold a pen still while that paper is whisked out from under it at about 100 miles per hour. Her ship still uses conventional LightDrive engines while in normal space, but this is how she travels to travel vast distances across the galaxy. In addition, Pockets tells some interesting stories about the things he saw while on her ship, including further technological systems that he could barely describe.

Unfortunately, as Patch has reminded us, even if we had the unlocking code on Natasha's encryption, our G-model Blue Horizon may not be large enough to contain the prototype of such a system without a major structural modification. Trading this technology to the right people would reap us untold treasures, but also untold headaches as politicians would no doubt accuse us of terrestrial subversion and attribute the information to whatever major corporation they happened to have in their pockets that week. Should we ever upgrade to another ship that can support it, I may authorize its inclusion for emergency usage, but for now it will be our secret and kept as an ace up our sleeve for now.

Now that our business for Faltane is finished, we are currently on course to Quet to pick up a load of processed micranite used in LightDrive shielding for delivery to Dennier. Quet's reputation precedes it as one of the least desirable places in the Planetary Alignment. It is more of a wasteland than a thieves' den, so it is only slightly higher on my list than Brandt. For the most part, all we have to worry about on Quet is getting dirty, not getting killed. Since both Brandt and Quet are within the Faya Star System, our travel time will not be the usual weeks, but merely a standard shipboard day. The orbits of both worlds are currently at their furthest from one another and there's a massive asteroid belt between them to negotiate or we'd arrive in only a few hours.

So far there've been no concerns other than Sparky reporting a larger-than-usual gap in her snacks. My first thought was of another stowaway like that girl from Earth, but we've had no visitors on board this time.

I would imagine this has more to do with the higher tempo we've been operating at through this section of space. I have maintained the two-on staffing around the clock until we get out of this system and there is bound to be a little more munching and book reading in the dead hours.

The new crew compliment is shaping up well. Renny is filling in where Jiro left off without either slacking at his job or trying to overcompensate for the sake of proving himself just as good. Renny is just being himself and the crew has taken to him for his own virtue. Still, occasionally Jiro's absence can be felt, but I'm happy to be surrounded by the people that I am now and thank God for small favors. Having Tanis back with us also gives us a trained medic in times of emergency.

Since the jaunt from Brandt to Quet is within the same star system, we will not be making an overlong stopover at the Dump, as Quet is sometimes called due to a past environmental disaster. I'll allow everyone four hours of free time after we've unloaded the cargo before picking up the micranite containers for delivery to Dennier, but I doubt there will be enough food or entertainment to keep everyone busy for the duration of our stop.

Merlin Sinclair, Captain

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A light flickered and an antenna fired off a signal to a tiny microprocessor, causing the small disk to rotate slightly on its cushion of air. A change in atmospheric pressure registered on the other side of a smooth panel and its auditoria picked up a slow, regular pulse of sound. It checked its records, searching for signatures. It ran in a microsecond a profile on each of its records, and found this one untitled and listed only under "related."

01110000 01110010 01101111 01100110 01101001 01101100 01100101 00100000 01101101 01100001
01110100 01100011 01101000 00100000 00101101 00100000 01110010 01100101 01101100 01100001
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Back in his cabin, Pockets' eyes were alerted to a flashing green light. He sauntered lazily over to tap a series of switches on a console and patch his way into Moss' video capture. What he saw did not impress him at all: the smooth, gray surface of a piece of paneling.

"What is it, Moss?" he asked into the microphone.

"Meow!" was the plaintive reply, and then across the speakers issued a synthesized copy of the odd sound it had acquired. It was a soft, repeating noise like...

Pockets' eyes went wide and he tapped a switch on the wall, "Captain?"

Another voice answered. *"The captain is on a sleep period right now, Pockets. What's the word?"*

"Taro! Moss has found something on board behind a panel in cargo, and it sounds like it's alive."

"How so?"

The raccoon tapped a few switches and relayed the sound onto the bridge. It reverberated on the bridge com system; the red fox recognized it and checked her crew roster, but in the last thirty minutes, all members had been accounted for and no one was supposed to be in the cargo hold – not even Durant. There was no reason for the sound of *breathing* down there, especially behind a wall panel.

Durant hovered over Pockets, the butt of a Binfurr rifle at his shoulder as the raccoon released the metal clips to access the panel before them. The section fell off and the bear moved the muzzle of his weapon to the edge, easing it away from the wall. Behind the pair, Renny stood with another rifle as Taro observed.

The next moment, Pockets backpedaled away from the panel, gasping for breath as a foul scent wafted out to greet him. Durant's eyes stung with it as well, his nostrils flared and an awful taste was suddenly on his tongue. In the dark recess slumbered a lone, gray form apparently oblivious of the noise around him. It was surrounded by half-eaten sandwiches, candy wrappers and a rusty canteen. The pair looked at one another, wondering if it was dead.

"What is that?" Renny asked, covering his nose to fight off the odor.

Durant poked at the form with the muzzle; it stirred, snorted and then went back to sleep. The bear looked back at Taro, not knowing what to do. The fox, however, moved her crewmate aside and stepped in to take charge.

"WAKE UP!" she screamed, punching the curled-up body. The intruder jolted into consciousness and smacked his head against the top of the inner panel.

"Huh? What?" he whined, annoyed with the interruption.

"Lucas," she sighed. *"How offensive to see you here."*

Durant's countenance dropped and Pockets rolled his eyes. Renny looked around to his friends' faces and caught the look of familiarity. Taro seized a limb and dragged a smelly wolf out of the panel and into the light of the cargo bay. He winced, caught off guard by the brightness. The cheetah let out a feline hiss as a swarm of white specks running over the crumpled form suddenly retreated to the shadows within the intruder's soiled clothing.

"I was trying to get some sleep," the wolf complained.

"Clearly," Taro indicated his hiding spot *"and stealing from us as well, it would seem."*

"Hey, I'm just hitching a ride. Can't a guy get a break now and again?"

"Sure," Durant snarled, *"what would you like broken?"*

Lucas blithely ignored the bear and rose to his feet, the white specks scurrying around beneath the trench coat he wore to find more shadows.

There was a family resemblance to their captain, though the fur patterns of his facial mask had hints of auburn highlights. He was thinner, more wiry, and he didn't look as if he'd had a good grooming in weeks, which could have easily been the case.

"So, where's my cabin this time?"

Merlin Sinclair cocked an eyebrow, though his eyes remained closed; he sat still for a long moment, then switched on his cabin com and rubbed his face with his hands. "This better be someone incredibly beautiful or I'm disconnecting you."

"You're in luck," an amused voice responded, "I'm gorgeous!"

"Wrong gender. What is it, Renny?"

"It appears we have another stowaway on board."

Suddenly the wolf was fully awake, sitting up on his bunk. "From Brandt? Have you found this person?"

"Yes," came the calm reply, "but Taro doesn't think our guest is going to be much of a threat."

"Does this person have a name?"

"Lucas Sinclair."

A long moment passed as the name hovered in space between his ears and his mind. It was familiar, but somehow—like forcing a feral cat into a bath—it just didn't want to go in. Finally the realization that his often-lost brother was now aboard the *Blue Horizon* reluctantly found a resting spot in his brain and sat there like the memory of a botched enema.

"Lucas?" he rolled, running a hand down his face, hoping it was a bad dream.

"Lucas," Renny replied. "Want to handle it?"

"No," Merlin growled, dually upset at this turn of events and the fact that it disturbed his well-earned slumber. "Throw him somewhere for the time being and I'll take care of it shortly."

Renny tapped off the switch with a wounded smile, looked with pleading eyes to Taro. The fox grumbled to herself, staring daggers at the indifferent freeloader as he crossed his arms and waited for her to make a decision about him. "Durant?"

Durant's eyes filled with dismay, but he accepted her orders. "I'd like you to take our leech and have him disinfected. Get with Tanis and see if he's carrying any kind of infectious diseases or..." she indicated a new flock of moving bodies as he moved an arm, "any *harmful* parasites. And please, before this smell gets into the ventilation system and spreads to other parts of the ship."

"I have some clothes he could wear, if you want to..." Renny trailed off, indicating Lucas' shoddy garments.

"Aye," the bear replied, passing his weapon to Renny. The others filed out and the bear half dragged his captive out into the open area of the empty cargo hold. He popped open a nearby panel, withdrawing a length of hose. "You'll want to strip down now," he advised. Lucas, however, just shrugged and looked at the deck. *Oh God*, Durant thought. *Am I going to have to undress him, too?*

"Captain!" sing-songed a voice.

The wolf stirred slightly in his bunk, looking up to a silhouette standing in his door. He looked around at the clock. It was close enough. Merlin dragged himself out of bed and rubbed life into his cheeks. "What's up, Renny?"

“Lucas...” – the name hung – it seemed for days – in the air – “...has been cleaned up and is somewhat groomed. Sam did the best she could, but I think miracles are beyond her capacity. Tanis had to inoculate him for about six different things and we spent the last half hour trying to flush the smell out of the cargo bay.”

Merlin’s countenance did not change. “So, he’s at least presentable?”

“Somewhat,” Renny found it odd that his captain was not shocked at Lucas’ condition.

“Okay, I’ll be right out to see what can be done about him.”

Lucas Sinclair stared idly off into space, clad in a clean black shirt, brown trousers and stocking feet. No shoes were available in his size and his own ankle-boots were still in the process of decontamination. He scratched his skin in places, the flea dip solution still an irritant.

“So,” Merlin growled, “what’s it looking like so far?”

Durant handed his captain a slateboard detailing the cost of cleaning up his errant brother. Combined with the food loss they could already calculate, the disinfecting, de-infestation of the cargo bay, re-sanitizing of the medical and mid-level lavatory, inoculations, and Renny’s clothes (marked as FREE, but Merlin did not feel that was apropos), the bill had already come to over two hundred credits. Merlin handed it back.

“Well, Lucas,” he began.

His brother paid no attention and cleaned his fingernails, flicking the gunk onto the deck.

“Lucas?” Merlin snapped fingers in his brother’s face.

“What?” the younger brother replied, irked at his brother’s impatience.

“*What* are you doing on my ship?”

He shrugged, “Nothin’ but doin’ my thing as always, why?”

“You are trespassing.”

“So? You don’t own space.”

“I own this ship.”

“I didn’t ask you for a ride on your precious ship, okay?”

“But you are here anyway.”

“I don’t *owe* you anything.”

“That’s up for debate. What were you doing on Brandt?”

“Why do you care?”

“Humor me.”

“I was taking some time off,” the younger Sinclair grumbled, irritated with the questions.

“Were you gambling?”

“A little.”

“How much.”

“Some.”

“Did you lose?”

“A little.”

“How much?”

“Why do *you* care?”

“You are being evasive.”

Lucas threw up his hands. “Look, obviously you *miss the point*. What do *you* care?”

The elder wolf steadied himself and sighed. These arguments never went anywhere. "Never mind," Merlin replied, "but as long as you are here you'll *work* for your keep."

"Okay," came the response, absently, with no real interest.

"All right, maybe I should be more specific: you are going to *work* for your keep - *for a change*."

"I gotcha, no worries." Lucas looked away, slouched posture saying more than words could. Merlin grumbled to himself, staving off the urge to tell him *then just stay out of the way*. Such an edict would be taken as a blank check to do nothing but eat and loaf. Lucas, unfortunately, knew semantics well enough to find cracks and escape hatches, and also knew how to play dumb when it suited his goals.

"Durant?"

The bear cocked an eyebrow as if to say *I've done my share of the dirty duty already*. "Boss." Merlin caught the motion, and stopped himself. "Is - uh - is the cargo bay cleaned out?"

"Aye."

"Good," he turned slowly, searching the faces for one that did not return a similar glare. "Sparky, I believe..."

He could feel, rather than see, the hairs stand up on her neck. Merlin sighed to himself and gestured for Lucas to follow him. The younger sibling stood, jammed hands into the pockets, and slouched his way down the hall.

When the lupine siblings were out of earshot, Renny inquired, "So what's the story with him?"

A collective groan followed, and Taro responded. "Lucas is Merlin's little brother. They say there's one like him in every family. Shiftless and lazy, been in prison and is usually up to his eyeballs in debt."

"Ah," the cheetah sighed. "My third cousin."

"Unfortunately we're kind of stuck with him for the time being."

Lucas Sinclair slouched, as was his habit, leaning against a long bar and dipping his fingers into a sauced bowl of grilled meatballs. His tenure as ship's lackey had survived twenty-four hours and he now made himself available to the cute young lynx, frying up something on the large, metal grill.

"So," he said, swiping another treat, "how long have you been a cook?"

She glanced up and replied, "Most of my life. Learned it from my mother on Fyn."

"Yeah, I've been in a lot of restaurants. Nice places."

"That's nice." She returned to her work.

"Probably no place you've been."

"I've not visited many places on Dennier."

"Just as well. They wouldn't have let you in." He swiped another meatball.

Sparky turned slightly, "Um... *excuse me*?"

"Well," he munched, opening his hands apologetically, "I guess you could, maybe, as a sweeper-upper or something. My grandparents are pretty wealthy and the places they go to are swanky."

"Ah," she rolled.

"I mean, it's like nothing you should be ashamed of. Lots of people are poor."

"What makes you think I'm *poor*...?" she bristled.

"Because you're from Fyn."

Durant entered the cooking area, feeling a palpable wall of contempt emanating from Sparky as she jammed utensils around her area. His eyes naturally went to the unkempt wolf sitting at the small bar beside her, munching cooked meatballs. The bear ambled up beside him, and addressed the lynx.

"Things going well, Sparky?"

She grumbled a reply, trying to be polite in her black mood.

Durant got the signal and turned to Lucas, clapping a hand on his back. "Say, I don't think I've ever seen somebody put away prairie oysters that way before. How many is that?"

The wolf smiled appreciably, squeezing another so that the juices spilled over his fingers, and tossing it into his mouth. "About twelve."

Durant's grin widened at Sparky looked quizzically back at him. "Wow... twelve. Not many people have that kind of tolerance for Terran testicles these days, even grilled."

Lucas' eyes bulged as the meat surged back up from his throat, filling his mouth with regurgitory bile. His head turned slowly to face Durant's bright grin.

"Hah! You ought to see the way they cut 'em off. They sever the whole genital section right after mating to keep the juices fresh." The bear clapped him on the back again, forcing Lucas to instinctively swallow, and then lurch out of the chair to find a place to vomit.

A long moment passed after he had gone. Then, Sparky seized a spoon and waggled it at the bear. "That," she said with a wicked smile, "was nice."

Durant only grinned in reply.

Merlin entered the bridge, looking down at the ledger on his slateboard that bore figures of his brother's expenses so far. The entries were short and to the point; nobody really wanted to go into detail, just drop the subject and go on. The ship had been placed on auto-pilot for a moment as Renny stood with Taro over Patch, lying on his back under a console. Merlin circled around the center chair and sat down, placed the slateboard on the armrest and then looked up.

Before his face a small, handmade plush wolf dangled from the ceiling on a cord noose around its neck. Swatches of fabric dressed it similarly to Lucas.

Merlin looked around the bridge; no one faced him. The wolf tugged the toy down from its spot and tucked it into a pocket of his flight jacket. "Renny... how are we flying here?"

"We seem to be losing power in the primary engine core. We're down to about seventy-four percent of our speed. We're not making good time."

"Cause?"

The horizontal raccoon barked a stream of curses and proclamations, and banged something under the panel.

"Patch is checking our instrumentation," Taro reported. "Maybe it's at this level. We're looking here while Pockets checks out the engines."

Merlin tapped a control. "Pockets, are you there?"

"I'm there."

"Found anything?"

"I canna tap the 'lithium crystals cap'n! I doont 'ave tha pauer!"

"I understand. Now, realistically?"

"We're looking at about a quarter power loss here, sir. It looks to be a problem with connections to the liquid crystal core."

"I thought you guys fixed that on Brandt."

"We did, but there's something missing now. Apparently a couple of the silver-plated relays have been... liberated."

The captain shifted his position and the small, plush wolf fell out of his pocket and onto the floor. All eyes on the bridge looked at it for only a moment, and then the other three went back to their duties. Merlin sighed heavily, snatched up the toy and stormed off the bridge.

"So..." Lucas needled, "you want a taste of the good stuff?" He rubbed his groin suggestively.

The Border collie finally surrendered to a constant stream of lewd insinuations. Incensed, she tossed a tiny package at him.

"What's this?" he asked.

"That's for you. A year's supply of condoms."

The wolf took it and fumbled it open to find it empty. He looked at her quizzically, "I don't get it."

"That," she rumbled, "is apparent."

A hatch opened behind Lucas and a brawny hand stretched out, snatched him by the collar, and dragged him back out the door as he yelped in surprise.

A few minutes later, Durant deposited Lucas in front of his brother, dropping him to the engineering deck from slightly higher than was really necessary.

"Empty your pockets." Merlin ordered his brother.

"Sure," he complied, turning the white stockings inside out. "You wanna frisk me too?"

"Pockets tells me that there are a couple of silver relays missing from the liquid crystal array. Needless to say, your name is at the top of the list of potential perps."

Lucas stared back blankly as if nothing had been said. Merlin lunged forward, grabbing his brother by the lapels of his shirt and worrying the younger Sinclair like a bone. "Listen to me you little *snit!* If you've stolen from me on my own ship I'm going to drag your butt back to Brandt and put you in prison myself!"

Lucas looked down at the trembling fists around his shirt, "Hey, aren't there some maritime laws against assaulting passengers?"

"You're not a passenger. You're a stowaway."

"Just answer the question," said the low rumble of Durant's voice.

"No," Lucas shrugged.

"You did not take them?" the bear asked.

"No."

"Are you lying?"

"No," he replied, without taking offense or changing inflection.

"Boss?"

Merlin slowly, stiffly released his brother. Lucas straightened out his shirt and turned to go. However, another clamp of a huge hand wrapped around his shoulder as the bear pulled him back.

"Oh no," Durant added. "I don't believe. Boss, with your permission?"

Merlin could not read the look in his crewmate's eyes, but nodded anyhow. Lucas found himself tossed over one shoulder and carted down the hall.

About ten minutes had gone by when the howling stopped. Tanis sauntered out of the back room of Sickbay, pulled off a pair of stained rubber gloves and tossed them into the incinerator.

"Well, he's telling the truth. They're nowhere on or *in* him."

Merlin scrubbed his chin with one finger. "Well then, where did they go?"

Tanis leaned against a wall as Durant emerged, a small smile of guilty satisfaction across his lips. "You know," the bear said, "Lucas is a little stronger than I thought he'd be."

"He almost threw ya once," the fennec fox added.

Lucas emerged from the clinic, buttoning his trousers and walking with a peculiar limp. "I hope you're *happy!*" he snarled at his brother.

"Well, ya were cracking a wide smile from where I was looking," Tanis beamed. The younger wolf gathered something resembling his dignity and shuffled out the door.

A panel chirped on another wall. The elder Sinclair crossed the room and tapped a button. "Merlin, here."

"Captain, I'm going to have to cut the engines," said Pockets' voice. "We've got a real leakage problem here and if we leave them on it's going to get out of control."

Merlin ground his teeth, but surrendered to his engineer's experience. "All right, see what it is going to take to get us to Quet on inertial."

"Roger that. I'll keep you posted as things develop."

The captain turned back to see Durant standing with crossed arms. "'It never rains, but it pours,' I believe someone once said."

The *Blue Horizon* seemed to ooze through space, the pattern of stars no longer slightly smudged as the LC engines stood still and cold while the ship continued on inertia. The great thing about traveling on inertia in space was that without atmosphere or wind resistance, they could sail for days on the energy they had gathered during their engine-powered flight. The not-so-great thing about it was that it was like going from power to manual steering on a *very* large vehicle. If they encountered obstacles, turning away from them would be a major chore, but at least the shielding field was still in operation, repelling micrometeoroids from piercing the hull. If they ran into hostiles... well, Merlin didn't even want to think about it. They were still too close to Brandt for comfort.

The captain sat in the pilot's chair, for there was no auto-pilot on inertial. He occasionally moved the manual control for thrusters, but rested his chin on one hand and stared out into the black void with a terminally bored expression. To the starboard, Taro stretched her legs out across a console and busied herself with a paperback copy of *How to Control Your Anger*. She had been using that book a lot in the last forty-eight hours.

The last thing Merlin Sinclair wanted was a proximity alert to go off on his console, indicating the presence of a rapidly approaching ship.

"What is that?" Merlin said, sitting upright.

Taro turned casually to the green blip on her screen, then scrambled and dropped her book as her fingers whirled across the keyboard. "I don't know, Captain. Apparently there aren't supposed to be any other ships in the general area."

"Go to alert," the captain barked, focusing on the blip and ordering Renny to bring weapons to bear. If they could not outrun the threat, their new weapons were about to get broken in.

Renny brought the new systems online with one hand while he found a silhouette and charged the computer to identify it. "Weapons hot!"

"Give me a channel," the captain said, grinding his teeth in anticipation. A soft whir followed as Taro opened the com port. "Approaching vessel, identify yourself." Merlin tried to sound as stern as possible to put up a good front.

A voice came back, "*Oh, hi-lo there!*"

Taro looked at Merlin. Merlin looked at Taro. It sounded like a cartoon.

"*Oh, don't worry about us! We're just on patrol out here and lookin' for... say, why're you guys on inertia?*" the voice asked.

"We..." Merlin began, "uh, just some routine maintenance on the engines," he said, not really wanting to admit their engines were out of commission to a potential enemy.

"*Oh, yeah? Can't that be fixed with a few rolls of splice tape?*" the voice yucked, and was joined by several similar voices yucking along with it.

"Ah, no," the captain allowed himself a curious sneer. This sounded too odd to be much of a danger. "We need silver-plated relays in order to fix things."

"*Oh, we've got some of those,*" from behind the faceless voice came a sound like many small bells clanging.

Taro looked back at her captain with a distinct *what-is-that* expression.

Merlin shrugged, a pained look on his face. "Well, if you'd be kind enough to sell us a couple, we would make it worth your while."

"*Sure!*" the ditzzy voice replied. "*Just sit still and we'll be right dere.*"

Several of the crew had joined the captain in welcoming their benefactors. Lucas sat in his cabin, nursing a very tender back end. Merlin had at least put on his presentable jacket when the visitors entered his ship. They turned out to be a gaggle of Dalmatians, dressed oddly in bright yellow slickers and red plastic hats that read EMERGENCY across the front in Terran English. But the oddest thing was that all eight of them moved as a single pack of bodies tightly pressed together. Only when the pack had entered the ship did a single Dalmatian press his way forward and introduce himself as Chief Roy of the Firedog Rescue ship, *Up Ducky*.

"I see," Merlin said with a hesitation at the name of their vessel, "please, step inside and make yourself at home."

The pack moved as a single body, a cacophony of madly bobbing heads with wide-open eyes taking in every detail of the ship. Merlin's smile faltered as he looked to Renny for support. The cheetah, however, could only stare in silence.

"Well!" said chief Roy, "This here's chief Bill, chief Rupert, chief Bonzo, chief Bob, chief Bubba and chief Billy Ray, 'n that's our firedog, Joey."

"How," Taro asked with a raised eyebrow, "can one firedog work for seven chiefs?"

"Doesn't matter," Roy said with a bright grin, "he doesn't do what we say anyhow."

"Then why do you keep him?"

"Well, what good's bein' a chief if ya ain't got nobody to be chief *of*?" There followed a gaggle of nodding heads with tongues flapping between grinning lips.

"So, whut's yer problem?" another, chief Bob, asked.

Pockets stepped forward, "Well, we're missing a pair of grade-three..."

"Stop!" another Dalmatian, chief Rupert, cried. He stepped out of the pack and knelt down before the raccoon, arranged the fingers of his left hand in an odd fashion across Pockets' forehead. He held the other hand in the air and declared, "I shalleth mind-toucheth with yor engineer and learneth the problem and how thus we mightst fixeth it!"

Pockets looked to his captain with trepidation. The other seven Dalmatians began to whistle eerie tunes, wriggling their fingers in the semblance of performing a séance.

Suddenly the Dalmatian stood, snapping his fingers. "They need the entire left block of their engine replaced!"

Instantly there was a maddening gang of howls, shouts of delight and laughter. Before anyone could speak again, the throng of Dalmatians disappeared down the hall in a storm of pattering feet, flapping tongues and yukking.

"No!" Merlin pleaded to the row of feet sticking out from service panels into the liquid crystal core, "we really don't need half our engine taken out and fixed! We *only* need two silver-plated relays!"

"Wrench," a hand darted out, and another hand darted out with a wrench to fill it.

Firedog Joey stood to the side, suavely chatting up Sparky in hopes of getting lucky.

Pockets tugged up a panel and looked down on a shiny yellow slicker, "You guys need any help under there?"

"Ratchet," another hand appeared in Pockets' face, and a ratchet flipped up from an unseen location between the translucent panels to land in it.

Merlin sighed, "Look, I really appreciate the effort, okay? But can you please just..."

"Salami on rye with mayo," another hand darted out, on the far right. Incredibly, the hand on the far left produced exactly what was requested, and it was passed down from one to the other until it arrived and was taken under the engine.

Pockets and Patch looked at one another, stunned.

"How can we get them *out* of there?" Renny queried.

Samantha, who had been standing by watching, knelt down near a pair of wiggling Dalmatian toes, "Maybe we can *tickle* them out?" She grinned and touched a foot pad.

BANG! Crash!! WHONG <kinkle> KRUNG!!

Suddenly all seven bodies slid out from under the engines, scowled at her and said in unison: "*Don't do that!*" Then they disappeared back the way they came.

Samantha stood, turned, and quietly left the engine room.

"Duck!" another voice. No hands moved. A moment later, all seven Dalmatians slid out, stood, and looked at one another. Chief Roy spoke, "Oh-kayeeee... *who* forgot the duck tape?"

Heads spun, eyes falling one on another until they came to rest on Billy Ray. Billy Ray searched nebulous pockets that rivaled Pockets' own with various expressions of worry and concern, then his face lighted and he snatched something from his deepest pocket.

A small animatronic mallard, held by the throat, carried a roll of silver tape between its webbed feet. Chief Bubba snatched a length of it and disappeared back under the engines with the other five. The duck looked at Merlin with pleading eyes.

"Heelp meeeee!" The duck was suddenly stuffed back into the pocket as its tiny electronic hoarse voice cried, "Caaall the poliiiiice!!" and Billy Ray returned to beneath the engines.

Merlin, Pockets and Patch looked at one another, wondering if they'd actually just seen that. "You know," Pockets said to a pair of feet, "there really isn't that much to do down there. We were..."

The body in question suddenly appeared from under the engines with a massive coil of fiber optic wire and diodes. The others withdrew with tubes, conduits, and other engine parts. The throng closed once again and began to yammer almost incoherently, comparing notes and parts.

Patch's eyes had shrunken to small dots watching the intruders mess with his engines. He turned to his captain and waved his arms wildly. "Do something!"

Merlin lost his temper. "All right, I'm *through* taking this garbage from you!" he shouted at the firedogs. "Put everything *back* the way you found it or I'm jetting the lot of you out into space in two seconds!"

The firedogs looked back quizzically, then returned to their yammering, this time withdrawing homemade tools and tinkering with parts, before sliding back under the engines.

Merlin ground his teeth and Patch stormed out of the engine room muttering things in several languages that made his brother's eyes grow wide.

"Hee-owgibbanogh!" roared a voice as the pack of Dalmatians slid as one out from the service conduit. Chief Roy crossed the small space between himself and Merlin and shoved a pair of translucent tubes in the captain's face. "Hey! Didja know that the only thing you're missing is a pair of silver relays?"

Patch fought the urge to deck him – fast, hard and continuously.

"Uh, yes..." Merlin replied.

"Well, that's easy to replace! Why dincha tell us in the first place!"

Merlin prepared a nasty response, but the Dalmatian was suddenly back under the array of engine tubes, humming to himself as tools whirred and a small shower of sparks followed. Patch gripped a nearby countertop with weak knees and wide eyes. Replacing a few relays did *not* require anything that would cause *sparks!*

The next moment, Chief Roy emerged more slowly, with an air of contentment. "There ya go! Should be smooth sailin' from here on out!"

Not convinced, Patch dove beneath the engines to inspect the work. When he arose from under the complex machinery several long moments later, his face wore a look of sincere astonishment.

"Well?" Merlin asked.

"Not a bad job," the raccoon replied. "For all the noise they were making, I feared the worst."

The captain appraised the Firedogs with a crooked smile. They had made a horrible mess, but fixed the problem. He didn't know what to say.

"Hey," said a new voice, "What's going on here?"

The wolf looked back as his errant brother sauntered lazily into the engine area. Strange, Merlin thought, that Lucas would voluntarily enter a place where work was being done. However, the elder wolf—optimistically—chose to think this new event a possible interest in

the gung-ho newcomers. An idea appeared and pushed itself forward in his mind with an alarming urgency. He turned back to the chief before him.

"Say... could you guys use an extra helper?" Hands began to shove Lucas forward for the Firedogs' interest. Other members of the *Blue Horizon* were anxious to get rid of the troublesome wolf. "He could be a Firedog Lucas to go along with your Firedog Joey," Merlin suggested hopefully.

Chief Roy approached Lucas with a grin, and then frowned. He furrowed his brow and began to sniff Lucas up and down. Then the others swarmed around him and did the same. The younger wolf felt unusually conspicuous and cast worried eyes at his brother—who looked away at Patch and Pockets as the raccoons checked their instrumentation.

The Dalmatians pulled back as one, and then retreated into a huddle. Their voices blended in a cacophony of disorderly noises, snorts, and jumbled statements.

"Captain," Pockets called. Merlin crossed the room to the terminal where the mechanic worked a terminal console.

"What's up, Pockets?"

"The engines are fixed, but not only that, they're running differently than before."

"Differently?" Merlin's eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"It looks as if they rerouted the flow of crystal energy so that it comes through purer and in less time. They disabled one of the safety redundancies, but," he indicated a juncture, "made it superfluous anyway by moving this up here."

"So we're running better?" the wolf asked with something resembling admiration.

"Cleaner, safer and probably faster."

"Hike!" cried the huddle of Dalmatians. Merlin crossed the room again as the pack of them stood before him.

"We can't take him," Chief Roy stated.

"Why's that?" Durant asked, disappointed.

Chief Rupert grimaced, "Because, even *we* know a lost cause when we see one."

The last sentence hung in the air as the throng of Dalmatians flocked together again, then stormed out of the engine room and across the cargo bay in a storm of pattering feet and flapping tongues. The crew followed the pack as it made a beeline to the connecting tunnel to the *Up Ducky*, and then the lot of them was through the airlock, detaching from the ship, and on their way, all in less than a minute. In shock, Merlin stood just outside the engine room in the cargo bay surrounded by his crew members.

"Did all that really just happen?" Pockets asked, scratching his head.

"I'm not sure," replied his brother, "but after this mess, I'm giving the engines a thorough inspection."

"They didn't even charge us anything," Pockets observed.

The captain sighed and shrugged as he tapped a com switch on a nearby wall, "Renny... let's get back underway."

"Right-o, Cap'n!"

Six hours had passed since the Firedog visitation and everyone's nerves were on edge from the continual presence of Lucas Sinclair. He had single-handedly managed to insult, confound, frustrate, and infuriate everyone on board without really trying and no one wanted

to have anything to do with him. The captain had difficulty trying to keep everyone, himself included, from shoving the ragged wolf out into space.

"I've had it with Lucas," Samantha grumbled to Merlin as she snuggled up close to him while they relaxed against several pillows on his bunk. "He's been watching my movies on the recreation deck and never puts anything away," she said. "He leaves food everywhere he happens to be and there's trash on every deck. I've even had to put password lockouts on every terminal on the ship but the bridge to keep him from messing with our systems."

Merlin slipped his arm around her bare shoulders and absently wove his fingers through her fur. "Seven more hours," he assured her, "then we'll be rid of him."

"That's an eternity!"

"He's lucky no one's tried to slit his throat in his sleep," Merlin snorted lightly.

"Don't think it hasn't crossed several minds, but no one can get past the smell to get near enough to do something so pleasant. I don't think he's showered since his flea dip when we first found him. Why do you claim him as family?" she asked.

"I don't. It's just an unfortunate act of fate that he was born into my family," the captain murmured. "He was the only survivor of the three born in his litter. He's always been a smelly fleabag, even as a young pup before our folks died. Neither Mom nor Pop could do anything with him, no matter how many beatings he got."

"Your dad beat Lucas?" She drew back in shock, unaware of this aspect of her lover's family.

"No, that was me. He challenged me for dominance often enough, but I trounced him every time. It never seemed to do any good, though. He kept coming back for more, but he never tried the same tactic twice. He spent most of his youth trying to find his way around things—mostly work—so that he didn't have to really earn them. If he couldn't get something he wanted in a legitimate way, he'd find some way to weasel it out of someone else or sabotage it so that nobody would want it. That was probably the main thing that I learned to hate about him; he always wanted things to come to him unearned."

"How did you put up with him growing up?" Samantha asked. "I'm surprised he's still alive."

Merlin sighed. "Don't underestimate him, Sam. Despite his scrawny build and the constant smell, he's intelligent and cunning. He only *appears* to be completely lazy. He could have finished school at the top of his class, but then one day he simply stopped trying, no matter how much our parents encouraged him. Even after we lost Mom and Pop, my sister Shannon also tried to encourage him to do better, but it was all wasted breath. At the end of one school year, he was caught hacking into the school computer systems and changing all of his grades when he could have easily earned them on his own. The worst part is that he's never used those abilities for a successful career."

"You're kidding!" Samantha exclaimed. "There's intelligence underneath that mangy exterior?"

"No joke," the captain admitted. "He only uses that mind of his for his own gains, whatever they may be. Usually I've no problem with someone doing that, but he doesn't care if he breaks the law or hurts others in doing so – and it's that last one that really gets to me. I can only wonder if his showing up on board was by plan or if he just happened to be in Langlop's Outpost at the same time we were."

"Whatever it is he's up to now," Sam replied, "it's costing us more and more having him as a passenger. I heard Durant telling Sparky about the totals he's been tallying on Lucas. We'd make a fortune if we had a paying passenger spending those kind of numbers."

Merlin looked over at her with a look of amusement. "Over the years," he muttered, "I've sometimes considered taking on passengers to add a little extra income to the business."

Samantha shook her head. "That might be more problematic than you think," she remarked. "Dealing with customers once every few weeks between flights is bad enough. Just imagine someone worse than Lucas locked in here with us for a month at a time."

"Okay, that just raised my hackles," the wolf said rubbing a hand over the back of his neck.

"Let that be a lesson to you."

The couple fell silent as they relaxed in the dimmed light of the cabin. After a long while, Merlin grunted. "Can you set a marker on Lucas' credit account? If or when he ever deposits anything into it, the total of his expenses should be automatically diverted to the *Blue Horizon* account, up to the amount he owes us."

Samantha turned her head toward him. "I can do that," she admitted. "What amount should I key in for the marker to divert?"

"Get with Durant and have him work up a forecast on what my brother should owe us by the time we get to Quet in a few hours, based on what he's charged up so far. One way or another, we *will* be reimbursed for the inconvenience of his presence."

Sam was about to reply, but she heard a soft whirring noise in the darkness. "Merlin," she whispered into his ear, "I heard something over by the bathroom, and I think I see something." The captain looked in the direction she mentioned and saw a faint green glow hovering in the air.

The wolf moved an arm quietly to the table beside the bed and thumbed the light switch to a higher setting. Framed in the doorway to the head, up near the ceiling, was Moss, floating silently. Its single eye was focused on them, but it made no movement other than the gentle bobbing on the air currents of the room.

Merlin sighed. "It's only Moss," he said. "I don't remember it coming into the room with us, though."

"No offense to Pockets," Samantha said, "but that thing unnerves me."

Merlin smiled and switched the light off completely. "Moss!" he called out.

"*Meow!*" it answered. It lowered in altitude as it approached the bed, as they could tell by the pale green light of its sensor lens. It stopped a meter from the bed, awaiting further commands or conversation.

"Leave this room and continue on your rounds," the captain ordered.

"*Meooooow, meow!*" The small saucer rotated on its axis and floated away from them. A moment later, the door swooshed open and the security unit departed lazily. The door closed and the room was covered in a blanket of darkness once again.

"Good riddance," Samantha said. "I don't like it watching me."

"Pockets told me he didn't program it to record anything but anomalies dealing with the ship."

"I still don't like it."

Merlin laughed and slipped a playful hand around her waist and lightly tickled her ribs. "You mean you don't like voyeurs watching us?"

She slapped him lightly and nipped at his snout. "What goes on in here is our business only!"

The planet Quet sat like a lifeless gray pearl in space. Even on the sunlit side of the small, moonless world, the terrain stretched on like a featureless blank. Pollution-saturated clouds swirled across its surface and even the world's tide-less, brown oceans reflected little light of the sun from the distance of spatial orbit. Nicknamed *The Dump*, Quet was the poorest of the Alignment worlds. Decades ago, an environmental disaster destroyed most life on the planet and left the atmosphere mildly toxic, though breathable. Quet's only current asset to the Alignment was its abundant source of micranite that was used in the containment shielding in LightDrive engines - the *Blue Horizon's* cargo pickup for the next delivery to Dennier.

As the freighter made its orbital approach, Merlin sat in the pilot seat. Taro was stationed at the Com terminal and Renny was seated at navigation. No one else desired to see Quet as the ship came in from space, so it was just the three of them on the bridge.

"Adjusting ship's time to Quetian clocks in the Plains Time Zone," Taro announced over the intercom. "Local time is oh-nine-twenty-one." It was standard procedure to set themselves to whatever world and time zone they were about to spend several days on. Whatever planetary time zone the vessel's clocks were set to would remain as standard ship's time until their next planetfall. The ship's systems reflected the change instantaneously with her reset immediately following the announcement. This was, however, only a formality as the ship and crew would not be taking their standard leave here. A hostile climate combined with a dead-poor mining community did not make for much need.

The fox received a signal in her headset and nodded to herself at the information scrolling across her station screen. "This is the *SS Blue Horizon*," she stated into her microphone, "Planetary Alignment registry number PA1621. We have inserted into optimum orbit, coming in on standard approach vector for landing in the mining vicinity of Lormun." She listened a second and then answered, "Micranite pickup for the Alvex Corporation with a four-hour layover preceding rapid turnaround departure. Request landing coordinates and launch window authorization."

She received the transmitted coordinates on her screen a moment later and as she listened, her fingers glided across her panel to transfer the data to Renny's terminal. The cheetah set about programming the navigational computer as Taro finalized their approach from the Quetian Air Authority.

"QAA has given us the okay for landing, Captain," she said over her shoulder.

"Aye," the wolf replied. "Renny?"

"Transferring navigational trajectory to your panel now," the cheetah answered.

"All hands, all hands," Taro announced on ship-wide speakers, "landing sequence has begun. Strap yourselves in."

Merlin moved the inverted, L-shaped guidance shifts forward and the ship nosed down toward the grim world. Renny flicked a switch at his station and the forward windows took on an orange hue as the heat shields activated. There was only a slight resistance to the controls as the atmosphere thickened with their descent. The blue saucer-shaped freighter sliced through the thick brown clouds with little turbulence and before Merlin could call for infrared on the video panels, they were below the thin layer and heading downward toward a low range of mountains.

Merlin checked his readouts and adjusted his course across the small continent and dropped their speed.

Taro half turned toward Merlin. "I've made contact with a representative from Lormun," she said. "Someone named Braith will meet us at landing pad three." Merlin grunted

his acknowledgement and dropped their altitude to fifteen hundred feet as they passed over the village and slowed to standard flight speed limits.

"There's the spaceport," Taro said with a grimace. The "spaceport" consisted of a single nondescript building surrounded by five round landing areas, all empty of craft. She moved to the engineering station and flipped a switch to start equalizing the ship's internal air pressure with that of the city, though without actually using the external atmosphere. In most cases, standard procedure would call for replenishment of the ship's air reserves with whatever planet they delivered to, but on visits to Quet this was a process avoided. Fortunately for them all, the air they had replenished on Brandt was of better quality.

Taro engaged a few more switches and then spoke over the ship-wide intercom, "Artificial gravity will be disabled in fifteen seconds. In another five minutes we'll be on the ground with full engine shutdown. All personnel report to Durant in ten minutes for cargo detail. That includes you, Lucas."

Renny felt the ship slow even more and glanced out the windows. They were barely over treetop level and on approach to a small concrete building. On a large sign that was nearly unreadable due to the pollution that clung to it were the rather bland descriptive words: *Landing Pad, Lormun*. The *Blue Horizon* stopped forward movement above a circle in the dirt ringed with stones and began dropping slowly.

Merlin lowered the landing gear and set his ship gently onto the ground with the slightest of bumps. He immediately began shutting down systems on his panel and Renny did likewise. Within moments, only the necessary systems on board were still operational.

The wolf got out of his harness and stretched as he stood up. "Taro," he said, "after Durant has signed with the local office for our cargo pickup, have him ready to give me assistance with Lucas."

"Aye, sir."

Renny cracked the knuckles of his hands and grinned with his teeth. "May I help?"

Merlin looked over at him with a frown. "I need you on cargo detail to load up. Durant can handle him."

Lucas Sinclair released the Moss unit he had deactivated a moment and took the few items he had hidden inside its shell, shoving them into the pockets of his coat. He should be able to pawn them off for food or other services at such time as he might need them. He only found one of the silver relays inside Moss, but didn't have time to look for the other one that had apparently jostled loose somewhere. Someone would come looking for him shortly, so Lucas left the room without a backward glance, not even watching the mobile security sensor unit float off to resume its routine sweep of the ship.

He took the lift down to the cargo area and saw that the loading had started without him. If they were going to make him work with them, he had no intention of doing much. He had taken no more than two steps out of the lift when Durant's massive paw closed around the back of the wolf's neck.

"Come with me," the bear growled at the younger Sinclair. Lucas could do little but walk where Durant aimed him and within a moment, he was flanked by his brother. The trio moved to the open bay door, and when they got to the ramp, Durant put a huge foot on the wolf's butt and then launched Lucas out of the ship. This was followed by a pause from the other crew members, who gave a congratulatory round of applause. Lucas landed in the dirt

and rolled twice, but he got up without knocking off the dust and continued walking in the direction he had been thrust. He didn't bother to look back, as he was used to the treatment.

A LITTLE LIBERATION

By Ted R. Blasingame

SS Blue Horizon PA1261

Captain's Journal

This will be a short entry. The Blue Horizon is on Quet, otherwise known as the Dump, to pick up a shipment of processed micranite for delivery to the shipyards on Dennier, my homeworld. We have flown empty from Brandt to the mining town of Lormun, a lackluster place that is barely on the maps of even this world. Payment for our services was transferred to the company account without a hitch and I have already had Durant distribute the crew's pay to their accounts. The hold is filled to near full capacity with the micranite crated in large octagonal boxes, each three meters across. For containers this size, our hold is quite large, so that's a lot of micranite.

Standard procedure after a space flight is three days of leave, but no one is really anxious to spend time on Quet so I told everyone (but Lucas) to be back in twenty-four hours. Despite his slothfulness, my younger brother has always been able to take care of himself in one way or another, so I have no qualms whatsoever about leaving him in this desolate place. A mining town is a working town and they don't tolerate loafers, so perhaps someone will actually put him to use – providing he wants to eat, that is.

Unfortunately, Lormun is so small and probably does not offer a lot of distractions for tourists, so it has been difficult getting the crew to leave the ship while we're here. There's a threat of slavery here, as it common on Quet in the mining towns and we're not too savvy on local laws, so very little contact is probably best. My own plans are to go out to see if there's a worthwhile restaurant in the area just for a change of menu, and then come back to take a personal inspection of the external hull of the ship while we're down inside an atmosphere, such as it is.

Merlin Sinclair, Captain

Renny looked down the main street of the mining community leading away from the landing pads and had the strangest sensation that they were in a replica of a town from an old Terran western movie. The ramshackle buildings were made of old wood that the warm atmosphere had dried out and cracked. The street was dirt and the warped boardwalks in front of the buildings were not an improvement. The local trees were not much more than sticks with tiny leaves, proving that the wooden building materials had probably been imported from some far away region or were so old as to have been there since before the planet-wide environmental disaster.

The sky was dark even though it was nearing the middle of the day and torches randomly lined the roadway. They saw only a few people out and about. Most of the population was at work in the mines this time of day. Beside him, Taro made a "tsk" sound and

she turned to face the small group with a frown. Against their better judgment, they had left the safety of the ship in search of a change of food.

"Not much to choose from, is there?" Durant asked from behind them.

"I've never liked this dump," Pockets said in a quiet voice, as if he might call something upon them from the dark clouds overhead if he spoke any louder. His eyes rolled upward in a nervous fashion that he had not even felt while walking the streets of Langlop's Outpost on Brandt. The air was breathable, but only just so; inhaling required a slight effort and the overall odor was unidentifiable.

Tanis and Samantha stepped out from a pair of swinging doors of the nearest building, an archaic print shop for the town's small printed newspaper. "The clerk said there are a few places to eat on the other end of town," the fennec fox said as they stopped beside their shipmates.

"According to locals who have to live here," Sam added as she pointed toward the east end of town, "the place with the best food is called *The Wild Star*. Supposedly it's the local entertainment spot as well."

"Good, let's go find it," Renny said. "I'm starving."

"Renny, you're *always* starving," Samantha said with a smirk.

"I'm starving, too," Pockets said. "The sooner we eat and get out of here, the better." Everyone seemed to be in agreement, so the small group began walking in the direction the Border collie had indicated.

"Do you think it's gonna rain on us?" Pockets asked, still eyeing the dark clouds overhead.

"I doubt it," Durant replied. "I think those are clouds of pollution, not of rain."

Samantha screwed up her nose and glanced upward. "Sludge from the sky, yech!"

They walked on in silence until they saw a sputtering neon sign in the window of an establishment set apart from the rest of the buildings. Rather than the common dried-out wood construction, it was made of corrugated metal that had rusted through the white paint in the climate. A large downward pointing red arrow was painted in the middle of double doors that were smeared with dark gray micranite dust from miners' hands. A small sign to the side of the doors bore the legend:

The Wild Star

A Dining and Entertainment Establishment.

Food, Liquor, Nightly Live Acts

Vid Rooms & Pleasure Rooms.

Weller Tagon, proprietor.

Renny pushed through the doors first. A wide room of dark paneling filled with wooden tables and chairs greeted them. A liquor bar lined the mirrored right-hand wall and a small curtained stage occupied the opposite end of the entrance; a hallway to either side of the stage led off behind beaded curtains. The only soul in the place was the bartender, a six-foot tall white rabbit in a red apron. He looked up at them from his chore of cleaning mugs and glasses.

"What can I do for you folks?" the bartender asked. "I take it you are from that freighter that landed a bit ago."

Renny stepped up to the bar and ran his tongue across his lips. "That's right. Is the restaurant open for business, uh, mister—?"

"The name's Harvey Robeson, folks, and yes the restaurant is open." The rabbit smiled and set down a large mug he had been drying with a towel. "The miners and slaves will be swarming in for lunch in about a half hour, so you came at a good time."

"Wonderful!" Renny exclaimed. "I'm famished."

Durant offered to the rabbit, "Just keep your arms and legs away from his maw."

"Just take a seat," Harvey said with a laugh. "My daughter Jess will be out in a moment with your menus." As the group moved to a nearby table, the bartender added, "One of your crew came in a little while ago and rented one of the pleasure rooms, if you're looking for him."

"One of our crew?" Taro asked suspiciously.

"A wolf in a long tattered trench coat."

"Sorry, but he's not one of ours," Durant said dryly. "He was a one-way passenger who needs a job with your community."

"Ah. There are plenty of jobs in the mines. Here comes my daughter now." A white doe in her twenties dressed in a low-cut beige blouse and a short red skirt came into the room from a side entrance with a handful of menus. Renny had to force himself not to stare at the young woman's ample chest, even when she smiled at him for noticing his gaze, and then realized that she was giving him the elevator-eyes as well. The cheetah had a notion that she helped out with the establishment's pleasure rooms.

A half hour later, Samantha and Pockets stepped out through the doors of the *Wild Star*. Despite the dreary environment of the planet, the food in the now-busy restaurant had been decent, although a bit on the expensive side. Since the local miners were not known for their wealth, she had a feeling the prices had been elevated just for the visitors. The others were still inside chatting away on various topics. Pockets rubbed his stomach with a smile and let out a low belch.

Samantha looked at him sideways with a smirk, but otherwise didn't comment as she stepped out into the street. Pockets followed, but after a few steps he gave his fingers a sharp snap. Sam knew the signal and looked back at him. The raccoon pointed only with his gaze down an alley between the buildings to their left and Samantha's eyes located the outbuilding he had noticed. Without a word between them, the duo casually walked into the alley.

On occasion, the raccoon and collie operated together to 'appropriate' items they might need later on, and a locked shed just might provide opportunity. Despite the warmth of the weather, Sam put her hands in the pockets of her flight jacket as they neared a small metal shed, her tail wagging slightly. Her raccoon partner smiled when he saw the standard padlock through the hasp on the door. From one of his many namesake pockets, he fished out a rolled-up pouch of silver instruments. He opened it partially and selected a small tool designed for such an occasion.

Before had a chance to start his work, however, he looked up at Samantha with a worried expression. "Sam," he whispered. "I think there's someone inside."

The Border collie leaned close to the door with a frown. "Sounds like whimpering," she whispered back. "A youngster, perhaps."

"What do we do?" the raccoon engineer asked. "It might be a slave from the mines. You know that's legal here."

Sam looked at him silently for a moment. "We can't just walk away, Pockets," she whispered. "Maybe someone's just hurt and trapped inside."

"If she's trapped, it was *not* by accident," he said, lifting the padlock slightly to make his point.

The collie looked down at her friend and gave him a pair of sad brown eyes. Pockets swallowed and then shrugged his shoulders. "Okay, we'll check it out," he said at last. The tool went into the key slot and the padlock popped open within a heartbeat.

Durant set his glass on the table and glanced idly across the miners and slaves that filled the room. Most had given the *Horizon* crew curious glances when they had come in for their midday meal, but otherwise had ignored them. For the past twenty minutes, he had been glancing over at a female bear that had come in with a young cub in tow. They sat in a booth next to the bar, oblivious to the tall ursine's attention.

Renny and Taro were engaged in an animated conversation on sports activities of the various worlds of the Alignment and Durant had grown tired of listening to them. He picked up his glass and walked toward the booth where the mother bear sat with her cub. When he stopped next to the table, the woman looked up at him, but immediately turned her attention back to spoon-feeding her cub a mushy paste-like substance from a jar.

"Pardon me, ma'am," Durant said pleasantly, "but I think I might know you, although I'm not quite sure from where or when."

She stopped, as though his voice had frozen her in that moment. Her hand trembled as she drew the spoon away from the child. "Please go away," she said, a nervous terror on the edge of her voice.

Durant was surprised by her demeanor, but held up a hand. "I don't want to bother you..."

"Then go away," the woman said again, gathering up her belongings with shaky hands. This time, the youngster looked up from its feeding to stare at him. Durant's eyes narrowed—there was something uniquely familiar about the child's eyes. He was *sure* he had seen this pair somewhere before.

Durant thought he would try once more, "I'm sorry, ma'am. I just want to know..."

"*Leave me alone!*" she snapped, her voice quavering. She snatched up the now-distressed cub and hustled out of the restaurant, leaving Durant standing alone with his mouth open.

Samantha took the first step and pulled open the old door of the rusty shed. As dark as it was in the alley, it only took a moment for her canine eyes to adjust to the blackness inside the two meter square building. The diffused noonday sunlight sliced through the darkness like a hot knife, but illuminated only the rusted, gray, mildewed innards of a storage shed. The scent of urine and feces permeated the small area, with a tang of sweat and vomit mixed in for an awful stench.

They heard a soft whine and Sam focused her eyes onto the spot the sound had emanated from. The collie covered her nose as she moved toward the source of the pitiful sound. Pockets stepped in hesitantly behind her, poised and ready for anyone who might try to attack them from within the shed.

The Border collie swallowed at what she saw. A canine youth, possibly in his mid-teens, sat cross-legged on the floor, his back toward them. A pair of ice-blue eyes peered at them over

his left shoulder and Sam could see him shaking. He looked like he might be a German shepherd with a mix of Siberian husky.

Fighting the urge to retch, she knelt to place a hand on a trembling shoulder. The skinny frame melted away from her touch, a cry of fear rasping from his throat as he squirmed around to face his attacker. The little thing backed up into a sloppy corner, landing in a wet pile she did not care to identify. In the sliver of light, pale eyes burned with fear and unendurable sadness. The naked youth's matted fur, torn and sporting bald areas from some unknown affliction, was a patchwork of stains and wounds. His torso was feebly thin, and another whimper issued from his throat as the corrugated breast rose and fell with each breath.

"Calmly, little one," she said to him in a soft voice, "we're here to help you." The youth didn't reply, but only stared at her. Samantha glanced back at Pockets before trying again.

"Can you tell us your name?"

The light blue eyes studied her. Then, after a moment more of silence, he said in a weak, raspy voice, "Max... Maximillian, ma'am."

Sam reached out and softly touched his cheek to bring him to face her. He did not resist this time and dropped his head submissively, his ears drooping. "Maximillian?" the collie repeated. "That's a nice name."

"M'master gave it to me," the boy said. "Most everyone else... calls me Max." He looked up into her eyes but did not smile.

"How old are you, Max?"

"Fifteen, I think."

Sam knelt next to him, mindful to keep out of the mess on the floor. "Did your master lock you in here?" she asked.

"Yes."

"How long have you been in here?"

The boy closed his eyes a moment and then answered, "I dunno. Five days, maybe."

"Five days! What did you do for that kind of punishment?"

Max lowered his head. "I disobeyed him."

"No one deserves *this!*" Pockets exclaimed in a whisper of his own as he moved in to stand next to his shipmate.

The youth looked at the raccoon with his head still down. "Mr. Tagon is my master," he said. "He says I deserve punishment."

"Mr. Tagon is wrong," Sam replied.

"Do you have anything to eat?" Max asked in a pleading voice, "and water?"

"Samantha..." Pockets breathed. "This Tagon is *starving* the kid!"

It was then that Sam noticed that the boy's left hand was missing its middle finger. The gnarled stub had become infected and swollen, the wound recent. Desperate with hunger, she surmised he had probably chewed it off himself. She turned to her shipmate with moist eyes. "We have to get him to the *Horizon*, Pockets!"

"Sam," the raccoon replied, "he's a slave. We can't just take him without permission."

The collie looked at him evenly and said in a toneless voice, "Why not? We were going to see if there was anything of value in here we could liberate anyway."

"But this is different, Sam. He's *alive*."

"He won't be for long if this Tagon creep keeps him in here," Samantha argued. "Five days... It looks like he's forgotten Max altogether." The boy listened to the exchange quietly in submission. He had gotten his ears boxed on more than one occasion for speaking up for himself, but he was *so* hungry.

"I don't eat much," said the small, plaintive voice. Pockets heard something in the voice, a twinge of hope and a grim morsel of desperation. For a moment, he remembered the small mouse he had seen on the *Lady of Dreams* and the explanation the tall fox had given him. He had looked on her with admiration then, to rescue a child in need, and suddenly felt a pang of guilt at his own reluctance to have that courage.

Samantha stood up from her crouch and held her hands out to Maximillian. "Pockets," she said in a firm voice, "I cannot stand by and let him be treated this way. I'm taking him to the ship, at least to get him some food and medical attention. We'll bring him back afterward, if we can."

"Really?" Pockets muttered, disbelieving her intentions. "You will take him away and then bring him back to this?"

"I... I will take responsibility when the captain finds out."

Max stared at her hands in fear. If he were caught outside of the shed with them, Mr. Tagon would probably beat him to near death. He looked down at his numb left hand and wondered if death might actually be a better choice. Here, in the dark, was a spark of decency against a starless night, but it was enough light for him to follow.

Samantha was still glaring at her crewmate when she felt the two rough hands slide into her own. She stood up fully and the boy tried to follow, but nearly collapsed in her arms from weakness. Despite the filth and stench of the youth, Pockets jumped in and helped support the boy's weight as they walked him outside. As an afterthought, Pockets left Max with Sam a moment to close and lock the shed door. If the outbuilding continued to appear unchanged, the boy's absence might not be noticed for a while longer.

Merlin and Arktanis walked back to the ship following a quick meal at a seedy little place called *Seiko's*. The desert fox had gone in to *The Wild Star* with the others, but had to go back to the ship for his credicard. He and the captain decided to try another place they found on their walk through town. The food had been edible, but there was little flavor to it. The pair were discussing the place's merits, or lack thereof, when the wolf saw someone near the hatch of the *Blue Horizon*. The shadows near the vessel were dark and the figures moved quickly into the interior of the main hatch. He put his fingers to his lips and whistled loudly, but they were already out of sight.

"C'mon, Tanis," he said.

"Think it might be Lucas again?" the fennec fox asked as they broke into a run.

"The thought *had* crossed my mind," Merlin admitted. "I'd sooner sell him into slavery here than put up with him on another voyage."

The pair approached the hatch and Tanis keyed in the passcode on a small pad near the main hatch. The door slid aside and their noses were instantly assaulted by a foul stench. "Gads!" exclaimed the fennec, backing up against a wall. "What died in there?"

"Remember how Lucas smelled when we found him on board? That's got to be him!" Merlin croaked.

"Even Lucas couldn't get that kind of stench on him in the short time we've been here, could he?"

They moved through the open airlock door inside and stepped into the hold. Merlin heard the faint hiss of the lift doors ahead of them and he motioned Tanis to follow him around

the perimeter of their loaded cargo. The indicator near the lift showed the elevator stopped on the second level, so the captain thumbed the pad to bring it back down.

A couple of moments later, Merlin and Tanis stood in the curved corridor of the crew deck, sniffing the air. The stench led to the right. "Smells like he went in to either Pockets or Sam's cabin," Tanis said.

Merlin knocked on Pockets' door, but there was no reply and the panel was locked. He went to Sam's door and repeated the action. The Border collie opened the door and faced them dressed in a robe. The running water of her shower could be heard inside.

"Hi, Captain," she said with a smile. "Hello, Tanis."

"What on Quet did you fall into?" Merlin asked as he pinched his nose. "Smells like a sewer."

"Yeah, mate, it's stinking up the ship!" The fennec fox added with a wrinkled snout.

"Good guess," the collie said a little nervously. "If you'll excuse me, I want to wash the smell off of me as much as you do."

Merlin snorted and shook his head. "Spray some perfume out here and in the hold, too, or Patch and Pockets will have your hide if they have to smell this all the way to Dennier."

"Aye, Captain," Sam said with a crooked smile. She shut the door, leaving her shipmates staring at the panel.

"Gah," Tanis gagged. "I'd go outside for some fresh air if Quet had any!"

Inside her cabin, Samantha moved back to the bathroom, where the engineer was showing their pungent guest how to work the shower. "Go get yourself washed, Pockets," she told him. "I'll take care of getting Max cleaned up."

"Okay," said the raccoon. "I might have an oversized shirt and some shorts he could wear, too."

"Samantha, are you *nuts*?" Sparky exclaimed. The lynx sat down at the galley table, put her elbows on the hard surface, and rubbed her temples with her fingers. "That's kidnapping!"

The collie put a finger to her lips. "Shhh... Keep your voice down," she said. "And it's not kidnapping if he goes willingly."

Sparky frowned deeply at her friend. "Just how many kidnappers were able to grab their victims by coaxing them so they thought they were going along *willingly*?" The canine only stared at her. "Samantha, since he's a slave, this is a theft of private property, not to mention against the laws of Quet in aiding a slave to escape."

Max stood just behind the Border collie, quiet in submission as he had been taught long ago, wishing strongly that someone would feed him; the aroma of food from the kitchen was making him salivate. Samantha reached around her and took his left arm gently. "Look at this, Sparky," she said as she indicated the missing digit from the boy's hand. The stub was medicated and bandaged from Tanis' Infirmary, but the absent finger was hard to miss. Sam raised the blue shirt the boy wore to expose Max's skinny frame. "Look at his ribs, Sparky. I couldn't just leave him there like this."

The lynx remembered the videos from Brandt, showing children in wretched conditions, and how her heart had gone out to them. There were pangs of pity tugging at her heart, but she shook her head with sad eyes. "You are going to land us all in a nasty jail here on the Dump if you're not *extremely* careful. But..." she sighed lightly, "I can't sit by and do nothing, Sam." She leaned forward and took the boy's bandaged hand. "Will you let us help you, son?"

Max nodded, but kept his head down with his ears and tail lowered. If these people wanted to be his new masters, it looked like they would treat him better, at the least.

"Now," Sparky said with new life, "how about some hot food to fill out those skinny bones of yours?"

For the first time since Pockets had picked the lock of the shed, the boy smiled. It was not a big smile, but there was enough there for the adults to know the prospect of *food* was his fondest wish.

Merlin Sinclair sat in the center seat of the *Blue Horizon*, going over the preflight checklist on his slateboard. They would be launching in just over an hour and he wanted to make sure everything was ready before leaving Quet. Taro sat at the engineering station, running through her own preparations and they spoke in monosyllables to one another while they went through every sequence.

The intercom beeped and the vixen thumbed the switch on her console. "This is Taro."

"Hi Taro, is the captain up there?" Samantha's voice asked.

"I'm here, Sam," Merlin said without looking up from his instruments. "What's on your mind?"

"If you have a minute, I have something urgent I need to discuss with you, in private." Merlin and Taro exchanged glances at the word *private*, and both had the identical thought wondering what she had gotten into this time.

"We're preparing to launch, Sam. Can it wait until we're under way?"

"Not really."

"Okay, meet me in my den," the captain replied. "We'll have to make this quick." He set the slateboard gently on the instrument console and walked out the door to the next room over. The panel had barely shut behind him when it opened again. Samantha walked in, but she was not alone. Accompanying her was a teenage canine in cutoff shorts and what looked to be one of Pockets' old work shirts. The door shut behind them, but before anything was said, he saw a familiar look in Samantha's eyes and felt a sudden dread. He steeled himself for what was obviously a calculated appeal to his emotions.

"No, Sam," Merlin said as he leaned back against his desk. "Absolutely not."

"But, you haven't even heard me out," the collie replied.

"I know you, Sam, and I know me. Let's not even start."

Maximillian stepped away from his benefactor's side and looked up at Merlin, who was a good ten inches taller. "Please listen?" he entreated.

Merlin glanced back over to the Border collie and sighed. "Start talking."

Samantha explained how she and Pockets had found the boy, though wisely omitted the fact they had gone to the shed to pilfer. After bringing Max to the ship, she had cleaned him up and coaxed Tanis into attending to the youth's wounded finger stub, and then taken him to Sparky for food. Afterward, she, Sparky, Pockets and Tanis had gathered together with him in the galley and slowly coaxed the boy's story from him.

Maximillian's mother had been a pleasure girl at a distant spaceport on the other side of Quet and his father had been a space-jockey only there for a few hours. The Siberian husky pilot never knew he had fathered offspring with the German shepherd female of his pleasure. Max had been born with three sisters in his litter, but they had been retained by their mother for upbringing in her profession. After he had been weaned, the male pup was sold to a creditor,

something not uncommon on Quet, and then he changed hands again. The boy's owner, an obese rat named Weller Tagon, had named him Maximillian and had been fairly rough in raising him.

"When Pockets and I found him," Samantha said in conclusion, "Max had been locked away in that filthy shack for five days without food or water for disobedience, and no one's even checked on him in that amount of time. Who knows how long he would have been there if we had not come along?"

"Locked... in a shed?" he asked slowly. Samantha averted her eyes and the captain correctly surmised how the boy had escaped his confinement.

"We could hear him whimpering from outside!"

Merlin scratched the fur on top of his head beneath the captain's hat and then crossed his arms. "Samantha..." he began. He stopped to collect his thoughts and emotions. "I agree that his upbringing has been deplorable, and I would have never condoned a punishment so severe, but..."

"But?" Sam repeated in a weak voice.

"But, no matter what we think about it, slavery is *legal* here on Quet... while theft and kidnapping are *not*." Merlin shook his head slowly. "If we had a way we could do this legally, I might not deny this request."

"His owner was going to *kill him*."

"That's not our business. On this world, people have the right to dispose of their property as they see fit. Besides the legalities, what use to us is a slave?"

"I can take care of him. I can pay his way," Sam said.

"Pay his way? When we're out in the middle of space, what good is money and influence if there are no dry-docks or supply stations on the way? You know our supplies are limited and sometimes emergencies do come up."

"I can work!" the youth interjected. "I can clean anything! And - and I will not take up much space. I can sleep in the refuse bin and I'll get off at the first stop. You'll never have to see me again."

Merlin sought words to respond, but the helpless, pitiable tones of the youngster's voice robbed him of his voice.

"I don't eat much," he continued. "You could feed me only every other day."

"Which is probably more than he was getting here," Sam punctuated as she wrapped an arm around the gangly boy's shoulders, "He's eager to help us." Max gave the captain a wide, toothy smile, as if to show his sincerity. Merlin sighed and rubbed his temples.

"What if we offered to buy him from Mr. Tagon?" the collie asked.

The wolf wrinkled his nose. "What are you going to tell him, Sam? That you found the boy by picking the man's lock? Samantha, he'll likely throw you and Pockets in that shed with the boy with the blessing of the local authorities." Merlin walked around the desk and sat in his chair. "What's distressing is that you are *guilty* of all three crimes and I wouldn't be able to do a thing for you. I doubt even your lawyer Jackson Wyatt could do much!"

The captain turned his attention to the boy. "I'm sorry, son," he said honestly. "I have to adhere to the laws of *your* world. By taking you with us, we would be breaking those laws. Do you understand?"

The small canine's countenance fell to a dejected heap and he clung to Samantha's arm with his maimed hand. In a small voice, he replied, "I understand." Then his voice dropped perceptibly, "Can you just kill me instead?"

Sinclair winced at the words, delivered in a wooden sincerity not to be found in depression or sarcasm – this youngster was *serious*.

"I can't do that," he replied.

Samantha stared back at her captain with a blank expression, but it was clear that she had foisted a choice on him: *quick and easy or slow and painful, the result would be the same*. Starvation, disease or self-cannibalism, he was doomed if he went back. She felt a momentary twinge of guilt for placing both friend and victim in this position.

"We're the only ship here and we will be leaving shortly," the captain answered. "When your master can't find you anyplace, he might think you are on my ship and I cannot afford any delays or extra financial burdens at this point."

Max deflated, settling onto the floor in front of the desk, out of Merlin's sight. "Don't make me go back, sir. I'll *die* if I do."

"Merlin," Samantha pleaded, "don't..."

The wolf looked at the digital clock on his desk. "Sam, if you can find a way to talk Mr. Tagon out of our young friend *in half an hour*, we can take him with us to our next port – provided you aren't hauled off to jail or made into a slave yourself for your crimes. Wouldn't your father's company really enjoy *that* kind of publicity? Otherwise, take him back where he belongs and be back on board in time for launch. We're leaving *promptly* at fifteen hundred hours." He stood up and walked around the desk. "I'm sorry, Max," he added, "I wish I could help."

The youth sat where he was, trembling as he stared at the floor.

With the conversation over, Merlin rose stiffly and left the room, back to the bridge. Inside the captain's den, Max looked up at the collie with heavy, doleful eyes. "I'm going to die," he stated, coolly and without emotion.

"Take-off in three minutes," Taro announced to Renny and Merlin. "All hands are aboard and Durant confirms that the outer hatches have been sealed."

"All hands?" Merlin asked. "Including Samantha?"

Taro looked at him strangely. "Of course she's on board, Captain. Why wouldn't she be?"

"Get her on the intercom."

"Aye, sir." She punched up the connection to the Border collie's quarters. "Sam, are you there?"

"I'm here, Taro. What's up?"

"Merlin wants to speak to you."

There was a noticeable hesitation before she answered in a cold monotone voice. "*What does he want?*" she asked brazenly. Taro's eyes widened at such blatant insubordination.

"Sam," Merlin said as he studied the power build-up gauges, "where is Max?"

"Who, the kid you want to die in filth and disease? He's where he belongs, just as you ordered."

The wolf felt the bitterness in her voice as a physical blow and decided not to pursue the subject further. It was time to launch and he needed his attention on the task at hand. Without answering, he motioned to Taro to sever the connection and return to business.

"Who's Max?" Renny wanted to know.

"Not now," Merlin said. "Full power to the launch thrusters, please."

"You've got it."

The blue saucer-shaped freighter lifted off the landing pad and roared straight up just shy of a mile before the nose angled up to slice forward through the dark afternoon clouds. Merlin Sinclair was glad to be away from that wretched place, and as soon as they were well out of orbit and on the navigational trajectory that Renny had computed, he told Taro to get Pockets on the line.

"Pockets, here, Captain."

"Release Moss on its sensor sweep of the ship," the wolf told him. "I don't want to find Lucas on board again."

"I set Moss on its rounds before we took off, Captain," Pockets replied. *"I had it check for your brother, but it looks like that loser's still on Quet."*

"Thank you, Pockets."

After she closed the connection, Taro touched a pad on the engineering console next to her and then spoke into her headset mike on ship-wide broadcast. *"Ship's artificial gravity is enabled and reading normal. Once we are beyond planetary traffic, the LightDrive engines will be engaged for cruising speed, but mobility is now safe. You may now shed your harnesses and move about."*

"Who's on first watch?" Merlin asked the red fox.

"I am," Taro replied with a smile. "What's on second, and I already have my book to read." She brandished a thick, lusty romance whose cover sported a bosomy feline heroine in lace clutching the neck of a robust, muscular male, their longhair coats of fur mingling amidst a fiery backdrop. Several pages were dog-eared; probably the juicy parts.

The wolf secured the autopilot controls and then unbuckled his seat harness. "It's all yours, then."

Renny looked over at the fox and gave her a wink. "I'll be by later to check you out... uh, check in on you."

Taro flashed him a wide grin, passed her eyes over the stud on the novel's cover, then back to Renny in appraisal. "Uh huh..." she said with a chuckle. Merlin rolled his eyes at the exchange and left the bridge with the cheetah at his side.

A week had passed since leaving Quet behind and in all that time, Samantha had not spoken to her captain. In the first forty-eight hours, neither Pockets nor Tanis seemed to look upon him very kindly either, and Merlin felt he could not blame them. All had been in favor of taking the boy with them and none were happy with their captain's executive decision. As far as they were concerned, Merlin had given the innocent Maximillian a death sentence. The only one who had been in contact with Max who did not seem to treat him any differently was Sparky. She appeared to understand his judgment, even if she had been willing to feed the boy from her limited stores. However, as the days passed the ominous hostility of the crew dissipated. Even though Merlin appreciated that, he felt odd, as though their collective distaste for his decision had lifted too early. He began to suspect that something was up, but staved the feeling off as an emotional hangover after all the events of late.

Merlin put his mystery novel aside and closed his eyes. He couldn't concentrate on the story during his free time right now but was not drowsy enough to sleep. He glanced over at his clock. 1600 hours. Sparky was usually in the galley working on someone's meal at that time, so

he thought he would stroll down the corridor and see what she had cooking. He stood up and pulled on a loose beige sweater, and then snared his captain's hat from its wall hook before leaving the room.

As he neared the galley door, he could hear restrained laughter coming from inside. He smiled when he heard Durant's deep laugh and wondered what the joke was about. He opened the panel and stepped inside with a large grin.

The laughter stopped immediately and Merlin's smile evaporated completely. Sitting at the long table with Durant, Sparky and Samantha was the young canine, Maximillian.

"You..." he rasped, more to the room than to the youth before him.

Merlin's first feeling was that of shock, and a cold wave swept his body like an ice storm. Then he felt his blood boil and the room grew incredibly hot. He clenched his fists and gritted his teeth as his eyebrows drew tightly together and his tail went up asserting his authority. Max could *smell* the captain's dark anger and he dropped quickly behind the table out of sight.

The captain bared his teeth with a low growl as his eyes lit upon Samantha. Her expression was defiant at first, but it swiftly melted into a frightened frown. She had known this moment would come sooner or later and thought she would be prepared for it, but under the wolf's penetrating stare, her will faltered. The indulgent boss tolerated the eccentricities of his crew more than most would, but it had been a long time since he had last experienced outright disobedience to a command. The feeling that now surged through his veins, pulsing in his temples, filled him with a violent fury, raising his hackles beneath the sweater.

Merlin brought both of his fists hard down on the table; the dinner plates upon it jumped, as did everyone else in the room. "*HOLDEN!*" he shouted, "*IN MY DEN, NOW!*"

The Border collie swallowed and stood up quietly to leave, but just as she took a step, Max scrambled to his feet and moved toward the wolf.

"Captain," he said quickly, "it's not..." The words froze in his throat when the commander's icy gaze sharply shifted to him. Samantha stepped past him, followed Merlin out into the corridor, and shut the door in the youth's face.

Durant let out the breath he had been unconsciously holding and Sparky looked as if she was going to be sick. Maximillian glanced fearfully at them and felt like crying.

"Is he gonna kill her?" he asked with moist eyes.

The load master gave the lad a weak smile and said, "Don't worry, boy. Samantha's talked her way out of trouble before."

"She didn't have any luck with him that day we left Quet," Max pointed out. "I've seen that look on my master's face before tearing into someone who'd crossed him. Most have learned not to do that again."

Sparky composed herself and sighed. "We are glad you're with us, Max," she said, "but Sam disobeyed a direct order, so now she has to face the captain. She knew it was inevitable."

Max shook his head. "It's not fair!" he exclaimed and balled his fists. "She *helped* me!"

"We know, lad," Durant said gently. "Merlin will see that once he calms down."

The youth blinked rapidly a few times and then bolted out the door. Sparky put her arms around herself and looked over to her friend. "I'm shaking all over!" she said quietly. "It's been a long time since I've seen that look on Merlin's face."

The grizzly bear got up and moved to her side to put his arms around her. "I know," he said. "Me, too."

Maximillian walked slowly around the carpeted corridor, trying to fight back the tears. For the past week, he had been staying in the vacant cabin that Lucas had recently occupied and most of the crew had chipped in to help take care of the boy's needs. Everyone had done their best to keep news of the boy's presence from Taro and the captain, though it was a general consensus that Samantha eventually would have to take full credit for her insubordination. Among the crew, everyone seemed to like the kid, even the perpetually grumpy Patch, and the feelings were mutual. Max had never met a greater group of folks in his short life and he wanted to do anything and everything for them.

In a few moments, he found himself circling around and nearing the captain's den. He could hear the heated voices of the angry captain and the supply officer, though he could not understand the muffled words out in the corridor. He sat down on the soft carpeting across the hall from the door and put his head down on his knees, curling his tail around his rear.

Merlin's voice quieted down after a bit and then Max could hear nothing else from the room for a long time. When the door finally opened nearly a full hour later, he swallowed hard, fearing the worst. Merlin took a step out into the corridor, but stopped when he saw the youth; the captain's expression was unreadable.

Samantha stepped around the wolf and saw Max looking up at them. She held out a hand to him and said, "Max, the captain has a plan that might help us all get what we want."

Merlin squatted beside him and put a hand on the youth's shoulder. "Please forgive me," he said with a concerned expression. "I have to contact your master, but if we play this right, you might just get your freedom."

New hope appeared in the teen's eyes. "Just tell me what I need to do," Max said.

"The connection has been made, Captain," Taro reported. Max stood beside Samantha just behind the center seat of the bridge.

"Weller Tagon," a raspy voice said from the com speakers.

"Mr. Tagon," Merlin said in an authoritative voice, for once thankful their communication system was audio-only. "This is Captain Sinclair of the *Blue Horizon*, a freighter that recently picked up a shipment of micranite from your mining town."

"It's three o'clock in the morning, so make it quick." Tagon said grumpily.

"I'm calling to inform you that we've captured a stowaway on board our ship, a boy of fifteen named Maximillian."

"So that's where he went," the voice of Tagon grunted.

"Sir," Merlin continued, "he has informed us that he is your property."

"That's right, I've had him all of his miserable little life. He'll get a hardy strapping when you bring him back to me."

"Mr. Tagon," the wolf said, "I'm on a tight schedule to Dennier and beyond with my deliveries. I'm afraid I will not be able to bring him back personally, but if you'll arrange to pay for a return transport for him with the Dennieran authorities, I'm sure you can have him back in about a month's time."

"A month?"

"We're still two weeks away from Dennier, sir. It will take another three weeks from there for him to get back to you."

A grumble came across the speakers before the reply. *"What's a trip like that gonna cost me?"*

Merlin smiled. "I took the liberty of checking for you and the only ship from Dennier that will be heading out your way is a private charter called the *Erasmus*. Its destination is to Brandt, but its captain says that she can swing by Quet to drop the boy off to you. The owner of the craft said she'd do it for ©900."

"Nine hundred credits!"

"Yes sir."

"The boy's not even worth that much!"

Merlin turned toward Max and gave him a wink. "Mr. Tagon," he said, "we also need to discuss payment for the boy's passage and trespass on board my own vessel."

"Payment?"

"That's right. He managed to stow away on board and has been pilfering from our limited food and air supplies for the past week. We don't normally transport passengers, Mr. Tagon, so our stores were not prepared to take this kind of hit. We'll now have to ration our food for the next two weeks."

"Uh, Captain..."

"I've had my accountant figure up the boy's expenses thus far, and prorated for the rest of the voyage. Since Mr. Maximillian is your property and responsibility, your bill will come to ©1200."

The raspy voice choked. *"Twelve hundred credits! Captain, the other ship wasn't even that expensive!"*

"True," Merlin replied, *"but a vessel expecting a passenger will have prepared for him. If you will have the payment credited to our account on Dennier, I'll release the boy to the authorities to have him returned to you on the Erasmus as soon as possible. If you're ready, I can give you our ship's registry for the payment transfer."*

Tagon's voice took on a sneer. *"I refuse to pay! Max is not worth all that."*

"Then, sir, you will have to talk to our collection agency," the wolf said in a menacing tone. *"A business such as ours has to frequently deal with such threats of nonpayment, so we will not hesitate to employ our lawyer if you refuse, Mr. Tagon."*

"Uhm... how about a deal, Captain? What if I just give the boy to you as payment?"

"You said he wasn't worth even 900 credits."

"I, uh, I spoke rashly, Captain. He's actually quite handy to have around. He can clean and cook, and is a quick learner."

"Perhaps," Merlin said dryly, *"but I don't have the air, food or space for another body on my ship. Once we get to Dennier, I will have him put on the private transport and sent back to you. Payment of his expenses to Blue Horizon Freight Transfer will be expected within thirty days or my agency will have collectors breathing down your neck, Mr. Tagon. Jackson Wyatt & Associates will be anxious to deal with you."*

"Captain!" the rat squeaked, *"I don't have that kind of extra money available for your expenses or even that of the other vessel. Lormun is a small mining town and we don't get that much business! If you won't take him for yourself, perhaps you can sell him once you're on Dennier to get your payment."*

There was a momentary pause. "I suppose I could do that, Mr. Tagon," Merlin said with his eyes closed. He lowered his voice, as if afraid someone might overhear his next words. "Slaves are not usually tolerated on Dennier, but I understand there's a black market for such things just about everywhere. Throw in two hundred credits to offset a minimum amount of food for him and we'll have a deal."

"Two hundred credits? Okay... I can do that."

"Upload the credits and the boy's contract to me and we'll end this conversation. Our registry code is PA1261."

Samantha had to clamp a hand over Maximillian's mouth to keep him from cheering.

"You are too kind, Captain. I am uploading it as we speak. Let me also extend a special bonus to you. The next time you are in my neck of the woods, I'll grant your entire crew to free meals for a day and a night, plus the use of my best pleasure rooms."

Merlin wrinkled his nose at the thought of returning to Quet. "That would be nice, Mr. Tagon."

Taro pointed to the console in front of her and made the universal "okay" sign to indicate the contract had been received and confirmation of the credits transferred. The captain made a motion with his fingers and the vixen began making the legal entries to the electronic document.

"We have everything now, so we'll not bother you further tonight," Merlin said.

"Thank you, Captain."

Taro severed the connection and Merlin turned toward her. "Finished?" he asked her.

The red fox tapped a button and a file was immediately transferred to his slateboard. Merlin applied his thumbprint signature in a box at the bottom of the document upon his screen.

"Maximillian," he said as he turned toward Samantha and the boy.

"Sir?" the young canine asked in a quiet voice. "I know you don't have much food and air for me, but I'll try not to use up -"

"Max," Samantha said into his ear, "that was only a ruse for Mr. Tagon's benefit. We routinely over-stock our supplies in case of emergency situations. Even our air is recycled and reused after it's gone through a scrubbing process. We have plenty to share with you."

Max looked up and searched her eyes for any sign of deceit, but he found none there. Finally, he turned back to Merlin and grinned widely. "I won't let you down, sir," he said with sudden enthusiasm. "I'll be the best slave you've ever had!"

Merlin chuckled and gave Samantha a wink. "Can you read Standard?" he asked the boy.

"Yes sir, I can. Angelina taught me!" The captain handed the slateboard to Max and told him to read the final entry in the last paragraph. Maximillian's eyes grew wide and he looked up to the wolf in disbelief.

"This says... this says that I'm no longer a slave," he said quietly.

"That's correct. By my authority as the new owner of your contract," Merlin replied, "I've set you free. However, since you are still under age according to the laws of Dennier, of which I am a citizen, I will be your legal guardian until you are old enough to leave on your own."

"Until... until I'm old enough?" Max repeated. "Does this mean you aren't going to kick me out once we reach Dennier?"

"No, Max," Samantha whispered into his ear. "You'll be staying with us."

Moisture welled up in the youth's eyes. The fifteen-year-old fought back the tears because he didn't want to seem weak, but there was too much relief and joy. He turned and jumped into Samantha's arms, grinning widely. The collie held him tightly, tears of her own glistening in her cheek fur.

"Captain," Taro said quietly, "to finalize the document when you register it on Dennier, he'll have to have a complete name."

"Max?" Samantha said into the boy's ear. "What surname would you like to have?"

The youth looked up at her first, and then turned to face the captain. "My sir-name?" he asked.

Merlin nodded to him. "You'll need a family name to be legal with the Dennieran registration. As a freed slave with no family of your own, it's your choice to use whatever name you want."

Maximillian wiped his eyes and thought for a moment. He looked at Sam, and then at Taro, before he finally faced the wolf once again. "May... may I use the name of my guardian?" he asked tentatively. "I would like *your* name, sir, if that's allowed."

Merlin gave him a genuine smile. "Maximillian Sinclair has a nice sound to it," he replied. "Okay, Taro, enter that name onto the document."

"Thank you, master," the youth said with a grin.

"You need not call me master," Merlin shook a finger at him. "You are no longer a slave."

"But," Max replied, "Samantha told me that all those I respect - people of great honor - should be called master."

Samantha shrugged, "I told him about Master Tristan."

The older wolf thought for a moment, scratched his chin. "I can live with that, but *captain* will do." The captain held out his hand, but instead of the expected handshake, Max gave his savior a fierce hug. After a moment, Merlin held him out at arm's length and said, "Since you will be sharing my family name, you may call me your *uncle* Merlin, if you like."

"Yes, sir!"

"Okay now, if you'll go with Samantha, she'll get you set up in our vacant cabin," Taro said with a smile. "You won't have to live under her bed anymore."

Max snickered and admitted, "That's where I've been staying all this time."

"Sneaky," Taro said with a chuckle.

"I will have Durant set up an account for you, starting with Mr. Tagon's two hundred credit donation."

"Wow!"

Sam stood up and motioned for the door. "You will need an education too. I'll get you lined up for some tutoring, as well. There's a lot about the Planetary Alignment I'm sure you don't know."

"What is a planner-terry line mint?" Max asked.

Durant stood beneath a hot shower, allowing the water to soak him to the skin below his thick fur. The memories of meandering around the filthy small town needed washing away. Still, his mind kept drifting back to the female bear he had met in the restaurant. Unfortunately, her brusque manner had left him feeling both apprehensive and uneasy, so he had dropped the subject. Perhaps, he thought, she simply had a familiar face, which would explain his interest. Maybe even as well, she might be trying to get away from a boyfriend or husband who had been cruel to her, and his massive, imposing form had been intimidating to her. Or maybe she was just shy. Who knew?

Durant scrubbed his fingers through the fur on his face, remembering her face as the cold rain spilled over him. Steam rose above his neckline, and he brushed the drops out of his eyes.

Cold rain?

The bear pulled his hands away from his face, staring at the palms to reassure himself that he was in a hot shower. The tiles and glass that surrounded him asserted that he was, but he wondered why he thought of cold rain right at that moment.

Something about the water coursing over him – that face... something about rain... Then it hit him, little by little filtering into his mind as it had been a mercifully forgotten memory.

Three years ago, he had been on Earth traveling to see a friend when his air car had broken down on the side of the road just outside of a small rural town in the Midwest. One of the energizers had broken and nobody was going to aid a large grizzly bear in the middle of nowhere, especially in the dark and buffeted by a rainstorm. He'd started walking up the road with what little credits he had on him, hoping to find an all-night travel stop to get some help. About ten minutes into his walk, a set of headlights sailed up to him and stopped. He found himself staring into the face of an attractive young female bear, herself a visitor to the planet.

She invited him into her car and offered to take him to a com. They had chatted about this and that, and he had the distinct impression that she had been examining his character, his intelligence, his perceptivity in the process. Not wanting to be rude, he answered her conversation as cheerfully as he could manage.

Their trip took them to a hotel, and she recommended that after the long day of travel, they simply get a room for the night and deal with his broken vehicle in the morning. Too tired after a day of travel and too enchanted by her appearance, Durant had agreed. That night had been magic. Their bodies explored one another, passionate, fleeting and anonymous – neither even knew the other's name.

The next morning, he woke to find his lover gone and a note on the pillow beside him.

"Life's greatest treasures are its little ones, and you have given me the greatest gift anyone could ever want. Please, never try to find me. I will always love you, and the part of yourself you've given me."

In a shower stall of the *Blue Horizon*, Durant slumped to his knees and wept into his hands. A hot anguish flashed through his frame as he realized why she had seemed familiar – and the reflection of his face in a shallow pool of water told him why he had recognized the child's eyes.

LOST, DISTANT WORLD

By Ted R. Blasingame

SS Blue Horizon PA1261

Captain's Journal

Most of my crew has assembled at my sister Shannon's home in the seaside capitol city of Grandstorm during our stay on Dennier. Liftoff is in forty-eight hours. Our normal down time between flight deliveries is three days, but I wanted a full week this time to give Max and myself the opportunity to get together with my family. Unfortunately, Shannon's husband, Bill has been away to Kantus on business for the financial management company he owns, so we have not been able to see him during this visit. It was his financial advice a number of years ago that helped me make a few wise investments that have paid off well. It is the sole reason I was able to purchase the Blue Horizon in the first place. While my sister has a nice home, it is not large enough to put up my whole crew, so most of us are back on board the Blue Horizon, even if we are stationary on Bill's private landing pad.

Max, Samantha and I just got back from a camping trip to spend a couple days without distraction to get to know one another. Originally, I had intended the trip just for Max and myself, but after my angry outburst when I first discovered that he was on board against my orders, he was hesitant to go on the trip without Samantha along. Sam was not too keen on camping out, but came along for Max's benefit. We had a few misfortunes, but things smoothed out and we eventually had a good time. I think that Sam and I may have finally convinced the boy that my fits of anger like that only come out when my orders have been blatantly disobeyed. As a former slave, he is fully aware of the repercussions of disobedience, but unlike his former Master, I have never struck anyone in my anger. I may abuse the furniture, yell loudly and dock someone's pay, but I have never resorted to the kind of violence he is apparently used to. Fortunately for us all, outright disobedience of my orders is rare, so it may be a long time before he ever sees me react like that again.

In the short time that I have known Max, I have discovered that despite his upbringing, this fifteen-year old is quite intelligent, even if lacking in actual knowledge. Shannon offered to take him into their home and get him into school, but he feels so indebted to me and Samantha that he refuses to be left behind. I know that Shannon's husband, Bill would have loved to meet Max. He and Shannon have wanted cubs of their own, but destiny has not blessed them with any. Both are good with kids and they would have loved Max as if he were their own.

Since the youth will be staying with us on the Horizon, Samantha has volunteered to tutor the boy and has purchased a large amount of slateboard files for the task. She has made Max promise to work with her on his schooling and they have already begun. The kid is sharp and has already shown a hunger for knowledge that most children his age would rather avoid.

For the sake of keeping everything legal, I contacted the local authorities our first day here and explained (omitting certain details) how I came to be in possession of the canine youngster. When they confirmed my report with Mr. Tagon on Quet with copies of the boy's legal contract, they agreed to appoint me as Max's legal guardian and had the process completed within two days. Max was beaming at the judge as she made us a virtual family and he was so pleased to take on the name of Sinclair. Since I am

not mated, I am not taking his place as a step-parent, but rather I will be more like an uncle to the lad. Like my sister, I have always gotten along well with children, even though I've never had any of my own; I've never had a nephew either.

Another event in our favor came from Taro when she informed me that she had already secured our next customer. Even while off duty, Taro is good at her job. A wealthy playboy on Mainor is throwing a wild party next month for some kind of tricentennial anniversary and needs a full shipment of entertainment goods from Flint City, Dennier. He has agreed to add a thirty percent bonus if we can get everything to him in three days. It's just an hour's atmospheric flight across Dennier to Flint and then the journey to Mainor is only a mere twenty hours. We are lucky the two planets are presently at their closest orbits in this solar system.

I got a collect call from Renny yesterday telling me that he was on Mainor. He had taken a quick flight there with a gal he had met in a pub, but she had partners who were waiting for him that night. As they were walking back to his inn from a restaurant, a pair of hyenas beat him senseless and robbed him of every credit he had had on him, though not without a fight. He requested an advance on his pay so he could charter a ship back to us on Dennier, but since we are heading that way soon, I wired him enough funds to stay there until we can pick him up personally. It was cheaper that way.

The only one of my crew besides Renny who is still absent is Sparky, and if she keeps up her tradition, she will probably show up mere minutes before we seal the hatch and take off.

Personally, I am ready to get going again. Our customer, none other than the playboy snow leopard himself, Harrison Merrick, is well known for his extravagance and generosity. My memory is a little hazy, but it seems we once attended a beach party of his on Crescentis a number of years ago and he'd spared no expense to make sure everyone had a good time.

If we make this delivery on schedule, we stand to fatten up the profit margin for our business considerably. After all the expenditures we have incurred in recent months, it is about time we started showing a profit.

Merlin Sinclair, Captain

"...and stocks for Delondin Enterprises on Earth continue to climb to unprecedented levels. This is News Around the Alignment with Holly Harken of the Interplanetary News Network. We'll take a quick break for a word from our sponsors, and then we'll be back to more news."

"Anything interesting on vid?" Samantha asked as she walked into the Recreation room. Merlin and Tanis sat on a sofa and Max lay sprawled out on the carpet at their feet, his eyes half closed from boredom with the broadcast.

"Just the interstellar news, Sam," Merlin told her as she sat between him and the fennec fox. She held a huge bowl of popcorn and set it in her lap for her companions to share. Merlin put his arm over the back of the couch behind her.

Patch wandered over to them from the deck's kitchenette, a hot cup of coffee in his hands, and Shannon followed him in with a tray of other drinks. The elder female wolf with tan fur handed cups of coffee to the adults and a soda to the canine youth on the floor. Patch took a seat on another couch and Shannon sat quietly beside him and with her own cup.

An attractive human woman looked out at them from the vidscreen, her long black hair spilling over her shoulders in a charming fashion and her outfit was royal blue with accents of gold across the shoulders. She held a stack of printed papers in her hands, but it was clear they were only a prop, for she never once looked at them in giving her report. She was well known

across the Planetary Alignment and even had her own fan club. She was the most popular news anchor to hit the vidscreens in a long time.

"Hello, once again, this is News Around the Alignment and I'm Holly Harken of the Interplanetary News Network. Our top story at this time is the supernova of a star just a day ago in the general direction of the Mytha Star System that has taken Alignment astronomers by surprise. With the density of the stars in that sector of the galaxy and the disruption of communication, it's not yet certain which of the suns has exploded. With the speed of light and the distances involved between star systems, it can be anywhere between one to six years before the explosion of the supernova is actually visible from any of the other worlds of the Alignment without high magnification. It is only because of the disruption of tachyon communications from the distant planets beyond that a supernova was even suspected." Holly shook her head of hair with a 'tsk' sound and added, *"There had been no prior suspicion on unstable stars in that area, so scientists are baffled as to the exact solar body that has exploded. Only long-range telescopes have been able to detect anything of the phenomenon. I'll be sure to bring you more information on this event as it comes to us."*

"Holly," Samantha said to the screen with a bored yawn. "I'm not interested in the stars..."

"And speaking of stars," the news anchor continued, "the newest release from the fusion music band known as Dragon, Wolf & Tiger continues to rake in overwhelming sales throughout the Planetary Alignment. Stephanie Dell, spokesperson for DWT, said the group never anticipated such a well-received..."

The newscaster was interrupted by a brown furry hand from off-camera that handed her another sheet. After a quick scan of its contents, the expression on the human's face became grave as she gave her report. *"I've just received word from the leading authority in the investigation of yesterday's supernova that says while the findings are still inconclusive, all indicators point to a Type 2 supernova of red giant star BAE-6410 located only one point five parsecs from the solar primary of the Mytha Star System."*

Samantha dropped her bowl of popcorn, scattering white kernels all over the floor and startling the young canine Max.

"Planet Sillon, a member of the Planetary Alignment and a popular vacation spot," Holly continued, "is currently silent, as well as two other non-Alignment populated worlds of the same star system. Even if Sillon's parent star was not the one to explode, the devastation of the nearby red giant with eight times its mass could still have catastrophic effects on all life in the Mytha system."

"INN is setting up a communication center on Joplin in conjunction with the Spatial Police Force to field calls of concern for anyone who might have had friends or relatives in the Mytha system. We will display the frequency at the bottom of your screen throughout the rest of this newscast. Nothing more is known at this time, but stay tuned to INN for the latest developments."

Samantha stared at the vidscreen silently, her hands curled into balls beneath her chin and tears welling up in her eyes. She swallowed hard and then cried out in a wordless shriek that set the others' teeth on edge. Merlin reached for her, but she threw off his hand and bolted from the couch and out the door. Tanis jumped up to follow, but Patch stopped him with a touch.

"What was that about?" the fennec asked.

"Sam's adopted family was on Sillon," the raccoon answered.

"You mean the Master Tristan that she's always talking about?"

"That's right. He and his family are Silloni."

Tanis balled up his fists and started to go after Samantha. Merlin stood up and put a hand on the fennec fox's shoulder. "I'll look in on her, Tanis," he said. "She and I have known one another longer than anyone else on our crew."

"That doesn't mean I don't care," Tanis said to his captain with a frown.

The wolf turned and stared into his medic's glassy black eyes with a dark look of his own, his tail animated behind him. "That's not what I meant, Tanis," he said after a quick sigh, "but I've met her Master Tristan and know what he means to her."

"True," Arktanis replied, "but she's not the only one who's just lost someone they knew on Sillon. I had a former military buddy who had his own tourist flight business there."

Merlin sighed again and nodded with a frown. "Please," he said, "just listen for any more news while I see to her." Arktanis nodded and returned to his seat with a grumble as Merlin left the Rec Room.

In her own cabin, Samantha cried into the pillow on her bed and Merlin sat beside her with a hand resting lightly on her heaving back. Merlin's sister sat in the plain chair next to the room's personal com terminal, her hands helplessly in her lap.

"They aren't sure it was Sillon," Shannon tried to say reassuringly. "At those interstellar distances, it may not be close enough to harm it."

"No," Merlin replied. "It's only speculation at this point, but the scientists who issued the report said it showed every indication of being *BAE-6410*, the red giant closest to Sillon's star that exploded."

"What are the chances of someone surviving on the planet?"

Merlin looked over at his sister and shook his head with a frown. He didn't want to discuss the supernova effects of a star on nearby worlds in front of Samantha. Shannon had never been away from Dennier, but she understood and fell quiet. Both wolves looked up at a sound at the door. It was Maximillian.

The boy moved in quietly and then knelt beside the bed next to Samantha, opposite of Merlin. Without a word, he leaned over her and draped an arm across her back with his head up against her own. Sam raised her head slightly at his scent and looked over at him, the fur under her eyes matted with her tears.

"I'm here for you, Sam," the youth whispered to her, "just like you were there for me."

Samantha touched foreheads with him and a hint of a smile. "Thank you, Max," she said as she leaned into him. "You're a good kid."

Merlin reached over and combed his fingers lightly through her scalp hair, unable to think of anything comforting to say. Samantha grew as quiet as the rest of the room as she finally relaxed a little. Her mind was racing and after a few long minutes, she lifted her head and looked at her captain and longtime friend.

"Our next assignment is a short trip, isn't it?" she asked him.

Merlin nodded and replied, "It will only take a day to make the pickup and delivery to Mainor."

"And after that?" she asked.

"Nothing yet, but Taro's still working to secure another customer for us from Mainor."

She reached out and put a hand on his leg closest to her. "Merlin..." she said slowly, "Can we go to Sillon?" The wolf's eyes widened, but she continued quickly, "We have to find out if Sillon is still there, Merlin! Master Tristan..."

The captain frowned and shook his head. "Sam," he said, "you know what a trip to Sillon is like. From our current position, it would take three *months* just to get there at top speed - that's a round trip of half a standard year."

"I know, but..."

"You know that for every voyage we make between distant worlds, we have to stock up supplies each time to last us the journey. We don't make trips to Sillon very often because of the expense, and if..." Merlin hesitated, "if Sillon is not there when we arrive, Sam, we will not be able to restock for the return flight."

"But, Merlin," Sam pleaded as she sat up on the bed beside him, "If Sillon *is* still there, they may be in need of help!"

"Which is a job for an operation much bigger and better equipped than we are, with *hundreds* of relief ships and *thousands* of medical and rescue professionals."

She was silent for a long moment. The wolf closed his eyes and bowed his head for a moment. After a small sigh, he said to her, "Sam, if you can secure a paying customer from either Dennier or Mainor to fully stock us for a round-trip flight to and from Sillon, we'll make the trip. However, we just can't *afford* to fly out there for a reconnaissance mission. I wouldn't be surprised if the SPF has a ship on its way out there right now for that very purpose."

The Border collie looked at him with an expression the captain could not read. Samantha wiped the tears from her eyes and stood up. She held out a hand to Max and said, "Come on, kid. We have work to do." The youth took her hand and followed her out of the room. He glanced back to Merlin with a sad look and then disappeared out the door with her.

Shannon cleared her throat and her younger brother looked up at her. "She's determined to check on her master," she said to him. "You've known Samantha half of your life, Merlin, and you know what she's like. Whether or not you want to, I think you *will* be making that trip to Sillon."

Sinclair pressed his forehead into his hands, ran his fingers through his fur in an expression of surrender. "With things the way they are right now, the only chance we'd have of supplying ourselves to that section of space is by taking illicit cargo. That's not even an option."

His sister sat quietly, her eyes a gentle expression of empathy. "Do you know anyone currently who could get word faster? Perhaps a friend nearer to the system who could check it out?"

Merlin's brow wrinkled at the thought. Armando would ignore him simply out of spite. It was possible that Faltane might be able to assist, but the shrewd capitalist did not seem like one to go on a mercy mission if it did not involve some gain for himself. Besides, Earth was farther away across the Planetary Alignment. Captain Natasha? With her rumored Particle Vault engines, he knew she could get to Sillon in practically no time at all. The thought occurred to him earlier, but he knew very little about the way she operated and was still not sure he could trust her.

"I'm afraid not," he admitted at last. "Dennier *is* the closest planet in the PA to the Mytha system and no one would be out that direction unless already on their way to or from Sillon. There are several stars between here and there, but none of them developed planets of their own, so there's really nothing out there."

Samantha had parked herself in front of Shannon's home communication center while Merlin, Durant, Tanis and Patch made preparations to fly across Dennier to Flint City to load up the cargo for their delivery to Mainor.

The Border collie was near to exhaustion from her diligent search for a backer of a voyage to Sillon. She had been at the console throughout the night, working with Taro's contacts on the

various worlds of the Planetary Alignment. She massaged her brow with her eyes closed when Taro walked into the room with her old slateboard tucked beneath an arm. "How goes the search?" the vixen asked her.

Samantha looked up and shook her head. "Everyone takes the news supposition as *fact*, and no one believes that life on Sillon exists anymore," she said wearily. "No one will invest in a trip to a dead world."

Taro sat next to the desk in a plush antique chair and put the slateboard in her lap with her hands clasped together. "I know," she said with a sigh. "INN has just reported that the Supernova Crisis Center on Joplin has been doing nothing more than collecting names of those last reported to be visiting Sillon. The SPF has declined to send any rescue ships out to the Mytha system, deeming it unnecessary."

"*Unnecessary!*" Sam replied loudly.

Taro shook her head in her own amazement. "As you said, it looks like Sillon has been written off by the rest of the Planetary Alignment, since that planet was primarily a vacation spot and otherwise contributed little to the rest of the worlds."

Samantha bristled and looked over at the fox angrily. "Sillon is a totally self-sufficient world," she replied stiffly. "They joined the Alignment over eighty years ago out of friendliness, and while they don't export much of their resources, they have never refused anything to anyone when asked!"

Taro held up a hand in defense. "Whoa, hold on, Sam! I didn't say I *agreed* with the INN report; I was only telling you what Holly said."

Samantha snorted and took a deep breath. "Holly is full of hooley!"

The pair fell silent, the conversation suddenly at a standstill. After a few quiet moments, Sam's expression softened as she looked over at her friend. Taro examined her slateboard as if it was actually interesting, but Sam could see she was lost in thought.

Sam looked away for a moment and gazed out the large curtained windows of the room. It faced the south toward a white sandy beach next to the Arvallian Sea and she could see Pockets and Max down near the water, scooping out sand from a hole they'd made. She didn't know what it might be they were digging for, but it appeared they were enjoying themselves out in the afternoon sun.

Taro broke the silence with a question. "Why don't you contact the Supernova Center on Joplin?" she suggested. "I'm sure they can put you in touch with others who had friends or relatives on Sillon."

"Why?"

Taro gave her friend a look of wonder. "I'm surprised you didn't think of it yourself," she said. "I would imagine you could find others among them willing to chip in to a central account to fund a flight out to Sillon to learn the news."

Samantha blinked twice before it dawned on her what her friend had just said. "It's strange that you would mention that. I had just been considering using my own fortune to finance the trip, but your way makes better sense." She thought a moment more and then said, "Maybe I can get the Supernova Center to set up a hotline so people could contact me to offer donations." She smiled for the first time in several days. "Thanks, Taro. You've just given me some hope!" she added as she turned toward the communication desk once again.

"I hope there's enough time for donations to come in," Samantha whispered to herself as she started to key in the com-frequency of Joplin. "We're leaving for Flint tomorrow and then we'll be on our way to Mainor."

"After we make Mr. Merrick's delivery to Rison on Mainor," the Border collie said to Taro and Pockets as they walked toward the ship, "we have a short hop across the province to Peacher, where stock supplies for the flight to Sillon are being gathered for us." She tapped the screen of her slateboard with a claw tip as they neared the ship's main hatch and added, "Everything's already paid for by the Supernova Rescue Fund, *plus* our standard delivery fee to Sillon."

Taro gave the supply officer a warm smile. "That's great! I'm surprised you didn't have any volunteers to go along."

Samantha grimaced. "Actually, I've turned down twenty-seven volunteer offers in the past two hours, including Holly Harken, herself."

Pockets spit out the gum he was chewing and looked up at her in alarm. "You turned down Holly Harken? Why'd you go and do that for?"

"I know you're a member of her fan club, Pockets, but it would take her three weeks to get here from Earth," Sam replied. "There isn't time for that; we're leaving in an hour."

Their conversation ended as the main airlock opened. Merlin and Durant stood just inside, pleasant expressions on their faces.

"Hello," the captain said with a smile. "Ready to go?"

Durant took a bite out of a carob candy bar and added with a mouthful, "Everybody's here but Sparky."

"She's *always* the last one to show up," the Border collie reminded them.

Merlin shook his head. "An hour before liftoff and she's not here." Durant and Taro moved off into the ship, their attention shifting to the coming launch. Left alone, the wolf took Samantha's slateboard and flipped through the screens as they crossed the hold. "I trust you and Holly will be in constant contact as we head out to Sillon?"

Samantha nodded and answered, "As much as the distance will allow in communications, but Pockets told me that he's just added some tachyon boosters to the com system that might help. Max and I went shopping this morning and bought a number of things to help the crew pass the time during the long journey."

"Oh? What did you get?"

"I got a ton of movies of different kinds to match each individual's taste, some schooling materiel for Max, music and books for Patch, mystery novels for you and... you get the picture. Hopefully we won't have any fights on board from boredom like the last time we headed out to Sillon."

The captain smiled. "Yeah, but we don't have any obnoxious passengers going along for ride like we did then, either."

"True."

"Captain! Captain Sinclair!"

Merlin and Samantha turned as one and both broke into grins as they recognized the tawny yellow fur of a male bobcat as he peeked in through the hatch opening.

"Roland!" Samantha called back.

Merlin left the collie at the lift door and trotted back across the empty hold toward the newcomer. He stepped outside and greeted Roland, Sparky and his sister, Shannon.

"Well, *this* is a surprise!" he said as he clasped hands with the short, but stout bobcat. "What in the cosmos are you doing on Dennier?"

Sparky put her hands on her hips and mocked an expression of anger. "I told you he was going to be here months ago, Captain," she said with the hint of a smile at the corner of her mouth. "You agreed to take him on whatever delivery we had next from Dennier."

Merlin winked at her and grinned at the bobcat. "I remember now," he replied. "You're welcome to accompany us, of course, but you may not want to go along on this particular journey."

Roland canted his head to the side and stared at him with intense green eyes. "Why not?" he asked. "Too dangerous?"

The wolf snorted and shook his head. "No, possibly too boring. You've heard about the supernova out toward Sillon, I assume?" Both felines nodded. "Sam is heading up an expedition funded entirely by donations from around the Planetary Alignment. We're going to fly fully loaded with extra supplies out to Sillon, if for no other reason as to find out if the planet's populations still exist. We've upgraded the radiation gel-pack shielding against any lingering effects of the supernova to its stellar neighborhood, so we should be safe in the area at the least. I tried to talk her out of it, but... you know how stubborn she can be."

"This could be a long, long trip out to nowhere and wind up having to make a turnaround and fly right back here," Roland commented. "That would be six months of wasted time."

"Whether or not we find a planet or any survivors," Merlin said as he led the group inside the ship, "most of the cargo we're taking consists of food for ourselves to supply us for the trip there and back. It's *fully* paid for, so wasted time or not, it will be standard profit."

"Always thinking of the business, eh, Captain?" Sparky said with a wink.

"Always." The wolf glanced back at Roland. "You're welcome to go with us at standard pay, but what of your employment here on Dennier? Weren't you working for Okami Corp?"

"That's right, I was," Roland answered. "Our contract with the starship construction company ran out this month and I've been looking for a job for the past two weeks. Boring or not, I'd appreciate the opportunity to go along on the journey to Sillon."

"Even if only to spend time with his honey, right?" Shannon spoke up from the rear of the small group. Sparky snickered and Roland looked embarrassed.

"Something like that..." he replied.

Merlin led them toward the lift and said, "Okay, Roland, consider yourself hired. I'll redraft your old contract for a signature later. I suppose it's a good thing you and Sparky are so close, since you'll have to share her quarters. We're totally booked."

"Oh?" the bobcat asked. "You have a full crew?"

"I told you about our cabin boy, Maximillian, remember?" Sparky told him. "He's using what was our only empty compartment."

"Yeah, I remember now. There have been a few changes in your crew since I last hired on with you," Roland said. "I'll miss playing cards with Jiro. He was a shrewd gambler."

"Speaking of gamblers, Arktan is back with us. You should remember him," Merlin said.

"The loser with the huge ears?" Roland said with a smirk. "I'll have to see how many credits I can liberate from him. If I remember right, Patch is a card player as well. The three of us will have to get together later for a game."

Merlin grinned. "Renny Thornton is the cheetah who filled Jiro's position, and Max is a canine kid I've just adopted as a nephew."

Sparky looked over at him with a strange smile. "You *adopted* Max?" she asked. She looked back at Shannon. "I thought you and Bill were going to take him."

Merlin's sister shrugged her shoulders. "Max wouldn't leave his liberators from slavery, so he's staying on the *Blue Horizon* with my brother."

"Did the authorities give you any trouble on adopting him without having a mate?" Roland asked.

"Not after they found out that Max was a slave that was given to me as payment after a delivery to Quet," the captain answered. "While that's legal on Quet, the Dennieran authorities don't think so highly of it. Legally, I could have kept Max as a slave, but the officials were impressed enough that I had freed him of the contract that they didn't hesitate when I requested guardianship."

"He's quite an intelligent kid, too," Sparky said. "As a slave, he learned a lot of skills that have become handy on board the ship and he even has an aptitude toward cooking."

Roland looked over at her. "I assume you're adding to his culinary skills?"

"Yes, he's already learning my techniques and recipes."

"That's convenient," the bobcat whispered into her ear. She smirked at him, but said nothing more as they neared the door to the engine room.

"Okay, Max, hold still," Tanis told the boy as he placed a mean-looking device up to his right shoulder. The lights in Sickbay were bright and everything was sterile and polished in the room. Max sat on a tan roller-stool, his shirt off from the physical the fennec fox had just given him, and his eyes showed a bit of fear. Roland stood to the side of the room, watching quietly. Tanis stopped what he was doing and smiled down at the canine.

"Don't worry, Max," he said in a soothing voice. "Everyone has to have inoculations."

"Why? What's a 'noculation?'"

"The *Blue Horizon* makes deliveries to a number of different worlds in the Planetary Alignment and each planet has its own kind of viruses and diseases. This one shot will protect ya from the worst and the most common of them from each of the places we'll visit."

"Oh."

Roland stepped over to them and put a hand on the fox's shoulder. "I've had it before, Max, but as it's been a long time since I've been offworld, I have to have another one myself. Don't worry, boy. It stings for less than a second."

Maximillian looked back at Tanis and said, "Give it to him first."

The medic looked at the bobcat and smiled. "Okay, Roland, ya heard the boy. Roll up yer sleeve."

Roland winked at Max and did as complied. Tanis lifted the ugly device up to the bared arm and placed the nozzle through the rough fur to rest directly on the skin beneath. There was a very slight *snik* and Roland's eyes went wide, trying to pop out of his head.

The bobcat screamed and clutched his shoulder as if it were on fire. He sank hard to his knees and began writhing on the ground in apparent agony. Max watched in horror at the spectacle, but Tanis started laughing.

Max looked up at the medic in shock. "That's m-mean! He's *hurting* and you're laughing?"

Tanis chuckled, but Roland sat up on the floor and pointed to the youth with a mischievous grin. "You should have seen your face!" the bobcat said.

Maximillian realized he was the butt of a joke, and scrunched his face up in a scowl. "That wasn't funny!"

Snik

"Yes, it was," Tanis replied with a smile as he pulled the device away from Max's skinny arm.

"Hey, what did you just do?" Max asked with wide eyes.

"Inoculated ya while ya were distracted," the medic said as he put the device away. "See, yer not in any pangs of agony, are ya?"

Max ran a finger over the spot of the injection and couldn't even tell where it had gone in. There had been no stinging prick or any other indication of what had been done, but he was still miffed at being made fun of.

"That wasn't nice," he grumbled.

Roland got up on his knees and looked at the youth with a calm expression. "I hate to tell you this, Max, but you need to lighten up. You're now part of a crew that has to get along together to survive the long distances of space between deliveries, and sometimes that means joking around together. Don't get upset at us for pulling this little stunt on you. Just learn to laugh about it and live with the camaraderie it will help you to form with others."

"Back on Quet, people played mean pranks on me all the time," Max replied somberly. "They always did it to get me upset."

Tanis put a hand on the canine's shoulder. "Not here, Max. We can't afford to do things like that on a ship where ya can't get away from an enemy. Roland and I have been friendly rivals for years, but we don't hate one another."

"That's right," the bobcat added. "We rib one another constantly, but it is all in good-natured fun. It keeps us from getting too serious."

"Like Patch?"

Tanis and Roland exchanged amused glances. The medic laughed and nodded, "Yeah, that crusty raccoon *is* just a little too serious, but he's one I wouldn't play pranks on."

"Why not?" Max asked.

"Ya can get along with him just fine without resorting to that. His temper has a short fuse and he doesn't deal well with pranks where he's the target of the joke."

"I'm confused," Maximillian said. "Didn't you just tell me that everyone needs to lighten up in order to get along?"

"I said that *you* need to lighten up," Roland answered. "If you don't, you will eventually turn out to be like Patch, continually grumpy and keeping to yourself all the time."

"But Pockets is his brother, and he's nothing like him." Max observed.

"True enough, but Pockets *chooses* to laugh and joke around instead of being serious all the time."

"Do ya want to be like Pockets or like Patch?" Tanis asked.

Max looked up with a grin, understanding in his eyes. "I'd rather be like Pockets."

"Hello, once again, this is News Around the Alignment and I'm Holly Harken of the Interplanetary News Network. Recapping our running story on the supernova out by the Mytha primary, there has been a tremendous response of families, friends and even business corporations to an open call put out by Samantha Holden, the heiress of Holden Pharmaceuticals, asking for donations to finance the loading of a private vessel with extra supplies for the three-month journey to the Mytha Star System. Sillon and her sister worlds have been unanimously declared lost by the PA Legislature, but there are those who cling to the belief that there are somehow survivors left to be rescued.

“Authorities at the Supernova Center on Joplin doubt that a single cargo vessel could provide much, if any, relief to a world whose star has exploded, but probably the greatest single benefit of this journey would be to bring back confirmation to the thousands who have lost someone on Sillon, of whether those who were there still live or not. The Blue Horizon, a freighter under the command of Captain Merlin Sinclair, is already on its long journey toward the lost, distant world of Sillon, having left Peacher, Mainor earlier this month. Ms. Holden is aboard the relief vessel and has asked me to convey her thanks to all who have donated generously to the flight in such an extremely short period of time. The journey and supplies have been paid for by many grateful donations and she promises to send back regular reports to me along the way so we may keep all informed of the situation.

“On a related note, this station learned only an hour ago that popular fusion rock band, DWT, otherwise known as Dragon, Wolf & Tiger, had only just arrived on Sillon for an extended vacation following last year’s exhaustive PA Worlds Tour. Stephanie Dell, spokesperson for DWT has fronted a large donation toward the Blue Horizon’s voyage to learn the fate of the band.

“Many authorities have expressed public disapproval of the voyage, deeming it unnecessary and wasteful of the donations that were sent in to send the ship full of extra supplies to a planet that no longer exists. On the opposing side, of course, are the thousands who eagerly await the Horizon’s findings, though the vessel will not reach her destination for another two and half months. Stellar scientists are especially interested in what the Blue Horizon will find in the vicinity of a newly exploded star, and have sent along special instrumentation to record the phenomenon.

“And now to our top story at this time. The Spatial Police Force has issued an all-points bulletin for the capture of a vessel known as the Basilisk. The captain of the ship is said to be a cunning black jaguar known only as Sagan, who has a bloodthirsty history. The kidnapping of several prominent genetic engineers from around the Planetary Alignment six months ago has been positively linked to Sagan through an unnamed informer to the SPF, who has been given high tech protection until the arrest of the pirate can be initiated. More details on Sagan will be broadcast as soon as our research has proceeded further. Stay tuned...”

“Hah!” Renny said gleefully as he thrust in with his sword toward Merlin’s unprotected heart. The wolf’s lips were pressed tightly in a grin as he parried the thrust in a lightning fast move that made Renny doubt his eyes. He managed to hold onto the rapier from his captain’s blow, though he almost lost it in the process. He darted back and had to counter a thrust toward his own chest with a fierce motion.

“You’ve learned quickly,” Merlin spoke between short bursts of breath, “but you’re still a rookie!”

The cheetah coiled his leg muscles as he parried and then bounded over his captain’s head in a somersault that almost connected him with the ceiling. He landed softly and whirled around to block another blow toward his abdomen.

“Okay, that was impressive!” Merlin said with a grin.

“The energetic music Moss is playing helps the mood,” Renny smirked as he held up a hand to signal for a rest. Merlin nodded and stepped back away from his navigator to raise his sword to his nose in salute. As if on cue, Moss lowered the volume of the music it played, but continued hovering in the middle of the room, watching the combatants idly.

“Thanks to Samantha,” the wolf said as he moved to a nearby chair, “we have plenty of music of all moods for this voyage.”

The door opened suddenly and Sparky exited the lift with Roland at her side. Both were dressed in Terran Asian clothing – she in a full silk kimono and the bobcat in a shorter hapi coat, both in bare feet. Renny waved silently as the couple moved across the large room toward them.

“Hi, Renny,” Roland said. “Hello, Captain.”

Merlin nodded as he lapped from a cup of cool water. “What’s on your minds?” he asked and set the cup on the table beside him. Moss’ programming recognized conversational tones and silenced its music appropriately.

Renny waved a hand across the device’s sensor field and said, “You can go now, Moss. Thanks for your help.”

“*Meow!*” With a low hum, the flying saucer moved toward the lift to start a sensor sweep of the lower decks. Roland watched it go and then turned his attention back to the wolf. Renny walked over and sat in a plush chair near the captain.

Sparky smiled at Merlin and said, “We just wanted to look over the Rec Room to see how we were going to decorate it.”

The captain tilted his head to the left a bit as he pondered the feline chef. “Decorations for what?” he asked suspiciously.

Sparky giggled and turned to put her arms around the bobcat. Roland quirked up his lips as he realized she had just assigned him the task.

“Merlin,” he said hesitantly, “Ivy and I would like you to exercise your authority as the ship’s captain to join us in marriage.”

Renny’s jaw dropped open, but Merlin seemed unsurprised when he stood up to face them. “I wondered when you two would make that decision,” he said with a smile. “I rather expected it two years ago.”

“Each of us had to build up a better income first,” Sparky admitted. “I’ve been saving up for this for a while and nearly lost it all when I caught the galley on fire. We intend to start a family right away.”

The captain gave the lynx a warm hug and then shook Roland’s hand. “I would be honored to exercise my authority,” he said. “Feel free to decorate as you wish and let me know when you want the ceremony.”

Renny got past his astonishment enough to stand up and shake hands with the shorter Roland. “I admit that I’m flabbergasted,” he said with a lopsided smile, “but congratulations to you both.”

“Thanks, Renny,” Sparky replied and briefly licked his cheek. “That means a lot to me.” She turned back to Merlin and said, “We’d like to have it in a few days at some time when we can put the ship on full automatic. Samantha and Taro have volunteered to help me get things ready, though we want to keep things simple. We’ve already talked to Tanis about our physicals.”

“Where is Tanis right now?” Merlin asked after taking another lap of water.

“On bridge duty,” Roland answered with a smirk. “I was just up there giving him grief.”

Merlin shook his head. Tanis and Roland had been friendly rivals for years and every time they got together, neither could resist the impulse to needle the other at any opportunity. Their bantering together was more intense than the rivalry that had recently developed between Renny and Samantha.

“Okay,” the captain said, “make whatever arrangements you want and then let me know what you come up with.”

"Thanks, Captain," Roland replied sincerely. He turned to Renny and slapped him lightly on the shoulder. "Sorry to take away your occasional partner, mate," he said boldly, "but she's mine now."

Renny grinned. "That's okay. I still have Taro."

"Funny," the bobcat said. "That's just what Tanis said."

"And this is the gravity stabilizer," Durant said as he tapped the bridge console beside a series of buttons. "That system is what allows us to walk around the ship without floating off the deck plates while we're out in space."

"What about shields?" the canine teen asked. "Don't ships have shields to help against attack?"

The grizzly smiled. "Yes, we have shields, but they operate at all times when we're in space, not just if someone comes after us."

"Why all the time?"

Durant rested a hand on the back of his chair and rubbed his chin with the other. "The *void of space* is actually far from empty, Max. There are all kinds of stuff floating about, some as small as grains of sand. The shield generator covers the exterior of the ship with an energy field that repels all that debris. Even a tiny rock could puncture a hole clean through the *Horizon* at light speeds without some kind of shield against it. In the event we're fired upon by another ship, the defense systems automatically strengthen the shield signal to counter it."

"Oh," Max said with pursed lips. "What's *this* do?" he asked, pointing to a control set off to the side.

"That deploys solar sails in the event we lose power and need to use the energy from a nearby star to generate power to keep us alive."

"I've heard of those! I've also heard spacers visiting *The Wild Star* say those were obsolete."

Durant nodded and smiled. "Aye, they are, but you can never have too many redundant backups, even if it is old technology. It was one of Samantha's acquisitions back on Dennier."

Max looked at him strangely. "Acquisition? Why did you say it like that?" he asked.

The bear chose his words carefully before he answered. "Sammy will sometimes filch hard-to-get things for the ship. That's what she and Pockets were doing when they found you."

"Isn't she rich?" the youth asked. "Why does she need to steal when she can just buy what you need?"

"I've never figured that out, myself," Durant said with a sigh. "I guess some things you can't get even if you have the money for it."

Max looked up at him looking thoughtful. "I guess *I* was the hard-to-get thing she and Pockets took that time, huh?"

Durant stared back at him with a dour expression, unsure how to respond to that.

Maximillian looked over the console at the environmental station of the small bridge and changed the subject. "Will I get to fly the *Blue Horizon* someday?" he asked as he looked up at the bear towering above him.

The grizzly motioned his companion toward the center seat of the bridge. He was pleased to see the former slave coming out of his shell. "If you stay with us for long, I'm sure you will. It's Merlin's requirement that all members of his crew be able to fly the *Horizon* in the event of an emergency, and that includes everything from taking off and landing. Once you

learn the system, you'll have to spend your own shift up here along with the rest of us. We have about six months before we get back to the Planetary Alignment, so this voyage would be a good time to teach you some of the systems along the way."

"Really?"

"Sure, sit down here and I'll start you out with the basics."

The recreation deck was festooned with hand-made flowers and garland that the women had fashioned from miscellaneous color papers and wires from Pockets' stash of spare parts. Placement of the decorations was tastefully done without being overbearing and the simplicity of it all was appealing. Samantha had found a few electric candles from the *Blue Horizon's* emergency supplies and had them arranged sparsely around the room. All of the lights were turned off, save for the soft ambience of faux candlelight.

Merlin had done a little research on wedding ceremonies typical on Fyn and the regions that Roland and Sparky were from and took notes on their simple traditions. As Tanis had told his friend on Earth, full body clothing was a human creation and a practice that had slowly spread out to the other worlds it dealt with. Previous to that time, the only garments worn by anthro races were worn either for simple modesty or to be merely ornamental.

It was not until the Earth reestablished ties with its long-lost colonies and formed the Planetary Alignment with them that clothing worn for individual expression really came into the picture. The felines of Fyn had not relied upon garments of cloth, but had been satisfied with their own fur covering. Even though many on Fyn had joined in the Terran practice of wearing clothing, most of their older traditions and ceremonies were still performed without them.

As there were no humans currently on board the *Blue Horizon*, all members of the crew would observe the Fynian tradition in their natural furs, with thin strips of cloth in strategic places for modesty. Samantha had fashioned sashes for everyone to cover over their genitals, though the bride and groom would wear nothing at all. The males would wear sashes of amber to match Roland's eyes and the females would wear green for Sparky's eye color.

As requested, everyone was present and the ship had been placed on full automatic, something that was rarely done. Should an emergency arise, the computer terminal on the third deck could alert them with an audible signal.

Arranged in a semi-circle at the aft end of the room, the *Blue Horizon* crew waited quietly. Samantha stood at one end with Taro next to her, then Renny, Tanis, Durant, Max and Pockets, with Patch at the other end. Merlin stood in front of the group facing them and waited for the arrival of the bride and groom. Moss floated behind the entire group and played soft music from its tiny speakers that Sparky had chosen.

At a specific point in the music, the lift doors opened and Roland walked out into the room. The panel closed behind him and then he walked slowly around the entire perimeter of the room until he had rounded the group and stopped in front of the wolf.

A moment later, the lift opened again and Sparky walked in holding a small bouquet of flowers gathered from her cabin decor. She followed Roland's previous path around the room and then stopped beside him in front of Merlin. The couple grinned at one another quickly and then turned their attention to the officiator of their union.

Merlin stood before them, his hands clasped together behind his back with a single object rolled up in one of them. He gave the couple a genuine smile and nodded quietly to each.

"There are many duties a starship captain must perform," he began, "but there are none as pleasant as uniting two people together in marriage under this authority. To be noted in the ship's log on this date, Roland Daniel Carlton and Ivy Elaine Sparks have come before me to be wed together as lifemates."

He looked around at each of those gathered around and then shifted his gaze back to the couple before him. "Fynian wedding traditions of the Kirin Prefecture are among the simplest of ceremonies, but the effects are of a lasting bond of those united. Roland... Ivy... please face one another and cross your right wrists together."

Roland turned toward his bride and raised his right wrist. Sparky raised her own wrist to match his and they crossed them together gently. Merlin stepped up to them and raised a wide length of red silk. Without a word or announcement, the wolf softly wound the material around their crossed wrists. When he ran out of silk, he put his arms around the shoulders of them both and rested his forehead briefly on top of their bound hands. Then he straightened up and took a step back.

Roland looked into his bride's moist eyes and then said to her, "*I will love you forever and always.*"

Sparky smiled and answered, "*I will love you always and forever.*"

They leaned together, nuzzled briefly over the top of their wrists, and then licked one another's muzzles. When they moved back into place, Merlin said to them, "Raise your hands." The couple lifted their bound wrists and then the captain said, "The red cloth represents the blood united between you in union, binding the two of you together for life. It is now my great privilege to introduce you as Roland and Ivy Carlton. May the stars forever light your united path."

Cheers and applause erupted from the *Blue Horizon* crew.

SS Blue Horizon PA1261
Captain's Journal

We are five weeks into our flight toward Sillon. The voyage to a supposedly dead world has proceeded without incident. The engines are purring like a kitten and my engineers are pleased with the power output. Durant has checked and rechecked the inventory of our cargo several times out of boredom, but I suspect he will not find any discrepancies this time. This cargo provides our own food and supplies for the long voyage out and back, so there's no reason for Samantha to filch anything from it.

Tanis and Roland have taken up wrestling on the rec deck whenever Renny and I are not in fencing practice, and I would say the two have become closer friends. Samantha and Taro have been taking turns at the communication terminal trying to raise Sillon without success. Sam has also held frequent conversations with Holly Harken in an exchange of information. The human has been broadcasting weekly reports on our progress, and with a lack of exciting news, has played up to romance angle of Roland and Sparky's shipboard marriage.

In the two weeks since the wedding, the rest of the crew seems to have accepted Roland into the family, whereas he had always just been a friend when he hired on with us for short trips in the past. Perhaps it is out of necessity that Roland and Tanis are getting along, since Sparky informed me earlier today that she is going to have kittens. As the pregnancy for felines is only a few weeks, it is likely the kits will be born before we have reached our destination. To be expected, it is just about all the females on my crew talk about now. In addition to that, we have all been wondering what to call the new mother-to-be. We have always called her "Sparky" as a derivative of her family name, but now that she is no longer Ivy

Sparks, do we call her by her first name, or do we continue to address her by the nickname. I shall have to ask her preference sometime soon.

I have yet to sit down with the newlywed couple to discuss their future on the Blue Horizon. I was pleased to exercise my authority and marry these two together, but a cargo ship with limited room is not the ideal place to raise a family. I would hate to lose Sparky; she has been a member of my crew since I first put the ship in business, but she has concerns that are more important now. I am thankful that Max is on board. Raised primarily as a kitchen slave, the boy has been helping Sparky these past few weeks in the galley. If Roland and Sparky decide to settle down somewhere after we get back, we may have to depend on Max for our meals.

Taro has been monitoring the scanning systems for the area of space in front of us. As we close the distance, the supernova should become visible to us soon, but the instrumentation sent along with us has been scanning in the gamma and x-ray spectrums, as well as all radio and tachyon frequencies. The sooner we can find out what we are heading toward, the more prepared we can be upon approaching the system. A supernova is not something a ship actually wants to get too close to.

Merlin Sinclair, Captain

“Captain,” Taro said to the wolf as she walked into his den. She wore a pair of loose cutoff shorts and a halter-top that displayed a generous amount of cleavage. Although he had seen more of her during the bare-fur wedding ceremony and reception, the slim bit of clothing only served to enhance her feminine form. Merlin had to force his eyes to the slateboard she held out to him.

“I need you to take a look at this,” she said in amusement when his eyes darted back to her chest.

He gladly took the slateboard and then studied the display. He bit his bottom lip after a moment, and then slowly shook his head. “Have you told Sam?”

“Not yet,” the vixen answered. “I thought you might want that job.”

The wolf looked up at her and nodded. “It should do a lot to improve her mood.” He glanced at the report once more and then asked, “Are you *sure* this is correct? I don’t want to give her any hope, only to have the truth jump out and bite her in the tail.”

Taro leaned over the desk, purposely acting oblivious to his trouble with concentration, but he managed to hold his eyes even with her own. “Since when do I leave something like this up to conjecture?” she asked with a smile. “I’ve triple-checked the readouts and the result is the same.”

The captain pretended to study the slateboard in his hands before he handed it back to her without letting his eyes stray again. With a mischievous smile, Taro stood up and moved back toward the door.

“I’ll let her know right away,” he told his second-in-command. He finally looked up at her before she disappeared and added, “Thanks, Taro. I’m sure she’ll be pleased with your research.”

The red fox merely smiled, winked at him, and then headed back to the bridge. Merlin swallowed and shook his head with a grin. It had been a long time since Taro had flirted with him like that. She normally kept her relationship with him purely professional, but lately there were times she seemed just a little more playful. He attributed it to the wedding ceremony and the impending birth of kittens. Taro might be a no-nonsense fox when it came to her job, but she

had shown herself to be quite feminine and susceptible to the joy of helping prepare for a wedding. She was quite the romantic in such matters.

Merlin leaned over his terminal and was about to call Samantha, but changed his mind. Something like this should be delivered in person. He stood up, snagged his hat from a wall peg and put it on his head between his ears as he headed out into the corridor. He went to her cabin, but received no response when he knocked and called to her. It was possible she was sleeping, but his sensitive ears heard nothing through the door panel. He next checked the galley, but it was empty as well. Sparky and Max had the place shining spotless, but no one was inside.

He moved to the lift and took it up to the rec deck. He could hear ominous music just before the door slid aside and he then walked into the darkened room. As he suspected, Samantha was sitting on the floor amidst a pile of fluffy pillows, watching an old movie. Max was nearby, his eyes riveted to the room's large screen. Roland and Pockets were in matching lounge chairs, quietly munching popcorn, and Tanis was draped across a couch.

"Samantha?" Merlin said over the sound and music coming from the room's speakers. The Border collie glanced over at him when he knelt down beside her, but she returned her attention to the film.

"Shh!" Tanis and Roland shushed him in unison.

"Sam," Merlin tried again in a whisper. "I have some important news for you."

She looked back over at him with a frown. "What is it?" she whispered back.

He put his nose right up into her closest ear. "Taro has detected the supernova on the long-range sensors."

"And?"

Merlin put a hand on her arm. "It's several light years closer than it should be."

"What does that mean?"

"It means, Samantha, that the supernova cannot be the one out by Sillon's sun. It's got to be another star!"

The sudden realization of what the wolf was telling her sunk in beyond the scenes of the movie still playing. She grabbed his arm and looked deeply into his eyes. "Can you contact Sillon?"

"No, not yet," the wolf replied in a low voice as so not to disrupt the others watching their film. "The supernova has disrupted all com frequencies several light years radiating out in every direction. I suspect Sillon is okay, but this supernova is blocking all communication with them."

Samantha jumped into his arms and hugged him tightly. "Merlin, that's the best news I've had in a long time!" She surprised him by licking his muzzle and then she pulled back a bit to look at him again. "I don't want to get my hopes up, but I won't be satisfied until we can actually talk to someone on Sillon."

"Taro says that Renny is already calculating a change of course to skirt around the supernova, but that change won't go into effect for another week at the most and it will lengthen our journey," Merlin replied. "We're still a long way off from the supernova itself."

"That's okay," Samantha said with a weary smile. "Now that there is a greater chance that Master Tristan is unharmed, I can relax a bit."

"Hello, once again, this is News Around the Alignment and I'm Holly Harken of the Interplanetary News Network. Recapping our running story on the Mytha disaster, I have just received

word in a weakening transmission from the Blue Horizon that their onboard long-range sensors have detected first traces of the supernova itself. While the ship is continually speeding toward the phenomenon, the crew has been taking readings and double-checking their sensors.

"I am pleased to inform my listeners that it appears that the star which has exploded was not... I repeat, not... the red giant near the Mytha Primary. Space navigational charts recalculated with new data have now identified the former star as SDC-971, a closer red giant luminary without any known planets." Holly ran the fingers of her left hand unconsciously through her dark hair and smiled at the viewers. "This is good news to all, but Ms. Holden wants me to stress that there has been no communication with Sillon as yet. The supernova distortion has disrupted all communication with the Mytha star system and nothing more may be known until the Blue Horizon herself has gone around SDC-971. Unfortunately, because of the increasing distance between the vessel and the rest of the Planetary Alignment worlds, the limited equipment on board the Horizon will no longer be able to breach the spatial interference to provide us with the regular status reports we've had since the ship launched out into deep space two months ago. When Captain Sinclair's ship has finally skirted SDC-971, it is likely we will have no more information on the flight until their return journey two months hence."

"The closer location of the type-2p supernova has set the scientific communities on the PA worlds into immediate action, and although interstellar distances will keep the effects of the blast from reaching most of the Planetary Alignment for several years, there could be very real results felt upon the worlds closest to it, primarily Dennier, Mainor, Brandt, Quet at first, and then later Kantus, Tanthe, Joplin, Crescentis, Ganis and Pomen. What those results will be has yet to be determined, but the combined brain trusts across the PA will be working diligently to develop what measures can be implemented before that time arrives."

Holly sat up straighter with a serious expression as she gazed out toward her viewers. *"INN will broadcast -any- information we receive on the flight of the Blue Horizon whenever we get it. For the sake of me and my station, I would ask that you do not call in to request updates on the flight. When we have something to report, I will make sure it is broadcast promptly and exclusively by this station. You can depend on Holly."*

"In related news, we have received word that another freighter has launched out toward the Mytha Star System, hoping to help any survivors of the catastrophe. We have only had limited contact with the Savannah Hunter as it heads out in the Blue Horizon's wake, although it is currently unknown who has supplied and financed Captain Jensen's flight to the lost, distant world."

"Captain?"

Merlin looked up from the budget reports on his slateboard and faced the intercom speaker on his personal terminal. *"Yes, Patch, what is it?"*

"Sensors are showing that we've finally cleared SDC-971, with it and its distortions now behind us."

"I'm impressed; taking a wider trajectory than usual only delayed us by a week," Merlin remarked. "Start scanning for the Mytha Star System and see if you can get a fix on the Silloni beacon."

"Aye, right away."

Merlin set his slateboard aside. He thumbed a switch on his desk terminal. *"Taro?"*

"Yes, Captain?" The fox's voice sounded drowsy.

"Sorry to wake you, but I need you on the bridge at the Com station."

"What's up?" Her voice sounded instantly awake.

"Patch says we're now past the supernova's disruptive influence. I need you to see if you can raise Sillon's communication net."

"Has Patch verified that Sillon is really there?"

"I have him checking on that now. If you are able to raise anyone, I'm sure Samantha will want you to contact Master Tristan."

"Okay, Captain, I'm on my way to the bridge."

Merlin flipped off the intercom, but it chirped again almost immediately. "Yes, Patch?"

"Mytha Primary has been confirmed, Captain. It's right where it's supposed to be and signal traffic appears normal."

There were times when Samantha fervently wished the *Blue Horizon* had been equipped with a visual communications unit, and this was such a time. When the voice of her mentor sounded across the speakers of the bridge, she nearly burst into tears. Merlin, Patch and Taro sat in various other seats around the small room as the Border collie occupied the com station.

"*Blue Horizon, this is Tristan of the Dragon Loft. What may I do for you?*" the thickly accented voice asked across the tachyon signal.

"Master Tristan," Samantha said with a lump in her throat, "this is Samantha."

"Samantha? This is quite the pleasant surprise! It has been nearly five years since I have seen my adopted daughter. How are you, pup?"

Samantha glanced over at Merlin and grinned widely. "I am fine, Master," she said. "The *Blue Horizon* has made this journey on behalf of the Planetary Alignment to check in on the well-being of Sillon."

"Indeed? Because of our lack of communication, no doubt," Tristan's voice replied, "although I would not have thought it important enough to the Alignment to send a vessel on such a distant journey merely to check up on us. The Regent has already ordered a relay satellite constructed to place some distance from the supernova to route all communications around the disturbance to the Alignment. It should be ready to launch in a couple of weeks."

"Master Tristan," Samantha said quietly, "from all indication in the perspective of the Planetary Alignment, it looked as if it was the red giant BAE-6410 near you that had exploded. I am sorry to say that there were only a few who actually believed that Sillon still existed."

"No, we are quite fine here. It is a star labeled SDC-971 that went supernova."

"Yes, we know that now," Sam replied. "But no one in the Planetary Alignment knew this until the *Blue Horizon* actually neared that location. There are many people concerned that their friends or loved ones perished on Sillon."

There was a quiet moment before the accented voice spoke again. "I would likely wager that my little Border collie is largely responsible for this voyage."

"Yes, Master," Samantha meekly admitted, "I had to know if you and the family were all right. The necessary operating supplies for the trip were donated and paid for by volunteers throughout the other Alignment worlds."

"Hmm... There is no emergency, but for the sake of those who believed we were still alive, I am sure our government will be pleased to know we're well thought of. May I speak with your captain?"

Merlin moved to Samantha's side and leaned over the console. "Sir, this is Merlin Sinclair."

"Captain Sinclair," Tristan said, "it is good to know the life of my little collie is still in your capable hand paws."

"Yes, sir, I have done everything I can over the years to keep her safe."

"For that you have my continued thanks. What is your present distance from Sillon?"

"We still have approximately three weeks before our estimated time of arrival, sir."

"Samantha will know the coordinates of my lodge that I call the Dragon Loft. I will arrange permission with the Regent to allow you to land on Sillon near my resort when you arrive."

"Thank you, sir. After three months of stellar travel, we'll be most gracious to see the green skies and blue hills of Sillon."

"How many are presently in your crew, Captain?"

"There are currently eleven on board, but we are likely to have several more by the time we arrive. One of my crew will be delivering kittens soon."

Tristan's voice sounded pleased when he replied. "Kittens? Who is their mother, your wonderful chef, Miss Ivy? I remember trying to steal her away from you on your last visit."

"Yes, sir, that's her. She is the proud mother-to-be. Ivy Sparks was united to her longtime sweetheart, Roland Carlton, early on in our flight."

"Please give her and her mate my congratulations, Captain, and please accept my hospitality to have your crew lodge at my resort during your stay on Sillon."

"Yes, sir," Merlin said at last. "I will convey your message and graciously accept your invitation."

When the connection was broken, Patch broke out into a rare grin. "Now *that's* a charitable fellow," the raccoon said. "I've heard that the *Dragon Loft* is the finest resort on the face of Sillon, and we've been invited to stay for free!"

The *Blue Horizon* was three days away from Sillon when Sparky went into labor. An onlooker would have thought the ship was under attack by the way everyone was reacting. Durant was on the bridge watch when Tanis made the call, which he then broadcast to the rest of the ship.

Sparky was denned in a darkened corner of the quarters she shared with Roland with Taro and Samantha assisting their medic. Tanis had to shoo all others away from the small cabin to give the mother privacy.

With nothing else to do, Merlin went to the Recreation Room so he could wait for the news. Patch, Pockets and Renny were already on the third deck ahead of him. The vidscreen was currently off, allowing a view of the smudged stars forward of the ship.

Patch had his ever-present cigar tightly clenched between his teeth as he paced quietly near the forward screen, strongly wishing he could light it up. If it were not for the oxygen-rich shipboard atmosphere, he would have been puffing on the cigar nervously. He and Sparky may not have been close friends, but they had always gotten along well and he genuinely liked her.

Pockets ran to Merlin when he came through the door, but the wolf only shook his head gently. There was nothing to report. Renny had done his own share of pacing, but he had abandoned that to unfold the exercise mat. He dropped to the floor and began rigorous push-ups to work out his anxiety.

Merlin moved to one of the lounge chairs and dropped in it with an audible exhale of air as Pockets ambled over to the kitchenette to fix himself a snack. It could be a long wait.

Durant lay on his bunk and quietly stared at the ceiling. Most everyone on board had nothing to do except wait for news of the birth and time seemed to slow unmercifully. It had been four hours since Sparky had gone into labor and nothing could distract them as they waited. The large cinnamon grizzly heaved a sigh and put his hands back behind his head. The lights in the room were dimmed by half and soft music played from a small unit on a nearby shelf.

His thoughts drifted around Sparky and the true friend she had been to him over the years, possibly his best friend of all. They had often spent quiet times discussing private matters, and each had understood one another's hopes and fears.

They had often taken their downtime vacations together and shared many interests, and while they had never been lovers, Durant knew that he could depend on her for anything. Now that she was married and was having a litter of kits, he felt strangely lost and alone.

His introspective thoughts were interrupted suddenly with a chirp and an excited voice from the intercom.

"Durant!"

The bear sat up and reached over to his personal terminal. "Yes, Taro, what is it?"

"Two kittens! One male and the other female!"

Sparky could not have looked happier. The birthing had gone well and she had two darling kittens to show off to her mate. Roland beamed with an inner light and no one bothered to mention that his chest was puffed out more in his pride. Names had already been chosen and Taro had noted the official recording of the date, time and given names on her slateboard.

The male kitten had the coloring of his mother, though his fur was still wet and matted to his tiny body. They gave to him the name of Roland's grandfather, *Joey*. The female kit was tawny yellow with a white under belly, and they called her *Kayla* after Sparky's sister. Neither infants' eyes were open, and they mewed softly for mother's milk. Sparky gave them what they needed and felt Roland's arms upon her shoulders. She looked up into his amber eyes and saw the love and warmth she had always known in him.

Her anxious shipmates would have to wait a while to see her kittens, but Tanis made sure she and her family had their privacy to rest and spend a little more time together.

Sillon was a world without liquid oceans that had the most varied, beautiful landscapes and creatures in all the known systems. The lush planet loomed in front of the forward windows of the *Blue Horizon* as Merlin brought her into a standard orbital approach. While they had been in contact with the planet's communication net for the past three weeks, Samantha had not dared hope for too much until she finally saw the place. Taro was on a communication link with the air traffic controllers as Renny awaited landing coordinates to calculate their navigation down to the surface.

Samantha stood next to the wolf with a hand on his shoulder, her gaze on the world below them. "This has been a long trip, Merlin," she said to him, noting not just the extreme distance, but also the duration of time on their nerves. There had been several squabbles along the way, but fortunately none had escalated to outright fighting this time. The captain nodded silently as Taro began reading off coordinates to the cheetah.

"Take your seat, Samantha," Merlin said without looking up.

"The *Palace of the Mists* has given us the okay for landing, Captain," Taro reported.

"Good," the wolf replied. "Renny?"

"Have just calculated navigational trajectory," the cheetah answered in monotone. "Transferring to your panel now."

Taro glanced at a monitor. "All hands, all hands," she announced on ship-wide speakers, "Dropping from orbit, landing sequence beginning in three minutes. Strap yourselves in."

At the three-minute mark, Merlin noted a green light on his board and moved the guidance shifts forward; the ship nosed down toward the world they had long journeyed. Renny flicked a switch at his station and the forward windows took on an orange hue as the heat shields activated. There was a resistance to the controls as the atmosphere quickly thickened with their descent, and the blue saucer-shaped freighter dropped moments later through a thin wisp of clouds that evaporated with its passing.

"Resetting ship's clocks to Silloni Rollocan Time Zone," Taro announced over the intercom. "Local time is ten-thirteen."

Renny turned to the fox to ask a question, but saw she was again speaking lowly into her headset. He moved his attention instead to one vidscreen showing the landscape below. They were still a long ways up, but he could see cultivated azure fields beneath them and an impossibly-high mountain range to the south.

"Look there," Samantha said. The cheetah followed her gaze to the distance and saw a large city ahead. "That's Wathradrim," she explained. "Master Tristan's lodge is about a hundred miles south."

"Are we going there or to Tristan's place?" Renny asked.

"Tristan said Silloni government officials would meet us at his lodge," Taro replied without looking up from her terminal.

"What is your master's family name?"

Sam looked over at him with a smile. "You've never met any of the Silloni before, have you?" Renny shook his head. "The Silloni do not use surnames," she answered.

"Oh."

"There are two primary species which make up the Silloni population," Taro added. "I think you'll be surprised."

"What are they?" the cheetah asked with interest.

"I'm not telling. You'll see for yourself."

As the metropolitan city of Wathradrim passed quickly beneath them, Renny stared down in wonder at the architecture. The structures appeared to be made of fluid metal that had been molded into place rather than constructed. He did not get a detailed look since the *Blue Horizon* sped up to get out of the way of a huge transport that bore down on them. The teardrop shaped silver ship never contacted them, but continued on its flight path as if the blue saucer had not been there.

When the city was far behind them, Merlin dropped the freighter to standard aircraft cruising altitude and stepped up their speed ever so slightly. He flew directly above a highway that stretched on toward the mountains they approached, ground vehicles moving slowly in relation to the flying saucer over gently rolling blue hills.

"Sam," Merlin said, "begin equalizing our internal air pressure with that of the outside and then start the transfer of atmosphere."

"Aye, sir." Without looking down at the station, the collie's fingers found the proper controls out of habit and activated them. "There it is!" She said gleefully as her eyes lit up. A small community built around the base of a massive overhanging rock cliff came into view as the *Blue Horizon* arced around the huge mountain. A large shimmering lake completely circular in shape, created long ago by an ancient meteorite was nestled up against the cliff. Sitting on the edge of the lake was a large, extravagant-looking structure built in soft curves and iridescent colors. The architecture was different from that of the city, though clearly of the same technology. The blue saucer slowed as it drew closer to the mountain.

"That's the *Dragon Loft!*" Samantha said excitedly as she pointed. Merlin grinned at her enthusiasm as he brought the cargo ship about and headed for a solitary landing pad located out in a lush open field a half mile from the lodge.

Taro engaged a few switches and then spoke over the ship-wide intercom, "Artificial gravity will be disabled in fifteen seconds. In another five minutes we'll be on the ground with full engine shutdown. Welcome to Sillon, ladies and gents."

A moment later, the *Blue Horizon* stopped forward movement above a stone landing pad ringed with flashing lights and began dropping slowly. Merlin lowered the caterpillar landing gear and set his ship gently onto the pad with the slightest of bumps. He and Renny immediately began shutting down systems at their stations. Within moments, only the necessary systems on board were still operational.

When the wolf got out of his harness and stood up, Samantha jumped into his arms and licked his cheek with enthusiasm. "We made it, Merlin," she said with an infectious smile, her wagging tail creating a breeze. "We made it!" Before anyone else had a chance to react, Sam ran out the door into the corridor beyond.

"I think she just *might* be happy to be here," Renny said with a laugh.

Cooped up inside a starship for three months, there was no one who wanted to stay aboard the *Blue Horizon* after she had landed. Even Sparky and Roland were outside the main hatch with their kittens. A transport was currently en route toward them. Renny stretched his arms and legs and had to suppress the urge to get out onto the blue grassy field around them and just flat out *run*. While the adults stayed on the landing pad, Maximillian showed no such restraint and was out wandering around barefoot in the manicured grass, sniffing constantly at the fresh scents that met his nose and gazing up into the clear sky. Having grown up on Quet, the young canine was not used to clean air and a green sky. No one was without a grin or smile; even Patch looked happy. The *Blue Horizon* had made the long journey without trouble and since some of them had not really expected to find a world to land upon when they reached this area of space, everyone was pleased as they could to be on this beautiful planet.

Renny nudged Samantha, who shifted anxiously from foot to foot and asked her, "Is Mister Tristan a collie like you?" Practically everyone turned to stare at the cheetah with amused expressions. "What?" he asked suspiciously at their gazes.

Samantha chuckled and shook her head. "No," she replied, "he's Silloni."

"Is that the Sillon version of the canine species?" he asked innocently.

"You don't even know what the Silloni are?" Pockets asked with a laugh that was shared by the others.

"Never seen one, I suppose," Renny answered, feeling very much the butt of an extended joke.

Samantha leaned on his shoulder and stared into his large eyes. "Then," she said mischievously, "you shall wait until you meet Master Tristan and see for yourself what he is."

"That's what Taro told me on the bridge," the cheetah replied lowly. "I don't think I like that sound of this."

A fat silver tube that was tapered to soft points on both ends approached the landing pad, moving silently a meter above the surface of the grass. It seemed to be molded as a solid structure without seams and, as far as Renny could tell, it had neither doors nor windows to see out of, nor did it make a sound. The tube slowed and stopped beside the group, their reflections staring back at them from its mirrored surface. Then suddenly, an opening appeared in the side closest to them. Renny had blinked and the aperture was just there; he saw nothing actually *open*.

Before anyone could move toward it, a male Border collie stepped out into the morning sunlight. He was dressed in casual attire, though he held his posture as if he were in a business meeting. He smiled at the gathering and took a step toward them.

"Alex!" Samantha said excitedly. She moved through the small crowd and jumped into the newcomer's arms. She licked him quickly on the cheek and then turned him back toward her shipmates, their arms around one another's waists. "Everybody, this is Alex Rogers, a very dear friend of mine."

Alex tilted his head in a short bow and said, "Welcome to Sillon." He glanced again at Samantha and grinned widely. "It is good to see you again, Sammy."

Maximillian rejoined his friends on the landing pad and looked at the newcomer who was obviously friendly to Samantha. He did not say anything, but frowned at the person as if he didn't trust him. Sam introduced everyone to the male collie one at a time, and at the end, Merlin stepped forward to clasp hands with him.

"It's good to see you again, Alex," the wolf said with a smile. "It has been a long trip."

"Well, you can relax now," Alex replied. "Master Tristan has given me instructions to set you up in the best suites at the *Dragon Loft* we have available. You are free to stay as long as you desire, courtesy of Master Tristan and the Silloni government."

"I *like* this kind of hospitality," Durant said from the back of the group as the male collie ushered everyone into the transport.

"Right now, Master Tristan would like to meet with you," Alex said. "You may return to your ship later to retrieve anything you may want to have with you in the lodge."

The inside of the craft was plush in colors of dark burgundy with gray highlights, and despite the apparent solidness of the transport's metal sides, they could see through them to the outside. Transparent metal had long been a dream of the Planetary Alignment, and it seemed as if Sillon had finally tackled the final obstacles of the process to include the material inside.

Alex played the panel at the forward end of the craft as if it was a musical instrument. There was only the faintest *hum* as the door resealed and they slipped quietly away from their freighter. Renny sat in a seat nearest where the door had been and reached out hesitantly to touch the wall. It felt warm, but completely solid, and he studied it critically until he heard someone gasp.

The cheetah looked forward and felt his eyes widen. The design of the lodge was like nothing else he had ever seen in his limited tour around the Planetary Alignment; he was in quiet, respectful awe. The transport stopped near an outcropping of the structure that looked to serve as a covered walkway and once again, the door of the craft just appeared. Alex led everyone out quietly and the group was met by a handful of porters made up of various familiar species.

The male collie hooked arms with Samantha and said to the others, "If you will follow me, Master Tristan will meet with you in the library."

Max moved quickly to Samantha's other side and walked along beside her as the small crowd followed Alex's lead. They passed in through the front doors of the lodge, which were already open and the metallic technology gave away to a different interior world of rich wood and immensely high ceilings. They passed the registration desk and everywhere they looked the place was made of the finest timber polished to shine. They saw crystalline chandeliers hanging from high rafters and soft music could be heard from somewhere down a long carpeted hallway.

The *Blue Horizon* crew approached a set of large double doors looked to be made of rare Hestran *virrin* wood. Alex opened them easily and led everyone inside a large, high-ceiling room filled with antiquated volumes in print from all over the Planetary Alignment and beyond. The collie shut the doors behind the entourage and then moved to a desk in one corner.

"Master," he said after tapping a pad inset into the surface of the desk, "your honored guests are here."

A familiar accented voice replied, "I will be right there, Alex."

Only a few heartbeats had passed before a side door to the library opened up and an impressive figure stepped through. Renny had never seen a Silloni before and the moment that Master Tristan walked through the door would forever be imprinted upon his memory. To the cheetah, it was as if he watched the entrance in extreme slow motion.

First through the door was a *huge* black hoof. The bipedal, digitigrade leg it was attached to was thickly muscular, though hidden beneath a pair of widely-bloused dress slacks tailored for the physique. Renny felt his eyes slowly move ever upward to the thick chest and wide shoulders covered by a slate-gray tunic with a Mandarin collar, and then into a dark equine face. The cheetah's gaze lingered a moment on the deep brown eyes, but then continued on upward to stare with an open mouth at the bone-colored, foot-long spiraled horn that jutted up from the dark head.

"Welcome to the *Dragon Loft*," the black unicorn said with a smile.

DRAGON, WOLF & TIGER

By Ted R. Blasingame

SS Blue Horizon PA1261

Captain's Journal

After three long months, the Blue Horizon has finally made it to the faraway world of Sillon. Along the way, we discovered that the supernova detected by the Planetary Alignment was not a star near our distant sister world, but of one in between. Thankfully, the doomed red giant star designated only as SDC-971 on the charts had no orbiting planets of its own, but the effects of the explosion were strong enough to disrupt all communication between Sillon and the other Alignment worlds.

We have been allowed to land at a country lodge known as the Dragon Loft, which is owned by Samantha's mentor and adopted father, Tristan. A few of my crew have never been to Sillon before and Renny was surprised to discover the species type of the Silloni, having never seen one before. Master Tristan is a magnificent fellow who has always commanded respect everywhere he has been. In his younger days, Tristan was a Silloni Regent, but in his retirement, he is the owner of one of the most extravagant vacationing lodges on the planet.

Along for the ride on this voyage was Roland Carlton, a longtime friend of Sparky's and an occasional hand I have hired onto my crew in the past. They have always been close, and I was approached early in the flight to perform the traditional duty of a Captain and officiate their wedding. The ceremony was simple, but everyone had a good time. Then, as the pregnancy of the feline race is only a few weeks, Sparky gave birth to twin kittens just prior to our arrival on Sillon.

The birth of the kits, and the relief that the Mytha star system and her three inhabited worlds within its Goldilocks Zone still existed, has created a lighthearted mood among my crew. Samantha has been eagerly awaiting the chance to get back together with Master Tristan, and even meeting her childhood friend Alex Rogers was good for her. All seems well, and a week's stay at the Dragon Loft before returning home will do wonders for us after the long voyage.

Merlin Sinclair, Captain

"Welcome to the Dragon Loft," the black unicorn said with a smile.

The large male before them stood nearly seven feet tall from hoof to head and his gleaming white, spiraled horn protruded another foot higher. This would explain the high ceilings of the place. Although his digitigrade feet ended in large hooves, each of his great hands possessed four fingers and a thumb and they were all spread out in welcome.

Samantha's face barely contained her wide grin as she rushed forward and practically threw herself into Tristan's arms. The grown woman was as a child in those massive arms.

When she looked up at him, her blue eyes were brimming with happy tears. "I am *so* happy to see you, Master!" she said in a choked voice.

The Silloni looked down at her and gave her a warm smile. "I am glad to be seen by you, my little collie." He gave her a tight hug for a moment and then released her to turn toward the others. "Captain Sinclair," he said to the wolf in his thick accent, "your journey has been a long one, and from what I understand, an uncertain one. You know now that Sillon has been in no danger of catastrophe and you can do much for us by telling the rest of the Planetary Alignment of our continued existence."

Merlin took a step toward him and gave him a short bow of courtesy. "Yes, sir, that is our intent. We appreciate your offer to stay at the *Dragon Loft* to rest up before our return journey. However, before we leave, we will need to record a small news conference with someone in authority to take back to broadcast to the rest of the Planetary Alignment."

"Ah yes, the masses must always know the news," Tristan replied. He looked over to Alex and said, "Please have Sir Hirotake join us, please."

"Yes, sir," the male collie answered.

"Alex has set aside our best suites for your stay," Tristan said to his guests after Alex had left the library. "This is our slow season and there are not many patrons here presently, so all of the benefits of our resort are at your service without many others to bother you."

Samantha beamed at him and then she drew the crowd away to the registration desk so they could get their room assignments. Only Renny stayed by the wolf's side, mesmerized by the huge mythological being dominating the room.

Tristan nodded to Merlin. "It is good to see you again, Captain Sinclair," he said. "You have always taken care of my Samantha, even before she coaxed us both let her travel the stars at your side."

Merlin smiled at the unicorn. He had always liked Tristan. For someone who had once been Sillon's Regent, Tristan was easy to talk to, despite his natural regal bearing. "I enjoy having her along," the wolf replied in a quiet voice so it wouldn't carry, "but even after six years, I *still* think as the major shareholder of Holden Pharmaceutical, she should be in a plush office somewhere, helping to guide the direction of her father's company."

"When Derek Holden died and left Samantha in my care as her legal guardian, I swore I would let her live the life she wanted within her means," Tristan replied with a smile and a wink toward the Border collie. "That she chose to spend her time traveling with you, rather than warming an office seat, was her own choice... A choice I would not allow even my own daughter."

"This is my first time at the *Dragon Loft*," Merlin said with an appreciative eye toward the volumes of books in the room. "You've done well in your retirement."

"Thank you, Captain. I do rather enjoy it here."

Samantha and some of the others wandered back over to them, all chattering away at one another. After months of uncertainty cooped up in a flying saucer, they were all excited.

"Mr. Tristan, sir," Renny asked quietly. "May I ask you a question?"

"Certainly."

"Samantha told me her hometown was on Alexandrius," the cheetah said with a tentative look toward the collie. "How did someone from a faraway world like Sillon become her legal guardian?" Samantha's smile never wavered and she nodded her permission for the unicorn to answer.

"There really is no mystery about it, my friend," Tristan replied. "Our families have been close since before she was born. Samantha's grandsire used to bring his family to Sillon

every few years for vacations when her father Derek was a lad. The friendship of our families grew each time we were together, but there was a time when my infant daughter, Laura had become deathly ill. There was no cure on Sillon for what she had, but Derek Holden, a chemist and pharmaceutical doctor at the time, recognized the symptoms for what the Planetary Alignment knew as *Altac Syndrome*. Always prepared, even on vacation, he carried a vast array of medicines with him. He did not know if the medication for Altac Syndrome would work on my species, but at my behest, Laura was given the treatment. Fortunately for us all, her illness decreased and was eventually eradicated from her body. It was at this time that I swore to him that my appreciation knew no bounds, and that I was forever in his debt."

Tristan saw the sad look that crossed Samantha's features and he knew what thoughts she must have been having. "Four years later, Derek and Amy Holden died in an accident here on Sillon that left their only child parentless. I had to fight the Alexandrian authorities to get custody of her, but I was Regent at the time and eventually won guardianship over her when they realized I could provide a better life for her than anyone else on Alexandrius. From then until the time she became an adult, I raised her as my own daughter."

Renny looked over to Samantha and exchanged friendly glances. "Wow..." was all he could say as the rest of the group remained quiet.

The door to the room opened and Alex walked in with a second impressive individual. Renny felt his jaw dropping again and Merlin reached over to push it shut for him. Trailing the collie was someone every bit as tall as Tristan, though much broader in the shoulders. His garments fit him snugly as if he were about to burst the seams and he held himself with an important air. Renny had never seen any of the Ryuji before and memories of the mythical *dragon* species from children's storybooks came unbidden.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Alex announced, "this is Sir Hirotaka Ahra, our Regent's official representative. Sir Hirotaka, may I introduce to you Merlin Sinclair, captain of the cargo vessel, *Blue Horizon*."

Sir Hirotaka strode forward and extended a large blue-gray hand toward the standing wolf, "Thank you for coming, Captain," the dragon said in a voice so deep as to almost rumble. His leathery eyelids crinkled in amusement as he glanced over the faces of the others when Merlin's smaller hand disappeared into his own.

"We are honored to meet you, Sir Ahra," the wolf said with a slight bow.

"Please," the blue dragon said, "you may call me *Hirotaka*."

"Yes, sir," Merlin acknowledged. He then turned and introduced each of his crew to both Tristan and the official.

Hirotaka dipped his horned head toward Sparky and Roland and studied their infants with a smile. "It is always nice to see children, however small," he said. "My congratulations to you both."

"Thank you, sir," Roland replied with a gulp.

"Excuse me, sir?"

Hirotaka turned to face the cheetah who looked at him curiously. "Yes, Mr. Thornton?"

"Please forgive me for staring, but I've never seen anyone of your race before," Renny said. "Would you mind if I asked a personal question?"

"Renny, don't!" Taro whispered.

The dragon stood up fully and crossed his arms in a guarded stance. "A *personal* question, is it? Ask your question and I will decide how personal it will be to me," he said with the neutral expression of a politician.

"Well, sir, I was wondering... do you have wings?"

Hiroataka tilted his head to the left and smiled widely, showing a full set of long, razor-sharp teeth. "There is nothing personal about your question, Mr. Thornton," he replied. "Without any knowledge of my race, I see no reason why you would know anything about us." He uncrossed his arms and let them rest at his sides. "In answer to your curiosity, I do not have wings. I am the male of my species. Only the female Ryuji have wings."

The dragon shook his head and glanced back toward Tristan. "I have heard tales brought back from your part of the galaxy where species such as ours were in your ancient legends. We have no way of knowing if there is any relation to those creatures and ourselves, but there *are* genetic ties to the humans of Earth just as there are with your own worlds. All we know for certain is that we are us."

Renny smiled and nodded his head. "For satisfying my curiosity, thank you, sir."

"May I ask a question of my own?" Merlin said to him. "This one is not as personal."

The dragon tilted his head again and just waved a hand in acceptance.

"Thank you," Merlin said. "You are from the nearby planet Ryu, but yet you are the official representative of the Silloni government. How is this possible?"

The dragon looked pleased at the political question. "I am Ryuji by species, but my great-parents were immigrants to Sillon. I am second generation Sillon-born Ryuji, and a native of this world."

"Where is planet Ryu?" Renny asked. "I've never heard of it."

It was Samantha who answered. "Ryu is one of three planets in the habitable zone of this star system, Renny, though Sillon is the only one actually a part of the Planetary Alignment. As with all of Terra's former colonies, the other two worlds were seeded by Earth's furmen explorers, but resentment at being abandoned for so long prevents them from joining the PA."

"Oh."

Sir Hiroataka clasped his hands behind him. "Now that the introductions have been fulfilled," he said, "it is time we got down to business." He motioned toward Tristan and continued, "No doubt my associate here has told you that for the past two months we have been constructing a large relay satellite to be launched and deployed at a determined location just outside the perimeter of the SDC-971 supernova. This will enable Sillon to resume communication with the rest of the Planetary Alignment, as it was before the star discourteously disrupted all avenues of transmission in that area."

"Yes, sir," Merlin replied. "We are aware of this."

"What you are probably *not* aware of is that while the satellite has been completed, we will have no launch vessel ready to deploy it for another two months. All of the vessels that could handle such an operation are involved in a separate matter of state and cannot be spared."

"I see..." the wolf said with an idea of where the conversation was heading.

"I have been authorized to hire you and your vessel, Captain, to take on our satellite as your cargo, and to deploy it at specific coordinates on your return trip to the Planetary Alignment."

Merlin nodded in understanding. His guess had been correct. "Is the deployment something that can be done by my crew, or will it require specialists to fly with us?"

"The young canine with you could launch it by himself, if necessary," the dragon answered. "Once the satellite is in position, all you need do is initiate the onboard system and its programming will take care of the rest, including automatic alignment with the PA communication net and a test signal in both directions."

"Then I am sure," Merlin told him, "that we can arrange a fair deal. My ship is at your service."

"The Silloni government will be most grateful of your efforts, Captain."

Silent and unseen, a large cloaked vessel quietly orbited the green world of Sillon. On the bridge of the *Hammerdine*-class starship, Captain Natasha Khasho stood in front of the holographic representation of the planet, her arms crossed and her expression compassionate.

"Well, Jazz," she said to her communications officer, "there it is — your homeworld."

A white Silloni filly got up from her station and approached the display. Her eyes were bright, but her expression was neutral. "Thank you, Captain," she said softly. "I know our long-range sensors had detected it was not BAE-6410 that went supernova that the news reports theorized, but I had to see that Sillon was unharmed with my own eyes."

Natasha walked over to her and put a hand on the unicorn's shoulder. "You've never told me why you left Sillon, you know," she said quietly, "but that's your story to tell to those you wish. You have served me well and I didn't mind the Vault out here. The crew could use a little R&R and your world is a nice place to give it to them."

"You know the *Blue Horizon* is down there," Jazz reminded her. "Certain members of our crew are known to them."

"And what of it?" the tall vixen replied. "I don't intend to contact them while we're here and we have an entire world in which to play."

"Let's land on the far side of the planet, as far away from them as we can just to be on the safe side."

Natasha listened to the tone of her officer's voice and tilted her head a little. "What is it you fear from the *Blue Horizon*?" she asked bluntly. "If you think there's a *danger*, I want to know why."

Jazz looked up into the vixen's eyes and stated, "There is no danger to the *Lady of Dreams*, Captain. I only wish to avoid a chance meeting." She lowered her eyes and her voice and added, "It has to do with my past... and the reason why I left home."

Captain Natasha nodded and decided to drop the matter. "Very well, then. Recommend a good place for R&R on your world and we'll go with your suggestion to steer clear of the *Blue Horizon*, or whoever it is in their crew you wish to avoid."

Jazz tapped in a set of coordinates into her terminal and the holographic display zeroed in on a location near the equator of the planet. The computer interfaced with the Silloni information net and began to display relative data and images of the region. Natasha nodded in satisfaction and gave the Silloni a smile.

"Looks like a perfect place to relax," she said.

Behind them, a door hissed open and the sound of soft steps filled the bridge. It was common to hear that, but the Silloni girl turned anyway to greet it.

A little gray mouse boy entered the bridge with coils of cable running down his limbs through bands of metal above his major joints. His left eye was covered in a dark red glass that kept out bright light that might further harm his damaged retina. The endosuit around him had been a wonder of Natasha's engineering department, allowing young Tim to walk again after a vicious attack by Sagan upon their own ship had crippled him and nearly taken his life. Control and strength in his arms and legs had been weakened with the sharp blow to the head the jaguar had given him, and without the help of the endosuit, he couldn't produce enough energy

to move at more than a caterpillar's pace. The sensitive pads lining the insides of the metal bands responded to flexed muscles and moved him how he needed to move. He was growing stronger in physical therapy, but would still need several more years to recover even the meek strength of what he'd had even at the age of ten.

Sagan's unexpected appearance resulted in near-fatal injuries on three of Natasha's crew, but none had hit home more than that of the young mouse. Despite their best efforts to thwart him, Sagan had escaped with some of her technology still in development, and for all his crimes, the vixen had vowed to skin him alive if she ever caught him. The medical team on the *Lady of Dreams* was able to save Tim's life, but some of his motor functions would likely need help for the rest of his life.

"I'm ready, ma'am," Tim said. Natasha started toward him, but Jazz caught her arm.

"I'll do it this time, ma'am," she volunteered with a smile. Tim's face lit up at the thought, and in a single, smooth movement, the Silloni girl swooped him up into her arms to take him down to the clinic for his physical therapy.

The *Blue Horizon* gently set down on the metallic landing pad of the Wathradrim warehouse and before the engines were fully powered down, a Silloni team was already on the move toward the freighter to load its specialized cargo.

The *Palace of Mists* had presented an official recorded speech by Sillon's current Regent for Captain Sinclair to return for them. The remaining supplies stored in the hold had to be split up and moved to the sides so they could load up the large relay satellite that the *Blue Horizon* had just been hired to deploy for them on their return flight. However, Merlin's crew had been granted a week's vacation at the *Dragon Loft*, so once the satellite was secure on board, they would be returning to Tristan's lodge.

Durant took charge as the satellite was weighed, loaded and then lifted from the deck of the hold with the overhead crane for suspended storage. As there was nothing else for the rest of the crew to do at this time, they all busied themselves until they could return to the lodge. Tanis hid away in Sickbay, sterilizing all his equipment. Patch ambled off to the engine room, though his brother remained to exchange jokes with Samantha. Taro and Merlin talked quietly between themselves near the cargo bay door and Renny had wandered a small distance away from the ship to chat idly with a few of the Silloni workers who had brought in their cargo. Sparky and Roland had remained behind at the lodge to care for their infants.

Although Maximillian had been with the *Blue Horizon* crew for nearly four months, he was still a bit shy around newcomers and stayed in the shadows away from the Silloni. He had spent a lot of his free time on board hovering around Samantha or Merlin, and found good friends in them both. Because of his time as a slave on Quet, he had a lot of experience in the kitchen and he had also become a regular sight in the galley as he watched and helped Sparky prepare meals for the crew. He was still fairly much a slave in his thoughts, even if he had been given his freedom, but it was a lifelong mindset he found hard to set aside.

Samantha found him sitting with crossed legs behind a box and tapped him on the top of his head. The canine youth looked up at her and smiled warmly. "Merlin says we should be finished here in about twenty minutes. Want to go with me to find some snacks?"

"Yeah!" Max replied with interest. He jumped to his feet and followed her out of the cargo bay.

Three days later, Renny walked into the plush dining room of the lodge, wondering what new dish he would be prompted to try this time. In the time since they had been there, he had sampled various meals that he had never tried before. The two main chefs of the place had encountered him on the veranda the first day and stopped to have him settle an argument on a particular dish each had concocted on his own. While his taste-test had pleased the poodle Francois, it had only angered the Manx cat named Pierre. Shortly thereafter, Pierre found him and presented him with a different dish to try, which the cheetah had found delicious.

Haughtily pleased, the Manx had left him to gloat to his colleague of his triumph. Two hours later, Francois cornered Renny again with another new dish to try. If it were not for the cheetah's metabolism, he might have gained some weight over the next few days, but it seemed as if the two chefs were determined to out-do one another, with Renny's taste buds as the judge.

Normally, such attention would have been bothersome to him, but with Renny's appetite, he had begun to look forward to his encounters with the gourmet pair. He had told Sparky of the situation and she had laughed. Pierre and Francois had been chefs together at the *Dragon Loft* for nearly a decade and they had gotten more competitive as time went on. She had once engaged in a cooking contest with them on a past visit, and had surprisingly won the judges' preference. Tristan had tried to hire her on the spot, but while deeply flattered, she declined in order to remain with the *Blue Horizon*.

"Don't wave your ladle at me, you saucy-mouthed wiper of other peoples' bottoms!" Francois snapped, hands on hips as he leaned forward to face the Manx cat before him.

"As if you had one whit of intelligence or culinary ability to tell a ladle from a spoon!" Pierre snarled back, tossing the metal utensil at the poodle. "Your spices are too weak and your sweeteners too strong, fluffy boy!"

The poodle drew back, his face a mask of shock and offense, "How dare you address me like zat, waving your flapping arms around like a freakish slinger of grease burgers! I was the chef of diplomats and presidents when you were wiping your nose on tablecloths!"

"That's right, and when your dentures fall out into the soup tonight, how will you cover that?"

"You think yourself a chef! You are a common *cook! En garde!*"

Suddenly the Manx found himself being chased by a livid poodle with a rolling pin. He backed instinctively, reaching for a weapon. His fingers found purchase on a stem protruding from a thick, hefty local vegetable and he brought it to bear as a club.

The poodle slashed out with the wooden weapon, and his adversary parried with the flat of the *hantsu* root, spinning him off balance and sending the canine careening into a cupboard. The poodle snarled, taking a handful of spice and throwing it with a flash into Pierre's face. The Manx howled in shock and a fluster of cinnamon in his face before launching himself onto the poodle. The two chefs slammed to the kitchen floor, struggling on the black and white tiles.

Pierre found the upper hand quickly, and reached for a tray of condiments. With a master's touch, he garnished Francois' nose and lips with honey mustard. Francois *hated* honey mustard.

And so it went. Flashes of metal utensils and hurled vegetables created a domestic combat zone.

Renny moved through the dining room and noticed that other patrons were animated with an excited buzz of conversation. He could not make out exactly what was being said and it was not his normal practice to eavesdrop, but he was suddenly curious as to what was going on. He found what had become his usual table near the kitchen and sat down in his chair to see what would happen next.

Ten minutes passed before he began to wonder if he were going to be waited on. No one had brought him a menu, a drink or even tableware. He folded his hands together on top of the table and continued to wait.

Another ten minutes. Still no waiter. The cheetah was getting impatient, so he got up and moved toward the closest table with customers. He approached one of the dragon-men from Ryu who was seated with a brawny tiger and a slender wolf.

"Excuse me," he said as he stopped beside the table. "Have you seen any of the wait staff recently?"

The wolf looked up at him with an amused expression. "I don't think you'll get served any time soon," he said. "The chefs had a fight back in the kitchen a bit ago and the waiters went to break it up."

"And everyone's still back there watching the argument?"

"No," the dragon said in a deep voice, "the fight was physical and one of them got hurt." He smiled a toothy grin and shook his head. "The Master of this place was called in and all the employees were marched out for an interrogation. From the look on the Silloni's face, I'd say someone's head is gonna roll."

Renny looked at him and sighed. "Who served your meals if all the employees were taken away?"

"Some little lynx who was nursing her kittens," the tiger replied. "Master Tristan asked her to watch things while he took care of his people. The woman's mate took the kits away when she headed for the kitchen, but she's not been out recently."

"That would be my friend, Sparky," Renny replied. "Thanks, guys. I'll go see if she needs some help." As the cheetah walked away, he had the vague impression that he knew those three from somewhere, but all thoughts on the trio vanished when Sparky emerged from the kitchen wearing her old familiar smiling kitty apron.

Her eyes lit up when she saw him. "I'm so glad to see you," she said. "Would you find Merlin and tell him that I need to talk to him?"

"Sure, Sparky," Renny replied. "Anything specific I should tell him?" The lynx hesitated as if she were going to say something, but then just shook her head.

"Okay, I'll see if I can find him," Renny said.

"Thanks, I appreciate it."

"Before I go," the cheetah added, "can I put in my order? I've not had any breakfast yet."

"Patch, there's *nothing wrong* with the engines," Pockets told his brother's feet, which were protruding from an open access panel. "Merlin said we were going to be here for a couple weeks of vacation instead of just one, so why don't you just relax?"

"Pockets..." said a muffled voice from the panel, "There is a twitch in our LightDrive accelerator unit that I want to take care of while we're in down-time. I haven't got time for a vacation."

"You can't do that without me, and I don't wanna be stuck inside the engine when I have a whole world to play in!"

"Then program Moss to watch the indicators for me and then git..."

"Moss can't tell you what the numbers are."

"Can it let me know when they get to a certain range through my slateboard?"

"Uhm, yeah, it can."

"Well then...?"

Pockets frowned and stuck his hands inside one of his many shirt pockets. He pulled out a small remote and tapped a tracer code onto its small panel. It would call the mobile sentry sensor to his location. "Okay, I'll program the dang thing for you."

"Good. Now, crawl into the other access tunnel tell me what the reading is on the RB gauge while we're waiting for your pie plate to arrive."

Merlin and Renny entered the dining room that was now clear of patrons. It had taken the cheetah a little while to locate the captain and he quietly hoped Sparky might have a warm meal for him. The pair went straight for the kitchen and was surprised to find Sparky and Max working together on a rather involved recipe.

"One quarter cup of ground *hantsu* root?" the young canine queried.

"Aye, it's that big meaty-looking vegetable over there, the purple one."

"It looks damaged."

"It'll do, Max. Just cut off the bruised end and grind off what you need from the middle."

"Sparky?" the captain asked curiously.

The lynx looked up and smiled at her friend. She had a spot of flour on her nose, which she tried to wipe away with a paw, but she only managed to smear the powder into her fur. "Hi, Merlin," she said, snaring a countertop rag and to wipe her hands on.

She looked over at Max and said in a quiet voice, "Dear, forget the *hantsu* root for now and get Renny's breakfast for him out of the number three oven, please. I need a moment alone with the Captain."

"Okay," the canine youth answered. He headed to one of the kitchen's massive ovens and pulled out a tray of warm food with insulated mitts. He and the cheetah left the room and then Sparky turned toward the wolf.

"What can I do for the mommy?" Merlin asked with a smile.

Sparky led him to a couple of counter stools and they sat down on them. "Merlin, I..." She hesitated and then began again. "Merlin, I don't know how to tell you this other than outright, but Tristan has offered me a job here at the *Dragon Loft* as his chief chef."

"I'm not surprised he's trying that again," the captain replied with a nod. "He tried to lure you away from me on our last visit here. You *are* a great chef, Sparky."

"Thanks," she said, but her smile appeared to the wolf as a bit sad. "The situation is different this time, Captain. Tristan has just fired Pierre and Francois and he needs a chef to attend the needs of his patrons."

"And you want the job?" Merlin asked with a neutral expression.

"Now that Roland and I have the kittens to rear, it might be a good idea."

"A starship cabin is not really an ideal place to raise children," the captain agreed.

"Tristan has offered me a good salary, a place to live, and even has a job for Roland."

"What of the *Blue Horizon*?" Merlin asked. "I won't be able to hire anyone to take your place until we get back to the other Planetary Alignment worlds, and three months is a long time to go without a cook."

"I understand there are two chefs in the area looking for a job," the lynx replied with a sparkle of mischief in her eyes. When Merlin did not return her smile, she shrugged her shoulders. "I've spent recent months teaching Max a lot of my recipes and have given him notes on everyone's tastes and preferences. He's already had a lot of kitchen experience on *Quiet*." She looked away and added, "I had him prepare a good amount of everyone's meals on our long voyage out here to Sillon, just in case something like this came up due to our kits."

"He's a bit young for that kind of responsibility," Merlin countered, "but I suppose he can fill in until I can hire someone else."

Sparky grinned and shook her head. "In the three months it'll take you to get back to the PA, I doubt you'll want to hire anyone else. Max has the aptitude to be a good cook. Besides, he will be sixteen years old next month. He's still young, but old enough for responsibility."

"Sixteen?" Merlin repeated with wide eyes. He smiled and crossed his arms. "I keep forgetting he's short for his age. I often think of him as a thirteen or fourteen year old..."

The lynx leaned forward and put a hand on his arm. "You need to treat him older than that, Merlin. He deserves the chance."

"Yes, you're right," he replied. Merlin fell silent for a few moments and then looked at her warmly. "I had a gut feeling I might lose you soon when you asked me to perform your wedding. You've been with us since the beginning; the ship will be empty without you."

Sparky moved over to him, wrapped her arms around his middle and laid her head on his chest. "You've always been good to me, Merlin. I'll miss you, too."

The captain held her a moment and then gently pushed her away so he could look into her face. "I'll have Durant draw up a nice severance pay for you, and although Tristan has already expressed his desire to hire you, I'll work up a nice reference letter, too."

"Thank you, Merlin," she said warmly. "You're the best."

Samantha sat with her legs crossed on the lush carpeted floor at the feet of her Master, her heart at peace and her mind feeling years younger. She and Tristan had been catching up on events of the past few years and had reached a lull in the conversation. They were in his private study with the windows open to a cool breeze and the evening light of the sun peeking around the edge of the mountain cliff.

"Samantha," Tristan said in his accented, deep voice, "in all your travels around the worlds, have you seen my Laura?"

"Laura?" the collie asked in surprise, referring to the unicorn's eldest daughter. "I would not have looked for her to be anywhere but on Sillon."

Tristan's expression became sad. "She and her mother had a disagreement two years ago concerning her career future. The evening ended with my daughter in open rebellion and she slipped away in the night. We have not seen her since. Guinevere and I have been worried that she has done something rash."

Samantha swallowed. She and Laura had been raised together as sisters. "Oh, no... What disagreement could be so bad to prompt her to leave?"

Tristan hesitated a moment before answering. "She wanted to serve on a starship... just as you have done. She had been canvassing various freighters and military vessels that came to Sillon in hopes of finding an appropriate one to dedicate herself to, but could find no luck. She had all but resigned herself to the idea that she would never find one she liked. Then, suddenly, she wanted to leave. She did not tell us where, why or how, just that she had to go soon. It was odd and unlike her to do anything impetuous, but she insisted on leaving within two days. Guinevere wanted her here on Sillon to start her own family, not out in the galaxy where pirates or the void of space might endanger her."

"Surely you have resources to search for her," Samantha said quietly.

"That I have," her master replied, "but my influence is not what it used to be and does not go beyond Sillon herself. I even had Hiroataka do a search for her on Ryu, but there has been no sign of her there either. I suspect she's out in the Planetary Alignment somewhere, likely traveling under an assumed name."

The canine shook her head slowly. "No, I'm sorry, Master," she said in a quiet voice. "I haven't seen her in my travels, but now that I know she's out there, I will use my own contacts to see if I can locate her; there can't be many white unicorn fillies out in the public eye "

"Thank you, my little collie. I know you will find her for us."

Taro felt a gentle rocking of her shoulder and she came awake immediately. She had been resting in a hammock on the veranda of the lodge and had dozed off in the warm sunlight. She opened her orange eyes and looked up into the face of a tiger dressed in denim khakis and desert hiking boots.

"Yes?" Taro responded curiously.

"Are you the captain of that freighter?" the feline asked her, a muscular arm raised with a finger pointing out across the manicured field to the landing pad.

Taro shook her head. "No, but I am her first officer."

The tiger knelt down beside the hammock and introduced himself. "My name is Carsen Vetter and I play bass in—"

"*Dragon, Wolf & Tiger*," Taro answered for him. "I saw you in the pool a couple of days ago. One of my crewmates has most of your music."

Vetter smiled and nodded his head. "We're here on an extended working vacation, but it's time to head back to Kantus to start recording a new album of songs we've written while here."

"So what can I do for you?" Taro asked with an interested smile, wondering if it would be appropriate to ask the tiger to sit with her.

"Word has gotten out that the Planetary Alignment doesn't think Sillon survived a supernova," the tiger replied. "Because of this, we believe our return transport was never sent to retrieve us. We have very unforgiving deadlines and need a ride home."

Taro nodded in understanding and replied, "As you have noticed, the *Blue Horizon* is a freighter. We don't normally take on passengers, but perhaps we can work out something with Captain Sinclair."

"I would appreciate it if you would introduce me to him."

"Certainly."

Ivy "Sparky" Carlton was all smiles. The crew of the *Blue Horizon* was gathered in a sectioned off area of the dining room for a private party. Merlin had not yet revealed her decision to stay on Sillon to anyone else. She would make the announcement herself, but only after making a certain long-promised presentation to her shipmates. She stood at the head of the table, wearing her familiar smiling kitty apron. Maximillian stood beside her, wearing a similar white apron of his own adorned with a drooling cartoon canine holding a knife and fork. He seemed just as pleased as she was about their presentation.

"My friends," the lynx said to those seated before her, "I have a special treat for you tonight. You've heard me talk about my favorite meal many times, though I've never been able to prepare it for you due to conditions required for its making."

"Uh, oh..." Pockets said with a grin. "I know what *this* is..."

Sparky laughed. "Yes, I suppose you all do." She turned to Max and nodded to him. "Go ahead and bring it out."

"At once!" the youth said with a large smile. He turned and disappeared through the door into the kitchen.

"Is this that explosive recipe of yours?" Renny asked with a smirk.

Sparky nodded as Max came back into the room pushing a metal cart with a large covered dish on it. "My friends" she said, "we give to you... the *Fynian Wonder Meal!*"

She took the top off the dish and immediately the air was filled with such an aroma that it set saliva glands to working. Inside the dish was a type of casserole that was the stuff of legends.

Samantha tilted her head up to sniff the air and gaze into the dish. She wondered how this meal would appeal to the carnivorous and vegetarian appetites alike, but she had to admit it smelled wonderful.

"Max and I have spent the afternoon working on this," the feline cook said as she dipped a large ladle into the mix. "Tristan's chefs had all the right ingredients, though I doubt either of them has ever made *this!*"

"You've been promising this thing for so long," Patch said with an amused grumble, "it *better* be good."

Sparky caught the smiling glint in his eyes and put her hands on her hips. "If this isn't to your liking, Patch, I'll gift you a box of the finest cigars on Sillon."

"Deal!" Chuckles moved through the crowd as Max began to deliver filled plates to each one present. Of those seated around the table, only Durant had actually eaten the Fynian Wonder Meal before. Merlin glanced over at him and saw the look of anticipation in the bear's eyes. He grinned at the sight, knowing it must be good for his load master to look thus.

He picked up a large spoon beside his plate and then picked up a small portion of the food. Tentatively, he put the spoon in his mouth and then closed his eyes. At once, several complimenting flavors tickled his taste buds and he opened his eyes wide. It was unlike

anything else he had ever eaten before, but he found the sudden urge to eat more. This was *good!*

A half hour later, there were looks of contentment on every face in the room. Not even Patch could find fault in the meal, knowing he'd not get those cigars, but he was now serenely well-fed.

Sparky leaned toward the wolf beside her and gave him a proud smile. "Now, do you agree that this was the best meal you've ever had?"

The captain grinned at her and nodded. "Sparky, you have outdone yourself," he said. "Tristan's getting a grand chef in you."

Taro looked up from her quiet conversation with Tanis and said, "What was that?" Merlin looked surprised at his slip and he glanced over at the lynx with a facial apology. She shook her head that it was okay and looked at the fox.

"I was just about to make an announcement and hoped a good meal would temper your reactions," she said quietly. "I'm staying on Sillon as Master Tristan's chief chef."

"Aw, no!" Pockets whined. "This is a joke, right?"

Roland had been sitting quietly at his mate's right, but he spoke up and answered the question for her. "No," he said in his raspy voice, "this is no joke. We have kittens to raise now and this is an ideal place for it."

"You couldn't have picked a better place," Samantha said with a smile, though her eyes were quickly growing moist at the thought of losing her friend's presence.

"Tristan canned his two combative chefs," Roland added, "and then offered her the position of chief chef, with a job for myself as well."

Durant set his drink glass down a little too hard, but made no effort to apologize. He had expected something like this ever since the wedding, but it was still a shock to him to be losing the one he had considered his best friend.

Sparky shook her head sadly at the faces staring back at her. "Merlin and I have already discussed this," she said, "and he's given us his blessing. I have a family now that needs a stable environment to grow in."

"We... I'll... miss you, Sparky," Pocket said in a quiet voice barely above a whisper.

"I'll miss you, too, Pockets," she replied. "I'll miss *all* of you. I've had seven good years on board the *Blue Horizon* and I have lots of wonderful memories, but now my place is here... with my family."

Tanis cleared his throat and then stood up. He effected a fancy bow in her direction and said, "It is been a pleasure knowing ya, ma'am. May all yer dreams and wishes come true for ya and Roland."

"Thank you, Tanis," Sparky replied. "That means a lot to us."

Brand Arkram was huge. A mass of thick muscle and coiled energy that seemed to move like a luxury liner as the red dragon sat behind an extensive set of electronic drums splayed out in a semicircle before him. A graveyard of broken drumsticks sprawled helter-skelter about him on the floor. To his immediate left, a slender gray wolf dressed wholly in black tapped at white keys, his ears buried beneath a pair of thick gray headphones. Music thundered through the studio like a tempest, splashing against the carpeted walls and shaking the whole room with its might. A nearby device spooled out an aggressive bass line that each of the musicians played in time to. No specific notes or design; just a jam session to vent energy.

This was Adam Singlebet's private sanctuary on Sillon, where the keyboardist kept a small studio for sketching. The trio had retired to the planet on a vacation following their longest tour yet. Singlebet and Arkram had brought their wives with them, but the women had decided to stay on when the boys departed on their own to Kantus for their recording sessions. Vetter, the unmarried member of the trio, had been lecturing on art and musical theory at the local college a hundred miles to the north.

The studio door opened a crack and Vetter entered. The two other performers slowly wound down their playing and Brand shut off the bass with a precisely hurled drumstick.

"Good news, compadres. We have a ride home," the tiger chirped.

"And there was much rejoicing," Adam replied.

"Yaaaay," Brand replied, dully and without enthusiasm.

"So what did we get?" Adam asked with interest.

"The *Blue Horizon*, a common freighter that's bound right where we want to go," Vetter replied.

"*Blue Horizon*?" Brand added, cocking an eyebrow. "Sounds generic enough."

"Any port in a storm," Vetter added. "I was kind of surprised that they weren't booked already, considering the lack of transport on or off this world."

"I hope they've got a good cargo capacity," Adam replied, indicating the studio and all its equipment. "We've got a lot of stuff to carry."

"Well, it *is* a cargo ship," the tiger responded, "but the first officer Nichols told me they've been hired to deploy a relay satellite for Sillon out near the supernova that caused all the trouble. The thing is already loaded and hanging over the rest of the cargo bay from a crane."

"Are we going to have to sleep in the hold beneath it?" Brand asked dryly. "It might get hard to breathe without air in the hold when they launch that thing."

"Nichols told me they would probably quarter us on their recreational deck since they don't have any available passenger cabins, but she suggested we should pack our things for storage in the hold in vacuum-rated containers."

Merlin looked out across the crowd at the faces of those gathered in the dining area of the *Dragon Loft* and lapped up some of his drink from a wide-mouth mug. Tristan had arranged a quiet farewell party for the *Blue Horizon's* crew and anyone remotely acquainted with them was there. Although the band had not been hired to play during the gathering, Adam Singlebet sat in a corner of the room, playing softly on a small personal keyboard he carried with him everywhere, even though the rest of his equipment was already loaded into the ship's hold. Being a musician himself, Patch sat nearby watching the master work wonders on a travel-size instrument.

As to be expected, Samantha hovered near Tristan and his wife, Guinevere, a white mare dressed in a gold dress and a matching ribbon laced around her spiraling horn. Alex Rogers stood with them, taking an active part in their conversation. The Border collie had known Samantha since their childhood days on Alexandrius and had long held a crush on her. Unfortunately for him, she had always treated him more like a brother than a close friend, which was a private source of frustration to him. Nonetheless, he enjoyed visiting with her and had spent as much time with her as she would allow during their stay. The Silloni couple's

three younger children were at the punch bowl with Maximillian, watching Tanis perform a few simple magic tricks with various pieces of fruit from the table.

Taro and Pockets were having an animated conversation with Roland about his new duties as head groundskeeper for the lodge, and Durant was nearby with Sparky, seated at a table and talking in quiet voices. The bear was really going to miss his best friend and the two of them reminisced over shared memories. The kittens were in the care of the lodge daycare center, so the feline parents would have time to say their farewells without distraction.

Renny and Carsen Vetter discussed females over their drinks and Brand sat to the side with Sir Hiroataka, conversing quietly in the language of their species.

The lupine captain finished his drink and then walked to those gathered around Tristan. He had spent time with Sparky and Roland and they had said their good-byes, and had then watched each member of his crew visit with them one by one during the party. He noted the lulls in the conversations and figured it was time to wind everything down.

"Master Tristan," he said with a slight bow of respect, "thank you for your hospitality during our stay. We've enjoyed our vacation here, but it's time we prepared for our journey to Kantus."

"Captain Sinclair," the large black unicorn replied, "you have honored our world with your voyage of service, but most of all, you allowed us the opportunity to see our Samantha again."

Merlin smiled. "As you know, Samantha was the reason we came, but now we have to be on our way to complete our task. We have your satellite to deploy and once it is in place, I would imagine that Sam will be in constant contact with the *Interstellar News Network* with a full report on our journey."

Guinevere stepped forward and clasped hands with the wolf. "Merlin," she said in a soft voice, "take care of yourselves and come back to see us any time you have the opportunity."

"We will," the captain said with a smile toward Samantha, "you can be assured we will."

"Then fare you well," the mare said with a nod of her head, "and have a safe journey."

Merlin glanced over his pre-flight checklist and mused about their voyage. He was ready to get back into space and into the old habits of a voyage. Granted, things were unlikely to be more exciting than the excursions he had experienced on Sillon. An archaeological jaunt days earlier had taken him to a valley of wind-carved rocks that were shaped like some titanic ribcage, though he actually liked routine and he enjoyed time on his vessel. After launch, their first priority would be the one-month journey to specific coordinates to set up the Silloni relay satellite a good distance from the supernova. They had been paid generously for the service and Merlin had given bonuses to his returning crew from the bounty.

Their supplies were fully stocked for the long return voyage and they were less than a half-hour away from launch. Patch was making last-minute adjustments to the LC engines and Pockets was currently on the bridge to monitor the changes on panel readings.

Due to their limited bed space, Samantha had quartered their passengers on the recreation deck as Taro had suggested. There was only a small bathroom on that level that the three of them would have to share, but a band accustomed to being on tour would be used to that. Unfortunately, Brand would find it a tight fit for his large frame.

Sam appropriated some temporary bedding from the lodge for the group to use on the three and a half month voyage to Kantus and everyone had been informed that the rec deck was to be off-limits to all *Horizon* personnel unless permission was granted by the band. Merlin had never been confined to a ship with a musical band and wondered just how much sleep he was going to get over the next few months.

Due to this rec deck restriction, Patch and Pockets had upgraded the Com systems in each of the regular cabins to allow for StellarNet video feeds for entertainment, something most of them felt had been a long time coming anyway.

It occurred to the wolf that it had been over three months since the Planetary Alignment had last heard from them, and the final transmission Taro had broadcast was news of the wide route the *Blue Horizon* was to take around SDC-971 to skirt the expanding effects of the supernova. They had been unable to send any other transmissions to INN thereafter and he was sure some of the investors of this voyage were anxious to get word on Sillon's continued existence. Sam already had plans to make use of the time required to get to the satellite launch coordinates to prepare a speech concerning the *Blue Horizon*, Sillon and the supernova for broadcasting.

The liftoff from Sillon would be routine, so all non-required personnel were waiting in the launch seats that folded out of the walls in the comfort of their cabins.

Taro had barely given the announcement that movement around the ship after the launch was safe when Maximillian had bounded out of his quarters and headed to the galley. He was excited, although nervous, that he was now completely responsible for feeding the crew of the *Blue Horizon* from now on. No longer would he be a cabin boy helping out the cook in her kitchen. The kitchen was now *his* for the next three months, a small fact that thrilled the former slave. It did not occur to him that he would be replacing Sparky, only that he now had a real job and real responsibility as a member of this crew.

He wanted to make a good impression on the captain and his fellow crewmates, so Max immediately started reading through the notes Sparky had left him on his slateboard concerning everyone's tastes. Everyone had eaten at the *Dragon Loft* before gathering on board and sealing the hatch, so that would give him some time to prepare for his debut as master of his own kitchen.

Merlin, Tanis, Durant, Taro and Adam Singlebet sat around the galley's long table and awaited the meal that Max had prepared for them. The other members of the passengers and crew were either on bridge duty, involved in personal projects or asleep according to their own schedules, and would be served later.

No one had any idea what the youth had prepared, but the small group tried hard to mask apprehensive feelings from their faces as Max brought out a large covered dish and set it on the table between their plates. It was plain to see that the young canine was happy to be serving them and Merlin resolved to appreciate the effort no matter what wound up on his plate, even if it were something like the Pinecone Scruff Beans that Sparky had tried to feed them when supplies had once gotten low.

Beforehand, Taro had informed Adam of the situation with the changing of the ship's cooks in hopes the musician would not embarrass the boy if anything went wrong. The vixen admitted to him that she was concerned that their evening meal might result in sandwiches and sodas if Max's efforts were unsuccessful.

Before the dish was uncovered, however, a nice aroma filled the room. Whatever it was smelled good, at least. Max lifted the cover to reveal a browned casserole and he set it aside. He produced a ladle timidly and handed it to the captain.

"If you will do the honors, sir," he said.

Merlin grinned lopsidedly and waved the ladle at him. "I will, if you promise not to call me *Sir*."

"Yes, sir... uh... yes, uncle." Max grinned and took a step back from the table with a short bow to let the meal begin. All eyes were on the dish when the wolf began to dip out the casserole. One by one, the others handed their plates to the captain and he doled out a portion to each. Now that the main dish was being served, Max disappeared back into the kitchen to bring out the side dishes he had prepared.

Taro was the first to try a mouthful of the casserole, and after tasting it, she smiled and winked at the youth. "Max," she said, "this is Sparky's *Tatertot Casserole*, isn't it?"

"Yes," the young canine admitted. "She suggested that's what I start out with. It was fairly simple to make and was proven in the past to be liked by the crew."

"Sounds like it was good advice," Adam added after sampling the food. "You did a fine job, boy. My compliments."

Renny yawned and stretched in the bridge's center seat. He had neglected to bring anything to do or read with him for his watch in the command center and he regretted it. He was bored and wished someone would come to visit him. All the lights on the bridge were turned off so the only illumination in the room came from the instrument panels and the stars beyond the forward windows.

The cheetah got up, moved to the engineering station, and leaned toward the glass. He studied the stars and recognized patterns he had memorized months ago from the star charts of this region. He had to do some mental calculating to account for their position change this far away from the rest of the Planetary Alignment, but he suspected he was fairly accurate in guessing their current location. The *Blue Horizon* had only departed Sillon a week ago and already he thought he could see a bright, fuzzy spot where SDC-971 used to be, though they were still a fortnight away from it at LightDrive speeds.

The communications panel chirped and Renny started in spite of himself. He had not expected any communication traffic this far out. He moved to the controls, picked up the headset and held it up to one fuzzy ear as he tapped the response button.

"This is the *SS Blue Horizon*," he stated. "What can we do for you?" He listened a moment and then grimaced. "Please hold while I get the captain." The cheetah sighed as he tapped another control.

The panel chirped and Renny opened the connection. "*This is Merlin. What is it?*" his voice asked.

"Captain, we just got hailed by the *Savannah Hunter*," he said distastefully. "Armando wants to speak with you."

"Armando! How in blazes did you get a signal from Armando Jensen way out here?"

"I didn't ask. Want me to pipe him down there?"

"No, not here. I don't want his voice to ruin everyone's meal. I'll be on the bridge in a moment."

"Aye," Renny acknowledged. He reconnected to the previous signal and then said into the microphone, "Captain Sinclair will be on the bridge in a moment."

Merlin came in through the door fully five minutes later, obviously having taken his time. "It's at times like this when I'm glad we don't have visual communication," he muttered to the cheetah, a deep frown on his face. Renny returned to the center seat as the captain put the signal on the bridge speakers.

"Armando," he said tonelessly. "What can I do to you?"

"Sinclair, ol' pal," the lion's gruff voice sounded from the speakers, "I'm actually pleased to hear your voice!"

"Indeed?" Merlin replied with a fixed stare out into space.

"How was your visit to Sillon? Our instruments show it's still there, despite the disaster everyone else believes took it out."

"Armando," Merlin said with an internal sigh, "we broadcasted a message to INN just before we reached SDC-971. The Planetary Alignment *already* knows that BAE-6410 was not the red giant star that exploded, but that we were continuing on just to make sure."

"Humph, then you mean my own mission of mercy wasn't needed?" the lion sounded perturbed. "I never heard the news. Are you sure INN received your message?"

Without answering, Merlin tapped out commands on the main computer console and recalled the last broadcast transmission they received from Holly.

"Hello, once again, this is News Around the Alignment and I'm Holly Harken of the Interplanetary News Network. Recapping our running story on the Mytha disaster, I have just received word in a weakening transmission from the Blue Horizon that their onboard long-range sensors have detected first traces of the supernova itself. While the ship is continually speeding toward the phenomenon, the crew has been taking readings and double-checking their sensors.

"I am pleased to inform my listeners that it appears that the star which has exploded was not... I repeat, not... the red giant near the Mytha Primary. Space navigational charts have now identified the former star as SDC-971, a closer red giant luminary without any known planets. This is good news to all, but Ms. Holden wants me to stress that there has been no communication with Sillon as yet. The supernova effect has disrupted all communication with the Mytha star system and nothing more may be known until the Blue Horizon herself has gone around SDC-971.

"Unfortunately, because of the increasing distance between the vessel and the rest of the Planetary Alignment worlds, the limited equipment on board the Horizon will no longer be able to breach the spatial interference to provide us with the regular status reports we've had since the ship launched out into deep space two months ago. When Captain Sinclair's ship has finally skirted SDC-971, it is likely we will have no more information on the flight until their return journey two months hence."

"The closer location of the type-2p supernova has set the scientific communities on the PA worlds into immediate action, and although interstellar distances will keep the effects of the blast from reaching most of the Planetary Alignment for several years, there could be very real results felt upon the worlds closest to it, primarily Dennier, Mainor, Brandt, Quet at first, and then later Kantus, Tanthe, Joplin, Crescentis, Ganis and Pomen. What those results will be has yet to be determined, but the combined brain trusts across the PA will be working diligently to develop what measures can be implemented before that time arrives."

"INN will broadcast -any- information we receive on the flight of the Blue Horizon whenever we get it. For the sake of me and my station, I would ask that you do not call in to request updates on the

flight. When we have something to report, I will make sure it is broadcast promptly and exclusively by this station. You can depend on Holly.

"In related news, we have received word that another freighter has launched out toward the Mytha Star System, hoping to help any survivors the catastrophe. We have only had limited contact with the Savannah Hunter as it heads out in the Blue Horizon's wake, although it is currently unknown who has supplied and financed Captain Jensen's flight to the lost, distant world."

"I had actually forgotten that you were on your way out here," Merlin said dryly. "Now that you know Sillon's still there, you can probably get in a good vacation before you turn around and head back."

"So what am I supposed to do with all my relief supplies?" Armando asked in an indignant voice. "What did you do with all of yours?"

Merlin kept his eyes focused on the stars outside the forward windows. "Relief supplies? Our cargo was donated to supply me and my crew on the trip out and back. We'll have used it all up by the time we get back to our next port. Fortunately, it wasn't a wasted trip. The Silloni government has hired us to do a job for them on the way back."

"What job is that?" the lion asked suspiciously.

"That's our business," Sinclair replied, "and is not your concern." Before his competitor could respond, the wolf recalled the last statement in Holly's broadcast. "We had the backing of a thousand donations to pay for our trip. Who's footing the bill for *your* voyage?"

"Uh, that's not your concern, either," Armando answered in a subdued voice.

"Probably pilfered from the stores of the Intergalactic Aid Foundation that were meant for Brandt," Renny said to his captain, not really caring if the microphone picked up his comment.

"Well, Armando," Merlin said with a smirk toward his navigator, "since you were doing a noble thing, I will not inquire further into your business with Sillon. Enjoy your vacation."

"Now, listen, Sinclair. You and I have been competitors, but we were both making a historic voyage to help out a sister planet all thought was lost. There's no need for sarcasm..."

"A historic voyage, eh?" Merlin cut in. "So that's your plan, to grab some of the glory of an honorable mission to a planet in need. Armando, Sillon was never in any danger, so once we transmit our report that everything is where it should be, this whole thing will be filed as another routine mission and everyone will forget about the *Blue Horizon* and the *Savannah Hunter's* voyages. We're not heroes, pal. Just freightliners."

"Probably right," Armando said in his earlier subdued tone. "Now I gotta figure out what to do with these supplies. We've had our own, but we're getting low. I suppose we could do what you did and use what we need from them."

"As you said," Merlin concluded with a smile, "that's not our concern. Enjoy your vacation." With the flourish, the wolf punched the button to disconnect the communication.

"So, what do we do now?" Renny asked.

Merlin headed for the door. "Back to what we were doing before he called."

"Could you have Taro bring something for me to eat?" Renny asked as he realized he was going back to boredom. "I'm hungry."

"I'll give her your request."

Two days later, Maximillian sat on the bunk in his room, his knees drawn up under his chin and his arms wrapped around his legs as he listened to a recording of DWT's music. He had spent some of his free time with Carsen Vetter, who had taken it upon himself to teach the youth a little about music. Having never married, Vetter made it his business to help any young person he could find. However, Merlin had forbidden him that morning to visit the rec deck where the band stayed until after the satellite had been deployed sometime the next day. The captain had not given him a reason and Max was a little dismayed over the issue.

Preparing food for the entire crew had turned out to be a larger job than he had anticipated and he had spent more time in the kitchen than he liked. He did not have much free time anymore and he wanted to spend it with the famous band. Samantha had also postponed his tutoring until after the satellite's deployment, so what little free time he did have was now spent bored in his room. He could put on a video from several he'd brought from Sillon, but didn't feel like watching anything alone.

He glanced over at his desk and noted the time. He would have to head back to the kitchen to prepare more food in a bit and he discovered that he was not overly enthused about it. He stood up next to the bed and reached for his apron that lay across the computer chair. He smiled faintly as he glanced at the cartoon figure of a canine holding a fork and a knife in its paws with its tongue hanging out the side of its mouth. Sparky had purchased it on Dennier and had gifted it to him when he had started helping her in the kitchen. He missed the lynx already and wished she were here to cheer him up as she had done on numerous occasions.

Maximillian had spent most of his life as a slave, but the crew of the *Blue Horizon* had been courteous enough never to mention his past unless he did so first. In fact, it almost seemed they had forgotten it and treated him like another longtime crewmember. However, he still had strong memories of the way Weller Tagon had treated him and while he looked fine on the outside, he still had a difficult time adjusting to life as a free spirit.

The youth heaved a sigh and donned the apron. While he was still tying the back strings, someone knocked on his cabin door.

"C'mon in," he said in a slightly raised voice.

The door slid aside and he glanced up into the green eyes of Carsen Vetter. "Hey, kiddo," the tiger said with a smile, "why haven't you come to visit with me today?"

The lighthearted expression that had spread across the youth's face when the musician appeared evaporated instantly. "Uncle Merlin told me not to bother you anymore," Max replied in a quiet voice. "He didn't say why."

Carsen stepped into the room and put a hand on the canine's shoulder. "Well, it isn't a bother if you join me at my own request, is it?"

"No, I suppose not."

"In that case, Max, will you join me on the Recreational Deck?"

The young cook looked up at the tiger and cracked a grin. "Yes, I would like that."

"Do one favor for me?"

"Sure, anything."

"Ditch the apron. You won't need it for a while."

"But, it's almost time for me -"

"Lose the apron, bud."

Maximillian hesitated only a moment before he pulled the apron up over his head and tossed it on the bed without bothering to untie the strings.

"That's better," the tiger replied. "Now come with me, I have something special I want to show you."

Max followed the musician from his room and skirted around the curved corridor to the lift. "What is it you want to show me?" he asked his friend.

The tiger looked over at him as they entered the lift. He punched the button for the third deck and said, "You'll know what it is as soon as we get there."

Max looked at him with a smirk. "You are being awfully—" he struggled to find the right word, "—vague."

"That's the point."

In a rare moment of uncharacteristic boldness, Maximillian twitched his tail and looked the tiger directly in the eyes. He raised a pointed finger and opened his mouth to speak. "*Don't even*—" He never got to finish his statement, because when the lift door slid aside, he was assaulted with a barrage of sound and bright lights.

"SURPRISE!" shouted a gathered crowd.

Max froze where he stood, his mouth open, his eyes wide and finger still pointing. Carsen grinned widely and pushed the youth out of the lift and into the room before the doors closed again.

The room was decorated with streamers and balloons that Samantha had picked up on Sillon, recorded music was playing in the background and a table to the side held several brightly wrapped packages and a traditional cake with candles.

Taro handed her drink to Renny and rushed forward to wrap her arms around the canine. "Happy birthday, Max," she said merrily. She gave him a quick lick on the cheek and then stepped back. Max stared at the crew and passengers of the *Blue Horizon* as he felt the blood rush to his face. Everyone was there except for Patch, who was probably on bridge duty.

"Birth... birthday?" he asked with emotion.

"That's right," Samantha said with her own wide grin. "We're celebrating your sixteenth birthday!"

"He's practically an adult!" Pockets said as he moved forward and grabbed the young canine's hand to pump it in a tight handshake.

Merlin crossed his arms and said with a chuckle, "Not quite legal, but he's getting there."

"Isn't seventeen the legal age on Dennier?" Renny asked.

"Yeah, but he's not there yet."

"Congratulations, Max!" Durant said as he handed him a glass of punch.

There were several more expressions from others to mark the occasion, but through it all, Maximillian stayed strangely quiet. Tanis noticed this and drew the youth further into the room gently by the arm.

"Come on in, Max," he said. "Ya have some packages to open to commemorate yer big day!"

Everyone became quiet as Max reached out for a package, but then drew his hand back. He looked around him at the faces of his friends and said, "I... I don't know what to say. I've never had a birthday party before."

"Never?" Durant asked.

"No... no one cares about a slave's birthday," Max said quietly.

Adam leaned on the boy's shoulder with his elbow and lightly butted his head up against Max's temple. "Ah, but you're *not* a slave anymore, free-Max," the keyboardist said. "You have plenty of folks who care a great deal about you, so lighten up and enjoy it. This celebration is for *you*!"

The young cook looked up at him with the hint of a smile as he realized the meaning of Adam's words. Tanis gently poked him in the ribs and said, "Yer now one of us, Max-o, and everyone's attention is on ya today, so enjoy yerself."

Max looked around the gathered crowd and smiled with moist, pale blue eyes. "Thank you," he said with genuine emotion.

Samantha stood next to the table of goodies and lit a metal match. "Come over here, Max. We have a tradition for you to perform." Curious, the young canine walked to the table as she lit several candles embedded into the top of a carob cake. Written across the brown cake in blue icing were the words, *Happy Birthday Max*.

Briefly, he wondered how Sam had made a cake without him knowing about it, as he had been in the kitchen so much since leaving Sillon, but he dismissed the thought as he began to realize just how much his life had changed since the *Blue Horizon* had landed on Quet. His throat tightened up when the rest of the crowd gathered in around him.

"Okay, Max," Sam told him as she stepped back, "lean forward and blow out the candles."

"But, you just lit them."

The Border collie smiled. "Yes, but when you blow them out, make a silent wish and if you get them all blown out with one breath, word has it your wish will come true."

"Okay," Max said, his tail wagging behind him, "I wish for..."

"No!" Taro interrupted, "You're not supposed to tell anyone what you wish for or it won't come true."

Max grinned. "Okay, then... stand back." His ears flattened against his head as he took a long intake of breath.

"You only have to blow out the candles, kid," Brand remarked with a deep chuckle, "not blow the cake off the table!"

Max lost his breath and started laughing, everyone else laughing with him. He grinned at the drummer and started to take in another breath, but lost it once more in laughter when the dragon winked at him.

It took him several tries just to take in a lungful of air, but when the canine was finally ready, he was successful in blowing out all the candles in one try. His gathered friends applauded heartily.

Merlin moved to the boy's side as Samantha began cutting the cake into pieces. "Max," he said, "congratulations and happy birthday. As everyone else on my crew knows, you get an extra hundred credits added to your account on your birthday."

"Wow, thanks Uncle Merlin!"

Tanis picked up a package from the table and handed it to the birthday boy. "These gifts are for ya," he said. "Go ahead and open 'em up."

"Music is a form of expression," Brand Arkram said later to the small crowd once the party had finally wound down, "and in order for it to be effective, you need have something to express. Going into a job like this to make money or gain fame is fakery and the audiences will sense it immediately. If you are going to do something, you have to do it for the love of whatever it is because your happiness is your life's goal. Others' approval will not add one micron to your time or joy if you are doing something you don't like."

Carsen nodded. "Adam and Brand didn't get married for social obligation or because they wanted sex. They got married because the women had qualities that would enrich their lives, enhance their pleasure. Our friendship is based on the same principle, that we increase each other's happiness. I'm not married because I haven't found that woman yet."

Adam snickered. "They haven't made women like what he wants in anything but marble."

The tiger blithely ignored the keyboardist and waved dismissively, "I got tired of watching music vid shows where the aging rock stars retold how they blew all their cash on women and drugs and booze, and I decided that was not going to be me. Keeping ourselves grounded has been a very big part of how this group works together and keeps on working together. The entertainment industry is not as big as all the hype makes it out to be, really. It's only a couple of thousand people specifically working on this stuff and others occasionally come in to help out. For instance, read the labels on all the music indexes you have and see how many recurring names appear. Producers, songwriters, session musicians... the pool gets smaller the more titles you read. This is a business and we treat it as such."

Carsen stretched and yawned, but continued his thoughts. "The biggest problem is not the competition, it's the media. Critics are ninety-five percent failed artists. There are two things they are going to say about you and you had better be ready for them. They are going to say you are on drugs and that you're in financial dire straits. See it coming and have a rejoinder for it in advance. You don't have to prove anything to them because their opinion means nothing. Opinions are like armpits; everybody has them and they all usually stink."

Samantha grinned and asked, "Did you get into the business merely for the business of it?"

Carsen shook his head. "There are different reasons to go into the biz, but music incorporates aspects of so many things necessary in life: mathematics, science, art and physical discipline... the benefits of studying and learning music far outweigh anything else you could teach a child." He glanced down at Maximillian, who was seated at the collie's feet and added, "Max started out with a deficit and must now run to catch up with his contemporaries. Compacting several things into a single course of study will give him a foot up he'll need if he's going to survive."

"What about touring?" Renny asked, changing the direction of the conversation. "Anything memorable?"

The tiger snickered and replied, "Barcelona, on Earth." As one, Brand and Adam groaned. Carsen shrugged and plodded on. "Our tour manager had set up a pyrotechnics spectacle for the big finish of the show. At each side of the stage they had set up these cannons..."

"Real cannons," Adam added.

"Yeah, real cannons," Carson continued, "but they didn't have cannonball in them, of course, just the charge. During rehearsals, the roadies set them off and *blam!* They went off all right, so Adam and I were supposed to set these off one right after the other at the end; beautiful show, right?"

"Later on in the show, however..." Brand growled.

The tiger smiled. "I finished up with the last bit of the finale and touched mine off. Suddenly there was this tremendous *whoom!* and this cannon, I swear to you, left the ground and sailed twenty feet up into the air. Sent light fixtures and guitars flying everywhere!"

Adam leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. "What the guys had done, by mistake," he said, "was that they had *doubled* the amount of charge in the cannons. So when these things took off they went off like Terran Roman candles."

"Luckily, the audience still thought it was part of the show," Brand said with a deep chuckle.

Adam smiled. "Of course, I saw all this happen to Carsen and I gritted my teeth..." Taro looked sideways at the tiger, who started giggling. "...because I still had mine to go!" The wolf laughed and sat back in his chair. "So I thought, *bear and grin it*, and I set this thing off and *whoom!* Up this thing goes in fire and brimstone. Utter mess of things!"

"And that was only the first night," Brand said.

"Oh yeah . . ." Carsen added.

The drummer took his turn at the story and said, "The next night we told Marconi, '*No cannons!*' He said okay, but having a flair for the dramatic, he talked us into a *fireworks* show instead. We said okay to that. At the end of the show, the next night... out of nowhere sails this rocket, *whoosh!* between Carsen's legs! Scared him half to death, and then another thing comes screaming out from behind the gong, grazes the eighteen-inch, bounces off and goes spiraling into the audience."

Adam shook his head. "It seems that what Marconi had done was to erect a vertical display with all these fireworks side-by-side on it and the thing fell over from the vibration of Brand's thundering drums just as we were finishing. It sent all the fireworks sailing through the stage and into the audience. It was a miracle that nobody was hurt!"

"We changed tour managers after that," Adam and Carsen said in unison.

"Setting the stage and the players on fire," Brand replied, "is not the best way to promote yourself."

"Although *it is* fun at parties," Carsen finished with a mischievous grin.

Ten-year-old Taro Nichols stretched beneath a palm in the warm afternoon, her best friend Tasha by her side. The two girls lay bare in their fur in the warmth of the Hestran sun, their languid bodies drying from a taxing swim in the local lake. This was their secret place, where they could lose what few social inhibitions they had and not worry about prying eyes. On an island ringed by sharp rocks that only the best swimmers dared navigate, it was a hideout where the girls could escape for a while. The long summer day had been fulfilling; catching bugs, torturing their little brothers, and beating the snot out of a local ball team before taking a swim in the lake where kids always furry-dipped against their parents' warnings. She looked at her friend as the other combed fingers through her scalp hair.

"You know," Taro sing-songed, "when I grow up I'm going to have a house and lots of kids and a big, strong guy with lots of money." Her friend smiled gently, her vulpine eyes taking in the sparkling water that stretched out before them. "What will *you* do?" Taro asked.

Her friend stopped, considered it for a moment, and replied matter-of-factly, "I'm going to rule the world."

Taro was taken aback, and smirked. "Yeah, right!" Her friend returned her amity with a small smile of her own.

It was on that day that each had made a solemn vow that no matter what, she would do all she could to make the other's dream come true. Taro thought it was a safe bet. For her, the

world was one long, glorious summer afternoon with no cares and no responsibilities. Hers was a world that could be taken for granted.

Thirty-eight-year-old Taro Nichols opened her eyes. Her room was dark and the body next to her was warm. She rolled over on her side, curled up next to Renny, and listened to his soft snoring. She mused briefly on her dream and wondered why such thoughts of the past came unbidden after so many years. Taro's youthful aspirations for the future had changed over time. She was no longer concerned with raising a family, choosing instead to live as she wanted out among the stars, but there were times she did miss a real home life. She considered her childhood friend and wondered where her life was currently headed.

"Keep the thrusters at station-keeping," said Merlin's voice from the bridge speakers. There was a metallic resonance behind the signal that gave the scene an eerie feel. *"Despite what Sir Hirota told us about the ease of deploying his satellite, this thing has a lot of mass behind it and I don't want even the slightest jolt to fling it out of our reach."*

"Aye, Captain," Taro replied as she kept her eyes on the readouts. Max had his face pressed up close to the port side window, trying to see any movement below.

Down in the hold, Durant and Patch watched the proceedings from the airtight booth of the load master's office. The bay door was open completely, the gravity deck plates turned off, and four suited figures hovered near the huge bulk of the spherical relay satellite as they slowly guided it out toward free space.

The thrusters of Merlin and Renny's pressure suits puffed in tiny jets as they maneuvered the leading edge of their cargo toward the opening. Trailing the satellite were Samantha and Tanis, as they made sure the upper and lower curves of the large orb were clear as it neared the bay door opening. It was quite a chore to keep it moving straight and also to keep delicate pressure suits away from the edges of the transceiver sensors.

"Okay, we're clear on the topside," Samantha reported as the upper curve of the satellite passed out into space.

"Same thing down under," Tanis added. *"Yer free to move it out into position."*

"Aye," Merlin replied. He gave a silent wave to Renny, who acknowledged with a wave of his own, and both upped the thrust on their suits, their tail pouches trailing behind them like banners. There was a moment's hesitation as the mass of the sphere gathered momentum, and then it sped away from the stationary *Blue Horizon*. Three hundred meters from the ship, Merlin and Renny circumnavigated the orb and reversed their thruster direction to begin slowing the satellite.

"You are in position now, Captain," Taro reported. *"Let me know when you are both clear and I'll activate the satellite's automatic maneuvering system."*

"I'm free and clear now," Renny said.

"So am I," Merlin replied. *"Go ahead and activate it, Taro."*

"Aye, sir."

The huge satellite drifted another twenty meters further before Merlin and Renny saw a series of green fire jetting from positioning thrusters all around its curved surface. The large orb braked to a halt and suddenly a myriad of spiny antennae telescoped out from hidden openings. The satellite then began turning slowly as it searched for the invisible communication net of the Planetary Alignment.

"Signal from Sillon has been locked in," Taro reported a moment later.

"Okay, we're coming back in," Merlin told her. As he and Renny fired their thrusters to return to their vessel, the lupine captain turned his head inside his helmet and looked toward a fiery nebula of red, white, yellow and orange in the distance - the remains of SDC-971, the reason for their long journey to and from Sillon. He frowned and sighed, glad to have the satellite taking up its position. It would allow the distant world to resume communication with the Planetary Alignment it belonged to, and life could then return to normal. Merlin would be glad to be on their way. By the time the *Blue Horizon* made it back to Kantus, over half a standard year would have passed since they left Dennier on the investigative mission.

"Signal from the Planetary Alignment StellarNet has been located and is locking in," Taro said with a cheery voice. *"ComNet has just locked in as well. The relay satellite is stationary in its position and working according to design. The prerecorded Silloni government message is broadcasting now."*

"Good," Merlin replied. *"Renny and I are nearing the cargo bay now and I see that Tanis and Sam are already inside. Once Durant has the doors closed and sealed, resume our course to Kantus at standard cruising speed. Renny has already entered the adjusted coordinates into the navigational computer."*

"Aye, sir. Preparing to get under way now."

The intercom always seemed to chirp at inconvenient times, Merlin had always thought to himself. The lupine captain had his feet tucked underneath his bunk to steady himself as he went through his daily set of exercises. With the rec deck occupied by their passengers, he had had to relegate his routine to his quarters.

With a snort at being interrupted, Merlin crawled upon his knees and tapped the response button on his cabin terminal. "Yes, what is it?"

"Sorry to bother ya, Captain," the voice of Tanis voice erupted from the speaker, *"but ya wanted to know when we could pick up INN's news broadcast."*

"Ah, okay," the wolf replied. *"Since we've been without news for four months, put the broadcast on ship-wide speakers."*

"Aye, Cap'n."

"Hello, listeners, this is News Around the Alignment and I'm Holly Harken of the Interplanetary News Network. First today is an update of the unrest on Nalirra since the ruling government split into two feuding factions over military exercises. General Duular of Kardon announced today that he would not support Sed Amittias' new law on lowering the draft age in order to increase military strength for a new conflict with sister world Oe'Tanata, and has promised to pull his own troops out of the imperial army unless the new law is rescinded. The dictator Amittias has not responded to Duular's public announcement and tension is growing among the civilian population.

"And on the heavy-gravity planet of Hestra, the previously unknown affliction that hit a community in the Taq Mountains of the Arellanes Prefecture two days ago is spreading. Medical officials in Taquit, a small remote town with a population of just under three thousand, have reported that at least eighteen people have fallen victim to something that has turned into a horrible nightmare. The cause of these sicknesses has not yet been discovered, but a high-level virus is suspect. The effects have been quite ghastly. The reports show that symptoms begin similar to a common flu, with fever, chills, sore throat and coughing. From there, however, the changes begin. The afflicted have complained that the nerve endings of the skin become super-sensitive, where the gentlest touch is extremely painful."

Holly's voice paused for a moment and her hard swallow could actually be heard over the broadcast. *"As the condition advances, the patient's eyes have turned crimson, a sign of internal*

bleeding that quickly advances to other orifices, such as the eyes, nose, ears, mouth and... others. Most of the patients have reached this stage as the area doctors race to contain this outbreak."

In the galley, Durant jumped at the sound of breaking dishes in the kitchen. He put down the chopsticks he was using and looked over his shoulder at the vixen, who wore an expression of horror. She gripped the kitchen counter so hard that it was leaving creases in the metal and she looked as if she might be near fainting.

"What is it, Taro?" he asked as he pushed his chair back away from the table. "Do you know someone in that place?"

The fox moved her mouth two or three times before she could speak and finally raised both hands to her face. "That's *my* — my hometown, Durant," she said in a shaky voice. She looked as if she was near fainting. "My family lives there..."

VIXEN'S NIGHTMARE

By Ted R. Blasingame

SS Blue Horizon PA1261

Captain's Journal

The Blue Horizon and my crew are on our way home, back toward the rest of the Planetary Alignment following a long voyage to Sillon. Despite our initial fears of the demise of the planet, Sillon was right where it was supposed to be, quite unharmed; the supernova that threatened it was in a different star system altogether.

Despite the relative good health and order of the place, it brought about changes to my crew with the loss of Ivy Sparks. Her marriage to Roland on the outbound flight resulted in kittens and with a generous job offer from Master Tristan of the Dragon Loft, she and her husband elected to stay on Sillon to raise their kits there. I hated to lose her after serving together for seven years, but I agreed that an interstellar freighter was no place to have a family with infants onboard.

On the voyage to the distant world, Sparky took Maximillian under her tutelage and taught him how to prepare meals and run a kitchen. The boy had prior experience in kitchens on Quet, but he never had to run the show on his own before. He's done well to prepare meals for everyone, but while he has never complained, he looks a bit stressed to me under his new responsibilities.

Along for the ride back to the Planetary Alignment as a paying customer to our next destination of Kantus, is the popular fusion rock band, Dragon, Wolf & Tiger, otherwise known as DWT, whose own transport never arrived to take them home. The guitarist of the group, a tiger named Carsen Vetter has a practice of tutoring youngsters in music, has taken it upon himself to befriend Max. Between cooking duties and music lessons, my adopted nephew seems to have little time to himself. I've been meaning to take him aside and ask him about it, but have yet to find a good time to do so.

To help pay for our voyage back, the Silloni Regent hired us to haul a newly built relay satellite out to preset coordinates and deploy it for them. The satellite's main function is to route communications between Sillon and the rest of the Planetary Alignment around the supernova disturbance of SDC-971. The deployment went smoothly and for the first time in nearly five months, signals resumed between that planet and the PA worlds.

In a transmission we received of an INN broadcast several hours after leaving the satellite in place, we soon found out about a deadly virus raging in a small remote city on planet Hestra. Not only is Hestra the homeworld of my first officer, the town where the nasty virulent disease is spreading is where she grew up and her family still lives. The report gave her such a shock that she collapsed moments after hearing the news and is currently resting in her quarters under Renny's watchful care.

Patch and Pockets are currently making repairs to the kitchen countertop she ripped from its wall mounts as she fell. Being from a heavy-gravity planet such as Hestra, Taro does well to keep control over her strength, but such was her shock that she left finger grooves in the twisted metal of the counter. I suggested putting her under sedation, but Taro wouldn't have it. She promised to behave and has apologized for the damage in the galley, but she requested we let her monitor the INN broadcasts on her personal com terminal.

Patch complained about the stress I put on our old, tired engines after I'd ordered Tanis to up our speed to maximum so we could get back to the PA as soon as possible. Patch reminded me, however, that despite our top speed, we're still nearly two months away from the nearest PA outpost and jeopardizing our Liquid Crystal core was not in our best interests. I gave in to his experience and had Tanis drop our speed back down, but not by much... just enough to take the strain off the engines and make our chief engineer a little less unhappy.

I have an uneasy feeling that the situation on Hestra will get worse before it gets any better, and that Taro is in for a long ride. Currently, Hestra is on the opposite side of the Planetary Alignment from where we'll be coming in from, and we'll still have to drop off our passengers on Kantus before we can go on to Hestra for her.

Merlin Sinclair, Captain

Samantha walked slowly along the curved corridor of the crew deck, hands clasped behind her back and her gaze on the carpet at her bare feet. She wore nothing more than a pair of denim cutoffs and an oversized cotton tee-shirt, and her fur was in disarray. She had tried sleeping, but the thoughts running through her mind would not let her rest so she had resorted to pacing the corridor quietly. Moss had scanned her a few of times on its rounds, but she had tried to ignore it, even if it did seem the small flying saucer buzzed by her faster than usual.

Their voyage through the cosmos seemed to go on and on forever and everyone was on edge. On the flight out to Sillon, Sam's nerves had been frazzled from the uncertainty of the fate of her family. Now, on the voyage back to the Planetary Alignment, it was not *her* family that was in everyone's mind, but Taro's. The Border collie felt responsible for the *Blue Horizon's* position, so far out into space that they could not make an emergency flight to Hestra, and she felt she had failed as Taro's friend.

What could she do? There must be *something* she could do, even way out here. Samantha plodded along quietly on her fourth orbit around the corridor, chewing her bottom lip in worry. Pockets stepped out of his cabin and Sam bumped into him without seeming to see him.

"Hey, there, Sammy," he said in a soft voice, "you okay?"

Samantha glanced up at his words and it was then the raccoon saw the moisture in her eyes. "No, Pockets," she said to her friend, "I don't think I am."

"What is it?" he asked as he led her back into his room. Just as the door closed, Moss whizzed by at a higher rate of speed. Pockets cleared a pathway through bits of junk lying on the floor to the bed and the two of them sat down together.

"I can't stop thinking about Taro's family," Samantha said after a moment of silence. "Her situation is similar to what I faced on our way to Sillon. I was worried about my adopted family and whether or not they were safe. I worried about it constantly and you know how distant I got from everyone. Taro's going to go through the same thing, Pockets. We're still two months away from Hestra, but the difference between our two situations is that I didn't know what was ahead. With the INN reports, Taro will be hearing about what is going on as the news is released, but still not be able to get there any faster."

"She's glued to INN now," Pockets agreed. "She hasn't slept much the past couple of days since hearing Holly's report and..."

"Holly!" Samantha exclaimed. "That's it!"

"What is?"

The canine smiled and licked Pockets on the cheek. "Thanks, Jerad," she said. Before the raccoon could respond, she was out the door and headed around the corridor.

Pockets touched the spot where she'd licked him and grinned foolishly. Whenever she called him by his real name, she was extremely happy, and the lick was a bonus. The mechanic sighed and fell back on his pillow. Samantha had never had a romantic interest in her partner in crime, but that did not mean he didn't have feelings for her. He knew that she occasionally slept with Tanis, and *everyone* knew that she had warmed the Captain's bed at times, but for Pockets she was just a dream. They spent many hours together off-duty, but the conversations never pointed toward themselves. He had often wondered what she might be like, but a larger canine like Sammy rarely ever found romance in a short 'coon like himself.

"Samantha! It is been ages since we last heard from you!"

"Hello, Holly," the collie said into the headset microphone of the bridge Com station. Patch sat in the center seat of the bridge on his watch shift, idly reading one of the captain's mystery novels he had found on the floor. He tried to give the appearance of being immersed in the story, but his ears were straining to hear Sam's half of the conversation.

"We received word that communications had resumed with Sillon a couple days ago, but no one knew if your ship was responsible."

Samantha wished she could see the human's face. She could practically hear the grinning over the headset and found herself smiling in response. "The Silloni government hired us to place a relay satellite on our way home, at coordinates where the signals could be routed around the SDC-971 interference. We did that two days ago, but were so shocked by your reports about Hestra that we forgot to check in with you. I even have some prepared statements to transmit to you concerning our journey."

"The situation on Hestra is getting worse, Sam. Much worse," the news anchor told her in a quiet whisper over the connection. *"The spread of the disease is more terrible than what I've made it out to be in my reports. The Hestran government wants us to soften our reports in order to prevent panic and a rush on the town by friends and relatives outside the area."*

"I was afraid of that," Samantha said after a hard swallow.

"There have already been over eight hundred cases of the sickness officially reported to the authorities."

"Eight hundred! Holly, your newscasts only said less than twenty cases have been reported!"

"Now you understand why Hestran officials want to keep panic to a minimum. My producers are upset and want to broadcast the truth, but in this situation, I think Hestra's request should be honored."

"Holly," Samantha said after a hard swallow, "a relative of a family in Taquit is on board the *Blue Horizon*. Her family's name is Nichols."

"Looking now at my database... Yes, there are a couple of patients of the disease with that surname on a list an undercover correspondent transmitted to me. This is Taro's family?"

"Oh, no..." Samantha breathed. "Yes, that's her. What are the two names you have?"

"Let me see here... Reika Nichols..."

"That's Taro's mom!"

"...and Kamui Nichols."

"That's one of her brothers," the Border collie said with a sickening feeling in her stomach. "Holly, I need you to do something very important for me."

"I'm afraid I can't get them out of Taquit for you," Holly replied somberly. "The place has been quarantined and is locked up tighter than a..."

"No, that's not what I had in mind," Samantha said quickly. "The *Blue Horizon* is still too far from the Planetary Alignment to get a good transmission to Alexandrius and I need you to relay a message to the corporate headquarters of Holden Pharmaceutical, my father's company."

"Okay, I can do that much. What is it you want me to tell them?"

"From the quarantine and the news reports we've heard since we were able to connect back into StellarNet, this sounds like a high bio-level virus," Samantha told her. "I need you to get in touch with Dr. Ron Williams at the Alexandrius Center of Disease Control in Alucara. He's an otter with a large amount of experience in these matters. Have him take Dr. Tina Sperry and Dr. Alexis Hamby to help him lead a team into the area. They are the finest medical biologists in the Planetary Alignment. Tell them to *get to Hestra, now!!*"

"The local military has already called in Lt. Alan McCarthy and Lt. Leann Silverberg. They're medical disease specialists with the Hestran CDC. They're rated for Bio-level 3, I believe."

"Dr. Williams' team is rated for Bio-level 4 and above. Better be sure to remind him that Hestra is a heavy-gravity planet, and they'll need to take endosuits with them just so they can stand up to work in that environment."

"Okay, I'll get on it right away."

"Thank you, Holly. I knew I could depend on you."

"Anything else I can help you with?"

"Taro would welcome whatever information on the Hestran situation you can provide for us, even if it is only on your news broadcast."

"Okay, I'll give you special consideration, my friends, and make sure I get whatever information I can to you." There was a pause and then Holly spoke again with a lighter tone. *"I want to thank you, Sam, for staying in touch with me on your way out to Sillon. I won the Masanori Award for the coverage while you were away."*

"You're welcome and congratulations, Holly, but you knew that Sillon was okay even as our last transmissions faded out when we neared SDC-971."

"There were many thousands of people waiting each day to hear whatever morsel of information about Sillon you could transmit to us. If you had not made the trip, we might still not know that it was not the star near Sillon's system that went supernova. We're thankful that Sillon is okay, but we're more thankful for you for giving us the confirmation we needed when our hopes were dim."

Samantha did not know what to say. She did not feel like a hero, especially when their sheer distance kept them away from getting quickly to Hestra. "Thanks, Holly," she said. "Now it is *we* who will be dependent on your broadcasts. We're still a long way from the Planetary Alignment traffic to do anything ourselves, so your news is all we will have for a while."

"I understand. Please tell Ms. Nichols that I will make sure to put out whatever news is available into my broadcasts, but as you've just found out, some of that information is being limited by the Hestran government, so I'll be relying on personal contacts as well. General Koontz is in charge of the operations at Taquit and he hasn't been too friendly with the media."

"Thank you, Holly. This means a lot to us."

"Okay, I'm signing off now to get in touch with your friends at the ACDC in Alucara."

Samantha said a few more words of good-bye and then removed the headset from her ears. Patch did not attempt to hide his curiosity and looked at her directly.

"From what I could hear of your conversation," he said in his country accent, "it seems to me that situation in Taro's hometown is worse than the news seems to let on, am I right?"

Samantha nodded and frowned deeply. "You're right, Patch," she replied. "I'll fill you in on the rest of the details later, but I have to go visit Taro right now."

The raccoon grunted when she darted out of the room. "I'm always the last to know anything," he grumbled to himself and opened up the novel again.

Sam had to stop short when she moved out into the corridor. Moss flew by rapidly and she wondered what the hurry was. She dismissed it when she neared Taro's cabin. She tapped on the vixen's door, but she got no answer. She knocked a little harder and called out for her.

"Taro," she said, "it's Sam. I really need to talk to you right now. It's about your family on Hestra."

The door opened and she saw the sleepy faces of Taro and Renny. Both were in shorts and tee-shirts that looked as if they had been slept in for a month. "What is it, Sam?" the red fox asked blearily.

"We need to sit down," Samantha replied. The cheetah led them into the room, and just as the door closed, Moss whizzed by again with a high-pitched "Meow!" Renny and Taro sat on the ruffled bed and pulled a blanket into their laps while the collie took the desk chair.

"I've just spoken with Holly Harken about the situation on Hestra," Sam began, "and your family is involved." She then told them everything the INN newscaster had told her and then tried to field their questions afterward. The stress of the past couple of days showed in Taro's eyes, and at the end of the conversation, she finally did something she had not yet allowed herself to do. She cried.

Merlin came awake instantly at the fire alarm. The first thought that occurred to him as he jumped out of bed and threw on a pair of pants and a shirt was that Sparky had once again set the kitchen on fire. He was already out the door and racing down the hallway toward the galley before he remembered that the lynx was no longer on board. He slowed to a trot and shook his head with a frown. He had not bothered to call the bridge for the location of the fire, but he had already arrived at the galley door. He thumbed the control to open the panel and then peered inside.

Behind the kitchen counter, Max was busily preparing the crew meals and looked up in concern at the sounding alarm. The kitchen stove was electric, so there were no open flames here. Merlin nodded his head in greeting and went straight to the com terminal set into the wall near the counter. He pressed the call button and waited impatiently.

"This is Samantha," the voice replied.

"Where's the fire?" Merlin asked.

"Engineering!"

Merlin did not wait to reply and bounded back out into the corridor. He found the lift open and jumped inside. A moment later, he ran out into the hold that was empty save for a few pallets of band equipment cabled to the middle of the deck beneath plasteel webbing; the rest of the donated ship's supplies had been moved into storage bins along the perimeter bulkheads. He could see red and orange flickering from inside the entrance to the engine room and rushed to investigate.

When he stepped through the door, he was met by searing heat and smoke. The automatic fire suppressant system was spraying white foamy powder over everything, but this particular fire did not seem to be responding to it. He pulled his shirt up over his nose and raised his other arm to ward off the heat from his eyes. He saw Patch lying on the floor of the

large room beside a scorched control panel near the flames. A small shadow emerged rapidly from the smoke and the wolf was forced to duck as Moss zoomed out of the room and into the hold.

Durant arrived in the doorway just behind him and gasped. He and the captain ran to the downed raccoon and quickly dragged him by the arms out into the cargo bay. Merlin moved to the wall and shut the engine room door as Pockets emerged from the lift. Moss veered into the empty elevator and the doors closed behind it, but the mechanic could hear a series of hard thumping from inside as the compartment rose to the upper levels. He grimaced, knowing from the sounds that he would probably have to effect repairs in there as soon as the current crisis was over.

Relieved that the second raccoon was not in the engine room, Merlin activated the emergency ventilation and purged the atmosphere of the flaming compartment out into space after the pressure door sealed shut. He clicked a nearby intercom switch and called to the bridge.

"Sam, shut down the engines, now!"

The collie didn't bother to give acknowledgement as the deck plates abruptly ceased their eternal vibration. The LightDrive engines powered down quickly. Merlin dusted a combination of soot and powder from his face fur and thumbed the intercom again.

"Patch is down," he said, coughing. *"Get Tanis down here with an oxy tank."*

"Right away!" A moment later her voice came back. *"He's on his way, Captain. How bad is Patch?"*

"Dunno yet. Stay tuned." The wolf clicked off the intercom and moved to his crewmates. Patch moaned and coughed a little, but was still out of it. His brother wore a worried expression as he absently pet the chief engineer's singed fur.

The intercom chirped and Merlin went back to the panel. *"Yes?"*

"Air pressure in the engine room is in the negative numbers, Merlin, but now rising on the way back to ship normal. Temperature is twenty-two degrees and also rising."

"Thank you, Sam," the wolf replied. *"Remain on inertia until we can get the engines running again."*

"Aye."

Brand Arkram stepped in through the door to the galley, dressed in a pair of swim trunks and a tank-top shirt with the masked face of a cartoon wrestling super-hero on the front. His muscular, leathery skin glistened with perspiration in the room lights.

Max looked up at him from his duties with a smile. "Can I help you with something, sir?" the young canine asked.

Brand shifted his gaze around the kitchen equipment and then shook his head. "No," the large dragon replied in a deep voice. "I thought I heard a fire alarm and came down to investigate."

Max bit his bottom lip and put down the cleaver he held in his hand. "I heard it, too," he answered, wiping his hands on his apron. "Uncle Merlin came in here a bit ago and talked to Sam on the intercom. She said the fire was in engineering."

"I *thought* the feel of the ship was quieter," the dragon muttered. "I hope they got it put out or we might be stranded out here."

Max's eyes widened at the thought that had not occurred to him before. "I hope so, too," he said.

Brand shook his head and then headed back toward the door. "Sorry to bother you, kid," the drummer said. "See you later."

"See you," the canine answered with the shrug of his shoulders.

Patch coughed, sputtered and managed to swear a blue streak in between as he pushed away the oxy-cup that Tanis had over his snout. He leaned over on his side and coughed a little more before he looked up into the eyes of his brother.

"Jerad, I swear I'm going to incinerate that wretched flobot of yours!" he growled.

"Patch, what happened?" Merlin asked as Tanis began wrapping the engineer's burned hands.

The singed raccoon looked up at the captain and answered, "After my shift on the bridge, I came down here to take care of a couple things on my checklist. I was refilling the heat transfer unit with trilinax when Moss came into the engine room at high speed. Trilinax is slightly volatile in the brief duration flowing from container to the transfer unit – Moss whizzed too close to a bulkhead, and I'm guessing it sparked when it bounced off the beam." He held up his bandaged hands and lightly fingered the singed fur around his nose. The raccoon mask around his eyes was strangely absent of singe.

"The trilinax blew up in my face," he growled. "Thankfully, there was only a small amount left in the container. I'm lucky I still have my fingers."

Tanis made a cursory look into the engineer's eyes. "How's yer vision?" he asked.

"My eyes are okay, I guess" Patch answered. "I had on a pair of safety goggles, but I think they got blown off my face."

"Moss has been zooming around the corridors all day," Durant supplied.

"It almost took my head off a few moments ago," Merlin added. He looked over at Tanis and said, "Take Patch up to Sickbay to check him out properly. Pockets, as soon as the engine room's atmosphere is back up to tolerable, I want you inside checking the systems. If the situation is well enough to restart the engines, tell Samantha on the bridge to get us back up to speed. Start repairs and cleanup on whatever was damaged in there. If the engine itself is out of commission, I need to know ASAP."

"I'll get on it right away," the raccoon said.

Merlin looked over to Durant. "Get the word out that if anyone finds Moss, they are to deactivate it by any means necessary. Until we find out what is causing its erratic behavior, I want it out of commission!"

"Aye, boss."

"I regret to inform you that Reika Nichols died this morning from the virus," Holly's voice reported somberly from the headset that Samantha wore. It was her watch on the bridge when the call came in and she felt her throat tighten up. "This thing is pretty nasty, Sam."

"What about Taro's little brother, Kamui?" she asked quietly.

"Sam, there's no way to say this gently, but it is likely he'll be dead before the day is over."

"Oh, no..."

"Interstellar travel takes time, but Dr. Williams and his team arrived on Hestra yesterday and have been up to their noses into the situation. General Koontz wasn't even going to let them into the quarantined area until Lt. Silverberg insisted he needed their help. Despite his or Lt. McCarthy's efforts, they have not been able to contain it. This thing has spread throughout Taquit and they have not even discovered how it's being transmitted yet." Holly paused and coughed. "The people are starting to panic and Koontz is threatening a media blackout on top of that."

"How are you finding out about all this?"

"INN sent a field correspondent to Hestra with the first news of the sickness, as a personal-interest story. Yariko Mansfield is putting her nose into everything to get as much information as possible before the General locks it all down. I've been holding back some of it during the newscasts on orders from my boss, but I've been giving you all the details."

"Holly," Sam said hesitantly, not sure she wanted to know what she was about to ask. "Tell me what you can about the virus."

"How much detail do you really want?"

"All that you can tell me."

"Of the eight hundred seventy-four confirmed cases of infection, the earliest twenty-three have already died from this sickness. More are reporting in to the tent city that has sprung up to hold all the sick and dying. All the hospitals are overrun with newly infected, with more cases being reported daily. Once the virus is contracted, death comes in about a week's time, so that means unless they can find something quick, they're about to have nearly nine hundred bodies on their hands. Your doctors are working around the clock to combat this thing, especially since they discovered what it is."

"What is it?" Samantha asked with renewed hope. "Where did it come from?"

"They don't know how it got started or where it is from, but they're certain it's a bio-safety Level Five virus. They're calling it Taquit Fever. This thing is hot in the blood and it basically liquefies the internal organs. The body loses blood through the tiniest cut or scratch, even through violent coughing. I've been told that the victim maintains a high fever the last couple of days."

"It is this liquefying that kills them?"

"Not entirely. The final moment comes when the body convulses so that the back, gluteal and leg muscles wrench backward, breaking the spine."

"I think I'm going to be sick," Samantha said weakly with a hand up to her throat. "Has there been any progress toward a cure?"

"Sam," Holly reminded her, "your team has only been in there a day. All they've really been able to do is identify that this thing is very bad and certain death to anyone who contracts it."

The door to the bridge opened then and Taro walked in with tear streaks in the fur of her cheeks. "Let me talk to her," she said in a cracking voice.

"Holly, Taro is here and wants to speak with you." Sam nodded to herself in response to something the newscaster said and then handed the headset to her crewmate.

The fox sized the fit of the headset over her large ears and then spoke into the microphone. "Holly," she said quietly, "tell me about my mother. I was listening in from the com terminal in my quarters."

There was a pause and then the human's voice returned. "Ms. Nichols, I'm sorry you heard our conversation or I would have been more compassionate." The vixen grunted noncommittally and her silence prompted Holly to continue. "I don't really have much on your mother, I'm afraid. All I know is that she was in a coma throughout the night and then... passed away this morning."

"What about Kamui?"

"He... he went into a coma earlier today."

"I see..." Taro closed her eyes and bowed her head for a moment. When she opened her eyes again and started out into space through the forward windows, fresh tears spilled into her cheek fur. "What about the rest of my family?" she asked.

"Their names are not on the sick list, so I assume they're all right. I can have Yariko try to get a message to them if you want."

"Yes, I would like that. My father's name is Cusco Nichols and he lives in the Norrah section of Taquit. Listen closely, and give my father this message exactly word for word: *Oretik herdantes harah ne shräelon trinrojur.*"

"Oretik herdantes harah ne shräelon trinrojur," Holly repeated. *"I've recorded this so I don't forget it. What does this mean?"*

"Pa will know what it means."

"Okay, I'll see if I can get it in to your family."

"Thank you, Holly. For everything." Taro disconnected the circuit and removed the headset from her ears. She turned to look at Samantha, who pretended to be interested in an instrument panel. "Samantha," she began, but when the Border collie looked over at her, the vixen's throat tightened up.

Instead of words, she moved quickly to her friend and grabbed her in a fierce hug, though mindful not to crush her with Hestran strength. Samantha returned the embrace and they both cried.

"Taro," the collie said after a while, "I'm so sorry for dragging us all the way to Sillon. It's all my fault that we couldn't get back quick enough for your Mom... If we weren't so far away..."

"Stop," the fox said softly as she rubbed her eyes red. "You don't have to apologize or feel like it's your fault." She wondered just how long her friend had been beating herself up for their present location. "How could you have known about this, Sam? How could *anyone* have known?"

Pockets studied the series of dents in the metal walls of the lift compartment, running his fingers along the grooves. If Moss was flying out of control in the confined space to make such damage, he would be surprised if the unit was still functioning for much longer.

He departed the lift near his quarters, a dirty rag in one hand as he tried to rub powdery soot from his fur and coveralls. He'd managed to replace the damaged heat transfer unit in the engine room with a spare on hand with only a minimum of difficulty, though he *did* lose a spot of fur from his right elbow trying to get to a solitary fastener in an out-of-reach area. What took the longest was the cleanup of the fire soot and the gray-white fire suppressant powder that was all over the room and in the equipment. He suspected he would be finding the stuff inside tool chests, engineering manuals and his clothing for weeks to come. Had it not been for Renny's volunteer help, he might still be there cleaning.

Merlin had ordered Patch to stay out of engineering for several days to let his burns heal. Tanis had treated him well, but now it would take time before the raccoon would be ready to work again. The captain had expected Patch to complain about being taken off-duty, but surprisingly, the engineer only nodded his head and said something about catching up on some reading. In the meantime, his brother would watch over the engines and make sure everything was set to go.

Pockets called up to the bridge and told Merlin the ship was ready to resume its course. The captain was on his bridge watch and was all too glad to have the engines back in operation. They were on their way and returning toward top cruising speed within moments.

When he stepped out of the lift, he thought he'd heard a high-pitched whine, but it was gone by the time the panel closed behind him. When he neared his cabin door, he turned his head in time to see Moss coming around the curve of the corridor. It was traveling much faster than he had really designed the flobot to go, and its single eye lens flashed in alternating colors. It made a soft *mewing* noise in distress as it zoomed by him and disappeared once again out of sight.

Pockets acted quickly. He moved into his cabin, grabbed a pair of insulated gloves off his personal work table and donned them in a hurry. He stepped back out into the hallway just as the tiny flying saucer rounded the corridor again.

"Come to papa," Pockets said quietly, raising his gloved hands to snatch it out of the air. Moss' avoidance system tried to maneuver it up and away from him, but the raccoon grabbed the battered leading edge of the unit and yanked down as hard as he could. However, the diminutive mechanic was neither strong enough nor heavy enough to counter the anti-gravity system he had designed and he was swept off his feet. The action surprised him and he cried out when it carried him along around the corridor.

"EEEEYYYYEEEE!" he yelled out.

Brand Arkram stepped out into the hallway from the galley where he and his band had been eating their supper and watched the masked critter desperately clinging to the flying disc.

"eeeeeeeeeeeeEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEeeeeeeeeeeee....."

Carsen looked out at the noise from behind his drummer and began laughing. When Moss came around in its next orbit a moment later, they saw a forced, '*I can handle it*' grin on Pockets' face. Moss flew close to the ceiling and the dangling raccoon almost lost his grip. He swallowed hard, trying to think of a *better* way to stop his wild ride as his feet ran along the wall when he got too close.

"What's going on?" Adam asked from inside the galley.

"Nothing to worry about," Brand said with a wide grin. Carsen glanced up and had an involuntary shudder go through him. When a Ryuji dragon smiled widely, it was a disconcerting sight.

Brand stood up straight and the horns on his head bumped the ceiling panel. He rolled up the sleeve of his right arm, raised a fist near his head and waited. It was only seconds before the raccoon-laden saucer rounded the corridor. Moss registered the danger in the huge, looming figure and immediately dropped its altitude. Pockets' knees bounced off the carpeted floor twice before it began to drag him along with it. He knew he should just let go, but now he found it difficult to release his death grip. By the time Moss reached the drummer, the friction on Pockets' knees had started to wear through the fabric of his coveralls with great heat.

The flying menagerie zipped sideways to pass the dragon and Brand drove his fist down with surprising speed upon the top of the mobile sentry system. Pockets landed hard on the floor and bounced to a stop against the wall. Moss tumbled to his side, its top smashed in and the antenna-whiskers bent. The unit issued a weak *mew* and then its eye lens went dark. A small access panel split open and several small parts littered the floor. Pockets opened his whirling eyes and glanced over at the crumpled heap. There was a scorched silver relay lying on the carpet beside it.

"So that's where he hid it..." the raccoon muttered in a daze.

Carsen knelt down next to the mechanic and took his arms gently. "C'mon, Mr. Pockets," he said with an amused smile as he pulled him up to his feet, "the ride is over."

Pockets looked up at Brand and weakly gave him a thumbs-up sign. "Thank you," he said hoarsely.

"Sorry about the damage," the dragon replied, "but it looked like you needed help."

"That's okay... I can build another if I can't repair this one." He leaned over and picked up the silver relay that had fallen out and hefted it in his small hand. "For now, I need to run diagnostics to find out why it started going nuts, and I think I have a clue right here."

"The trees and mountains are not as tall as they are on other worlds," Taro said quietly to her friend. "The heavy gravity of Hestra never let them form too high, though the forest wood is dense, but surprisingly lightweight."

Tanis nodded his head absently and gently stroked the fur between her eyes. They were fully clothed, but relaxed on the bed in her cabin with the lights turned down low. He sat with his back to the head wall and she lay on her back between his legs, her head resting in his lap and her eyes closed.

"Of course," the vixen continued to talk of her home, "as a child, I never knew our world was heavy-gravity. To me it was normal, having grown up there. I laughed and played, jumped into puddles and climbed trees just like any other kid," she said. "It wasn't until I got to go off-world that I found out that most inhabited planets had a lower gravity than ours. I was the first of my family to see another world in person."

"Ya know, in all the years we've known one another," Tanis said in a soft voice, "I don't think ya have ever told me about yer home."

"I've always been a private person about home," Taro replied. "Taquit is a small town and we didn't have a lot of the niceties of a metropolitan city. The Nichols family was poor and Pa barely made enough money in the quarry to support the lot of us. That's why I left," she said. "My best friend Tasha's family had the opportunity to move to Brandt while it was still a nice place to live, long before the Siilv deposits dried up. I talked them into letting me go along, lying that my family had given permission. Naturally, when we got to Brandt, my family found out I was with them and threw a fit. After weeks of silence, Pa finally contacted me and made me promise I would do something with my life."

The vixen opened her eyes and looked up at her friend. "Customer Liaison on a freighter is not necessarily what he had in mind, but the pay is more than he ever made and he says he's proud of me. I've only been back home three times since then... the last was five years ago when my youngest brother Kamui was born." Her eyes turned sad. "He's known about his big sister, but has never really met me."

"Try not to think about him right now," Tanis whispered as he resumed stroking her brow softly. "Tell me more about yer world."

Taro closed her eyes again. "Taquit is snuggled up in the curve of the Taq mountain range in the Arellanes prefecture," she continued. "We lived in the stunted shadow of Mt. Hayao. Framing the other side of Taquit is the Sachnesan Sea, a freshwater inland sea seven hundred miles across that fed the river that flowed through the middle of town. My siblings and I played in the water most of my life and spent many days and nights on the white sand beaches. As a youngster, I didn't know that a mining town was poor and I didn't really care until I got older."

The vixen chuckled to herself. "I'm talking about home again..." She cleared her throat and rubbed her cheek on Tanis' leg. "Two years before I left Taquit with my friend, I got to leave town with a group of friends and do some traveling around Hestra. Although low-level, most of the planet is mountainous, y'know," she said. "We only have one real saltwater ocean, but it's more of a gigantic river two thousand miles across that meanders around near the equator, dividing the planet into two large continents. There are other Fur species on Hestra, though foxes are the most prevalent." She looked up at Tanis with a smile. "You would fit in nicely there... providing you could stand up under your own weight."

Tanis chuckled, but otherwise didn't say anything. Taro fell quiet for a few moments and her eyes began to moisten as her thoughts returned to her family. "Even though I left my family behind, I still love them." She turned and rose up so she could lay her nose up against her friend's chest. Tanis held her close and her tears trickled through his fur.

"I miss my momma," she said barely above a whisper.

"I understand," he comforted, his voice a low purr as he began to gently rock back and forth. "Yer friend... are ya two still talking?"

Taro allowed a small smile to flit across her lips, "Not really. She started a company of her own a few years ago and last I heard was doing very well."

"On Brandt? Wow, she must be an incredible businesswoman."

"You have no idea," Taro replied.

"Oretille herdantes Taro ne shräelon nissei," Holly repeated for the second time. She wanted to make sure she got the foreign words correct. *"This was the only response your father gave when I relayed your message to him via our field correspondent in Taquit. Do you know what it means?"*

The tears flowed freely down the vixen's cheeks and she had to swallow hard before she could speak into the headset microphone. She was getting so tired of crying lately and she had a feeling that this voyage would see more of her tears before it was over. She was used to being the strong one, not the tenderhearted image she had presented lately. She wiped the tears from her cheeks and finally answered the newscaster.

"Yes," she replied, "I know what it means."

"Please, Taro," Holly said softly, *"Please tell me what your exchange means."*

The vixen shook her head and was about to tell the human to mind her own business, but decided to give only the simplest of answers. "We were saying goodbye, Holly. In a very personal way."

"Goodbye... Then you don't think a cure can be..."

"No, Holly, we don't," Taro said a little roughly. "Listen to me, please. I know you could probably use this as a personal interest story on your broadcast, but as a friend, *please...* just let us have our peace." The tears started flowing again. "My papa and I have said our goodbyes to one another. There is no more than that."

Two days later, a resonant beat pulsed from the Rec area, punctuated by a syncopated keyboard phrase. Below the odd mixture thumped a low growl of bass. Vetter was playing in the upper register to accompaniment from Brand while the keyboard system sang a

programmed track. The two were merely sketching, taking the music in no specific direction. Brand played alongside the sharp bass-line simply for his own pleasure.

Taro watched the proceedings from a lounge chair at the starboard wall of the room, having been invited along by the tiger. The vixen needed to get away from her quarters, her job... she just needed her mind on something else right now. Surprisingly, the band had not played very often during the course of the journey. Mostly they had spent time pursuing their separate interests. Adam had explained that even though the trio was the best of friends, they got enough of music—and each other—while in the studio and on tour. She had witnessed a verbal scuffle between the keyboard player and the bassist more than once, and began to understand where that statement had come from. Between Vetter and Singlebet, a healthy dose of compromise was always involved in the direction that the music went. Arkram, to his credit, either stayed out of their way or crushed their egos when necessary. He was both benevolent dictator and referee when necessary.

*“Ever since I drew my first breath – I had no one to call my own
It’s been a life of isolation, spending all of my time alone
I said I’d never feel again – I said I’d never cry
I said I’d never let nobody see all the emptiness inside
But I don’t know if it’s forever – And I don’t know if it’s tonight
But in the dark you’re shining like a star and I can follow that much light
Now the lonely road is not so long when you walk it with a friend
Now all because of you I’ve found – the strength to love again...”*

Taro tried to focus on the lyrics, tried to imagine the woman Vetter was singing to. She kept thinking about Hestra and it would not go away. Her brother Kamui had died the day before and her older sister was now sick with the virus. She was all cried out. She had not heard anything from Holly since then. Either the newscaster had no more information, or she was giving the vixen time to grieve.

“Hello, listeners, this is News Around the Alignment, and I’m Holly Harken of the Interstellar News Network. In a joyous sendoff from world officials, Earth has just launched its newest exploration vessel to probe the unknown reaches of space beyond the Planetary Alignment. The Zephyr left this morning on its maiden voyage out toward the Railon Star Cluster. I will give you more details of this historic flight later on in the newscast, but now I have late-breaking news from the Taquit Fever epidemic on Hestra.

“Dr. Ron Williams, working in conjunction with the Hestran Center of Disease Control, announced only minutes ago that the bio-safety Level Five virus which has already killed nearly a third of the Taquit population is,” she paused, reading over it again, “an engineered disease... Yes, folks, that’s right. The deadly Taquit Fever virus was created in a laboratory and deliberately set loose in a small mountain town. Hestran officials are now calling this a terrorist attack.

“In light of this new discovery, the government has also issued a statement that the numbers released to the media thus far have been guarded closely to prevent panic, but they are no longer able to maintain secrecy of this magnitude from the public. INN has received an official statement from Hestra that the death toll in Taquit now numbers... one thousand, seven hundred twenty-one individuals of a community of roughly three thousand.”

Holly stared at the pages for a long moment before continuing.

“Colonel Jack Card and the 429th Battalion were called in two days ago to keep anyone from entering or leaving the infected hot zone. There have already been several people shot while trying to escape the quarantine area and the bodies of all the dead have been burned to keep the disease from spreading further.

“This is catastrophic, folks, of the like this reporter has not seen in a long, long time. It is apparent that someone engineered this deadly virus and purposefully infected this town. Taquit is a poor mining town with no wealth of riches or information to ransom. Industry is sparse here, so officials are baffled as to the reason this mountain population was sentenced to death.”

The operation was called “Global Compassion.” Two pilots sat in a briefing room as a four-tier general, five senators and a host of other officers and lettered Furs explained the situation. Much information and elucidation, many catch phrases and aggrandizing clichés were pronounced, but in the end, the briefing came down to a simple order.

Two pilots filed out of the briefing room and rode to the hangar, where a fueled GO0S3 bomber sat, waiting to taxi out to the runway.

Taro Nichols fainted. She did not shriek or scream and yell or fly into a rage. She merely fainted. The shock was simply too much and she had to be carried from the recreation deck where the band had invited the whole crew up to watch the news.

It was later decided that her fainting had come at a good time, for just a few moments later Holly returned to the broadcast following a station break to reveal another late-breaking major announcement that had just been issued from the Hestran government.

The Taquit Fever virus was *airborne*, the worst possible method of spreading a high-level lethal virus and seasonal winds were expected within days. By the time INN had received the announcement and broadcast the news, the deed had already been accomplished. A Triterion V fuel air bomb—the most powerful non-nuclear weapon in the Hestran arsenal—was airdropped over the town. In less than three seconds, a fireball twenty miles in diameter engulfed Taquit. All the available oxygen in the immediate vicinity was ignited to the ferocity of a blowtorch and nothing, not even an underground shelter, survived the explosion.

Three thousand lives evaporated in an instant, including those who had miraculously not yet contracted the disease, along with the military personnel stationed to keep the area quarantined *and* the medical staff sent in to help them. The aerosol virus was almost certainly gone - along with everything and everyone.

Two hours had passed since INN’s fateful broadcast. Coverage on the situation continued, but there was nothing new to hear. Everything was repeated and analyzed over and over until Merlin finally shut off the vidscreen. The crew of the *Blue Horizon* was stunned and the vessel was almost a ghost-ship of quiet in the hours that followed. Eventually, the scattered crew slowly gathered again on the rec deck and the silence was broken only when Taro returned and reactivated the vidscreen without a word.

"Hello, listeners, this is News Around the Alignment, and I'm Holly Harken of the Interstellar News Network. It is unlikely that any world of the Planetary Alignment has yet to hear the terrible news of the finality of the Taquit Fever virus on Hestra. INN's field correspondent, Yariko Mansfield is on Hestra, reporting live from the Arellanes prefecture. She is in a small town thirty miles to the south of where Taquit used to exist. She and her team have taken video images that we will broadcast unedited for you. Please be warned that the scenes may be too graphic for some viewers, so discretion is..."

In a lower corner of the screen, the INN field reporter broke in and broadcast an interruption. *"This is Yariko Mansfield for INN. We have an emergency!"*

Holly's face contorted into annoyance for being interrupted and turned to look angrily at her own off-screen monitor. *"Yariko, please wait until..."*

"Open news channel 135.79, now!" Yariko demanded with eyes wide in fright. Viewers could see Holly's own expression as she complied with the channel change. The view altered, and in place of the INN reporters, the feral green eyes of a grinning black jaguar filled the screen. Merlin jumped to his feet, his hackles raised.

"For those who do not yet know me," the jaguar said in a smooth, but deeply accented voice, *"I am Sagan. How do you like my handiwork?"* Video imagery appeared suddenly in a window that covered the top left quarter of the screen. Sagan shifted to one side to allow viewers to see both him and the images simultaneously. The area that had existed between the curve of the Taq Mountains and the Sachnesan Sea was as black as the feline's slick fur. The view zoomed in to show close-up shots of the buildings, the machinery, and... what was left of thousands of charred bodies.

"What you have affectionately called Taquit Fever was a virus of my design. I am certain that others may claim credit for my works, so I'm transferring information about the genetic markers in the virus to you now."

"It... was... SAGAN?" Taro yelled at the screen.

"My virus has no cure. No antidote. Nothing, aside of firebombing – as you have discovered – can stop it once it has begun." The jaguar leaned closer to the camera. *"Some have wondered why it was Taquit. To what purpose was this horror unleashed here? Taquit was chosen... merely as a test-bed. In my opinion, the only one that matters, this test was a success."*

Sagan pulled back away from the camera and stood up straight with his arms crossed. *"I am not making any demands... yet. This is my weapon. I can... and I will... use it again, at a time and place of my choosing. When the time comes that I do have demands... you will listen to me... because you will know I that I will not hesitate to use my new weapon on an important target any less than I would of one like this that has no real value."*

Sagan laughed just once into the camera and the video zoomed in on his confident smile. He said nothing more, but crossed his arms, his eyes flashing dangerously and the lights from whatever studio he broadcasted from making the almost-imperceptible pattern spot shimmer. Scenes of destruction continued to play out in the video window open beside his image. INN regained control of the signal and the image of Sagan shrunk to a quarter of the screen and locked in frozen silence as the sobering pictures of Taquit were brought forward.

Taro stood up slowly, her fists shaking at her sides and a look of pure rage on her face. She stared at the grinning face of the black jaguar and screamed at the vidscreen, *"Sagan's taken everything from me! He murdered... Jiro! He's murdered... my family! Destroyed... my home!"* The vixen shook her right fist at the screen and vowed in a hissing voice, *"Sagan... you are dead! If I ever get my hands on you, I will rip your head from your shoulders!"*

In a fit of rage, she tried to charge the screen, but she tripped over Max and fell face-first onto the floor. Had she not tripped over the youth who had been on the carpet at her feet, she

would have smashed her fists through the vidscreen at the image displayed there. Instead, she curled up in a ball on the floor where she had fallen, screaming her rage and anguish vehemently into the carpet.

Max backed away from her as quickly as he could, his eyes wide in fear. He was a first-hand witness to rage and knew his health could be in danger were he to remain close to such strong emotions, but surprisingly the vixen didn't slash out at anything. He looked up at the vidscreen at the jaguar's face that just would not go away and swallowed.

How could anyone be so cruel?

In another part of space, Lennier Robbins watched as a myriad of expressions crossed his captain's face. Natasha Khasho's eyes fixed on the image of the ebony jaguar and she scowled as she listened to the report delivered in such smug malice and watched the scenes of destruction. Normally her entire bridge staff attended these meetings, but the boy Tim was still recovering from his daily physical therapy with Jazz.

She tapped off the vidscreen and looked up at the ceiling. The cougar sat silently with her, the thrum of the liquid crystal engines far away from wherever she was. Suddenly she snapped her eyes to look at Jape Devon across the table. "Talk."

The lightly colored felinoid looked up from a small screen, shaking his head. "The signal is genuine - he delivered the virus," Devon said. "Comparing the medical reports from Hestra to his transmission, the genetic marker is there, though difficult to find if you don't know what you are looking for. Without the key, the marker would not show up on any genetic scans at all, so the odds are that he's telling the truth."

"What is it?" she growled, more statement than question.

"It is a complex chain of amino acids that are harmless until they come into contact with blood iron life forms. That's... pretty advanced." Devon pursed his lips. Natasha's eyes sat like cold pearls beneath heavy brows. Sagan's face sat on the shimmering vidscreen, that cold grin still on his face.

Jape Devon had another thought, one that he did not voice. *There is no way that any normal Fur, human or even a computer could have done the necessary calculations for something like that.* The Kastan knew it was unlikely that any but his own species was capable of actually executing the complexities of this virus, and he did not want to be suspect.

"He's stolen our prototype Vault transport," she snarled, "and maimed our cabin boy." A number of low, hateful growls ringed the table. Tim was favored by the crew, and his near-death had left them all simmering for revenge. "And now he's killing my homeland."

"Now it's *personal*," Robbins added, his voice casual in the oppressive gloom of the staff meeting.

A day had passed and there had been no further news, and no more calls from Holly. With the recent events, it was likely the news correspondent had her hands full, but there was really no more reason to hear from her. Taro's family and hometown were gone. Nothing else could be done about it.

Merlin had searched all over the ship for his first officer and no one had seen her. She had not been in her quarters, on the bridge, on the rec deck, nor anyone else's cabin. When the

lupine captain finally found her, she was *inside* a storage locker in the cargo hold, huddled between shock cushions meant for unstable packages. They might have found her sooner if Moss was still functioning, but as such the captain had searched for her himself. She whimpered when Merlin's hand lamp shined in her eyes and he could see her matted face fur. He moved the light to the side and knelt down beside her.

"Taro," Merlin said quietly, "I know we consider ourselves civilized, but the ancestors of both our species have a tradition that I think would be appropriate." The vixen looked up at him through her tears and shook her head that she did not understand. Merlin reached out, took her hands in his own, and spoke one word. Taro nodded, put her arms around him, and pulled him into a heartfelt embrace.

"Yes," she said finally into his ear. "That's what I want to do..."

The recreation deck was illuminated only by ten candles that had been taken from the ship's stores. The musical band had cleaned up the room earlier for the occasion and it was ready for the observance. Only six individuals occupied the rec deck. Merlin, Samantha, Maximillian, Taro, Arktanis and Adam were the only participants of this particular ceremony. The non-canine types had gone to the lower decks to give them privacy.

The six sat on the floor in a loose circle with their eyes closed. No one said a word, as everyone got quiet and situated, and after a moment or two of silence, Merlin began.

He raised his nose to the air and began to sing in a low, throaty howl of his ancestors. There were no words to this song; it was only a voice to the stars to mourn the loss of loved ones. Within a moment, Samantha added her higher voice to the song, and it wavered a little as the emotion of what they were doing came out from her. Maximillian, though a stranger to the custom, understood the song and joined in a quieter voice. Adam was next, lending his tenor howl to the song, and Arktanis followed him in high, but smooth notes. Each participant continued to sing their song, and finally, with tears falling freely from her closed eyes, Taro lifted her head and howled her song of farewell to her family, friends and home.

*SS Blue Horizon PA1261
Captain's Journal*

For the past five hours, INN has been scrolling a list of names of the three thousand forty-two known to have died in Taquit. I can only assume that the Spatial Police Force is in turmoil as they try to figure out what to do about Sagan's crime. I have taken Taro off the duty-roster for now to let her grieve and she has taken the opportunity to spend more time with our passengers. Brand Arkram has agreed to help her work out her frustrations on the exercise mats on the recreation deck. He is possibly the only one on board who can withstand Taro's Hestran-born strength and seems to enjoy the sessions with her.

We should be arriving in Kantus in another week, and we are glad to be back within the boundaries of the Planetary Alignment proper. It is unlikely we will be making another trip to Sillon anytime soon, but for the sake of all of us, I sincerely hope the next one will be less eventful.

Merlin Sinclair, Captain

In his private chamber, Sagan watched as a shimmering projection displayed on a small tabletop before him.

"I'm not impressed," the sparkling visage purred. It was a man's body and he could see the face easily. Sagan was the only one that he would speak to directly, unabashed to reveal his identity. "Taquit was not *just* a test site and you gave away entirely too much information about the virus."

"What can they do?" Sagan growled, teeth glistening in a wide grin. "We are now the greatest threat to the Alignment and the so-called Pirate Queen has provided us with the means to travel from place to place as soon as we get the technology unscrambled."

"Yes," the mechanical voice intoned, "and you will deliver that technology to me. Now."

The jaguar sat back in his seat. "Yes, but I have something else to take care of first."

"You are taking an awful risk, Sagan," the voice commanded.

"I doubt that it will be ten minutes' work to destroy the *Blue Horizon*," he chuckled.

"I was not talking about the *Horizon*," came the cold reply, "I was talking about *me*." Joining the projected image was a second figure, swathed in a long, white robe that concealed its face. "You remember Conn, do you not?"

Sagan blanched, gripping the armrest of his seat and averting his eyes. He felt his heart race, faster and harder, beating in his breast like a drum. *Oh yes*, he remembered Conn. The exotic alien had prosecuted the grueling torture the jaguar had undergone, tearing his mind apart in hellish conditioning program that had made him helplessly submissive, impotent to act against his master. He had watched as Conn had mangled his sister, burned his mother alive and emasculated his father. The master had sat beside him, comforting him while the viciousness played out before young Sagan's eyes. All of his master's trusted servants underwent the interminable anguish, the psychological rape that bound them to his service.

"Your initiation was hell," the master snarled. "But that is a hell you will pray for if you defy me. Let them go about their business and deliver the compartmentalized Vault transport to me. *Now*."

His mouth dry, his limbs weak, Sagan clenched his eyes shut. It was probably true, but the jaguar ground his teeth, allowing the burning ball of acid in his belly to become anger. His humiliation turned to hatred against the most convenient adversary, and in a dark, twisted part of his mind, Sagan found a target for all of his fear and outrage.

THE BLOOD OF ARIS

By Ted R. Blasingame

SS Blue Horizon PA1261

Captain's Journal

There is nothing like a disaster to take away the fun of a potentially flawless trip. We left Kantus a week ago with a full hold of general supplies for the Consolidated Fishing Colonies of Crescentis, but now that has all become irretrievable space debris. While doing a routine maintenance scan of the hold, Moss ran a diagnostic on the cargo deck's control system - which opened the bay door. The rapid decompression ripped everything from the deck through the plasteel webbing and scattered it across known space outside of warp. Fortunately, no one was on the cargo level at the time or we might have lost them too. Not for the first time, Durant has threatened to jettison Moss and Pockets and let them both join our lost cargo among the stars.

Durant has given me a copy of the manifest, the amount of the lost supplies and equipment, not to mention the loss of our payment (and future business) when we arrive at Crescentis without the colonies' goods. Renny has altered our course and our heading is now back to the Anya star system we'd just left behind. Tanthe is the closest industrialized world where we might replace the supplies and try to save face with the Crescentis fleet. I can't say I know much about the world as I have only been there once before to a rural community, so I have to do a bit of research on the library computer.

Pockets has given me his troubleshooting report on Moss, but the results were inconclusive. Despite that he'd had to reconstruct the unit following its encounter with Brand Arkram on the way back from Sillon, he found no cause for this incident. Pockets' final opinion is that the fault lay in the control system of the hold. He is down there now running his own diagnostic on the system program, safely secure in load master's pressurized office should the doors open again.

Durant has also worked through our finances and has delegated a substantial portion to cover replacement of the supplies. It looks like we will merely break even this time around, without a profit to show for our voyage. I have promised Pockets to dock his pay the full amount the next time something costly occurs directly caused by the flobot.

The last couple of weeks have been rough for Taro. Results of the Taquit Fever epidemic on her homeworld have put her on edge. She is alternately depressed, furious, and heartbroken at the events taken place as a result of that devil, Sagan. I have never seen her this agitated and am wondering how she will react if we run into more trouble before she comes to terms with all that has happened.

Merlin Sinclair, Captain

"Are we within range yet?" Merlin asked as he shrugged into his flight jacket.

"We should be in communication with Tanthe in two minutes, Captain." Taro replied from her console.

Renny adjusted a flight control and then turned to the wolf. "What did you say this monarch's name was again?" he asked

Merlin frowned and answered, "King Adion Aris. According to the Planetary Alignment database, his family line has been the primary seat of authority for Tanthe since the planet converted to single government world under coyote rule over two hundred years ago."

Taro spied a flashing sensor light and then swiveled in her chair to face Merlin. "We're within range now, Captain," she said. "I've hailed their communication net and am waiting for a reply from the proper authority."

Merlin merely nodded and straightened the hat between his ears. Even though their Com was not equipped with a video signal, he simply felt his voice would sound respectable if he *looked* respectable.

The vixen put a hand to her headset and nodded to herself as she listened. She seemed mildly surprised and then responded by naming off the species of everyone in the crew. "Wolf, cheetah, bear, two foxes, two raccoons and two canines." Merlin watched her with an odd expression as she continued listening to her headset. "The wolf is male, our captain. Of the canines, one is female and the other is a young male." Another pause. "Sixteen."

Taro glanced over at Merlin and simply shook her head. She acknowledged something said to her and then turned back to the command seat with a surprised expression. "Uh... Captain, His Majesty the King is online to speak with you."

"The king?" Samantha repeated from the engineering console. "I think you mean the Prime Minister, who speaks on the king's behalf."

Taro shook her head, looked at the captain and held out her headset to him. "No, I've just been told that the *King* would like to speak with you."

"That's very odd." Merlin waved a dismissal to the headset. "Okay, overhead com, please." Taro tapped a control and nodded. "This is Captain Merlin Sinclair of the *Blue Horizon*," he said over the channel.

"I am King Adion Aris," said a rich baritone voice to the immediate attention of everyone on the bridge.

"Your Majesty," Merlin acknowledged slowly.

"*What is it we may do for you, Captain Sinclair?*" The coyote asked. "*We have checked your Planetary Alignment registry, Blue Horizon. You are listed as a commercial cargo hauler, but we find no record of any flight plans filed by your ship to our world.*"

"We were on our way from Kantus to a fishing colony on Crescentis," Merlin replied as smoothly as he could. "We suffered a mishap three days ago that resulted in the total loss of our cargo and we would like to negotiate with you to re-supply our shipment of general supplies."

"*What type of mishap?*"

Merlin frowned slightly. "A faulty computer diagnostic initiated an errant code on the bay doors and jettisoned everything from the hold. Fortunately, none of my crew was in the area at the time." He did not bother to add that the computer malfunction was likely caused by their mobile security system, Moss.

"I see," the monarch replied. "*Very well then, Captain. I will arrange to provide you with coordinates on where you should land. Upon arrival, I would like to meet with you personally, and I am quite sure we can reach an agreement on the supplies if we have what you need. I would also count it a personal favor if you would dine with me this evening.*"

"Dinner, sire?" Merlin gulped. He wasn't sure if he was up to dining with the ruler of an entire world. He wasn't even sure why someone as elevated as the king was even talking with him. Surely he didn't meet with *every* visitor to his world.

"That's right, Captain, as my guest. You may also bring up to four others with you."

The wolf sighed inwardly and replied, "Aye, King Aris. We accept your gracious invitation."

"Good, good," the coyote said merrily. "I look forward to meeting you. Now, I must see to the preparations for your arrival. Your communications officer should now be in contact with Sky Patrol for landing instructions. Good day, Captain Sinclair of the Blue Horizon."

The connection broke off before Merlin could say anything more. The king's words were confirmed as Taro's hands moved across her controls to transfer landing coordinates to their navigator. The wolf looked to Samantha and frowned.

"How about it?" he asked, looking at the three on the bridge with him. "Any of you want to join me to dine with a king?"

"I think I'll pass," Renny muttered.

Samantha glanced at him with a smirk. "You? Passing up a free royal feed, kit-cat?"

Renny twitched an ear and shrugged. "Free food or not, those affairs are a little too stuffy for me," he replied without rising to the bait to banter.

"I'd rather not be there myself," Merlin added with a heavy sigh. "I had originally intended to send Taro and Samantha in to make the negotiations for the supplies, but as you heard, my presence has been desired by the King, himself."

"Count me in," the Border collie said. "How should we dress for this?"

"Knowing the *Horizon's* a freighter, we won't be expected to have full dress outfits available to us for dining with dignitaries. Dress as nicely as you can, but I wouldn't bother with extravagance." He looked back at the others and sighed. "Ask around and see if we can get more volunteers," he said.

The transport arrived ten minutes after the *Blue Horizon* landed. Tanis opened the primary airlock and stepped out into the springtime air of Tanthe. The smell was clean despite their proximity to the city visible in the near distance, but that was likely due to recent rain. They had been directed to land on a pad in an open field just west of Aris Grand.

The captain wore a light blue open collar shirt with bloused long sleeves under a dark blue vest. His loose, black trousers were tucked into knee-high boots. As usual, his captain's hat was perched atop his head between his ears. Beside him, Taro stepped out into the sun and pondered the sight of the heavy forest nearby. She had been brooding over her hometown catastrophe on Hestra and Merlin had prompted her to join them for a change of scenery. She had first declined, but gave in when it looked as if Merlin would give her a direct order. If she was going to go, she wanted it to be her own decision. She looked stunning in a pair of tan pants and a loose white blouse. She took a step further and looked behind her. Samantha stretched her arms with a smile, inhaling inhaled deeply. She was attired in a beige jumper adorned with golden leaves drawn from shoulder to waist diagonally.

Hanging back in the shadows was Tanis, who wore light brown pants and a black short sleeve shirt with an open collar where the fluff of fur at his neck spilled out as if it were a scarf. The fennec fox scanned the far horizon suspiciously, wondering why this world's king wanted so much to meet them. He pointed toward a growing speck flying out toward them.

"There's our ride," he said. Approaching them was a transport that looked as if it were nothing more than a flat platform with guard rails to keep passengers from falling overboard.

At the front was a tiny control panel where the pilot stood regally in an outfit not unlike Merlin's, though a black cape lined with blue satin flowed briskly in the wind behind him.

The coyote landed the flying platform ten meters from the bulk of the *Blue Horizon*. Merlin led his small group across a rich grass pathway. When they approached the platform, the pilot bowed slightly and said, "I am Kal Navar. It is my honor to take you to the city of Aris Grand, Captain Sinclair, and to meet with his majesty, King Aris."

Not knowing exactly what was expected, Merlin executed a small bow as well. "Thank you, Mr. Navar."

"Kal will do, if you please." The tawny coyote smiled and opened a section of the railing to let them board the platform. "You need not bow to me, Captain," he added with a small chuckle. "I'm just the hired help, not the royalty."

"It's nice to make your acquaintance, anyway, Kal," Samantha said as she stepped up beside him. "We're not royalty, either."

Navar watched as each of the party boarded his craft and shut the gate behind Tanis, the last to step inside the railing. Before he returned to his instrument panel, he replied, "You may not be royalty, but be prepared to be treated as such. King Aris does not invite many off-world visitors to his table, so you are likely to have everyone's special attention."

"Why us?" Taro asked. "The *Blue Horizon* is only a common freighter."

"I'm sorry, but the King did not disclose his intentions to me."

"That's okay, Kal. We're just curious."

"Please hold on. The deck beneath your feet will be stable, but you never know when a sudden burst of wind might blow through."

When he visually confirmed that everyone had at least one hand on the railing, he tapped the panel before him. The platform lifted fifty meters off the ground with a soft hum and nosed back the way it had come, picking up speed as it moved.

Merlin made his way to the pilot's side, mindful to keep an eye on the coyote's cape fluttering wildly in the wind. "Can you tell us how we're expected to act for your king, Kal?"

The coyote didn't take his eyes from their destination, but answered with barely a shrug of his slender shoulders. "*Just be yourselves* would be the best advice I could give. Aris does not like deceit and he respects honesty. He already knows you may not be aware of royal protocol, so is prepared to make allowances for your ways for the occasion."

Tanis moved to Samantha's side as they floated over a tall grove of trees and their destination came clearer into view. The castle palace was as majestic as any they might see in a Terran storybook. The towers and parapets were all there, as well as a drawbridge and the classic moat. These were all for show, Navar explained, for although the exterior looked ancient, it was less than two hundred years old, and the interior of the place was high-tech and well-defended.

"How many dignitaries will we be dining with?" the wolf asked. "No offense, but I don't feel comfortable about being in a room full of people in a social class I don't belong in."

Navar smiled. "Don't fear for that, friend. As I hear it, only the King and his family will be present. You will see neither the Chancellor nor Prime Minister during your visit; both were hospitalized from a transport accident a few days ago. The dinner is to be informal."

"Probably best," Tanis said dryly.

As the platform rose above the weather-worn walls of the castle, the visiting party saw the gleaming marble fineness of the palace nestled in the center of the vast enclosure. A moderate city surrounded the palace and its colorful gardens, and they were surprised to realize that the castle walls encompassed the entirety of the metropolis as if danger was

expected without. They also saw large arrays of pulse cannons snuggled in the parapets and towers, some of which eerily followed the progress of the platform.

Navar took them directly to the palace and set them down on a landing pad in front of the capitol building's entrance. The marbled walls of the structure towered ten stories, and cut into the grayish white stone were images of what the party took to be past rulers of Tanthe. The top of the building was gently curved in a dome that also displayed carved images. Outside the large wooden double doors were crouched sculptures of wild coyotes, obviously harking back to their wilder ancestors.

Navar shut down the power on the transport and led the way up the steps to the palace doors. From behind the sculptures came two uniformed guards who looked mean enough to slay the visitors with merely a glance. Throughout the Planetary Alignment, coyotes were not known to be an especially aggressive race, but these two defied that description. Scars were prominent across their bodies and one guard's left eye was permanently closed.

"Who be these?" the one-eyed sentinel asked in a raspy voice.

"Palace Secretary, Kal Navar, delivering honored guests to his majesty, King Aris."

The second guard consulted a common slateboard datapak and nodded. "Kal Navar is scheduled to deliver up to five guests to the Library upon arrival," he announced formally. "You may proceed." He nodded to the other guard and they opened the doors in crisp unison. The small procession moved quietly in through the entrance, and when the panels shut tightly behind them, Navar chuckled lightly.

Samantha smiled and asked, "Why do you laugh?"

"That wasn't necessary," their guide explained. "They already knew I was bringing you into the palace. They're trying to show off for the guests."

"Well, I thought their presentation was nice," Samantha replied. "Their attempt was appreciated."

"I would let them know you said so," Kal said with a chuckle, "but I'm afraid their heads would swell up and burst!"

Merlin looked around the foyer they had entered. The floor was carpeted in deep brown and the walls were beige accented with golden trim in intricate designs. The low ceiling gave the room a cozy atmosphere and the lighting was provided from glowing panels. A few portraits adorned the walls and potted trees were in each corner but one. A solitary desk occupied that space, though it was vacant at the moment.

"This is my normal post," Navar said as he moved into the large cushioned chair behind it. He tapped a few keys on a terminal inlaid into the tabletop and then waited for a readout. "Just checking in with Security," he explained. An x-ray image of the room appeared on his monitor and he nodded to himself when no weapons were detected on any of the guests.

He stood up a moment later and walked to a solid wall. When he came within a meter of it, two panels slid aside to reveal a long, wide hallway. He stepped through and motioned to the guests. "This way, please."

Merlin moved forward with Samantha and Taro at his heels. Arktanis hung back a moment before following. "Marvelous!" he whispered to himself as the wall closed behind him.

The painted ceiling in this hall was high and expensive chandeliers provided bright illumination for their walk. It appeared their destination was at the far end of the palace. Every twenty meters was an ornate door, some labeled with the names of the rooms beyond, and twice they crossed a junction with another large hallway. Randomly placed potted trees and shrubs gave off fresh aromas that were pleasing to their noses.

As the group made their way and listened to Kal Navar recite a little of the history of the kingdom, they passed servants and others with business inside the palace offices. At one of the main crossroads, Merlin noticed an elegant young female in a fetching outfit watching them with obvious interest as they passed. She might have been seventeen or eighteen and undisciplined, the wolf thought to himself, for the servant's duties were apparently forgotten.

He nearly bumped into Samantha when the group stopped in front of him. He shook himself from his musings and noted that the door before them was labeled "Royal Aris Library." Navar opened the panel and led them inside a chamber of polished wood shelving, lush carpet, and the leather bindings of books new and old. Large oil paintings resided on easels in the corners and depicted the King's Heroes from nearly three centuries of Tanthean history.

Once the door was shut behind them, Merlin immediately noted from the intense silence of the library that it had been soundproofed against outside noise. Several large chairs and lounges were situated in random places for the readers' comfort. At the moment, Navar and his charges were the only occupants of the book-filled chamber.

The coyote motioned them toward the seats. "King Aris will take his audience with you in here, but it may be a few minutes. Feel free to make yourselves comfortable." With that, Navar gave them a short bow and left the room.

Merlin took a seat next to Samantha on a lounge and smiled. Taro strolled over to one of the huge paintings and idly studied a coyote identified as Prince Tanager who was adorned in fancy garments of a past age. Tanis walked to a window and gazed out onto a neatly arranged central courtyard where gardeners tended the lush plant life of a hedge maze.

Only a few moments passed before the door opened again. King Adion Aris walked in with a wide smile. Every article of the slender coyote's clothing was the same shade of burgundy, including the large jeweled ring on his finger. He wore no traditional crown, but rather a circular amulet with the family crest on a golden chain resting upon his chest denoted his sovereign leadership. He looked to be in his late fifties and his gaze was clear and penetrating. Everyone stood up and faced the monarch as two guards in uniforms of dark green moved in behind the king and stationed themselves on each side of the door.

Merlin removed his hat and gave the monarch a slight bow.

Aris offered his hand to the wolf. "My dear Captain, welcome to Tanthe and the capitol city of Aris Grand."

"Thank you, your Highness," Merlin said with a slight nod before taking the coyote's proffered hand. He turned toward his small party and introduced each of them to the king as they gathered around him. "This is Samantha Holden, Taro Nichols and Arktanis TeVann." The king shook hands with each of them; he seemed to enjoy the physical contact. When he looked at Tanis, he twitched his whiskers.

"TeVann?" he asked.

"Yes, Sire," the tan fox replied with a slight bow. The king nodded as if remembering something, but then stepped back to face Merlin.

"I know it was a great loss to lose your cargo, Captain, but for me I am pleased to have your company." King Aris sat in one of the plush chairs and everyone but the personal guards followed his example by taking their own seats.

"Thank you for receiving us so warmly," Merlin replied, "but I do not understand why such a high-level person such as yourself would want to meet common freighters."

Aris continued smiled. "Please indulge me, sir."

"Aye, your Majesty. As you wish."

The monarch nodded. "Do you have a list of the goods you need?" he asked. Merlin reached into an inner pocket of his jacket and removed several sheets of paper folded together. He handed these to the monarch. As the coyote browsed the list, a servant entered the room with a rolling cart containing glasses and a chilled wine bottle. The coyote servant poured drinks for all. Merlin tried to refuse, for he did not drink liquor, but a glass was placed in his hand anyway. He didn't want to cause a stir, so he merely held the glass without sampling the amber liquid.

The king looked up from the papers and said, "I can provide you with everything on this list, Captain Sinclair, though it will take a day or two to gather some of the supplies from the different provinces on my world."

"Thank you, your Highness. I'm sure the price of your goods will be fair."

The monarch folded the pages and snapped his fingers. One of the guards behind him bowed. "Take this to Kal Navar and have him initiate the acquisitions."

"Yes, Sire." The guard took the list and promptly left the room.

The king looked back at his guests. "Navar will take care of this for you, Captain. If you will honor me with your company for three days here in my palace, I will consider a substantial *discount* on the shipment."

Merlin swallowed and tried to make his smile appear genuine. Three days would put them further behind schedule, but the Moss accident had already done that on its own. He also didn't really want to stay longer than necessary in the presence of one who governed an entire world. The *Blue Horizon* had been to nice places before, but had never had this kind of reception. It made him uneasy, but his business seemed to depend upon the situation this time.

"We would be honored, your Majesty," he answered to the king's delight. Samantha leaned over and whispered into his ear and he nodded.

"May I request approval for shore leave for the rest of my crew, your Highness? If we're to spend several days here, they would appreciate the opportunity to tour your grand city."

King Aris nodded, pleased with the request. "Of course, dear Captain. It is good for the local economy when guests spend time with us."

"Thank you, Sire."

After Aris had dismissed them, Merlin contacted Durant to inform him of the king's permission to allow shore leave to the rest of the crew and that transportation to and from the ship would be provided. Taro and Samantha followed a servant to their assigned quarters and Tanis arranged to be taken back to the ship to get a few items.

Merlin was interested in the architecture of the palace and wandered randomly down the corridors. He didn't notice the figure quietly following him everywhere he went, but after a short time he had the feeling of being watched. Not surprising, he thought, since everyone probably knows everyone else by sight, and although wolves were a similar species to coyotes, his dark coloring made him stand out among those who went to and fro throughout the palace.

He soon felt the need for relief and was distressed at the thought since he did not know the method or customs used here. He decided quickly that it would be best to swallow his pride, show his ignorance and just ask someone.

He looked around and gulped when he realized there were only four people in sight and all were female. He swallowed hesitantly but had to ask someone. Only one of the women was actually looking his way, a young servant girl trying to hide from him in a recessed

doorway. *Ah*, he thought, *my shadow*. He walked toward her and, knowing she had been seen, she stepped out into the corridor looking embarrassed at being discovered. Merlin recognized her as the curious girl who had watched his party when they had first arrived, though she was now clothed in a peach blouse that she filled nicely and tan riding breeches with black, knee-high boots.

Oh well... he thought, *might as well ask her...*

"Pardon me," he said, "but I am a stranger to this place and I would appreciate it if you would direct me to... uh..." His words lumped into his throat. *How does one ask such a thing?*

The girl tilted her head to the side curiously, awaiting him to finish. She was amused by his apparent distress, but did not know its cause. If she could read the wolf correctly, he looked self-conscious.

Merlin gulped and leaned forward to whisper his need to her. No sense in letting everyone around them know. "I... uh... need..." The girl turned her ear toward him. Merlin swallowed again and finally whispered, "Pardon me for being blunt, miss, but I need a place to... uh... relieve myself."

The girl laughed in amusement, but politely hid her face behind her hands. Merlin frowned and wondered if he could crawl off into a hole somewhere. Perhaps he could hold on long enough to make his way back to the ship.

The girl wiped her eyes and said, "I can show you the way, mister wolf. Follow me." She laughed again and took a swift pace back the way he had come from. Merlin smiled nervously and trotted after her. Fortunately it was not far. She led him through an ornate door into a sleeping chamber, past a frilly bed piled high and surrounded by fluffy pillows. A male servant eyed the wolf suspiciously as the he followed the girl through the room, but she continued on as if not seeing him.

She stopped before another ornate door and opened it for him. "In here," she said.

"Thank you so much, miss," Merlin gasped. He went in and shut the door behind him. Thankfully, the facilities were similar to what he was used to so he would not have to take precious time to figure them out. *Good. Not a moment too soon.*

He emerged a few moments later, clean, refreshed and ready to resume his tour of the palace. His savior sat on the edge of the bed and the other servant was now absent. The room seemed mighty fancy if it was the servant's personal chamber, but then again, everything in this place looked fancy to him. Merlin felt humbled when he approached her, quietly noting the aromatic perfume in the air.

"My apologies and my thanks, miss," he said with a smile. "I don't know what I would have done without your help."

The young girl smiled merrily and her eyes twinkled. "No doubt you would have embarrassed yourself in a different way, dear wolf." She chuckled again.

"No doubt..." he replied with a frown. He leaned forward and gave her a quick lick on the cheek in traditional thanks. She drew back in surprise and touched the spot he had licked her. Her lips parted and Merlin silently noted how pretty she was.

"I am Captain Merlin Sinclair," he said, standing up straight with his right hand on his chest. "If my lovely benefactor will tell me her name, I will let your master know you were a great service to me."

"My master?" The girl choked back a laugh. Her eyes widened and she dropped her hand from her cheek to her lap.

"Or whomever you report to," the wolf added.

She motioned toward a plush chair beside the bed. "I think you'd better sit down, mister wolf."

Merlin shook his head. "I'm sorry, but I think I should leave before I get you into trouble."

She laughed again in a manner that seemed more fitting to her age than her previous words had. "Please sit. I like your company."

Merlin hesitated a moment and finally took the seat. "Well, maybe a few minutes will be okay." He looked rather stiff sitting there and the girl laughed again.

"You could start off by giving me your name," the wolf prompted, wondering what joke she was pulling on him.

She stood up and extended a hand toward him. He took it gently and looked up at her with a look of puzzlement. She smiled and said, "I am Tinara Shei Aris, second daughter of Adion Aris, monarch of this world."

Merlin suddenly felt light-headed. *He had licked the cheek of the King's daughter!* If he had ever felt like fainting before, it was now - but he was afraid he would wake up with his head on a chopping block if he did. He swallowed multiple times but could not bring down the dreadful lump in his throat.

The wolf wiped his hat from his head and bowed toward her in fearful shock. "I...I...I... I'm sorry, milady. I...I...I... was uh... uhm... Please forgive me, I'm terribly sorry for... uh... for..."

The princess put her free hand on his head and ran her fingers through the fur between his ears. "Relax, captain wolf," she said. "I'm not going to hurt you... or report you to my *master*." She chuckled and sat down on the bed facing him. She gently touched the spot on her cheek where he had licked her and said almost shyly, "I like you."

He managed to meet her eyes and said, "I, uh, I don't think I've ever humiliated myself quite like this before, Princess. Please forgive me."

She laughed, something she had done a lot of at his expense, and shook her head. "Listen to me, Captain. *I forgive you*. It's okay. I'm not mad, nor insulted. Now, please, relax."

Merlin finally smiled. "When I noticed you following me, I thought you were a curious servant wanting a glimpse at the visitors."

"No," she replied, "just a curious *princess* wanting a glimpse at the visitors."

"We would have met during tonight's dinner, wouldn't we?"

"Yes," she answered, "but I was impatient."

Merlin started to relax a little under her easy manner, but he was still flushed. He was light-headed and blinked rapidly several few times.

"Is something wrong?" the princess asked.

"It's rather warm in here, your Highness," he answered with a hard swallow. Panting, he began to fan himself with his hat. "Would you allow me to leave your presence to get some fresh outside air?"

"No," she countered. "Now that I have you, I don't want to let you go. However, I would appreciate your escort outside in the courtyard air."

Merlin smiled and nodded. "I accept."

Both stood up and Merlin discovered his legs still worked, despite his fright a moment ago. He followed the princess from the room, slipping his hat back on, and walked beside her down the corridor, ignoring the curious glances by the real servants.

They passed through a glass door that slid aside at their approach and the fresh aromas of the courtyard flowers were welcome to the wolf's senses. He blinked at the bright sunlight and smiled, taking in a deep breath. Much better. The princess put her arm in through one of

his and led him along a cobbled walkway. Merlin was very aware of the surprised looks from the gardeners at seeing the daughter of their king on the arm of a stranger. Tinara smiled openly and nodded as they passed.

"I don't know if this is such a good idea, Princess," Merlin said, indicating their arms.

"Why? I like it."

"Because word of it might get back to the King and I do not want to jeopardize my ship's trade with him. We are still in negotiation for your goods."

Tinara laughed. "You are safe with me, dear wolf. My father has been looking for a mate for me and it is not uncommon for me to be seen in the company of males. He has no sons and my elder sister and her husband have produced only more daughters for the royal lineage."

"And his Highness wants a male heir?" the wolf replied nervously.

"Uh huh... Unfortunately, there's been no one for me on all of Tanthe, despite many suitors." She looked up at him and smiled. "I think father would be pleased with you."

Merlin stopped and stared down at her. "Me?" he said hoarsely. "Is that why he insisted on meeting us personally? He *did* inquire about the canine-types in my crew before we were allowed to land."

"I do not know what my father's motives are," she answered with a smile, "but I would not put it past him."

Merlin swallowed and looked at her. "How can you be sure I'd be an acceptable mate for you when you don't even know me?" he asked.

Tinara laughed again and hugged his arm tightly. "Silly wolf, I did not say I had chosen you as my mate. I was only explaining why my father would not mind me walking arm in arm with you."

"Oh..." Merlin replied, aware he had just made a fool of himself in front of her - again. The princess chuckled and beckoned him on. They began walking again along the winding path through immaculately sculpted bushes and trees. The temperature was comfortable and only a slight breeze wafted by pleasantly.

"Tell me about your life as a merchant trader," Tinara said.

Merlin shrugged his shoulders and smiled. "Well, Princess, there's not really much to tell. I'm the captain and primary pilot for our ship during the main watch, and..."

"The captain... *and* pilot?" she interrupted, wide eyed.

"Yes, I'm the captain," he answered. "As for being the pilot, my entire crew rotates at the controls, so none of us get too tired on the long journeys between systems. But for emergencies, I usually take the center seat, myself."

She leaned into him as they walked and the wolf was momentarily distracted by her perfume in the midst of the garden scents. "What kind of emergencies, Captain Sinclair?"

"In case one of us is injured when we go into battle, then -"

"Battle?"

Merlin frowned. "Against pirate raiders, Princess. They like to prey on merchant ships like ours. Because of this, we have just upgraded the engines on my ship, the *Blue Horizon*," he said, "but every time I'm ready to make much-needed repairs to other, older systems, we take another financial hit like our loss of cargo this time."

"Oh..." They walked on a few moments more and then she looked up at him. "Would you honor a request for me?" she asked in a soft voice.

"I will try, Princess. What is your request?"

"That you would call me by name, and not by title," she replied.

"Aris?"

"No, silly wolf. *Tinara*."

Merlin smiled and replied as he ducked under the low-hanging limbs of a willow tree, "I didn't know it was allowed to be so direct with royalty, Princess... *Tinara*."

She gave a big smile. "It is allowed if the royalty desires it, Mr. Sinclair."

The wolf was feeling more comfortable with the young coyote and returned her smile openly. "Would it be out of place for me to ask you to return the favor?"

"You mean call you by your first name?" She seemed delighted.

"Yes, please." They entered an area of the courtyard garden with high hedges. She led him into a growing maze and held onto his arm as if he might run away were she to release him. As they wound through the organic labyrinth, they passed stone benches, marble sculptures or flower pots at every third turn of the path. They came upon several branches in the walkway, but the princess led them on through the warren with the knowledge of their destination.

"You're nice, Merlin." She giggled as she said his name. "I've never really known a wolf personally before. I know our original species were usually enemies, but I can't find anything about you that I do not like." They resumed walking and rounded a corner. The princess stopped suddenly when they came upon a couple on one of the many stone benches. It was Kal Navar and Taro, and they were oblivious to the intruders to their privacy. The coyote's hand was inside Taro's jumper as they alternately kissed and licked one another's muzzles.

Merlin was caught by surprise and somewhat embarrassed for his friend, but smiled at the obvious pleasure the vixen was having. After her recent grief, it was good to see her with a smile again. He looked over at *Tinara* and saw the dark scowl in her eyes. She purposely scuffed her feet and the reaction was immediate. Navar looked up in shock at the royal princess and the coyote jerked his hand from Taro's blouse with enough force that they all heard the fabric rip. The fox grabbed the torn section of her clothing with both hands and looked up with wide orange eyes.

"You ... your Highness!" Navar exclaimed, jumping to his feet to execute a quick bow.

"Kal Navar," *Tinara* acknowledged in a voice dripping coldly. The look in Navar's eyes told Sinclair she was someone whose respect was highly valued by the servant, and he had likely just lost any favor he might have had with her. Taro merely looked embarrassed at being caught. Merlin winked at her with a small smile that went unnoticed by the coyotes.

After glaring at Navar for a silent moment more, the princess slid her hand into the wolf's and said, "Come along, Merlin."

The princess led him away through the maze in silence, at a pace quicker than what they had previously moved. At length she slowed and stared down at her feet. They came upon another of the stone benches and she motioned for them to sit down. She turned and stared at the wolf steadily, and then an unexpected smile crept across her lips, erasing the momentary fury. She looked back the way they had come and then back into his amber eyes.

"Merlin..." she said in a lilting voice. "What they were doing back there..."

"I'm sorry, your Highness," the wolf said hesitantly. "I don't think Taro meant any disrespect to your court."

The princess put a finger to his lips. "I'm not concerned with her personally," she said, "but about what they were doing together."

"Yes?"

She leaned closer to the wolf so that their noses were only an inch apart. "Do that with me."

Merlin blinked twice and swallowed. "Do that with *you*?"

"You like me, don't you?"

"Yes, Princess, but –"

"Tinara, remember?"

Merlin closed his eyes just a moment and then looked around them. They were alone, and although there were windows from the surrounding buildings visible, he could see no one through their mirrored surfaces. He looked back at the princess and tried to think of a way to gently turn her down.

"Please?" she asked in a whisper. Her eyes had a soft expression and she looked as if there was an inner glow of anticipation within her.

Merlin nodded silently, resolving to limit his touches only to her lips. He could not bring himself to be as intimate as Navar had been with Taro. He moved closer and gently licked the side of her muzzle. She leaned into him pleasantly and coaxed him to kiss her directly on the lips. Although he complied, she was pretty and he had to concentrate to keep himself from giving in totally to her charms.

Adion Aris now wore all green. He looked out from the third floor window of his office chambers into the courtyard and idly let his gaze wander through the pathways at the gardeners and guests to his palace. After a moment he recognized Kal Navar leading a vulpine visitor through the maze by the hand; they seemed in a great hurry. The king smiled to himself. Navar was a good coyote, but he usually kept to himself. It was good to see him with a female, even if only a visitor.

He looked around and then saw his youngest daughter. She was with the visiting wolf on a park bench near one end of the maze. He had intended to introduce them during the evening meal as part of his strategy, but it appears they had already found one another. He smiled at the scene, but *then* he saw what they were doing. He reached into a drawer of a small credenza beside the window and drew out a small spotting scope. He put it up to his eye and focused the lens upon his daughter.

"Well, well..." he said to himself. The wolf's hands were around Tinara's slender waist and hers were around the back of his neck as they enjoyed a kiss. The king watched a moment more and put the eyeglass away. He walked to his desk and sat in the chair before a small monitor. He touched a control and a face appeared on the screen.

"Yes, your Highness?" the female on the monitor answered.

"Shenna, has my visitors' manifest request been initiated?"

"Yes, Sire. Kal Navar put it in an hour ago with Supply. It will take three days to gather the goods here to the capitol."

"Three days..." the king muttered. He thought a moment and then said, "When Navar gets back to his desk, tell him to slow the process. A day or two would be sufficient."

"Slow it, your Majesty?"

"Shall I arrange to have your ears examined, Shenna?" he asked tonelessly.

"No, Sire. I'll see to it Navar understands as soon as he arrives."

"Good." He touched the control again and the screen went dark. He rubbed his hands together and stood up. He walked to the door and left his office after a quick glance back toward the window.

As they walked through the long corridors once again, Tinara was lighthearted, happy and had her arm wound through Merlin's as her tail wagged behind her. She had introduced him to a number of the staff, all the while clinging to him with smiles and giggles, but they were now in a different part of the palace and he did not think he would have been able to find his way back if she decided to leave him. They had come in from the maze on the opposite end of the courtyard than they had entered. This way was less traveled, it appeared.

"Tell me, Merlin," the princess said. "Why you didn't touch me the same way Kal did to that friend of yours?"

The wolf tilted his head as he looked at her. "One step at a time, sweet Tinara. I don't get intimate as quickly as Taro does, especially in public where someone might be watching from a window."

"But you do like me?"

Merlin laughed. "You're a bit young for me, but yes, I do like you."

"A bit young?" she repeated with an arched eyebrow. "I'll have you know I am a legal adult!"

"That was never in question, but you are still the king's daughter."

Tinara pulled him to the side of the hallway to a simple door. She opened it, switched on the light and then they went inside. She shut the door behind them and locked it.

Merlin surveyed the guest room suspiciously. They were in a small bed chamber that was apparently unused and of simple design. The bed was a four-poster with a sheer canopy curtain that was drawn aside and a pair of high-backed chairs flanked it on either side.

"Why are we here behind a *locked* door, Tinara?"

"Just providing us with some privacy."

The wolf was worried now. He had picked up her scent earlier and realized she would be in heat very soon. He would have to handle this diplomatically, since he was not about to put his neck on a chopping block for a bit of physical pleasure with the daughter of a planet's ruler.

The princess looked at him slyly and swished her tail. "Whatever you do while you are here," she said in a quiet voice, "just remember you are *not* to tickle me..."

The wolf looked at her strangely. *What an odd thing to say*, he thought to himself.

When he did not respond, she sighed and said, "Did you hear me? I said, '*don't tickle me*'..."

Merlin raised his eyebrows leaning in closer to her, his nose almost touching her own so that he held her undivided attention. "You mean, don't do *this*?"

He boldly grabbed her sides and she shrieked. Undaunted, he playfully danced his fingers about her ribs as she screamed out in laughter. He hoped she had chosen this particular room in the palace for its seclusion. It wouldn't be good if someone recognized the princess' voice screaming from behind a locked door.

Tinara jumped away from his fingers and fell on her back upon the bed through the sheer curtain. The wolf didn't give her time to regroup. He threw caution to the wind, leapt up, straddled her legs and pinned them to the mattress. He faced away from her and began removing her knee-high boots.

"Oh, no you don't!" she exclaimed. "*Not the feet! Not the feet!*"

Merlin mimicked an evil cackle as he managed to work one boot halfway off her foot. "Too late, Princess. You asked for it and now you're going to get it!" Her boot hit the floor and

he managed to get the other one off without much more trouble. She wriggled her feet frantically, but he held them fast while he removed the dainty socks she wore beneath the boots.

Tinara sat up and grabbed at the wolf's ribs, but he only shook his head with a smile. "No good, your Highness. I'm *not* ticklish." He pulled a finger along the sole of her right foot and she inhaled sharply. "Sensitive, is it?" he asked. He thumped the tip of his tail against the side of her head and she tried to grab it with a snicker.

Sinclair tickled both feet with his fingers and she shrieked behind him. She wrapped her arms around his sides and tried to reach his hands to stop him, but her arms were not long enough. Merlin only doubled his efforts and she lay back on the bed screaming with her hands pressed up to her eyes. She laughed uncontrollably and bucked when he moved his fingers to her toes.

Giggling hysterically, she squirmed to get free but she was too weak from laughing to do much. Merlin focused his attention on the underside of her toes, where she seemed to be the most ticklish. Then, after a couple of minutes of the torture, he slowed and then stopped. Tinara continued laughing for a minute more and then finally wiped the tears from her eyes to look up at him. He stared at her over his shoulder and his mischievous expression put her into another fit of giggles.

Merlin got up off her legs and sat on the bed next to her. She panted and little chuckles would hit her from time to time. He lightly grabbed her right knee and she shrieked again without thinking. She snared his hands and held them as she sat up beside him.

"Merlin... Sinclair," she said between heavy panting breaths, "I am... *so* hot..."

He laughed and asked, "Want me to turn on the ceiling fan?"

Tinara half closed her eyes and shook her head. "That is not what I meant, my wolf..." Merlin became suddenly aware of the strong scent in the air, and his sensitive hearing picked up her rapid heartbeat in the quiet of the room. She leaned closer to him and her eyes narrowed further.

"Tickling my toes is my big turn-on," she panted softly. "Now you must continue what you have started..."

Merlin's senses were swimming from the scent that permeated the room and he shook his head several times to clear his thoughts. It took a great effort, but he managed to put his arms around her in a soft embrace, instead of what he *wanted* to do. The embrace she returned was stronger, clutching, and her hands started to explore.

His nose was near her left ear and he nuzzled it gently. "Tinara... I can't do this."

The princess didn't seem to hear him at first, but then she slowly calmed. She said nothing for several long moments. He could feel the tension dissipate and then she pulled away from him to look into his eyes with a halfhearted smile.

She swallowed, sighed and then said, "I know, I know — daughter of the king..." She licked the side of his muzzle and then kissed him long and hard with her arms tight around the back of his neck to keep him in place. Merlin gasped for air when she finally pulled away.

"Thank you," she said after a quiet moment. "No one's ever discovered my turn-on toes before."

The wolf smiled his mischief again. "Well, you *did* prompt me to tickle you," he reminded. "You can't deny that!"

She chuckled. "I confess that I enjoy being tickled, but I didn't think you'd remove my boots!" The two of them laughed and the princess finally put her arms around him softly, snuggling up to his chest. "I don't want you to leave, Merlin Sinclair," she said quietly.

"According to your father's predictions, it will be a few days before our cargo is assembled," Merlin replied. "I'll be here that long, anyway."

Tinara closed her eyes and said in a voice too quiet for even the wolf's sensitive hearing, "Perhaps longer..."

At that moment, Merlin's stomach grumbled lowly. He laughed and said, "Sorry, it's been a while since breakfast." The princess sat up looked over at an ornate clock across the room. She bit her bottom lip as she noted the time.

"If we hurry back to our rooms, I think we can be ready in time to dine with my father and your friends."

"How much time do we have?" Merlin asked.

"Just under an hour."

"Then we'd better hurry!" Merlin handed her a boot and picked up the other one, forgetting the socks. He couldn't resist, though, and gave her bare toes a quick tickle. She squawked and slapped his hand away playfully.

"Stop that, or we'll never make it on time!" she scolded half-heartedly.

Merlin grinned and shook his head. "Deadlines..."

King Aris was pleased with the spread of food set out on the long table. There was more than enough to satisfy them all. Merlin, Samantha and Taro stood beside him as he made introductions.

"I present to you my family," the king said. Three female coyotes faced them all dressed in fine gowns. One of them was near in age to the king, one in her thirties and the youngest of eighteen. "This is my wife and queen, Sechsi, my eldest daughter, Carina, and my youngest, Tinara." The three guests bowed toward them.

"Pleased to make your acquaintance," Merlin said politely.

"And I yours," Sechsi replied in a soft voice.

Aris turned to Carina and asked, "Where is Dolan? I requested your husband's presence, as well."

Carina motioned to the air with a hand and answered, "He left this morning with our three girls for the Misty Amusement Park in Tamaranth. They were on their way before our guests ever arrived."

"I see." The king indicated for them to take their seats. Servants moved in quickly to tend the chairs for the ladies and Aris gave his wife and daughters a pleasant smile. Taro looked up at the broad-shouldered coyote that held her chair for her and gave him a warm smile. Samantha was seated beside her with Merlin next to the Border collie.

"Will the fennec who joined us this afternoon dine with us tonight, Captain?" Aris asked as the servants moved around the room to attend the family and guests.

"My apologies, your Majesty," Merlin replied. "He accepted the offer to see your city and has not returned as yet."

"A pity," Sechsi said as the servants moved in to fill their glasses and bring in laden plates. "He will miss an excellent meal."

"Indeed," Samantha agreed. "It looks absolutely wonderful!"

"So, Captain Sinclair," the king said with a friendly smile, "What did you think of our city?"

Merlin glanced quickly to Tinara and then back to the king. "I spent most of the day touring your palace and the courtyard, Sire. I never made it out into the city itself."

"Did you see anything you liked?"

Merlin's eyes darted once again to the younger princess and the cleavage her gown revealed before he returned his gaze to Aris — a subtle action that did not go unnoticed by the monarch. "Yes, your Highness," he replied. "You have a lot of beauty and beautiful things in this place."

The king looked over at Merlin's interest and asked, "Are you all right, Tinara? You are usually quite the chatterbox at the table."

She looked up shyly as a servant filled her glass. "I'm fine, father. I just have some things on my mind." Under the table, she had slipped off one of her elegant shoes and had begun to rub her toes gently against the wolf's ankle.

"Indeed? Anything you'd like to discuss?"

"No, not really."

"All right, then." Aris returned his attention back to the captain as Sechsi asked Taro about the Tanthean dress she wore. It was a local design and the vixen explained she had accidentally torn her own garments while in the garden courtyard; one of the servants had provided it for her.

As the talk went on and they began their meal, Merlin and Tinara exchanged another long glance and smiled at one another. The king watched them covertly as thoughts swirled through his brain. He kept his expression neutral, but continued to watch them.

Merlin shut the door to the guest room he had been given and switched on the light. The bed was a large four-poster with a sheer fabric curtain around it underneath a matching canopy, very similar to the one in the chamber Tinara had taken him to earlier. A small stand was next to the bed and a massive mirror in an ornate frame hung on the wall. There was a plush velvet chair in two of the corners, a live potted fern in another and expensive tapestries on the walls.

He walked to the closet and found an assortment of garments inside he noted were all in his sizes despite that he had not given anyone his measurements. He peeked into the bathroom and was delighted to see a sunken marbled bathing area with the top edge at floor level. It had been a long time since he had had an immersion bath. There were only shower cubicles in the small cabins on the *Blue Horizon*.

The meal with the monarch's family had not been as stuffy as he had feared. Although he did not get to visit much with Tinara, her presence had been nice, especially in that stunning gown she had worn. The king and queen had both been interested in talking with him, more so it seemed, than with his companions. It was likely due to his position of authority. Aris had seen especially interested in the genetics of his family history.

Merlin had wanted to speak with Tinara when the meal was over, but Aris had requested her presence in private. Instead, he and his shipmates had wandered back out into the garden for a bit. Although he had tried to hide it in the king's presence, Merlin was irritated because he had been told that due to some of the specific items on the manifest, their cargo could take a day or two longer to assemble as originally thought. He was afraid the delay might cost him his next delivery, as they were already behind schedule. Cursing Moss' existence beneath his breath, he and Samantha headed back to their assigned rooms while Taro sought out Kal Navar.

Merlin thought again about the bath and smiled. He began to unfasten the clasps on his shirt, but stopped when he glanced at the mirror. The whole business of being the king's guest made him cautious, so he turned out the light and moved into the bathroom. He covered the mirror there with a huge towel and then started to fill the bath with hot water. He found a large candle and matches lying on the counter, so he lit it for ambiance and shut off the overhead light. He also discovered a bottle of bath soap, and when he opened the glass container, his nose was met with floral scent. He smiled, poured a small amount into the churning water, and was rewarded with frothing bubbles.

The wolf got out of his clothing and then stepped into the hot bath with a hiss. Very warm, but nice, he thought as he slowly sat down. He shut off the tap and suddenly became very still. He thought he had heard someone in the outer room. He strained his ears for a moment and then shrugged his shoulders when he didn't hear anything else. He slid down into the water until it was over his shoulders with bubbles around his head. Merlin closed his eyes with a contented smile and relaxed.

His thoughts meandered to the afternoon and he remembered how compelling the princess had been. He had enjoyed her company. If she had not been royalty, he might have actually given in to her charms. He almost had, anyway. As he soaked, he pictured her in his mind and could almost hear her speak his name.

"Merlin?"

The wolf's eyes snapped open. He *had* heard his name. His gaze darted to the doorway and a figure moved into the candlelight.

"Tinara?" he asked quietly.

"No, but I'll leave if you were expecting her," the Border collie said dryly.

"Samantha? No, I wasn't expecting anyone, but she was in my thoughts," he admitted.

She knelt next to the floor-level bath and scooped up some bubbles. "That looks inviting," she said. "Is there room for one more?"

Merlin smiled amongst the bubbles. "There's room enough for a whole *cozy* of us in here. C'mon in."

"A whole cozy, eh?" she chuckled as she dropped her dress to the floor. "An interesting thought – want to cozy up together when we get out?"

Merlin looked at her suspiciously. "How many in our cozy?"

The collie slid into the hot water slowly to get used to the temperature and then made her way to his lap. "Just you and me, Merlin."

He put his arms around her. "Anything wrong? I thought you were going to grab Pockets and head out on the town."

"I couldn't find him and I didn't feel like being alone."

"So you crept into my room instead?"

Samantha slid a hand down his stomach and nuzzled his ear. Using his terminology, she whispered, "Well, you've always shown me a good cozy whenever we've gotten together." She licked his ear playfully. Merlin closed his eyes and enjoyed her ministrations with a smile. He had needed a distraction from thoughts of Tinara and in walked Samantha. Good timing.

Samantha turned in his lap so that she faced him. After she got situated, she asked, "What is this about you and the princess I see?"

"Is our attraction that obvious?"

"It is to someone who's known you for years," she answered. "Taro noticed too. Did you and the princess...?"

The wolf shook his head. "No, *not* with the king's daughter," he assured her. "Not that I hadn't thought about it, though."

"I thought so," the collie said slyly. Merlin smiled as she squirmed a bit in his lap and added, "Time to think of *me* now."

Merlin yawned lazily as he opened his eyes and saw Samantha dressing. "Good morning, Merlin," she said. "Sleep well?"

"Mmm hmm," he murmured. He stretched and smiled up at her. "Where are you off to so early?"

"To see if I can find Taro's friend, Kal," she answered with a smile. "He mentioned a clothing shop in the city I want to check out, and I also want to see if I can find more distractions for the Rec Room. After our journey out to Sillon and back, everybody's sick of what we have now."

Merlin slid from the bed, looked through the bed covers scattered around the room, searching for his trousers. "Kal's probably working, Samantha. Check his desk at the palace entrance."

"I remember." She moved over to him and nuzzled him lightly. "Thanks for last night."

He licked his lips and smiled. "Anytime," he replied.

It took the wolf half an hour to straighten up the room from the mess they had made of it and was relieved that nothing was broken. He had a towel wrapped around his waist as he stood looking into the wardrobe. He would wear something today from the assortment provided for him. There was a knock at the door. Thinking it might be the princess, he rushed to answer it. He opened the door and peered into the faces of Renny and Tanis.

"Hi, guys!" Merlin said with a grin. "Come on in while I get dressed."

"Hello, boss," Renny said. He walked in with a smile and boldly snatched Merlin's towel away from him.

"Hey!" the wolf exclaimed. "At least close the door first." He covered himself with his tail before someone else out there got a free show.

Merlin studied the closet again and selected a few items after Tanis closed the door behind him. He took the garments into the bathroom to change into and called out to them. "Everything okay?"

"Just fine," Tanis replied.

"How did rubbing shoulders with the royalty go?" Renny asked. He put a hand on a bedpost and leaned against it, his eyes roving over the décor of the room.

"The king's family is a nice bunch, not stuffy at all," Merlin answered, "and the food was excellent. It's too bad you two didn't come with us."

"The way I heard it, I'm surprised ya even tasted the food," Tanis said with a chuckle.

"Huh?" Merlin walked out of the bathroom with his black boots in hand. He wore a loose pair of tan trousers and a white, open-neck shirt with bloused long sleeves. Around his middle was a gold sash tied loosely on the right.

"Taro said you spent most of the meal making eyes with the young princess," Renny replied.

The wolf sat in a chair to slip on his boots. "Well, I did spend the afternoon with her."

Tanis sniffed the air and added, "Last night, too, from the smell of it."

Renny sniffed and laughed. "You fast-moving wolf, you."

"No, that was Samantha," Merlin replied nonchalantly as he stood up; it was no secret to his crew that the two of them occasionally hooked up. "So, guys, what are your plans today?"

A light knock on the door stopped any reply to the question. Merlin walked past his friends and opened the door. This time it *was* Tinara.

"Good morning, your Highness," the wolf said with a bow. "Please come in."

"Your Highness?" she repeated. "What happened to calling me by name, silly wolf?" She stepped inside and slid her arms up over his shoulders. She was about to lick his muzzle when she saw his companions. "Oh, I didn't know you had company," she said in surprise. She drew back away from him a step and dropped her hands to her sides.

"These are my shipmates, Princess," Merlin explained. "Princess Tinara, meet Arktanis and Renny." The pair bowed slightly and Tanis even gave a small wave of his hand.

"Hello," she said. "I'm sorry to disturb you and your friends, Merlin, but the king and queen would like to meet with you in the throne chamber."

"Taking him home to meet the folks?" the cheetah quipped.

Tinara turned to him and smiled openly. "Something like that, Mister Renny."

"Do I look presentable enough for the throne room?" Sinclair asked, spreading his arms wide. "I found these in the wardrobe." The princess looked at him with a critical eye and then moved to the cabinet. She pulled out a gold fabric vest and held it out to him. He put it on and faced the mirror.

"All ya need is a turban," Tanis said, "and a gold-trimmed cape."

"And a camel," Renny finished with a laugh.

Merlin glared at them until Tinara threaded an arm through his and said, "I think he looks like a prince." With that, she gave them a wink and then gently licked the wolf on the cheek.

Arktanis coughed into his fist and said, "How do *I* look, yer Highness?"

She studied the short tan fox and then her eyes lit up. "You look like Rastus, our court jester," she remarked.

Merlin and Renny began laughing, but Tanis looked excited. "Rastus is *here*?"

"You know him?" Tinara asked.

"Is he a fennec fox, like me?"

"Yes," she answered with a smile. "He's a little shorter, but his ears are longer. His family name is TeVann."

Tanis smiled widely. "That's him. He's my cousin."

Renny pointed to Tanis and looked to Merlin. "How about that – there's another one of him in the galaxy!"

"Would you like to meet him?" Tinara asked as she moved back to Merlin's side. "He'll be waiting in the wings of the throne room."

"Yes, I would. It's been about ten years since we last saw one another," Tanis said excitedly.

"I don't know what they want," Merlin said, "but I don't wish to keep the king and queen waiting."

"Probably not a good idea," Renny replied. With that, Tinara led them out the door with the others trailing along.

"I wonder how Rastus wound up on Tanthe." Tanis wondered aloud. "The last I'd heard, he left Nalirra when he was rejected by our military due to bad eyesight."

Tinara nodded as they walked. "Kal Navar told me that he found Rastus lost and alone at the edge of town a few years ago. It seems the transport your cousin was on made an

emergency landing on Tanthe and he wandered away before they took off again, stranding him here without his luggage and only a few credits on him. Kal hired him for the palace when he discovered his sense of humor."

"Sounds like the Rastus I knew, alright," Tanis replied with a grin at Renny.

Their conversation dissipated when they arrived at the massive wooden doors that led into the throne room. Tinara stopped and turned to the wolf. "Go on in, Merlin. They are waiting for you," she said. She gave him another quick lick on the cheek and added, "I'm going to take your friend to meet his cousin."

"Wait!" Merlin exclaimed, suddenly nervous. "Can you give me a clue on why your parents have summoned me?"

The princess smiled merrily and shook her head. "No, but don't be worried, my wolf," she said. "My father likes you. Just be yourself when talking with them, like you did last night." She took Tanis by the elbow and led him away to a side corridor.

Merlin looked to his remaining companion and frowned. "I don't know if I'm ready for a full-court conversation with the King and Queen – especially since Tinara is being purposely vague about why they want to see me."

Renny put a hand on his shoulder. "Want me to come in there with you, in case you need a distraction for a hasty retreat?"

"Why would I need a retreat?" Merlin asked, feeling his dread deepen.

Renny winked at him. "Well," the cheetah answered, "you *have* been pretty chummy with their daughter. The royal rulers may take exception to that. I think the story usually goes that only other royalty may court a princess."

Merlin twitched his tail nervously. "But, I wasn't actually courting her," the wolf complained. "She just wanted..."

"I'll be right behind you," the cheetah promised.

Merlin nodded and turned to the doors. "Maybe they just want to inform me that our replacement cargo is ready," he added with a frown.

"After only two days? That's wishful thinking."

He pushed the doors open with surprising ease despite their size and entered. Renny moved in behind him silently. The throne room was not a huge chamber, perhaps the size of small auditorium. There were several rows of seats near a raised dais, upon which were two ornate marble thrones. King Aris sat on the left and Queen Sechsi on his right. Exquisite purple draperies hung on the walls and a handful of people stood near the front. A uniformed guard beside the door walked over to Merlin and spoke to him quietly.

The male coyote turned and headed up the carpeted center of the room to the King and announced the wolf.

"Merlin Sinclair of the *Blue Horizon*, your Highness."

The king motioned to the wolf to approach the thrones. As Merlin walked forward, his shipmate fell into step behind him. The pair halted before the dais and bowed in unison.

"Welcome, welcome," the monarch said. His quiet voice carried well in the acoustics of the room. His expression seemed to be pleased and the wolf was eased somewhat.

"Welcome, Captain. Who accompanies you today?"

Merlin turned slightly to his companion. "Renny Thornton, your Majesty. Navigator of the *Blue Horizon*."

"Welcome, Mr. Thornton."

Renny remained silent, but gave the monarch a formal bow.

Straight to business, Aris turned and looked at the wolf. "You come highly recommended by my daughter, Mr. Sinclair."

"Sire? Recommended for what?"

The king turned and looked at Sechsi with a smile. She returned it and he resumed his gaze to the curious wolf. "To marry her and keep the royal bloodline going, son."

Merlin's jaw dropped and Renny did a double-take toward him. Aris continued as if he had not noticed the wolf's stunned countenance.

"I spoke with her at length last night after dining," he said. "She convinced me that you should be the one to take up my offer of her hand in marriage."

"She was most adamant in having you as her mate, dear Merlin," the queen added with a gentle smile, using his personal name.

The captain's face was of pure shock. "Me, your Highness?" he responded hoarsely. "I'm wasn't actually seeking her hand, and I'm not... uhm, I'm no descendant of royal blood that I could marry a princess anyway!"

The king laughed aloud. "You do not have to have royal blood to marry a princess of Tanthe, son," he explained. "Once you marry my daughter, you take on my family name and any children you produce through her will have my blood to become rightful heirs."

"I'm not even a coyote!"

The monarch shook his head, amused by Sinclair's anxieties, but he was used to getting what he wanted. "We are close enough in species for you to produce pups with the Aris blood."

Merlin coughed. "Is this the reason why you wanted to meet with me?" he asked hoarsely. "The reason why you queried my First Officer on the species of my crew?"

"Yes, exactly."

"Your Highness, I like Princess Tinara very much, but I'm just a captain of a cargo ship and I'm only here to replace my lost cargo!"

Aris held up a hand to silence him. "Merlin," he said jovially, "you will be a prince here, with millions under your command and wanting for nothing."

The wolf nodded. "I suppose that would be preferable to my lifestyle, Sire, but I understand royalty are not truly as free to do what they want as common folk."

The king's smile faded for a moment and he glanced back at his queen, who sat silently observing him. "True, very true," the coyote replied. "I am ruler of an entire planet, but yet I have to follow more rules than my subjects." He wearily looked back at the small group assembled before him.

"However, that's a small price to pay for having all the needs and wants of my family provided for with just a spoken word, my dear wolf."

Queen Sechsi extended a hand toward Sinclair. "Will you please consider joining my family?" she asked in a personal tone. "You are the first suitor she's actually considered, and her standards are high. That young girl's heart is taken with you."

"But we've only known one another little more than a day..." Merlin countered with a frown. "How can you base a lifelong marriage on a brief acquaintance?"

"Such things are possible," Aris remarked with a smile at his queen. "Sechsi and I were engaged within *hours* of our first meeting."

Merlin closed his eyes and bowed his head a moment in disbelief. He felt a hand on his shoulder and looked into the large yellow eyes of his feline companion.

"May I speak with him a moment, your Majesties?" Renny asked with a slight bow of his own.

"Of course," King Aris replied.

Renny drew the perplexed wolf off to the side and spoke to him in a voice barely above a whisper. "Merlin, think about this," he said. "You'll have a better life than flitting around the Planetary Alignment hauling cargo for other people and dodging pirates. You can stay here to help rule a planet and make puppies until you're all worn out. You could put Taro or Durant in charge of the *Blue Horizon* and buy a whole fleet of freighters if you wanted to keep the business."

Merlin deepened his frown. "You're not helping my situation, Renny. I'm trying to talk his Highness out of this..."

Renny gave him a sincere look and said, "The princess really likes you, Merlin, and she's a beauty."

"I'm not even the one she really wants," he blurted, his words unintentionally carrying in the acoustics of the throne room.

"What was that?" the king called out. "Who is it she desires? She's spoken of no one else, only you."

Merlin and Renny slowly turned and faced the monarch. The wolf approached the throne, leaving his companion where he stood.

"Your Highness, I've only known Princess Tinara for two days, but there is someone here in your own palace who has already caught your daughter's eye, and from what I've seen, his desires for her are just as real."

Aris raised his eyebrows. "Here, among my own?"

He did not like to meddle in the relationships of others, but in a matter of self-preservation he was now committed to revealing what he really only suspected. "Yes, Sire."

"That cannot be," the king replied. "I put out an open invitation for suitors for Tinara months ago and she has rejected *all* who responded. If she desired someone, why did she not choose him?"

Merlin clasped his hands behind him. "Because he never came forward, your Majesty. He was probably afraid you would reject him, even if she did not. Besides, I imagine he feared she would discard him as with the others, for he does not seem to know that she desires him in return."

"How do you know the desire is there?"

Merlin smiled a little. "I've seen it in their eyes when they looked at one another."

"Who is this one you speak of?" Queen Sechsi asked. "Identify him."

The wolf spoke the name. The reaction was one of surprise and disbelief. The king and queen bent their heads together and began speaking to each other in quiet whispers. Merlin was not sure if he had done the right thing by voicing his suspicions. As far as everyone in the throne room was concerned, Sinclair had told what he knew, but in reality, it was only a guess based upon a single observation and numerous mentions of the person's name in their conversations.

It was a gamble to counter the attention away from him on the subject of marriage to Tinara, and he hoped he was not mistaken. The king motioned to a servant and then whispered a command to the maiden. She turned and left the chamber at a fast walk.

"Captain Sinclair," King Aris said in a neutral tone, "if you are correct and my daughter will have him, I will reward you for the trouble we have caused you and send you on your way." The wolf bowed.

"However... if you are mistaken," the monarch continued with a darker expression, "I will *expect* you to take Tinara's hand in marriage and become an adopted son into my

household. The *future* of the Aris family line is at stake here, and I *will not* take a negative answer."

Merlin sighed and hoped again that he had been right in his suspicion. Without making any further replies, he simply bowed. Renny nudged him and motioned to the side of the throne room. Princess Tinara had just come through a side door and moved toward him with a smile. Renny stepped back a pace to give her room. She stopped on Merlin's right and threaded an arm through his.

The wolf gave her a smile, but she noted the expression was weak. "What is the matter?" she whispered. "Has something happened?"

Merlin swallowed and frowned, but before he had a chance to answer, the guard stopped beside them and announced to the king, "Kal Navar, your Highness."

All heads turned to the back of the room. Merlin and Tinara turned to look and saw the Palace Secretary approaching them, his ears drooping as he looked at her.

"Kal," Tinara whispered quietly as he stopped beside her, "Why are you here?"

"The King sent for me, your Highness," Navar answered. "I do not know why."

Aris looked down at the small group. "Tinara, I need confirmation on something that was just brought to my attention."

"And what is that, father?" she replied.

"In past months, you have refused every suitor who answered my open invitation for your hand in marriage," he said. "Word has spread of your inaccessibility so that it has gotten to the point where no one has approached me in weeks for fear of your rejection. I had begun to give up hope of having more children born into our bloodline through you, until last night when you revealed your desire to have Merlin Sinclair as your mate. From the conversations your mother and I have had with him, neither of us have any reservations in your choice and we agreed he would be a welcome addition to the royal family."

The princess heard a sharp intake of breath from Kal beside her. This was news to him about the wolf. Tinara swallowed but kept her attention on her father.

"Just a few moments ago," King Aris continued, "I received word that there is one right here in the palace who is interested in you - someone who, I am told, you also have an attraction for."

"Who gave you such information?" Tinara asked as she drew up closer to Merlin. "I have my Intended right here. Who are you talking about?"

"Kal Navar, present yourself." The king extended a hand toward the coyote before him.

The palace secretary moved a step forward and bowed slightly. "Your Highness?" he appeared bewildered. "I did not circulate any such information."

The king sighed audibly. "You misunderstand; since this all so vague, I will ask bluntly. Do *you* desire my daughter's hand in marriage, Kal Navar?"

Tinara looked sharply at Kal, taken completely by surprise at her father's question. Navar perked up his ears and straightened his shoulders. He did not direct his answer to the king, but turned and faced Tinara instead.

"Truthfully, your Highness," he replied. "I do, very much."

The expression in Tinara's eyes softened from shock to admiration. "Why did you never come forward, Kal?" she asked, a wag stirring her tail.

Navar looked to the king, who merely encouraged him with a nod. The coyote looked embarrassed, but now that his feelings were made known, he turned back to the princess and boldly took her by the hand. "Because I was never sure how you felt about me," he replied. "And... I am only the Palace Secretary, no one of much influence or heritage."

Tinara put her free hand up to his cheek and sighed. "Silly coyote," she said, "I've dreamed about you for some time. My feelings for someone are not dictated by royal title or position."

Navar took a breath and said, "Then, you would consider my bid to your father for your hand in marriage?"

Tinara slowly turned to face Sinclair, who had remained silent throughout the exchange. "Merlin?"

Sinclair smiled and nodded toward her. "Your Highness, I have grown quite fond of you," he said, "but we have only known each other *two* days. You and Kal already have history and I believe you are meant to be together - I was merely the catalyst to make it happen, I suppose."

"The catalyst?" Navar repeated.

"Yes, it was I who told the King about you," Merlin said with a smile to the monarch. "I noticed the glances you two exchanged in the garden yesterday. There was more in them than mere humiliation at being caught in the act of something embarrassing. I saw the feelings. I saw your eyes."

"But..."

"The princess also couldn't stop talking about you while she was showing me the palace and introducing me to your staff."

"Then...?" Tinara looked up at him hopefully.

The wolf smiled openly and gestured toward Navar. "If you will have him as your mate, Princess, I give you my personal blessing, for what that may be worth."

Tinara threw her arms around Merlin and embraced him tightly. "That means the world to me, my wolf." She pulled away after a moment more and then turned to Navar.

She took his hands into her own and said, "I accept you, Kal, as my husband and a Prince of Aris."

Navar smiled widely, and keeping a hold on Tinara's hands, turned to face the king and queen. He bowed toward them and said, "May I present myself to you, your Majesties?"

The King and Queen both stood up and moved to the edge of the dais. The monarch took his wife's hand and smiled at those assembled below. Servants on the periphery of the throne room looked to them with rapt attention.

"The King and Queen of the house of Aris, rulers of Tanthe," the king said in a commanding voice, "hereby accept Kal Navar as a future member of the Royal family. Upon his union to Princess Tinara Shei Aris, Navar will be adopted into the family as *Kal Navar Aris* and become a Prince of this house. It is so declared!"

Applause from those gathered in the small throne room echoed around them. Tinara and Kal bowed in unison to the king and queen and then embraced each other tightly.

"Before the wedding can be arranged," King Aris said to the young couple, "you will need to find and train a replacement for your job as Palace Secretary, son. Someone will be needed to help organize the ceremony."

Kal turned to Merlin and extended a hand toward him. "Would you be interested in remaining with us?" the coyote asked. "I hear it on good authority there's a job opening for you."

The wolf laughed and shook his head. "Thank you, but, no. I have a crew of my own to rule. I wish I could stay for the wedding, but I'm sure it will take weeks to organize and the *Blue Horizon* has a shipping schedule to get back on track. We are already behind due to our original mishap and I fear we may have lost a customer with the delay."

Navar looked to the king, who nodded to him. The future prince turned back to Merlin and said, "Your cargo has already been assembled and can be loaded onto your ship this afternoon."

"Today?" Merlin repeated in open surprise. "I thought it would be several more days, and we still have not yet negotiated a price for the goods. We'll need to discuss payment before you deliver..."

Tinara held up a hand and turned to the king. "May I offer this cargo to them as a gift to Merlin, father?"

The king nodded. "If you wish, then it is done."

"I do so wish." She turned back to the shocked pair and then gave Merlin another warm embrace. "Thank you, dear wolf, for your gift to me."

Merlin felt a sudden panic, thinking she publicly referred to their tickling session the day before, but she moved back to Navar and put her head on his shoulder; he understood.

"I hope the two of you are very happy together, and that you are successful in producing a male heir to the blood of Aris."

Kal laughed and said, "Thank you, Captain."

"Merlin," the wolf corrected. "I don't know when we may be back this way, but I hope you will not forget me."

"Not likely," the princess whispered, with a barely noticeable wink. "If I have any say in the matter, we'll name our first son after you."

Merlin sat at the helm of the *Blue Horizon* as it left the orbit of Tanthe. A fresh photograph of Princess Tinara was taped to the console and he smiled as Renny gave him a course correction. He had come close to having a life of ease for the rest of that life, but he knew he belonged here with his friends, who were about as close to family to him.

"Now that we've left Tanthe," Renny said, "I can give you this. A courier delivered it at the last moment before we sealed the ship, but I didn't have time to give it to you before now."

The wolf glanced up at him as the cheetah held up a fat envelope secured with Aris wax seal. He set it on the pilot control console in front of Merlin. "I wonder what it is," the captain said, looking down at the packet. "I left a short message for Kal before we left, but I don't think he's had time to read it and respond with something like this." Renny merely gave him a shrug and waited curiously.

Merlin could only wonder what it was. "Take the controls, Renny, as I see what this is." The cheetah nodded and took the captain's place in the pilot seat. Merlin picked up the envelope and moved to the engineering station. He leaned up against the console and then broke the Aris seal. With hesitation, pulled a set of parchment documents from the envelope and studied them in silence.

"Well?" Renny said impatiently. "You know the old human saying about curiosity and the cat -- I'm *dying* to know what it is!"

Merlin sat down in the engineer's seat and fanned himself with the documents in his hand. His eyes were wide and he swallowed hard. He took a couple of deep breaths and then looked over at the cheetah.

"These are official documents that grant us purchase of a new starship freighter," he said quietly, "paid in full, courtesy of the Aris Monarchy. All I have to do is sign one form and

submit it back to the palace when I'm ready... It's hand-signed by the Princess and countersigned by the King."

Renny was stunned. "Uh... Wow...!"

Merlin finally smiled and nodded. "The *Blue Horizon* still has life left in her," he said, rubbing the console beside him with his fingers, "so I think I'll just store these documents away for safe-keeping for such time as we might need them." He motioned toward the controls. "Stay where you are. I'm going to make a thank-you call."

Kal Navar walked alone back to his desk, his feet barely touching the floor. He had dreamed of Princess Tinara since she had come of age and now he would be married to her. It had been a most pleasant, if not highly unexpected, chain of events with the arrival of the *Blue Horizon*.

He paused when he reached his desk and found a sealed envelope waiting for him. He opened it and found a simple message without a signature. He smiled to himself and tucked it deep into an inner shirt pocket.

The note had read, "Tickle her toes, she will reward you greatly."

BLUE HORIZON DOWN

By Steve Carter

SS Blue Horizon PA1261

Captain's Journal

The Blue Horizon is presently within orbiting range of Crescentis; our journey from Tanthe thankfully uneventful. I'm just about to head up to the bridge to take my usual place in the center seat to bring us in, and my crew is ready to rest planetside on the beaches of the island world.

Sparky's absence can still be felt here, even though Max has done an admirable job of filling in where she left off. The boy has proven a handy relief pitcher not only in the galley, but in general upkeep of the ship. He's almost always cleaning something or tidying up here and there, no matter how many times we've all assured him that it's not necessary. He really wants to prove himself, though. This morning I gave him an old pair of ensign insignia from my earlier years in the Dennieran military. They mean nothing on this ship, but the chrome reflects nicely and his posture has improved now that he can make them flash when he walks right.

I'm pleased to report that –

Whoom!

Merlin's quarters suddenly lurched to the side with a jolt hard enough to launch him out of his desk chair, his journal hitting the deck beside him. The wolf tumbled to the floor in a heap, sliding across the carpet to slam into the side of his bunk. His lupine senses alerted, firing off in a state of near-panic as he fought to regain his footing and equilibrium. The room shuddered with a low growl as another heavy jolt rocked the ship again.

Above his head, a speaker came on, "*Captain! We need you on the bridge right now!*"

Sinclair's neck snapped up at the sound and he struggled to his feet as another titanic blast rippled through the ship, sending him careening against a wall as he launched himself out of the door and down the hallway.

The ship became an inferno of red lights and sirens as she took another hit.

On the bridge, Taro's fingers gripped into the arms of her seat at the Com Station as she barked orders behind her at the center seat.

"Where's it coming from?"

A bath of red light filled the bridge as a warning klaxon blared. Renny snapped his head up to report above the din of chaotic explosions around the ship. "It's coming from the starboard! Whatever it is, it's got a kick!"

"Evasive!" Taro shouted, and the ship banked to port while pushing up speed to aid in escape. All three vidscreens filled with a shower of green energy spraying around them,

narrowly avoiding the sleek blue saucer as Renny swung it around at deep angles. This near to the atmosphere of Crescentis, they were effectively boxed in by the layer of charged troposphere that shielded the world from its star.

The upper atmosphere of Crescentis reacted to the laser fire from the battle with flashes of ionic energy, weaving a deadly spider's web of death just below them. The ship banked sharply as wicked fingers of energy slashed out at the pinned-in freighter, only to sail right back into the barrage of green energy. It was like trying to escape in an electrified maze.

Behind the *Blue Horizon*, a black, wraithlike object moved swiftly, silently through space. Its shape was that of a long, flat curve—a manta ray floating ghostlike in the blackness. Moving noiselessly through the vista of stars, the ship had come up on the *Horizon* totally unnoticed. But when its cannons spoke, searing blasts of white-green energy cut into the unsuspecting freighter before the automatic defense systems kicked in and the shields strengthened.

At the controls of the ship, a massive form manipulated a pair of red controls with the aplomb of a master fencer. The thick black hands flamed with an eerie blue sheen in the low light of the bridge, and dark green eyes glowed with a deranged luminescence from deep-set pits under the gunner's brow.

Behind the gunner, a broad, dark shape moved forward to place a heavy hand on a shoulder. "Don't lose them," its voice rumbled.

The gunner nodded, bringing the red crosshairs back up to bear on his now-agile target. The design shone across his face like a brand, painting half his own face in its crimson glow. "We have them right where we want them," he replied.

"Take as long as you like," his leader rumbled.

Sinclair charged up onto the bridge. Taro was already there for him.

"Captain," she leapt up from the Engineering station. "We're being attacked from the starboard by an unknown aggressor. Ship scanner has only picked up a trace of class G spatial distortion and—"

"Class G?" Merlin's jaw dropped. The idea was terrifying.

"Yes sir," she said, "It's got to be Captain Natasha."

He looked out into the vidscreen. The idea seized around his mind like a fist, but... no. "It isn't Natasha," he replied. "It's got to be someone else. She could have already destroyed—"

Another titanic blast rocked the ship, spinning it off its axis so hard that it began to tumble end over end through the black of space, out of control.

"Engine room to bridge!" came a plaintive voice. "We're losing control of the ship back here! One more direct hit could button us up!"

"We can't maneuver this close to the atmosphere!" Renny yipped, terror beginning to creep into his voice.

The cheetah quickly vacated the center seat and Merlin swiftly took his place. The wolf tapped keys on the armrest pads, checking to see if the cargo hold was occupied.

"Seal yourselves into engineering!" Merlin ordered.

"Already sealed in!"

"Durant?"

"Went to the upper decks an hour ago."

With all hands accounted for, he flicked a switch and then seized the guidance shifts. "This is the Captain," he said over the ship-wide intercom, "Hold on to something, *now!*"

"See how easily the white meat slices," a dark, rumbling voice purred around the gunner's ears. "You, who have caused me so much dishonor... who almost cost me my life. You will pay..."

"Sir," the gunner said, "we can destroy them now."

"No," came the reply. "Don't destroy them yet. I want them to burn... let them cook and *burn* in the atmosphere."

The gunner grinned, his sharp, white teeth glinting in the sunrise just appearing over the horizon of the planet below.

A moment later, the dark commander's screen lit with the *Blue Horizon's* engines flaring in a peculiar arc. The blue saucer dipped quickly, crazily as its cargo bay door opened with a blast of freezing air and the debris of jettisoned cargo on its underside, catching a buffet of troposphere from the planet below. Catching the wave, the ship whipped down on its Y-axis at an impossibly sharp angle. The bank caused the ship to catch some of its own exhaust trail in the wake, but the *Blue Horizon* went straight down, whirled beneath its attacker, and rose straight back up again like a slingshot to face it from behind.

"What the...?" the black feline captain growled.

With the enemy now against the glow of Crescentis instead of the black of space, the bridge crew of the *Blue Horizon* saw it clearly in the corona of light splitting over the curve of the planet. It was long and thin; the smooth wedge shape of a manta ray flamed against the white star's light as the cloaking device reflected the glorious dawn like a prism. The *Basilisk*.

"*Kill it.*" Merlin rumbled, drawing the cargo bay doors shut with the flick of another switch.

The *Basilisk's* screen shifted to the rear sensors as a hail of ordnance erupted from the *Blue Horizon's* military-grade pulse cannons, filling the *Basilisk's* screen with a blue inferno. The shimmering shape moved evasively, but not fast enough to avoid the hail of wicked blue flame. The pirate ship quivered under the brunt of the blast and Sagan was catapulted off his feet with the roar of concussion slamming against his bridge. A ripple of energy splintered across the hull of the *Basilisk* and the broad screen before the gunner exploded, sending white-hot fingers of electricity riddling through his body as he screamed.

Sagan bared his teeth at the turn of events and lurched up from the bridge floor. The jaguar slammed his fist down on his control panel, bringing the shields up to bear as he pitched forward and shoved his gunner out of the station cockpit.

"Aft weapons, return fire!"

From the rear of the *Basilisk*, a barrage of the white-green energy loosed, strafing the blue saucer across its bow. Below, the charged atmosphere flared with the exchange of fire.

As the freighter rocked around her, Samantha's fingers passed over the console before her, tapping out digits as she worriedly prepared a distress signal. A series of red numbers appeared on the console before her and Renny caught a glance of the series.

...subspace channel 13/666...
...under attack at Crescentis...
... request immediate assistance...

What channel was that? the cheetah wondered.

"Fire," Merlin growled.

Another blast of energy filled the screen before him, but his ship only lurched slightly now that the shields were engaged. The black manta ray sailed up from the atmosphere to hide in the black of space, momentarily occluding the star and casting its shadow over the *Horizon*. Renny took his chance and hurled another salvo of pulsar fire at the ship, rocking it laterally before it flew out of the corona of light.

Sagan hammered controls on his console, finding that the ship systems didn't respond to his commands. The jaguar snarled at the impotence of his anger, pounding the face of switches and buttons. He tore from the bridge, leaving his second with instructions to pound them until they stood still as a corpse.

"This is going to be bad," Merlin grumbled as a trail of flame and smoke marked the location of the *Basilisk* as it turned in space to face them. Renny wasted no time and opened fire on the enemy vessel, blue flashes of energy reflecting ineffectively off the powerful shields like water on a balloon. Merlin swerved the ship at a steep angle, maxing out the maneuvering thrusters for the embankments, and just avoided the hail of wicked green that slashed through space at his own ship. Although equipped with a bit of military weaponry, the freighter did not have the maneuverability of their assailant. Shields were down to twenty percent after the initial attack and he couldn't afford a hit anywhere.

But he got one.

A blast sent a ripple of electricity through the rear thruster and straight into the secondary energizer of the liquid crystal engines. Across the chamber Pockets and Patch, working feverishly to restore power to the shields, stopped in stunned terror at the ball of fire that lit the engine room. The array exploded in a boiling wall of flame before a shower of white coolant sprayed it down, extinguishing the explosion. Each of the singed raccoons whipped a breathing apparatus from the wall and strapped it on. A viscous cloud of black smoke filled the chamber as the blast's spent energy found another way to impede their work.

In a specially-designed chamber, the pirate Sagan locked down a synthplast cover over himself as another of his crew tapped a series of keys on the outer face of the stolen capsule. Natasha Kasho's trademark arc-and-skull symbol still stood out on the clear cover, even though all of the other features and cables had been replaced with power conduits from the *Basilisk*. The cryptic instructions of stolen technology had not been precisely deciphered, but they had made best assumptions with what they could not understand.

In another moment, Natasha's micro-Vault prototype transporter was ready.

"Wosret to Briggs," the crewmate said into a com. "The captain is ready to transport."

"We'll keep it steady for you," Sagan's second assured him.

Nakhti Wosret steadily tapped keys, keeping his mind on his job as the ship jolted again. They had tested this prototype transporter out on inanimate objects and the captain's pet, and everything had come out perfectly fine. This would be the first real test of the transporter. Sagan turned to face him as the Vault tube hummed to life.

The *Horizon* whipped around in a sharp arc, deftly avoiding its oncoming adversary, and planted a precise ripple of energy across the damaged aft section of the *Basilisk* with its shock-thread emitters. Even with its shields at maximum capacity, the black vessel rocked sharply with the new assault.

Wosret lost his balance and lurched toward a forward panel, instinctively breaking his fall with an out-thrust hand. His palm landed across a face of touch pads, lighting them all with the pressure and altering the computations for the Vault. His face betrayed a look of panic as his mind froze—what calculations to correct the error? Sagan's eyes went wide when he saw his crewmate's countenance.

Too late, the micro-Vault phased up and engulfed the pirate in a glittering field of blue-white energy. His scream was cut off in the sizzling light, but his last thought was his wish to slaughter the captain of the *Blue Horizon*.

On the other side of the Planetary Alignment, a screen lit. A pair of massive hands tapped keys and read an encrypted tachyon message. The thick, muscular form tore from his seat to find his commander.

Above Crescentis, the *Basilisk* had acquired the upper hand.

"Target their weapons arrays, disarm them," Sagan's second commanded. The ship whipped up around to face the *Horizon* full-on, and a series of pinpoint blasts lit up the blue vessel's weapons, shattering them in a tight pulse of energy. Sensors and critical circuits for guidance destroyed in collateral, the *Blue Horizon* dipped forward, tilting its face toward the planet.

Durant stumbled out of the lift into a wave of heated air and surveyed the damage to the cargo bay to find it almost a complete loss. Merlin's use of the bay doors as a catapult had saved the ship, but also cost them their cargo — *again*. The inner walls of the hold were scorched black and still superheated with the residual energy of his piloting trick, and a haze of smoke still emerged from the nearby engine room.

In the middle of the chamber, a white sphere of ball lightning splintered out to the inner walls, catching the bear's attention. He peered at it, wondering if it was some unforeseen effect of the bay damage—charged particles or something reacting to the chemical or metallic properties of the ruined cargo—before the ship suddenly lurched forward.

A black shape appeared in the center of the electrical blast and quickly plummeted from its discharge, the force of gravity and skewed inertia — straight toward him.

"Weapons are out!" Renny shouted. "Guidance is out!"

"*Captain, the engines have sustained too much damage!*" came a voice over the com port. "*We have to shut down or we're dead no matter what they do!*"

Merlin grimaced tightly. This was not the way he wanted to go out.

"Shut 'em down," he growled. "Samantha... signal our surrender."

"Sir?" she bit back her words, rage and humiliation flaring through her blood like acid.

"Now!" he barked. "While we still can."

A tremor passed through the bridge, and after a moment's hesitation, the canine tightly relayed the message to the dark, slender ship before them. In the next moment, her communication panel sparked, and a ripple of red snaked across its face.

"They want to surrender, sir."

Briggs scrubbed his chin with a finger, pursing his lips in thought. "Keep all weapons locked on that target, but don't do anything else." He looked down at a simple amber light on his bridge panel and he nodded to himself. "The captain's tracker shows he made it across all right and I don't want to take any chances while he's over there."

"Aye, sir," Gauss replied. "Are we accepting their surrender?"

Briggs paused a moment before replying, "Let them wonder."

"What are they waiting for?" Renny asked aloud.

"They want to take us alive," Taro spat.

"Surely they realize we've jettisoned our cargo? What else do they want?"

"Revenge," Merlin growled, fingers gripping into the command chair arms like vises. "Open ship-wide message to the crew..."

"Internal com is down beyond mid-ship, captain," Samantha bit back, jamming fingers at her smoking panel.

"You and you," he indicated Taro and Renny, too furious to repeat their names, "get to the rest of the crew and tell them to arm themselves. We're about to have boarders." Memories of the last time they had had boarders brought Jiro's death vividly in front of the captain's eyes.

Durant smashed a thick hand against the black-furred skull, sending Sagan hurling across the room to slam against a blistering wall. The floor was too hot to stand on, and even the air singed his fur. But he had to keep this menace from getting into the main body of the ship.

Sagan was different now... larger, stronger and more aggressive than the bear remembered him. A thick rope of drool hung from the jaguar's gaping jaws and he was howling in some primal rage. The pirate launched off the wall to slam into Durant full-force, but the load master maintained his stance and caught his enemy in a vicious bear-hug.

An unholy howl erupted from the jaguar as thick cords in the bear's arms pulsed, an iron grip slowly constricting around him. *Snap!* A rib broke under the pressure, driving the feral jaguar insane with agony. His clawed hands slashed at the bear's face, viciously bringing thick ribbons of blood surging from vessels below the skin, spouting from pulsing arteries as the bear kept his head down, protecting the thick cords in his neck.

But Sagan's bare feet had claws as well, and when he began to shred the bear's tunic, bright rivulets of crimson spilled down the front and began to sizzle on the floor below. Knowing he was going to be disemboweled, the bear tightened his grip and squeezed harder as blood surged up into his mouth.

Crunch! Snap! More ribs cracked under the pressure and Durant sank his muzzle into the jaguar's shoulder, spilling eerie, dark blood on Sagan's gray uniform.

"Kill him! Kill him!" the jaguar repeated. A heavy cuff landed on the tortured head and Durant suddenly lost his bearings. Loss of blood and the vicious attack relaxed his grip, and the jaguar slithered out of his grasp and onto the bay floor. With another heavy smash to the face, Sagan sent Durant to the floor in a heavy heap. The bear was conscious of the heat, searing into his body as he lay on the metal deck.

The deranged and injured Sagan tore across the bay toward the red lift door, upending an extinguisher and sending it across the room where the hose tore loose and the contents spouted out into the air. A splash of liquid nitrogen spilled across the superheated floor, rendering spidery cracks through the metal around the fallen bear.

Patch snarled behind the oxygen mask, pounding a panel with his fist. Pockets hosed down the liquid crystal engines with an extinguisher, trying to lower the temperature before the system parts fused.

"Boarders," Pockets grumbled. "We have weapons down here, right?"

"The biggest one of all," his brother rumbled. Patch reached above the main console and gripped a handle. With a rough jerk, he pulled down a cylindrical piston ringed with switches and green lights.

Pockets stopped and inhaled sharply, meeting his brother's eyes with trepidation. If they got as far as the engine room, there was no stopping them. He dropped the extinguisher and stood beside his brother. He reached up above the console and drew out another thick cylinder on the other side.

"Have you ever seen a liquid crystal core go up?" Patch asked. His brother shook his head. "It's a beautiful flower in the vacuum of space. I would rather go out that way than at the claws of pirates!"

He pressed a pattern in the switches, seventeen in order, and the lights changed from green to red. His brother tapped in another seventeen unit code, and both cylinders illuminated in red.

Pockets stepped back from the console as the central panel flipped over, exposing a single, red trigger handle. His brother sat in the small, utilitarian chair before it, and waited.

Pockets, with nothing else to do, sat beside his brother. Each glanced occasionally at the door, waiting for the inevitable. With the blaze abated and the air clearing, Patch pulled off his mask. The self-destruct had never been included in with the original LightDrive engines, as a common freighter had no secrets with which to keep from a potential enemy, but the Porter brothers had installed it themselves years ago. They had never seen the need to use it until now, but it had long been available.

Taro rounded a corner at a dangerous pace, Renny close behind. "We've got to get down to the cargo bay!" she shouted. "See if Dur—" She never completed her words. The vixen suddenly hunched forward, howling in pain as her body mysteriously left the floor, raising a good ten inches into the air. Renny stopped short, shocked at the sight. Taro's body wilted backward to reveal the huge, misshapen black form of Sagan. The jaguar's claws were embedded in her abdomen and covered in blood.

"You..." Renny snarled. The glittering green eyes fell on him, and a blasphemous sound erupted from the form as he dropped the tall fox, charging at the cheetah at full speed.

Renny darted out of the way, sending the jaguar to the floor with a thud before he rocketed back up to face the new enemy. Renny sped past him, slashing at the pirate with razor-sharp claws and opening up blood vessels in the thighs. Sagan whipped his head around to follow the blinding yellow streak, but it ricocheted off the walls like a rubber ball faster than the hateful green eyes could follow.

A wail of agony sounded behind them; Taro stared down at her belly as she saw organs seeping out around the cruel gashes. It was enough distraction for Renny to lose his bearings. The monstrous Sagan caught the cheetah in his vise-like hands.

Taro pulled herself up and slapped a face of buttons; the internal com system still worked in the forward half of the ship.

Merlin heard the commotion: something was on board. When the strained tone of Taro's voice wafted through the com link, he knew they were in trouble.

"Sagan," the voice gasped. "*Sagan is on board...*"

Merlin stood, pointed at Samantha. "Take the con!" Without waiting for a response, the captain opened a panel in the bridge and drew out a heavy, dual-edged blade, then disappeared through the doorway.

Samantha, all alone on the bridge, ground her teeth. No weapons, no communications, no power to the engines. They were dead in space. She looked to the vidscreen at the hateful manta ray that held them at their mercy, and resolved that if she was going to die, she would take as many of them with her as possible.

Then her ears pricked up at a familiar sound. She turned her head to look back at the doorway. At the bottom of the jamb, a frightened Max wept openly, clutching at the metal of

the door in terror. The metal on his ensign's insignia caught a glint of red light and flashed back into her eyes. Her mouth dropped and she turned to look at her console—yes, it was still operative!

"Come over here," she commanded the teen. Max, conditioned to obey orders instantly, rose from his spot and ambled forward.

Var Briggs peered at the vidscreen as a pair of flat, web-like structures opened on either side of the *Blue Horizon's* top. He rubbed his chin and tapped nails against the command seat's armrest.

"Sir, are they deploying... solar sails?" one voice interjected in disbelief.

"If they think they can escape on solar wind, they must think we're worse off than we really are." He chuckled. "They're not going anywhere."

Merlin rounded a corner to the sound of struggle. There was Sagan, standing in the darkened hall with his crewmate's throat in his hands, holding the struggling cheetah a full two feet off the ground. Renny's claws were imbedded in the wiry thews of the jaguar's forearms, streams of blackish blood spilling down his hands as he fought to shred the tendons crushing the life from him. In spite of this, the intruder was killing him slowly, deliberately.

Nearby, Taro lay in a fetal position, desperately sobbing and trying to keep herself together—trying to inch toward the door to find some safety. A pool of dark red surrounded her on the floor, streaks in the floor from where she had pulled herself so far.

"*Demon!*" Merlin shouted at the jaguar.

Sagan's head snapped up to the new sound, his glass-green eyes flaming at the new contact. He dropped the cheetah to the floor in a heap and stood still, heaving, his eyes glowing in green fire. Merlin motioned with the blade for Renny to move aside. Instead, the cheetah tucked and rolled, then came up beside his captain, his body a massive coil of unspent energy. His breath came in ragged gasps, but he was not gone yet.

Just hang in there, Merlin thought, glancing over at Taro.

Sagan stood, unmoving, glaring at Merlin Sinclair. The wolf saw something in the jaguar's face—this was not the same nemesis he had fought before. He was *different* somehow. Not the cold, calculating murderer he once was... He—this—was something wholly unnatural. A shudder passed through the captain as he fully realized that he was probably about to die.

Sagan saw it in his face and charged.

In the dark of the wounded bridge, Samantha pressed glowing switches, whispering to herself, "*Stay calm... lucky, lucky, lucky, lucky ... just keep calm... you can do it...*"

"What are you doing?" Max asked, worried now that things had gotten so bad. He could feel tautness in her manner like an oppressive blanket.

She spoke, barely above a whisper with the adrenaline pumping through her system. "We hit them pretty bad last time and they disabled our weapons system. I'm *hoping* that they dropped their shields to conserve power now that they think we can't harm them."

“What good will the solar sails do?” the boy whimpered.

She turned to him. “Max, I need you to man that station right over there, okay?”

“Okay,” he nodded, crossed the room and waited for further instructions.

“When I say so, I need you to press the solar sail’s collector panel density up to two hundred percent, okay? It is that brown slide-control.”

The boy nodded, but wondered why she was pursuing this course of action. Durant had given him some tutorial about the solar sails, but from what little he understood about them, performing this action would not propel them with any speed at all. It would just make the sails really shiny. Had Samantha gone crazy?

“*Don’t look at me. Don’t look at me. Don’t looky, looky, looky, looky...*” she continued to chant, manipulating the angle, adjusting the sails’ energy receptor level to zero percent.

“Well, you have to give them credit for their tenacity,” Briggs said to no one in particular. He tapped a control on the command chair and opened a hailing frequency: “*Blue Horizon*. You are outnumbered and outgunned. We’ll take you alive; there’s no sense in trying to escape.”

A spray of white-hot electricity filled the hall as another conduit ruptured, showering the combatants in a maelstrom of light. Renny Thornton flew through the air, slamming against a far wall as Merlin moved in for another shot. The wolf sliced the blade down in the cramped quarters, and a deft move from his target spared the jaguar a disemboweling stroke. The blade clanged to the floor and Sagan slammed a foot into Merlin’s face, sending the wolf sprawling across the hall to crash into another wall. The weapon fell to the floor and the dark intruder kicked it hard enough to send it spinning to the side near the dying fox.

Merlin rolled up back onto his feet, only to be met with the charging jaguar’s body slamming into him like a hurled boulder. The wolf grunted as the back of his head cracked against the wall, and Sagan withdrew just enough to pull back for another blow. His thick, muscular fist was slick with a mixture of crimson and black blood. Part in panic and part in fatigue, Merlin dropped to his knees; the vicious blow missed him and landed upon the metal wall, denting the gray surface with the crunch of torn cartilage and bones. As the captain rolled out of the way, the massive jaguar moved serpentine to follow him. His thick tail slashed at the air like a pendulum above a helpless victim. He crouched slightly, legs quivering with energy – with the lust of pouncing a trapped kill.

A recovered Renny shot from a low point into the jaguar’s legs and sent him down in a flurry of limbs scrabbling for purchase. The cheetah no longer moved like quicksilver, and one desperate movement found his ankle snared in a black fist. That fist clenched instantly, shattering the fragile bones of the navigator’s foot and bringing a sharp, painful scream from him as a splinter pierced through the skin. Sagan worried the wounded ankle, wrenching as much agony out of his victim as possible. Renny clawed at the floor, unable to pull himself free of the monstrous grip. Sagan gripped tighter, enjoying the helpless cries of his prey.

Then it was the jaguar that screamed, releasing the limb as he felt Merlin Sinclair’s lupine teeth tear at his throat. The wolf came close—oh so close—to ripping the major artery, but missed it by only a fraction of an inch. Sagan’s powerful arms gripped the captain around

his breast and pulled him in, pinning his arms to his sides and crushing the breath from him in a powerful bear-hug.

Caught off guard, Merlin gasped, trying desperately to seize a moment's breath, but to no avail. His throat burned for oxygen and he felt his ribs compressing, compacting, and ready to break. His nails sought purchase in the jaguar's flanks, but the pressure of the unnatural grip sapped strength from him.

The world began to contract, the red lights grew dim, and Merlin saw only a haze of orange moving awkwardly, slowly in the mist before him. He could feel the hot breath on his face as Sagan's grin grew wider and the jaguar licked blood from his lips in anticipation. Merlin felt his body spasm, convulsing in a last, desperate attempt to free itself and find precious air to stay alive.

Sagan lay on his back on the dark hallway floor, the limp body of the gray wolf sprawled across his breast as the dark jaguar squeezed life out of him. And there, not too far away, was the tall fox, still clutching at her belly, moving toward the discarded blade.

From the side, the tawny body of Renny Thornton approached with a long, gray cord in his hand. The cord flamed with sparks, and the cheetah fell to his knees in pain and exhaustion, jamming the sparking end of the energetic cord into the jaguar's face.

A shower of blue-white sparks erupted and Sagan released the gray wolf's body with a roar. A new pain ripped through Merlin as the cold floor came up to smash him in the face, and his numb body somehow staggered with life. He hurt all over, he was shaking, and his vision was clouded, but he knew he was alive. Sagan squirmed, screaming in pitches of agony as the electric shock burned his face, until he scuttled out of the way, lurching his way to his feet and planting a heavy fist hard against the wounded cheetah's sternum. The acrid smell of burned flesh and fur filled the corridor.

Sagan stood again, his two adversaries on the floor before him and the dying fox behind. "Now," the jaguar rumbled through his own pain and agony, his voice like a skin stretched over broken glass, "you will *all* die."

Merlin ground his teeth, nostrils flaring. He had not yet recovered and Renny writhed in too much pain to fight on. They were all going to die here and now, and he couldn't do a thing about it.

Then a grunt followed, and the sound of metal on metal as the silvery blade of the sword flashed. The blade-tip clinked against the metal floor beneath the carpet it pierced as Taro used it as a crutch to vault up from her position on the hallway floor. It was enough to get her vertical, and, releasing her gushing abdomen, the fox fell forward, seizing the mad jaguar around his skull. Sagan spat viciously, taken off guard as she wrapped a muscular hand beneath his chin and cupped the other around the crown of his head.

With a single, Herculean effort, the Hestran fox wrenched Sagan's head, cracking his jawbone so hard it unhinged and sagged, swinging free of his face. Merlin's face dropped at the sight as a steady stream of her blood—and other somethings he tried not too hard to think about—trickled onto the floor between them. With the other hand, Taro pushed his head forward and again wrenched the jaw, splintering his vertebrae in a sickening crunch. In the next instant, Sagan's head faced backward, looking into her eyes in disbelief.

Taro released him and slumped to the hallway floor again, regathering herself in the fetal pose as tears spilled out of her eyes.

Sagan remained standing as his head slowly and gradually spiraled back around to normal. The glass-green eyes still flared, but with a flat, lifeless expression. He wobbled on uneasy legs for a moment, his face falling to meet Merlin's as he extended one arm, pointing

with one finger in a final accusation. Then he fell to his knees, wobbled again, and slammed to the floor. A splatter of the eerie, black blood spilled out of his body in a sickening gurgle as he ultimately expired.

For a long moment, no one moved in the hallway. Then Taro groaned in agony, raking her nails against the curved wall. Renny hobbled up onto his knees and seized the sword. With it, he helped himself stand, gingerly avoiding his crushed foot, and gently seized around her shoulders. She had passed out from the effort.

He tried to lift the mortally wounded fox into his free arm to take her to Sickbay, but the slick floor, his injured foot and overall weariness was too much for him. He slumped beside her and looked hopefully to his captain.

Merlin gathered his feet from beneath him, shook out his head, and shuffled over to help them both to the Sickbay before he could check in on the bridge.

Samantha finished calculations and gave a nod to Max, growling quietly, "Ever fry ants with a magnifying glass, Max?"

The youth pushed the sail density to two hundred percent as she whipped a control, angling the sails to face the nearby star. The dense sheen of material flamed in space, catching the light of stellar energy. The flash filled both solar sails like super halogen lamps, blinding the crew of the *Basilisk* for a crucial moment as Samantha moved a control, flexing the sails to a convex, half-egg shape. The reflection on the sails shrank and merged into a single beam one centimeter in diameter at five-trillion candlepower. The beam sliced through the unprotected *Basilisk* like a hot needle through butter before the solar sails disintegrated beneath the strain of reflecting so much energy.

A ribbon of superheated slag spiraled out of the *Basilisk* as its fore and aft hulls began to buckle in the vacuum of space. It was a neat hole, exactly one centimeter wide from stem to stern on the black vessel, at a slightly rising angle. It would have done a surgeon proud.

Briggs found his ship suddenly collapsing around him, but managed to seal off the bulkheads at the four major sections of the ship before losing everything. The stab at the controls had been blind, with rows of dancing green and yellow flashes filling his eyes while his mind registered what had happened. He vehemently cursed the *Blue Horizon*.

"Sir?" came a voice below him. He rubbed his eyes, vision returning but with a huge yellow flash still remaining on his retinas. He managed to focus on the captain's life signal tracker on his bridge panel. It was dark. He snarled and wiped at his eyes again.

"Finish them, now!"

"What of the captain?"

Briggs turned his icy eyes on him and snarled. "That was an *order!*"

The gunner swallowed and nodded without another argument.

Samantha's stomach fell as she realized the enemy ship was still capable of destroying them. It would have been better, she knew, to fall to Crescentis and burn up in the resulting

crash than to fall to Sagan's murderous crew. Max crossed the bridge, panting in heaves into her arms for safety as the *Basilisk* approached. The canine pulled the young male close, cradling him in a sheltering embrace.

Their eyes met, and the youth gulped hard, closed his eyes and then kissed her directly on the lips. She pulled back in surprise to see his face, full of fear and sadness. She gasped, wondering how long he had wanted to do that.

Merlin stormed onto the bridge, eyes full of confusion at the change of events. On the vidscreen before them, the hated ship moved forward, bearing down on them as a hail of blue-white electricity filled the black of space. In another moment, the corona of the nearby star was extinguished, eclipsed from their view.

Merlin's jaw fell and his eyes flew wide. Samantha raised herself and turned to peer over the console in awe; Max followed her gaze in confusion. A huge structure suddenly filled space directly behind the *Basilisk*.

"Sir?" a crewmate yelled.

Briggs waved him off, "Not now, Sennedjem!"

"Sir!" came the insistent voice. Briggs suddenly noticed that members of his crew were panicking.

Then he saw it.

"Shields!"

"Mr. Robbins," hummed a throaty voice.

"Aye, captain!" he replied, a pair of blue joysticks flipping up into his thick hands.

Captain Natasha stood up from the command seat of the *Lady of Dreams* and pointed to the flat-black manta ray in a forward section of the spherical hologram before her. "If you please, sir."

The *Basilisk* rocked in space, beaten by a barrage of white-green bolts of energy from all twenty of the dreadnought's forward batteries. The blasts cudged the black ship, smashing it back and forth like a ball tossed between hands as the shields sputtered, flaming and flickering in tortured protest.

Then a thick, terrific blast pierced through the shield and glanced off the ship, blistering the hull and raking a starboard section open. Thin fingers of crimson and orange splintered across the naked orifice in the ship as a shower of sparks followed. The shields failed and the *Basilisk's* remaining engine cells kicked in for escape, trailing a thick tail of smoke as it departed for deeper space as fast as it could manage.

The *Blue Horizon*, released from the fray, began a slow spiral to Crescentis below.

"Catch them!" Natasha boomed. Robbins activated an attractor beam and locked on to the faltering *Blue Horizon*. The azure saucer continued to descend toward the planet surface.

"Can't maintain a good lock on them, Captain!" the cougar protested. "The atmosphere has absorbed too much energy from the battle and is charged with too much static. The best we can do is slow them."

"Then set them down as easy as you can and prepare a landing party with medical and mechanical crews," she growled, tapping another switch on her console. "Mr. Devon, Mr. Blackthorne, deploy to pursue the *Basilisk* and destroy it."

Moments later, a pair of forward-swept-wing fighters dropped gracefully from the middle of the *Lady of Dreams* and shot off in pursuit. In the next moment, a trio of smooth gray triangles dropped from the bay.

Patch held on desperately to the harness of his chair as the ship around them shook and shuddered. Then both brothers startled as the engine room hatchway grated open, the metal protesting as it had to be forced. Pockets fidgeted in his chair, and Patch wrapped fingers around the crimson trigger, ready to ignite the engines right after he saw the look on...

Durant, haggard and covered in red and black blood, leaned weakly into the engine room. "We've got to get to the upper decks - right now."

Patch released the trigger as he and his brother bounded out of their harnesses.

The ship toppled roughly, sending Max tumbling across the bridge to slide into a wall as the inside heat increased. The inertial dampers and the gravity deck plates had stopped functioning, releasing the contents of the freighter to gravity and momentum's whim. Bright fingers of cracked glass snaked across the vidscreen as the *Horizon* plummeted toward the surface of the planet.

"We have no control!" Sam shouted above the screaming metal around them. A deafening roar surrounded them, growing higher in pitch as the careening ship gathered speed.

Merlin swore beneath his breath and hurled himself across the bridge to seize Max by one scrawny ankle and pull the youth to him. He bundled the ensign into his lap and threw himself under a console, hoping it would provide at least some protection from whatever came next.

Durant and the brothers made a steady path toward the bridge, stopping to catch their bearings as the ship pitched wildly. What was happening? They were about to press further when a long, dark river of blood seeped around the curved hallway in the flashing red lights. The three stood stock-still, eyes wide at the sight.

As the ship pitched upward, something massive slid down in the slick pool of blood and gathered together in a pile against a wall. Durant moved back in shock, looking down at the crumpled heap that was Sagan's body. The eyes still burned iridescent green, but the face was deformed, ripped apart with the bottom jaw at an impossible angle. Oily black liquid seeped from the body, mixing with the dark crimson in a scene out of Hell's blackest pit.

Patch took the initiative and stepped around the corner, as far away from the mound of broken flesh as he could manage. The raccoon had never been superstitious like his sibling, but he had no wish to challenge fate with this one. His brother followed absently, the grizzly bear close behind. They left it alone.

Then the ship banked sharply, spinning on its axis like the saucer it resembled, sending the three of them slamming against the dented and scarred walls. Pockets fell too close to a still-sparking cable and yelped in shock. Durant slipped in the slick pools on the floor and crashed down almost on top of Patch.

"Just hold on," Renny said, unaware of his voice. He wept openly, speaking in the high-pitched wail of a kitten. Taro lay strapped to a sickbed, drenched in blood. Tanis had applied three compresses to her abdomen before the bleeding had stemmed, but she remained unconscious. Acutely aware of the pain in his own foot and over the medic's protests, the cheetah had not sat down, but remained clutching the bed at her side as the ship spun on its way to oblivion.

He wanted her to open her eyes, to say something, to squeeze his fingers if she could. Nothing came. The rhythmic heartbeat on the monitor sparked in green, unwilling to give up just yet. Her breathing came in long wheezes, occasionally choked with a rivulet of blood that would spill out of her mouth.

"Just hold on," he repeated.

Suddenly the ship stopped rocking and steadied out. For a long moment, Merlin didn't know what to do or think, but he forced himself to sit up. Gentle white light was pouring in through the transparent vidscreen windows, but the high-pitched howl of rushing air was still there. He pried the petrified Max from his chest and looked over the console.

They had passed through the atmosphere. They were still alive, having never engaged the heat shields. This was not possible.

A Crescentan shoreline was approaching with terrifying speed. They were headed right for the coast, where a land mass met the famed Forvea Trench, a shelf of land that dropped straight down for uncharted miles just two hundred yards away from an isthmus between two of the largest islands.

If we go into the Trench, we'll all drown. If we hit the island, we'll splatter and be destroyed. Either way, we'll probably die with the force of impact.

"Sam!" Merlin barked.

Her face appeared from behind her hiding place.

"Deploy the solar sails - use them as a parachute! We can try to glide down," he ordered.

She began to move, but then stopped. She opened her mouth to speak, but turned to the pilot's control panel instead. The solar sails were gone, but there was no time to explain. She manipulated controls, and reopened the cargo bay door just a crack. Then her feet left the floor as the ship began to careen slowly end over end as it plummeted toward the ocean below.

Merlin shot her a look of surprise, and perhaps even betrayal. The Border collie gripped the console and caught its underside with her knees. She realized that if her gamble didn't work, the captain would fire her for insubordination if the crash didn't kill them all.

What was there to lose?

The *Horizon's* descent altered with the trajectory change. The massive blue ship slammed into the ocean flat on its back instead of on one edge. Inertia pulled it forward still, despite the seething, sloshing water's protest. The bodies on board were thrown helter-skelter around the compartments as the ship was completely enveloped in the icy water of the Forvea Trench.

The blistered wounds on the ship's underside allowed the surging ocean inside, and in an instant the superheated liquid crystal engines were engulfed in a fist of freezing water.

On the shore, a small human boy had been fishing with his grandfather when the streak of blue fire slammed into the water. A ripple of wave boiled up from the impact and heat and surged toward them, almost toppling the fishing dock on which the two stood.

After that, the ship whirled in the water once before going under, leaving a steaming hole in the ocean where it used to be. In only seconds, the water was filling the hole again.

A thump, deep and ominous, emanated from under the water. Then the boy's jaw dropped and the old man gripped his shoulder as a bright yellow ring appeared around the hole in the ocean, and a fragment of the ship blew out of the hole with a sound they had never heard before. With a force unimaginable, the ship sailed out of the ocean, rumbling over the fishers' heads. Its smooth belly moved it gently along unseen air currents until it plowed into the land below, sliding across the soil and throwing up clouds of dirt and rock. The ship continued on, driven by inertia and the loose earth beneath it, until it had crossed the length of the isthmus and slowed to a halt on the beach on the opposite side.

The front of the inverted ship sat in two feet of water before its weight collapsed the sand beneath, and its nose began to sink. Down, down... the ship settled into the water nearly ten feet, and stopped. In its wake, a swatch of torn-up land stretched for over two miles.

The boy looked at his grandfather and the old man looked at the boy. Neither could think of anything to say. Then the two were cognizant of another sound: a whirring drone came up from behind them. They turned together to see a squadron of tri-wing ships gliding down from the clouds toward them.

Having nothing else to do, the fishermen merely pointed to where the ship had landed.

Merlin Sinclair sat, shivering, covered in a blanket and recovering his wits. Nearby, Samantha answered questions in a choked voice as the tension released itself and she let her emotions loose. The captain surveyed the scene around him.

Five sleek, triangular shuttles encircled the smoldering hulk of the *Blue Horizon*. Natasha's rescue ships had arrived just in time. A small throng of locals had gathered around, including what appeared to be local officials. However, a ring of rough-looking uniformed

guards had surrounded the crash site almost immediately, and a wide-shouldered cougar was deflecting anyone who looked official.

Renny lay stretched out on a hovering gurney as someone looked at his crushed foot. The cheetah yelped in a high chirp now and again when the otter probed a sensitive spot, but he kept asking about Taro. She was nowhere to be seen within his field of vision.

Pockets sat over to the side out of danger, nursing a head bruise with a cold pack pressed against his temple while Patch cradled a splinted, broken arm. Durant sat wheezing on the soft grass, refusing medical attention until the others were taken care of. The first removed from the wreckage, the grizzly had been sedated via stunner when he had tried to rush back into the ship and find those who had not yet come out.

Tanis and Max, largely unhurt, were helping the rescue crew.

"Sinclair," came a raspy, masculine voice. The wolf turned to see Natasha strolling up to him. Although unsteadily, he stood, still dwarfed by the tall fox, to answer her arrival. "Looks like you took one incredible beating up there. Most people I know would have lost it."

Sinclair didn't recognize it as a compliment. He blinked twice, trying to find a response. "I... I don't know why we're all alive."

"You're welcome," she responded. Not sarcasm, but genuine concern. "When the *Horizon* went down I had Robbins follow you with an attractor beam. We couldn't get a good lock through the charged atmosphere but instead deployed three shuttles and they made it in time to shield you and lock onto the main body of your ship before the LC core went up. Propelled by the explosion, they were able to get the bulk of the ship out of the water, though I imagine the landing was quite a bumpy ride for you."

Merlin was stunned. "You?"

She nodded.

"How did you even know...?"

Natasha ran a hand through her head fur, looking around at the other crewmembers, "Somebody on board your ship is apparently learned enough to know a secret subspace channel used exclusively by privateers, but that we'd be the only ones with the communications equipment powerful enough to pick it up. Whoever sent us that message saved you."

"Thank you for your help. I'm indebted to you, Captain," Merlin murmured with his ears and tail down in submission.

"Not at all," Natasha responded with a shake of her head. She lifted his chin with a finger to look him in the eye. "I don't require compensation, but if there ever comes a time when I could use your services, I'm sure we can come to some kind of agreement."

Stunned that a pirate would pass up the opportunity to indenture others to her cause, Merlin nodded gratefully.

A protest, a primal grunt erupted from behind them.

"No!" Natasha growled as Durant charged the wreckage again, lumbering off balance and drunkenly toward the blistering, crackling metal. Still blinded by rage, grief, pain and the sedative, the bear stampeded toward the dying ship in an effort to save – something.

"I don't think so!" came another voice. A huge body stepped in front of the bear, taking him down in a football tackle. Inertia pushed them both over and Mr. Robbins held onto Durant with iron thews. Worn, injured and drugged as he was, the bear was no match for the massive cougar, but he continued to struggle.

"Ma'am?" another voice asked. Natasha turned to the figure of Tim as the boy hefted a two-ton chunk of the debris above his head. Inside a cybernetic exosuit, the mouse stood a good

seven feet tall and had the strength of fifty men. With the ease of tossing a small stick, the lad hurled the weight away from the ship into a gathering pile of rubble.

"What is it, Tim?" she asked.

"I think you should see this," he said, backing away from the newly-opened hatch. Natasha frowned, gathering herself and moving forward. Merlin, suddenly seized with a new feeling of dread, followed on unsteady legs.

Tim backed up slightly to allow her a vantage point of the inside of the ship's hallway where the structure of the external hull had been ripped apart in the landing. There, out of the lip of metal, a flow of thick, oily material seeped out onto the sand, and in the half-light that still remained inside the ship, was Sagan's corpse.

Merlin and Natasha stood for a long moment, saying nothing.

A blaze lit behind them, illuminating the body in a halo of blue light. Merlin startled and turned, only to see a blowtorch had extended from the boy's top-right armature. But what concerned him more was the blank look on the young mouse's face. With one eye behind a red monocle hardwired into the suit, the boy betrayed no horror, no remorse as he beheld the grisly, broken cadaver. Tim looked on the face of twisted, mutilated death with a calm dissociation that chilled the wolf. Merlin had no way of knowing that Sagan had been the cause of the boy's crippling injuries.

"Let me finish the job," the mouse said tonelessly.

"No," she snapped, as a mother berating a rude child. "They'll need this when the formal inquest happens. Speaking of which..." she checked a timepiece, "we need to get out of here before the SPF arrives."

"Leave?" Merlin asked, wide-eyed with an almost supernatural fear at the thought.

She sighed, "Yes, I'm afraid so. We can't be here when they arrive, even though we'd like to help you out as much as we can. We've taken statements from everybody so that the SPF can be out of your fur ASAP. Our guy is an ex-cop, so he knows what info to get. We've provided general first aid to everybody who needs it, but for the more extensive jobs, you are on your own."

"Taro..." he rasped. "I know you have technology that nobody else does. C-can you help her? I don't want to lose her..."

"Taro Nichols will accompany me to Pomen for medical treatment," she said flatly, as though stating a fact not open to discussion. "And it's not a favor to you, either."

"Wha—?"

"Let's just say that it's a personal matter between two Hestrans. *Let it go.*"

"Yes, ma'am." Sinclair didn't know what else to say to all her generosity. He wanted to kiss her, but the tall vixen strode off without so much as a handshake and called the rest of her crew to follow.

Renny was set on a regular cotton gurney with a sterile bandage around his foot, and the others were allowed to keep their generic medical bandages and salves. However, all traces of Natasha's advanced technology were quickly, methodically removed before her party boarded their shuttles and gracefully pulled away from the scene.

When the locally-assigned SPF forces arrived a half hour later, the local magistrates had taken control of the situation and the fate of the hulk of the *Blue Horizon* had been placed in the paws of the diplomats. Merlin, frustrated at the thought of the matter being tied up for months or years in the interstellar court system, found himself at a loss. His one consolation was that the SPF Rangers recognized the body of the pirate Sagan and immediately informed SPF Headquarters on Joplin. Merlin was informed that he and the crew would be awarded his

bounty, placed in escrow until their arrival on a planet that could handle the transfer. This tightened the noose even further, as the Crescentis fishing fleet made a play for partial credit for the villain's death.

However, news of the *Blue Horizon* traveled fast, and representatives from the Crescentan embassies from Sillon and Tanthe stepped in. The matter was finalized within a week, the insurance with the fishing fleet for the lost cargo was resolved, and the crew of the *Blue Horizon* was transported off Crescentis in stylish Tanthean Corvettes.

The *Lady of Dreams* sat in cloaked orbit around the planet Pomen, having delivered their precious cargo to someone at a planetside location that Natasha had not cared to name.

Jape Devon stepped out of his warbird as the rasping engines shut down. The alien seemed visibly distressed as he removed his characteristic black flying helmet.

"Mr. Devon, what news?"

Devon replied. "Blackthorne is dead."

Natasha's face drew into a tight grimace as she clenched a fist.

"Following the crippled *Basilisk*," he continued, "we were set upon by another ship of similar make. We beat a quick retreat but Blackthorne got sloppy and tried to take them on. After... *that* happened, the new contact turned back to aid the *Basilisk*. I didn't stick around for anything else."

Natasha ground her teeth, rubbing a finger against her chin. There was another player in town.