



*Blue Horizon*  
Book Two

BLUE HORIZON, BOOK TWO

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Written with the assistance of  
Eileen Blasingame and Steve Carter

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Published by Lulu Press  
<http://www.lulu.com>

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<http://trblasingame.com>

## **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

Writing the introduction to a book is probably the hardest thing I've had to do on the entire *Blue Horizon* project, especially on a second volume of stories. Book 1 addressed the start of the series and where it had appeared before finding its permanent home on the Internet.

*Blue Horizon* has been a satisfying endeavor. Not only have I had the opportunity to enjoy spinning tales around our cast of characters, I've made many friends among the fans of the series. There have been countless words of encouragement given me on *Blue Horizon*, especially during the times when I considered closing down the project altogether, and I've been told that our stories have inspired others to write tales of their own and post them online for others to read as we have done.

Eileen, Steve and I never actually intended to go public with our stories, but it's a decision we made that has continued to reward us for our efforts. The tales may not be perfect, and some of the plotlines may not necessarily be original, but we've enjoyed sharing the adventures of the *Blue Horizon* with our friends and fans. Thank you to all who have visited our websites and especially to those who have written and expressed their enjoyment reading our tales.

The stories have been divided up into "seasons" much as a television series. A major set of events has been our marker for the end of a season, with a new start designating the beginning of new scenarios. Book One of *The Captain's Journal* contained eleven stories which made up the first season and set the stage for the characters, ships and situations that would carry through the rest of the tales.

As its name suggests, Book Two contains the stories which made up the second season of the Captain's Journal and will take the reader on a set of individual tales that will lead up to major events that will shake the very foundations of the Planetary Alignment. This second season was the shortest of them all. Most of the stories were plotted out separately and are only loosely tied together in chronological order, but as you read you will start to see pieces of a larger puzzle that will all come together in the next season.

We hope you enjoy the tales presented here for you. While *Blue Horizon* has been primarily an Internet-based project, requests for the stories in hardcopy have long come to me. With the accessibility of publication through print-on demand, we are now able to make our books available to those who wish to hold a physical volume in their hands. Thank you for your interest and support of this project.

– Ted R. Blasingame  
2000

P.S.

This book of tales represents the second 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 Two

## LIFE'S A BEACH

By Ted R. Blasingame

\*\*\*

When Samantha woke up that morning, she felt fairly chipper for the first time since the crash of the *Blue Horizon* six weeks earlier. A lot of her mood had to do with the sunlight streaming in through the cracks of the curtains of her room that fell across her bed and warmed her fur. The weather of the past week had been foggy with misting rain and generally gloomy. The spirits of the crew had been understandably low, despite the therapy they had all undergone. Most of them had sustained injuries in the crash on *Crescentis*, and with the loss of their ship and their livelihood, everyone had been perpetually bored, edgy and depressed.

Samantha was one of the lucky ones of the crew. Strapped to the command chair on the bridge during the crash, she had received little more than bumps and bruises garnered from loose debris that had pelted her. Likewise, Pockets, Max and Tanis had come through the event with minimal injuries, but everyone else had been hospitalized for a while.

The Border collie stretched her arms and allowed herself to smile at the sunlight. She had dreamt of flowered fields, snowcapped mountains and a sunny beach during the night, and seeing the morning sunbeams in a clear blue-green sky warmed her soul as much as the air.

She slipped out of the bed and put on a pair of denim shorts and a long white shirt with the sleeves rolled up to the elbows, instead of the colorful and lightweight body-covering robes that were the common dress in this part of the world.

She grabbed a grooming brush from the nightstand and began to run it over her fur as she moved to the window. With one hand, she pushed the curtains aside and bathed the entire room in bright sunlight.

Her room was on the seventh floor of the building the Tanthean government had allowed them to stay in during their recuperation on Pomen, and her room window faced the nearby Karin Sea. Samantha tilted her head to the right at a sudden thought. She glanced at the nightstand clock and nodded silently to herself.

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Merlin listened to Samantha's suggestions and lapped his coffee with a frown. He sat upright in his bed against the headboard, a breakfast tray across his lap and a pot of fresh coffee on the nightstand beside him. The Border collie had come to his room in brighter spirits than he had seen of his crew during the past few weeks, and she had gone straight to his curtains to pull them aside. The wolf had been awake, but had not yet crawled out of bed. His ribs were still tender despite weeks of healing, which made him reluctant to get out and do anything. He thought Sam's idea was a good one, but doubted anyone would agree.

"We've been doing nothing more than moping around since the crash," the Border collie said. "Everyone's depressed and nobody even talks to anyone else anymore. We *need* to get away from our rooms for a day."

"It's not likely our doctors will allow an excursion, Sam," the lupine captain replied. "My ribs are still sore, and Renny and Patch are still wearing casts."

"Merlin," the supply officer said, "I've already talked to our doctors this morning and they have all agreed that a day outside will help us all, providing we don't overdo it."

The wolf grunted and looked at her over the edge of his coffee cup, his expression unconvinced.

"Listen, Merlin," Samantha continued, "there is a sandy beach only two miles from here. The Karin Sea is a body of fresh water, so we won't have to worry about saltwater bothering us. We *need* to get out of these rooms," she repeated, "even if for a day! For those who want to wear them, I've already found a nearby shop with swimwear for different species at discount prices that I'm willing to cover out of my own pocket."

The captain sighed and then allowed her to see a smile of defeat. "Okay, Sam, you win," he said. "Go tell the others what you have planned for them, but I have a feeling you'll get nothing but opposition."

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An hour later, Samantha stood before Merlin, her expression downcast and angry. "Max, Tanis and Pockets are the only ones who agreed going to the beach was a good idea," she said to him. The lupine captain was dressed solely in a pair of blue shorts and he had been trying to exercise on the floor of his room, as much as his sore ribs would allow. He looked up at her and tilted his head.

"Sam," he said quietly, "you four are the only ones who were not badly injured in the crash. If you want to go, you're all free to spend the day at the beach together."

The supply officer shook her head. "That defeats the purpose of the outing, Captain," she said. "*Everybody* in our crew has been depressed and sullen. Everybody, *especially* the injured, needs to get outdoors for some fresh air and a change of scenery. Amy agrees we need psychological healing, as well as physical."

"Yes, our counselor would say that," Merlin replied. He bit his bottom lip in resignation and then sighed. "All right, Sam. I don't even want to go, but tell everyone that it is an order from the captain that we will all spend today at the beach as part of our psychological healing. It doesn't matter to me if they want to just sit under an umbrella and sulk all day, but everyone is going. I'm appointing you coordinator on this, Sam," he said. "Arrange for transportation, food, drinks, swimwear and beach towels. If anyone gives you guff over it, send them to me."

Samantha grinned and gave him a crisp military salute. "Yes, sir!"

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As expected, Merlin was besieged with complaints from his crew, but the wolf had since talked with their counselor Dr. Howard, who reaffirmed his recommendation for the outing. The captain stuck to his command and in the end, everyone found themselves at the Reynard Beach on the sandy shore of the Kirin Sea.

Samantha was pleased, despite the grumbling. She set out blankets on the white sand and put up a few large umbrellas while Max and Tanis hauled coolers of food and drink from their rented vehicle. Patch had complained the loudest when told Merlin had ordered everyone to the beach, but he was the first one to settle in a lounge chair beneath an umbrella once they were set up. He chose a chair with arms so he could rest his left arm cast on it. He brought with

him a slateboard containing engineering trade magazines with the intent to read them thoroughly while there. He also brought along a shirt pocket full of his favorite cigars, which he began to smoke in open spite of the others' protests.

Almost immediately, Pockets headed for the water and began swimming to exercise tired muscles. Despite his short arms, the raccoon was able to swim well. Tanis joined him a few moments later and soon the two were splashing one another in fun.

Renny spread out on another blanket with his leg cast extended in front of him. He wore a pair of tight black shorts and a pair of dark sunglasses as he lay back in the warm sun. Of all the crew members of the late *Blue Horizon*, the cheetah was probably the most depressed. He brooded about everything he could think of. Being the athletic-type, Renny was confounded by the crushed foot that had to be rebuilt and his inability to get around very well with it bound up in a synplast cast up to his knee. The battle with Sagan had been traumatic, as he had never been involved in such a fight before, especially with an opponent who was so obviously deranged. He still had nightmarish dreams about the cold green eyes and the crazed look in them, and he had jumped out of a deep sleep on more than one occasion panting himself dry.

Probably the one thing that kept him down more than any other was the loss of Taro Nichols. She had been taken from the crash site by the *Lady of Dreams*, supposedly to private physicians here on Pomen, but there had been no word of any kind as to her fate. Was Taro alive, or had she perished from the evisceration she had received from Sagan? When the cheetah had first come on board the *Blue Horizon* as the new navigator, she was the first to welcome him warmly, and the two of them felt an immediate attraction. He had been inexperienced with women before Taro, but she had long since given him the experience and confidence he had needed.

It was well known that Taro never played favorites, and that she had no intentions of getting involved in a serious commitment, but that was not so for Renny. He believed he well and truly smitten with the vixen, and anytime she paired off together with Tanis, he felt jealous, even if he was fully aware that he did not have exclusive rights to her.

He missed her terribly, and the worry of not knowing her fate gnawed at his mind constantly. No matter what anyone said or did for him, he sustained a glum demeanor. Dr. Howard was concerned for him. She knew that cheetahs often formed close bonds; it might take a while for Renny to get used to the idea that Taro might not return.

Maximillian was intrigued by the beach. The only other beach he had ever seen was on Dennier, next to his adopted Aunt Shannon's house. He and Pockets had goofed off together there, but this time the young canine was more interested in the other beach-goers that he was watching with a silly grin.

Durant stepped up next to the youth and put his arm around Max's shoulders. "What are you looking at so intently?" the bear asked with a knowing smile.

"The girls..." Max replied in a faraway tone.

Durant pulled a cold drink from the cooler at his feet and replied, "I thought you saw plenty of women at *The Wild Star* back on Quet."

Max looked up at him with a frown. "Yeah, Master Tagon made more money from the pleasure rooms than he did from the restaurant, and I saw a lot of women there," he said, "but I was younger and never saw them like this." He grinned and nodded toward a nearby volleyball game where the contestants were mostly canine females. None were wearing the standard robes of the populace, but in the beach setting they were all wearing little more than skimpy shorts. It was quite a difference.

"They look a lot nicer to me now," murmured the youth.

"Ever kiss a girl?" the grizzly asked as he settled into a beach chair that barely supported his bulk. He hadn't said it to tease the young canine, just merely curious.

The first thing that came to Max's mind was the brief kiss he had given Samantha on the *Blue Horizon* as it was about to crash, but that was done in the face of terror and he didn't think it really counted. He felt his skin flush beneath his face fur and had to force his tail to remain still, but he shook his head. "No," he replied. "Not really."

"Be patient, Max. It'll happen."

The sixteen year old canine nodded silently, but asked, "Do you think they would mind if I went over there and watched them play?"

Durant took a pull on the straw in his drink and then gestured toward the volleyball game with his soda. "If you don't stare too hard at the ladies, it'll probably be okay. If they see you gawking, they may take offense."

"I'll remember that."

From his place on another nearby blanket, Merlin had listened to the exchange between Durant and Max, but as the teen wandered off toward the volleyball game, he allowed himself a smile as he considered what the youngster must be feeling. Samantha must have been thinking along similar lines, as she sat down next to him and said, "Our little Max is growing up, isn't he?"

The wolf nodded. "Sooner than I expected. I keep thinking of him as a kid."

"Well, you're his uncle now," Samantha replied with a smile. "You're supposed to think of him that way, even if he's almost an adult."

"Oh, no! What happened?"

Merlin and Samantha looked up at the new voice and saw two female cats approach Renny. Like the volleyball players, they were dressed only in the barest of shorts and had plenty of lovely fur to expose, even while their chest fur provided plenty of coverage. One was a black cat with white on her arms, legs and belly. The other was a golden cougar and both were kneeling next to the *Blue Horizon's* navigator.

Renny didn't feel like entertaining guests, but he had never been one to be rude to anyone. He tried to act disinterested so they might go away, but soon found himself telling them of the fate of their ship instead.

"You mean," said the mountain lioness, "it was *the* Sagan? The one who murdered all those poor foxes on Hestra?"

"Yeah," Renny said with a scowl. "That's the guy."

The black and white cat moved closer and sat on the blanket beside the cheetah's lounge chair. "That's terrible," she said. She put a hand on her bosom and introduced herself. "My name is Tina."

"And I'm Marelle," the cougar said, kneeling on the blanket at Renny's other side. "Tell us more?"

The navigator looked from one to another and sighed inwardly. It didn't look as if he was going to be left alone, but at least the scenery was nice to look at. They were both near in age to himself. "My name is Renny," he said. "Anyway, there we were, outgunned by a pirate ship that could out-manuever us..."

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"Hey, would ya look at that?" Tanis said as he swam up beside Pockets. He pointed briefly toward the beach and the raccoon followed his gaze. "Renny's attracted beach kitties!"

Pockets snorted water from his nose and replied, "If *that* doesn't cheer him up, then he actually died in the crash!"

Tanis looked over at the mechanic's grin. "That would definitely cheer *me* up!" he said with his own smile.

"Me, too..." the raccoon agreed. "Now if we could just find a way to cheer up my brother. He's such a hothead!"

Tanis looked over at his companion and snickered. "I doubt there's anything we can do to cheer him up, but I know how to cool him down."

\*\*\*

For an afternoon where he had really done nothing at all, Max was having fun. He had spent time watching a volleyball game of bouncing girls until they left to have a cookout elsewhere on the beach. He had never learned to swim so he stayed away from the water, though he did enjoy walking along the sand where the waves lapped up over his bare feet.

He watched others swim and frolic in the sea and children build castles in the sand. There were other games he witnessed that he could not make sense of, but the participants were obviously having fun. He felt alive and enjoyed the scents and sights he experienced. This was nothing like the beach he had visited on Dennier. There, the shore had little sand and an abundance of rocks and shells that hurt his feet. Here, the white sand was soft, though hot in the sun, and he enjoyed digging his toes into the cool moisture beneath the heated surface.

Maximillian had been with the *Blue Horizon* eight months and he still found it hard to think of himself as a free spirit. Practically everyone on the ship had tried to make him feel like one of the crew, but there were times he still thought and acted like a slave. He knew it was no longer necessary, but fifteen years of slavery was a strong force of habit to break. Still, he enjoyed the knowledge that if he wanted to go walking along the beach on his own, he was free to do so without having to beg to do it.

The canine youth stopped and picked up a flat rock he found in the sand. He remembered something Pockets had shown him on Dennier and positioned the stone in his hand a certain way. He flung the rock toward the water with the intent to make it skip on the surface, but it only *plunked* into a wave. It would take more practice and he started looking around for more flat rocks.

In his search, Max no longer watched where he was going and wandered away from the water up the shore. He could hear more laughter nearby, but he didn't bother to look up until he saw a large shadow bear down on him; he was suddenly bowled over when a striped body ran into him.

"Oh, I'm *so* sorry!" a deep voice rumbled in his ear. Max lifted his head up from the sand dune he had been mashed into and saw the large Bengal tiger who had knocked him over. The muscular male reached down and helped pull him to his feet by a strong grip on his arms. "Are you okay, son?" he asked.

Max brushed sand out of his face fur and sputtered the grit off his lips. "I think so," he said with a gasp.

"My apologies," the tiger said. "I was chasing my daughter's beach ball and I'm afraid I didn't see you in time."

"Dad!" Max looked behind the tiger and saw a diminutive female running up to them. "Is he all right?"

The canine grinned at her and shook more sand out of his large ears. He remembered what Tanis had told him about taking things lightly and replied, "He tried to bury me, but I think I'll live."

Both tigers chuckled at his smile and the larger one put his arm around his shoulders. "This is my daughter, Wendy, and I'm Dr. Bengoro. Would you like a soda to rinse the grit out of your teeth, son?"

"Sure," Max replied. "I'd like that."

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Patch felt drowsy and his eyelids were heavy. He had been reading engineering articles for a while and was engrossed in an article concerning one of Earth's deep-space exploration vessels that had just returned from its maiden voyage. The article had interested him, but sitting still on the warm beach made him lethargic. He lost the will to fight it any longer and set his slateboard inside a pack beside him, intent on a nap.

Had he been more alert, Patch might have detected two figures sneaking up behind him. The chief engineer settled back into his chair and closed his eyes.

Pockets hung back as his companion tip-toed through the hot sand toward his brother. He had argued against the prank on his sibling, but the desert fox was determined to do it anyway. It might be the only chance he ever had at something like this.

Arktanis stopped just behind Patch and lifted a child's plastic bucket up high, almost to the edge of the umbrella that shaded the raccoon. A solitary drop of water preceded the rest by a couple of seconds, and it was just enough to make Patch open his eyes. He caught a glimpse of Tanis just before his face was dowsed with large *splooosh!*

Patch coughed, sputtered and fell out of his chair as the desert fox took off across the sand, cackling mischievously. Pockets headed in the opposite direction as so not to be blamed by association. Patch wove a tapestry of obscenity that rivaled the fine arts of the Greco-Roman masters as he glared at the retreating backside of Tanis. He was soaked and the sand that had been tracked on his blanket now stuck to him. He waved a clenched fist at the fox and added more profanity in his direction, rotating his words through several languages.

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Maximillian sat with his legs crossed on the blanket of Alan and Tess Bengoro, quietly lapping a peach-flavored soda. Wendy sat beside him and idly chatted about their present vacation. Her father was a surgeon, her mother a botanist and Reynard Beach was a favorite spot of theirs to vacation. They lived further south in a tropical zone, though there weren't any beaches like this where they were from. Wendy was only a year younger than Max, but she'd had a good education and some of the things she talked about were over the canine's head of knowledge.

Tess had asked him about himself, but Max was rather loathe to say anything about his youth on Quet, so he just told them his uncle Merlin owned a starship and they were couriers to the different worlds of the Planetary Alignment. He didn't elaborate and they didn't press him for more information.

Wendy seemed fascinated with his face. She had never seen a German shepherd with pale blue eyes before and couldn't seem to stop looking at him.

"Max," Alan asked, "would you like to have a little fun?"

"Uh, sure..."

The male tiger moved away from the blanket a few paces and dropped to his knees. With only his hands and claws, he began to scoop up sand and pile it to the side of a depression he made. He was methodical about it and seemed to ignore his companions.

After a moment, Tess knelt beside him and helped him dig. Wendy looked over at Max and grinned. "Uh oh..." she said.

"What's they doing?" Max asked her.

"Digging a hole."

"What's it for?" he asked.

"For you."

"For me? Why?"

Alan winked at Wendy and kept digging. The hole was not deep, but was getting longer. "I'm going to bury you in it."

Max tried to back up, but lost his footing and merely sat down quickly in the middle of a forgotten sand castle. "You're not going to bury *me* while I'm still alive!" the canine exclaimed. "I'm not a bone!"

Alan laughed and looked up at his daughter. "Don't worry, kiddo. I'm not going to bury your head, just most of your body."

"What?" Max asked. "Why?"

"Just for fun," he answered.

"How will *that* be fun?" Max asked.

"Come over here and lay down in the hole."

Max was suddenly very uncertain about his new friends. He had heard stories of seemingly innocent people killing the unsuspecting and he swallowed a lump in his throat. He tried to hide his fear and shook his head, wondering if he should run.

"Uh, no thanks," he said. "You can do it to Wendy instead."

With a chuckle, Alan reached over to give Wendy a guiding hand and the girl took it without hesitation. She walked down inside the shallow oblong hole and then stretched out along its length in the cool sand as if she had done this many times. Alan helped to adjust where she lay and Max saw that that her head and feet stuck out on both ends.

"Tess, give me a hand with this," the doctor said.

Alan scooped up the sand he had piled to the side and began filling in the hole around Wendy. Tess knelt on the opposite side of the hole and did the same. When Alan and Tess finished, there was a mound of sand on the beach with Wendy's head sticking out of one end and her bare feet protruding from the other.

Max crawled over to her and asked, "Are... are you okay?"

"Of course," she answered. "We've done this loads of times." She wriggled her toes and Max found himself smiling. He looked over at the adults and shrugged his shoulders.

"Now what happens?" he asked.

The tigers looked at one another with a grin, but Wendy was the one who answered. "Now I just lay here for a while. The feel of the sand around me is nice," she said. "You should try it."

"Hey, there, Max!"

The canine youth looked up at the familiar raccoon's voice and he smiled. "Hi, Pockets!"

The mechanic stopped near the small group and asked, "What's going on?"

Tess offered him a smile. "Your friend is trying to decide whether or not he wants to be buried in the sand like our daughter," she said. Pockets glanced quickly to the male tiger, who

wriggled his fingers in a specific way. The raccoon understood immediately and knelt in the sand beside his young friend.

"Why don't you try it, Max," Pockets said with a mischievous smile. "It should be all right."

"Well," the canine said with hesitation. "I suppose it'll be okay so long as you're here." Max looked up at Alan and then introduced his friend to them. "This is Pockets. He's from my uncle's ship that I told you about."

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Pockets," the doctor said. "I'm Alan, this is my wife Tess and my daughter Wendy."

"Hullo."

"So, you want to try it, too?" Alan asked Max.

"Okay. Wendy looks safe enough."

Alan and Tess began to quickly dig another furrow in the sand beside their daughter. When it was ready, they looked up at Max and nodded to him. He looked over at Pockets, who just grinned back at him. Without another word, the canine youth took his place in the depression as he had seen Wendy do earlier, and allowed the tigers to cover him over.

The sand was cool against the canine's sun-warmed fur, and it actually felt good. After a few moments, he could feel the weight of the sand all around him and it seemed that Wendy's folks were still piling on the sand.

"How does that feel?" Alan asked him.

Max screwed up his mouth and frowned. "I can't move," he said.

"Does it hurt?" Tess asked. "Are you uncomfortable?"

"No," Max admitted after thinking it over. "It's kinda nice, really." He looked at his crewmate, but Pockets seemed amused, though he did look anxious as if expecting something.

The adult tigers sat down in the sand, each before a pair of teenage toes. Alan grinned and said, "Now, here's where that fun begins!"

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Patch stepped out of the small beach changing room and scowled once again out across the sand toward his crewmates. He had finally dried out his fur, and was thankful none of Tanis' water had gotten into his cast. Having already been unwrapped, his last remaining cigar hadn't survived and he was fairly upset about it. The raccoon grumbled to himself and decided to see if any of the boardwalk shops along the beach carried a decent blend of cigar. He never got to smoke while on board a ship due to the oxygen-rich atmosphere, but the opportunity to smoke while they were down on Pomen was too much for him to pass up.

He wandered along the boardwalk for a while and the rich flavor of cigar smoke suddenly touched his nostrils. He smiled and brightened up. He'd know that particular aroma anywhere! He moved quickly into a small shop barely large enough for three customers at a time and went straight to the tiny counter. A meercat wearing a red ball cap turned backwards between his small ears peered down at him from the stool he was perched upon. He was smoking the cigar Patch had smelled from outside.

"What kin I getcha?" he asked.

"Brandtian cigars," Patch stated with a nod to the meercat's hand. "Katshoggi blend."

The suricatta grinned at him around his smoke without removing it from his mouth and nodded. "Enticing, ain't it? How many you want?"

"Five."

The merchant reached behind the counter and then brought up five metal tubes. He set them on the counter and then totaled up the price. Patch blanched at the figure, but didn't comment as he pulled out his credicard and handed it to the meercat. Things were more expensive around tourist areas, he remembered with a frown.

As he waited, Patch turned to look toward a strange noise behind him. It was a small child, about two years old, in a lime green pajama suit resembling a popular children's programming character. It had, as its single head ornament, a long, straight shaft sticking up out of the head. Combined with flat, broad earmuffs on the side that seemed out of place in this weather, the sight of this child's head disturbed the engineer in ways he couldn't put his finger on.

The meercat handed his card back to him and Patch thanked him for the cigars. The raccoon left the small business with his purchase and rubbed his eyes, not from the cigar smoke, but rather from the hideous sight he had just seen.

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Durant could feel the muscles in his arms complain as he forced himself to swim in powerful strokes. He had suffered a mild concussion and several low-degree burns and cuts across his abdomen in their ordeal, but he had recovered quickly. He had not been swimming in so long and the exercise would be good for him, especially after weeks of lethargy in a medical facility. He'd been one of those who had complained about the excursion, but now that he was out here, he was enjoying himself.

He was a little farther out from the shore than he knew he should be so he turned back inland and began again. His eyes had been shut through most of his swimming but he suddenly collided with another body. He dipped under the waves momentarily as he momentarily lost his tempo, and when he emerged a heartbeat later, he looked up into the smiling black eyes of a polar bear.

"Pardon me, ma'am," Durant said with a nervous smile. "I was concentrating too hard on my swim, I suppose."

The white bear continued treading water beside him. "I wasn't expecting anyone this far out," she replied in a smooth voice, "but I'm happy to meet you. My name is Carmen."

The grizzly bear nodded to her and said, "Glad to meet you, Carmen. I'm Durant."

"Is that your personal name or your family name?" she asked as the two of them began swimming slowly toward the beach.

Durant had always hated his first name and never allowed anyone to call him by it, so he hesitated to give it to her. "Leonardo is my first name," he replied at last. "Leo Durant."

She'd noticed his hesitation and quickly picked up on his distaste for his first name. She didn't have a problem with this, so she gave him a warm smile. "Well, Mr. Durant, would you care to join me in a swim?" Carmen asked him, despite that they were already treading water side by side.

"I would love to," he answered.

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Twenty minutes later, the ursine couple emerged from the water and walked up the beach a short distance to Carmen's blanket. She had several extra-large towels and she handed one to her new friend.

"This ship you serve on," she said casually, "the *Blue Horizon*? Is it a cruiser?"

"It is... uh, was... an *Okami* freighter," Durant answered as he admired her sleek fur. "Pirates shot us down over Crescentis last month as we were coming in to make a delivery. The ship didn't survive, but the rest of us are still recovering."

"Oh, I'm sorry," the polar bear replied. "My ship's an *Okami* freighter, too."

Durant tilted his head sideways and smiled. "You're joking, right?"

"No, really," she said as she rubbed the towel vigorously across her shoulders. "I'm the ship's doctor of the *Hidalgo Sun*. It's an old D-model, but it still gets us around."

"What are you doing here?"

"We're on shore leave between jobs," she answered with a smile as she dropped the towel and then slipped into a tan beach robe. "Captain Rezo always gives us a day or two of leave every time we make a delivery somewhere. We dropped off a shipment of building materials yesterday. We'll be leaving in the morning with housewares bound for Ganis."

"Would you mind a bit of company on your last day here?" Durant asked her. "I've spent the last six weeks around stoic doctors and grumbling crewmates. I sure would enjoy a smiling face of a beautiful woman for a change, even if for a little bit."

Carmen squinted and tilted her head as she tried to read his true intentions and decided he was being honest. "Are you sure you want to spend your time with *another* doctor?" she asked with a teasing smirk.

"If she smiles like you, I do," the grizzly replied with a lopsided grin.

The polar bear laughed. "Okay, you can meet me at a little comfy restaurant at the corner of Reno and Anderson Road at seven o'clock tonight. It's called *The Venetian Rose*."

"Yes, I would like that," Durant replied. "What about now? May I buy you lunch?"

The doctor gave him a little pout and answered, "I'm afraid I don't have the time right now. I just came down to the beach for a last swim in the sea before starting my preparations for our next voyage. I have a number of official errands to take care of before supper tonight, which is the time I'll be free."

Durant nodded, remembering all the little extras he always did for the *Blue Horizon* just prior to each launch. "I understand," he said with a genuine smile. "I'll meet you promptly at seven o'clock at *The Venetian Rose*, a nice little place right up on the boardwalk, and will be most appreciative of your company."

Carmen leaned forward, briefly touched noses with him, and then sat back on her knees. "I will look forward to it," she said.

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Patch returned to his party's beach spot and noted with satisfaction that the sunlight had already dried off his chair. Merlin lay on his back in the sun on a nearby blanket, his eyes closed as he enjoyed the warmth. The engineer mused for a moment that it was odd to see his captain wearing only swim trunks; although covered in fur, the wolf always seemed to be clothed from head to toe. Renny was surrounded by five minimally-clad females of differing species on the far blanket, and they all seemed to be enthralled with the cheetah's injury and his tales of experiences on the *Blue Horizon*.

Clad in a red bikini, Samantha was out away from them all, slowly going through martial arts routines she had learned years ago on Sillon. She went through the ritual practically every day, whether in her room or out in some open space. The exercise did her good and

helped discipline her mind. It had actually been months since she had involved herself in the routine, but since their arrival on Pomen, she had resumed them.

Patch sat back down in his seat and rested his cast upon the chair's arm. With his other hand, he pulled one of his new cigars from a shirt pocket and took it out of its metal tube with nimble fingers. He produced a lighter from a nearby tote bag and lit the cigar with a smile after biting off the tip. He puffed on it a few times and then nodded to himself at its flavor. Contented, he picked up his slateboard and brushed sand from its screen.

He tapped through the articles and had just found one of interest when a snow leopard walked by. The feline stopped just a step past him and then turned toward him. She knelt down at the edge of his blanket and then gaped at him. Patch felt the intense stare and looked up with a frown.

"What?" he growled irritably, gripping the slateboard so hard it shook. No sooner had the word left his lips that the leopard broke out into a wide toothy grin.

"Jasper Porter!" she said in a rough voice. "I *thought* that was you."

Patch nearly dropped his cigar. "Alice?" he asked. When she nodded, he finally smiled. "Alice Forrestal. If I wasn't injured, I think I'd jump up and give you a hug!"

The leopard moved forward onto the blanket and licked him on the cheek. "It's good to see you again, you ol' bandit, but what happened to you? You lose a fight?"

The raccoon nodded and took another puff of his cigar. "Actually, yes. Pirates shot our ship out from under us over Crescentis last month and we had a rather acrobatic landing pattern."

The snow leopard sat cross-legged in front of him and put her hands in her lap. "Well, as one old engineer to another," she said, "give me the details."

Patch was genuinely happy to see the older matriarchal feline. They had become friends serving as mechanics on board a military vessel years before he had ever heard of the *Blue Horizon*. Their battleship had been old and nearly falling apart, but somehow they had kept Captain Wildman's ship in operation, despite the demands the old fart had placed upon it. He had not thought of the leopard in years, but he was actually glad to see her again.

"It was the *Basilisk*," he began, "Sagan's ship."

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Only a small, distant rock, a full moon was just rising above the far horizon in the blue-green afternoon sky and lazy clouds floated overhead. Wendy and her new friend walked along the beach just at the water's edge, heading toward a high cliff that marked the end of the sandy shore. She glanced over at the German shepherd with ice blue eyes and then quietly slipped her hand into his.

Max's eyes widened and he looked down at their hands in surprise before looking up to meet her gaze. She gave him a smile and then shifted her attention back to their walk up the shore. Maximillian swallowed and grinned a little foolishly. This seemed to be a day of *firsts* for him. Like the delicious, sand-trapped foot tickling he had experienced earlier, holding hands in this manner with a girl was something new to him, and he found that he liked it very much.

As a slave at a pleasure house, he'd been told he been neutered at a young age. He had a lot of head knowledge about the kind of things adult couples did when they were together, but he did not have those kinds of feelings toward Wendy. What he did feel toward her, however, was a fondness like none he had ever had for anyone else. He didn't really know what he was feeling, but he enjoyed being around her. They had spent most of the day together, whether it

was that burial in the sand, playing volleyball with her family and some of his crewmates, eating lunch, or like now just walking quietly along the beach toward the cliff.

There were several large boulders littering the ground at the base of the cliff they had once belonged to. From the amount of tidal erosion, moss and bird lime on them, the boulders had apparently been there for some time. The young couple was not really thinking about where they were going as they wove around the small maze the boulders provided. When they rounded a particularly large one right near the cliff, Wendy and Max came to an abrupt halt.

Quite oblivious to their presence was a pair of coyotes cuddled close together on the sand next to the cliff. They were kissing and licking muzzles quite passionately and Max could feel his face flush beneath his fur. Wendy grinned widely and then looked at Max. She narrowed her eyes mischievously at him and then without a word, she leaned over and kissed him full on the lips.

It took Max by surprise, but he found his arms around her waist of their own accord as he gave in to her charms and leaned into her kiss. They pulled apart a moment later and Max could feel his head whirling. He was speechless, but not altogether numb. Somewhat shyly, he leaned forward and kissed her again.

Wendy pulled back after a moment and grinned widely into his wonderful ice blue eyes. She liked him a lot and was about to kiss him yet again, but they heard a sound and both turned back toward the other couple. The coyotes were starting to get more involved in their passionate activities, and the young couple saw the swim trunks start to come off.

Max grabbed Wendy's hand quickly and led her back around the boulders and out toward the beach. Neither said anything as they headed back down the shore toward their friends and family, but once they were sure they were out of earshot of the couple, they both giggled.

"Whoa..." Max said as he ran his fingers through the fur between his ears. "It's a good thing we didn't show up a few minutes later!"

Wendy laughed. "Heh... I think we would have seen more than kissing and licking!"

At the mention of kissing, Max cleared his throat rather awkwardly. They smiled at one another and resumed walking hand in hand. Neither said anything more for a long while, each of them dwelling on the lingering feelings of their own kisses.

"Max?" the young tigress asked after a while, "May I ask you a personal question?"

"Hmm?"

"What... uhm, what happened to your finger?"

Maximillian raised his left hand, stared briefly at the healed stump and frowned. He was embarrassed and hesitant to tell her he had chewed it off one day in hunger while locked away without food for a week in a filthy shed. He felt a lump in his throat and wondered how to respond. He would rather tell her about his experiences and responsibilities since becoming a member of the *Blue Horizon* crew. His mind raced for a way to answer her.

Wendy noticed his hesitation and frowned. "I'm sorry, Max. I know it's not any of my business."

The canine felt a sudden dread, as if withholding the story would make her stop holding his hand. He had been punished for lying so many times in his upbringing, but suddenly he didn't care. He looked up over at her and grinned lopsidedly.

"It's not that," he replied, his mind racing. "It's kinda gross and I don't think you really want to hear about it."

"Please?" the tigress asked in a quiet voice. "I'd really like to know."

Max swallowed and shrugged his shoulders. "You know I told you that I was the cook for the *Blue Horizon* before we crashed?"

"Yes?"

"I... uh... accidentally cut off my finger... uh, helping to prepare a meal in our kitchen." Max swallowed again, finding it hard to speak. Lying was harder than he thought and he found he didn't like the experience. "Pockets rushed me to Sickbay," he lied, "and the cook I was helping finished making the meal while I was being looked after." He looked up at her and laughed nervously, his tongue feeling unusually thick as he further exaggerated his tall tale. "No one knew that my finger had gotten mixed up in a guest's dinner plate until too late, and the guy never even noticed the extra bit of meat in his meal until we found the bones cleaning up..."

Wendy stuck out her tongue and made a face. "How awful!"

Max chuckled and sighed to himself in relief that she bought his embellished tale. He held up his left hand again and showed her the stub up close. "I've been a *whole* lot more careful with the cleaver since then!" he said with a nervous laugh.

Wendy looked back up into his pale blue eyes and smiled. "I'm glad you have a sense of humor about it," she said. "My father's a surgeon and I've seen how depressed some of his patients get when they lose a limb. He's been able to help several of them by reattaching a severed hand or tail, or... Max!" she snapped the fingers of her unoccupied hand and grinned largely. "Why don't you talk to my father about your finger?"

"Why? What can he do? My finger's long gone."

"He can probably fit you for a prosthetic that you can use in its place."

"What is a... pros... prosth... what you said?"

"An artificial finger that looks and operates like the one you lost. They can make them to match your skin and fur colors where they look natural."

Max sighed and shook his head. "I appreciate the thought, but I once heard my uncle and our accountant discuss having that done for me."

"So what's the problem?"

"An operation like that is expensive and there aren't enough funds in our account since the crash. We're still seeing doctors now and uncle Merlin says he doesn't even know if our insurance will cover it all." Max's ears drooped a bit and he looked down at the waves lapping at their toes. "We came to the beach today just to get outside in the fresh air to cheer up a little."

"I'm sorry," Wendy said in a somber tone.

Max looked over at her and then gave her a smile. "Meeting you today has been the best day I've had in a long time," he said. "I'm glad I met you, Wendy. I really am!"

The Bengal tigress smiled at him and fell into his blue eyes again. She stopped and faced him, holding both of his hands in her own. "I'm glad, Maximillian Sinclair. I'm glad I met you, too." She leaned forward, pressing her lips against his again and this time Max was not hesitant to return the motion. He had discovered that he liked kissing quite a bit.

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As Samantha wound her way through the umbrellas, beach blankets and an assortment of children digging in the sand, she could hear the chatter as she neared her own site. She carried a couple of sodas and sandwiches she had picked up at a nearby boardwalk stand, their own picnic basket having been overturned earlier by a couple of rambunctious teens running

along the beach. She smiled mischievously when she saw Renny's small crowd of female groupies. Patch was nowhere in sight.

"Oh my," she said as she drew nearer, "you have your own fan club!" She chuckled as she sat down near the cheetah and handed him a sandwich. "I thought you might be hungry."

"Thanks, I'm famished!" Renny said between bites. He saw movement out of the corner of his eye and nodded off across the sand with a gleam in his eye. "Look, Sam... sheep! Don't you have the urge to go herd them into a pen?"

The Border collie followed his gaze and then narrowed her eyes at him. "Oh, *really?*" she answered dryly. "I'm sorry about the sandwich, but I think I saw a gazelle up on the boardwalk. Don't you cheetahs usually *eat* gazelle? Oh, wait..." she snickered, "I'm sorry. You can only catch the *kids!* But then again, *you* can't even catch a cold right now, eh, gimpy?"

Renny's jaw fell open, but he squinted in the sunlight at her, more than ready to verbally spar with her as was their custom. "Don't you need to be on a leash, mutt?" he grouched. "Better yet, you need a muzzle!"

"Says you, Tweety," snapped the collie. "Chirp, chirp, chirp... Why don't you learn to *roar*, sissy cat?"

"Go whiz on a tree, Fido - or better yet, an electric fence!"

A rabbit resting at the cheetah's feet sat up indignantly with her hands on her hips and glared at Samantha. "You," she huffed, "are *rude!* How dare you talk to poor Ren-Ren that way!"

"*Yeah!*" the rest of the navigator's admirers chimed in together.

"Ren-Ren?" Samantha burst into laughter with wide eyes. "*Ren-Ren!*"

The cheetah felt like sinking into the sand as he realized she would probably remember the bunny's little nickname and use it on him at some point in the future. Instead, he looked at his groupies and waved a casual hand at the collie. "Don't mind her. Sammy's a crewmate of mine," he told them. "She's *always* like this..."

Before he could continue with his jibes, the sun was eclipsed by a huge bull that stopped before his blanket. The large fellow was adorned with a massive amount of gold chains around his neck, a golden ring in his nose and several more on his ears. The muscular fellow grinned at the females gathered on both sides of the cheetah and then flexed his muscles. Renny snorted loudly at the bull's display, but the brush-off didn't have its desired effect. The bull buried his toes in the sand and then kicked up a lob of it into the injured cheetah's face.

"Hey!" Renny sputtered. The bull kicked more sand onto the navigator and then flexed his muscles again for the ladies.

"Hey, youse gals," the bovine muscle head said in a thick voice. "Why don't youse leave dat losah and come wit me? He's not big enuff to satisfy all youse!"

There were collective groans from all the women at once. "Chuck Maps," Tina muttered in disgust behind her hand to one of her companions.

Renny fumed in silence. Normally, he was an easygoing guy and never started a fight on his own, but he had never hesitated in the past to finish a brawl he got involved in. Unfortunately, with his leg in a cast there was little he could do against the bully.

Samantha stood up and walked toward the flexing bull with a slight spring in her step and a silly grin on her face. *Huh?* Renny watched in disbelief. It looked as if his crewmate was actually *interested* in the brawny idiot.

Chuck grinned and flashed a set of perfect teeth as she got up close to him. "Hiya, lil' lady," he said.

"Hhhi," breathed the collie to him. "I see you have a lot going for you, big guy," she cooed.

"Yup, yup!" the bull agreed enthusiastically.

Sam stepped back from him and half turned away, giving him a seductive look. "You are quite a hunk, fella... one big hunk of *crap!*" Her last word surprised him, as well as everyone else within earshot.

"Whuh?"

In a swift motion that would have done the cheetah proud, Samantha swung around and planted her foot in the middle of the bull's stomach. Unprepared for the small collie's attack, Chuck was unbalanced and fell backward, holding his middle.

"No one," Sam told him between clenched teeth, "No one picks on my friend but *me*, you bozo!" She launched herself forward and drove both fists up under the bull's jaw, making his head bounce backward.

Before he had a chance to recover and counter her assault, Samantha proceeded to trounce the bully with roundhouse kicks and pummels against the side of his thick head, though mindful to keep away from his sharp-looking horns. She didn't give him a moment to regroup and retaliate, and every time he tried to raise up an arm in defense, she would grab it and twist it in a motion that almost made it crack even under her slight weight.

Chuck was flabbergasted at the attack. He was used to being on the giving end, but not only that, the collie was actually *hurting* him. There was one brief instant where she stumbled back after landing a solid kick to his left knee and he managed to scuttle away from her. He lost his footing in the soft sand and fell over into the umbrella which instantly closed around his head. His horns ripped through the weather-worn fabric as he struggled to free himself. Samantha took the initiative and proceeded to kick at the flailing legs protruding from the umbrella until the bull started to yell for her to stop.

Nearly out of breath from her actions, Sam stepped back toward her friend and then sat down on the blanket beside the cheetah's little harem. She retrieved her canine-designed sunglasses from the top of their cooler. She put them on, smoothed her ruffled fur and then casually picked up her drink as if nothing had happened.

Renny leaned over toward her with a smirk and said, "Wow, Sammy! He's looking like *ground* Chuck to me!" A couple of the girls giggled.

"Yup," Samantha snickered. "He's been *tenderized*."

"He's so stupid," Tina said with a frown as the bull continued to try to escape the umbrella. His motions were much slower now, as the aches and pains were sinking in.

"He's a real nimCOWpoop..." Renny added.

"Definitely a *moo-ron!*" Sam agreed.

"You know, he's probably *grillin'* in the umbrella frame on that hot sand," the cheetah said with a laugh, "and I like my steak charbroiled!"

Samantha smiled and remembered a jingle she had heard on the radio while on Earth. "*I like mine with let-tuce and to-ma-to...*" she sang.

Tina glanced first at Chuck, who had finally escaped the umbrella and was crawling away in disgrace at having been beaten up by a smaller female, and then she looked over at the collie. "Boy, you sure had him fooled," she said with admiration.

"Oh, it was easy," Samantha said with a grin. "He was so gullibull...!"

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Later that night, Samantha lay in her bed as she snuggled up to her body-length pillow, smiling contently to herself. The day had been a success. They all still had their aches, pains and injuries, they were still without a ship and the finances were dwindling, but at least for a day, they'd all had a chance to smile and forget their troubles.

## UP FROM THE ASHES

By Ted R. Blasingame

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### *Captain's Journal*

*Where do I start? It has been three months since my last entry into this journal, and much has happened. First and most notable, the Blue Horizon herself is dead – a broken heap from a semi-controlled crash on Crescentis following a pirate attack by Sagan's black ship, the Basilisk.*

*Sagan alone boarded my vessel in a manner that is still a mystery to us, and inflicted terrible damage to my ship and crew before he died at the end of a fierce onboard battle. Through the valiant efforts of my crew, and the intervention of an ally I will not name even in my journal, the Basilisk was driven away and the Blue Horizon managed to make it down to the planet's surface.*

*We landed hard and the engine core had to be jettisoned in the midst of a meltdown. The Horizon will never fly again – there was too much structural damage from the orbital attack and also from an impact with a Crescentan island land mass to save it. My lifeless ship currently resides with its keel broken in a junk heap several hours away from our present location here on Pomen, conveyed there by a massive salvage transport. Pockets has paid it several visits and always comes back feeling depressed. The ship may have belonged to me, but he seems to have felt the loss more as if she had been a close friend. I guess that is what happens to engineers who are intimate with a vessel's inner workings. I have submitted a fully-detailed report of the incident with the SPF that's been filed on the Joplin central computer.*

*Interstellar Insurance is sending a claims adjuster here for final settlement of our case, and Mr. Andes is due to meet with me sometime today. During the four-week flight from Kantus, he has been in constant contact with me, the SPF and the Cinos Scrap Yard where the Horizon now resides. From the preliminary report I've seen, Interstellar looks to pay off in full at the closure of the case due to the nature of the attack.*

*The loss of my ship is hard to bear, but it's insignificant when I think about my crew. Due to injuries incurred from his fight with Sagan, Renny had to have his entire right foot reconstructed with some of the bones regrown, and has spent weeks in physical therapy learning to walk on it again. He has progressed well, and if his flirting with the nurses is any indication, he has finally gotten through his acute depression.*

*Durant suffered a concussion and several low-degree burns and cuts across his abdomen, but seems to have recovered well. Pockets and his brother were both treated for smoke inhalation, and Patch had a broken left arm to deal with. Samantha, Maximillian and Arktanias all had an assortment of bumps and bruises, but were otherwise okay. I suffered a concussion and two broken ribs. All of us have been through post-traumatic stress counseling, and most of us have had recurring nightmares stemming from it all. Renny says he still sees Sagan's wild green eyes in his sleep. The pirate has haunted mine as well.*

*Of Taro, however, there has been no word in all the time we've been here. She suffered the worst of Sagan's physical assault, and frankly, I don't see how she could have survived the deep abdominal wounds. The last I saw of her, mere moments before our entry into the charged Crescentan atmosphere and the resulting crash landing, she was dying in the frantic arms of Renny. Tanis did all he could to stabilize her, but even he was unsure it would be enough. Our unnamed benefactor told me Taro would be*

*taken to the advanced medical facilities on Pomen, and that is the last word I have had on my friend and second in command. I fear the worst.*

*The rest of my crew and I are still here on Pomen in the capitol city Adasa. We were brought here from Crescentis by Tanthean Corvettes courtesy of the Aris monarch, and most of us have already been released by the medical facilities. Only Renny continues with his therapy. Since Pomen was his homeworld, Durant headed straight for his brother's home on the other side of the planet after he'd been certified well enough to leave the facility's care. The rest of us are being housed within the Tanthean embassy until such time as we can leave. It helps to be friends with the royal family.*

*Before leaving Crescentis, the SPF allowed us to retrieve some of our personal possessions from the wreckage, in addition to the Horizon's memory core. From my private safe I retrieved the documents gifted me by the House of Aris at our last visit to Tanthe. It makes me wonder if Aris was precognitive of our fight with Sagan when they had the papers drawn up for us. Upon our contact with the Tanthean embassy here on Pomen, I presented the documents to Ambassador Poledouris. He assured me the documents would be expedited to Aris Grand, but as yet I've heard nothing more in the three months we've been here.*

*As it stands, I am captain of no ship, with my business out of commission, and my crew mostly incapacitated. Although Sagan was killed in the conflict, his ship remains at large. Presently, our immediate future is uncertain and hangs upon the documents of Tanthe with the conclusion of the investigation by the Spatial Police Force.*

*Merlin Sinclair, Captain of the late SS Blue Horizon, Registry PA1261*

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The lupine captain put down his pen and closed his journal. It was the third one he had owned over the past six years and its stiff cover binding was worn from handling. The entry he had just written filled out the last available page in the book, so he decided to add the purchase of a new journal to his list of things to do this day. He already had plans to shop for a new captain's hat. His old one had been lost in the crash of his ship and he missed wearing it, even if there was no ship to be the captain of.

Idly, he placed the journal inside a small attaché and then stood up from the desk. Autumn morning sunlight streamed in through the open windows of his seventh-floor room, though storm clouds were gathering on the horizon. A gentle cool breeze brushed the window's blue and white curtains and he could smell moisture on the air.

Merlin moved to a closet and removed the robes he wore. He hung them on a hangar and selected a few garments for the day. The native Pomen robes were comfortable, but he preferred the style and material he was used to wearing.

He slipped into a pair of dark blue trousers, but the lightweight pants were new and the tail opening was tighter than he was comfortable with. He would have to get it altered among his things to do today. He chose a powder-blue short sleeved shirt that fit him loosely and then looked up at the time displayed through the panel of one wall. He was to meet his crewmates in the building's first-floor restaurant for breakfast in ten minutes.

He picked up a handful of small items from his desk and dropped them into his pants pocket after he slipped into his old black boots. He headed for the door, pausing only to pluck his embassy-issued identification card that doubled as a room key from a small table, but halted when he stepped out into the corridor. Affixed to his door panel was a plain white envelope with his name neatly printed across the front in red ink.

The wolf glanced up and down the brightly lit hallway, but it was deserted save for himself. He plucked it from the door and locked the panel behind him. He waited until he was in the elevator with the doors closed before he tore the paper envelope open with a claw. Inside was a simple white sheet of paper with a single sentence printed across the middle. Merlin's ears went flat against his head and he growled lowly at what he saw, feeling a cold wave come over him. He resisted the urge to crumple the missive angrily in his hand, but folded the page and placed it back inside the envelope instead.

The elevator doors opened a moment later and he stormed out of the lift, only to run into a pair of armed coyotes in embassy uniforms. They barred his way and studied the anger in his eyes suspiciously. A quick glance around showed Merlin that armed guards were stationed at nearly every doorway in the lobby.

"Identification," the coyote on the right demanded.

Merlin handed over his ID without a word. The coyote scanned it with a hand reader and grunted lowly. "Okay, Mr. Sinclair, you may pass."

"What's up?" the wolf asked curiously. "Security hasn't been this tight in all the time I've been here."

"Sorry, sir, that's not your concern," the other coyote replied. "Move on."

"Right." Merlin continued on his way toward the restaurant and had to show his identification again to enter. Once inside, he moved to a large booth in the far right corner of the room. His crewmates were spaced around the table and a canine waiter was already taking their orders on a slateboard. Samantha stood up and licked him on the cheek as he approached.

"Good morning, Captain," she said.

"Hello," the wolf replied, first to her, and then with a nod to everyone else. He took a seat next to Maximillian who looked as if he wanted to go back to bed. He yawned widely and rubbed his eyes.

Renny was the last to place his order and the waiter then turned toward Sinclair. "For you, sir?"

Merlin nodded to the Irish setter without smiling and answered, "Just coffee and beefsteak, please. Medium-rare."

"Yes, sir." The waiter executed a short bow and then trotted off with their orders.

Patch lit one of his cigars and puffed on it a moment while he peered across the table. "What's the matter, Captain?" he asked. "You look shaken."

Merlin frowned and tossed the envelope onto the table. "This was on my door this morning."

Tanis snatched up the envelope and pulled out the letter. He looked up in surprise and then handed it over to the raccoon. Patch read it quietly and then passed it around. Renny placed it back on the table after they had all read it and then everyone looked at Merlin.

"Any idea who wrote it?" the cheetah asked.

"No," Merlin admitted, "but I have my suspicions." He picked up the letter and read it again as if he couldn't believe he had actually received such a thing.

The short message read: *Do not attempt to rebuild your business.*

"Who do you suspect?" Pockets inquired.

"Possibly a survivor of the *Basilisk*," Merlin replied.

"Or it could have been Armando," Pockets suggested.

"No, as much as he'd like to see us out of the competition, that's not his style. What unnerves me is that with all the increased security around here," the captain motioned toward

the guards in the lobby, "how someone without proper authority got inside the embassy to affix it to my door."

"Someone from Tanthe, then?" Renny asked. "An inside job?"

"It's possible," Tanis replied, "but I thought ya were pretty chummy with the Royalty."

"Any idea what all the hubbub is about, anyway?" Samantha asked. "I thought I was going to be frisked as soon as I came out of the elevator."

"Nobody frisked *me*," Renny said with a smile. "But then again, who wouldn't want to frisk a woman?"

Samantha sneered at him, conscious that she was the only female left of the small crew. "I was *not* frisked, Ren-Ren," she retorted, "but it looked like they were about to."

Merlin put the letter back inside the envelope and then folded it neatly. He placed it inside his pants pocket and then glanced back toward the guards. "From all the activity, I would guess they have a high-ranking official coming in. This *is* an embassy."

The wolf turned to look Pockets straight in the eye and added, "I wouldn't try to pick the locks on any more supply closets while we're here, if I were you, Mr. Porter — especially with this kind of security."

"Yeah," Tanis chipped in. "We might be guests of the embassy right now, but ya could spend time in a nasty prison somewhere bleak for yer pilfering."

"Hey!" Pockets said in indignation, "I asked three times for more fur shampoo! No one would bother to get any for me, so I helped myself."

"No more, Pockets," Merlin replied as he wagged a finger at him. "If you have to, go down to the corner store to get your shampoo."

"So, what's on the agenda for today?" Tanis asked as a couple of waiters arrived with their orders. Maximillian perked up at the prospect of food.

Merlin picked up a coffee cup and shrugged his shoulders as if the question was trivial. "Renny's going back to his therapist, and..."

"Awww, daddy, do I have to?" the cheetah whined.

Pockets snickered as Merlin finally grinned. "Yes, son, you do," the wolf replied. "I have some shopping to do and I have to meet the adjuster from Interstellar Insurance. You all have *another* free day to do what you want."

"This is all so boring," Max grumbled as he started to eat his breakfast. "We've been here so long that we've *done* all the interesting things to do in this city."

"At least on the long flights between worlds on the *Horizon*," Pockets added, "we had interests and things to do. Here, we don't even have much of our own stuff anymore."

"Any word on a new ship, Captain?" Patch asked. "My talents will get rusty if I don't have an engine to use them on."

Merlin frowned and shook his head as he took a lap of his coffee. "No, I'm afraid not," he answered. "If there weren't any new ships in stock at the factory, they'd have to build one, and I believe that takes about four months at the very least." He took another lap and sighed audibly. "The government of Tanthe has been very good to us since the crash, but who knows how long it will take to go through the bureaucracy to get us a ship. As far as I know, the paperwork may still be sitting on someone's desk, awaiting yet another official to approve it."

"But the documents were issued by the *Princess*," Samantha said between bites of her meal. "You would think that would be approval enough to go through immediately."

Merlin sat back in his chair and struggled with a thought as he stared into his cup. "I don't know how long this is going to take," he said after a long moment, "so I think you may wish to seek employment elsewhere."

Everyone looked up at him suddenly, some with mouths open. Pockets had a mouthful of food and had a hard time swallowing it.

"Captain?" Patch asked through a cough of cigar smoke.

"Are you laying us off?" Renny asked.

Merlin looked up at them. "No, it's just a suggestion," he replied quickly, "but without a source of income, I won't be able to pay you much longer before my finances are completely dried up. The salvage operation of the ship on Crescentis and its transportation here to Pomen wiped out most of the account. All our medical expenses are being put on a tab for me, but eventually I'll have that bill to pay as well. The Tanthean government has graciously allowed us to stay here in their embassy as guests and provide us with meals free of charge, but we've been on Pomen three months and no one can tell me how much longer we'll be here."

"Captain," Tanis said, "since our lodging and meals are paid for by our coyote friends, I don't have much need for a salary. Just a small allowance for personal things would be okay with me, if ya want to cut my pay until we get another ship."

"The same goes for me," Renny replied. "With my physical therapy, they're not going to let me go anywhere for a little while longer anyway."

Samantha touched Merlin's arm and said. "You can stop paying me altogether for now."

Max looked up with a long face. "I'm staying with you, Uncle Merlin. No matter what happens. We're family."

Samantha nudged the canine youth with an elbow. "Until you are eighteen years of age, you have no choice *but* to stay with Merlin, even if the legal age on Dennier is seventeen."

The conversation grew quiet and everyone looked back to their captain. Merlin swallowed and glanced around at his friends. "You all read that note," he reminded them. "Someone out there still has a grudge against us. That means that even if we do get another ship, that doesn't mean we'll be safe."

"Captain," Patch said as he extinguished his cigar in a glass ashtray, "I would love to stay and engineer for you on a new ship, but I'm afraid I have debts of my own I'm obligated to pay. I need work and collectors have found me even here."

Pockets turned and stared at his brother with wide eyes, but Merlin nodded understandingly. "That's okay, Patch," he said with a bit of a smile. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the handful of data crystals he had picked up earlier. Each was labeled with the name of a crew member. He spread them out onto the center of the table and then sat back in his chair. "You've all been a good employees, though *some* of you have tried giving me ulcers, but despite this, I've written up a nice reference for each of you for a job search if you choose to do so."

"Thank you, Captain," Patch replied. He reached forward and pushed the crystals around until he found the one that bore his name.

"Well, *I'm* staying with Captain Sinclair!" Pockets said in a huff toward his brother.

"That's okay, Pockets," Merlin said quickly. "It was my suggestion and I think Patch is wise to look elsewhere. I don't know how much longer I'll be able to pay you guys even at cut salaries, so personally I think you're all making a mistake if you hang around. I *do* appreciate your loyalty and willingness to stay, but it's not necessary."

He turned to look at Samantha with an look of resignation. "This might be a good time for *you* to return to your father's company."

The Border collie gulped. "But—"

"Something's going on outside in the lobby," Tanis interrupted. Everyone's eyes turned toward the glass walls of the restaurant and saw coyotes running here and there in excitement.

Two coyotes in crisp suits approached the guards at the restaurant doors and spoke quietly for a moment. One of the guards pointed though the door directly at the crew of the late *Blue Horizon* and the pair of suits immediately walked over to them.

"Captain Sinclair?" one of them asked.

The wolf stood up. "Yes, sir?"

"Please come with us. Your presence is required."

"All of us?"

"Just you, sir."

Merlin resisted the urge to ask them who wanted to see him, but he suspected they would only give him the run-around. He turned to his crewmates and shrugged. "Think about what I said. I'll see you all later."

"Good luck, sir," Renny offered.

Merlin followed the coyotes across the busy lobby to the elevators. He was taken up to a small, but luxurious office on the top floor of the building, and once inside, one of his escorts told him to wait. He was left alone only a couple moments before the doors opened again.

Two guards filed in and gave him a suspicious look before stationing themselves on either side of the door. Prince Kal Navar Aris then strode in, his head held high, wearing garments perfectly tailored for him. He wore an amulet over his business suit that was similar, but smaller than the one King Adion Aris had worn and he sported several golden rings mounted with precious gems on his short fingers. As soon as his eyes lit upon the wolf, Kal's expression lightened up with a broad smile.

"Merlin!" the coyote exclaimed and walked over to him. The wolf bowed toward the prince and then returned the smile.

"Prince Kal," he said, "you're looking well."

The coyote clasped arms with him. "Considering all you've been through, you're looking well, yourself. Princess Tinara made me promise to tell you that she sends her love." Kal motioned toward the guards and the pair quickly departed, shutting the door behind them. The prince led Sinclair toward a pair of exquisite wing-back chairs beside a darkened fireplace and they sat down facing one another.

"I didn't expect to see you again so soon, sir," Merlin said quietly, "especially not under these conditions."

Kal nodded his head and rubbed a finger beneath his chin. "Nor did I," he replied, "but I thought it would be fitting if it was I who presented you with your new ship. Tinara would have come too, but she's expecting..."

"My new ship!"

"The documents you presented to Ambassador Poledouris upon your arrival here were checked for their authenticity before we were contacted about them. I got in touch with the shipyards on Dennier and found they had one *Okami* class freighter of the H-model design barely into construction. We had them make a few special modifications during the building of your new vessel. I volunteered to come in person to return the favor you granted to the royal family."

Merlin bowed his head and clasped his hands together in his lap. Without looking up, he said, "Because of my personal self-sufficiency, it's often hard for me to accept expensive gifts from others." He looked up into the coyote's eyes. "But due to our current financial status, I'm afraid I was *depending* upon Aris to help me in this matter. I'm sorry."

Kal tilted his head to the side and smiled. "Merlin," he said gently, "if you had not revealed my feelings for Tinara to her family, I would still be the Royal Secretary, and it would

be *you* who would be expected to produce an heir to the throne of Tanthe. I am deeply indebted to you, my friend, and this new ship does not completely erase that debt."

"Prince Kal," Merlin said slowly, "I am greatly appreciative of the new ship, but please don't feel you have to do more for me."

"More has already been done."

"More?" the wolf asked meekly.

"You lost your cargo of supplies for the Crescentis fishing colonies that brought you to Tanthe," Kal replied. "We re-supplied your ship and again those supplies were lost, this time through no fault of your own. After our Corvettes took you away from the crash site, Princess Tinara realized that the fishing colonies still had not received their supplies, so she took it upon herself to send another cargo vessel already on Tanthe to Crescentis. Oddly enough, I still had the supply list from your visit."

Merlin stared at the coyote in wonder. So many tales of monarch families he had heard over the years had told of tyrants and self-absorbed kings. The Aris family matched none of those descriptions. He didn't know what, if any, hand that King Adion had in all this, but even if not, the planet would be in good hands under the leadership of Kal and Tinara when the time came for them to rule.

Not knowing what else to say, Merlin made a small bow from his seat and said, "You and the Princess have been generous to me and my crew. You have our eternal thanks and friendship for your help in our hour of need."

"You're very welcome," Kal replied with a smile. "Now, tell me about your crew. How do they fare?"

"They're recovering," Merlin said, "but there is another matter I need to discuss with you first."

"Oh?"

The lupine captain pulled the folded white envelope from his pocket and passed it to the prince. Kal opened the letter and read the single sentence with a frown.

"This was on the door of my embassy suite this morning," the captain explained.

The prince scowled and took on a dark expression that Merlin had not seen before on the cordial coyote. "I will have my people look into this immediately," he said. He pulled a DataCom from an inner suit pocket and tapped in a passcode. He spoke rapidly for a few moments and then put the unit away.

As if the matter were completed, the Prince looked over at the wolf with bright eyes. "Now, would you like to see your new ship?"

"Yes, sir, I would," Merlin said with a smile.

"Do you want to invite your crew to join us?"

Merlin thought for a moment and then shook his head as he glanced at the time displayed through the wall panel. "We had finished breakfast and they are likely scattered by now. Besides," he added with a gleam in his eye, "I would like to inspect her myself in private without the bunch of them distracting me. They'll have plenty of time to see her later."

"Very well, then. Let's go."

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*" – and that's what he said,"* Samantha's image reported from the com screen.

Durant shook his head sadly at the somber, but not altogether unexpected news. As the accountant for *Blue Horizon Freight Transfer*, the bear was well aware of Merlin's financial plight. Still, it was hard to hear.

"We've all been together for almost seven years," he said to the Border collie. "It'll be hard breaking up."

*"Isn't there anything we can do?"*

"Not with the present situation as it is, I'm afraid."

*"What if I offer to buy Merlin another ship?"* Samantha asked, her moist eyes glistening in the high resolution monitor. *"I have the money from my investment returns."*

Durant shook his head again. "You know him as well as the rest of us, Sam. How do you think he would react to that?"

The collie thought for a moment and then sighed. *"He would be appreciative,"* she replied, *"but would not consider the ship his own. He'd consider me as the new owner of Blue Horizon Freight Transfer."*

"That's right," Durant replied. "In Merlin's eyes, he would rather dissolve the business than do something like that. He's been that way for as long as I've known him."

*"Me, too. Oh, Durant, how could this have happened? Everything was going so well."*

"Apparently Sagan knew more about our movements than we were aware of. If he knew we were going to be in the vicinity of Crescentis, then he must have been tailing us or monitoring our communications specifically."

*"That doesn't help."*

"I know, Sam," the bear said. "None of it makes any sense."

*"So, what are you going to do? Most of us are going to stick around as long as we can, but Patch is already out looking for another job. Good engineers are in high demand, so he shouldn't have to look more than a few days."*

*"What about his brother? They going together?"*

*"No, Pockets promises to stick with Merlin no matter what it comes down to, but Patch said he has too many debts and needs to be working. I never thought I would see that pair ever split up."*

Durant scratched his ear and looked around him. "I'm set up well enough here in my brother's house, Sam, and we've always been close. I'll probably just stay here until I hear of anything final from Merlin. If he decides to dissolve the business altogether, then I'll look into another job. I'm debt-free at the moment, so I'm not in a hurry."

*"How's your brother?"*

"James? He has a girlfriend named Beverly who's sweet and seems to be good for him. He still misses his wife and kids, but it's been four years since the crash and everyone's tried to get him to move on. It's been nice visiting with him again and he's assured me I can stay here as long as I need to. If the business dissolves, I might settle down here in a place of my own with an accounting firm, much as I did before I joined the crew."

*"Merlin's trying to get me to return to the family business,"* Samantha replied. *"There's a corporate branch here on Pomen, but I really don't want to do that. With luck, we'll get a new ship soon, but hopefully it won't be too much longer."*

"Listen to Merlin, Sam," Durant said somberly. "I know you prefer to run around with us, but going back to your father's company is probably the best thing you could do right now."

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Prince Kal led Merlin away from the royal limousine toward a large hangar on a private airfield. Two guards wearing body armor trailed them by a few yards, but otherwise they were alone. Merlin glanced up at the cloudy sky and idly wondered when it was going to start raining. The clouds were dark and heavy, and the air was laden with moisture.

One of the guards moved in front of the Prince as they approached the door and tapped in a security code on a pad next to the lock. There was a slight *chirp* and the panel split apart to reveal a cavernous dark arena. The guard turned on the lights and moved in first, surveying the area before he nodded back to Prince Kal. The coyote allowed Merlin to pass through the door ahead of him.

The lupine captain stopped after only a couple of steps inside. His breathing was shallow and his eyes tried to take in the sight all at once. The newest model of the *Okami* class freighter design was shy of being twice the size of his old ship. He had seen the larger vessels before, but this ship was *his*. Rather than the old fat flying-saucer shape, this one appeared to be oval lengthwise and much larger, although leaner. They had come into the hangar facing the ship's port side. Right away, he could tell that the vessel had a larger engine pod. The color was battleship-gray, but he could have it repainted later.

Probably the oddest aspect of the new freighter that he saw during that first couple of moments was the absence of forward landing gear. The weight of the engine section in the back more than made up for the counterbalance needed to keep the ship upright, and he guessed that fact would hold true even when the cargo bay was fully loaded. His expert eyes discerned aerodynamic panels for forward landing gear, however, and it made him feel unconsciously relieved to know they were there should they be needed. For now, they were simply tucked away.

Prince Kal looked over at the wolf and saw the captain's eyes shining. "The data from your old computer core can be safely transferred to the new system," he said. "It is equipped with a *Geo-25* computer system by Voshnesinski Information Systems."

"It has a *VIS* computer system?" Merlin asked in awe as they resumed walking toward the ship.

"The latest."

When they approached the main airlock hatch, Merlin saw the PA Registry number painted on the hull beside it.

"*PA1138*," he read aloud.

"I took the liberty of having it registered for you," Kal said.

"Does the ship have a name?"

The prince shook his head. "No, that is something I wanted leave up to her captain. Will you call her the *Blue Horizon II*?"

Merlin shrugged his shoulders. "I haven't really thought about it, actually," he confessed. "I dislike putting a number into a ship's name, but I think I'll talk it over with my crew before making that decision."

"Where did the name *Blue Horizon* come from originally?"

Merlin smiled at him. "It's from the lyrics of a song in an old movie I like," he replied. "The first time I heard the lyrics, I thought to myself, '*That sounds like a good name for a ship*'. It was probably three years later when I bought my freighter and remembered the words."

Kal removed an ivory envelope from an inner pocket and handed it to the wolf. "Here are the title papers granting ownership of your new ship, in addition to all the security codes currently encoded into the system. There is a data crystal in there where everything is

duplicated. I would strongly suggest you change all the codes yourself once you have the system up and running to minimize security breaches."

Merlin nodded as he took the envelope. In light of the letter he had gotten that morning, he thought that would be a good idea. He turned the envelope over and saw the Aris royal seal. He smiled up at the prince and broke the seal before him. Inside was a folded sheaf of papers accompanied by a thin data crystal.

He browsed quickly through the printed pages and located the list of codes. He found the one he wanted and then tapped the code into the security pad next to the main hatch. The doors split apart diagonally and the chamber light of the airlock came on.

Prince Kal put a hand on the wolf's shoulder and smiled at him. "Since you stated the desire to see your new ship in private, I will leave you to explore her on your own. I will send my limousine and driver back here after it has taken me to the embassy, so you may return for your crew when you are ready."

"Thank you, sir," Merlin said with a bow and genuine appreciation.

"May I expect you and your crew to dine with me tonight?"

Merlin nodded with a wide smile. "Yes, sir. We would be honored."

"Good," the prince replied. "I'll make the arrangements on my way back to the embassy. Enjoy your new ship, my friend."

"Thank you, sir, I will." With that, Prince Kal motioned toward his guards and the three of them retraced their steps back to the limousine.

Merlin Sinclair turned and looked up the side of the gray ship toward the bridge. "Well, girl," he said in a soft whisper, "let's get to know one another, shall we?"

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"Your résumé looks satisfactory, Mr. Porter," a young and smartly dressed otter said with an appreciative nod. A nameplate on the desk revealed his name to be Nolan Xavier. He looked at the raccoon's data crystal on his desktop monitor and he nodded again. "Have you ever been on a *Paladin*-class passenger cruiser before?"

"Only as a customer seven or so years ago," Patch replied. The pair sat in a Spartan office in a small building near the principal spaceport in the city of Adasa. The headquarters of the Merriam Cruise Lines was on Ganis, but they had a district office set up in the capitol city of each world of the Planetary Alignment.

"We require ten engineers on each of our cruisers, Mr. Porter, and we're lacking two positions on our newest ship, the *SS Argonautia*." The otter slid a slateboard datapak toward Patch and indicated a red figure in a box on the screen by itself. "This would be your salary, to be paid to you at the completion of every voyage."

Patch did his best to hide his surprise. Merlin had always been generous in the salaries he granted his employees, but it could not match that of a corporate budget. The contract bound him to ten voyages, wherever they might take him, and guaranteed his pay. The other benefits outlined in the document far surpassed anything he had ever made before, but the conditions also limited him in his job. Six-plus years on the *Blue Horizon* had granted him plenty of freedom to experiment and try out new things on the systems, but on the *Argonautia*, he would be just one of a team of ten that would be expected to follow the rules and stick to corporate specifications.

He thought about it another moment and then nodded to the otter. "I would be honored if chosen to serve on the *Argonautia*, Mr. Xavier."

"Splendid," the otter replied. "If you'll sign on the line next to the bottom, we can get your contract finalized"

"You mean I'm hired?"

"That's correct, Mr. Porter, as of this moment." The raccoon signed the document with a thumbprint and handed the slateboard back to the otter. "You should report to docking port forty-two no later than noon tomorrow and ask for a canine named Marcus Bem. He's the chief engineer of the *Argonautia* and will be your immediate supervisor. You will go to him for all things." Xavier keyed in a code onto a small scanner and then slipped a plastic card into it. A moment later, he retrieved the card and handed it to Patch. "This is your identification and pay credicard. Show this to Mr. Bem and he'll know I hired you."

"Thank you, Mr. Xavier."

The otter looked at him and cocked his head sideways. "We still need one more experienced engineer to make the crew complete. If you know of any others looking for employment, please send them to me."

"Yes, sir, I will." Patch stood up, shook hands with the otter, and then left the office. He intended to go straight to his brother to tell him about his new job and the other opening that would be waiting for him.

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Merlin stood in the center of the empty cargo hold, all the lights on and looking around him in awe. The area was double the size of the old ship's hold, and had a higher ceiling that was equipped with two cargo lifting cranes. Freight tie-downs were recessed into the floor and spaced three meters apart in a grid pattern. Along the walls near the deck were insulated, airtight storage bins that were rigged to keep the contents within regulated temperatures as needed. Two of the bins contained anti-grav pallet carriers, chains, cables and straps. Another bin was full of plasteel webbing, and yet another harbored twenty pressure suits of various sizes and shapes. Higher on the wall above those bins were a series of racks where other large items could be stowed within adjustable, horizontal arms, adding more storage for cargo.

The load master's office was located between storage bins and was insulated and soundproofed with a pressure door. The office included a kitchenette at one end of the room, and a lavatory within a small compartment next door.

The captain continued his self-guided tour across the bay and into the engine room. According to the spec sheet from the packet Kal had given him, the Liquid Crystal LightDrive engines were larger than those of a G-model and the energy output had been doubled. There was plenty of room to work in and access panels were everywhere to give an engineer ample ways to get in to get to whatever problem might come up. Just about every type of tool needed to work on an LC engine was provided in a tool room of various instrument kits, and in the event someone did not have the knowledge to work on the engines, or power was out preventing anyone from accessing the computers, a full set of hardbound books lined a wall in the engine room office for reference. Like the load master's office, this one also had a small kitchenette. Whoever had redesigned the *Okami* class freighter had put a lot of good thought into the comfort of those who maintained one.

Satisfied with what he had seen, Merlin walked back across the bay and entered the main lift to take him up to the next level. When he stepped out onto the Crew deck, the light came on automatically, obviously programmed to conserve power when no one was in the

circular corridor, but to activate instantly whenever someone was present. The carpet was a mixture of blue and gray and the walls were a simple white.

He decided to take a walk around the corridor once before peeking into any of the cabins. Since the ship was larger and oval in shape rather than the old circle, there were more rooms available. In the old vessel, the inside wall of the Crew deck corridor wrapped around the upper level of the cargo hold, but that was not so in this one. The Crew deck sat on *top* of the two-story cargo bay. There were storage rooms and equipment chambers for the ship's systems in the center of the vessel, where they had been moved from the lower deck of the old model. Much more efficient, he thought to himself.

He made a complete circuit around the passageway and found himself standing beside the main lift again. He had counted fifteen crew cabins, the bridge, Sickbay and the captain's ready room, but had seen no sign of the galley. Between each cabin were more access panels for extra storage or equipment. His first impulse was to visit the bridge, but thought he would save that room until the very last. There was no reason to do so, but he fancied the mystique of waiting until the last moment to see his new ship's command center.

As a rule, Merlin liked to have his personal cabin next to his office den, so he chose that particular cabin as a start. The door slid aside when he thumbed a square pad beside the panel, but the lights didn't come on automatically as they had in the corridor. He reached inside and touched the switch, noting immediately that there were various lighting settings on the controls.

When the cabin was fully illuminated, he nearly gasped at the size of the room. The place was larger than his quarters on board the *Blue Horizon*, and instead of two rooms, there were three. The main room was furnished with a corner sectional couch, a central coffee table and two plain lamps mounted to small tables on opposite ends of the couch. A standard desk and terminal occupied a corner nearest the door. There were no decorations on the plain walls, save for a vidscreen mounted within the wall opposite the couch.

Intrigued, Merlin walked through a door at the back of the room and saw a bed much larger than standard on freighters. Had he not known better, the lupine captain might have thought he'd stumbled onto a personal star cruiser. Another terminal vidscreen was mounted within the wall across from the bed beside a set of storage bins recessed into the bulkhead. There were night stands on either side of the bed and plenty of storage room beneath.

Merlin smiled and stretched out on the bare mattress to get a feeling for it. It was a bit soft for his tastes, but he spied the comfort controls for it on the left night stand. He could adjust the firmness of the mattress later when he was settled in.

The wolf got up and moved to the walk-in closet. He peered inside and was pleased with the amount of space available. Another room connected through a door at the opposite end of the bedroom and he ventured inside to take a look at the lavatory. Everything was fairly much the same as it was on his old ship, but this one contained a combination shower and large immersion bathtub. The older G-model vessel had only a shower, and there had been so many times on long voyages that he had often wished for a tub to soak in. He decided the new ship design must have a fairly large water reservoir and good reclamation unit.

When Merlin approached the door to leave the cabin, he saw a small covered panel near the door that he had not seen when he had gone inside. He opened it cautiously and saw lifepod ejection controls with a printed set of instructions inside the panel door. In the event of a disaster, each of the fifteen cabins could be ejected from the ship as a lifepod. He assumed each was equipped with its own air supply, emergency rations and guidance system. The door was a standard internal panel, but outside the thick door frame was an airlock pane designed to slide

across the opening and seal the compartment for ejection. *Impressive*, he thought to himself. *A good idea, but I hope we never have to use it.*

He looked into two more nearby cabins before he was satisfied that all were identical in size and layout. The three-room Infirmary was well equipped, but currently devoid of supplies due to legal restrictions and the shelf-life of certain medications. He didn't linger there, but moved to the lift and took it up to the next level.

As he had suspected, the recreation deck was larger than his last one and the galley occupied the aft end of the room. The floor, walls *and* the ceiling were covered in a tight, but soft burgundy carpet with gray trim. The lighting was indirect and gave the room a cozy feeling. A huge vidscreen covered a good portion of the forward wall and he could see recessed sound pods placed all over the room. Four couches and four reclining chairs were arranged in a semi-circle facing the vidscreen, but they were not mounted to the floor as the crew quarter furniture was so they could be moved around for different events or hobbies.

Like the cargo hold, there were recessed storage bins in all the walls, though all were empty save for one that contained a large folded exercise mat. The galley was open to the rest of the deck, but the kitchen itself was contained within half walls and equipped with large appliances. As with Sickbay, it was empty of supplies. It was apparent everyone would have to help out in a hefty shopping spree before they could even think about taking off.

Merlin was pleased with his new ship. It seemed everything was a vast improvement over the old vessel and he felt more than fortunate that it had been simply given to him as a gift. With a contented countenance on his face, the wolf took the lift back down to the second level and headed for the bridge.

He stood in front of a blue door painted with the golden image of an old sailing ship's wheel, the traditional adornment of the bridge door on all *Okami* freighters. He held his breath for a moment before activating the control to open it. When it slid aside for him, he stepped inside the darkened command center and turned the lights up full.

The semicircular room was painted in shades of blue and gray, with four stations lined around the forward curved wall: navigation, communications, weapons, and engineering. Each with a set of instrument panels that arced in a generous semicircle around a plush swivel seat wide enough for even Durant's large back end.

Another station in the middle of the room was located behind and between the communication and weapons stations. The pilot's station was the center seat for flying, and controlling all take-off and landing maneuvers. It was in this seat where he would spend many flight hours, as well as whoever was on standard watch.

Three large window panels covered the curved forward wall and all had the 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. Instrumentation filled most of the walls, as well as up into the low ceiling. The entrance to the bridge was at the left corner of the back wall, and the door to the head was in the right corner. There was also another door in the left wall leading directly to the captain's den next door.

He let his gaze move back to the weapons console as it dawned on him that a factory-made *freighter* had a weapons station! He walked over to it and took a look at the labels on the panel. His pulse quickened when he realized that this was not standard equipment, but military-class Tanthean armaments. The ship was armed to the teeth and could defend all points of a three-dimensional compass. So, this is what Prince Kal meant when he had a few

*special modifications* made during the construction of the ship. The console also contained a secondary set of flight controls, should the pilot's station ever be damaged.

Merlin moved back to the center seat and sat down slowly, as if savoring the feeling of being captain once again. He looked over the control console and noted with relief that everything looked to be in the same places as his old ship. He keyed in a few commands and the left viewing screen came to life showing the interior of the cargo hold. Another switch showed him the exterior of the ship, out into the otherwise empty hangar. He shut it off and stood up again, and walked to the environmental station at the back of the room. He switched on a few systems and using the new ship's registry, keyed in a command to tie in with the planet's weather satellite system. He focused in on the city of Adasa and noted the strong thunderstorms currently raining down on the region just outside this hangar.

With the enjoyment of connecting into the systems on the ship, Merlin moved to the Com station and dialed up the number of Samantha's room at the embassy. She answered almost immediately and her face showed up clearly on the left vidscreen. This was another surprise to the captain: the old ship's com system had been audio-only. He told her in quick sentences of the meeting between him and Prince Kal. She became excited at the news and he asked her to get in touch with the others and let them all know. He wanted to meet with them in the restaurant again and then he would arrange to take them out to see the new ship. He also told her of the Prince's invitation to them all for dinner that evening.

"I still have an hour before I'm to meet with the representative of Interstellar Insurance," he finished up by telling her, "and I still have a lot I need to do here before I leave."

Samantha's face was beaming. "Yes, sir!" she said excitedly. "You've just made everybody's day! I'll let them know about it right now!"

Merlin closed the connection and then moved over to the engineer's station. He pulled out the security codes from the envelope the Prince had given it to him and began the sequence to change the factory-set codes to new codes he would create specifically for his business.

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Once again the crew of the late *Blue Horizon* was gathered together, but this time on the recreation deck of the new vessel. The large vidscreen displayed Durant's smiling face as he joined in the meeting via satellite teleconferencing from his brother's home on the other side of the planet. With the exception of Patch, everyone seemed in high spirits; the raccoon had not said a handful of words since his return to the embassy and hearing the news.

Merlin had given everyone but the absent Durant a tour of the ship and had pointed out all the new and wonderful features he had discovered thus far. On their way to the hangar, Samantha had convinced the driver of the limousine to stop at a local grocery market, where she and Max picked up a number of items for the crew to share in lunch when they got to the new vessel.

Merlin couldn't stop smiling while listening to everyone's comments on what each had seen as everyone finished their meals. He currently sat in one of the recliners with a coffee cup in his hand and a new nautical hat atop his head. Pockets was seated beside him, rattling on and on in praise of the ship. He had noted Patch's silence, but he felt too good to give it much attention.

"The only downside I can see to the new ship," Pockets said, "is the absence of Moss."

"Moss was *your* invention, Pockets," Renny said as he limped toward a couch. "Did you really think the new ship would come equipped with one?"

"Not really, but I do miss the little flying saucer."

"So build another one," Samantha suggested.

"Please, God, no!" Durant's voice emerged from the speaker system. "*I think losing Moss in the crash was the only good thing that came from this whole mess!*" Durant's dislike of the mobile sentry system was well known among the crew.

Pockets sneered up at the bear's on-screen face. "If Moss hadn't jettisoned our first batch of cargo on the way to Crescentis," the raccoon reminded everyone, "we wouldn't have landed on Tanthe, where the Captain captured the heart of the princess, *and* which resulted in the gift of this wonderful new ship. Sagan apparently *knew* we were on our way to Crescentis, so if Moss hadn't dumped the cargo by mistake, we would have been attacked anyway - though *without* a new ship to get the business back up and running."

Renny laughed and took a drink from his glass. "Pockets can justify anything, can't he?"

"True," Tanis replied with a big grin, "but we cannot always depend on the Captain meeting women of influence if we get into more trouble."

Merlin chuckled and shook his head. "I don't know, Durant," he said with a smile. "I wasn't all that fond of Moss either, but it *did* find two stowaways for us."

"With the way your brother smelled," Durant countered, "*we would have found him on our own without Moss' help.*"

The captain chuckled. "I can't argue with that."

Everyone appeared to have finished eating, so Merlin spoke up in a louder voice. "Okay, there are a few things to go over, so I need your attention. I met with Mr. Andes just before I picked you up at the embassy and we went over everything together. After three long months, Interstellar Insurance has finalized our case with the Spatial Police Force."

"It's about time!" Pockets said.

"It was ultimately determined that we were not liable and that we had done everything we could to avoid the result of the incident. I had total coverage on the old ship and they have awarded us a hefty sum for the *Blue Horizon* as a total loss. Of course, now I get to contact Mr. Andes again before he leaves Pomen to get our *new* ship insured."

"What about the reward for Sagan?" Renny asked. "Didn't the SPF on Crescentis tell you that with the identification of his body that we would be granted the reward?"

Merlin nodded. "Yes, they did, and that money has been held in an account for us all this time, but it would not be actually awarded to us until the closure of the case. The case was closed as of this morning." The captain looked up at the vidscreen and said, "Make a note of this, Durant," he said. "From the insurance and reward monies that have been transferred to the account of *Blue Horizon Freight Transfer*, I am granting every member of this crew a deserving raise. I'll get with you later for the specific amounts reflecting your positions."

"Aye, Boss," the bear acknowledged with a grin. "*I've noted your statement in the account books so you won't forget.*"

"The payout has also resolved all our medical bills," Merlin added. He then raised his coffee cup up in honor of his employees and said to their grinning faces, "Thanks for being such a good crew, my friends." The others raised their glasses in unison and began chatting among themselves.

No one seemed notice that Patch maintained a solemn air despite the good news. Everyone was used to his perpetual sour or neutral facial expressions, but had they looked closer they might have seen that he appeared ill. He had not yet told anyone of his new employment, and everything he had seen during the tour of the new ship only made him stall a bit longer before bringing it up.

"I've already chosen my cabin," Merlin announced. "It's right next to the captain's den as it was before. Before you leave today, you can pick out the quarters you want as your own. They're all identical in size and layout, and we have more rooms available now than we do crew members."

"They're larger, too," Tanis said. "Much larger."

"I like the addition of a bathtub," Durant said. "From your description, the tubs should be large enough to accommodate even me."

A lull came over the group when Max asked, "What about Taro? Are we going to set up a room for her too?"

Everyone looked to Merlin, who shook his head slowly. "Captain Natasha told me she would transport Taro to Pomen ahead of the rest of us and would only tell me that she would be well cared for. Since then, I've heard nothing more than that." He looked around the group with a frown. "Natasha has proven to be an ally, at least in this case, so I can only assume that Taro is still alive and in good hands. I have had no other word on her status."

Samantha leaned forward, her arms resting upon her knees. "I've tried contacting the *Lady of Dreams* on the same channel I sent out the distress signal that brought her to us," she said, "but this time I've not received a reply."

"At the time Natasha took Taro with her," Merlin added, "she said it was a personal matter between her and Taro, and that I was *not* to inquire further. I can only hope that she will eventually update us on our friend's condition." He looked up at the vidscreen again where the bear had been listening quietly. "Durant, I want to earmark some of our new funds for Taro. I have no idea whether her medical expenses will be billed to us or if Natasha plans to handle it herself, but I want to keep a reserve on hand for her just in case."

"Aye, boss."

Merlin drained his coffee cup and then changed the subject. He leaned forward and held his empty cup in both hands as his arms rested on his knees. "My friends, *Blue Horizon Freight Transfer* is back in business. Earlier this morning, I recommended that you should seek employment elsewhere," he said, letting a smile cross his features, "but I'm glad Prince Kal got to me before any of you had a chance to find anything."

Patch cleared his throat and spoke in a meek voice that none of them had ever heard from him before, "Uh, Captain... that's not entirely true."

The wolf felt a sudden dread at those words. "Meaning?" he asked.

"Once you gave us letters of reference this morning, I went out immediately looking for work." He looked down at his feet for a brief moment and then back up into the amber eyes of the lupine captain. "After three months, I – I didn't expect you would be getting a new ship *today*. Despite the crash and the SPF investigation, I've had creditors breathing down my neck for payment and I needed a new source of income to pay them."

"Oh, Patch..." Samantha said in a quiet voice. "I would have given you a loan to keep you on your feet."

"Thanks, Sam," the raccoon said with sincerity, "but that would have been replacing one loan with another. Merlin's funds were running out and I needed a steady source of income, so I went looking for a job this morning after our meeting as recommended. I didn't *expect* to find what I was looking for at the first place I applied, but it practically fell into my lap."

Pockets looked at his brother in disbelief. "You don't mean to say that you..."

"I was hired this morning by the Merriam Cruise Lines as an engineer on a new cruise ship. I report tomorrow by noon."

Merlin sat back in his seat, but Pockets stood up and looked down at his sibling. "After all the time you've spent with the *Blue Horizon*, you are leaving just - like - that?" he shouted.

"Pockets!" Merlin said sharply. "It's okay. Patch didn't know that Prince Kal had already arrived with a new ship. It's my fault."

"But, now that he knows," Renny said with a try to diffuse the situation, "all he has to do is tell MCL that he's no longer available."

Patch shook his head. "It's not that simple, Renny. I signed a *contract* with them. I already have an account and identification as a member of the crew on the *Argonautia*. Besides..."

"Besides *what*?" Pockets grumbled.

"Being a large corporation," Merlin said with a nod of understanding, "they pay more and have better benefits, right?"

"Yes, Captain," Patch admitted. "That's correct."

Pockets groaned and dropped back down in his chair in a huff. His brother looked over at him and said in a quiet voice, "They have another engineer's position open if you want it."

Pockets jumped to his feet again in anger. "Are you stupid *and* an idiot?" he shouted. "Merlin just got a new ship and needs his crew — and that includes *you and me*! I'm not leaving, even for more money. You should stay, too!"

Patch stood up and faced his brother with his own air of anger. He was quickly getting tired of being treated like a traitor. "I told you that *I'm* already bound to a contract!" he shouted back in his sibling's face. "There's nothing more I can do about it, and neither can you!"

"But we *have* a contract with Merlin!"

"Which he *dissolved* this morning when he gave us permission to seek other jobs!" Patch grabbed his brother's shirt with clenched fists and pulled him closer, nose to nose. "I'm not happy about this whole affair either, but don't you *dare* tell me —"

Pockets shoved his brother hard, and the fabric of his own shirt ripped with Patch's grip. Patch fell into his seat and Pockets backed away a step.

Patch stood up again to pummel his brother, but Samantha swiftly placed herself between the two raccoons. "Stop it!" she said angrily. "Just stop it, *both* of you!" She glared at Pockets until her friend finally backed down and returned to his seat. When she turned to look at Patch, he was huffing and glaring at his brother, but finally sat down.

Merlin cleared his throat and all eyes returned to him after a tense moment. "We'll miss you, Patch," he said gently. "It was my fault for not coming back to tell everyone about the new ship right away after I'd spoken with Prince Kal. Finding new jobs often takes a while and I didn't really think any of you would have the time to find another job in the *two hours* since I'd talked to you, so I took a personal tour of the ship before getting back to you. I was wrong and I'm sorry." He stood up and walked over to Patch. He extended a hand toward the raccoon and said, "Good luck on your new ship, Jasper. I hope you'll keep in contact with us and let us know how you're doing."

Patch swallowed when he heard the captain call him by his first name, something he hadn't done in years. He clasped hands with the wolf and nodded solemnly. "Thank you, Merlin. I will."

"Durant and I will arrange a nice severance pay for you this evening."

"I appreciate that, Captain," Patch said. He bit his lip for a moment and then added, "I assume you have more to discuss with the crew, so I'll be on my way. I have a few personal items to pick up before reporting in tomorrow." Without waiting for a response, Patch turned and walked toward the lift, purposely refraining from meeting anyone's eyes.

"Goodbye, Patch," Maximillian said in a sad voice as the raccoon reached the lift door. "I enjoyed your music."

That was all it took for Patch. He hit the control pad inside the lift and the panel closed behind him before anyone saw the moisture in the usually unshakeable raccoon's eyes.

After the lift door had closed, the room fell completely quiet as everyone immersed themselves within their own thoughts. Merlin walked to the galley to refill his cup. When he felt that the mood had been dark long enough, he returned to his seat and took a lap of coffee.

"Okay," he said with a weak smile, "moving right along."

Before he could say anything more, Pockets sat up straight in his chair and said, "Captain, despite the bombshell my brother just dropped on us, I just want you to know you can depend on me to keep your new ship running as smoothly as possible."

"Thank you, Pockets," the wolf said with a confident smile, "I know we'll be in good hands with you as my chief engineer."

"Unless he builds another Moss," Durant added, diffusing the tension in the air with a chuckle. Everyone seemed to relax again as they all looked toward their captain.

"After months of inactivity," Merlin said with bright eyes, "it's time to get back to work. Pockets, I need you and Tanis to retrieve the old computer memory core from storage and slave it to the Geo-25. Then it will be Samantha's job to transfer all our old records and data to the new system." He pulled out a series of printed cards and passed them around the room. Here are the security codes for the new VIS on-board computer systems. Don't lose them. You'll need them to set up and access your personal folders, as well as to get on board the ship when it's all locked up. New security measures will also require you to log in each time you take control of the bridge for your watches. Durant, I'll hang onto yours until you can get back here."

"I'll let my brother know I'm leaving and will try to be there sometime tomorrow," the bear answered.

"No need to rush," Merlin replied. "We still need to go shopping for new slateboard datapaks, as well as basic supplies to restock the ship, and I need to put out a call for applicants for Taro's job."

The room fell silent again and the wolf sighed. "No need to be alarmed," he said with a frown. "I merely need to hire someone as a temporary replacement. I still need someone to handle her duties."

"I can take over Communications," Samantha said. "No need to hire anyone else for that."

"Okay, that duty is yours," Merlin said. "However, I still need a Customer Liaison to handle the responsibilities of seeking out and securing delivery jobs for us and making all the contacts necessary to get that done. There's a lot of work involved in that job."

"I know," Renny said. "Taro often told me about how she'd done this or took care of that. It's a fairly involved process, using up a lot of communication cycles."

"Until I get *some* kind of word on Taro's condition, I can't count on her coming back for a while, if at all. Whomever I hire will be in full knowledge that the job may only be temporary. If we can have Taro back in the position, the job is guaranteed for her."

"Hire another female," Samantha said with a grin. "With Sparky and Taro gone, I don't have anyone else to discuss *girl stuff* with."

"Hire someone my age," Maximillian added.

"He already did," Tanis quipped. "His name is Pockets!"

"Hey!" the raccoon yelped, "I'm almost thirty-two!"

"Yeah, but *ya act* like a teenager!" Tanis retorted.

"You make that sound like it's a bad thing," Max said with a grin.

"There's nothing wrong with acting like a teenager, if ya *are* a teenager!" the tan fox laughed.

"Don't pick on me or I'll tell my Momma..." Pockets said with a playful pout.

Merlin shook his head and said in a lighthearted tone, "I don't care what age the applicants are, so long as they can do the job."

"Do we need another engineer to help Pockets?" Renny asked.

Merlin looked over at the raccoon. "What do you say, Pockets?" he asked. "Do you want any help in the engine room?"

"No, sir," Pockets said confidently. "This new baby is *mine!*"

"Okay, I'll just put out a call for Customer Liaison," Merlin said. He looked up at the vidscreen and added, "Durant, with Taro's absence, I'm formally making you my second-in-command. You have more experience than anyone else and are the most qualified."

"Thank you, boss."

"Tanis, I need you to make up a list of all the medical supplies and medications we'll need to have on board. The ship is completely bare of such things, so we'll have to start from scratch."

"Aye, sir."

"Is your medical license up to date? You'll need it for some of the stuff."

"Yes, it is."

"Holden Pharmaceuticals has a division here," Samantha said. "I can make arrangements for Tanis to get what he needs."

"Good. Max, I need you to make up the most complete listing of groceries and ingredients that you can think of," Merlin said. "Get with everyone and find out what kind of dishes they prefer and then study your cookbooks to see what ingredients you'll need. We want to have plenty of food in the stores to last weeks at a time, and don't want to starve when we're between worlds and light years from the nearest restaurant. I'll want to take a look at the list before you go shopping, just to make sure."

"Uncle Merlin?" the young canine looked hesitant, and a little embarrassed.

"Yes?"

"As long as you are hiring new people... uh, can you hire a new cook, too?"

Merlin looked at him in silence for a moment and then nodded his head slightly. "I know you've needed some assistance in the galley, Max. I'm sorry I didn't have someone helping you before."

"I don't think he's asking for *help*, Captain," Samantha said quietly.

"I see," the wolf replied when he saw the look of confirmation in the youth's eyes.

"Well, with our surplus, I suppose we can hire a new cook as well."

Max swallowed and gave Merlin a grateful smile. "Thank you," he said. "I... I wasn't doing very well in the kitchen."

The captain gave him a look of compassion and said, "You did a good job, Max, and I'm proud of you for it. Is there something else you would rather be doing?"

Maximillian glanced over at Pockets and shrugged his shoulders. "Can I work with him in the engine room?" he asked.

Merlin looked over at the raccoon. "What about it, Chief Engineer?" he asked. "Could you use a trainee mechanic?"

Pockets crossed his arms and narrowed his eyes at the youth as he pretended to really think it over hard. "Well... now that my brother is out of the way, I probably *could* use a minion

to boss around..." The German shepherd grinned widely and put his hands on his knees as he leaned back in his chair.

"Okay, Max," the captain said. "You do what Pockets tells you and I think you'll learn a great deal."

"Thanks, Uncle Merlin," the canine said. Then he turned toward Pockets and added, "Thank you, too, Pockets."

The raccoon winked at him and Tanis chuckled. "As long as jobs are shifting around," he said with a smile, "can I be the new captain?"

Merlin bared his teeth at the tan fox. "Request denied," he said with a fierce grin. Tanis made an exaggerated show of being frightened and everybody laughed.

"Okay, Renny," Merlin continued, "you will need to continue your physical therapy even after we're on our way, so I want you to get with your therapist and find out what equipment you'll need for it. While you are checking on that, look into getting us some new exercise equipment as well. We lost our rapiers in the crash and I'd like to continue fencing practice during our voyages once you are up and able."

"I'll take care of it," the cheetah said. "What about ordnance for the weaponry?"

"That's one thing this ship is supplied with. We're fully loaded."

"Is the combination of insurance and reward money going to be able to pay for all this?" Tanis asked. "Just getting the ship supplied with the basics is going to cost a small fortune!"

Durant let out a small whistle in surprise. They could hear Durant clicking away on the terminal during the conversation and he answered the question himself. "*I've just now checked our account balance and we have over ©3,000,000 available to us!*"

"Three million credits!" Tanis gasped in awe.

Merlin gave the vidscreen a lopsided smile. "Thanks, Durant! I hadn't planned on giving them all the full amount so no one would *over-spend* on their shopping trips!"

"Oops..." muttered the grizzly.

Merlin shrugged and continued. "A number of the Planetary Alignment worlds had sizable sums set aside for the capture of Sagan. The SPF made sure all of those sums were awarded to us." He spread his arms out in a stretch and added, "There was a larger reward on his head if brought in dead than if alive. Apparently, no one wanted to bother with putting him on trial where he might find some loophole and escape. The government of Hestra was especially pleased to hear of his demise."

"Let's just hope the knowledge of the *Taquit Fever* virus was lost with him," Samantha said quietly.

"Agreed." Renny added.

"Now that you know about the money, I want to caution you. This money belongs to the *business*, so Durant is going to require you to turn in *all* your receipts when you make purchases for the ship. When he gets here, he'll configure your accounts with back pay for the past three months, and you can make any *personal* purchases out of that."

"Can we use some of the money to buy a couple of power loaders?" Renny asked. "We've rented some here and there at the places we've landed, but it would be nicer if we had our own."

Merlin raised an eyebrow and looked over at Pockets. "Do you think you could find us a couple of used models?" he asked. "We have money in the account, but I'd rather not use it all up right away."

The raccoon nodded. "Let me know what kind of budget I'll have and I'll scout around the local rags to see what I can find."

"Durant and I will discuss it and give you a figure as soon as we can."

"Thanks, boss," Renny said with a smile. "That will make things go a little smoother."

"Has the new ship been registered with the Planetary Alignment?" Tanis asked.

"Yes, Prince Kal took care of that for us." Merlin replied, "The registry is PA1138."

"Did the prince register a name for the ship as well?" Durant asked.

The wolf shook his head. "No, he left that up to us."

"So, what are you going to call it?" Samantha asked.

Merlin took a drink of coffee and drained his cup again. Max jumped up and ran to the galley to get him a refill, though keeping his ears tuned to the conversation.

"I thought I would let you all discuss it," Merlin replied. "Suggestions?"

The group fell quiet as they began to think.

"We could call it *Sagan's Demise*," Renny said after a moment.

Tanis snorted. "That would be an open invitation to any pirate who might have been allied with him to come and get us."

"How about the *Rhinoceros*?" Pockets suggested.

"That sounds like a name for a huge battleship," Durant said.

"With the way this baby is armed, isn't that appropriate?" Pockets asked.

"What about *Zephyr*?" Renny tried. "We can have one that sounds kinda exotic."

"There's already been a ship with that name." Pockets replied, remembering an article in a trade magazine he'd read during their convalescence.

"How about *Free Enterprise*?" Renny tried again. He got nothing but groans from everybody, so he sullenly crossed his arms and decided to keep his mouth shut.

"What if we call it the *Gray Ghost*," Max said as he returned with the captain's replenished coffee. "The *Blue Horizon* was painted blue," he said. "This one is painted gray."

Merlin shook his head as he took the cup. "The old ship was painted blue because of the name, not the other way around. I don't like gray ships and I'm going to have this one repainted next week," he said. "Gray reminds me too much of the military ships I served on."

"I agree," Tanis replied. "Battleship-gray paint is dull."

"I have the perfect name for the new ship," Durant said. Everyone looked up at the vidscreen in doubt. "Why not just call it the *Blue Horizon II* and go with that? After all, the business accounts are all under the name of *Blue Horizon Freight Transfer*."

"Not a bad idea," Pockets said, "if we drop the *II* from the name."

"We wouldn't have to get used to a new name," Tanis agreed, "just a new registry number. It's been done before with other ships."

"I like that idea," Samantha replied. "What do you think, Captain?"

Merlin nodded and lapped his coffee. "A new ship should have a new name, but I agree it would make things easier since the old ship has been decommissioned." He looked around. "Continuing to use *Blue Horizon* seems to be a popular idea. Any objections?" No one voiced a negative opinion, so Merlin nodded. "I'll submit the necessary forms with the PA Registry tomorrow and make it official."

He yawned and stretched again. "This has been a full day for me already," he said, "and I could use a chance to recharge. I'm going back to the embassy to take an hour's nap before I start in again on more I have to do. Remember that we've all been invited to dine with Prince Kal this evening, but for now you're free to do whatever you want the rest of the day. We'll begin operations to prep our new *Blue Horizon* tomorrow morning, so I need everyone to report back here no later than 0900 to get started. That will give us all time to have a good breakfast before we begin. Lady and gents, we're about to be back in business."

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When Patch got out of the taxi at the docking port the next morning, he was dressed in a pair of slacks, a nice shirt and jacket. It had been years since he had worn such clothing, but his old comfortable casual garments were in a small bag in his left hand. Since the crash of the *Blue Horizon*, he owned little else, for even the smallest of his musical instruments had not survived, most of which were likely at the bottom of the Forvea Trench of Crescentis. He paid the driver and the cab drove away, leaving him alone on the dock.

Despite the arguments of the previous day, the entire local crew of the *Horizon* had given him a farewell breakfast with well-wishes, handshakes and a few small gifts. Pockets was still displeased with his decision, but that didn't stop him from giving his brother a fierce hug and shedding a few tears at their last good-bye, with promises from both to keep in contact. Although they *had* spent time apart before, the twin brothers had been together most of their lives more often than not. Although Samantha had never really been close friends with Patch over the years they had known one another, she had given him a quick lick on the cheek and warm hug in farewell.

Now standing in the shadow of his new vessel, Patch looked up at the massive pleasure cruise ship and sighed. It was the largest non-military craft he had ever seen, and even then it dwarfed most battleships. It was sleek with rounded edges and painted white with red and gold trim.

Crowds of people gathered around the primary gangway amidst calls of farewell and tears of departure, but as a ship's hand, he would enter a smaller gangplank to board the ship near the stern. He smiled a little at their enthusiasm, but Patch didn't imagine that the cruises on the *Argonautia* would be anywhere close to pleasurable for him, other than burying himself in his work.

He cleared his throat and squared his shoulders. It was time to find the chief engineer and report in.

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"Okay," Merlin said to Durant, "I have our prospects narrowed down to these two." He keyed in a command and displayed the applications for side by side on the center screen of the bridge. Durant looked up at the information and photographs and read quickly through what he saw. There hadn't been many applicants over the six days since Merlin had put out an ad for Customer Liaison in the major news media centers around the world. Unfortunately, there didn't seem to be many individuals with the skills he required on Pomen. He had received one application all the way from Kantus, but the bulldog had been vehemently upset that Merlin would not hold off all other interviews for the four weeks it would take him to travel to Pomen. How he had found out about the interviews in another star system altogether was unknown.

"Cynthia Allport is a twenty-five year old brown mouse from Earth," Merlin told the bear at his side, showing him her picture. "She was born to a communications developer who had immigrated to Earth and was programming computers before she was riding a bike. She finished her degree in computer communications at the Lagerstrom University of Pomen, with a Minor in clinical psychology. If I hire her, Samantha wouldn't have to take over Communications. This girl seems to have an analytical mind and a genial personality." He

looked over at Durant and gave him a smile over narrowed eyes. "She was also rather flirtatious."

"Trying to influence your decision?"

"No doubt."

"What about the other one?"

"Antoinette Delondin is a twenty-seven year old human, also from Earth, but her family was military and like most, she's lived just about everywhere. Due to this, she can speak a variety of foreign languages from multiple worlds. She's had a lot of experience dealing with people, as she usually joined local social clubs and interacted with people wherever they went, and she has a business degree." He showed Durant her photo. She was slender, dark-skinned, had large green eyes that were almost hidden by equally large glasses and she wore her black hair short.

"What was your impression of her?" the bear asked him.

Merlin rested his elbows on the instrument panel and tapped the countertop with a nail. "She seems fairly competent. I get the impression that she would probably do okay, but like the mouse, she doesn't have the exact experience we really need."

He rested his chin on the counter and added, "I'm sure this will sound xenophobic, but every time I've ever dealt with a human, they always seem to have a phobia of some kind against Furs, probably since they're the ones who created Furs in the first place to do their interstellar exploration for them; most of them still think of us as nothing more than talking animals. I've not found one yet who's felt comfortable around me, other than a friend of my father's when I was a pup."

"You've been wary around humans ever since Connie Davies."

Merlin's ears went flat against the side of his head; he gave the grizzly a quick scowl at memories of the *Blue Horizon's* very first on-board nurse.

"Is that what you feel from Ms. Delondin?"

"I'm not sure, but then again I've always had a hard time reading them. Human body language is different from Furs; they don't have tails and their ears don't even move."

Durant shook his head. "These two are the *best* of the applicants?" he asked.

"Everyone else I've interviewed has even *less* experience and training," the captain replied, "or was so repulsive in one way or another than I *knew* I didn't want to be cooped up in a ship with for weeks at a time."

Durant looked over the information and frowned deeply. "Can't you just appoint Samantha to do the job?"

Merlin chuckled. "Funny you should mention that. I offered her the job, but she told me that she already had enough to do with maintaining the ship's computers in hardware and software, as well as her duties as Supply Officer. She's not as familiar with the Geo-25 system as she was the Geo-21, so she has a lot of research and testing to do with the new computer. As Renny pointed out, Customer Liaison is a full-time job, calling weeks and even months ahead to the various worlds to promote our company, arrange delivery and pickup, and payment for our services. There's a lot of PR work involved." He shook his head. "Sorry, but I need to hire someone else for that job, unless you want it, yourself."

Durant looked surprised but then he smiled. "No thanks, boss. I'm your load master, the accountant for your business, and also your second in command. I don't have the time or the desire to take on a fourth hat with Taro's liaison duties too."

"I didn't think so," Merlin said with a grin. He looked back up at the vidscreen and waved a hand towards it. "We have to have the position filled to secure us a customer just so

we can *leave* Pomen, so that means it's down to choosing one of these two. We don't even have Taro's old slateboard datapak with her list of clientele contacts this time," he said, referring to an incident when he'd first set up the business almost seven years earlier. "I'm afraid there just is no one *fully* qualified in this place and I'm not even sure about either of these. Neither have much experience in this line of work, nor do I really wish to give anyone on-the-job training on how to contact and secure customers."

"May I make a suggestion?" Durant asked.

"Sure, what is it?"

"Pick whichever one you think might be better in the job," the bear explained, "and tell her that if she can secure a paying customer from Pomen to anywhere else within three days, she can have the job. If, by the end of that time she hasn't found a delivery for us, offer the same test to the other applicant."

"And what if neither of them is successful?"

"You could always contact that guy on Kantus and tell him we'll wait for his arrival."

Merlin snorted. "After the tantrum he had over the Com when I refused to hold up the interviews just for him, there's no way he will ever work for me. He's got an egotistical entitlement problem and he didn't sound as if he would be good at following orders."

He frowned and studied the applicants again. "Okay, Durant, I'll follow your suggestion. The *Horizon* has been repainted, we're finally stocked up on all our supplies, all licenses and legal fees have been paid, we've all checked out of the embassy and have been living on board the ship for the past two days. Now we just need somewhere to go."

"Which one do we test first?"

"We'll give Ms. Allport first crack at it."

"Ah, so she *did* influence you!" Durant said with a laugh.

Merlin shook his head with a grin. "Possibly, but not in the way you're thinking," he said. "Just thinking that perhaps her degree in Psychology might help us out on the long voyages."

"Then why don't you just hire her outright and forget about the test and the rest?"

"I suppose I could," Merlin admitted, "but now that I've thought about it some more, I like your idea. If she can arrange a delivery for us to make, then she'll be hired anyway, whether I choose her right now or after the test."

"Should I contact Ms. Delondin and the other applicants and simply thank them for their interest?"

"No, we'll hold off on that until I actually hire anyone. We may have to fall back on one of them anyway."

"Okay, boss," Durant said as he turned off the vidscreen. "I'll just save the contract file until we know whose name to put on it."

Merlin nodded. "I'm going to give Ms. Allport a call and give her the basic information she'll need when contacting people for our business. She will have three days."

"Okay, what about our new cook?"

"Only one applicant. Lorelei Easter, or Lori, as she likes to be called, is a twenty-six year old cottontail rabbit," Merlin sat up and read from his slateboard. "She was born on Mainor, but like Ms. Delondin, her family was military and she grew up all over the place. She's extremely friendly, claims she can get along with anyone, and also claims to be a good cook with lots of experience. Her references *have* verified her experience."

"What was your personal impression of her?" the bear asked him.

Merlin pulled up a photo of her on the slateboard. Her fur was snowy white and she wore only enough clothing for modesty, a tradition still in practice in places around the Planetary Alignment, and it was enough to show off her numerous curves. "She's bubbly, with lots of bubbles; I have a hunch that she's the type who likes collecting crystals, incense, love beads and messes around with things like auras and acupuncture. Easily distracted, too."

"An airhead, eh?"

The wolf grinned. "Well, I wouldn't go so far to hang any labels on her, but what's important is that she enjoys cooking and has the experience feeding other species whether vegetarian or carnivorous. I'll contact her shortly and let her know she's got the job." Merlin glanced over his notes again and then added with the nod of his head, "All three applicants have flight experience, too."

"That's good." Durant looked at his slateboard and keyed in some numbers. "I'll set up an account for our Easter bunny right away," he said with a quick grin at his own joke. "I can get the rest of her financial data when she comes on board."

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Merlin met the cottontail rabbit at *The Feathery*, a sidewalk café close to the Tanthean embassy where he had been a frequent customer during their extended stay. Lorelei was waiting for him at a sidewalk table, her twin suitcases and matching trunk were on the ground beside her chair. She was dressed in a pair of powder blue shorts and a white silk blouse with half the buttons open exposing her fur-covered cleavage. She wore a small golden four-leaf clover good-luck charm on a thin chain around her neck and her eyes were covered by a pair of dark sunglasses. She was sipping at a glass of lemonade when the lupine captain walked up to the table.

"Hello, Miss Easter," he said with an extended hand. "Good to see you again—"

Before he had a chance to finish his greetings, the rabbit jumped up, kissed him quickly on the lips and then gave him a fierce hug with a lilted giggle, all while still holding onto her lemonade. "Thank you so much, sir," she said merrily. "I am *so* happy to get the job! You have *no* idea how good it was to get your call earlier, and when I got it I just *danced* around my room, and I..."

Merlin pulled himself out of her clinging embrace and pushed her back to arm's length with a lopsided smile. "You *don't* have to try to influence me," he teased. "You've got the job already."

"Oops," she said with an embarrassed expression as she removed her sunglasses. "I didn't mean it to look that way, sir."

Merlin shook his head with a smile and then wagged a finger at her. "The Captain's First Rule: don't call me *Sir*, got it?"

"Yes, sir... uh, yes, I got it, Captain."

"You can call me captain, boss or even just by my first name, which is Merlin," the wolf explained as he led her back to the sidewalk table. "I served in the military as an officer and got awfully tired of everyone being called *Sir*, so I don't allow anyone to call me that. I don't mind when it is used as a form of respect, but don't use it as a title, okay?"

"Uh huh," the rabbit replied with a grin. "I understand. Likewise, please call me *Lori* instead of Lorelei. It's what I go by mostly."

"Fair enough. I take it you're ready to go on board?"

"Yes, I am, Captain," she said with a wave of her hand toward her suitcases. "I've always traveled light and everything I own are in these three and my purse."

Merlin nodded and motioned at a waiter across the patio. "I know you're probably ready to get to the ship, but I'm hungry and want to eat something before we leave."

"Didn't you tell me the *Blue Horizon* was fully stocked with food and kitchen equipment?" Lorelei asked him, her blue eyes sparkling. "I could prove my culinary skills by making you lunch on board the ship."

Merlin chuckled and smiled at her. "Thank you, Lori, but I'm pretty fond of this little café and this may be the last time I get the chance to eat here before we take off. Besides I'm addicted to their coffee. You'll have plenty of time to prove yourself to the crew once we get under way."

"Okay," the rabbit replied with the shrug of her shoulders.

"My standard practice is to gather everyone together in one place to introduce everyone to a new crew member," the wolf said, "but I have everyone scattered right now doing last minute things for the ship before launch. You'll probably meet a few of them informally when we get in, but we can get you settled in promptly after I've eaten." The waiter arrived and took his order, and when he had gone back to the kitchen, Merlin continued. "We'll be getting another new crew member sometime in the next few days," he told the rabbit. "If we get a customer in that time, we'll be leaving shortly thereafter."

"Nice," Lori replied with a smile. "I can't wait to be on our way!" She looked around for a moment before returning her gaze to her new employer. "As a coffee drinker, what's your favorite blend?" she asked.

Merlin grinned. "I like coffee in just about *all* its forms across the Planetary Alignment, but Kidwell is probably my favorite. Here's a tip when you shop for ship's groceries each time we land - *always* make sure we have plenty of coffee. We have a number of coffee drinkers on board, but I'm probably the one most addicted to the stuff." He shook his head and added in a lighthearted tone, "Don't *ever* let me run out of coffee... That's your first warning."

\*\*\*

The lights came on in the vacant cabin of the freighter at the touch of a control. Into the room walked the shapely female rabbit with a big smile, followed by the ship's chief engineer and the medic. The raccoon struggled with her two large suitcases and the desert fox wrestled with an even larger trunk behind him. The antigrav pallet they had used to bring up her luggage was too wide to fit through the cabin doorway, so for the final distance the heavy containers had to be hand carried.

The newest member of the crew followed them into the room and was amazed at the amount of space in her quarters. Most of her stellar travel in the past included tiny rooms on whatever transport her military family happened to be on, but this one was huge when compared to them. She could hardly believe her luck, and while it was only a common freighter, Lori was pleased to have been hired onto its crew.

Tanis set her trunk near the couch and let out a small yip at the sudden sharp pain to his lower back. As a cargo-mover and a medic, he knew to bend his knees instead of his back when moving heavy objects, but he had stolen an appreciative glance at the way her powder blue shorts fit her curves, as well as the white silk blouse with half the buttons open, and forgot himself for a moment.

Lori was instantly at his side. "What's the matter?" she asked in a genuinely worried voice. Her large blue eyes were concerned and he tried to wave her off.

"Just stood up wrong," he answered with a pained grin. Pockets snickered. He had seen Tanis' lustful looks at the newcomer.

"Here, let me help," the cute rabbit replied. Before the medic could say anything more, Lori moved behind him and began to massage the muscles of his lower back right above the base of his tail. He leaned against the trunk and closed his eyes with her ministrations, acutely focused upon her perfume instead of his pain.

Pockets blinked twice at the image they presented and wondered if he could fake an injury. He shook his head silently at the thought. It would be his luck that Tanis would be the one to treat him instead of the lovely bunny. He didn't even know Lorelei yet and he already felt a little envious of the attention Tanis received from her.

After a few moments, Pockets tired of watching and headed for the doorway. The action was enough to get the rabbit's attention and she stood up to back away from Tanis a step. "Thank you," the desert fox said to her. "That feels much better."

"You're welcome," she said sweetly. Lorelei moved toward the raccoon and reached out both hands toward him. Without thinking, he raised his hands up to meet hers and she held them gently.

"Thank you, Pockets," she said. "You and Tanis are gentlemen for helping me with my belongings." With that, she leaned over and kissed the engineer on the cheek. She smiled at his reaction and then moved back to the medic. She leaned forward to kiss him on the cheek too, but Tanis narrowed his eyes with a smile and tiptoed up slightly so that her kiss landed on his lips instead.

Lori pulled back with a giggle. She pushed him away with a finger to the tip of his nose and then winked at Pockets. "If you two will excuse me now," she said with a slight tilt of her head, "I need to unpack."

"Of course," Tanis replied. He nodded pleasantly and then moved toward the door. Pockets started to follow, but held back to ask a question.

"Lorelei?" he asked. "Have you ever made baked Jinkles?"

"My little brother's crazy about them, especially sprinkled with Adarian cheese," she said with a smile. "Of course I have."

"I've never had them with cheese," Pockets said in awe.

"Lightly toasted, the cheese adds good flavor. I'll have to make them for you sometime."

"You'll have a friend for life if you do!" replied the engineer enthusiastically.

Lorelei's eyes crinkled in amusement at this silly little raccoon as she opened a small suitcase. The container was upside down, so when the sides opened, the contents spilled out onto the carpet at the engineer's feet. Pockets knelt down with her to pick up the items and was puzzled at what he saw. There were beaded necklaces, incense sticks and a multitude of crystals in various shapes, all threaded through with silver or gold colored strings.

Lorelei picked up one particularly large spherical crystal and held it up so the cabin lights reflected off of its faceted sides. The rabbit's eyes widened at the sparkles and Pockets got the distinct impression that she was awed by her own trinkets. She giggled and picked up another crystal, this one diamond-shaped.

The raccoon stood up slowly and put the things he had picked up onto her bed beside the suitcase. Lorelei no longer seemed to notice him as she stared transfixed at the crystals. Pockets frowned and left the room. Tanis leaned against the corridor wall with an amused expression on his face.

"Now, that was unexpected, wasn't it?" he asked.

Pockets looked at him and shook his head. "You saw?"

"Yeah... mesmerized."

The engineer stuck his hands into two of his many pockets and frowned. "She's cute and friendly, but I'm beginning to wonder about her already."

Tanis nodded his agreement. "It's only a first impression," he said in a whisper, "but I think she's a ditz."

Pockets looked over at him and twitched his whiskers. "It must be an act," he replied. "She's probably an egg-head."

"So pretty..." Lorelei's voice cooed from the open cabin door.

"Egg-head? How about a scrambled egg?" Tanis asked with a laugh.

Pockets leaned in close to one of the fox's large ears. "I've never been around a rabbit before," he confessed in a whisper. "Is what they say about them true?"

"You mean the rumors of an insatiable cross-species *appetite*?" Tanis asked with a smirk at his companion.

"Uh, yeah... that's what I meant."

The fox chuckled and merely grinned. "I'm guessing you'll have to find that out on your own."

"Tanissssss..."

"Pocketssssssss..." Tanis mocked. "C'mon, let's get the antigrav pallet back down to Durant."

\*\*\*

Samantha had just arrived at the hangar where the *Blue Horizon* resided. She had been out getting supplies for the new vessel and was about to recruit a few of the guys to help her unload them from a rented truck to take it all inside the ship. The cargo bay door was fully open and she saw Durant as he wandered the large space to inspect the contents of all the storage lockers.

"Hi, Sam," the grizzly said to her as she neared him. "Have a good time shopping?"

"As always," she replied cheerfully. "Is anyone else around? I need help unloading the last of the supplies I felt we needed."

"Pockets is in his engine room drooling over the new tool kits," Durant answered. "I think Renny and Tanis are upstairs somewhere. Max left with the captain a little bit ago."

"Thanks, Durant."

"Did you get the music I requested?"

Samantha smiled up at him. "I got everything you wanted except for the new album by The Jettisons," she said. "That one hasn't made it to Pomen yet."

The bear shrugged his shoulders. "Oh well, maybe I can find it at our next destination. Thanks for getting the others for me."

Sam put a hand on the load master's arm. "You're welcome, Durant. I picked up more music and movies for the Rec room, linens, janitorial supplies, cargo tie-down supplies, computer software, spare parts for just about every system on board, stationary, books and magazines both electronic and in print, and a whole lot more." She moved toward the lift as she continued to speak to him over her shoulder. "It's been tough trying to think of everything we might need, starting off with an empty ship to supply. It's just like when we first started the business."

"Yeah, I remember that."

"I'm sure we'll think of more things after we get underway, but I think I got most of it. Every time I think I'm done shopping, I remember more we need."

Durant watched her walk away with a smile. Samantha had been instrumental at keeping up the spirits of the crew during their downtime, and while he might argue with her from time to time over the cargo manifests, he was glad to have her as a friend.

Samantha rode the lift up to the second level and stepped out into the corridor. She looked toward the left at a sound and saw a cabin doorway open just where the hallway curved around out of sight. She had not learned who had chosen which room yet, so wasn't sure who was inside. Soft music issued from the open door, so she moved toward it with a smile.

"Hello?" she said when she reached the room. She put her head inside and it took her a moment to comprehend what she saw. A black-light lamp was the sole source of illumination in the dark room, which gave all light-shaded objects an eerie phosphorescent glow. A slateboard on the desk issued the music that Sam recognized as Terran techno disco. Beads and crystals hung from the ceiling in a seemingly random pattern and there was the faint scent of jasmine incense burning somewhere. She glanced at the bookcase where several printed paperback volumes had not yet been stacked neatly and she felt her face flush beneath her fur when she read some of the risqué titles.

The Border collie tilted her head to the side when a humming came from the lavatory, and a moment later, a white rabbit came out into the room. She wore a pair of really short shorts that barely covered her behind beneath a fluffy tail, and a rainbow-colored, tank-top tee shirt. Her white fur glowed dramatically in the black light. She saw Samantha and grinned widely.

"Hullo!" she said merrily.

"Uh, hi," Sam replied hesitantly. "Who are you?"

"My name's Lorelei, but you can call me Lori." The rabbit stopped in front of the canine and leaned forward until her nose almost touched Sam's. "I'm your new cook!"

The Border collie leaned backward a little to put some personal distance between them. "Hello, Lori," she said hesitantly. "I'm Samantha."

Lorelei grabbed the collie in a tight embrace and did a couple of little excited hops. "Hi, Samantha!" she said cheerily. "Captain Sinclair told me there was another woman on board." Sam pushed at her gently, not quite sure of how to take the newcomer.

"Uh, Lori, I need some room," she said. "Personal space, please."

The rabbit released her and stepped back with a finger under her chin. "Oh, I get it," she said in a lilting tone with a grin. "Don't be alarmed, sweetie. I just like to hug my friends. It makes us more like a family, which is what an interstellar crew is supposed to be like, right?"

Samantha managed a look of amusement. "Uh, supposedly," she admitted. "Have you met any of the others?" she asked.

Lori sat down on her bed and drew her legs up beneath her. "Lessee," she replied in a faraway tone, "Pockets and Tanis helped bring my things on board, and I also met a cute little doggy with light blue eyes. I think he said his name was Max, but he was kinda shy." She looked up at Sam and asked, "Is he old enough to mate? He looks nice, but he seemed frightened when I flirted with him."

Sam swallowed back her thoughts and answered tightly, "No, Lori, he's not old enough. Better leave him alone... he's the captain's nephew and he's under age."

Lorelei shrugged her shoulders. "Oh well, I understand there's plenty of other males on this crew." She narrowed her eyes mischievously at the collie and added, "The captain's got a nice tail. I wonder how long it will take me to get together with him."

Samantha sputtered and looked at the bold newcomer in disbelief, her tail standing up behind her. "Forget it! You don't have a chance!" she said angrily.

Lorelei shrugged again. "S'okay," she said with a smile. She didn't seem to even register the collie's tone of voice. "Want me to see if I can arrange for you to occupy his bed? I know a lot of tricks that would get even someone like you under the sheets with him."

Samantha coughed into her fist and really, really tried to contain herself. "Someone *like me*? Listen, Lorelei... you are getting on my bad side and we've just met. You know *nothing* about this crew, so don't come in here with ideas on what you think should or shouldn't happen!"

Lori looked at her quizzically and held up her hands. "Okay, okay, Samantha," she said. "I'm sorry I assumed too much. You and the captain have similar facial fur markings. Are you related?"

The collie couldn't believe her ears. "No," she said through clenched teeth, "we are not related. It's only coincidence that he has a similar facial pattern and I would never get into bed with a relative anyway..." She suddenly clamped her lips shut. She'd said too much and knew it when she saw Lori's expression of delight.

"Ahh... now I understand," the rabbit said slyly. "Sammy's sleeping with the boss!" She put a finger to her lips and winked at the collie. "You can trust me to keep it a secret from the rest of the crew."

Samantha sighed deeply and put both hands on her forehead. This simple little conversation was giving her a headache. This was not the way she normally greeted new crew members.

"Does your head hurt?" Lori asked in a worried tone. "I have an herbal tea that will take care of that, to ease the tension."

The supply officer looked up at the newcomer and shook her head with a scowl. "Thanks, but we are stocked with meds in Sickbay. I'll just..."

"Oh, no, that just *won't* do," Lori interrupted. "Manufactured drugs are unnatural, sit inert in your system, and that's bad for you. What I have is healthier. I wouldn't trust anything produced by those evil pharmaceutical companies."

"Evil...?" Samantha felt her hackles beginning to rise.

"Yeah, companies like Holden Pharmaceuticals or Thayer Drugs are only out to hurt people for profit under the guise of being helpful," the rabbit said as she rummaged through a box beside the bed. She stopped and then looked over at Samantha with an amused expression. "You said your last name was Holden, didn't you? Same as that drug company... funny, huh?" She went back to searching through her box and didn't see the look of fury on the collie's face.

Samantha was about to inform the irritating rabbit that Holden Pharmaceuticals was her late father's company, but a knock on the door behind her caught her off guard. Both females turned and saw a slender cheetah leaning against the doorway, one foot partially held up off the floor. He wore a pair of black jogging shorts and a purple tank-top.

"Sam?" Renny said with a glance at all the strange decorations in the cabin, "Durant said you needed help bringing supplies on board. Pockets and Tanis are already down there with the pallets. I was going to help, but the captain still won't let me move heavy objects until my foot heals further."

Samantha nodded to him, appreciative of the interruption. "Thanks, Renny," she said. "I need to get down there." She moved past the navigator toward the nearest lift without looking back at the rabbit.

Renny looked over at her and smiled. "Hello," he said. "Is there something I can help you with?"

Lorelei grinned widely at the cheetah and was drawn to his large, golden eyes. She moved closer to stand nose to nose with him and leaned up against his chest with her hands clasped behind her back. "You can start by telling me your name, handsome. I've signed onto your crew and want to be seeing a lot more of you."

"Renny Thornton," he said, acutely aware of the primary points of contact between their bodies. "I'm the ship's navigator."

"Hi, navigator," she said with a sly smile. "I'm Lorelei, or Lori, as my *intimate* friends call me. I would like *you* to call me Lori..."

Renny grinned and put his hands on her shoulders. He pushed her gently away from him and said in a quiet voice, "Perhaps another time, Lorelei... but I'm afraid I can't right now."

The rabbit could smell that he was interested, but something was holding him back. "What's her name?" she asked in a more conversational tone.

Renny nodded with a smile. "Taro Nichols. She was badly hurt in the crash, but we haven't heard anything about her condition in months."

Lorelei stepped away and leaned back against the wall. She looked solemn and replied, "Captain Sinclair told me about the crash. I'm sorry for you all." She allowed a smile to creep across her face again and added, "but if you feel lonely and need someone to snuggle with, please don't hesitate to find me. I'm always willing to help out."

The cheetah bit his bottom lip gently. He had no doubt that she would be willing, but he cared too deeply for Taro and until he found out anything about her, one way or another, he wouldn't seek out anyone else.

"Welcome to the *Blue Horizon*," he said to her. "I'm sure we'll get more time to talk later, but I need to get back to the duties our captain has assigned to me."

"Okay, Renny," Lorelei said with a smile. "I'll see you later."

The cheetah withdrew from the room and headed for the bridge. Lorelei watched him go, admiring his shorts and grinned to herself as she turned back to her unpacking. There were opportunities to be had here, she thought to herself. This new crew would be well worth investigating.

\*\*\*

The *Blue Horizon* had a customer by the next morning. Ms. Allport had arranged a paying client delivering electrical and technical parts from the very city there were in, to the under-industrialized world of Fyn for a new communications center. Not only did the mouse win Merlin's respect with her quick results, but her job as a member of his crew was assured when she also secured a delivery afterward from Fyn to the SPF headquarters on Joplin. That delivery consisted of nothing more exciting than linens and clothing, but it was for a paying customer nonetheless.

An hour after calling Merlin with the information, she showed up at the *Blue Horizon's* hangar with three suitcases and two trunks of luggage, and then the wolf let her pick one of the empty cabins. With everyone on board, he then called a meeting of the entire crew to the recreation deck.

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Cynthia Allport felt a lump in her throat as she watched the various crew members gathering around the main table next to galley at the aft end of the rec deck. The brown mouse was dressed casually in one of the local Pomen robes of white and yellow with a blue belt sash, but after seeing the garments the crew was wearing, she intended to change into a style of clothing that more in keeping with what she saw among them.

She had a habit of brushing her short brown hair off the edges of her large ears with a finger, which did nothing more than draw attention to them. Her blue eyes had missed nothing when she had been given a quick tour of the ship, and she was secretly pleased with the selection of males on board the vessel.

She sat to the captain's left at the end of the long table. A cheetah sat on Merlin's right, chatting idly with a female Border collie. Across the table from him was a short raccoon who watched her with interested eyes. His clothing had pockets sewn onto practically all available spaces on the front and sides and there seemed to be something in each of them. Seated next to him was a large grizzled bear with cinnamon-colored fur. He was taller and larger than anyone else on board and was talking pleasantly to a young canine seated beside him.

A fennec fox with large ears sat between the collie and a cottontail rabbit and he nodded to her pleasantly with eyes that were so dark as to be nearly black. Everyone's attention went to Merlin as he cleared his throat and then adjusted his hat.

"Okay, crew, I want to introduce you all to our new Customer Liaison," he said. "This is Cynthia Allport."

The mouse smiled nervously and gave a nod of her head. "Hello," she said. "Please just call me *Cindy*."

"I'll start the introductions with myself, as is customary," the wolf said. "I'm Merlin Sinclair, the captain, owner and primary pilot of the *Blue Horizon*. This guy next to me is Renny Thornton. He's our navigator and primary co-pilot. Next to him is Samantha Holden, our supply officer and computer tech." Sam smiled and waved her fingers at the mouse. "If there's anything you need, she's the one to tell."

Merlin gestured to the raccoon seated next to Samantha. "The guy with all the junk in his pockets next to you, *Cindy*, is Jerad Porter. He's our chief engineer and mechanic, and as you can guess, we call him *Pockets*."

"Hi, nice to meetcha!" the raccoon exclaimed cheerily in a distinct country accent.

"Across the table from *Pockets* is Arktanis TeVann," Merlin said when the chuckles faded.

The tan fox nodded again and gave her a pleasant smile "Just call me *Tanis*, mate."

"And next to him is our cook, Lori Easter, another newcomer to the crew who has only been with us since yesterday, herself. We introduced her to everyone in a meeting like this last night."

"Hi, *Cindy*," the rabbit said merrily.

"Seated beside *Pockets* is our load master and business accountant, Durant, who is also my First officer. Next to him is our young trainee mechanic, Max."

"Hello," the canine said with a friendly smile.

Merlin glanced at his slateboard and then back to his new employee. "That's everyone, *Cindy*. No one around here expects to hear a speech, but if there's anything you want to say to this group, go right ahead."

The mouse smiled back at her new crewmates and said, "I'm pleased to be here with you all and hope I can fit in." She looked embarrassed, but added, "Captain Sinclair told me

about Taro and I'm sorry all that happened to her and the rest of you. I know I can't replace her, but I hope you'll give me chance to do the job you need me to do."

"Have you ever done this before?" Renny asked.

"Cindy has already arranged two jobs for us," Merlin answered quickly, in hopes they would not dig too far into her inexperience. "We'll be loading up the ship this evening with cargo bound for Rrownon on Fyn," he explained, "and from there we'll be making a delivery to Joplin. As soon as we get underway, she'll be working on contacts beyond the SPF headquarters."

"Good show!" Tanis said with a smile. "I'm impressed already."

Pockets stood up and then slapped the table with the palm of his hand. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said, mimicking the loud voice of an event announcer, "with the quick work of our newest crew mate, the *Blue Horizon* is officially back in business!" The small group clapped and Cindy blushed at all the attention.

"Welcome aboard," Renny said to her.

Merlin put a hand on the cheetah's shoulder and said. "I'll go over ship's operations with her before we actually take off." He looked at Samantha and added, "Arrange a launch window with the Port Authority for this evening. We'll head across town to the Zeyhr Warehouse at seventeen hundred to load up the cargo and then we'll be ready to launch toward Fyn at nineteen thirty."

"Do we have time to make a last-minute run into town?" Renny asked.

"The ship is ready to leave at any time," the captain replied. "It's now oh-nine-twenty. Everyone should be on board in time for preflight checks *no later than* sixteen hundred hours, so that gives you just under seven hours to do whatever you want. If you are not back by then, you're going to be stuck on Pomen for quite a while longer."

"Ugh," Pockets said. "Pomen's a nice world, but I'm sick and tired of this city. You're not leaving *me* behind! I'll be here hours before launch."

"Okay," Merlin said at last. "You can go now. Meeting is adjourned."

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*SS Blue Horizon PA1138*  
*Captain's Journal*

*The Blue Horizon is now on its way toward Fyn, following a stay of almost fifteen weeks on Pomen. We left Adasa four hours ago, and although this new vessel is larger and heavier, we had one of the smoothest launches I've ever experienced. My crew seems happy with the ship and it's more than we could have ever hoped for; everything seems to have worked out well.*

*Although Lori and Cindy are new to this crew, they seem to have come in at a good time when everyone's in lighthearted spirits. Cindy is inexperienced, I know, but I have a feeling she will learn quickly. She's already had a good start. Time will tell how she will fit in with the others, but then again everyone goes through a transition time when they first come on board. Lori promises a big introductory meal for everyone later this evening and I'm sure that will do wonders to endear herself to the crew.*

*Samantha tried yet again to reach Captain Natasha to see if we could get word – any word – on the status of Taro Nichols, but as before, we've had no reply. Despite all the good that seems to have come out of this situation, not knowing our friend's whereabouts or condition is the one raw nerve at the back of everyone's mind. Even if she were in a coma and in poor shape, at least she'd be alive. We don't even know if that's the case.*

*I was sorry to lose Patch, but due to my own fault with timing he's no longer a member of my crew. I wish him well and hope he can find pleasure in the work he has on the Argonautia.*

*As for myself, I'm doing okay. I still have dreams and nightmares about the crash, most of which include the fight with Sagan. I don't know what happened that caused his sudden insanity and pure hatred of me and my vessel, but the look in his eyes during our close combat still makes me shudder. When I think of this, I cannot help but wonder who left that letter on my door at the embassy last week. Was it from the Basilisk crew, an ally that Sagan had out there somewhere, or someone else as yet unknown to us?*

*Anyway, I'm glad this is all over. I have a new ship, a financial margin in the business accounts and a good crew. The Blue Horizon might have been knocked down, but through it all, we have finally risen from the ashes.*

*Merlin Sinclair, Captain*

**ALL THE LUCK**  
By Ted R. Blasingame

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*SS Blue Horizon PA1138*  
*Captain's Journal*

*The Blue Horizon is currently resting in the metropolitan city of Rrownon on Fyn, having delivered a shipment of electronic and technical parts for a new communications center that will help bring Fyn further into the net of the Planetary Alignment. Fyn is not primitive, but they are possibly the least technologically developed world of the PA, as well as the youngest member of the Alignment, having only joined up at Earth's behest a mere twenty-five years ago.*

*Our flight from Pomen went smoothly, though I had Renny plot us a course outside of the normal trade routes due to rumors of a new series of pirate attacks in the area. I've had my fill of pirates and although my new ship is armed to the teeth, I have no desire to put it to the test.*

*Despite the newness of the vessel, my crew was rather quiet on this voyage. The absence of both Taro and Patch was strongly felt and everyone tends to avoid talking about either of them. I'm sure Cindy has felt the strain in taking over the position of a well-loved crew member, but she hasn't complained – not to me, anyway. Possibly the one person on board who might identify with exactly what she's going through might be Renny, as he joined our crew right after Jiro died – at the hand of the same pirate which nearly destroyed us this time, I should add. However, despite having an eye for the ladies, I've seen no indication that he's made any advances toward our new crew members. Lori and Cindy are both quite sensual and openly flirt with the males on board, but Renny and Taro were lovers. I don't think the cheetah will give in to their charms until he's at least heard something on her fate.*

*Tanis, on the other hand, seems to be interested in both of our new gals, as does Pockets. Tanis and Taro used to be a casual item in times past, but in the months prior to Sagan's final attack, I noticed a marked change in my medic. He seemed to have distanced himself from Taro in a romantic sense to allow Renny to charm her unchallenged. I don't know if that was the result of Taro's feelings, Renny's or Tanis. It could be any number of reasons. While I have no proof, I strongly suspect both of our new crew members have had private liaisons each with Tanis and Pockets. I have no problems with this, so long as it doesn't affect their duties to the ship.*

*Max has made great progress in the engine room. I don't think I've seen anyone so young enjoy his own duties quite as much as he does. He loves learning new things and it gives him a sense of purpose he didn't seem to have in the galley. He still doesn't have the expertise that Pockets does, but with his memory for procedure, I suspect Maximillian is going to be a great mechanic in time.*

*Durant has been quiet lately. He's taken his role as first officer well enough, but he tends to spend most of his time alone down in his office on the cargo deck, even to the point of fixing his own meals in the kitchenette there. I worry about him. He's been a good friend for a number of years and he and I used to visit often during off-duty hours before we lost the other ship. No doubt he's still a little traumatized from the whole experience. Cindy has a degree in psychology, so I may have her visit with him about it later.*

*Perhaps the one individual on board who seems the least affected by everything is Samantha. She's kept a cool head on her shoulders and has been openly friendly to everyone, but I think I sense a*

little animosity between her and Lorelei. It's nothing I can put my finger on, as I've not heard them get into any arguments, but just a gut feeling. If there's anything I've noticed about Sam since the crash, she's spent more time with me during off-duty hours. It could be concern about my well-being, but it's not anything she's talked about.

I've known her far longer than anyone else on my crew, and we've been occasional playmates, but she's been more my best friend than a lover. There have been many times that I've thought about our relationship; I do love her, but I've not quite decided if I'm in love with her or just comfortable with her. However nebulous my feelings may be, I'm glad she's here. She's been my confidant on more than one occasion and while she doesn't always have a solution to my troubling thoughts, it's nice just to have someone to listen.

Renny is still limping on his injured foot, despite his ongoing physical therapy. He's always been the athletic type and I've seen him spend a lot of time on the onboard exercise equipment. Sometimes I hear the thump, thump, thump of his feet as he uses the oval corridor of the crew deck to jog around. He doesn't have the swiftness he had before and I know this really bothers him, but if he continues this, he'll be back up to speed before too long.

Cindy has already been in contact with the SPF headquarters on Joplin, where we are scheduled to deliver a load of nothing more exciting than linens, clothing and recreational materials. Joplin is a tiny planet in the geometrical center of the combined worlds of the Planetary Alignment. Its sun is dim and dying and its sole planet is an airless rock of common and undesirable minerals. It's considered neutral territory by the Alignment, which made it the perfect place for the Spatial Police Force headquarters.

Unfortunately for those who work in the pressurized domes of the SPF HQ, there's not much to see and do there other than daily duties, so leave-time is frequently granted to the cops who have been there for months at a time. There are no actual exports from Joplin for us to make a delivery elsewhere, so we'll be flying empty to Kantus, but Cindy has already lined up a job for us from there hauling miscellaneous starship parts to the Mars colony in the Sol system.

She had originally had us down to deliver a variety of export goods to Nalirra from Kantus, but I don't particularly like going to Nalirra and the cargo would have been too small, so I stepped in and nixed that particular delivery. It's probably the most touchy and paranoid of all the PA worlds besides mother Earth. They always seem to be feuding with other planets, though they haven't started any actual wars in a long time. Although they are a part of the Planetary Alignment, including them wasn't easy since they harbored a great amount of resentment toward Earth for the Great Abandonment. Prejudice against pure humans is still strong there.

It's been several years since we've been to Nalirra, and Tanis wasn't thrilled to be going back there either. It's his homeworld and he says he lives in fear of being drafted back into their military yet again if he's even in the vicinity of the place. Nalirra is not a low-class, sleazy place like Brandt or Quet, but distrust of other worlds is high there. People seem to be tightly wound and minor things tend to set them off. Visitors always have to be careful how they phrase their conversations while there. There are nice areas to visit across the world of Nalirra, but the general attitude of the natives makes it hard to enjoy them. One sometimes wonders if the planet was an original dumping ground for Earth's more violent colony volunteers, but I've never been able to find anything like that in the history texts.

We've stocked up with our standard food supplies while here on Fyn to cover our needs to and from Joplin since we won't be able to restock while there, and we are now only a few hours away from take-off. One member of my crew still hasn't come back from his shore leave, and I'm hoping Tanis makes it in time. The Blue Horizon is back in business, but since we were out of the game for three months, I don't want to have any more delays than necessary in our schedule.

The last I heard, Tanis was visiting with an old buddy of his who lives up in the mountains out away from the metropolitan areas of Fyn. Maybe the fresh air will do him good, but I find I'm constantly

*watching the clock for his return. I've never had to leave anyone behind due to someone not getting back before launch, but there's always a first time.*

*Merlin Sinclair, Captain*

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Twenty miles to the southwest of the Rowrnnon metropolis, Arktanis TeVann and Clarence Duffy were steadily walking through the dense foliage of an undeveloped forest. The desert fox's loose-fitting dark green shirt was torn and smudged in places, as were his tan shorts. There were shallow cuts on his arms and legs and a nasty bruise was swelling on the left side of his forehead. His companion, a male husky with dark fur and dusty gray arms, legs and tail, was in similar shape. His bright red, flowered shirt was like a beacon in the dark green leaves and gray shadows of the forest. The overhead tree branches blocking a good portion of the afternoon sun were high enough off the ground that the underbrush of the forest floor was thick and difficult to travel through. The smell of rotting leaves, the aroma of a myriad flowers and the moist tang of humidity permeated the olfactory senses of the tired and weary pair.

"Ya drove that floating rustbucket ya call an aircar into a tree... in the middle of nowhere... as we cut across country... and my ship will be taking off soon, with or without me," Tanis grumbled to himself. "We've been walking for over an hour and have barely made any headway through this mess. What lousy luck."

He stumbled over a tree root but caught himself before he fell onto his face into a thorny briar and filled the air with expletives. As he got back to his feet, his sleeve caught one of the tiny spikes and the material ripped as he pulled it away.

Duffy shook his head as his friend made his way around the prickly brush. "Despite your efforts to get us lost in all this," he said in a deep voice, "I think there's a main road not far from here."

Tanis sighed in relief as they shuffled into a clearing of dry leaves and knee-high grasses. A spot of vibrant sunlight pierced the tiny field, which made them both squint in the sudden brightness.

"If we're lucky," Duffy continued, scanning the area with pale blue eyes, "another car will pass and give us a lift." He smiled as a thought crossed his mind. "I know a place on the way where you might want to -"

*Thunk! Splash!*

Duffy's head turned toward the sound, but he saw nothing - not even his friend. "Tanis?" he asked tentatively. "Where'd you go?"

"Down here, Duff..." The fennec's words sounded far away.

The husky looked down toward the voice into the tall grass and then saw a dark hole in the ground he had missed seeing when the sunlight had momentarily blinded him. He crept closer and gazed down into the pit. It looked as if it was lined with bricks of clay and about ten feet across. He couldn't see anything of Tanis in the shadows below but his large ears.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

Tanis squinted up at the silhouette at the top of the well and said in a strained voice, "Give me a moment to find out."

His sight adjusted quickly to the darkness of the hole. He was sprawled ungracefully on the ground at the bottom of what might have been a water well at one time, but there was no structure above ground. He was about twenty feet from where Duffy knelt beside the opening.

The walls were old and crumbly, and pieces of brick littered the bottom. Weeds and roots sprouted from the moss-covered walls here and there and he could see a few coins scattered about in the four inches of water he sat in. His pants were soaked and damp leaves clung to what was left of his shirt.

Tanis tried to stand up, but a sharp twang shot through his ankle. He inhaled sharply as he stumbled into a curved wall and took his weight off the foot.

"Can you climb out?" Duffy called down to him.

"No, I don't think so," the fox answered, "Nothing's broken, but I've twisted my ankle and the walls don't look like they could hold my weight anyhow."

Duffy stood up and looked around the small clearing into the trees. "I'm going to look for a vine or something to pull you out."

"Go ahead," Tanis muttered. "I'm not going anywhere." He squatted as best as he could on his good foot and arranged some of the broken bricks into a pile that was large enough to sit on so he wouldn't have to rest in the water. He flipped his tail to the side as he sat down and then leaned back against the slimy wall.

As he waited for Duffy to return, Tanis swished his right hand idly in the water. He thought about picking up some of coins, but decided he wasn't going to be on Fyn long enough to spend them on anything – providing he got out of the hole and back to Rrownon in time to catch the *Horizon* before they left without him. He stirred up some of the sediments from the bottom and a gold gleam caught his eye. He reached into the water and then pulled out a fat golden disc a couple inches in diameter, attached to a thin silver chain.

He turned it over in his hand and looked at the raised symbols and designs adorning both sides. He couldn't read the local language inscribed into its sides, so he decided it must be something someone lost while out roaming these woods. It looked like it might be a pocket watch, but he could find no cover to open on either face, so he surmised it was probably a pendant. He pulled up the edge of his tattered shirt and began to polish it with a smile. Whatever it was, he thought it might make a decent souvenir of his excursions on Fyn to take back with him.

Tanis raised the chain over his large ears and then pulled it down around his neck. The pendant rested against his chest and he fingered it absently as his mind moved onto other things. It took him a moment before he started to realize that the cool metal of the disc had grown warm and began to vibrate.

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Duffy snorted to himself as he maneuvered an old wooden ladder through the underbrush. He had found a rotting, abandoned cabin not far in the direction they had originally been walking and discovered the long ladder leaning up against the structure. Although the condition of the treated wood was questionable, he thought it might be several feet too short to let Tanis climb all the way out of the pit, but figured if he could get the fox close enough to the top, he could lift him the rest of the way out.

He finally made it back to the clearing and as he neared the hole, he called down, "You'll never guess what I just found!"

"Duffy!" shouted the voice of Tanis from the pit. The husky dropped the ladder expecting the worst, and fell to his knees. He peered over the lip of the well... and looked directly into the surprised eyes of his companion. With quiet astonishment, Duffy could feel his hackles rising as

he witnessed the tan fox float magically out of the well. When Tanis was perhaps a foot above grass level, Duffy reached out, grabbed his friend and then pulled him to solid ground.

Tanis' eyes were wide with fright and he scrambled to pull the chain of the pendant over his head and off his still-buoyant body. He started to toss the golden object back into the well, but Duffy snatched it out of his hand by the chain before he had the chance.

"What happened?" the husky wanted to know as the pendant started to sink to the end of its chain. He looked at it and then back to his friend who had settled to the ground.

Tanis cleared his throat and began smoothing down his fur. "I found this thing in the water down there," he said shakily. "I thought I might keep it as a souvenir, but after I put it around my neck, I began to float up off the ground!"

Duffy held it up by the chain and inspected the inscriptions. "Is it magic?" Tanis asked him.

The husky looked at him, his pale blue eyes crinkled in amusement. "Magic?" he repeated. "No, it's not magic, though it might have seemed so to some of the locals around here."

"Then... what is it?"

"The inscription is written in *Svelloc*, a local language," Duffy explained. "It says this is a *levitation pendant*, given by the gods in ages past." As he spoke, he poked a claw into a seam into the mysterious design and gently pried the object apart into halves. Tanis looked close and suddenly felt foolish at what he saw inside.

"It's a tiny anti-grav generator," the husky said, "commonly used in luggage transports at space ports."

"But... why put one inside a pendant and put that ridiculous inscription on it?"

Duffy shook his head. "I've heard stories that before Fyn became a part of the PA, a few scoundrels landed here and tried to pass themselves off as being magical to the low-tech locals. This was probably one of their little devices."

"Hmph..." Tanis snorted. "I examined it closely while I was down in the well and never saw an *on switch* anywhere. What did I do to turn activate it?"

The husky looked at his friend and smiled. "I tinker a lot with gadgets up in my cabin and messed around with technology long before I settled here on Fyn," he replied. "These generators are inert when kept cool, but are activated when a mild current is applied to warm it up. After lying in cool water for so long down in that well, your body heat probably activated it."

Tanis nodded and said, "That makes sense." He took the pendant from his friend and attached the chain to his belt loop so it would dangle at his side without coming in contact with his warm body. As he finished, he happened to glance at his watch. "If we don't get on our way," he said as he started moving away from the pit, "I'm never going to make it back to the *Horizon* in time - not that I really have a chance getting there on *foo - oof!*" Tanis stumbled over something in the grass and fell face first once again. He grumbled a list of obscenities in several languages as he slowly pulled himself back up to his hands and knees. "What did I trip over *this time?*"

Duffy chuckled and pointed to a small sign at the fox's feet that had been long covered over by weeds. "That was the *Well of Luck* you fell into, Tanis," he told him. "A local wishing well."

The tan fox stared wearily at the sign for a moment and then slowly stood up. He wasn't usually so clumsy, but after the car wreck and the dense foliage they'd had to hike through, he

was fairly exhausted. He turned without a word and limped out of the clearing in the direction they had originally been traveling.

Duffy started out after him and kept quiet until they passed the old cabin where he had found the ladder. The shadows didn't seem as dark up ahead, but that didn't seem to matter to the pair. The husky knew his friend was in a bad mood from all of this, so he smiled and tried to cheer him up.

"Falling into the *Well of Luck* should make you lucky," he said, "or so the local legends say."

Tanis turned and gifted him with a cold stare as they pressed on through the dense brush. "Yer car broke down and we've had to walk miles to get this far," he said in a hoarse voice. "I've fallen twenty feet into a dank, damp well and I'm now limping on a sore ankle, lost in a forest without the benefit of a crutch. I'm wet, bruised, tired and very unhappy at the moment – and I'm probably not going to make it back to my ship in time to leave this wretched place." He heaved an audible sigh and added, "I *don't* feel very lucky!"

Duffy was about to say something else when the tan fox broke through the edge of the forest brush and tumbled down a small embankment. There was the sound of screeching tires and then startled voices. The husky's face lit up in surprise to see that Tanis had fallen down an embankment onto a small paved road. From the scene before him, a convertible ground car full of females in summer outfits had stopped scant inches from running over his poor friend.

The women of varying species gathered around the dazed tan fox, helping him to his feet. They brushed the dirt and leaves from his tattered clothing, chattering excitedly to him and to each other. Several ran up to Duffy as he made his way down the embankment.

Duffy introduced him and his friend, and after he explained what had happened to them, the women were sympathetic. A rather chesty squirrel who had been driving the large car smiled at the males and said, "I'm Tammy, and my friends and I are on our way to a glamour competition in Rrownon. You're welcome to ride with us."

Duffy gave her his best smile and nodded. "Thank you, Tammy. My rather beat-up companion is late getting back to his ship at the spaceport. Do you think you could take us there?"

"That's down the street from where the competition is being held," a nicely shaped collie told him. "We can take him right to the terminal."

"That's wonderful..." Tanis gasped as two of the ladies lifted his arms over their shoulders and helped him to the car. Everyone piled into the vehicle, putting Tanis in the front seat and Duffy in the back, each accompanied by lovely ladies. Tammy put the car into motion and accelerated to a fast rate. It didn't take long before they passed over the top of the hill and saw a large city in the distance.

An Irish setter leaned up close to Duffy and gazed into his pale blue eyes. "What about you, handsome?" she asked in a sultry voice. "Where can we take you after we drop off your friend?"

Duffy felt someone behind him pick twigs from his fur and then start to groom his tail with a soft bristled brush. He smiled and replied, "I just need to find a place for the night before I try to make my way back home. I'm a local."

"You're in luck," a small red fox told him with a flutter of long eyelashes. "We're all staying in a suite of rooms at the Harvee Hotel. You can stay with us!"

He swallowed and gave her a big grin. "That's lucky, all right," he said. He leaned forward so that he could whisper quietly to his friend. Tanis smiled contentedly as the collie

beside him slowly stroked his large ears when he heard his friend ask, "What was that you said back there about *luck*?"

**HIDALGO SUN**  
By Ted R. Blasingame

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*Captain's Journal*

*We've been adrift in space for over a week, unable to propel ourselves by any means we've tried. We have plenty of power for all life support functions and there are no real dangers facing us, but we are stuck light-years between systems... too far from any stars for solar sails to be of any use. We are moving toward our destination, though merely on the inertia left after our engines broke down.*

*My engineer has exhausted all alternatives for creating a power source to get our Liquid Crystal engines functional enough to get us to the nearest star system. The closest inhabited world is Mars, and while it is nothing more than an outpost for Earth, it is equipped with a repair depot that frequently works on Okami-class freighters. Although it's the "closest" world, we aren't even near the Oort Cloud surrounding that particular solar system, so without a source of propulsion, it would take decades to drift into the gravitational influence of Sol on our current inertia.*

*While I admit that I sometimes turn a deaf ear to my engineer on the problems of this old ship, I have to readily concede that I should have listened to experience this time. I was warned months ago about the condition of the Liquid Crystal power transfer unit, but our recent turn of bad luck with finances kept me from buying the parts to keep it running correctly. Because of this bad judgment, my ship is crippled and we have no way to repair the damage with anything we have on board.*

*I wouldn't think that things could get much worse until my communications officer informed me that our attempt to boost the signal last month by channeling the Com lines through the LC engines has resulted in burned-out helix circuitry in the system. Nerves are on edge and tempers have flared, including my own. This is no way to run a business, but I freely admit that the ship's captain is fully to blame this time.*

*We have rigged a low-level distress signal to repeat once every quarter hour, but only a passing vessel near this shipping lane would be able to pick it up. We have to hope that someone comes our way soon.*

*Rezo Kegawa, Captain  
SS Hidalgo Sun, PA3347*

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Mark Littlefeather looked at his reflection in the mirror of his tiny cabin and frowned at his scruffy appearance. He had neglected himself over the past few days, as had most of the crew since they had become stranded between systems. He ran a hand through his short black hair; it felt oily and he was suddenly aware of his body odor. The permanently-tanned human sighed and realized he didn't want to exist that way, even if they might never make it to another civilized world.

The ship's load master leaned forward to get a closer look at his reflected brown eyes. They were bloodshot and bags were starting to form beneath them. He set his angular jaw and

nodded to his unshaven reflection. He pulled off his dirty tee shirt and denim jeans and then stepped into the shower. Perhaps after he had cleaned up, he would find Toni to see if she would have dinner with him. Antoinette was the only other human on board, and while she had never shown a romantic interest in him during the three months since she had joined the crew, she did appear to enjoy his presence whenever they talked.

She had dark skin and black hair like himself, but didn't share his Amerindian heritage, though she seemed fascinated with his family traditions. Her large green eyes always seemed to sparkle behind the large lenses of her glasses whenever he spoke of his spiritual guide, or when she asked about the various items on display in his cabin. Those glasses were a source of curiosity to many, as modern medicines or outpatient procedures could cure most optometric issues. She'd never explained why she wore the things, but she really did seem to need them to see clearly.

As Littlefeather showered, he wondered why someone with such an aptitude for numbers and information like Toni would want to sign up on an old D-model *Okami* freighter. He doubted it would have been anyone's first choice for a job in accounting. It had been harder to find replacement parts for defective shipboard systems and business had not been that good lately. The chief engineer was good at her job, but there was just so much that Alice could do with what they had. This time the snow leopard had not been able to keep the power transfer unit running long enough to get them to Earth. Inertia would continue to move the ship in that general direction at near-light speed velocity, but the time involved would be prohibitive to their survival.

He only hoped that someone would fly close enough to pick up their weak distress signal or all their careers would soon come to a close. They had supplies on board to last them another month... two, if they rationed well.

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Captain Rezo Kegawa ambled around the curved corridor of his small freighter, his hands behind his back and his eyes downcast toward the metal deck plates that were partially covered with a few mismatched throw rugs his crew had acquired over the years. The end of one was floating off the floor a couple inches over a gravity deck plate that need replacing, but instead of fixing it, everyone just walked around it, including the captain.

The short red panda was agitated and pacing had always been his way of dealing with concern. He wore a loose set of black exercise shorts under an oversized beige robe that trailed behind him in the hallway, but his feet were bare on the cold flooring.

He was already late getting his cargo of Kantan lingerie to the distribution center of *Misty's Toybox* on Earth and he would likely lose a good deal of the revenue on this trip due to their mechanical failures. Alice Forrestal could be miracle worker at times when it came to ship maintenance, but there were no miracles to be had this time around. The ship was old and dilapidated, and on a normal voyage Rezo usually made just enough on his business to pay his crew, with only a tiny profit going to himself. He had often considered finding another line of work, but he was addicted to space travel, even if it had to be done inside a rustbucket like the *Hidalgo Sun*.

The door up the corridor opened and a small, wiry lemur stepped out of the bridge. Her red sleeveless shirt that matched her eyes and her legs swished with bell-bottom black trousers. She peered at the electronic slateboard in her hands and she scowled at the device, her thin

monochrome tail swishing in agitation. She hit the side of it twice before she sighed and looked up at her captain.

"Anything?" Rezo asked her.

"No, sir," the communications officer answered with a frown. "We're still broadcasting the distress signal, but with Com out of commission with the engines, we'll have no indication if anyone has heard it and may be trying to contact us." The lemur sniffled from a sinus infection and shook her head. "Alice and Pax are trying to route a bypass on the system back to its original configuration, but they haven't had any luck so far. Some of the original parts have been modified and are already in use elsewhere."

"Where were they used?"

"In the Life Support system."

"I see," the captain replied. "Who's on the bridge?"

"Jonesy."

The red panda nodded and resumed his amble down the corridor. "Thank you, Riki," he said. "Keep your digits crossed someone will hear the signal."

"All the time, sir."

\*\*\*

Leo Durant sat in his office as he quietly peered over the cargo manifest. The computer file matched what he accounted for in the hold, but it didn't match his memory for data. The grizzly had read through the manifest before the ship launched from Kantus and he was sure there were now items that were missing, even if the electronic files didn't reflect it. He growled lowly to himself and rested his chin in his left hand on the desk as he scrolled through the information. The *Blue Horizon* carried a load of starship parts bound for the Mars colony, and while their new vessel was in first-class condition, the load master wouldn't put it past Pockets to filch a few items from their cargo for spares and then have Samantha fix the books behind his back.

Durant would find the discrepancy, he was sure. He would have to itemize everything of the original manifest from memory and then compare it with what was currently on board to find the problem. This was nothing new, as both the Border collie and raccoon had gotten into his cargo before, and he knew many of their tricks.

Staring at the computer screen made the bear's eyes ache and he sat back in his chair to rub them with the back of his hands. He yawned widely and then moved his neck back and forth with a *crack*. Durant was tired and he knew that he would never remember the original manifest with a foggy brain, so he resolved to take a break and go up to his quarters to take a short nap.

He stood up and moved away from the desk toward the door, but when he opened the panel, he heard a sound that filled him with sudden dread.

"Meow."

"No, no, no..." the bear muttered under his breath. A familiar shape hovered in the air a few feet in front of him, exactly at eye level. Two shimmering green lenses stared back at him, one positioned slightly above the other, and the metal whisker antennae below them twitched and repositioned themselves slightly as the small, metallic blue flying saucer scanned the accountant.

The bane of Durant's existence was back, but the silent whirring of its internal mechanisms was quieter than the sounds of its predecessor. The bear groaned and fervently

hoped that Pockets had programmed *this* version of the mobile sentry system to be less troublesome than the original. If not, he would jettison it personally, without preamble or confession to the deed. Durant moved out into the darkened cargo bay past the new unit and headed for the lift. He was in no mood to deal with Moss, especially in his present state of mind.

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On the recreation deck, several members of the *Blue Horizon* crew watched a movie on the large vidscreen. Pockets sat on one end of a couch and Cindy stretched out along the rest with her head in his lap. On the other couch was Tanis and Lorelei, huddled together over a huge bowl of popcorn. Maximillian was stretched out on the carpet at their feet, and Samantha was draped over a recliner off to the side. Merlin stood at the coffee maker in the kitchen at the back of the room to refill his cup as the movie progressed behind him.

The intercom beeped on a console near the galley and Merlin moved to thumb the control. "This is the captain," he said, leaning close to the condenser microphone. The action from the film rose in volume, so he had to strain to hear the voice from the tiny speaker.

*"Merlin, this is Renny."*

*"Yes?"*

*"Did you know there are one thousand, one hundred, thirty-eight spots on the ceiling in here?"*

Merlin smiled and picked up the coffee pot. "Sorry, ol' boy. You're on bridge watch and can't leave for another two hours."

*"I know, but I'm bored,"* the cheetah groaned. *"One of these days you need to have to have Pockets install a video feed up here so I can watch a movie or INN while I'm up here."*

"Maybe," the wolf replied, "but on watch, you're supposed to be monitoring the controls and readouts, not watching a movie."

*"What's the difference between watching a movie and reading a book like you do?"*

"The difference is your focus, Renny. I've seen you watching a show and I know how absorbed you get when you're trying to take it all in, to the exclusion of all else."

*"I just don't want to miss any details,"* complained the navigator.

*"Sorry, but no video feeds other than Com on the bridge."*

*"You're no fun. Everything's automated on the bridge and the VIS computer will alert us to any noticeable changes in readings; Sam explained the Geo-25 system in detail to me, Captain."* Renny tried to sound really convincing, *"There's no real need to have the bridge manned around the clock anymore."*

Merlin shook his head with a smile at the navigator's efforts and replied, "Automation is a good thing, but I still want a physical body on the bridge at all times. I know you wanted to see this movie, Renny, but it was your turn for bridge duty. You can watch it later."

*"Gee, thanks, boss,"* the cheetah said dryly. *"I knew I could depend on your compassion."*

"You should know by now to take something with you to do while on bridge duty. It's your own fault for going in there empty-handed, as you tend to do half the time you have the watch."

*"Great... if I don't fall asleep before my watch ends, I'll get to see the movie after everyone else knows the ending. It would be just like Lori to be a blabbermouth and tell me what happened before I get to see it."*

"True," the captain admitted. "She does seem to be enjoying it, too. I don't want to miss it either, so I'm going back to my chair now."

"Oh, all right," the cheetah replied in a dejected tone. "I'll be sure to call you if anything ever livens up in here."

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Tanis picked up his empty soda cup in one hand and retrieved the popcorn bowl in the other. He followed Lorelei across the Rec Room to the galley and admired the sight of her little puffy cottontail protruding through the rear flap of her lounge pants. Everyone else had already left to do other things and Renny had arrived with full intent to watch the movie they had just finished.

The navigator had his arms loaded down with snacks of his own and smiled at them as he headed toward a recliner. Lorelei put her glass on the counter and took the bowl from Tanis. She looked at the orphan kernels left behind and wrinkled her nose.

"I wish all the kernels would pop," she said with a frown.

Tanis chuckled. "Ya would think the evolution of popcorn would have advanced enough over the centuries that someone would have come up with a way to make *all* the kernels pop."

"Yeah!" the white rabbit agreed.

"Nalirran scientists came close a few years back, but it had an unpleasant side effect and didn't sell well."

Lori emptied the remnants of the popcorn into a small container and then set the bowl in the galley sink. She wiped her hands on a towel and then set it aside.

She looked up at Tanis and smiled at him with large blue eyes. "Can you tell me about your homeworld?" she asked him in a lilting voice. "My family traveled a lot while my Papa was in the military, but we never made it to Nalirra. I always heard it really wasn't a friendly place to visit."

The desert fox shrugged his shoulders. "It still isn't," he admitted. "I grew up in probably the only stranger-friendly country on the planet, but even then I have no desire to ever go back there."

"Tell me about your hometown, please?" Lori asked.

"Sure."

"How about telling her about it elsewhere?" Renny called from across the room. "I want to watch the movie, *not* listen to your hometown stories!"

The medic snorted, but smiled at Lorelei. "Yer cabin or mine?" he asked her with narrowed eyes.

The rabbit laughed and took him by the arm. "Yours," she said. "I know you don't care for all my crystals and incense. Besides, your mattress is more comfortable than mine."

"All the cabins have the same beds, Lori."

"Not true. Yours is more comfortable."

Renny turned the volume of the movie's opening fanfare up so high that they couldn't talk further, so they took the hint and headed for the lift. Only when the doors closed behind them did Renny lower it back down to an acceptable level.

Tanis and Lorelei stepped out of the lift onto the crew deck and headed for the medic's quarters. They went inside and Lori went straight through the front room to the bedroom. She climbed up on the headboard end, pulled his pillow up into her lap, and then wrapped her arms around it. She smiled at him over the top of it and waited for him to get situated.

Tanis realized they weren't going to play so he settled into his desk chair and propped his feet up on the bed after kicking off his soft-sided boots. "So, what would ya like to know about the trouble-makers of the Planetary Alignment?" he asked.

"I dunno," Lorelei replied. "Just tell me anything about Nalirra. What's the planet like?"

The desert fox scratched the bottom of his chin and looked upward in thought. "Hmmm, okay. Nalirra is divided up into four continents, with a separate country dominating each one. About forty years ago, a young hyena named Sed Amittias initiated the conquest of the other countries. He was the ruler of the southern country Braf, and after the end of a three-year war, Amittias took over the planet as its sole dictator. There have been periodic attempts by others to oust him, but he's been quite safe in his citadel at Sardis."

"Which country are you from?"

"Kardon," he answered. "It's the smallest of the four countries, but we've always had the best technologies - probably because we've had more freedom for research. The other three have tried to take them from us for ages, but we've also had a better military because of our science."

He smiled at her and added, "Nalirra was colonized nearly three centuries ago, but the technology for space flight was lost within a hundred years after Earth abandoned us. Kardon was the first country to go off-planet again a hundred and thirty years ago, but none of the other countries had a successful launch for another twenty years after that. By that time, we had already started to investigate the other planets in our system, but when Amittias took over, he shared our captured technology with the other countries."

Lorelei stretched out on the bed and propped her chin up with the pillow. "If you had the better military, how did he take over?"

Tanis crossed his arms and frowned. "He infiltrated the ruling bodies with his own people, or those he could sway to his side," he replied. "That's the simplest way to put it. During the battles that took place away from the country capitols, Amittias' operatives undermined the other rulers and eventually had them all assassinated in their sleep. Those who were left in charge were already on his payroll."

"He doesn't sound very nice."

"No," the medic agreed, "but that happened forty years ago. Despite his dictatorial rule he allowed that each country could retain their own customs and ways of doing things. The four areas may still bicker with one another, but there are actually some very nice areas on the planet like Alosia. That's on the edge of the Alos desert, but it's my hometown and there's a lot to see and do around there. Not," he added, "that I intend to recommend a visit to outsiders."

"You don't think I'd like it?" Lori asked.

"I think ya would," Tanis answered, "but ya'd be harassed by the locals for no reason other than ya were not *from* there."

Lorelei's ears drooped a little. "If everyone there's so rude, how did *you* turn out nice?" she asked.

Arktanis smiled and sat up. He leaned closer to the bed with his elbows on his knees and replied, "I left Nalirra and spent a good deal of time in other places. I seriously doubt ya would have liked me when I first jumped off-world. I was a different person then."

"Well," the rabbit said with a smile, "I like you now, Tanis. You're nice and snuggly."

The desert fox grinned widely and moved onto the bed to sit beside her. "I like ya, too," he cooed into her ears.

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"Yes, sir," Cynthia Allport said into her headset microphone. "We should arrive at the Mars Colony in about eight days with an overnight layover, and then after a twenty-hour journey, we'll be on Earth for three days to load up cargo bound for Argeia." She paused to scribble some information on the screen of her slateboard with a claw tip and nodded to herself. "Uh huh. It will take us three weeks to reach Argeia, three days down and then three and half weeks of travel before we can get to you. That will be okay?" She smiled to herself. "Yes, sir. We're always glad to do business with you, too. Yes, sir, I now have you on our flight calendar. Yes, sir, that is still our standard delivery price. Okay, we will see you in a little over six weeks. Thank you... you, too." The mouse switched off the connection and then quickly transferred her notes into the ship's computer.

Cindy was three hours into her watch and had made good use of the time to further their business orders. She sat back in the Com station chair and stretched. She stared out the forward windows into space for a moment and let herself relax.

After a few heartbeats, she got up and moved around the small bridge, glancing at each station's readouts. She considered sitting down in the pilot seat, but changed her mind and slid back into the chair at the Com station. As she did, she noticed a small flashing light that alternated between red and amber. She frowned and unconsciously brushed her hair up over her right ear with a finger. The mouse thumbed the intercom switch and waited.

"This is Merlin," the wolf's voice said a moment later.

"Captain, it's Cindy. I have a red and orange flashing light on the Com panel, but it's not labeled. I don't know what it means."

"Uh oh – okay, I'll be right there."

"Uh oh? What do you mean by *uh oh*?" she asked, but Merlin had already dropped the connection. He had been in his den next door, so he arrived almost immediately. He wore a pair of blue trousers and a white tee shirt, in addition to his favorite captain's hat. He went straight to her side and looked down at the panel.

"What did you mean by *uh oh*?" she asked him.

"We're picking up a distress beacon."

"Distress?" Cindy repeated. She frowned and watched as the wolf tapped out a command on the terminal keyboard; the circuitry within the right-hand forward window brought up a star chart of their current sector of space. A small green dot blinked to indicate the location of the *Blue Horizon* on the chart. Scattered blue and red dots in Doppler shift represented other ships tracked in pre-scheduled flight plans. The *Blue Horizon* was on a seldom-used shipping lane, its heading intersected by a small red dot a short distance in front of them. A readout of scanned information scrolled across the bottom of the screen and Merlin read it silently.

"The distress signal is weak," he said at last. "It's not likely we would have picked it up had we been on the usual route to Earth. It appears to be traveling only on inertia."

"So what do we do?" Cindy asked. She had never taken part in a rescue operation before.

"Try to hail them," the captain replied. Cindy nodded, picked up the headset and placed it around her large ears with the boom microphone near her lips.

"This is the *SS Blue Horizon*," she transmitted on the same frequency as the beacon. "Your signal has been received. Please respond."

Cindy listened and fine-tuned the controls before her, but retained her frown. She repeated her message three times with a thirty second pause between each of them. "I'm not getting a response," she told her captain. "I think it's an automated signal."

Merlin moved to the navigational console and sat down. "Where's Renny?" he asked over his shoulder.

"I think he's still watching the movie on the rec deck," the mouse replied.

Merlin frowned and shook his head. "Okay, I'll take his place at navigation. Cindy, you take the pilot seat and adjust our course to the figures I give you when I get them calculated."

"Okay," she replied hesitantly. It had been a long time since she had actually piloted an *Okami* freighter manually, but the ability to fly one was a requirement for everyone on the crew - even the young Max had been required to learn to operate the ship's central seat; he wasn't proficient yet, but was still learning. Cindy took her place at the pilot station and took hold of the guidance shifts as she watched Merlin's fingers click across the navigational panel. He bit his lip in concentration and then thumbed a green button.

"The coordinates are on your screen now," he said. "Release the autopilot and alter course."

"Yes sir."

Merlin didn't think twice about her ability to pilot the ship and turned his attention to a navigational scanner. The course change was simple and it only took them off their scheduled flight on a small tangent, so the process turned out to be fairly easy for the mouse. She adjusted three settings and moved the guidance shifts accordingly.

"We're on the new heading, Captain," she reported.

"Good." The wolf keyed in a few more commands on the navigation console and then nodded silently to himself. "We're on a heading straight for the signal. At our present speed we should arrive in about fifty minutes." He stood up and walked back to the pilot seat to stand beside her. He pointed to a gauge on her panel and said, "When we're five minutes away from the target, decrease our speed to half sub-light, and then by another quarter two minutes past that. When we hit that five minute mark, call me on the intercom. I'm going to be down in the cargo bay with Durant to get the emergency hatch tunnel ready to extend."

"Okay, sir," she said in a nervous voice.

Merlin looked up into her eyes and asked in a soft voice, "Want me to get someone else up here to handle this with you?"

She shook her head. She didn't want him to think she could not do her job. "Uh, no. I can take care of it."

"Okay," he said with a smile. "Call me if anything changes, including your mind."

She chuckled and relaxed a little. "Aye, sir, I will."

Merlin turned and left the bridge without another word, leaving the mouse alone with her assignment.

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Antoinette Delondin poured hot tea from a thermal container into her cup and then set it aside. The human female took a tentative sip of the drink and then nodded to her companion in satisfaction. "Just the way I like it, Mark," she said with a smile. "Thank you."

"You're welcome, Toni," he replied. The other human crew member of the *Hidalgo Sun* took the thermal container and then poured a cup for himself. Toni had spent a lot of time on the bridge since the engines had gone offline. There were windows in all of the cabins, but they were tiny and the accountant loved the view of the stars from the large command center windows. Mark Littlefeather knew of her fondness for raspberry tea and hoped he could earn

some points with her by taking some to her. She smiled at him warmly and held the cup in her hands, but then her gaze drifted back toward the windows.

Mark took a drink of the hot liquid and studied the slender woman. She was in her late twenties, had darkly tanned skin like himself, and short black hair that hovered over her collar without touching it. He loved her large green eyes and knew he could get lost in them if she would ever give him the chance to get closer. Today she wore black slacks and a green, short-sleeved blouse made of silk that matched her eyes and shimmered in the bridge lights. He wore a pair of denim jeans and a simple white tee shirt that was a size too small.

Toni took off her large-rimmed glasses and set them on the console beside her. She took another sip of her tea and then set it on the counter beside her lenses so she could rub her eyes gently. When she looked back over at her quiet companion, she put her glasses back on and picked up her cup.

"Do you ever get lonely, Mark?" she asked in a quiet voice. The load master was caught off guard and opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out. He cleared his throat and she put a hand up to her lips. "Oh, sorry," she said quickly. "You've shown me your family pictures before and I wondered if you missed them."

"Ah," the large man replied with a nod. "Yes, I do miss them, but I try not to dwell on the memories too much. It's been ten years since the crash."

"Why did you never remarry?" she asked. Mark studied her expressions, but was unable to read her intentions.

"It's the same story you'll get from most people who've lost someone like that," he said after a moment. "I didn't want to get too attached to anyone else, only to lose them again; at least, that's what I keep telling myself."

"Is that why you're serving on a ship crewed by..." she chose her next word carefully, "...Furs?"

Mark sat back in his chair and took another sip of his drink. "Partly," he admitted. "I've been with the *Hidalgo Sun* long enough that I've grown really fond of some of them, but I won't sleep with any of them." He smiled a bit and added, "Well, a couple of them have curled up with me in the bed, but only in sleep. My people have always held animals in high regard, whether they were sentient or not, but... not that." Toni started to reply, but Mark added quickly, "What about you?"

"Do I sleep with any of them?" she asked. "No, I..."

"I meant, do you ever get lonely for your family?"

"Yeah," she admitted, "a lot. My dad still serves in the military on Earth and both of my brothers are away on other planets learning what they can learn. Mother is mother... ever the faithful housewife to dad, and she's still so much in love with him."

"Have you ever had a family of your own?" Mark asked tentatively.

Toni didn't hesitate, but she did shift her gaze back to the stars beyond the windows. "No," she answered. "I never had the time."

Mark pressed his luck a little further and asked, "Any potential prospects?"

"No," she said again. She didn't look at him, but continued. "I was always too skinny and I don't have much of a chest, so no one ever showed much of an interest in me." With her attention on the stars, she didn't see her companion's cheeks redden.

"What about now?" he asked as he tried to will his heart to slow down. "Do you ever get lonely for close, *human* company?"

"Mark! There's something out there!" She stood up and leaned closer to the windows, their conversation instantly forgotten.

The moment lost, load master sighed and stood up beside her. "What is it?"

"I think it's another ship," she said. "The color is dark, so it's hard to see. I think it's blue, but there are running lights." She tapped the communications controls, but got no response. "Com is still out," she moaned.

"I see it," Mark said. "It's another freighter and it's slowing down to match our inertia. It must be one of the new ones. It's larger than ours, nearly twice our size." He glanced over at her with a smile. "They might be trying to line up their hatch with ours!"

They looked at one another briefly and both grinned widely. *Rescued!* Toni hugged him suddenly and then kissed him full on the lips. She lingered for a moment before she drew back and then looked up into his astonished eyes with a shy smile.

She blushed and then headed for the corridor. "I'll go tell the captain," she said. "You'd better get down to the main hatch."

"Right!" he said. The human male licked his lips and then remembered to turn on the ship's own external running lights before he left the bridge.

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Mark Littlefeather bypassed the slow lift and opened the panel next to it for the emergency ladder. He grabbed the sides and descended two rungs at a time. He jumped out onto the floor from the last meter up and stumbled when he hit the ground. He almost fell into one of the octagonal plastic crates that held their cargo, but managed to right himself in time. He bounded around the outer aisle of the hold and approached the main airlock. He shielded his eyes from the cargo bay lights and peered out the small window of thick glass set into the hull beside the hatch.

The blue *Okami* freighter had matched his ship's inertial speed and the two vessels were now no more than a few meters apart. Mark couldn't see its registered name because of a flexible tunnel that extended from the stranger's main hatch. It was a standard ship-to-ship passageway that all starships were equipped with for just such situations. He could see a figure in a pressure suit just outside the appendage, guiding it along with maneuvering jets. He immediately noted the tail sleeve trailing the individual.

The human activated the controls to begin depressurization of the airlock and he looked over his shoulder in anticipation. He expected Captain Rezo to show up at any moment, but apparently no one else knew about the rescue ship since none of the others had yet appeared. It was a shame the malfunctioning Com system included the intercom. A sound at the hatch brought his face back to the glass. He couldn't see the suited figure anymore, but he could hear the seal couplings connecting the end of the tunnel to the hull. A long moment later, several distinct metal-on-metal knocks on the airlock outer hatch sounded. He glanced at a gauge near the glass and was satisfied with the readout. He thumbed a large red button beneath the gauge and the outer door locks released with a hard *clunk*.

He moved over to a small window in the inside door and watched the newcomer enter the small compartment and give him a thumbs-up sign. Mark knew what to do and began the airlock pressurization. The process would take longer this time, since he would have to pressurize the flexible passageway between the two ships in addition to the airlock. He heard footsteps behind him and looked back to see Alice approach him with a yawn.

"What's up, Littlefeather?" she asked him. "I heard banging."

Mark grinned at the snow leopard and gestured toward the hatch. "We've got visitors!" he said.

The older female twitched her tail and whiskers and stuck her face up to the airlock window, fogging up the glass with her breath. "Who is it?" she asked.

"Not sure," Mark replied as he checked the pressure gauge, "but it's another freighter. Her registry number is PA1138, but I couldn't see the ship's name."

"The Com system is still down," Alice commented as she brushed food crumbs from her lavender nightshirt. "How did you know they were coming?"

The human laughed and replied, "Toni looked out the window and just saw it. She's gone to get the captain." A small beep from the panel indicated full pressure in the airlock. Alice glanced out the side window and saw that the flexible tunnel sides were taut and looked like a solid wall of silvery metal now. Mark toggled a switch and the inside hatch locks released with another *clunk*. He stepped back when the thick door pulled inward several inches before it slid to the right on tracks.

The person inside reached up to release the seal ring on the neck of the pressure suit. With a sharp *snick*, the helmet came loose. Mark had expected a Fur, but he swallowed hard when he saw the lupine head uncovered. *It was his spiritual guide!*

Mark grinned widely and extended a hand toward the visitor. "Welcome to the *Hidalgo Sun*, stranger!" he said excitedly. The wolf hesitated briefly but then shook his hand in greeting. "We're so very glad to see you! My name's Mark and this is Alice."

The individual inside the suit nodded quickly to each and then said in a low-throated voice, "I'm Merlin Sinclair, captain of the *Blue Horizon*. We picked up your distress signal."

Taking the initiative, Alice said, "Our LightDrive engine is out of commission, Captain, and..." Approaching footsteps interrupted the beginning of her explanation. A short, very thin lemur ran up to them and stopped beside her. The diminutive critter stared up at the wolf with a big grin, her red eyes unblinking.

"Boy, are *you* a welcome sight!" she said excitedly. She sniffled and then blew her nose on a handkerchief she produced from a pocket.

Merlin smiled down at her and then shifted his attention up to more arrivals. Before anyone could say more, he lowered his chin onto a tiny lever within his pressure suit and spoke into the condenser microphone near his lips. "Cindy, give the all clear. Have Tanis, Renny and Samantha join me over here. The tunnel is pressurized, so they won't need suits."

*"Aye, captain."*

Merlin looked over at an approaching group of individuals and noted how bedraggled most of them looked. He didn't know how long they had been without engine power, but he correctly assumed it had been more than just a few days from the expressions on their faces.

A female black jaguar moved in close to him and he resisted the sudden urge to flee. The memories of Sagan were still fresh in his mind. Before he could react, however, she slipped forward and gave him a fierce hug. The action surprised him, but he decided to let it go. Apparently they had given up hope of a rescue. The jaguar pulled back long enough to peer into his golden eyes and then gave his cheek an emotional lick. This elicited chuckles from the assembled group, but the shapely feline remained at his side with an arm threaded through one of his.

"Well, now," a short red panda said in a squeaky voice with a wide smile as he stepped forward, "I see Tsarina has given you her standard greeting!" There was more laughter from the group. "I am Captain Rezo Kegawa of the *Hidalgo Sun*."

Merlin managed to pull himself away from the jaguar and knelt down to face the panda eye to eye. Rezo was about the same height as Pockets, rather than his larger black and white cousins.

The wolf extended a hand in greeting. "I'm Captain Merlin Sinclair of the *Blue Horizon*," he replied.

Rezo shook his hand willingly. The dark stripes in the fur beneath his eyes made them look slightly slanted and small, but the gratitude in them was genuine and warm. "Thank you for stopping to investigate, Captain," he said. "We've been adrift for twelve days, our engines and communications inoperative."

"Anyone injured?" Merlin asked. "We have a medic on board."

A female polar bear moved forward one step and replied, "I'm Doctor Burgess, Captain," she said, "but everyone's in good health." She looked around at her crewmates and added with a smile, "Unless you want to count Riki's sinus infection and some mild cases of cabin fever from boredom." There were a few chuckles.

There was a *clunk* at the far end of the walkway. Merlin turned to glance behind him and saw three members of his crew floating toward him in casual clothing. He wanted to get out of the suit as soon as possible. With the helmet off and the extra pressure in the suit gone inside the artificial gravity of this ship, the joints were creased and causing him discomfort.

The jaguar whistled when she saw Renny step from the gravity deck plates of the airlock and float toward them across the space between ships in the pressurized tunnel. "This is getting better and better," she said with a grin.

Like his captain, Renny felt his heart skip a beat at the sight of the dark feline and he took a hesitant step backward after reaching gravity again. He bumped into the desert fox behind him. Tsarina noticed the expression on his face and was puzzled at his reaction. She left the wolf's side and rejoined her own crew.

Merlin looked at the cheetah with a frown. "Help me out of this suit, please," he said. Immediately, Renny and Tanis began to unbuckle the joint seals. As they worked, Merlin nodded toward the Border collie at his side. "This is Samantha, my computer tech," he said, and then with a wooden smile gestured toward the cheetah. "This is our navigator, Renny, and the other guy is Tanis, our medic."

"Hello," Renny and Tanis said in unison.

"What happened?" Samantha asked. Merlin quickly repeated what he had been told as the suit came apart around him. He finally stepped out of the leggings and turned his attention back to Rezo.

"If you'd like," he said, "you can join me in my den and we can discuss your situation in more detail. In the meantime, our two crews can mingle a bit."

"That would be good," the red panda replied, "but I'm afraid we don't have much room for a large gathering."

"That's okay," Samantha said. "Our ship has a spacious recreation deck perfect for mingling."

Merlin nodded his approval. "The tunnel is secure between our two ships, so everyone can come and go as needed while we're coupled together." Tsarina snickered at his choice of words and Rezo rolled his eyes.

"Let me introduce my crew to you, Captain," the red panda said. "You've already met my navigator, Tsarina Ahnya." He gestured toward the snow leopard at his side. "This is my chief engineer, Alice Forrestal. Doctor Carmen Burgess, you just met. Next to her is Sean Jones."

The orange tabby cat cleared his throat with a smile and said, "Everyone calls me Jonesy."

"Next to him is Keri Petrie, my supply officer and our cook." The small gray mouse smiled, though seemed lethargic. It had been a while since her last fix of caffeine.

"This big guy I think you've already met. Mark Littlefeather is our load master."

"Hello," the human said.

"Next to him is Roger Paxton," Rezo said, indicating a palomino horse. "He's our mechanic."

"Just call him *Roj*," the lemur said with a smirk.

"Don't start that again," the equine mechanic snorted with a shake of his head. Like the rest of his species, his kind had been gene-spliced from Terran horses three hundred years earlier, and although he stood upright on hooves and digitigrade legs like the Silloni, his arms ended in human-like hands. He placed one of those hands upon his chest and splayed out long fingers. "If you don't mind, just call me *Pax*."

Rezo chuckled. "Riki Nori, my communications officer," he said of the lemur. He turned and then gestured toward a human female in glasses who stood behind everyone else. "And this is Toni Delondin, my accountant."

Merlin twitched his right ear when he saw her. "*Antoinette Delondin*?" he asked.

Toni stepped forward and smiled. "Hello, Captain," she said. "Nice to see you again, especially now."

Riki looked back and forth between the wolf and human. "You two know one another?" she asked with a snuffle.

Merlin looked embarrassed, but nodded. "She put in an application with my ship a few months ago when I needed a temporary replacement for one of my crew."

"Was it on Pomen?" Jonesy asked.

"Aye, it was," Merlin replied. "How did you know?"

"Captain Kegawa hired me about a week later," Toni explained with a shrug.

Merlin stepped closer and held out a hand, palm upward. "Please forgive me for not selecting you," he said.

She smiled at him and took his hand. "Forgiven," she said. "My experience is more toward accounting, so my duties on the *Hidalgo Sun* are more appropriate than the position I applied for with your ship."

"Ah," the wolf said.

Tanis took the lull in the conversation as a sign and held up a hand for everyone to see. "The *Blue Horizon* is the latest model of *Okami* freighters," he said, "and there's plenty of room for everyone if ya want to come over and take a look around."

Merlin and Samantha looked at one another. It looked like Tanis was going to play tour guide. "Captain?" he said to the red panda.

"Please, lead the way," Rezo said.

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When Durant walked onto the rec deck, the place was noisy with the buzz of animated conversations. The crews of both freighters were visiting and the grizzly bear couldn't remember the last time the third deck had been so lively. Pockets and Maximillian were involved in a discussion with a snow leopard and a palomino horse close to the lift and he heard them all speak in the techno-babble language that engineers and mechanics were known for. He couldn't tell which ship's engines they discussed and he just nodded his head toward them with a smile as he walked past.

Cindy and another mouse relaxed on one of the couches laughing and talking in whispers together and a small lemur joined them with sodas. Durant looked around and saw

Lori at the galley counter with a female black jaguar who looked rather forlorn. He hesitated a moment when he saw her and had to force Sagan's face from his mind. Near the front video panel was Samantha. She had her arms crossed as she listened to an orange tabby's account of their current troubles. Two humans, a man and a woman, stood behind the feline to inject their own comments into his tale when needed. Tanis and Renny were across the room engaged in a conversation with someone, but Durant couldn't tell who it was from his vantage point.

He turned his attention back to Samantha and approached her small group.

"Whoa," the orange cat said as the grizzly bear stopped beside the Border collie. "You're a big 'un..."

The accountant looked down at him and gave him a smile. "Hello," he said. "I'm Durant. Pardon me for interrupting."

"Sure, jump on into the conversation," Jonesy said with a grin.

Durant hadn't met any of the crew of the *Hidalgo Sun* until now and almost felt like a stranger on his own ship within the crowd. He looked over at Samantha and gestured casually out over the room.

"Where's the boss?" he asked.

Samantha took a pull on her soda straw and shrugged her shoulders. "The captains have been in his den for over an hour," she replied. "What's up?"

The grizzly leaned close the collie to speak over the noise of the room, but when he did, he saw the person Tanis and Renny had been talking with. He immediately forgot what he was going to say and started to grin.

"Uh, never mind," he said absently. "It wasn't important." Without waiting for a reply, he wandered off in the direction he had been staring.

"What was that all about?" Mark Littlefeather asked curiously.

Sam was puzzled. "I'm not sure," she replied.

Durant stopped when he was directly behind Renny, leaned on the cheetah's shoulders with an arm, and looked over at the female polar bear they were talking with. The navigator looked up at him with a grin. "Hi, Durant," Renny said.

"Durant?" the polar bear repeated. She looked at him with her head tilted slightly to the left. "Leonardo Durant?"

Tanis immediately stepped backward a pace to put distance between him and the bears. He knew how much the load master hated his first name and expected a forthcoming explosive response. He was surprised, however, when Durant merely grinned.

"Hello, Carmen," he said.

"Carmen?" Renny looked back and forth between the bears and laughed. "Well, I'll be... this is the Carmen you told us about?" he asked.

"Yes, it is."

Carmen looked at him curiously. "What did you tell them about me?" she asked.

Durant shrugged his shoulders and replied, "I told them I met a wonderful woman on the beach on Pomen named Carmen, and that we shared a nice dinner and conversation."

Tanis stepped back up to his original spot and added, "Spending time with ya that one day helped bring Durant up out of his depression, y'know."

Carmen smiled at the desert fox and replied, "No, I didn't know that."

"We were all fairly down at the time," Renny said. He looked over at the grizzly and sighed. "I think Durant and I were competing to see who was hardest to get along with."

"How sad." Carmen stepped forward and gave both of them a quick lick on the cheek. "As a doctor," she said, "I have an interest in the mental well-being of my patients, as well as the physical. Even if you weren't my specific patients, I still feel for your pains."

Renny looked up at her as she stepped back. "We're okay now," he said, "but we went through some rough days." He glanced over at the desert fox and made a motion with his head. Tanis nodded and looked up at the polar bear.

"It was nice meeting ya, Doctor Burgess," he said, "but Renny and I are going to mingle with the other guests a bit and let ya and Durant catch up."

Carmen smiled at the medic. "Thank you, Tanis. We'll talk again later." As the cheetah and fox walked away, she motioned toward a surprisingly empty couch and said to Durant, "Shall we sit down?"

Across the room, a lull had come into a conversation that had left Max floundering for understanding some time ago. The snow leopard named Alice was an older motherly type, but she had an extensive knowledge on the workings of an *Okami* freighter.

"So, Jerad," she said to the *Blue Horizon's* chief engineer, "where's your brother? I keep expecting him to walk through the lift at any moment. I haven't seen him since we ran into one another on Pomen."

The raccoon frowned and stuck his hands in the pockets of his coveralls. "Jasper isn't with us anymore," he said sourly.

The leopard's eyes went wide. "Oh no... What happened to him?" she asked.

Pockets suddenly realized how his comment must have sounded. "Oops," he said. "I didn't mean it like that, Alice. He's okay... he just doesn't work here anymore."

The other engineer let out a heavy sigh and then smiled crookedly with a hand up to her chest. "Don't scare me like that," she said with a strained laugh. "I like the old coon."

"Hey!" Pockets said with mock indignation. "I'm the same age as he is, and *he's* not that old!"

"Okay, so tell me, why did he leave?" Alice asked. "I never thought I'd see the day when the Porter brothers would ever be willingly separated."

Pockets still felt sore toward his brother for leaving the way he did, but they had known Alice years ago when they had all three served together on a Gansen battleship. He quickly detailed the situation that led up to Patch's departure. After he finished, Alice crossed her arms and gave him a perplexed look.

"So he's on board a cruise ship now, eh?" she said. "I'll bet it irks him not to be Chief Engineer anymore."

Pockets shrugged. "Probably. He always did like being in charge of the engine room, but I haven't heard anything from him since he set sail on the *Argonautia*. I've sent a few letters, but he hasn't answered any of them."

Paxton had been quiet throughout the recent turn of the conversation and suddenly put a hand on his stomach. It growled loudly. Max snickered and looked up at the horse with a grin.

"Want something to eat?" he asked. "Lori's got a lot of stuff in the galley."

The palomino looked embarrassed but nodded with a smile. "Lead the way, boy," he said. "We've been rationing our food stores."

Pockets watched Max and Pax head across the room and then turned back to the leopard. "He's a good kid and is a fine student," he said to her. "Max has a lot of potential in him."

"Perhaps with the four of us working together, we can come up with a way to get the *Hidalgo Sun* operational again."

Pockets glanced up at her and bit his bottom lip. "I know you're probably sick of looking at the inside of your ship right now, but can I go over and take a look?" he asked.

"Sure," she said. "I'll take you over there, myself."

When Max and Paxton arrived at the galley, the jaguar sitting there put her head on her arms on the counter; Lori had gone out into the crowd to mingle. "What's the matter, Tsarina?" Paxton asked her. "You're usually excited to meet new people."

The ebony feline glanced up at him with doleful eyes and sighed. "Everyone acts like I'm some kind of pariah," she groaned. "Every time some of the *Horizon* crew looks at me, I see fear in their eyes. I don't understand it."

Max sat down at the counter beside her and put a hand on her arm. "I know why," he said timidly. "It's not you they're afraid of, but seeing you brings up some awful memories." Tsarina looked at him silently, waiting for him to continue. Pax sat down on her other side and focused on the young canine. Max looked for the right words to say.

"Are you familiar with the name of *Sagan*?" he asked.

Tsarina shook her head that she did not, but Pax nodded. "What's that pirate got to do with this?"

"Sagan was the one who unleashed that nasty virus on Hestra," Max explained. "He has also attacked the *Blue Horizon* on more than one occasion. The last time we met up, he got on board somehow, hurt some of us and killed Taro, too. Well, we're not really sure she's dead, since we haven't heard anything about her since the crash, but everyone thinks she died from her injuries; they were pretty bad."

"That's awful, but I still don't understand what this has to do with me," Tsarina said.

Pax leaned over to her and whispered into her ear, "Sagan was a black jaguar, dear."

"Oh..." she muttered in a quiet breath. "They think because I'm a jaguar that I'm related to him?"

"No," Max said quickly. "That's not it at all. No one blames you for what happened to us, only Sagan and his crew."

"But, because I'm of the same species..."

"...it brings up memories of the attack." Pax finished.

"Uh huh," the young canine replied. "It's not your fault, but I think that's probably what's going through their minds."

Tsarina looked at him, sure that she didn't really feel any better by his explanation. "Were you there when it happened?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, "but I never saw Sagan, myself. They stopped him before he got to where I was on the bridge."

"Is this why you aren't afraid to talk to me?"

"I guess," Max said with the shrug of his shoulders. "I think you're pretty, too."

Tsarina suddenly smiled in spite of herself. "Why, thank you, Max," she said. She touched him gently on the back of his hand with a finger, making him wonder at its significance.

Max cleared his throat and said, "Uh, would you like me to introduce you to some of the others? There were only three on our crew who actually fought with him face to face. If you talk to the others, perhaps you can show them you're not the same as Sagan."

"I don't know," she said as she absently fingered the straps of her yellow overalls. "It might not make a difference."

"Then again, it might," Pax said. "Go ahead, Tsarina."

Max looked up at her renewed interest as she glanced around the room. "Can you introduce me to the cheetah?" she asked. The other feline had piqued her interest ever since she first saw him.

"Uh... that might be difficult," Max said with a lump in his throat. "Taro was his girlfriend, you know, the one we think died. He still misses her a lot."

"Yeah, that figures... Okay then, how about the cute fox? Was *he* traumatized by this Sagan?"

"Nope, he's good. Tanis is a neat guy. Let me go get him."

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"I dunno about this," the voice of Pockets shouted from the opening of a small access panel. Alice knelt beside the passageway and peered inside at the raccoon. "The primary capacity lifter on the energy transfer unit is so shot I don't think there's a way to fix it, even if we *could* get it out onto the workbench in one piece."

"That's why I haven't bothered to pull it out of there yet," the leopard replied. "I crawled in there last week to remove it, but once I saw its condition, I didn't see a need to go through the trouble. It would take half a day just to get it out of there and then the ship would be without any kind of power at all in the meantime."

"You crawled in *here*?" Pockets asked in an amazed tone and looked out at her. "There's barely enough room for me and you're bigger than I am."

Alice gave him a sultry look and said, "I'm very flexible."

Pockets grinned back at her. "Yeah, that's a neat trait you felines have. Okay, I'm coming back out. There's nothing I can do in here."

"Most ships carry spares of their important parts," Alice said as the raccoon inched his way back out toward the engine room, "but we've used up most of ours over the past couple of years with no budget to keep any in stock."

"I can look in my stores to see if I have something that might work," Pockets grunted as he neared the opening, "but our parts are for an H-model, not a D."

"Think we can modify it to work?"

"Dunno, but we can try," he said. "I'm pretty handy with gadgets."

Alice gave him a hand and pulled him free of the tight passage opening. "Yes, I remember your gadgets," she said with a grin. "I still use a couple you made for me way back when."

Pockets glanced up at her. "Oh, really?" he replied with a smirk. "Okay, let's get back over to the *Horizon* to see what we can alter."

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"I can't tell you enough how glad I am to see you, Captain Sinclair." Rezo took a lap of his coffee and savored the rich flavor. "The foremost reason, of course, is because my ship broke down, but I've also heard a lot of good things about you," he added. "Of all people to come to my rescue, I'm glad it was you."

Merlin leaned back and propped his feet up on the desk of his den, his own cup of coffee in hand. "Oh? Who's been talking about me?" he asked.

The red panda smiled at him. "Holly Harken, for one. Coverage of your voyage to Sillon was the main focus of her newscasts for months, and while your final battle with the *Basilisk* over Crescentis didn't make all the headlines in the PA, there are those who took notice."

Merlin looked at him and frowned. "Notice, yeah. I've been threatened against rebuilding my business. Not the kind of notice I really wanted. No one's made a move against us as yet, but we have to be on the alert because of that threat."

Rezo looked at him in surprise. "Threatened?" By whom?"

"I don't know, but I have to assume it was someone associated with Sagan," the wolf replied after taking another lap of his drink. "My only other enemy wouldn't pull anything like that. It's not his style."

"You have another enemy?"

Merlin chuckled. "That's too strong a word. Armando Jensen is more of a business rival that we've bumped into on numerous occasions. He flies a *Sakura*-class freighter called the *Savannah Hunter* and we always end up verbally sparring anytime we meet."

"*Sakura*? Why would he want to fly one of those things for?" Rezo exclaimed. "Back when I was younger, I was the pilot for a *Sakura* freighter. The controls are unwieldy and it has too many blind spots, despite external cameras and sensors mounted all over its hull."

"It can carry a larger payload than an *Okami*," Merlin replied. "His ship will hold more cargo than mine and he thinks by having that capacity that he can get more customers."

"Does he do well, business-wise?"

The wolf shook his head. "Not really. Armando likes to cut corners and even cheat to get his clients, but I've not really seen that it's done him any good."

Rezo leaned forward and rested his arms on the desk. "Sounds like you keep tabs on him," he said.

Merlin shrugged. "It never hurts to monitor your competitor's business," he replied. He took another lap of his coffee and then put his feet on the floor. "What about you?" he asked. "How's your business doing?"

Rezo sighed and sat back in his chair. "Not good," the red panda answered. "I barely make a profit after paying my employees and maintaining my ship, and sometimes I have trouble doing even that." He looked over at the wolf and shook his head. "The *Hidalgo Sun* is seventeen years old. Parts are getting harder to find and when we *can* locate them, they are either expensive because of their rarity or we have to dig them out of a salvage yard. I can't afford a newer ship because I can barely afford to even restock our supplies for each voyage." He ran a hand over the red fur of his head and sighed again. "I hate to say this, but the Planetary Alignment needs a catastrophe somewhere so our business would pick up."

Merlin looked over at him oddly. "A catastrophe?"

"Yeah... something where freighters such as ours would be in high demand to transport supplies, aid or people." Rezo slid down in his seat a little and stared down at his feet. "If things don't pick up soon, I'll probably have to shut down my business and lay off my crew before long."

"What's your debt situation like?" the wolf asked him.

Without looking up, Rezo answered with a smile on his face. "Oddly enough, I'm in good shape. I paid off the loan on the *Hidalgo Sun* within three years of getting it and the rest of my credit history is good."

"With a credit history like that, why not take out a loan to get a newer ship?" Merlin asked. "You wouldn't have to get the newest H-model, but at least one that's a little easier to maintain and get parts for."

"I can't afford the payments," Rezo explained. "Until business picks up, it's not likely I can afford another loan even if I do have a good credit history. I still have other bills to pay beyond that." He looked over at the wolf with a deep frown. "If our combined mechanics can't find a way to get my engines operational, I may have to abandon the ship altogether and beg you to let me buy passage for me my crew to ride with you to Mars. We might be able to find other jobs there."

Merlin pursed his lips in thought for a moment and then said, "Hopefully, it won't come to that."

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Durant stretched, yawned, and glanced across the room at the clock on his cabin terminal. It was still too early to crawl out of bed so he snuggled in closer to Carmen. She stirred a little in her sleep, but remained within her dreams.

The grizzly bear smiled to himself and felt grateful for the substandard parts of the *Hidalgo Sun* with only a hint of guilt. Carmen was a gentle and affectionate lover and it had been a while since Durant had spent time with someone like her. He glanced over at her face in the dim light of his cabin and saw her pleasant smile.

*So lovely*, he thought to himself. Had it not been for the breakdown of the *Hidalgo Sun*, he might not have ever seen her again after their brief meeting on Pomen. While he couldn't be sure of her own feelings, Durant resolved to stay in touch with her.

\*\*\*

Antoinette floated gently across the tunnel that connected the two freighters. She enjoyed the sensation of weightlessness away from the artificial gravity deck-plates she had gotten used to on board the ships. She smiled to herself and halted her progress toward the *Hidalgo Sun*. Then with a tiny caress of the wall, she pushed away and twisted her body gently so that she executed a graceful pirouette. She turned slowly around and around, her eyes closed and her arms wrapped around herself.

Toni turned lazily in the air, her mind ignoring the constant thrumming of power from both freighters that vibrated across the tunnel walls. She heard one of the airlocks release and she looked up to see who had joined her. It was the Border collie from the other ship.

"Hello, Samantha," she said with a smile.

Sam gave her a canine grin. "Hi. What's going on?" she asked.

Toni shrugged and replied, "I like the weightlessness... I can dance in the air." With her words, she turned in another pirouette, her arms outstretched in fluid movements. Had she been wearing veils, they would have trailed around her in delicate streams. "I can rarely find a place to do anything like this."

Sam chuckled and tried her own take on what the woman had just done. She turned quietly in the air, and just for the fun of it, Samantha drew her legs up to her chest and turned end over end three times before righting herself. She looked at Toni with a smile and waved to her.

"Enjoy yourself," she said with a chuckle. "I need to talk to our engineers."

"Bye, Samantha," Toni replied with another gentle twist. Before the Border collie had made it to the airlock at the other end of the tunnel, she could hear the human quietly humming to herself.

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Moss hovered above Max's ears as he, in turn, peered over Pockets' shoulder. The raccoon browsed through the ship's spare parts inventory list with a frown. Alice and Paxton watched from the sides, the equine mechanic nervously grooming his mane with a brush he carried with him everywhere. Pockets found the part they needed and a three-dimensional diagram popped up on the screen with its design specifications. Alice glanced over the images and frowned. Pockets heaved a sigh and sat back in his chair, almost bumping into Max.

"I don't see a way the newer model design can be altered to work in the *Sun's* engines," the snow leopard muttered into his ear. "There are just too many differences."

"It looks like they totally redesigned it from the ground up," Pockets agreed.

"How much difference is there?" Paxton asked. In response, the raccoon ordered up the specifications in the computer's memory of past *Okami* model designs. The D-model version of the part they needed looked nothing like the H-model part that was available on board the *Horizon*.

"The wiring, configuration and even just the way it works are all different," Pockets said with a frown. "They've been improved over the years between each model." To prove his point, he called up the data of the same part for each model of *Okami* freighter between the D and H series.

"See?" he asked as he pointed to each of the five units with a tiny claw. "The major design change came between the F and G models. Prior to that, the units were virtually identical."

"Would the unit from an F-model work?" Max asked out of boredom.

Alice nodded her head. "It would work perfectly," she said, "if only we had an F-model to cannibalize."

"Do you think Durant would let us use one from our cargo?" the canine asked.

Pockets looked at the young mechanic in wonder. He had not even remembered that the *Horizon* carried a load of parts bound for the starship repair facility on Mars.

"If Durant has the unit we need amongst our cargo," the raccoon answered with a conspiratorial smile, "the *Hidalgo Sun* will have a new energy transfer unit very soon, permission or not."

\*\*\*

"Now, isn't this better?" the jaguar purred. Tsarina sat straddled across Tanis' upper legs and gently kneaded the desert fox's shoulders. He lay face down on his bed, his tail draped across her lap, with a contented smile across his lips as she worked the kinks out of his muscles.

"Mmm hmm..." he mumbled. Tanis had spent some time with Tsarina since Max had introduced them on the rec deck. Like Maximillian, Tanis had never actually encountered Sagan and he had been more receptive to the feline's company than the others had. He found that she was quite sensual and she enjoyed flirting. He didn't know how much time she would spend with him before moving off to someone else in his crew, but at the moment, he didn't mind. Her ministrations kept him pleased and he resolved to enjoy it as much as he could.

\*\*\*

"Come in."

Merlin looked up from his desk as Durant, Samantha and Pockets filed into his den. Rezo smiled up at them curiously from his seat near the wall. Pockets and Samantha looked pleased. Durant did not.

"Yes?" the wolf asked.

Pockets spoke up first. "Captain," he said, "none of our own spare parts will work with Captain Rezo's engines. The differences between the models are too great. However..."

"However," Sam repeated, "our present cargo includes parts that *are* compatible with his ship."

Merlin didn't say a word, but looked up at the grizzly bear. He already knew what Durant was going to say to Sam's unspoken request.

"Boss," the load master said, "we don't *own* the parts we're carrying as cargo. We can't use them for the *Sun* as if they were readily available stock."

Rezo bit his bottom lip, but kept his mouth shut.

"I *know* Pockets occasionally filches from our cargo," Durant continued, despite the hurt look the raccoon gave him, "so I had a perimeter alarm set up around the crates in the hold. He set it off."

Merlin kept his face impassive and directed his focus on the engineer. The raccoon stuck his hands into the pockets of his coveralls and the sound of tools could be heard jingling against one another as he made room for his hands in there with them.

"There's no other alternative, Captain," Pockets finally replied. "Alice and I have determined there is no possible way to repair the *Sun's* engines, and the spare parts for the *Horizon* will not work for them either. Parts from our cargo *will* work, but Durant won't let me use them."

Merlin glanced quickly at Rezo and then back to the bear. "What's the cost on the parts they need?" he asked, knowing the bear would have already checked on the information.

"Twelve hundred thirty-seven credits," Durant responded without hesitation. "It's too much to just let slide, boss. It's a theft that Mars would notice immediately." He looked over at the red panda and shook his head. "Sorry, Captain."

Rezo frowned deeply and looked over to the wolf. "It looks like there's no alternative," he replied with his head lowered. "If you would be kind enough to take me and my crew with you to Mars, I can pay you for our passage. Perhaps I can work out some kind of deal with the repair depot there for parts."

"What about your ship?" Samantha asked.

"We'll have to abandon it until I can arrange a ride back here from Mars with the parts we need."

Pockets put his hands on the desk. "Merlin, Paxton told me about Captain Rezo's financial state." He looked apologetic at the red panda, but continued, "I seriously doubt he has enough to pay for the parts *and* a transport back here to install them. They'll probably just turn around and sell him the parts we already have on board!" He looked up at the grizzly in silent accusation.

Durant crossed his arms. "I'm not arguing with that, Pockets," he said with a scowl, "but you just can't *take* the parts you need from a customer's inventory!"

"Merlin," Samantha said quickly, "what if we contacted the Mars colony director and explain the situation to him? If we offer to pay them for the parts we use, they shouldn't complain."

"Unless the parts were already earmarked to fix someone else's ship," Durant countered.

Samantha frowned at the bear as if to say *'you are not helping at all.'*

The lupine captain looked over at his red-furred counterpart. "If Mars gives the okay, would that be acceptable?" he asked.

Rezo didn't look happy. "I... don't have twelve hundred credits in my account," he admitted in a quiet voice. "I think I can afford to pay you for our passage to Mars to cover food and air, at least. Once there, we'll all look for new work. I can put the *Sun* up as a salvageable derelict for someone else to pick over."

"That's *not* right!" Sam exclaimed. She knelt down next to the red panda and looked into his eyes. "If Mars will sell us the parts, would you allow me to pay for them myself?" she asked in a sincere tone. "It would be at no charge to you."

Rezo felt his eyes grow moist and he nodded. "I don't know why you would do that for me, but I don't really have a choice, my dear," he said. "I will accept your kind offer, but I *promise* you I will pay you back when we get back on our feet."

The Border collie looked up at the load master and accountant of the *Blue Horizon*. "Durant?" she asked.

The bear nodded quietly. "If *Mars* gives the okay for such a transaction, I don't have a problem with it."

Merlin looked over at Samantha and nodded too. "Get on the Com at once to Mars. See what you can do."

"Thank you, Merlin," Sam replied with a smile. She looked back to Rezo. "We'll get those parts for the *Hidalgo Sun*," she promised, "and then you'll have a working ship again."

The small red panda smiled at her and then nodded gratefully to Pockets. "Thank you," he said. "I *do* appreciate everything you are doing for me."

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"So what's it like working for Captain Sinclair?" Keri asked Cindy. The mice had returned to the recreation deck in the galley area. They had been talking for hours about anything that came to mind. Both does loved to chat and they acted as if they were best friends catching up on old news, even though they had only just met.

Cindy leaned back against the wall from the table and put her arms behind her head. "He's fairly easy going," she said, "but you don't want to get on his bad side. He's quite a grump if you do something against his orders."

Keri leaned forward on the table with a grin, her ears practically wiggling in anticipation. "So, what did you do?"

Cindy gave her a lopsided smile. "Everyone on the ship has to take a six-hour watch on the bridge so that it's manned all the time," she explained. "He told me one day a few weeks back that it was my turn for bridge watch. I was up here watching a movie at the time and had a half hour left before it was over." She shrugged her shoulders and bit her bottom lip gently. "Nothing ever happens out here and the ship's always on auto-pilot while en route, so I didn't go to the bridge until the movie was over. By the time I got to the bridge, Merlin was waiting for me and you could practically see the black cloud forming over his head. It seemed an important message from one of his business contacts came in during that half hour the bridge was unmanned and we lost a job because no one was there to receive it. The job went to a competitor."

"Ooh, not a good thing," Keri replied with a wince. "What did he do?"

"He docked *half* of my pay for that voyage, partly from the lost job and partly for disobeying an order." Cindy sighed and put her hands in her lap. "I haven't missed bridge duty since."

"How does he act when you *haven't* disobeyed him?"

Cindy smiled again. "He's all serious if you're talking to him about the business, but if you visit with him at any other time, he's pretty casual. He doesn't have too many rules for us, so it's a relaxed atmosphere so long as you follow them."

Keri took a long drink of her soda and then wiggled her nose at her new friend. "So, tell me..." she said in a low, conspiratorial tone, "What's he like in bed?"

"Dunno," Cindy replied with a mock frown. "Samantha's in the way."

"Oh? So they're exclusive to one another?"

Cindy shook her head. "No, not really exclusive from what I've heard, but it seems like she can sense when he's in the mood, y'know, and has already made plans with him before I have a chance."

"You're just not trying hard enough, girl," Keri replied. "You're going to get lonesome that way."

It was Cindy's turn to grin widely. "Not so," she said. "You only asked about my captain. I have other willing guys whenever I need company."

"Ah..."

"So, it's your turn. What is it like to work for Captain Kegawa?"

"He's moody," Keri answered after taking another drink of her soda. She was addicted to caffeine and in the time the *Hidalgo Sun* had been adrift, she had already depleted the ship's supply of coffee and soft drinks. The *Blue Horizon* was stocked with a large supply of caffeinated drinks and she was delighted to have so much to live on.

"When he doesn't get his way, which seems to be most of the time, he rants endlessly and is quite a pain to be around," she continued. "During the times when he's not in a snit about something, he can actually be fun. He loves to joke around, almost to the point of playing pranks, but he doesn't take pranks against himself very well."

"Sounds wishy-washy," Cindy replied.

"Of course, it would be nice to have a better salary, but the business is broke most of the time. The budget rarely has enough for replacement parts for the ship, which is why the *Sun* is currently out of commission." Keri stuck out her tongue and made a face. "Our contracts will run out soon, so I've been thinking of looking for a new ship to hire onto if things don't pick up soon. Do you think Captain Sinclair would like another hand?"

Cindy shook her head with a frown. "I doubt it. I'm only here as a temp, myself." She took a few moments to tell the other mouse about Sagan's attack on the ship and then added, "If Taro ever comes back, my job is history. That was a condition in my contract."

"Yuck..."

"Yeah, but I agreed to it when I signed on. We haven't really discussed it since then, but I've heard some of them talk about Taro as if they think she's really dead. They've heard nothing about her since the crash and that's been nearly six months ago. Nothing against a woman I don't even know, but I can hope the captain will make me permanent if she doesn't come back. I like it on board the *Blue Horizon*."

"What will you do if this Taro *does* come back?"

"I'm not sure," Cindy replied. "There are agencies on each world of the PA we work with to line up new jobs. I might try one of them if that time ever comes."

Keri sat up slowly and leaned back in her seat. "If things don't start to look up for us," she said, "I might want to apply for a job with one of them, myself."

\*\*\*

Lorelei crawled out of her bed and padded softly toward the bathroom, nimbly stepping over the clothing that covered the floor of the cabin. When she started the water for the shower, there was a knock on her door. She quickly wrapped a small towel around her and went to the door in the front room. When she opened it, the orange tabby cat of the *Hidalgo Sun* smiled up at her.

"Hullo," he said.

"G'morning, Jonesy," Lori said with a grin. "You're up early."

The feline twitched his whiskers and licked his lips. "It may be morning on the *Blue Horizon*," he replied, "but the *Hidalgo Sun* is still set on the Panos time zone on Mainor." He shrugged his shoulders and grinned. "However, you mentioned you had a big breakfast planned for the crews of both our ships."

"I'm sorry, but it'll take me a while to prepare everything," Lori replied.

"Want some help?" Jonesy asked. "I occasionally give Keri a hand when she has something like that planned."

Lori grinned as she let him in and then turned to take a fresh towel from the closet. "Sure," she replied with a sly smile. She slipped off the towel she had just been wearing and handed it to him. "I can always use an extra pair of hands."

The orange tabby cat gave her a feral grin and shut the door behind him. He was not overly fond of water, but he could tolerate a shower - and sharing a shower *with* someone was even better.

\*\*\*

Mark Littlefeather straightened his burgundy flight jacket and cleared his throat. He knocked on the door to Merlin's den and waited for a response. A moment later, he heard a voice call out from behind the panel.

"Enter."

The human male thumbed the door switch and the panel slid to the side. Merlin was at his desk poring over three slateboards displaying spreadsheets of data on the *Blue Horizon* accounts. He was dressed in black slacks and a loose beige sweater, but his boots were set aside so he could feel the soft carpeting on his toes.

"Hello, Captain," Mark said quietly.

The wolf looked up and hesitated a moment before giving the human a reply. He'd distrusted humans for years and hadn't been comfortable having two of them on his vessel. Having one in the close quarters of his den made him pause.

"Mr. Littlefeather," he replied courteously after a couple of heartbeats. "What can I do for you?"

Mark smiled and nodded respectfully toward him. "I've wanted to speak with you ever since you came aboard our ship, sir," he answered. "May I have a moment of your time?"

Merlin frowned and tapped out a command on each of the slateboards. The files saved on each and then a screensaver of small Dennieran crustaceans began dancing across the screens.

"Have a seat," he said.

"Thank you, Captain." Mark took one of the two seats on the opposite side of the desk that was covered in printed books, trinkets and several green plants.

"Okay," Merlin said tonelessly, "what is it you need?" He crossed his arms and leaned back in his seat.

Mark had a difficult time reading the wolf's expression, but he got the impression that Merlin was not pleased with the interruption. He swallowed and put his hands in his lap. He managed a bit of a smile and his dark brown eyes were slightly averted so not to appear confrontational to the wolf.

"Sir, it's not really a matter of *need*," he began. "I just... just wanted to talk. You've visited with my crewmates ever since our two ships came together but I've not had a chance to really meet with you myself."

Merlin maintained his frown. He had purposely avoided the humans whenever he had the opportunity, but it looked as if he was cornered. He sighed and tried to relax a little. "Sorry about that," he replied. He uncrossed his arms and picked up a small water pot. He gave a little of the liquid to an aromatic fern on the corner of his desk and said, "I suppose it's your turn to visit with me."

Littlefeather nodded with a smile. "Well, sir, I'm sure you know that there are many different beliefs among the people of Earth," he said. "I was taught to respect the elements of nature and to live in harmony with the things and people around me."

Merlin looked up at him. "You worship the elements?" he asked.

The human shook his head, "No, sir, I *respect* them."

"That's commendable."

"Yes, sir. Anyway, it is traditional in my family to find a common bond with something in nature and to consider that person, animal or object as a lifetime friend to turn to in times of difficulty."

The captain set his water pot aside and returned his attention to the man. "I don't follow you," he said.

Mark leaned forward and rested his elbows on the desk. "When I was younger, I went on what we call a *dream quest* in which to discover who or what my spiritual guide might be. In the course of my mental search, I discovered that my personal guide was the *gray wolf*."

Merlin's frown reappeared, but he remained silent as the human continued. "There have been times in my life where I've faced significant crossroads, but didn't know which way to turn." Mark said, "Every time I've had an important decision to make, I have seen the image of a wolf in some way, almost as if this creature guided my judgment. At other times, the appearance of a wolf has heralded some kind of good change in my life."

Merlin Sinclair resisted the urge to roll his eyes. "So you think *I'm* your lucky wolf?" he asked.

Littlefeather swallowed and shook his head. "No, sir," he replied, "but seeing you does encourage me. Sir, I don't know what the future holds for me. I'm not clairvoyant and I don't believe in magic, but what harm is there in recognizing signs that things may turn out for the better?"

Merlin was puzzled. This man was like no other human he had had any close dealings with before. Usually he had to deal with the likes of Victor Faltane or Connie Davies, which always left a bad taste in his mouth from the encounter. Mark Littlefeather didn't have that kind of air about him.

"Okay," he said after a moment, "now that seeing me has given you hope, what now?"

Mark smiled. "I don't require anything from you, Captain," he answered. "I just wanted to let you know that I am glad to have met you and already feel my life enriched."

"Even though I haven't done anything for you?"

"Even though, sir."

It was Merlin's turn to lean on the desk with his elbows. His expression softened toward the man. "You amaze me, Mr. Littlefeather. I admit that I have never felt comfortable around humans," he admitted. "You are the first I've talked to who did not want something from me, and my dealings with your people have usually gone badly."

Mark nodded in understanding. "I'm not surprised," he said. "Even though Earth engineered the Furs and later formed the Planetary Alignment with its lost colonies, there are still a lot of xenophobes around. In spite of the fact that Furs have now been around for three centuries and are genetically related, a lot of humans still don't see Furs as being on the same sentient level as they are. In *my* family, however, we were raised to respect all people, no matter which race, species or planet they happen to be from originally. This is how I believe."

Merlin nodded with a soft expression. "I can't fault you for that," he said. "I admit that you puzzle me, but I am surprised that you actually seem to respect me."

"Yes, sir, I do."

The captain leaned back in his seat. "I would like you to do me a favor, Mr. Littlefeather."

"Anything, sir."

"Please stop calling me *Sir*," the wolf replied. "It's okay to use as a form of respect at an initial meeting, but not as a title, and *not* all of the time. I'd prefer if you would just call me *Captain* or even by my first name, *Merlin*."

"On one condition," the human answered, "that you would do the same and call me *Mark* instead of Mr. Littlefeather."

"That's a condition I think I can handle."

"Thank you, s... uh, Merlin. Let me know if there's anything I can do for you."

"Okay, Mark, I will do that." Merlin looked at the time displayed through the wall and sighed. "I'm afraid I need to get back to my budget now. I have something rather important I'm trying to work out with my accountant and I need to get back to it."

"I appreciate your time, Captain."

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"This is the *SS Blue Horizon*," Durant said into the headset microphone. "What can we do for you?"

"Blue Horizon, I'm Kent Terrace, central manager of the Okami Repair Facility of the Mars Colony."

"Yes, Mr. Terrace, we've been expecting your call." He turned and gave his companions in the room a thumbs-up sign and then put the call on the bridge speakers.

"I need to speak with Captain Kegawa, please."

"I'm here, Mr. Terrace," the red panda said aloud, letting the bridge microphone transmit his reply.

"I've called to inform you that you are granted authority to use whatever parts among the Blue Horizon's cargo as necessary to get the *Hidalgo Sun* operational in this emergency situation. Provide us with an itemized list of the parts you use so we can compare it to the manifest when our shipment arrives. Once we have a list of what you've used, we will reply back with an itemized pricing at wholesale costs. Payment will be required within thirty days of this transaction."

Captain Rezo smiled at Jonesy and Antoinette, who stood beside him. "Thank you sir," he replied. "You've been most generous."

"As a condition of this transaction," Terrace continued, "you will bring your Okami freighter to our facility as soon as you are flight capable, where your vessel will undergo proper repairs to specifications to prevent a further occurrence of these issues. We are proud of our ships, Captain, even the older models."

Rezo had not expected this. Samantha had agreed to pay for the parts they needed, but not to further repairs to his old ship. He didn't know how he would be able to pay for the depot repairs, but he didn't really have a choice. He needed his ship operational.

"Aye, sir," he said after a brief glance at Merlin. "Once we're on our way, we will chart our heading directly to your facility."

"Then I won't take up anymore of your time, Captain, and let you start your repairs. We will see you soon."

"Yes, sir, and thank you again, Mr. Terrace."

Rezo looked at Toni with a frown. "Tis a mixed blessing," he said. "We should now have the parts we need, but we'll still have to scrounge the bottom of the barrel to pay for a depot visit."

The human accountant looked at the slateboard she held in her hands and frowned. She adjusted the glasses on her small nose and cleared her throat. "Captain," Toni said, "I don't think we have enough in the coffers to even pay for more than a couple days at a hotel in the Mars dome for the whole crew. Besides this, we're so overdue on delivering our cargo that we probably won't even get paid for *that* job."

Rezo patted her on the arm. "I know, Toni, I know," he said. He looked at Jonesy and said, "Please assemble the *Sun's* crew on the *Horizon's* recreational deck. I want to inform everyone that once we get to Mars, I'll clear what's remaining of everybody's contracts so you all can find other work."

The orange cat heaved a sigh. "Yessir," he muttered.

Merlin looked at Durant, who nodded silently in return. The wolf stepped forward and sat down in the command seat of the bridge. "Captain Kegawa," he said, "Durant and I have been going through our budget and I've worked up a small loan for you out of our surplus, if you'll accept it."

"Captain, I *can't* afford another loan," Rezo reminded him.

Durant handed his own slateboard to the red panda and let him see the readout. "We've worked out an *interest-free, low-payment* plan for you with that should not hurt your profits very much," the grizzly said. "With your vital systems repaired, you can invest your cargo fees in your employees' salaries and build up your profits again."

"You won't be able to update *all* the systems on the *Hidalgo Sun*, but the more urgent needs will be taken care of so those systems shouldn't break down again."

Rezo showed Durant's slateboard to Jonesy and Toni.

"How can you do this?" Jonesy asked. "Why would you do this?"

Merlin gave the feline a genuine smile. "As I said, I have the surplus, and I've spent a great deal of time talking with your captain since our two crews came together," he said. "I sincerely believe he's the type I can trust to pay me back. It may take a while with a small payment plan like this, but I have confidence that Captain Kegawa will pay back every credit in time. This is not something I would do for just anyone."

Rezo wiped sudden moisture from his eyes with the sleeve of his jacket. "Thank you, Captain Sinclair," he said in a quiet voice. "You're right about me. You'll get back every credit, one way or another."

Antoinette moved to the wolf and kissed him gently on the side of his nose. He looked up at her in surprise. "That's *thanks* for the whole crew, Captain. You don't know just how much this means to us."

\*\*\*

Alice knelt on the metal floor of the *Hidalgo Sun's* engine room and peered into a narrow access panel at ground level. Immediately in sight were the bare feet belonging to the canine youth, Maximilian. He had shed his sandals to get better traction crawling into the cramped space. The snow leopard had to resist the temptation to run a finger along the exposed soles, but Max and Pockets were hard at work removing the power transfer unit. The confines of the access tunnel were so cramped that the unit had to be disassembled a piece at a time, so the two smallest mechanics were crammed inside together. Miscellaneous parts they had kicked out were already scattered about the engine room floor.

"I have the Initiator ready to be taken offline," Alice said to the feet. "All but the four of us have transferred to the *Horizon* and Pax is ready to shut down the system power."

"Just a few more minutes before you do that," came Pockets' voice from deep within the access shaft. "We still have a couple items to break free, so don't shut everything down just yet."

"Roger," Alice replied.

"Huh?" Paxton asked at the mention of his first name.

Alice twitched an ear. "Nothing, Pax. Just hold on for a moment before you shut down the power to the whole ship."

"Will we lose life support?" Max asked. "Doesn't it take power from the engines, too?"

Pockets grunted as he worked loose a tight part. "Normally we'd have to use the standby life support generator, but in this case, the *Horizon* will be providing life support for both ships while the main system is down over here."

"Oh."

Alice looked down at printed schematics laid out on the floor beside her to make sure they had done everything necessary. Once the power had been discharged from the unit, there would be no starting it back up until the part had been completely replaced.

<bang> <clunk> "Yeowch!"

"What was that?" Paxton asked.

"I'm okay," Pockets' voice called out. Then, a moment later, "All right, shut 'er down!"

Alice looked across the engine room at her partner and watched as Pax spread out his fingers and simultaneously pushed three red stiff buttons at the back of the console. There was a loud *clunk* and the ship grew instantly quiet. The familiar, continual vibration of the deck plates ceased immediately and an eerie silence fell upon the engine room. The only light on board the vessel emanated from a single transparent flexible hose containing a glowing yellow gel that was threaded into the access way with the two small mechanics.

"Give me a reading," Pockets called out.

"Zero," Paxton replied after looking at a dial with a pocket flash.

"Zero," Alice relayed in to the raccoon.

"Are you sure?" Pockets asked. "If there's the tiniest bit of energy in this thing, I'll be roasted for your supper tonight as soon as I grab onto it."

Alice smiled. If the raccoon could see her, she would have needled him with a tongue across her lips in mock anticipation of that meal.

Paxton double-checked the readouts. "Zero on the console. Not a quiver."

"Absolute zero on the readings," Alice relayed.

Inside the cramped access shaft, Max looked over at Pockets and swallowed hard. The raccoon saw his expression and smiled.

"Don't worry, Max," he said confidently. "Once we get this thing separated from the rest of the LC engine, the rest is easy."

"I don't want to be fried," the canine youth said quietly. "Are you sure this is safe?"

Pockets nodded. "There's no power channeling through it now. At this point, it's only a hunk of inert metal."

"Okay," Max replied uncertainly. Pockets had warned him from getting up against that particular piece of equipment after they had removed its outer cover and had stressed the danger. Now he was being told to physically grab onto it and take out the mounting bolts on his side of the unit.

"All right," Pockets called out. "We're going to take it loose now."

The raccoon handed Max a powered spanner mounted with the correct receptacle that matched the one he would use himself. The German shepherd took it and eased its business end up to the large insulated fasteners. He steeled himself against a jolt just as the socket touched the first bolt. When nothing happened, he released the breath he had held and gave his partner a nervous smile.

It took another ten minutes before the unit finally came free of its housing. The mechanics eased the heavy unit to the floor and Pockets lifted the end of the glowing hose to peer up inside the scorched part. He mumbled something to himself with a creased brow.

"Wow," Max said as he peered into the unit.

"Well," Alice asked impatiently, "what is it?"

"It is all burned and melted inside," the canine answered. Pockets gave him a nod and pushed on the part. Max started to scoot backward and pulled on the unit at the same time. "We're coming out now."

\*\*\*

Lorelei smiled at her companions. Keri and Jonesy were helping her prepare a celebratory dinner for the two crews and they were making good use of their time. The ships' engineers were deeply involved in the repair work on the *Hidalgo Sun* and everyone else waited in different areas of the *Blue Horizon*. At interstellar speeds, the Mars Colony was only two days away from their present location, so the cottontail rabbit dug into her goods to make this meal a grand one. She had pulled up her special recipe file and had acquired the services of her two new friends to help out with the preparations.

Despite the impatience of the *Sun's* crew to hear word of completion on the repairs, everyone seemed to be in good spirits. It was this atmosphere that Lorelei hoped to enhance with good food.

\*\*\*

Twelve hours after they had begun repairs, Paxton reengaged the power system to the LC engines and the lights came up normally. "So far, so good," the palomino said. He looked over at Alice, Pockets and Max and grinned at them. All four of them were tired and dirty from long hours of hard work. The new parts were in place and everything had been hooked back up with minimal issues.

Alice moved to the main engineering console and said, "Now for the first test." She thumbed the intercom button and said into the small microphone set into the terminal, "Riki, are you there?"

*"You're coming in loud and clear, Alice," the lemur's voice said cheerfully. "We have internal communications again."*

*"See if you can..."*

*"I know my job, engineer. Hold on while I contact the Horizon."* Alice frowned at the others and waited. Nearly five minutes passed before Riki's voice sounded again in the engine room. *"The Blue Horizon comes in clear as a bell," she said, "and I was able to contact the Mars Colony in a tachyon message test. As far as communications go, we're operational again."*

*"What about the main computer?"*

*"The boot sequence has finished and appears to be fully operational. There are no errors reporting."*

"Okay," Alice said after checking another readout, "have the *Horizon* disengage and retract the access tunnel so we can try an engine test. Life Support systems over here are now operating normally and Mark has just secured the main hatch."

*"Aye, will do."*

Without waiting for further conversation, Alice pointed a finger at Paxton, who nodded and began calibrating systems for a cold restart. Pockets moved to another console of the room and went through another checklist. Max watched silently as the raccoon tapped touchpads and made adjustments to the controls. The ship might be old, but Pockets was familiar enough with it to know what he was doing.

Pockets looked up at Alice and smiled when the deck plates began vibrating quietly. There was power building up in the liquid crystal core just as it should, but they would still have to see if they could get any thrust from it.

*"The access tunnel has been retracted," Riki announced after several minutes. "Captain Rezo is here on the bridge at the controls and awaits your word for engine test."*

"Aye to that," the snow leopard responded. A moment more and she looked up from a set of gauges that monitor power reserves. Paxton nodded to her and Pockets gave her a thumbs-up sign. "Okay, bridge. All systems are set and seem to be operational. At your discretion."

*"Aye."*

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From the bridge of the *Blue Horizon*, Merlin and Renny watched the faded red hull of the *Hidalgo Sun* slowly pull away. Merlin nodded to the cheetah and said, "It looks like they're good to go."

The crimson freighter rotated briefly on its Y-axis and then hesitated only a moment before it suddenly shot away into the distance. Renny grinned. "Course laid in for the rendezvous coordinates."

"Aye," Merlin replied. The wolf engaged the engines and the *Blue Horizon* took off in pursuit of the other ship.

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As Lorelei had hoped, her grand celebratory dinner had been a big success. The two ships were once again coupled together and both crews were gathered on the *Horizon's* recreation deck, the meal finished. The long galley table was occupied and others were sitting on the couches and recliners out in the room. Conversations were in full force and general spirits were high.

Cuddled together on a couch, Durant and Carmen spent the last of their time making promises to stay in touch after their ships departed. Long distance romances seldom worked out, and they'd both agreed they couldn't be exclusive, but they were determined to try to keep their relationship going as long as possible.

Tsarina and Tanis occupied the other couch. The desert fox lay with his head in the jaguar's lap and Tsarina gently stroked his large ears as they talked. Across the room, Lori and Jonesy were quietly nuzzling their good-byes. The *Hidalgo Sun* would be leaving within an hour.

Others around the room also spent the last of their moments together with new friends and it looked as if the two crews had made good use of their time intermingled.

Captains Merlin and Rezo sat at the head of the galley table. The red panda listened intently as his lupine counterpart pitched a business idea to him. Renny sat beside them, his tummy full and his eyes half closed as he listened in. Samantha relaxed beside him, her attention also on the captains' conversation.

"We'll follow you all the way in to Mars to make sure the replacement parts are working okay," Merlin said. "After we've unloaded our cargo there, we'll continue on to Earth to deliver your shipment for you to the distribution center of *Misty's Toybox* in Paris. Cindy's already made arrangements with Misty Paltier for the delivery."

Rezo nodded quietly and took a lap of his drink. "As to be expected," he said after a moment, "I had to waive my fee to her for our extended delay, so this is another setback for my business."

Merlin nodded. "It couldn't be avoided. However," he added, "after your repairs are made and you've left Mars, I'll do my best to send some business your way. Sometimes we have clients that need our transport services, but we can't take them on due to other deliveries on the schedule. It's those I'll refer to you."

"Thank you," Rezo replied. He held up his drink and said, "I salute you, Captain Sinclair. You're one heck of a guy and you've done so much for us already." He swallowed his drink and leaned closer to his counterpart. "I like being your friend. I know you can't cover for me beyond this, but it's been great knowing you."

Merlin looked at his watch and smiled. "We need to end our little party," he said. "Both of us need to get back on a schedule and we both still have our pre-flight checklists to go over."

"You're right," the red panda agreed. "It's time to finalize our fare-wells and be on our way."

Merlin held out his hand and Rezo took it gratefully. Their two crews had worked well together and there was no doubt in anyone's mind that they would be seeing one another again.

**RESPECT THE WIND**  
By Ted & Eileen Blasingame

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*SS Blue Horizon PA1138*  
*Captain's Journal*

*The Blue Horizon landed in Woodward a little over an hour ago at the Municipal Airport. This city doesn't have a standard spaceport, as we're the first starship to actually land here, but there was a large section of tarmac not in use where they directed us to set down. Compared to the other aircraft there, the Blue Horizon looks like a four-story building sitting out there. The closest actual city engineered to handle vessels like ours is the Burns Flat Spaceport, seventy-five miles to the south of Woodward.*

*We drew quite a crowd to the landing area from the locals, and surprised a number of them when they discovered my entire crew was made up of aliens. Due to our shared past history, there are still a lot of xenophobes among the population of Earth, but so far we haven't had a problem with anyone here in this town. We get a lot of stares and some of the bolder children want to "pet" our fur, but mostly we've been left alone. Oddly enough, my usual sense of unease around humans has been quiet, perhaps due to my recent experience with Mark Littlefeather, as well as the fact that no one here has demanded anything of me... yet.*

*Misty Paltier, the Chief Executive Officer of Misty's Toybox chain of interspecies intimate clothing stores, was understanding of the delay of her cargo on board the Hidalgo Sun, but promised future business to the Blue Horizon for getting her overdue merchandise to her distribution warehouse in place of the other ship. She promptly hired us to make a delivery for her from Paris, France to the other side of the planet to the Great Plains of the North American continent. Our large cargo hold was practically empty as we delivered a mere twelve boxes of women's lingerie to one of her properties in Woodward, but she paid standard fare for site-to-site same-world delivery, so I'm not one to complain.*

*I don't know what there is to do in a small city like Woodward, but high-speed mag-lev transports can take my crew wherever they wish from here during our typical three day shore leave. As for myself, I'm planning to take in the fresh air, just relaxing at a local hotel and make extensive use of the swimming pool. If Max is willing, I'd like to teach him to swim and this would be a good opportunity for it.*

*I understand Tanis has a friend who's currently practicing medicine here in Woodward; that fennec seems to know people everywhere we go. He said they served together during their residency on Nalirra, but whereas Tanis was drafted into his first term with the military a semester shy of getting his full degree, his friend has gone on to practice medicine for short periods of time on various worlds. His skills in anthrobiology have come in handy on more than one occasion, but his current locale is this unlikely small plains town where he's the only non-human in a population of fifteen thousand.*

*Despite the area's moniker, the weather looks rather calm. It's hot here, and there are thunderheads off in the distance toward the southwest, but there's only a gentle breeze blowing and the sun is shining down on us. I've seen my share of violent storms on Dennier near my hometown, but Renny's not looking forward to being in a place with a nickname like Tornado Alley, mild weather or not.*

*Regular thunderstorms don't bother me – I really do love them – but I can't forget the tornado outburst that nearly leveled Grandstorm when I was a cub. Those things scare me.*

*I got word from Rezo that the Hidalgo Sun is in the repair depot and will be grounded for a while. As he feared, the repairs the depot wants to make are extensive and the projected bill is going to be more than he can afford right now. However, Mars Colony has agreed to employ his entire crew for the duration in miscellaneous jobs to help defray the costs. Extra help on Mars is always coveted by the locals and bartering work for work is common.*

*After our stay in Woodward, we're to fly to Flagstaff to pick up our next cargo and then we'll be on our way to the world of Argeia. My crew seems excited at the prospect of visiting that world for our next delivery. Not much is known about the place other than what has been in a few travel vids that have circulated around the PA. Xenophobes almost to a fault, outsiders typically have not been welcome to the so-called white planet in the past, so this delivery could turn out a few surprises.*

*All of the current members of the PA were originally colonies of the Earth, but Argeia is a bona-fide alien world that developed completely on its own; its indigenous sentients belong to a feline race known as Kastans.*

*One of Taro's old contacts was approached by the government of Argeia, which has only recently considered trade negotiations with the Planetary Alignment. Somebody recommended us and the Kastans followed up to hire our services. We've already received payment for the upcoming voyage, and it is a generous amount, too – much more than is our standard price for delivery to a new location.*

*Before we start that voyage, however, it's time to relax.*

*Merlin Sinclair, Captain*

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The Barnyard was a rustic establishment on the edge of town. The old inn was made of brick and wood, a replica of the style common to the area two centuries earlier and usually popular with out-of-town guests. At the moment, however, only a family of three was booked in for a couple of days besides the crew of the *Blue Horizon*, but they had gone out for the day to see the local attractions, such as they are.

It would have been easier and less expensive had Merlin's crew decided to use their own beds in the ship, but after weeks on board no one cared to see their rooms again for a while. A change of scenery was always nice, and while the canned, recycled air on the ship kept them alive, nothing could compare to the fresh air of a planet, no matter where it may be – with the possible exception of the mildly-toxic atmosphere of Quet, that is.

As soon as they had been released, Pockets, Lorelei and Durant had taken to walking toward the center of town at a leisurely pace. Tanis was anxious to see his colleague and Cindy had volunteered to go with him to the other side of town. They hired a bright yellow taxi and disappeared down the road in the warm summer sun of the late afternoon.

Inside the lobby of the antique-decorated inn, Renny stood before a wallboard of pamphlets showcasing local attractions while he chewed absently on a plastic straw he had gotten with his soda. He picked up a few with colorful pictures that looked interesting, especially one profiling a local commercial cavern tour. He carried those he had selected and ambled toward the back patio where Merlin, Samantha and Max were splashing around in an aquamarine pool. The cheetah was a decent swimmer when he had to be, but he disliked getting wet more than necessary and found a sun-warmed deck chair more to his liking. He settled down into it and began to relax, but he considered taking a run later; his foot seemed to be fully healed and he hadn't had any twinges in weeks.

Max, on the other hand, had never learned to swim. There was neither a reason nor a place on Quet for him to try it, so he stayed in the shallow end of the pool or crept along the sidelines with a tight grip on the outer tiles. He had agreed to let Merlin and Samantha teach him how to swim, but he wanted to be acclimated to the water first. He remembered the beach on Pomen and let his mind drift to his walk along the sandy shore with the cute little tigress he had met there. He and Wendy continued to write to one another with promises to meet whenever possible, and he always looked forward to her letters – even if several of his crew mates teased him about having a girlfriend.

Samantha crawled up onto Merlin's shoulders in the pool, laughing and giggling as the wolf stumbled on the sloped bottom and got a mouthful of chemically-enriched water. Merlin gasped and sputtered as he managed to lift her – and his nose – above the waterline. He grinned mischievously and pushed her backward. She landed with a splash that soaked a laughing Max, and just managed to miss the feline navigator with a wave that fell short of his chair. Renny jumped up with a yelp and moved his chair further back away from the edge of the pool while the others laughed.

"What's the matter, Ren-Ren?" Sam asked in a lilting voice. "Afraid of getting your precious fur wet?"

"Jumping *into* a large puddle of water's not my idea of relaxing," Renny replied with a smirk. "I can keep myself clean without immersing myself."

Max sniffed at the matted fur on his arms with a frown. "It doesn't feel all that clean to me," he said. "The water smells funny and leaves my fur sticky whenever I get out."

"That's the chlorine," a new voice said. "It's what keeps bacteria and other nasty things from growing in the water." Everyone looked up at the thin elderly innkeeper who had just come out onto the pool deck with a tray of lemonade-filled glasses. He wore a straw hat with a wide brim to shield his balding head from the sun and was dressed in a white shirt and pair of tan shorts. His sandals clapped on the tile as he approached a small table beneath a wide umbrella and set his tray on it with a smile.

Mr. Harris had never been off of the Earth before – he had never even been more than a few hundred miles from his birthplace of Woodward, at that. He had seen pictures of Furs in magazines and vids, but until Merlin Sinclair's ship had set down a few hours earlier, the only one he had ever seen in person was that vulpine doctor on the other side of town, and then only from a distance. Some humans avoided Furs as being too different, but Mr. Harris was fascinated by them and tried to find any excuse to be nearby.

Likewise, Merlin had found Mr. Harris to be a nice fellow and didn't mind his presence, feeling this elderly widower presented no threat. Renny barely paid the man any special attention. Nearly an equal number of Humans and Furs lived together in harmony on his homeworld, so being around them felt as natural to him here as it did on Kantus.

"I brought you some lemonade," Mr. Harris said with a friendly smile. He took off his hat and mopped his forehead with a handkerchief. "I thought you might be thirsty out here in the sun."

"Thank you, Mr. Harris," Samantha replied with a smile of her own. She climbed up the pool ladder and reached for a towel. The human's eyes grew wide and he turned his head quickly with a mumbled "You're welcome."

It took Sam a moment to realize that the man had not expected her to be swimming in the pool without a swimsuit. Her natural black and white fur hid her nether regions well enough, but the cold water had an effect on her chest that made it specifically noticeable to the human male. Samantha felt pity for the man and covered herself with her towel. She walked

over to him and said in a quiet voice, "Please forgive me, Mr. Harris," she said. "I forgot where I was."

The man swallowed for a moment and then looked aside at her hesitantly. When he noticed she was covered, he sighed and gave her a smile. "I'm sure that's natural where you come from, my dear," he said, "but I'm just not used to seeing it." He swallowed again and added in a quiet voice, "You're welcome here at my place, but for the sake of my other guests, would you please wear something while you're in the pool?"

Samantha nodded with a smile as she picked up a glass of lemonade. "I'll get a bathing suit in town today. I promise we will follow your rules, Mr. Harris."

"Thank you," he said. "I think I'll go back inside now before any more of you get out of the water, too."

Renny looked up at the Border collie with a wide grin after the human had gone back inside. "You're scaring the locals, Pooch," he said. She made a face at him and then took a drink of her lemonade through a large straw. It was tart, but tasted good.

Merlin and Max walked up beside her. "What was he bothered about?" the wolf asked as he daubed the corner of a towel into his left ear.

Samantha looked down and grinned widely. "We're embarrassing our host by not wearing anything in the pool."

Merlin followed her gaze and then shrugged. "Ah, I forgot they don't like that." He looked over at Max, who was already wearing a pair of red swim trunks.

"We wore them at the beach on Pomen," Max explained. "I thought I was supposed to wear them in the water here, too."

Merlin nodded at the canine as he consciously covered his crotch with his bushy tail. "Looks like you were right, kiddo," he said. "A lot of the worlds in the Planetary Alignment have picked up the habit of wearing swim clothing to cover their privates, though you'll still find a lot of places where people don't wear clothing at all, preferring their own fur for covering."

"Well, I was going to drink my lemonade and get back into the pool," Samantha said, "but since I don't have a swimsuit, I think I'll just go up to my shower to wash out the chlorine. I'll put on shorts and a tank top later so I can sit out here in the sun and not embarrass Mr. Harris." She looked over at the wolf and lightly grabbed the end of his tail with a smile. "You need to get some shorts on too, mister."

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"Arktanis TeVann!" a male red fox in a white smock exclaimed in amusement when Tanis stepped out of the taxi and paid the driver in local currency. "I never thought I'd see the day when *you* would show up at my clinic!" Tanis grinned widely and pulled his friend into a brief embrace as Cindy slid out of the taxi beside them.

"It's good to see ya again!" Tanis said. He turned to the mouse and put an arm around her waist. "This is Cindy Allport, one of my crewmates," he said to the fox. Then he looked at his companion and said, "Cindy, this is my friend, Doctor Marvin Tronnor."

"Honored to meet you, Ms. Allport," the physician said. Cindy winked at the doctor as he took her hand and licked it lightly across the knuckles.

"Oh, he's a charmer," she giggled with a grin at Tanis. "Nice to meet you, too, Dr. Tronnor."

The red fox led them inside his clinic, a small white building with a flower garden in the front adorned with bird feeders and a bird bath. Inside was a cozy waiting room with soft chairs, couches and a vidscreen in one corner with the sound muted that showed a local weather reporter in front of a wind chart. They moved through the room into his private office in the back, which looked even cozier than the waiting room. A desk stood in a back, covered in papers and spreadsheets in front of a computer tablet that was currently off. The opposite corner of the room contained an L-shaped couch with plants hanging over it from the ceiling and a gentle warm breeze wafted through wispy white curtains framing an open window. Through another doorway was a soft four-poster bed. It was likely he lived in the back room of his clinic. The three of them sat on the couch, a fox sitting on each side of the mouse.

"So how did you wind up on my doorstep?" the doctor asked. "I was surprised when I got your message stating that you would be here."

Tanis shrugged his shoulders. "We were hired to make a delivery for one of the stores here in town," he said. "When I heard it was Woodward we were coming to, I remembered this was yer last known location." He leaned back against the cushions and yawned in the warm room. "It was just luck that I was able to contact ya."

"How's your business here, Dr. Tronnor?" Cindy asked.

"You can call me Marvin – please," the doctor said with a smile. Then he looked around the room and replied, "I originally set up my practice in this town *because* there aren't any other Furs here. I'd attended a medical school in England to study human biology and they said I had learned well quickly. However..." he said with a sigh, "most folks in Woodward don't think of me as a practicing physician, but more of a veterinarian. They think I'm here to be a doctor for their *pets*. I've tried to explain otherwise time and again, but it rarely sinks in."

Cindy frowned, but Marvin continued with a smile. "I don't mind, really. I've made good friends with some of the folk who've brought me their animals and some of them have even started letting me treat *them* as well." He pointed to his medical degree and other certificates framed on the wall. "After all, I *am* a licensed physician in human physiology. It's taken a while, but a number of them are starting to warm up to having a fox as their family doctor."

He grinned as he leaned forward and lowered his voice in a conspiratorial manner. "The kids *love* having a furry doctor and parents have told me that their children tend to behave better when they're with me." Cindy giggled, not from his words, but from the hand he had just placed on her knee.

Marvin looked at Tanis and fell back into regular conversational tones, but didn't remove his hand. "Speaking of children, do you still perform magic tricks for kids?"

Tanis nodded. "Any time we're near a park where children congregate, I always take a few tricks up my sleeves. It's always fun to see their little smiles as I wow them with my brilliance."

Marvin nodded and casually gestured toward the door with his free hand. "Crystal Park is just down the street a few blocks," he said. "Lots of oak and willow trees shading the grounds and there's usually quite a crowd of little ones scurrying all over the place at this time of day."

Tanis noticed his friend's hand on Cindy's knee and took the hint with a smile. Cindy looked at him innocently, but he could see the '*get lost, I want to visit with your friend*' look in her eyes. He stood up casually and stretched.

"Well," he said, "if ya don't mind me abandoning ya for a while, I'm going to go see the kiddies." He grinned and gave them both a knowing wink. "I'll be back later, Dr. Marvin."

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Durant heard a gasp behind him and he twitched an ear in response, but otherwise kept his attention on his task. He flipped through the publication titles in the boxes in front of him and browsed in search of something that would catch his interest.

The grizzly bear was currently inside a local comic shop and he received nothing but stares from the customers. Most of them were under the age of twenty and the clerk behind the counter was barely above that himself. Like most everyone else in town, they had heard about the flying saucer with an alien crew that had landed at the airport.

A comic shop was probably the last place any of them would have thought one of the aliens would visit, and it was odd to see a seven-foot tall grizzly bear wearing clothes and browsing through graphic novels. A boy of fourteen with runaway dark hair stood in a corner of the room and pushed his wire-rimmed glasses up on his nose, staring in awe. Another boy with fiery red hair grabbed him by the arm and pulled him past the ursine customer, bolting out the front door.

Durant tried to appear oblivious to the reactions his presence caused, but the continued whispers and stares were beginning to irritate him. He picked up a handful of titles he'd set aside and made his way to the checkout register. He set them on the counter and smiled at the clerk.

"I will take these, please," he said casually.

The man behind the counter swallowed, but took the books with a forced smile. He hesitated when Durant handed him an interstellar credicard, but when he noticed the card was of a common type that would automatically make adjustments for local currency, he took it with a sigh of relief and rang up the sale.

A moment later, Durant left the building and wondered where he should go next. He knew it wasn't so much that he was a Fur that bothered people, but it was that *and* his sheer size. He'd had similar experiences in three stores already. He knew someone like him was uncommon in this place and didn't fault them for their surprise, but he had grown weary of it already. It was for this that he never really enjoyed himself whenever they visited Earth. Humankind was responsible for *creating* furmankind three centuries earlier, but they all seemed typically biased against them.

With a sigh and a glance upward at a darkening sky, Durant headed back to the *Blue Horizon*. At least there he could find sanctuary.

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Tanis kept an eye on the overhead clouds and tried not to frown when he heard the distant rumbling of thunder. He currently sat on a park bench near a sandy area full of children. Most were gathered around him in open mouth awe as he juggled three apples that had fallen from a nearby tree. He had spent the past hour at the park, where young children had followed the furry man around and he had performed a few magic tricks for them. A few parents had rushed up in concern when they saw their youngsters near the alien, but after watching him suspiciously for a while most had relaxed and stood nearby as he entertained the kids.

Arktanis TeVann had always loved children. He knew that someday he would like to settle down somewhere with a nice vixen and have a few of his own, but until such a time ever presented itself, he was content to enjoy the offspring of others.

Earlier, as he had was about to show his interested fans a disappearing coin trick, a blond-headed boy of five had crawled up onto the bench beside him and began to pet the fur between the large ears on the top of his head with a grin. He turned and looked at the youngster with a smile, and with that a full score of children moved forward to run their little hands and fingers through the fur on his head, tail, arms and even one daring youngster had lifted his shirt to see if his back was covered in fur as well.

The tan desert fox became the favorite point of interest on the playground for the next hour. He showed them a few more tricks, had a little chase with some, and then told them a few stories his mum had taught him with he was just a kit himself.

A strong wind with moisture in the air had begun to steadily pick up, so the parents and babysitters began to gather up their youngsters. A clean cut man in his late twenties walked up to Tanis with a smile as he grasped hands with his six year old daughter.

"Thank you for entertaining our kids, mister," the man told him. "I don't know when Alicia's had so much fun out here at the park. Here's something for you." He tried to hand Tanis a few dollars, but the fox shook his head with a grin.

"I appreciate the offer," Tanis replied, "but hearing their laughter and seeing their smiles is payment enough."

"Well, okay," the man said with a knowing smile. "I can understand that." He pocketed the currency and then reached out to the fox without hesitation to shake his hand. "Thanks again. The kids do like you." He looked up at another roll of thunder and glanced to the dark clouds. "However, I think you'd better find shelter soon. The weather forecaster said we were in a severe thunderstorm warning right now and it's going to start raining soon."

"The inn where I'm staying is on the other side of town," Tanis mused.

"There's a shopping mall not far from here," the man said as he pointed down the street. "Go up three blocks to Baker Street, turn left and you'll see the mall a half block in that direction."

"Thank you," the tan fox replied.

"You're welcome."

The breeze wafted Tanis' large ears a bit as the man and his daughter walked up the street toward their house and he gave a little wave to the girl who looked back at him. He glanced up at the clouds and then moved out to find the mall.

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Bricker's Hardware was a small store, but Pockets felt he was in a mechanic's heaven. The selection of hand tools was impressive, especially those in configurations he had never seen before or had not seen in years. He picked up one particularly nasty-looking weapon of a tool and immediately thought of a spot in between the *Horizon's* double hulls where it should work better than anything he already possessed. He picked up four of them for good measure and dropped them into a shopping basket that was already so laden with tools that his small stature had a hard time maneuvering it down the narrow aisle.

Lorelei had no use for the kind of hand tools Pockets drooled over, but she was no less excited at the variety of cooking spices that Mr. Bricker had in his store. She already had a handful of incense sticks in her basket, in addition to several colorful Southwest-style blankets. She giggled delightfully at the aroma of a spice container she opened and knew she just *had* to have that one after taking a quick taste from the tip of a moistened finger.

Pockets and Lorelei approached the checkout counter at the same time a short while later and exchanged grins at one another's shopping basket. The white rabbit looked up at the dark haired man behind the counter and presented her credicard. He smiled pleasantly and took it as he began to ring up her selections. A small vidscreen was on the wall behind him and the local weather reporter was going on about the approaching storm.

"We need to hire a taxi to take all this stuff back to the ship," Pockets told his companion.

"Yeah," Lori replied, "then we can do more shopping!"

The man behind the counter smiled. "I can call one up for you," he offered. "My brother drives one."

Lori grinned widely. "That would be great! Thank you."

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Cindy closed her eyes as the wind blew along the side verandah of the clinic and felt little pricks of sand from the air. She and Dr. Marvin were resting lazily in a porch swing, their conversation having reached a lull. The air had grown oppressive with winds that couldn't seem to make up their minds to blow hard or not at all.

The mouse opened her eyes at the sound of voices and saw several people trotting down the street in apparent concern. She watched them until they rounded the corner and then looked over at her newfound friend.

"Wanna go back inside and snuggle some more?" she asked the red fox at her side with a wiggle of her small nose. When he looked back at her, however, he wasn't smiling.

"I think we'd better go in and look at the weather report," he said seriously.

Cindy looked out across the yard at the dark clouds between the trees and frowned. "I'm not afraid of storms," she said, "but you should see our ship's navigator, Renny. He gets real -"

"You might be afraid of this one," Marvin interrupted with a shake of his head. "We've been getting weather reports all day about the potential this one is building up to, and it could get ugly." He stood and offered her a hand up. When she took it and stood at his side, he led her inside to the back room of the clinic. The gray mouse took a last glance outside before he shut the door and then picked up the vidscreen remote from the night stand.

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Renny stood up from his deck chair and frowned at the approaching storm clouds that talked in continual rumbling. He could see lightning flashes within the towering clouds and the occasional ground-to-sky strike. The very air had taken on a greenish tinge and the horizon beneath it was getting harder to see in the darkness of the evening.

Samantha looked up at him with amusement. "What's the matter, Ren-Ren? Are you afraid of a widdle storm?" She couldn't resist the temptation to needle him about his fear of bad weather. The two of them had been trading good-natured insults all afternoon, but this time her feline companion wasn't smiling.

Renny turned and looked at her with wide eyes and the black stripes in his fur beneath them made the cheetah's expression all the more forlorn. A crack of lightning sounded suddenly and Samantha could see Renny shake in resonance with its reverberating echoes. She knew it was time to cut the jokes. He was really nervous.

Merlin and Max paid no attention to the navigator. The gusting winds threatened to blow the pieces off of their game board, but neither felt like abandoning their close match just yet. Max had a good mind for games and was giving the captain a run for his effort.

Renny set his jaw firmly after a moment and sat back down. "I'll be all right," he said between clenched teeth. "I can do this." He almost jumped out of his skin, however, when Merlin's DataCom beeped.

The wolf picked up the DC unit from the table beside him and thumbed the Receive button without looking up from his game. Max had just taken two more of his pieces.

"This is Merlin," he mumbled into the small device. He looked up at the sky as he listened to the call and then nodded in agreement. He suddenly realized the caller couldn't see his action and then answered, "That's a good idea, Durant. Go ahead." He clicked off the unit and set it down again to get back to his game.

"What was that about?" Samantha asked him.

The wolf answered without looking up. "Durant's back at the ship. He wants to activate the *Horizon's* spatial shields to protect the onboard systems from local lightning." As if to punctuate his words, a tendril arc lit up the sky with a resounding *Crack!* Renny jumped out of his chair and ran inside the inn without another word.

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"That cloud looks funny," Lorelei said strangely.

Pockets looked up to where she pointed and frowned at a section of the thunderclouds that hung lower than the rest and almost appeared to be slowly turning in place. The whole sky was now overcast with heavy clouds and a part of it even looked a little green. Something in the wind didn't feel right, but he didn't know much about Terran weather patterns so he didn't voice his concern. They had taken a taxi back to the ship to deposit their purchases, but were now crossing a large mall parking lot toward a collection of stores so they could be inside if it should start to rain.

Lorelei wrapped her arms around herself. "It's getting chilly," she said, "and my ears are popping."

Pockets grinned suddenly and wrapped a small arm around her waist. "Here," he said, "let me help you get warm."

The rabbit giggled and put an arm around him as well, the weather momentarily forgotten. Seconds after they reached the glass doors of the mall and had gone inside, rain began to fall.

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Dr. Marvin stood by the window and looked out into the rain. It had started lightly, but was now falling hard in big drops. Cindy stood next to him, the sounds of the vidscreen in the background. They had watched an earlier weather report warning of the approaching storm, but the physician beside her had grown distant and the look in his eyes worried her.

"What's the matter?" Cindy asked him timidly. "These thunderstorms are common here, aren't they?" She looked back out the window. "My family used to live on the West Coast for a while and heard about them all the time," she said, "but we didn't live where we had this kind of weather."

"Thunderstorms are common here, yes," Marvin replied, "but this one's giving me a bad sense. The radar images on the vidscreen are showing a bit of a rotation in the clouds — never a good sign in this part of the world. When the cool air from Canada flows down the Rockies and collides with the warm air coming up from the Gulf, it can make a deadly mix." He glanced over at her after a moment with an upraised eyebrow. "You just said you're from Earth?" he asked in curiosity. "Where did you live?"

Cindy grinned at him, thankful to have his attention again. "Santa Barbara, California," she replied. "They don't seem to mind Furs out there as much as other places. We lived up on the mesa. My father was on a —"

A crack of lightning and another new sound interrupted her words. Ice chunks the size of marbles began falling from the clouds and made a deafening din on the metal awning over the veranda outside. Cindy looked at the doctor with wide eyes, her heart creeping up into her throat.

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Samantha shut the patio door behind her. She and Merlin made it inside just as the rain began; Max had gone inside earlier to check on Renny after he had beaten Merlin at their board game. Mr. Harris walked into the room a moment later and stopped beside the canine to look out the window.

"It's going to be a gully-washer," he mumbled as the wind tossed two of the deck chairs into the pool. He looked at the Border collie beside him and nodded "It's a good thing the Harpers got back in time. They'll be down for supper soon, if you and your friends would like to do the same."

"We *are* getting hungry," Sam admitted to the man. "I can't wait to try your food."

"Annabelle is one of the best cooks in town," the elderly man said with a nod of his head. "I don't think you'll be disappointed in her supper, even if you are from outer space." He gave her a smile to let her know he was merely teasing, and Samantha chuckled at his expression.

She leaned in closer and said in a conspiratorial manner, "I hope Annabelle has a lot of food back there. My cheetah friend has quite an appetite."

There was a delighted glint in Mr. Harris' eye when he replied. "I don't think she has any gazelle meat in her freezer, and there aren't any in these parts for him to take down on the run."

Samantha snickered. She liked this man immensely. "Well, he'll have to suffice on —"

*Crrrrrrrrr-ack! BOOM!*

Lightning struck a communications pole in the field next to the inn and charred splinters swirled around in the strong wind before raining to the ground. More thunder sounded nearby in reply to the electrical tantrum, and it began to hail. In the front room of the inn, Renny let out a cry and stood up rigid from the wicker seat he had been huddled in. There was another flash and he ran up the stairs with wide eyes. The canine started after his friend.

"Max!" Merlin said sharply. The young mechanic stopped halfway up the staircase and looked back down at him. "I think he needs to be left alone," the wolf told him.

Max looked as if he was going to protest, but after a furtive glance back upstairs when he heard the cheetah's door slam, he slowly made his way back to the ground floor.

A brown-haired boy of five opened up a door at the top of the stairs and looked down at the canines with wide eyes. "Hey, Mom!" he said excitedly back inside the room, "There's dog-people here! Can I go down and pet 'em?"

"Tommy!" said a hushed voice, "That's rude!" A woman peeked out the door and looked down the stairs with a frown. "You can go down there, but be nice."

Merlin lowered his head, growling lowly to himself and Samantha just sighed. Distracted from his shipmate's fears, Max laughed and grinned at the boy as he took the stairs two at a time.

"Hi!" little Tommy said to Maximillian. The German shepherd smiled and looked at him steadily with his ice-blue eyes.

"Hello," Max replied. He sat down on one of the steps so that he looked eye-to-eye with Tommy and then tilted his head forward with a smile.

The boy recognized the gesture and reached forward to pet the top of Max's head gently. He laughed to himself and patted his head again.

"Tommy!"

Max looked up at the boy's parents coming down the staircase. He stood up and let them pass. The woman grabbed her boy and held him to her and the man stopped to look at Max.

"Please forgive him," he said. "He doesn't know -"

"It's okay, I don't mind," Max told him with a smile. "He's done nothing wrong."

"Thank you," the woman said. "We don't mean to be a bother." Thunder boomed and rattled the windows as the rain and hail slowed and then stopped.

Mr. Harris walked over to them and shook the man's hand. "Mr. Harper, you've just met Max Sinclair. The wolf over there is his uncle, Merlin Sinclair, and the lovely lass over by the patio window is Samantha Holden." He turned to his other guests and said, "This is Jim and Mary Harper, and their son Tommy."

Jim Harper walked over to Samantha. "Holden?" he asked with a quizzical expression. "Are you kin to the Holdens on Alexandrius, by chance? Holden Pharmaceutical?"

Sam smiled. "That's right," she said. "I -"

At that time, a plump red-headed woman in an apron came out of the kitchen and tapped on a glass with a spoon for attention. Everyone looked at her and she smiled. "Hello, folks," she said. "I'm your hostess, Annabelle. If you will look over our menus and give me your dining preferences, I can get started on your suppers."

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"Look, there's Tanis," Pockets said to Lorelei. They were in the food court on the lower level of the city's only large shopping mall, sitting in a booth with the remnants of their meals on plastic trays. Lorelei had finished off a nice salad, while Pockets had indulged himself in seafood. They waved toward their friend, who saw them and walked over to their table.

"Fancy seeing you two here," he said with a smile. Lorelei pulled her shopping bags out of a chair and the desert fox sat down with them.

"Looks like ya've been spending yer credits," he said.

"You should have seen the haul we took back to the ship earlier!" Pockets remarked.

"The locals must love ya."

"The locals think we're *strange*," Pockets said dryly, "but they don't refuse our money."

"Yeah, well, I had a wonderful afternoon in the park with -"

The lights in the mall flickered briefly and then went out. There were raised voices in alarm all over the complex and a few cries of fear. A few cigarette lighters flicked on here and there as people tried to see where they were.

"Hmm, well this is fun," Tanis said above the din of voices from the crowd around them.

Someone bumped into Lorelei's chair and stumbled into her lap with a grunt.

"Oh!" Lori exclaimed.

"Sorry, miss," a young male voice replied as he pulled himself back up.

"That's okay, I—" she started to say, but her voice cut off suddenly. They could hear someone shuffle away in the darkness and Pockets cleared his throat in concern.

"Are you okay?" the raccoon asked. It was often hard to stop Lorelei when she was talking, as she could sometimes be a chatterbox, so her sudden mid-sentence silence piqued his interest.

"Uhm, yeah," she replied with a giggle.

"What just happened?"

"Ohhhh, nothing..." Lori answered with another giggle.

"So... what do we do now?" Tanis asked as a few candles in the food establishments began lighting up. The power was still out and the air was beginning to get stuffy without the air circulation system running.

The roof of the mall was made of painted glass, and while the lightning flashes outside did little to penetrate the darkness within, they could hear the panes rattling with the rumble of deep thunder. Tanis looked up instinctively, even if he couldn't see much of anything.

"I was in an electronic shop earlier," he said. "Weather reports on the local station were warning viewers about the potential danger of this storm. Something was said about a wall cloud and recommended taking shelter."

"What's a wall cloud?" Pockets mused. Tanis only shrugged in the dim light.

"Since we're nice and dry," Lorelei said, "I guess we have good shelter here."

"If we were on the *Horizon*," Pockets replied, "I'd head straight for the backup generator. I don't know if this place even has one, and I wouldn't even know where to look. I think it's best if we just keep our seats. The local engineer should have power back up soon." His companions could hear tools clunking together in the darkness, and suddenly their vision was momentarily blinded by the bright light of a small flashlight torch the raccoon had pulled out of his largest pocket.

He smiled at them in the beam and asked, "Don't I just light up your life?"

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Jim Harper looked up from the dining table to the windows. Even in the light of the candles that Annabelle had lit against the sudden power loss, he could see forceful winds making the window panes bulge inward. A pigeon had slammed into the patio door earlier, but the stunned bird had already been swept away by the wind. Renny sat opposite him at the table, his hand tight around his glass of water. His crewmates had coaxed him out of his room to eat, but the raging storm continued to unnerve him.

"Mr. Harris..." Jim said, "that can't be a good sign." The innkeeper followed the man's gaze to the flexing window panes and he swallowed hard. The rain had begun again and was pelting the straining glass with large drops.

"Everyone," Mr. Harris said in a loud voice, "this storm's gotten serious – it looks like we may have a –"

The tiny speaker of a small radio came to life as Annabelle turned on a battery operated unit. Everyone in the room became quiet as they listened to the excited voice emanating from the radio.

*"–touched down just outside the city limits just moments ago, taking out a power station and a mobile home park! The debris cloud appears to be rope-like in appearance, but from my vantage point it appears to be growing even as I watch! I advise all citizens of Woodward to get to a shelter immediately. If you don't have one, get to the lowest level of your house or building and move to the center part of the structure, like a closet or bathtub, and cover yourself up with blankets and pillows. Stay away from all windows, especially on the south and western sides of the house. If you are caught outside, get to a drainage ditch or other depression, but don't attempt to get into a vehicle and outrun the tornado. Highway overpasses are too dangerous to use as shelter and should be avoided at all costs. If you –"*

The overburdened windows exploded inward, showering everyone with tiny square blocks of glass. Had the windows not been made of safety glass, everyone at the table might have been shredded. As it was, there were only superficial cuts all around, but furious winds were blowing more rain and debris inside through the empty window frame.

"I have a storm shelter out in the yard, just beyond the pool!" Mr. Harris shouted to be heard above the roar. Everyone scrambled for the doorway, but Merlin had to grab Renny's collar to forcibly pull him up off the floor toward the raging storm outside; it required Samantha on his other side pulling on an arm to get the cheetah to his feet. Jim picked up his son and grabbed his wife's hand.

As they darted outside into the torrential rain, Merlin's eyes grew wide. He heard a sound that brought back terrible memories and he swallowed hard. A deep roar, like the moan of a bull-fiddle filled their ears. As they made their way across the wet tile by the pool, Mr. Harris chanced a look behind them. No one could hear him gasp, but Annabelle saw the expression on his face. She turned to see what he had seen and a cry escaped her lips.

A dark funnel of cloud and debris was bearing down on them, sucking away the very air around them into its swelling mass and blowing out the remnants of houses and other structures it had already devoured. The funnel had formed into a pronounced stove-pipe shape and had to be nearly a half-mile in width.

"Run!" Annabelle screamed, "Run!"

Jim Harper raced across the muddy grass yard to a faded blue dome jutting up out of the earth. He grasped the thick handle at ground-level set into its curved surface with his free hand and twisted it, and even above the tornado's roar they could all hear the rusted metal screech in protest. He handed his son to his wife and grabbed the handle with both hands before it released and allowed him to swing the door aside. He pulled Mary and Tommy to him and then guided them down concrete steps into a musty dark opening.

Mr. Harris stumbled in the wind, but Merlin rushed forward to keep him upright. Annabelle ran on ahead to the shelter as the captain helped the elderly innkeeper onward.

Samantha slipped on slick grass in the yard behind them and fell face-first into mud. She rose up on trembling arms, and in a disgusted voice muttered to herself, "Someone *always* trips in the movies when running from danger. I can't believe it was *me!*"

Renny had gained enough of a presence of mind as debris flew past them to give her a hand up. They'd turned back toward the shelter when a sharp *crack* and a sudden cry of pain came from behind them. Samantha kept running, having not heard the voice, but Renny looked

back and saw Max lying on the ground. The front of the youth's shirt was torn across the chest and a large board flipped away from him in the wind.

Seeing the youth lying on his back amidst the slashing torrents of wind and rain, Renny felt a surge of emotion greater than his inherent fear of the storm. As Max fought to get up despite the stinging pain across his chest, their eyes made contact and the cheetah felt himself emboldened. Renny streaked back across the distance between them and dropped to his knees beside the youth in the muddy grass.

"R-Renny..." Max gasped.

"Let's go!" the cheetah said, as much to himself as the youth before him, and helped him to his feet. Renny supported his weight and it was a struggle to continue standing against the wind. It was hard to keep his feet on the ground - he felt as if the wind were trying to pick him up - but he put his head down and they resumed their flight toward the shelter.

The navigator looked up to get his bearings and saw several more boards flying directly at them. With more instinct than conscious thought, Renny dropped backward, pulled Max to the ground and then rolled over on top of the boy just as three thick planks tumbled through the space they had just vacated. The motion had been quick, but Renny was sure he had seen large rusty nails protruding from the boards that could have done serious damage.

Once again, Renny got to his feet as Max clung to him with his eyes tightly closed. The cheetah made his way toward the shelter where Merlin stood outside by the door, yelling something at him to coax him onward. The pair started for a moment at a flash of white. The cheetah paused as he recognized a bird fluttering helplessly in the wind before them, and a moment later the bird exploded in a blast of feathers as a baseball smashed wildly through its body as though hurled by a champion pitcher. Nonplussed, Renny and Max got to the shelter and Merlin motioned them downward below ground. The captain followed them into the hole, pulled the heavy metal door behind him with a clang, and quickly shoved a thick bolt to lock the panel into place.

The wolf moved down into the cramped shelter where everyone huddled close together as the storm raged overhead. Renny panted for breath and leaned against the wall as Samantha took a look over Max. Even in the darkness of the shelter, Samantha could see the whites of Merlin's eyes as she tended to Max's injury. Now that they were safely underground and out of immediate danger, her friend would start to remember - and remembering might prove to be just as disastrous.

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The *Blue Horizon* rocked from side to side. That in itself would not cause the load master concern during a normal voyage, for areas of turbulence in nebulae, stellar winds and the upper atmospheres of the planets were commonplace, but with the ship sitting inert on the ground Durant looked up in alarm. Even within the *Horizon's* thick shell, he could hear things hitting the protective shield of energy surrounding the ship.

He set his graphic novel aside and jumped up from the bed. He trotted from the cabin to the bridge, and when he stopped beside the center seat, his eyes went wide with what he saw through the forward windows.

A tight column of cloud and debris nearly three quarters of a mile in diameter occupied the middle of the darkened town. Despite the power loss of the main electrical plant, he could see power flashes sparking all across the city as the tornado hit other sources of energy and

disposed of them. It would have been difficult to see the funnel cloud in the evening darkness were it not for the explosions ripping around the base of the thing.

The grizzly bear turned on the bridge systems and selected the infrared filter for the forward display. The tornado, the overhead storm clouds and the city beneath all stood out in eerie green detail. He swallowed at the sight of the path of devastation he could see and increased the magnification of his field of view. He sat down hard in the center seat. There was nothing he could do to prevent the continued destruction of Woodward – all he could do was watch in horror as the tornado pressed onward, propelled by its own tremendous force.

\*\*\*

Cindy could hardly breathe beneath the pillows and blankets that she and Marvin had pulled into the small supply closet with them. It was the only room of relative safety in the clinic, located at the center of the structure. Sounds of breaking glass and splintering wood sounded loudly outside the buffeting door and there was no mistaking the feeling that the building was being ripped apart around them. The small closet swayed and packages of tongue depressors, bandages, pill bottles and other medical items showered them from the upper shelves.

The mouse and fox both cried out in surprise when a metal pole suddenly pierced the door panel and drove furiously into the wall at the back of the closet with a *bang!* Cindy's eyes were wide and a shudder passed through her. The pole had penetrated the closet directly between her and Marvin, with only a couple of inches to spare between their cheekbones.

There was a teeth-grating sound of shearing metal as something gave away in the wind and Cindy screamed when the whole closet tilted crazily. Driven forcefully over onto its side, it was added to other debris in the rubble.

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He could feel himself shaking and could do nothing to stop himself. The storm itself had not frightened Merlin like it had Renny, but the raging tornado that had just passed over them brought back the terror of a day years ago in his youth. He hadn't known the blinding fear was buried in his mind, but the memories came back too vividly amidst the roaring winds above their shelter.

Eight year old Merlin Sinclair was shoved into the deep indoor bathing pool of the family home with his younger brother Lucas, and pillows and blankets were piled in with them. The young wolf had never seen their father so scared and so determined in all his short life. There was no room for Christopher Sinclair to get into the pool alongside them, so he lay on top of his sons and held onto a small mattress with one hand and the faucet with his other as violent winds drove lethal debris through the shattered windows of the house.

The walls shook from the approaching tornado, one of several that hit Grandstorm that day, and things fell out of the bathroom cabinets in crashes that were barely heard over the din. The thick branch of a tree drove through the wall mere inches above the quivering mattress, its edges still sharp despite having just been thrust through several layers of stone, wood and plastic.

Lucas was crying, but there was nothing that could be done to quiet the five year old. Merlin was on the verge of tears himself, but drew comfort in the sturdy form of his father above him. The house creaked and groaned and the wind drove rain, mud and debris into the

house through the hole in the wall that widened as material was constantly ripped away. A section of the roof separated from its joists and disappeared into the roiling, dark afternoon sky, and the mattress was suddenly torn from Christopher's grasp.

Winds buffeted the black wolf and he snarled at the storm as he held onto the thick plumbing that was all that kept him from flying. He could feel some of the pillows sucked out from beneath him and Merlin's arms grasped tightly to his legs. It was hard to breathe as the very air seemed to be swept away in the maelstrom. Something on the outside smashed into the side of the house and the wall caved in on top of the bathing pool.

Less than a mile away, Diane Sinclair and her daughter Shannon had abandoned the family vehicle after it had flipped over into a drainage ditch. They ran for their lives as the debris from a housing area that had just been destroyed by the storm pelted them mercilessly. Diane had picked up Shannon from her tutor just before the tornado touched down in a park a block away and she had vainly tried to outrun the howling funnel cloud.

The mother and daughter ran to a highway overpass. Diane thought that the narrow spaces near the girder supports might shelter them from the wind and debris, and she saw that several others were already huddled up as close inside the structure as they could fit. She pulled her fifteen year old daughter up the embankment and pushed her up inside the girders as the tornado crossed the field directly toward them. The child wrapped all four limbs around and through the girders, clinging desperately to sanctuary.

Diane clung to the girders above her and tried to wedge herself in over the top of her daughter to give her protection. Debris pelted her and it felt as if hundreds of needles were piercing the skin beneath her fur. Her right leg had gone numb and she stole a glance into the wind that sandblasted her eyes with grit and noted with horror that a ten-inch shard of glass was embedded into her calf just below the knee. She knew better than to try to pull it out in such conditions and felt faint from the sight, so she closed her eyes tightly. The squall grew stronger and the small area beneath the overpass funneled the winds that strengthened already violent gusts. Diane suddenly knew they'd all made a mistake trying to shelter in a place that would only make the winds worse.

Shannon screamed something into her ear, but she couldn't make out what it was above the roar of noise. She felt her grip weaken on the girders and she looked up into her frightened daughter's eyes to realize that stronger forces were pulling herself away. Shannon cried out to her mother as she tried to reach out to grasp hands with her, but the suction was too great and Diane swiftly disappeared into the dark whirling mass of the debris cloud. It was only the child's right leg jammed through an opening in the girder that prevented her from being pulled out with her mother.

Back at the Sinclair home, young Merlin and Lucas felt as they were being smothered beneath the weight of their father with the remnants of the bathroom wall as the howling winds continued to take the house apart around them. The children cried out in sustained panic and the lupine captain of an interstellar freighter howled his terror along with such memories.

Merlin didn't feel Samantha's arms around his waist, holding him tight in the cramped quarters. All he could see was the silent face of his father later placed upon a bloody hospital gurney after they had been dug out of the rubble by a police officer following the storm. They were reunited with their sister the next morning, but their mother remained missing for days afterward; she was later found buried under rubble two hundred yards from the overpass where Shannon and only one other had survived.

The tornado had leveled a majority of the city of Grandstorm on Dennier on that day. Afterward, young Shannon, Merlin and Lucas were sent to live with their mother's parents on

Alexandrius, and it was there Merlin later met Samantha Holden, a young Border collie who had been sent from Sillon to the university where he attended.

Samantha held her head against his and spoke quiet words into his ears, trying to ignore Tommy's wailing behind her. Max clung to her leg with his eyes tightly closed, and Renny was balled up against the ground in a nearby corner in a fair catatonic state.

Then the sounds of the violence beyond the thick cellar door decreased almost suddenly; those huddled together breathed in relief that they had somehow made it through the worst of the storm that raged on away across town.

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Pockets was clowning around with his flashlight when the wall on the opposite side of the food court suddenly collapsed inward from the weight of a mangled vehicle that had been forced through it. Dust, debris, water and glass exploded out over the consumers and a howling, gale-force wind began to blow everything around them furiously. Parts of the weakened ceiling fell into the mall. The winds grew stronger and more of the outside wall collapsed as the churning continued to grow. Chunks of concrete, steel, glass and bricks from the upper level of the mall began hitting the floor around them and everyone dove for whatever cover they could find.

The *Blue Horizon* crew members scrambled beneath their metal lunch table just as a large iron beam fell down over them. One edge crashed onto the floor near Pockets and pulverized the concrete, but the other caught the short wall of plants they were sitting next to and, although partially crushed, supported it enough to keep from killing them all. The tornado continued to churn through the middle of the mall and after what seemed an eternity, the whirling maelstrom moved on to devour the surrounding neighborhood, leaving the remnants of the shopping center in ruin.

Lorelei swallowed hard and coughed at the dust she inhaled. She tried to raise her head, but bumped it on something in the darkness. She could see nothing and felt something lying across her lap. She moved a hand over the soft lump and decided it was Pockets judging from the clink of tools in the pockets she felt. He was out cold. She could feel his breath on her hand but he didn't seem to be laboring, so she left him alone.

"Tanis?" she asked timidly. She heard a groan and felt movement behind her.

"Tanis is dead," the desert fox's voice wavered as Lori repositioned herself over to him. Pockets' head slipped off her lap and hit the floor with a *thunk!*

"Yip!" the raccoon squeaked as the jolt woke him. Lorelei reached out and pulled him back to her lap. She coughed several more times and heard other voices out in the darkness within the sound of rain. The wind still blew through the open mall, but had lessened in intensity.

"What happened?" Tanis asked as he tried to sit up. Like the rabbit, he bumped his head on something above them and grunted as he rubbed the back of his skull. There was a strange smell in the air and he coughed when it burned his lungs.

"Something hit the mall," Lorelei replied. She tried to sort out the memories, but everything had happened so fast. She'd never experienced anything like it before and didn't know what else to say.

"Was it a bomb?" Pockets moaned. No sooner had the words left his mouth than an explosion ripped the air and pushed it violently above them. The ruins were lit from the fire of the blast from a ruptured gas line from one of the food court kitchens. Shrapnel and searing

heat filled the air around them as the fireball expanded upward, but then retracted in the wind and rain. Fortunately for them, they were shielded by a mountain of debris and were relatively untouched by the explosion, but others had not been so lucky. Horrible shrieks of pain and screams of anguish filled the darkness, and there was more yelling as other survivors tried to put out the multiple fires before more were hurt.

As a result from the flames that had started at places around them, Lorelei could see out through the rubble across the destruction. Her head grew light when she realized that the end of the mall with the food court where they huddled was all that was left of the mile-long shopping center still standing. She could also see fragments of bloody bodies crushed beneath sections of the upper level that had collapsed, mere feet away from them.

"We have to get out of here," Tanis said hoarsely, "away from the building before more of it collapses on top of us." He pointed to the remains of the upper level above them and they could see pipes, wires and other things hanging from the unstable, crumbling precipice.

\*\*\*

Durant looked down at the armrests of the *Horizon's* center seat. He had gripped them so hard while helplessly watching the tornado rip through town that he had bent them down and inward. The impressions of his fingers were also mashed into the padding. He released the armrests and rubbed the fingers of both hands absently as his attention went back to the vidscreens.

The right-hand screen was magnified and tracking on the tornado itself with sensors providing data on wind speed, direction, barometric pressure and a projected pathway. The other two screens were focused on different areas of the town. Normally, he would not be able to see parts of town for the buildings in the way, but the tornado had carved a swath right through the small city that left his vantage point open.

It took him a moment to realize that the tornado, while still growing in size and strength, was moving out away from the opposite edge of town and headed toward the northeast for open prairie. The ruins of Woodward were being left behind.

Durant felt only slightly more relieved until a thought occurred to him. He looked up at the image and data of the tornado and it showed no signs of dissipating. He moved to another station and tied in the ship's computer with the local info net. He called up a satellite topography map of the area and overlaid the data from the tornado's path across it. The grizzly frowned deeply. If the tornado kept its current trajectory, it would continue on through prairie occupied by the occasional farmhouse, but it was headed toward a popular recreational park of hot springs and a couple of small towns just beyond.

If he didn't do something quick, Durant felt as if there would be more deaths from this monster before the destruction ended. With the power down throughout the city, it was likely that he had the only functional communication equipment available. As quickly as he could, he called up contact data from the info net and then moved to the Com station to warn the authorities of those places in the tornado's path. After that was taken care of, he would put out a call for help to surrounding cities to provide emergency assistance for Woodward, if they weren't already on their way.

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It took the combined efforts of Renny and Jim Harper to force the door to the storm cellar open. Shredded wood, bricks and tree limbs lay across the faded blue dome, but they were finally able to push the heavy metal panel aside after a lot of struggling.

Jim was the first one up the steps and out onto the soggy ground above, and the cheetah noted the man's surprised expression as he looked around. Jim glanced back down at the expectant faces below and shook his head. "There's nothing left," he said, "but the twister's gone."

One by one, the survivors emerged from the dank shelter into an emptiness that was overwhelming. The wind still blew, but it was only a whisper of what it had been earlier. Lightning flashes continued to illuminate the sky, but thankfully no more rain fell on their position.

Annabelle and Mr. Harris were the last to step outside. The two of them clung together and both wept openly when they turned toward the inn. The two-story building, well over one hundred fifty years old, had been swept away entirely; the foundation had been wiped clean of everything except a few twisted water pipes that spewed through crimps and splits.

Splinters of wood, glass, insulation and other debris littered the ground, but for all the destruction, the area was cleaner than what they would have expected. The tornado had moved directly over the building and had taken everything with it.

Merlin stood beside Samantha, feeling calm but quite embarrassed over his behavior in the shelter. He was *captain* and should have remained strong in the midst of the storm, but his courage had failed him. Max was aching and rubbing his chest; he would be bruised, but he didn't think anything had been broken. Fortunately for him, the board had hit him with the flat side and had only knocked him to the wet ground. He stood beside Renny, who seemed to have regained his composure as well. The storm still thundered and pounded around them, but the emergency of the situation had calmed him – it had given him a purpose. The cheetah was in complete awe at the sheer power of a storm and what it could do, but although he was okay now, it was unlikely he would *ever* be comfortable around such weather phenomenon.

There were sounds of voices crying out from all directions as people emerged from other shelters and searched for missing people or pets. Sirens wailed in the distance and it reminded Samantha of something. She walked to where Mr. Harris mourned the loss of his home and livelihood and put a gentle hand on his shoulder. He looked up at her with wet tears and he brushed them from his eyes angrily as if embarrassed to carry on in such a manner. Samantha gave him a moment to compose himself, and when he finally looked as if he had steadied himself, she asked a question that was on her mind.

"Mr. Harris," she began. She cocked her head to the side and listened to the emergency vehicles down the street. "Doesn't Woodward have warning sirens for this kind of weather?" she asked. "I never heard anything sound off."

The elderly gentleman shook his head sadly and shrugged his shoulders. "We do have a warning siren," he replied, "but it seems I heard the system broke down with last winter's hard freeze. I don't think the city had the extra funds in the budget to have it repaired, so I suppose nothing was ever done about it."

Samantha looked angrily out across the demolished neighborhood around them. "I wonder how many lives might have been saved had they fixed it."

Merlin saw something fluttering in the grass at his feet. It was just a bit of debris, but he stooped to pick it up anyway. It was a stiff piece of torn paper with a date and a few names scribbled on it. He turned it over and saw that it was part of a photograph of a human family of four. Two young boys with bright, mischievous eyes sat on the wooden steps of a garden deck

between a lovely woman with wavy brown hair and her husband, a handsome man in glasses with graying hair and a mustache. He walked over to Annabelle and handed the photo to her.

She examined it, but shook her head. "I don't know who they are," she remarked. The wolf looked at the portrait again and noted how happy the family appeared. He wondered who they were, and whether or not his possession of the picture meant that someone in it was hurt.

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Cindy felt someone pull at her eyelid and suddenly there was a piercing light. She raised a hand to shield her face and heard a sigh of relief.

"She's coming around," said a relieved voice.

"She doesn't look hurt too bad," said another. "Are you sure *you* are all right?"

Marvin's voice answered, "I have bumps and bruises, but I'll be okay."

"Okay, Dr. Tronnor, we're going to keep looking for other survivors, then."

"Thank you, Dale. I'll see if I can salvage a few First Aid supplies and join you."

Cynthia Allport blinked her eyes a few times and tried to sit up as footsteps led away. Marvin's hand supported her shoulder and helped her into a sitting position. He looked at her in concern and she immediately noticed small cuts on one side of his muzzle and an ear.

"How do you feel," he asked her.

Cindy closed her eyes a moment and took stock of the aches and pains she felt. Fortunately, everything seemed to be minor. She looked back up into his green eyes and gave him a little nod.

"I've felt better," she said, "but I don't think there's anything broken. I *do* have a headache the size of my ship..."

"Yeah, me too," Marvin said with a smirk, "and I don't even know how big your ship is."

The gray mouse looked around in the flashlight glare. They were on a soggy blanket in what looked like a war zone. They were apparently in the front yard of the fox's clinic, although the building lay mostly over on its side in a pile. The night sky was lit up in the distance by lightning, but the winds had died down and rain no longer fell. There was a faint odor of gas, but it was getting weaker, and she could hear sirens a few blocks away.

"How did we get out?" she asked her friend.

"My next door neighbor found us," the doctor replied as he shined his flashlight over her cuts and bruises, feeling of her arms and legs to make sure there were no hidden injuries. "He's one of the few that's let me treat him and his family. He and I usually take daily walks together every morning before I open up the clinic."

The red fox stood up and offered Cindy a hand. "Let's see if you can stand," he said to the mouse. She nodded, took hold of his hand, and then got to her feet. She was a little shaky on her legs, but she remained standing.

"Now that you're upright, how do you feel?" he asked her.

"I have a bit of a cramp in my left leg," she replied as she massaged the sore spot.

"When they pulled the debris off of us," Marvin said, "you were laying on top of that leg."

"It doesn't feel broken. I think I'm okay." She moved closer and then embraced him for a moment; it was not for any sense of romanticism, but merely because she needed it.

"So long as you're okay," he said, pulling away to look into her eyes, "I'm afraid duty calls for the physician. I have another flashlight torch here - can you help me dig through the

rubble for First Aid supplies?" He looked around at the devastated neighborhood with a frown. "There's going to be a lot of hurt people and I have a feeling it's going to be a long night."

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"Here's another one, Michael," Pockets said glumly. He and a red-haired man in his thirties began picking up pieces of debris off of another body. When the man moved a chunk of wood and plaster, he choked and began to cry.

He looked up at Pockets in the dim light produced by an emergency electric lantern and wiped his eyes for the fortieth time since they had started working together. "This is the husband of the woman we found a few minutes ago," he said. "His name was Sean Brennen. Our boys played ball together every summer."

Pockets looked down at the deceased man and shook his head. The man's throat had been crushed from fallen debris and his bright blue eyes were open in shock. He put a hand on Michael's shoulder.

"If you want to take a break, I can go look for others," he said.

"No," Michael said as he wiped his eyes again. "I'll be okay. I want to lay him next to his wife and then I need to look for their son."

Not far from where Pockets and Michael worked, Lorelei tended to a couple of teenage girls. One had her arm in a makeshift splint, tied up in a sling made from her blouse, and the other had a wrap around her forehead made from one leg of her pants. Both had bruises and scrapes on their faces and arms. Lorelei had located a bottled water dispenser that was somehow still upright and was giving drinks in crumpled paper cups to the survivors she found.

The first girl had maintained her composure despite her injuries, but her companion had wept almost continually since she had been uncovered in the debris. It was only now that she had stopped bawling. The appearance of the humanoid white rabbit had taken her attention and Lorelei had been sweet and compassionate toward her. The sniffing girl was petting the ultra-soft fur of Lori's arm, and the action seemed to calm her.

However, Tanis found that being a Fur in an emergency situation on Earth was not necessarily a benefit. He was a medic and was helping out as much as he could, but there were some individuals so in shock that the sight of a short, bipedal furry creature with giant ears was just too frightening to allow him to help. He provided assistance where he could, but felt powerless when his help was refused, no matter his skill in medicine. Changing tactics, Tanis moved off into darker areas to help those who couldn't see him well in the stormy evening.

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Morning arrived at last. All remnants of the storm clouds had vanished and a clear blue sky was calm. Birds were chirping and the temperature was pleasant.

Durant stood on top of the *Blue Horizon*, having climbed out through an emergency hatch in the ceiling of the recreation deck. He had just finished cleaning blood and other stains from the floor of the cargo bay and he needed fresh air in his lungs. He also wanted to see the city with his own eyes. From this vantage point, he could see the mile-wide damage path that cut diagonally across Woodward in a southwest-to-northeasterly direction. The area resembled a junkyard of downed poles, wires, bricks, splintered planks, twisted metal and glass. He had

never been in a war zone before, but Durant had seen images of battle destruction on news programs; what he saw that morning resembled such photos.

Fires had broken out during the night and there were plumes of dark smoke still smoldering throughout the city. Hundreds of houses and businesses had been destroyed. Some that had been in the immediate pathway of the tornado somehow still stood, evidence of the unpredictable nature of the winds associated with a tornado, while others beside them had been reduced to complete rubble.

Various members of the crew had reported in to him through the night via their DataCom units and everyone had been accounted for and still breathing. None of them had sustained serious injuries, but he was the only one who had not had an up close and personal experience with the storm.

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The majority of them had stayed up through the night to help the injured and look for survivors, so most were now on board the ship in their cabins, exhausted and asleep. Earlier in the morning hours, Merlin had volunteered the *Blue Horizon* to transport the worst injuries to a hospital seventy-five miles south in Elk City, the closest large city, as the Woodward Hospital and Health Center was full and overcrowded.

With an exhausted and shaken crew, the *Blue Horizon* had made four round trips between the cities and Durant hoped they had been in time to save the lives of those they had transported. He had monitored the local broadcasts all morning and the death toll was still counting. The vid and radio warnings had done well to prepare the city for the potential of the approaching severe weather, but without functional storm sirens, the loss of life was higher than it should have been.

Although the town was still reeling from the previous night's havoc, Samantha had already initiated a sizable, anonymous donation to the city of Woodward that was earmarked *specifically* for an advanced tornado warning siren system. While emergency and cleanup crews were continuing to comb the area for other survivors – and bodies – an order was already being processed for the equipment, delivery and installation of the warning system to be put in as soon as power was restored to the parts of the city still standing. Although tornadoes can form during any month of the year, the season of greatest potential still had several weeks left, so getting the warning system in place even before the town could begin rebuilding was a priority.

The other outlying places that had been in the path of the storm had been amply warned and the destruction had not been as great. The tornado had turned in a graceful arc toward the North after it left Woodward in its wake and it was tracked for another half hour before it finally lost its power, dissipating in the middle of empty ranch land. Reports had it pegged as an EF5 tornado on the Enhanced Fujita scale, topping out with wind speeds in excess of two hundred seventy miles per hour.

Durant took a large breath of air and then turned back toward the hatch. Like everyone else, he needed rest. They would be departing Woodward later in the evening if they were no longer needed and would take the rest of their shore leave in Flagstaff before their next pickup for delivery.

As the accountant approached the emergency airlock to descend back into the ship, a white dove fluttered down and landed on the upraised hatch. Durant smiled as the bird cooed at him a moment before flying away again. The Terrans symbolized peace in the appearance of a white dove. Perhaps Woodward would find some of that peace in the aftermath of the storm.

## THE MYSTERY OF WALKABOUT

By Ted R. Blasingame

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*SS Blue Horizon PA1138  
Captain's Journal*

*The Blue Horizon is currently a week away Argeia, an old world containing the first truly alien race that humanity has encountered. The Furs of the other planets in the PA were all products of Terran genetic engineering that were sent out as colonies of the Earth three centuries ago, but the Kastans of Argeia developed completely on their own. Having them agree to join the Planetary Alignment after getting through the difficulties of the language barriers had made it all a challenging endeavor, but the recent successes has many excited.*

*Our flight from Earth is going smoothly, and since this is a new route for us, we're passing through a section of space not yet frequented by PA interstellar travel.*

*I cannot help but think about what we went through back on Earth while in Woodward, but it's been two and a half weeks and I think everyone is sleeping comfortably again. I find it highly unlikely that Samantha will tease Renny about his fear of storms anymore. We've all been through a lot, and although I feel embarrassed over my own behavior during the storm, I feel awfully fortunate that none of us were seriously injured. I'm glad it's over, but the citizens of Woodward have a long recovery ahead of them.*

*I received a call from Captain Kegawa a few days ago. His ship has been cleared for return to service, though it passed the safety inspection only barely. I don't know what use I could actually have for an aging ship like the Hidalgo Sun, but Rezo has promised his help should we ever need it.*

*I don't really have much to report at this time. Although we are in a new region of space, the flight itself is routine and has been thankfully quiet. Samantha's pulled out a load of movies she picked up in Flagstaff and the majority of them have actually been quite good. There have been a few stinkers in the bunch, but sometimes it's impossible to know ahead of time what a show is going to be like. Most were made on Earth and have an all-human cast, but there's been a few Sam found that were probably made elsewhere that have a predominantly Fur cast of characters. They're all in various degrees of quality, but we should have plenty of entertainment to last us a few voyages.*

*Lorelei has become hooked on an old interstellar televid show lately. No matter who's watching a show or movie on the vidscreen, she has announced to everyone that she must watch The Golden Chef Challenge, which originates from Alexandrius. I've only watched it with her once, but from what I could tell, the main objective was a fancy cook-off between famous or prestigious chefs from all over the PA. Each show unveils a new specific ingredient from anywhere in the PA that the chefs must incorporate into their meals, and this can sometimes border on the ludicrous. I don't know much more about the show that this, but Lori nearly started a fight with Samantha last week when the show came on while Sam was in the middle of a movie. Samantha finally let the rabbit have the vidscreen since Lori's show was broadcast live and Sam's was a file she could always come back to.*

*Max has proven himself a fast learner in the engine room. Pockets praises him often for his efforts, and has even begun teaching him technical electronics. Max hasn't quite gotten the hang of that yet, but he seems interested in learning new things.*

*I finished off the final novel of a mystery series I love yesterday and have no others to start in on, so I think I'll turn in for the night. I should have stocked up while back on Earth; I could use a good mystery right now.*

*Merlin Sinclair, Captain*

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"Captain, please come to the bridge."

"What is it, Sam?" the wolf asked wearily. He glanced at the digital clock on the far wall with groggy eyes. It was 03:45 hours.

"Twenty minutes ago the long-range proximity scanners picked up what appears to be a large body of refined metal. The scans suggest a large vessel."

"Another Hidalgo Sun?"

"We aren't detecting a distress beacon — or any other transmissions from it for that matter."

"Okay," he replied with a yawn. "Alter our course to intercept."

"Already on our way. We'll arrive in about ten minutes."

"I'll be there after a visit to the head," he muttered sleepily.

Several minutes later, Merlin strode onto the bridge rubbing his eyes with one hand, a cup of coffee in the other. He was dressed in an ornate Mandarin robe that Sparky had given him before they had departed Sillon, one that had survived the crash on Crescentis. He yawned and wiped his eyes again. Samantha sat in the center seat, her hands on the guidance shifts as she fired maneuvering thrusters to bring the freighter softly to a stationary spot in space.

The center window had a clear view forward of the freighter, though nothing but stars could be seen. The left window's circuitry displayed sensor readings, and on the right was a computer rendering of the huge vessel they approached. They could not see the ship in the darkness of space and had to rely solely on instrumentation.

The primary purpose of the long-range scans were for debris that might be in the flight path with the potential to pierce the protective shields around the ship without being able to deflect them; in this case, it appeared to be another vessel.

The most prominent feature of the ship they approached was the giant delta wing configuration of the living module. A grid of huge pipes and structural beams extended aft from the wing's center nearly fifty meters and ended in a large pair of twin engine pods. The whole thing looked as if it were a stubby arrow piercing the void of space. There were no running lights or internal illumination, which made it difficult to see without the light of a nearby sun; dim and distant starlight was merely occluded instead of reflected. They approached the vessel from a higher vantage on the starboard and the sensors indicated that it was several times larger than the *Blue Horizon*.

"I'm getting weak power readings, but nothing else," Sam told the wolf when he stopped at her side.

"Registry?" Merlin asked as he looked up at the screen.

"There's no transmitting beacon encoded with the ship's I.D. I've tried hailing the ship, flexing on all local frequencies, but there's been no reply."

"I don't recognize the design," Merlin said as he studied the huge arrow-shaped structure. He took a lap of his coffee and then set the cup on the station counter. "Any idea where it's from?"

The Border collie shook her head and answered, "No, but I have the computer checking the configuration to see if the design itself is listed in a PA database."

Merlin leaned on the back of her chair and rested his chin on the top of her head. "How far are we from it?" he asked in a mutter.

Sam checked her readings. "We're holding at approximately two kilometers."

"Bring us in closer," Merlin said quietly. "About thirty meters... and drop us level with it."

"That's awfully close," Sam replied with a frown.

Merlin looked at her sideways with a smile. "If we can find an accessible airlock for the tunnel," he said, "we'll need to get even closer."

"Ahh," the Border collie mumbled as she nudged the thrusters to move the ship gently forward.

Merlin looked up at the right screen when the computer chirped and displayed the results of its search. He twitched an ear while he digested the sparse information. "*Goldenrod*-class, a long-range explorer originating from Earth," he said. Samantha was busy guiding the *Horizon* in closer and couldn't look over at the readout. She merely nodded to acknowledge hearing him.

"We still don't have an I.D. on the ship," he said, "but the library data states that it's an early design that Earth was using when they developed the first version of LightDrive technology."

"Look at the aft pods," Sam said after a quick glance toward the screen. "The output section definitely looks like it's equipped with LightDrive engines."

The *Blue Horizon* eased up closer to the darkened ship and the collision alarms bleated loudly. The captain quickly reached across Samantha's console and silenced the annoying sound. "We've got to get in closer," he muttered.

"At least we know the alarm works," Sam said with a lopsided smile. She glanced up at the sensor screen and spied an airlock near the forward apex of the delta wing. She tapped a control and then touched the screen with a claw tip right over the other vessel's hatch. Thin red crosshairs appeared over the spot she'd touched and then she entered the distance into a keypad. She released the guidance shifts and they began to move almost imperceptibly on their own.

"We're still seventy-five meters away. Auto alignment is now engaged to bring us in to fifteen meters on thrusters."

The wolf nodded and moved quietly to the engineering station on the forward wall to look out through the windows at the derelict. The intercom chirped and Merlin moved back to the Com station.

"Bridge," he said after tapping a touch pad.

"What's going on up there?" Pockets' excited voice came through the speaker. "*I heard alarms!*"

"The sensors picked up the mass of what looks to be a large derelict ship. I'm having Samantha move us in close so we can check it out. If there's anyone on board, we'll need to give them assistance. If not, we'll claim salvage rights."

"*And did you bother to wake your engineer at this discovery? NoooOooo...*"

Merlin smiled and winked back at Sam. "Okay, engineer, get your britches on and meet me down by Durant's office. We don't know if there's any air in that ship, so we'll have to use the suits."

"*Aye, Captain. Who are you sending over?*"

"Just you and me for now."

"I'll have our suits prepped as soon as I can get down there."

"Thanks, Pockets."

Freed from the controls while the computer handled the current maneuver, Samantha looked over at the captain. "Can't we just send Moss over there to look around for us?" she asked.

Merlin shook his head. "That would be handy, but it wasn't designed to work in a vacuum and it won't operate outside the influence of the *Horizon's* computer system anyway. Pockets has talked about insulating and sealing it up, while extending its range to fly outside the ship for things like this, but as far as I know, it doesn't have that capability yet."

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By the time Merlin and Pockets were totally enclosed in their soft pressure suits, most of the crew was awake and watching with interest. Durant and Tanis were in the cargo bay with the pair, helping to make sure all connections and seals were secure. It was standard procedure to have someone double check each suit before going out into a potentially harmful void or atmosphere, especially since these suits were not specifically tailored to the current *Horizon* crew. Pockets had found one fairly close to his size, but he complained that the tail pouch was not roomy enough for his plume.

Renny, Max and Cindy crowded onto the bridge to watch through the windows. Since the derelict ship was dark and hard to see against the backdrop of stars, Samantha turned on the outside flood lamps and had the bridge lights down to minimum. The right-hand screen showed a sensor view of the ship.

In the cargo bay, Durant opened the thick inner door of the airlock and Merlin moved past him and into the small chamber. Patch crammed himself in beside the captain, a set of common tools hanging from a utility belt connected to his suit. Two suited bodies in pressurized suits in addition to the packs upon their backs barely fit in together. Once they were all in, Durant shut the door behind them and then began depressurization. Tanis stepped up to the tiny window in the hatch and peered inside as a loud hiss sounded from the mechanisms.

As it would take a moment for the airlock to reach zero pressure, the grizzly bear tapped a control screen with a claw tip and there was an immediate *thunk* somewhere between the double hulls of the ship.

"Zero pressure," Durant reported when the panel beeped. "Extension tunnel released."

"*Aye to both,*" Merlin's voice replied over the intercom speaker. There was a metallic quality to his words, as if the modulation was slightly out of sequence. The outer airlock hatch split apart diagonally and the suited figures within floated out. Each grabbed hold onto the end of the tunnel that surrounded them.

"*We're moving out,*" the wolf reported. Small jets of vapor issued from the packs upon their backs, activated by tiny controls within their suited gloves.

"*Hey, look!*" Pockets' voice commented gleefully, "*I'm a floatin' fool!*"

"He got the fool part right," Tanis said to Durant with a grin.

It took time to guide the extension from one ship to the other, but once they reached their objective, they placed the end around the frame against the hull of the derelict.

Merlin tapped a small panel. The first control lit up the tunnel from within, and from the vantage point of the bridge, the tunnel glowed eerily, even in the flood lamps. The second

control he tapped adhered the frame instantly to the other ship around the outer perimeter of its hatch, while a thin rubberized tube beneath it filled quickly with gel.

*"Seal is secure," Merlin reported. "Okay, Durant, go ahead and pressurize the tunnel to ship-normal. If there's a pressurized atmosphere within that ship, we don't want to destroy its integrity getting in."*

*"And if there's no air inside?" Durant asked.*

*"Then all we lose is the air inside the tunnel."*

*"Aye, boss."*

Due to the volume inside the extension between the two vessels, it took several minutes to fill it to capacity. *"Tunnel pressurized, boss," Durant said into the terminal's microphone moments later. The flexible sides of the tunnel looked like solid sheets of metal now that it had pressure.*

*"Captain?" Samantha said..*

*"Yes?"*

*"We can see a large open window port in the bridge area of that ship."*

*"Open?" Merlin asked.*

*"That means I'm glad I'm in a pressure suit," Pockets replied.*

*"Probably blown out," Samantha conjectured. "There's no glass, metal or shield over the opening. We missed seeing it before."*

*"Okay, thanks. The external hatchway controls on this end are inactive. Pockets is trying the manual release." There was a quiet moment as everyone waited, and then Merlin spoke again. "There's an identification label affixed to the hatch door," he said, "but it's not written in Standard."*

*"Probably one of Earth's local languages," Pockets commented, "but it's not English either; I don't know any of their others."*

*"Turn on your visor camera, Captain," Cindy said into the microphone. "I might be able to read it." The mouse shifted her attention to the left vidscreen, which had just come to life with an image from a tiny visor camera built into the top of the wolf's helmet.*

*"Are you getting this?" Merlin's metallic-sounding voice asked.*

*"Yes, Captain," Cindy replied. "Give me a moment to study it."*

*"The door seal just separated, but we haven't lost any of our air," Pockets announced. "That means at least the airlock itself is still pressurized."*

Samantha looked over at Cindy and saw the mouse nod her head. She mumbled something to herself, but the station microphone picked up her words. *"It would be written in a stylized form of kanji..." she said.*

*"Can you read it?"*

*"Somewhat. It's written in the language of the Japanese. The ship is either called the Walk Around, Back Walker, or the Back Hiker... or something like that. I'm a bit rusty reading these characters."*

*"Isn't that a Registry number?" Samantha asked, pointing to the identification label on the screen.*

*"Yes, I believe it is," Cindy confirmed. "K... V... N... dash... 92... 012."*

*"KVN-92012," Samantha repeated. "That doesn't sound like a standard Planetary Alignment registry number, but I'll do a search on it anyway."*

*"I've got the hatch opening up," Pockets said triumphantly. A slow creak came across the speakers with his voice. "Could use some lubricant. I don't think it has been used in quite a while."*

*"Good job, Pockets," Merlin said. "Okay, folks, we're going in. Durant, unless there's a reason to move the ship, leave the tunnel in place for now."*

“Aye, sir.”

Durant and Tanis moved into the bear’s office and the load master keyed into his terminal. “Samantha,” he said into the intercom, “can you connect me to the signal from the captain’s visor camera?” The collie didn’t bother a verbal response, but Durant’s vidscreen came to life with the images of the other ship’s airlock.

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Merlin floated into the small chamber and turned to face his engineer. Once they were both inside, it took both of them to pull the hatch shut. Pockets struggled with the manual latch, but managed to get it secured. Merlin tried the controls for the inside airlock hatch, but it was also non-functional. Once again they had to manipulate a manual release, but this time they didn’t have to struggle with it. The internal hatch swung out into a dark corridor, and as soon as Merlin stepped out in it, his foot became heavy and clumped to the deck.

“The gravity deck plates are still working,” the wolf reported as he moved out of the way for Pockets to step into the passageway, “though they don’t feel up to full strength.”

“This must be how it felt to Taro to walk around our ship,” Pockets said quietly of their absent Hestran friend.

“Captain,” Samantha’s voice sounded in their helmet speakers, “We have additional information on the registry of this ship.”

“Go ahead,” Merlin said as he shut and secured the hatch. He turned and aimed his suit’s forward lights toward the floor. A thin layer of ice crystals covered everything, likely due to moisture in the air. There was trash and other items scattered beneath their feet. Pockets knelt down to examine some of the papers, but he couldn’t read the written characters so he set them back down where he found them.

They’d entered the ship in a moderate sized chamber. One wall was lined with pressure suit lockers, but when Pockets looked inside, they were all empty. There were information screens on the opposite wall, but all were dark and frosted over.

“Cindy was close with her translation,” Samantha said. “The name of the ship is the SS Walkabout, Terran Registry KVN-92012, Goldenrod-class, long-range exploration vessel. Her captain’s name is listed as Shin Amamori. Her last filed flight plan was from Kitakyushu, Japan on Earth to Newport, Kantus, but it never arrived at its destination. Listed as missing.”

“When was that?”

“Nearly a year ago.”

“Do you have a crew or passenger listing?”

“Yes, sir. It lists the captain, fourteen human crew members and ten passengers of various furman races.”

“That’s twenty-five bodies we might find...” Merlin muttered with a deep frown. “Does it give a flight mission?”

“It was a mission of ‘firsts’. The SS Walkabout is a replica of the SS Goldenrod, the first Terran ship equipped with an early type of LightDrive engine. They were retracing the route originally taken when Earth sent its first furman settlers to Kantus, itself the first habitable planet chosen to begin a new colony. Goldenrod was successful in its voyage, but the Walkabout never made it.”

Merlin checked the readings of a hand scanner that was strapped to his left arm and grunted. “We have a good atmospheric mix with acceptable pressure in here, but the temperature is down to minus twelve Celsius. It should be breathable, but very cold.”

He moved to Pockets and turned the shorter raccoon around so that he faced away from him. "Let's get these maneuvering packs off," he suggested, reaching for a set of snap clasps. "We won't need them inside the ship."

"I'm with you, Captain," the engineer replied. "Inside the ship's gravity, this thing is heavy!"

After they'd helped one another shed their external packs and set them on the floor beside the hatch, the two of them walked the length of the dark room to a connecting hallway, though still protected by their sealed pressure suits. The raccoon shined his lamps up and down the corridor and then pointed in one direction after studying markings near the ceiling. "The bridge should be this way, one level up," he said. "I think we're on the crew deck."

"Want me to lead?" the wolf asked his superstitious friend.

Pockets shook his head inside his helmet and then realized Merlin couldn't see the action. "No," he replied confidently. "I'll be all right." He ambled down the dark passageway in the light gravity, his bobbing light creating strange shadows off of equipment panels along the walls and overhead pipes.

"Whatever you do," Renny's voice sounded in their speakers, "don't go wandering after the ship's pet!"

Pockets stopped cold in his tracks and clenched his gloves into fists. "Don't do that to me!" he exclaimed, "I had nightmares for a *week* after watching that show."

Merlin snorted. "I should have Samantha's tail shaved for bringing that one on board."

"I warned you all that it was a scary movie," Sam retorted. "I didn't make any of you watch it."

Merlin gave Pockets a small push and the raccoon resumed walking down the corridor. They passed several doors marked in the same written characters, but continued past them. There would be time for checking them out later. If they were fortunate, there might be a flight recorder on the bridge of this ship to tell them what happened. The passageway made an angled turn to the left.

The engineer stopped and examined long dark marks on the side of the corridor. "There's scorch marks on some of the walls," Pockets said uneasily, brushing the fingertips of a glove across one. "I wonder if they had a mutiny."

Merlin leaned close to a wall and held up a chemical scanner toward a brownish stain on the carpeted floor. "Blood," he said quietly. They continued along the corridor, finding more scorched evidence of blaster fire. Pockets stopped a moment later at a standard airtight door on his right. "This should go up to the bridge," he announced. An old-style gauge in the door made the engineer frown. "Air pressure behind this door is considerably low," he said. He tried the manual release, but it was stiff. "Pressure on our side is making this tough."

Merlin lent his strength on the circular wheel and it began to turn slowly. The rubberized seal around the hatch began to hiss as air from the corridor was sucked inside. By the time they got the panel opened completely, the pressure had equalized. Merlin shined his lamps into the opening at a set of metal steps leading upward. He wrapped his gloved fingers around a rail mounted to the wall and took the stairs slowly. Pockets moved in behind him and closed the hatch.

At the top of the steps was another hatch. This one had a thick glass window in a horizontal strip a foot long and four inches high; Merlin leaned forward until the bubble of his helmet touched it gently. He peered into the next room, but he couldn't make out much in the darkness beyond.

"I don't see any instrument lights through the window," he said. "Not that I really expected any."

"How does the pressure read?" Pockets asked.

"Zero. Is the hatch behind us secure?"

"Yes."

"*Are you at the bridge?*" Durant's voice asked.

"Just outside the airtight door," Merlin replied. "We're going in now." He reached for the door wheel and hesitated. "I'm going to do this slowly and let the air in the stairwell escape gradually, so the hatch doesn't explode outward."

"*Good idea.*"

It took almost three minutes before Merlin could swing the door open onto the bridge. He and Pockets stepped quietly into the large room and the engineer gave a small whistle inside his helmet at what he saw.

"*What is it?*" Samantha asked. "*We can see your head lamps moving around through the bridge windows.*"

"Nearly everything in here is scorched," Pockets answered. "It looks like they must have had a tremendous fire boil up through here."

"Everything that wasn't metal in the construction of the instrument panels is all melted, though not completely through," Merlin added. "They either extinguished it themselves, or the broken window sucked all the oxygen from the air before it spread to the rest of the ship."

"The broken window, I would guess," Pockets said. "The extinguishers are still in their mounts on the walls."

"*Any... bodies?*" Tanis asked. "*I can't see any in yer video feed. It's too dark to see anything clearly.*"

"There's nobody here," the captain replied to the medic as he walked over to what was left of the captain's chair. "Either everyone got out or anyone on the bridge was sucked out when the large window blew out."

"Captain," Pockets said quietly, "I can't tell where the fire originated."

Merlin looked around, shining his lamps over the whole room. Everything was scorched and partially melted, but nothing looked as if it had actually exploded. Even the overhead pipes were intact.

"*What about a flame thrower?*" Renny ventured to ask. "*They used flame throwers on the monster in Sam's movie.*"

"Renny, would you shut up already about the movie?" Pockets said irritably. "This place is giving me the willies without your witty remarks."

"*I was being serious.*"

"Something like a flame thrower might explain this, however," Merlin said.

"Yeah, but a container of thermite will do the same thing," the engineer retorted, "though the damage would be considerably more extensive."

"*Who'd be carrying thermite?*" Sam asked in a bored tone. "*That's not a common item in a starship's supply cabinet. Then again, neither is a flame thrower.*"

Merlin shook his head inside his helmet and sighed softly. "A container of anything volatile would leave behind signs of an explosion. There is none here."

"Well, I seriously doubt there are any slime-headed monsters prowling this ship," Pockets huffed.

"*Are you surrrre of that?*" Renny's chipper voice asked.

"Captain," the raccoon asked dryly, "do I have permission to jettison Renny when we get back to the *Horizon*?"

"Sorry, but I need him on my crew," Merlin replied with an unseen smile.

"What about the movie? Can I jettison that?"

"Sure, if you can wrestle it away from Samantha."

*"That movie's mine!"* the collie's voice exclaimed.

Pockets decided to ignore the rest of the conversation as his thoughts sorted out what he saw. He couldn't tell if the mess around them was entirely because of fire or some struggle. He walked across the bridge to a wall access panel and pulled gently on the twin handles. It came loose fairly easily and he set the cover on the ground at his feet. "Captain," he said, "the circuits don't look too bad."

Merlin walked up behind him and peered into the recess in his lights. "Do you think you can restore power?" he asked.

"I dunno. That depends on the condition of the LC engines," the engineer replied. "If they're still generating, I could probably rig up something, but the fingers of these gloves are too large for delicate wiring work."

Merlin walked over to the forward port to examine the remaining bit of thick glass in the window frame. "See if you can find a way to seal up this opening, Pockets," he said. "If you can do that, we can pump up the air pressure and heating in here so you can work in your coveralls."

"I can probably vacuweld a plate of sealed metal over the opening," Pockets replied. "I do have project scraps large enough."

"Okay, go ahead and get to that. I'm going to make my way to the engine room and see if there's any power down there."

"Would you rather that I checked the engines?"

"No, your priority is to get this hole sealed up so we can work in here."

"Aye, sir."

The wolf turned and headed for the hatch. "Durant," he said to the other ship, "get everyone suited up and get over here. I want to do a sweep of the place for the crew and passengers."

*"Lovely..."* Renny muttered.

*"Ugh... Right away, Captain,"* Durant replied.

*"What about me?"* Samantha asked.

"You're still on bridge watch, Sam," Merlin reminded her. "You stay put."

*"I didn't want to look for bodies, anyway."*

"Just keep an eye on all the sensor readings. Let us know if there are changes in anything."

"Aye, sir."

"Cindy?" he asked.

*"Still here, Captain."*

"I need you to work with Pockets. You can help him decipher labels on panels and diagrams."

*"I've never been in a pressure suit before,"* the mouse replied. *"Can I just wait until Pockets gets the ship pressurized again?"*

"He'll need to read labels to see which controls to use to get that process started," Merlin answered with a frown. "Otherwise he might jettison one of the engine pods while I'm in it when he's only just trying to turn on the heat. Durant will help you get suited up and instruct you on what to do."

"Aye, sir," Cindy said in a dejected voice.

"I'm going back to the *Horizon* for my vacuum welding equipment," Pockets announced. Merlin didn't bother to answer and opened the hatch to the stairwell. The engineer followed him down to the main corridor and reversed their earlier processes with the airtight doors.

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Merlin walked slowly through a maze of corridors, disoriented and unsure of the route to the long tunnel to the engine pods. He couldn't find any rhyme or reason to the layout of the vessel's floor plan and felt sure he had gotten himself lost in this huge ship. He tried a few doors which usually led to crew cabins or storage closets. Everything was marked with that curious Japanese writing and none of it was familiar to him. Why doesn't a member of the Planetary Alignment label things on a starship in Standard, the accepted common language of the PA worlds? he thought to himself.

As his thoughts drifted back to his search, he came across a door equipped with an airlock. He smiled to himself, thinking he had found the way to the engine room, but it turned to a frown when he noticed the condition of the door. The control mechanism was scorched and the pressure wheel was bent, as if someone had tried to force their way inside. The panel was ajar slightly and Merlin cautiously eased it open. He shined his headlamps into the darkness and recognized the ship's galley. Burned chairs and tables were overturned and there were more scorch marks across the floors and walls.

The wolf moved inside and worked his way through the room toward the kitchen. Only one chair was still standing upright at the kitchen counter. Food wrappers and other trash littered the floor. Dirty dishes filled the sink and out onto the adjacent counters. Curious, Merlin opened the large refrigerator door. A puff of cold vapor escaped out into the room and he peered inside. There didn't seem to be much food inside, certainly not enough to sustain twenty-five individuals on the flight between Earth and Kantus. He closed the door with thoughts of wonder and he moved next to the dry-goods pantry. As with the refrigerator, there didn't seem to be a great deal of food inside. Years of space flight experience told Merlin that the food stores he saw might sustain a single person for a week or two.

He shook his head and idly wondered at the competence of the ship's supply officer. Realizing that he had spent too much time blindly wandering the corridors, the captain moved back out to the main hallway to look for the way to the engine room. With only his headlamps to provide illumination, it would be easy to miss clues to what happened.

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Pockets stepped back away from the window and nodded to himself. He set his vacuum welding equipment on the remains of a bridge chair and lowered his chin onto a tiny lever within his helmet to speak into a condenser microphone near his lips

"Sam?" the engineer asked. "Has there been any word from the captain about the engine room?"

"No, Pockets," the Border collie replied. "I've been watching his progress from his visor cameras. He's on Com channel one, but he's been quiet, looking around through various rooms he's come across."

"Where is he now?"

"I'm not sure, but it looks like he's floating down a long, dark tunnel. He went through an airlock a few minutes ago."

"Floating?" the raccoon mused. "He must be in the access corridor leading back to the engine pods. It does make sense; I wouldn't think they would bother with gravity deck plates along that route."

*"How's the repair work coming?"*

"I've just sealed up the window, Sam," Pockets replied as he admired his handiwork. "If Cindy ever makes it up here to the bridge, she can help me identify the controls to bring up the air pressure – providing there's power from the engines to work the controls."

*"Hold on, Pockets,"* Samantha said suddenly. *"Merlin's on the line."*

There was a pause and a few static clicks in the engineer's helmet speakers and then the captain's voice came in clearly as Samantha patched in signals from the two channels together.

*"I've reached the hatch to the engine room,"* he said. *"I can feel a low, pulsing vibration in the deck through my boots. Something's still operating in there, so perhaps there's hope for this crate."*

The raccoon nodded to himself at the news. "This is Pockets, Captain," he said. "How's the air back there?"

*"There's no ice crystals on anything, and my hand scanner shows... air pressure is ship-normal and the mixture seems to be good. Temperature is only thirty-eight, however. I'm halfway tempted to open my faceplate to test the freshness of the air, but I won't be that careless just yet."*

*"Not a good idea,"* Sam's voice said. *"The air may not be that healthy once you get inside the engine room."*

*"Agreed."*

"Put your helmet up against the hatch and tell me what you hear," Pockets suggested.

There was a soft clunk in the speakers and then the captain replied, *"I hear a low hum, the same pulsing I feel in my feet – and other sounds I can't quite make out."*

\*\*\*

Maximillian Sinclair opened a cabin door and peered in with a lump in his throat. The German shepherd youth was inexperienced in exploration and the stories he had heard of derelict ships had him unnerved and afraid of what he might find. His pressure suit fit him okay, but the cold, oxygen-nitrogen mixture inside the helmet was irritating his sinuses and giving him a headache. He also felt a little claustrophobic inside the suit, but he wasn't about to let uncle Merlin know he couldn't handle it. The captain's opinion meant a lot to him and he always felt ecstatic whenever the wolf praised him for something.

He moved inside the crew cabin and shined his light across the furniture, making sure not to miss the floor as Durant had shown him. If there was anyone still on board the dark vessel, that's where they would be. Fortunately, or unfortunately, depending on the point of view, no one had yet to find any sign of the original crew or passengers. The *Walkabout* appeared to be deserted.

What happened to them? Max wondered silently. He picked up a framed photo of a human's family or friends from a low table. Did they leave, or were they taken by someone... or something?

He walked through the room to the head and as he turned the corner, his tail pouch brushed against a lamp and knocked it off its bedside table. It crashed to the floor and Max jumped with a frightened yelp. When he turned to look at the cause of the noise, Renny's voice crackled in his helmet speaker.

*"Max!"* the cheetah nearly shouted in the headset. *"What happened?"*

"I'm okay," the canine youth replied. "I just knocked a lamp off a table with my tail. It startled me."

*"Have you found... anything?" Lorelei asked.*

"No bodies, if that's what you mean," Max answered.

*"Yeah, that's what I meant."*

"There's lotsa stuff all over the floors. Looks like there was a lot of fighting."

*"That's the impression I'm getting, too," Tanis added to the conversation.*

*"I'm not joking this time," Renny said, "but it really does look like someone used a flame-thrower."*

*"Isn't that dangerous in an oxygen-rich atmosphere?" Cindy asked.*

*"Yes, it is," Durant's voice answered. "Pockets? Any luck restoring power?"*

"Not to the controls I really need," the engineer replied. "Cindy's helped me find the right circuits, but I'm afraid these things are fried beyond use."

*"Got anything on the Horizon we could use?"*

"Not for this crate. The technology is similar, but not interchangeable."

*"I've noticed a pattern to the burn marks," Tanis reported.*

"Pattern?" Durant asked.

*"Yeah... control panels, access panels, instrument panels, transfer conduits..."*

*"I see what you mean," Renny said.*

*"I don't get it." Lori said. "Is that important?"*

*"It means that whoever did the damage wasn't shooting randomly," the desert fox replied. "It's as if they were trying to knock out all power routes."*

The Com channel went quiet as everyone mulled over the implications, but after a moment Renny voiced a question.

*"Do you think they were trying to cut off all power to the bridge?" he asked.*

"Ohmigosh!" Max exclaimed in fright. "Ohmigosh! Ohmigosh!"

*"What is it, Max?" Cindy asked. "Knock over something else?"*

The canine youth tried to back out of the head, but his feet wouldn't move. "I... f-f-found someone..." he stammered.

*"Alive?" Tanis asked excitedly.*

"No..." Max's voice sounded like he was going to be sick.

\*\*\*

Merlin opened the door to the engine room slowly. It swung out into the passageway and a dull orange light filtered out across him. He could instantly hear the power rumbling from the engines. The ship was stationary, but there was power aplenty inside.

He checked his scanner. "There's a lot of interference in here for the scanner," he mumbled. "The micranite shielding must be pretty thin."

*"Captain?" Pockets' voice crackled in his helmet speakers interlaced with static.*

*"Yeah, Pockets? What do you have?"*

*"I found ... flight recorder," he replied. "The thing got ... full blast of ... scorched the inside of the bridge."*

*"Do you think you can retrieve the data off of it?"*

*"It's ... mass of slag, Captain."*

Merlin was silent for a moment while he turned off his useless scanner and hung it from a loop strap on his utility belt. "Okay, Pockets. See what you can do with the other controls. I hope to see if I can route some power to you shortly."

*"Aye, sir."*

"Sam, have the others try to locate the captain's quarters. There may be a written logbook somewhere. I'm not the only one to keep a journal. Ship's captains have kept them for centuries."

*"Not all... written book like you do."*

*"Just look for one."*

*"Aye, will do."*

With no further discussion, Merlin moved into the orange light of the engine room. The walls were high and just about every square footage of them was covered in gauges, dials, switches, buttons and other displays. There was barely enough room for him to move in the narrow corridor in the bulk of his pressure suit, but there was no gravity here as well, which made it simpler to find routes around the equipment.

He was no engineer, but he studied a few of the active gauges anyway without knowing how to decipher the Japanese text. He picked up his scanner again, but it was useless in this environment. He couldn't even get a simple temperature reading.

The narrow walls ended as the captain moved out into a roomier interior of the compartment. Metal stair rungs mounted on the walls went in every direction, obviously to help free-floating personnel pull themselves around the room. Orange glow panels mounted in the walls provided the illumination he saw. He also saw bits of paper and food wrappings floating about in invisible rivers of air current.

Merlin pulled himself to the center of the room and looked around. He had already lost his bearings on which way was *up* in relation to the rest of the ship. The engine room was disorienting and he suddenly wished he had Pockets down here with him. He really had no idea where to begin looking to transfer the readily available power to the bridge.

*"Captain?"* Samantha's voice sounded with static in his speakers. *"I have... reports."*

*"Go ahead, Sam."*

*"Max says he's found ... body, but he doesn't know ... to tell anyone where he is."*

"I can understand that," the wolf replied, looking around the unfamiliar room. "Can Max identify a name tag or anything else on the body to show who it might -"

*"Merlin,"* Sam's voice said softly, *"the boy's scared out ... his wits. I don't think he's ... seen death like this before. I think it might ... asking too much to have ... search the body."*

The captain bit his bottom lip. He shouldn't have had the young canine join the search party and it had never occurred to him. "Yes, of course. You're right. Tell Max to wait outside in the corridor from whatever room he's in. Have the others look for him so someone else can check out the body."

*"Okay, I'll relay ... messages."*

"What was your second report?" he asked. Samantha quickly filled him in on Tanis' assessment of the pattern of fire he had discovered and the wolf's frown grew.

"If all the power conduits and panels have been specifically targeted, there may not be a way to restore power to the rest of the ship without an extensive overhaul of the systems."

*"Captain, with ... delivery schedule, we won't have time ... anything like that. We ... not a rescue or salvage ship."*

"Yeah, you're right again," Merlin said. "How much time can we spend to search through the rest of the ship? We're going to have to file a report with the SPF on finding the *Walkabout*, and we'll have to give them some information."

*"We can prob... spare another eight hours at ... most. After that, we'll have ... max out our cruising speed to make up ... difference in our flight schedule."*

"Eight hours? Okay, Sam. Patch me in to Pockets, please."

*"Aye, sir."*

As the wolf waited for the connection, Merlin thought he saw movement among the shadows across the room. He pushed away from the metal ladder he had clung to and crossed the room swiftly. Before he got to the other side, however, Pockets' crackling connection filled his helmet.

*"Captain,"* the raccoon reported, *"...s nothing more I ... do up here on the bridge without power."*

Merlin snared a support beam as he approached a bulkhead and then stopped his momentum with a clunk against the wall. "Has Samantha filled you in on Tanis' theory?"

*"Yeah, I was listening in ... them when he told her about it. It doesn't look ... we're going to get the systems ... this crate working again."*

"I understand," the wolf replied. "Listen, do you think you can rig up a makeshift guidance system back here in the engine room? We can't rely on connections to anything you might install on the bridge."

*"I don't have anything ... that in my stores, I'm afraid. The spare system for ... Horizon requires the VIS computer system we ... on board. I seriously doubt ... would be compatible with the Walkabout's antique diagnostic computer ... there."*

Merlin mulled this over as he glanced around the room. A moment later he said, "Each crew compartment of the new *Horizon* doubles as an escape pod in the event of an emergency. Doesn't each one have their own guidance system?"

*"Now that you mention it, yes. They're small ... self-contained, designed to get the pods away from ... ship in a hurry, and possibly get ... to some nearby planet to be picked up."*

"Take one from an unoccupied cabin and see if you can rig it up down here," Merlin said. "We can replace it later."

*"May I ask ... you're planning?"*

"I want to fire the engines to move the ship closer to regular PA traffic so the SPF can pick it up. All we need is for the engines to push it to coordinates Renny will calculate. We can also set up a beacon so it can be found again."

*"Hmm, I can probably rig ... something like that."*

"How long do you think it will take? We only have eight hours before we have to get back on schedule toward Argeia."

*"Should not take ... than three or four hours with Max's help."*

"Okay, get on it right away."

*"Aye, Captain."*

The Com channel went silent as Samantha switched the engineer back into the verbal traffic of the rest of the crew. Merlin looked around the room once more to reorient himself to his position. He pushed off from the wall into the direction of where he thought the main hatch out of the engine pods to be and noticed the orange light in the room suddenly grow brighter. He twisted his body to turn in the air and gasped at a large tongue of liquid fire stretching out toward him.

\*\*\*

Max stood out in the corridor, across from the doorway into the room where he had found the body. He trembled and wished fervently someone else from the *Horizon* would show up soon. At first, the youth had been thrilled to be included in the search party. He had thought of the whole thing as an adventure until he came face to face with the reason for the search.

The boy closed his eyes, but the image inside the room wouldn't go away. He heard a noise in the corridor and looked up to see one of the *Blue Horizon* pressure suits moving toward him from a junction in the passage. Max managed a smile at the face that peered at him from inside the helmet.

"Hi, Tanis," he said with relief.

"I found Max," the medic announced over the Com channel. He looked concerned at the boy and asked, "Ya going to be okay?"

The canine youth nodded slightly. "I think so," he said.

"Can you give us a clue where you are?" Durant's voice replied.

"Look up on the wall near the ceiling," Renny spoke up. "You will see a small set of three numbers separated by dashes every few meters. The lower the first number is, the closer you are to the nose of the ship. The second number indicates the deck - "One" being the top level where the bridge is located. The last number starts with either a zero or a one. A number starting with a zero indicates you are on the port side of center and the following number shows you how many bulkheads you are away from the same center of the ship. Likewise, a number starting with a one shows you are on the starboard side."

"How do you know that?" Cindy's voice asked.

"I found a ship's tech manual written in Standard," the navigator answered. "It was burned pretty badly. I learned that much from a few pages still intact."

"Are you reading from it now?" Lori asked.

"No, I left it in a room somewhere. There wasn't enough of it to keep."

"And you remember all that?" Cindy asked in wonder.

"I have an eidetic memory," he reminded her. "I remember everything I read."

"Oh, yeah..."

Tanis shined his lamp up toward the ceiling and spied a label with the numbers Renny mentioned. It was printed on a reflective background and the desert fox had to shift his position to read it. "I see it. We're at 17-2-05," he told them. "I'm going into Max's room now."

"You want to wait until one of us gets there to go in with you?" Durant asked.

"Not necessary," the medic replied. "I've seen bodies enough on Nalirra, not to mention those in Woodward. All the rest of ya can go on looking for others while I take a look at this person. The captain still wants us to look for a logbook."

"Keep us informed," Samantha's voice piped in.

"Aye, aye."

Tanis put a hand on the canine's shoulder. "Ya can wait out here if ya want," he said softly, "or ya can go on to search other rooms."

Max looked at him through his visor in the dark corridor and shook his head. "I don't want to look for any more bodies, Tanis. I don't."

"I don't blame ya, Max. Okay, ya stay out here while I check out yer friend in there."

"Okay," the youth replied. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Actually," Samantha said into their helmet speakers, "Pockets needs your help, Max. The captain has a better assignment for you that doesn't include the crew search."

Tanis turned toward the room Max had previously entered, but he glanced back at the canine. "Ya want me to go with ya back to the main hatch?" he asked.

Max felt better at getting a new task and the relief showed in his eyes. "No, I think I can find my way back."

"Okay. Just remember what Renny said about the bulkhead numbers," the medic told him. "The main hatch should be at 0-2-0. It's on this level, all the way forward."

"Yeah, I remember. Thanks, Tanis."

"Yer welcome," the tan fox said. Max headed up the corridor and Tanis moved into the room. He glanced around the compartment but didn't see the body, so he assumed it must be in the head. Max had neglected to mention where it was. He stepped around the broken glass of the lamp the boy had knocked off the table and entered the other room. He had expected to find a charred corpse from the evidence throughout the *Walkabout*, but that was not the case here.

The body of a blonde human woman lay half out of an immersion bathtub, her naked flesh covered in ice crystals. Her face, a frozen mask of terror, lay on the floor next to a pedestal toilet, her head turned to the side and her gray eyes open. Broken plastic shower rings littered the floor from when she had fallen through the plastic curtain.

The medic knelt as much as his pressure suit would allow and took a closer look. He counted eight nasty-looking stab wounds across her back, shoulders and neck, and from the long-dried blood stain on the floor beneath her, he assumed there were more across her chest.

"*That's a bad way to die,*" Samantha's voice whispered in his ears. Tanis frowned and stood up.

"I didn't realize ya were tuned in to my visor camera, Sam," he said dryly.

"*I've been switching back and forth between everyone's signals,*" she replied. "Don't worry," she added, "*I had already prepared myself to see bodies if any were found.*"

"Well, this is only the first," he said quietly as he moved back out into the bedroom. He wanted to see if he could find some identification for the woman. "There's got to be another twenty-four of them somewhere on this ship. Has anyone else found anything?"

"*Not yet. Durant and Lori are down on the third deck. Renny and Cindy are on the same level as you, and Pockets and Max are on their way back to the Horizon.*"

Tanis picked up a few items from a dresser drawer and looked them over. "Sam," the fox said in a stronger voice. "I've found the woman's identification written in Standard. Her name was Mrs. Tracy King and she was a Historian from a place on Earth called Atlanta." Tanis flipped through some papers and continued, "Her travel voucher says she was part of the team retracing the original historic flight of the *SS Goldenrod*, but had plans to meet up with her brother once the ship reached Kantus."

"*Yeah, her name's on the passenger list. Does it give the brother's name?*"

"Scott Barrister."

"*You said she was married. Was her mate on the flight?*"

"I found a picture of her with a man on a sunset beach, but I don't know if that was a husband or her brother," he replied as he picked up the photo from the bed stand. "I don't see anything listed about her traveling with anyone, and this is a single-occupant cabin."

He fell silent while he looked around the room some more, but found nothing else of interest. "Have ya heard from the captain?" Tanis asked idly.

"*At last report, he was heading out of the engine room. He gave Pockets an assignment and he was returning to the main area of the ship. I'm checking his camera now.*"

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Merlin Sinclair twisted his body as quickly as his floating form could move, but the intense flames reached him before he could get out of the way. Searing heat licked at his back and the thrust of the flames pushed him across the room. The pressure suit was made of flame resistant material, but the wolf knew it would only hold out under such intense liquid fire for so long. He outstretched his hands to cushion his blow against a support beam, but he caught it at an oblique angle that made him start to spin.

He glanced down at his waist, where the scanner was on fire. He batted at it frantically, but the device remained in flames. He snatched it from his utility belt and flung it away. It resembled a burning meteor as it bounced off a panel of gauges in a shower of sparks and then floated beyond view down another passage.

He had not seen where the flames had originated from, but he had no delusions about malfunctioning equipment or phantoms of the dead crew. Someone was alive and meant to kill him. Another jet of fire shot out across the large room toward him, but his accidental spin saved him from another roasting. Merlin wobbled into a bulkhead and a randomly outstretched hand snagged on an instrumental panel lever. He grabbed onto it and his helmet slammed hard into the corner of a work station. A crack spread across the visor and Merlin gasped with wide eyes. Fortunately for him, the engine room was pressurized with an atmosphere or the bubble might have exploded out into the room. The captain of the *Blue Horizon* pulled himself into a side alcove that looked to be a zero-gee break room and he reached down to turn off his oxygen flow. *No need to waste my air now that I can't keep it in my suit*, he mused quietly.

He looked around in the orange light to see if there might be anything he could use against his attacker and found only a butter knife, a large plastic serving platter and a mirror. He cursed himself silently for not arming himself before coming on board the derelict vessel. He had assumed it would be safe, and it had not occurred to him to bring along any of the Binfurr firearms from the *Horizon*. His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a voice screaming out in rage – his assailant.

Merlin curled his fingers around the handle of the mirror and then edged it close to the boundary of his alcove. He wanted to use it to peer around the corner, but his helmet wouldn't let him get close enough to it to see. He tried to disconnect and flip up his faceplate, but the crack had become jagged and wouldn't allow the bubble to recess back into the helmet. With a silent sigh, he unfastened the helmet and removed it altogether. He couldn't use it in its present condition anyway and let it float in the air behind him. This done, he inched back to the corner with the mirror.

\*\*\*

Durant was tired and bored. The search had been fruitless with the exception of the one body Max had discovered, and the ship was so antique that its rooms and signs written in an unreadable language were unexciting to him. He and Lorelei had looked through just about every door on the cargo level of the ship without finding even one of the *Walkabout's* crew. He was beginning to assume that the others had been jettisoned out into space, but wondered why the one woman had been left behind.

The bear found a large crate in the hold to sit on and rested his bulk on top of it. He idly read the contents label written in Standard, as was his habit as the *Blue Horizon's* load master, but there was nothing interesting listed inside the container. All around him were boxes of items like decontamination units, cold weather clothing, pressure suits and an inordinate

amount of artificial cheese food. Lori was across the dark room, looking through wall lockers. She'd been quiet the past half hour – a blessing to Durant. She had chattered away almost non-stop since they had teamed up on this level, but the severity of the situation had finally subdued the white rabbit.

Durant looked up to see her walking toward him. "Anything?" he asked her.

"No," the cook replied as she settled on the box beside him. "Nothing but camping equipment crammed in the lockers. It doesn't even look like they were stored in there very well, especially the tents."

"Tents?" Durant repeated. He glanced down at the crate he sat on top of and reread the contents label. *14'x14' tent, olive green. Military surplus. Seven (7) each. Box one (1) of twelve (12).*

The load master got to his feet slowly and motioned for Lori to get up. "What is it?" she asked.

Durant bent over and flipped up three clasps that held the top closed. The locks were not engaged. He quietly lifted up the lid and they both peered inside.

Lori couldn't help herself. She screamed.

\*\*\*

Merlin's lip curled up into a snarl when a jet of liquid flame blasted the mirror from his hand. His glove resisted destruction, but it became super-hot and the sheer force of the surge almost propelled him out into the engine room. His other hand held tight against a table leg that was mounted to the wall, and he pulled himself back into the alcove a heartbeat before a second stream of fire shot through the place he had just occupied.

He glanced quickly toward his blackened glove to make sure he still had his fingers, but the pain in them was enough to know they were still there. That burst had been too close. His assailant had apparently followed him across the room.

The flames had hit the mirror only a couple heartbeats after he had pushed the edge of it around the corner, but he had already caught sight of his would-be assassin. It was a thin, bearded human with long black hair that floated wildly in the absence of gravity. He was dressed in a soiled white tee shirt and a pair of blue sweatpants. The short glimpse was enough, however. The look in the man's eyes told him instantly there would be no reasoning with the guy.

The wolf was cornered in the alcove and his attacker was closing in on his position. He looked around again to see if there was anything he missed and his eyes singled out an item he had passed over earlier. He snared his floating helmet out of the air, put it back on despite the cracked bubble and then snapped the connections in place. He reached up to the wall and removed a fire extinguisher mounted over a built-in grill. He pulled the safety pin and then eased himself closer to the opening of the alcove.

Despite the dim lighting in the engine room, he detected a faint shadow on the far wall. It was too vague to give him any much more than an outline, but it told him what he needed to know. He raised the nozzle of the extinguisher before him and then locked a foot around the leg of a table. It was only a moment later when he saw a few random strands of long black hair drift into view.

Merlin counted to three and then squeezed the handle. A jet of white powder shot out from the nozzle and caught the man full in the face just as he peered around the corner. The human sputtered, shrieking foreign words as the force of the extinguisher pushed him out into the open, and he almost lost his grip on the device he had been using as a flame-thrower. Merlin

recognized it instantly as a decontamination flame-gun to use on bacterial areas of a ship after setting down in an alien environment. It was not meant to be used at such a high level of expulsion, but he rightly assumed the tool had been modified.

The captain of the *Blue Horizon* didn't waste any time. He unhooked his foot from the table and fired off the extinguisher toward the back of the alcove. He got plenty of thrust and the wolf shot out of the break-room toward the human who still shouted obscenities from the powder in his eyes.

The man couldn't see, but he heard the hollow *whoosh* of the extinguisher and knew instantly he was in trouble. He swung the flame-thrower up and fired off a searing blaze that missed the wolf by a mere foot. He gripped the trigger tightly and began fanning the area around him with intense flames.

Merlin's inertia brought him within a few feet of the man, but the wild flailing of fire nearly hit him several times. He hurled his spent extinguisher at the man and it hit him on the right shoulder. The human let out a cry of pain and the flames died when his fingers reflexively lost their grip. Still blinded by the powder, he wiped frantically at his face.

Merlin tried to get in closer to grab the flame-thrower, but the human's sight partially cleared just as his gloved hand closed around the barrel of the device. The man howled and squeezed the trigger again, nearly setting Merlin's helmet ablaze. The flames licked greedily at the wolf's helmet and a tiny tongue of fire penetrated the crack, singeing the fur on his nose.

Merlin yelped in pain and quickly used his grip on the barrel as leverage to bring his legs around and kick the man in the knees. He had tried to get him in the gut, but the pressure suit limited such movement. However, it was enough to stop the blaze again. The captain wrenched the flame-thrower back and forth, but the human held on tightly.

For a moment, their grappling brought them up face to face, and for the first time the man saw the face inside the suit. His eyes widened tremendously and his mouth opened in a scream of mortal terror at the sight of the lupine creature within. He began to thrash about violently and started to pound at the wolf's chest as if Merlin were a wild beast bent on tearing out his throat.

The action confused Merlin, but he saw insanity in the man's eyes. Without a second thought, the wolf hit him in the face with a gloved fist twice in rapid succession. The wild man's head rocked back with the blows, but despite the pummeling, the man retained his grip on the flame-thrower; with desperate strength, he wrenched it free of Merlin's hands. Thrown off balance, the wolf floated backward but tried hard to swim back toward him.

*"Captain Amamori! Stop! We're here to help!"*

Merlin and the man both turned to look toward the new voice. The man ground his teeth together and shouted something in Japanese at the sight of three more suited figures floating toward them. He swung the nozzle of his flame-thrower toward the newcomers and the wolf lunged as well as he could toward him.

"Look out!" Merlin shouted. He couldn't tell which of his crewmates had joined them, though he had recognized the voice of Pockets. The trio scattered a second before the jet of flame passed through the area between them; the human screamed in frustrated rage.

Merlin was unable to swim in the air fast enough to get to the man. He had disconnected the maneuvering pack from his suit earlier and none of his crewmates were equipped with them either since they had crossed over using the extension tunnel. Being out in the open away from anything to push off from, the wolf could do little more than swim in place. Each time the man fired his flame-thrower, its counter-thrust pushed him further out of the lupine captain's reach.

"Merlin, are you all right?" Renny called out from behind a bulkhead. The wolf briefly wondered why the cheetah's voice didn't sound in his helmet speakers, but he didn't have time to think about it for long. The human fanned the air with flames and Merlin managed a tuck-and-roll that barely flipped him out of the way before taking the brunt of the attack once again.

He opened his faceplate as far as it could go and shouted back, "I'm okay, but I could use some help!"

By luck, he managed to float close enough to an instrument panel to hide behind just as a blaze seared the controls. A warning klaxon sounded out and the engine room fire-suppressant system activated. Sticky white powder shot out of nozzles all over the room and it incensed the man further.

*Captain Amamori?* Merlin mused to himself. Pockets must have seen a photo of the man somewhere in the ship. He looked around him, searching for anything he could use as a weapon. Despite the powdery suppressant filling the air of the zero-gee room in a thickening fog, Amamori continued to shoot flames toward each of the intruders into his domain. It was unlikely anyone would be able to get near him until his fuel ran out, and there was no assurance that he didn't have more stashed around the room in reserve.

The klaxons continued to sound and a large power unit mounted to a wall exploded outward in a shower of sparks and debris. The fire had apparently gotten to something volatile before the suppressant was able to douse the flames. Amamori cried out as bits of metal and plastic shrapnel pelted him and he suddenly released the flame-thrower. The device drifted away from the man and he started jerking in spasms.

Merlin looked out through the white, hazy air and swallowed hard at what he saw. A long and thin piece of twisted metal was embedded in the middle of Amamori's forehead. The human's mouth opened and closed slowly like a fish out of water and his fingers clutched weakly at the air, but before the wolf could force himself to look away, Amamori stopped moving.

"Merlin!" Tanis called out above the alarms.

Captain Sinclair pushed off from the instrument panel toward his medic's voice. A moment later two sets of hands grabbed hold of his suit. Before anyone could say another word, another equipment panel arced out in a blaze of energy making the klaxon change pitch and pattern.

"Uh, oh, that's done it," Pocket said. "We've got to get off this ship ASAP!"

"Do we have time to retrieve his body?" Merlin asked.

"No time!" the raccoon replied sternly. "That new alarm is the call for *Abandon Ship*. We'll need every second to get back to the *Horizon*!"

"Right..." Merlin muttered wearily.

Renny moved up behind them and spoke into his headset. "Samantha!" he said in a rushed voice. "Recall everyone back to the *Horizon* right now and get the ship ready to blast off in a hurry!"

"*What happened?*" Durant's voice sounded as the foursome made their way back toward the engine room hatch. "*Did you find the captain?*"

"We did. No time to explain why, but there's an out-of-control fire in the *Walkabout's* engine room, and it's probably going to blow!"

"*This is Samantha,*" the Border collie's voice announced immediately over everyone's headset on all frequencies. "*This is an emergency! Everyone get back to the Horizon pronto! The Walkabout is on fire and out of control! I repeat, get back to the Blue Horizon, right now!*"

Merlin could hear Sam's announcement from his crewmates' helmets but not his own. "My headset must have been smashed when I hit my head," he said dryly.

Pockets reached the engine room hatch and opened it as the others came up behind him.

"Yeah, we've been trying to reach ya," Tanis said to the captain. "Lori and Durant found the rest of the bodies in the hold and Cindy found a photo of the captain in one of the cabins. His body was not among those in the crates."

"What about the captain's journal?" Merlin asked as they propelled themselves into the long tunnel that would take them to the main body of the ship.

"Haven't found it," the fox replied. "That wild man back there resembles Amamori in the photo Cindy found, so I would bet he had his journal with him in there."

"Pockets, do you think there's a way we can jettison the air from the engine room to smother the fire?" Merlin asked his engineer. "We still don't know what happened here and that journal may be the only clue."

Pockets turned to reply, but as he opened his mouth, they heard a deep, muffled *boom* and the whole ship shook around them.

"Whoa!" Max's voice said in his helmet speakers.

"What happened?" Durant asked.

"I dunno, but the *Walkabout* shook and the tunnel between the ships buckled!"

"Is it still intact?"

"Yeah, but I hear hissing."

"That's an air leak, Max," Pockets said with a frown. "Make sure your suit is secure, your helmet's sealed and get back to the *Horizon*."

"It is and I'm on my way," the young canine answered.

"Durant?"

"I'm on the *Horizon*, Pockets."

"Close the airlock after each person who comes back on board. If that tunnel collapses..."

"Understood. I'll take care of it."

Pockets looked at Merlin and said, "I know the journal's important, but something big just blew up back there. I doubt we'd have time to vent the air back there and find it, even if we were still in there."

The wolf nodded. "All right, it'll have to remain a mystery. Let's get out of here." His breath was getting cold and it fogged the inside of his helmet.

"Captain," Renny said as they continued to pull themselves along the long corridor. "If the tunnel is losing air, how are you going to get back to the ship? Your helmet is badly cracked. You also have a burn melt on the back of your right leg."

"No wonder my leg is stinging," Merlin muttered.

Pockets reached inside his utility pouch and pulled out a roll of the most universal repair material in the cosmos: duct tape. As a mechanic, Pockets had long believed that duct tape was Earth's greatest contribution to the galaxy and he always carried it with him everywhere he went.

Renny grinned at the raccoon's resourcefulness and took the roll from him. As they neared the hatch to the main section of the ship, he began to tear off strips and apply it over the cracks in the captain's helmet.

"It may not be completely space worthy," he said, "but it should hold your air in long enough to get you back to the *Horizon* still breathing."

Merlin nodded without saying a word and turned his oxygen flow back on. He felt worn out, but welcomed the familiar sense of gravity when they moved out of the tunnel into the *Walkabout's* aft corridor. They may be weighed down by their pressure suits, but the wolf was fairly certain he could run in it faster than they could float in zero-gee.

"You can tape up my leg when we get up to the main hatch," he told the cheetah. "I want to get away from here before the engine room goes completely and takes the rest of the ship with it."

"Okay, let's go!" Renny said. In single file, the foursome began trotting as fast as their suits would let them. The navigator had memorized the route and led them through the labyrinth of corridors quickly. Moments later, they arrived at the main hatch. Merlin was exhausted. Fighting in a suit in zero-gee had taken more out of him than he had thought, and he was wheezing from the fire suppressant that had gotten into his helmet. He leaned against the wall as Pockets operated the mechanism for the hatch and Renny knelt to bind up the melted spot in the captain's suit.

"Samantha confirms that everyone else got off the ship," Tanis said to Merlin. "We're the only ones still here."

"Good."

Pockets looked down at Renny. "Is his suit secure?" he asked. "I'm about to open the hatch."

"I've taped up all cracks and tears I can find," he replied, "and his helmet is sealed."

Merlin pointed toward the hatch. "Go."

Pockets opened the door and immediately they saw a tear open up in the metallic fabric of the access tunnel. There was no time to reattach his maneuvering pack, so without preamble, he took Merlin's arm and pulled him out away from the ship's gravity. He and Renny pushed the wolf along before them and Tanis brought up the rear.

"Durant," Pockets said into his headset, "Merlin's suit is ripped and his helmet is cracked, but we've got him taped up. I don't know how long the makeshift seal will last, so Tanis is taking him into the airlock first. Renny and I will wait our turn."

"Aye to that."

"Go ahead and release the tunnel from the other ship." Durant didn't reply, but they felt a *thunk* in the sides of the tunnel as the far end's seal deactivated and the remaining air vented as shimmering crystals. Merlin moved inside the airlock hatch and Pockets shut the door behind him.

"Okay, they're inside the hatch," Pockets announced. Although they couldn't hear anything in the vacuum, the remaining pair saw Tanis' thumbs-up through the small view port to indicate pressurization.

There was a bright flash of light outside the tunnel. "*Another explosion from the engine section!*" Samantha exclaimed in their headsets. "*Oh no! Guys, hang on tight to the tunnel! I've got to move the ship fast!*"

Pockets and Renny barely had time to grab onto the slack sides of the tunnel before the *Blue Horizon* moved. Renny glanced behind him and saw the *Walkabout* suddenly lunge toward them, crumpling up the far end of the tunnel in the process. He gasped and drew himself up as close to the blue saucer as he could, but it looked like the explosion that propelled the derelict vessel forward was going to crush the two of them between the ships.

Suddenly the *Blue Horizon* angled upward and surged forward to slip over the top of the *Walkabout*. Pockets closed his eyes as he held on tight. The sudden motion pulled the flexible

tunnel down across them and Renny managed a quick glimpse at the burning ship before the *Horizon* sped away.

*"You still with us?"* Samantha's voice called out.

*"Barely,"* Pockets managed to reply against the sudden thrust of the ship. *"But I don't know how much longer we can hold on, Sam!"*

*"You've got to, boys,"* Cindy said into the line. *"We don't want to get caught in the explosion!"*

No sooner had she spoken that the suited males saw a brilliant white flash, but because of their entanglement in the remnants of the tunnel they didn't actually see the replica exploration ship tear itself apart in a magnificent fireball. The flames billowed out rapidly, but then dissipated in the vacuum as the shockwave expanded out away from it.

*"Hold on just a little longer,"* Merlin's voice said. *"We have to get far enough away from the blast before we can let you guys inside."*

*"H-hurry,"* Pockets pleaded. *"The tunnel's about to t-tear away from the ship with our m-mass weighing it back against your thrust!"*

*"Hold on,"* Samantha said, *"I'm going to slow the ship, but spin our axis so the bulk of the Horizon shields you from the shockwave."*

Pockets pulled himself up hand over hand toward the hatch and suddenly felt the saucer change direction as they had been warned. The raccoon felt sick to his stomach watching the stars fly by at an alarming rate during the quick spin, but smiled weakly when the airlock hatch suddenly opened up. Renny grabbed the raccoon's elbow and pulled him into the airlock with him, but didn't relax until the outer hatch secured with a loud *clunk*.

*"We're in!"* he announced.

The *Blue Horizon* rocked violently as the shockwave hit the ship. *"Get us out of here, Sam!"* they heard Merlin's voice call across the Com against the hiss of pressurizing air. They felt a surge of motion, and after a few long agonizing moments later, the ride smoothed out. Durant opened the inside hatch of the airlock and greeted them with a worried expression.

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Merlin leaned back in his chair on the recreation deck where the crew had assembled for a special meal prepared by Lorelei. There was a feeling of quiet among them as they ate without real conversation. A day had passed since the destruction of the antique replica, and while the *Blue Horizon* had resumed its original heading, everyone's thoughts were still back on the other vessel.

Merlin had spent time with each member of his crew after they had all rested, to compile as much information as possible before he filed his report with the Spatial Police Force. Samantha had recorded the video images transmitted from everyone's suit helmet cameras and had saved them into a combined file to transmit along with Merlin's report. Although she knew that an investigation would be mounted by the SPF into the matter, Sam did some research on her own and found a few bits of information from the London database on Earth.

The captain took a lap of his coffee as he looked around and noticed that everyone had pretty much finished their meals. It was a rare occasion that Merlin let the bridge go unsupervised and allowed the entire crew to gather together. Pockets had the auxiliary station on the rec deck programmed to duplicate any alert that might sound on the bridge, including incoming messages.

*"Okay, Sam,"* the wolf said across the room, *"what do we have to send to the SPF?"*

The Border collie looked at him strangely. She had already told him everything she knew in an earlier meeting with him, but then she realized her reply would not be for him, but for the others. Everyone looked at her expectantly.

"Well," she began as she pushed back away from the galley table, "what I've been able to put together is still a puzzle without all the pieces. The *SS Walkabout* was a replica of an old *Goldenrod* class exploration ship that first went out to the stars to colonize Kantus. In honor of the tricentennial anniversary, this one left Earth eleven months ago to retrace the historic route of the original vessel to Kantus, but the *Walkabout* disappeared twenty-eight days into its journey. A search and rescue operation was mounted by the SPF, but the ship was never located in an area that is now seldom used for regular space traffic between the two worlds. The search was called off after a month."

She took a lap of her drink and continued. "The commander of the ship was Captain Shin Amamori, a veteran astronaut of the Terran Space Agency's Deep Space Exploration Division. Amamori had a crew of fourteen to staff the operation of the *Walkabout* and ten passengers of various races who had paid large sums of money to take part in the recreation of the original historic flight. Most of the passengers were historians or worked in fields related to what the flight meant. I dug up records and found psychological profiles on each of the crew and all the passengers. With current LightDrive technology, the usual travel time of between Earth and Kantus is three standard weeks, varying only a few hours dependent upon their orbits around their respective stars. The rudimentary LightDrive-type engines that were used on the *Goldenrod*, and replicated again on the *Walkabout*, were not as efficient and the travel time between the worlds using them would be nearly eight weeks."

She looked around her and gave everyone a wry smile. "As we're familiar with the effects of long voyages, we can all appreciate the need for a crew that can get along with one another being cooped up in a ship for weeks at a time."

"I've had people tell me how amazed they are that my crew resembles a family more than co-workers," Merlin said with a nod. "I've always used psychological profiles when evaluating someone for my crew. Nobody's perfect, but if you don't get along with one another, long journeys can be disastrous."

"Yeah, look at Armando's crew," Renny said with a gesture of his hand. "I keep hearing how his people are always fighting amongst themselves."

"Good example," Merlin replied.

"Anyway," Samantha continued, "there was only one person on board the *Walkabout* who had not had a recent psyche evaluation prior to that last voyage."

"Captain Amamori?" Cindy guessed.

"That's right. He'd been in the service of his company for many years and it later came out that he had greased the palm of the one in charge of getting those done."

"Greased the palm?" Max asked with a funny look on his face.

"Bribery," Tanis explained to him. "He paid off someone to keep the results of his evaluation off the records."

"Oh."

"Whatever happened on that ship will probably never be fully explained," Samantha said. "We suspect Captain Amamori went off his rocker at some point and started killing everyone, but even that is uncertain. There's also the possibility that *he* was the sole survivor of an attack or mutiny and the long months of being alone afterward unbalanced him."

"No, I think *he* did it all right," Pockets countered. "He tried to kill the four of us in the engine room and Merlin got a close look at the space madness in the man's eyes."

"The computer memory core was destroyed," Sam said with a quiet shake of her head, "as well as practically every book or other documents on board. We can only guess that he didn't want any record of his actions that might be out there. The captain's logbook was never found, and now the rest of the evidence has been lost."

"All we can do is turn over what we have to the SPF, including the audio and video feeds that Sam recorded from your suits," Merlin stated. He lapped up another drink of his coffee and frowned. "I've already talked to each of you about what you saw and did over there, but we can probably expect the SPF to want to discuss it with us further with questions of their own when they make their investigation."

He looked around the room and then settled his gaze upon the Border collie. "I'm proud of you all, but I want to voice my personal satisfaction with Samantha's performance getting the *Horizon* away from the *Walkabout* while keeping the rest of us safe in the process, especially with Pockets and Renny still clinging to the outside and vulnerable to the approaching shock wave. It was good thinking in a crisis that saved us all."

Samantha looked embarrassed at the public praise and several voiced their own appreciation for her actions. Pockets leaned up against her and rested his head on her shoulder, his expression one of admiration.

"Thank you, Sam," he said quietly. She put her arms around him and gave him a warm hug. The conversation fell quiet while everyone mulled through their own thoughts.

A moment passed before Merlin cleared his throat and then looked at the raccoon. "Did the *Horizon* sustain any damage in the ordeal?" he asked his engineer.

"Other than the loss of three maneuvering packs for the suits and the ship-to-ship extension tunnel, no," Pockets replied. "I've already put in the order for new packs and another tunnel assembly to be delivered in Grandstorm to your sister's house on Dennier, which is where we're headed after Argeia, right?"

"That's right," Cindy replied. "We have another shipment to pick up in a city on Dennier that isn't near her place, but we'll have about a week of downtime before we'll leave with it."

"Yeah, but I'm anxious to see what Argeia's like," Tanis said with a sudden grin. "If ya go by the vidscreens, that'll be a right dandy place to visit."

Conversations moved toward tales each of them had heard regarding the new alien world, but the captain's thoughts were elsewhere as he lifted a hand to the singed spot on his nose. Tanis had cleaned up his wounds and the wolf was thankful for the pressure suit he had worn against Amamori's onslaught, but he would have memories to keep of this adventure.

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Merlin Sinclair sat in the center seat on the bridge trying to reread one of the novels on his slateboard. He had been on duty an hour but found it hard to focus. He marked his place, set the device aside and turned down the interior lights until the only illumination came from the instrument panels.

He stood up slowly and then moved to the forward windows. One star directly ahead was brighter than the rest, *Dokke*; their destination was in orbit around that sun. He leaned on the Com station and let his mind drift. Almost immediately, he could see Captain Amamori's brown eyes, wide in stark terror and mouth open in screams of mortal peril. *What had the man gone through?* Merlin asked himself. *What drove him over the edge?*

He could only hope the Spatial Police Force could find out something more in their investigation, but he doubted it. With the destruction of the *Walkabout*, only fragments remained and there was little left of anything physical to examine. All they really had available were the experiences of he and his crew.

*Had Captain Amamori murdered his crew, as all of the evidence pointed toward, or was there another explanation?* Merlin suspected he would never know. The mystery of the *Walkabout* would likely go unsolved.

## THE ASSASSIN

By Steve Carter

### *The Heir Apparent, Part 1*

*Captain's Journal*

*SS Blue Horizon, PA1138*

*This is our first journey to the white planet, Argeia. Home of the semi-feline race called the Kastani, Argeia is one of the wealthiest – but scarcely populated – and alien – worlds in the Alignment as a new member. From what I understand, it's a very democratic trio of city-states that occupy one continent on the very large globe. The Kastani have until recently, been very averse to joining the Alignment, preferring to maintain their planetary sovereignty from a distance. The few Kastans who've ventured forth from their home world and learned our Standard language in recent years have been unusually quiet about the workings of their people, and have all been interesting characters in and of themselves. This leads most to believe that they're a planet of oddballs, but I doubt that is truly the case.*

*At this time, the Kastani will not allow other races to live on their world. There are simple ambassadors from Earth, Sillon, and Hestra, but they are only allowed to go in certain areas of the capitol city-state, Donisia. The Kastani developed completely separate from the human and fur races that began on Earth, an original sentient species of their own. We will not be staying for very long, as visitations on Argeia are kept to a rigid schedule. They'll allow us three days of recuperation time in the equivalent of their hotel and its many amenities, but we cannot leave and go out into the city itself. It seems odd that such would be the case, since their structures are vast and beautiful, and their flowing architecture is very appealing to the eye. However, considering that they're just now opening up their borders, I'm prepared to accept a little bit of reluctance to throw the gates wide apart for what can often be a very hostile galaxy.*

*Our cargo is also unusual. We're shipping six dozen blue diamonds from Earth, especially cut into prisms that would be practically useless for industry. However, their technology is like nothing we've ever experienced before. They are no more advanced than any other world, they just do things so, for lack of a better word, alien. That part of the cargo can be carried by two people in a box the size of a footlocker. In addition to this extremely rare shipment, the bulk of our transport is two metric tons of frozen strawberries; apparently a delicacy among the Kastans. I've heard stories about what the fruit does to them, which lends to the humorous idea that we're now bootlegging.*

*Still, it will be interesting to see firsthand the landscapes that have until recently been available only on vidscreens, and to finally meet these strange aliens in their own habitat.*

*Merlin Sinclair, Captain*

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*It is very dark in space, a limitless, velvety void with simple pinholes of light, lifetimes away. In truth, space is a very bright place with incalculable flashes of brilliance filling trillions upon trillions of light years. But light diminishes as it gets further from its source, so the viewer*

sees only remnants of radiance billions of years old already, and only from the nearest sources. Few know where the light from distant stars goes.

There are dead stars, collapsed in on themselves and feeding like greedy insects upon the light of living stars. Their density is so powerful and their gravity so strong that even time slows down and collapses in their pull. It is whispered among many in short, punctuated sentences that there is a force behind these star-eating monstrosities. They devour everything in their paths and grow denser, more ravenous with every absorbed molecule. They are, by their nature, street cleaners of the universe. This is where the light goes.

Moving silently, relentlessly toward its cosmic nourishment, the dark stars spend millennia making their way through the universe, searching out and consuming everything in their paths. What science calls dark matter, religion calls evil.

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Legislature Speaker Jo Chan sat at her desk, poring over a slateboard. The silver fox had been preoccupied with matters most dire in the ruling body of the Planetary Alignment. Elected chancellor of the loose union of representatives of the worlds, she played the role of benevolent manager in times of strife. Things had gotten bad over the last several weeks. The introduction of Argeia into the aligned body of worlds was rocky, and a criminal element had arisen in the Planetary Alignment since the destruction of the pirate Sagan. Pretenders to his notoriety had cropped up everywhere; new faces looking to succeed the master and get themselves a reputation. Most had been dealt with swiftly and effectively by the Spatial Police Force.

Beneath the chaos and confusion, however, looting and posturing was a greater puzzle. Running like a resonant rhythm over which all the other problems played was a string of crimes that had no specific pattern, but did have similar circumstances. Locations across the Alignment had been targeted for terrorist acts ranging from destroying old and uninhabited buildings to specific murders of high profile celebrities and public servants. Added to that were the deaths of a handful of slaves on Quet, a military functional manager on Earth, and a recently abused child on Alexandrius. All had died quickly, with the same pattern of slashes across their bodies.

Accusations flew in all the usual directions. Dennier and Mainor blamed one another, Nalirra blamed everyone. A rat had arrived from Quet to demand an investigation into who was destroying his slave property and his cronies had made sure he got the chance to address the Legislature directly. The club owner had little of value, but many friends in the right places.

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Lucas Sinclair roused, his head limp on a sore neck. How long had he been asleep? The young wolf looked around to find himself in strange surroundings. He remembered falling asleep in a brothel where he had used the credit chit he had liberated from an unsuspecting tourist, but this wasn't it.

There were lights here, painfully bright in his eyes, and the smell of antiseptic. His entire body ached, with the remnants of aches all over, twinges throughout his musculature here and there. It seemed a comfortable bed, but it was as though he had been sleeping on a table top. A long, clear tube flowed into his arm from a bottle of fluid overhead. He was in some sort of hospital setting.

Before him was a single figure. Swathed in a white cloak, an alien feline stood straight, peering directly at him with black, lifeless eyes. The gray creature was like no other he had ever

seen, with the body of an Olympic athlete beneath the light wisp of cloth. Where the robe parted in front, he saw a dark gray uniform with silver lining, and a chrome utility belt with a variety of storage containers. On one side, he could see a short staff about three feet in length. The canine sat forward to speak, and realized that he couldn't hear the stranger's breath, nor perceive the rise and fall of its breast.

"You are awake," came another voice.

Lucas turned to the new sound, a small slateboard datapak directly to his right. On its screen was a pale silhouette against a black backdrop. It was smooth and unmoving; the canine figured it wasn't a live picture. A small, red eye pointed at him, feeding his image to whoever was speaking to him.

"Where am I?" Lucas asked, wincing with an uncomfortable turn of his frame.

"You are in my care," the image replied. "You've been here for five days."

Lucas blinked, moving his stiff body a bit more and noticing how dry his mouth was. "Whuh-what am I doing here?"

"I like your work, Sinclair," the electronic voice rasped. "I want to employ you."

Lucas chuckled, a contemptuous smile spreading across his face. "Sure, what you want?"

"I want a technical advisor and computer hacker. You come highly recommended." At the edge of Lucas' vision, the gray alien moved slightly, drawing a small device from beneath the white cloak, clicked a switch and activated it.

Lucas crossed his arms smugly, "Sure, I'll need an advance of ten—"

"You'll do it for room and board," came the reply.

Lucas grinned in oily smugness, "No, I only work for money. Up front. In advance."

"Actually," rasped the slateboard, "I know what you do things for. No amount of money can persuade you. You are motivated by personal comfort, which I can provide to you in spades."

Lucas considered this for a moment. Maybe he could milk this sucker for something nice, if not credits. What the heck? Who needs wealth when he's got all the things he wants at the end of a string?

"I can get you women, if you want them," the slateboard continued. "I can get you drugs, flashy cars, amenities of the most high. But *no* money."

"My tastes run to the exotic," Lucas said, testing for a reaction. "Certain things I only want to know about alone."

"I can get you any compliment of beautiful boys you want," the voice purred. "I have an associate who..."

"*No!*" Lucas choked, disgusted at the very idea. "That's—that's not what I meant at all..."

"I'll expect you to be in your office tomorrow morning. You have the rest of today to get your things in order. Your personal dormitory has been laid out for you on the other side of the far wall. The dining facility is open all the time. I trust you'll have no further questions."

"Hey, I didn't accept yet."

The voice said nothing for a long moment. Then a small blip of sound came from the screen and Lucas pulled back. The gray feline at the foot of the bed snapped its fingers once, drawing his attention. Lucas watched as it pressed a switch on a device that it held. The device made a high-pitched squeal, and the wolf felt a sharp pain in the smallest toe of his left foot.

An instant later, the toe exploded with a sickening splatter, spraying blood, bone and cartilage over the sheets and the bed. Lucas screamed, pulling his wounded foot up to cradle it,

to pinch off the bleeding and try to stop the pain. The gray creature handed him a swatch of gauze and a first aid kit before shutting down the hand-held device and returning it to its case on the chrome belt. Lucas wept openly, his cocky composure shattered by the raw agony of his punishment.

"There are one hundred and nineteen more of those planted all over your body, Sinclair," the voice from the slateboard said. "Don't try to remove them or scan for them, as they'll all be set off one by one if you do. You'll die slowly, terribly as your bones crack and your organs burst. If we detonate surface charges, such as what you just experienced, we can dismember you at every major joint. If we detonate inside you, we can cause ulcers, aneurysms, heart attacks... whatever we want. They are not terribly powerful, but the damage they cause can be very painful. Do you understand?"

Lucas, barely cognizant through the throbbing agony, nodded in the direction of the slateboard.

"Good. Work well and you will be rewarded with all you want. Work poorly..." The voice trailed off, allowing a pregnant silence to fill the room.

The gray creature stepped forward to take the slateboard, its body moving fluidly like a serpent across the room. It left the room to allow Lucas Sinclair to bind his wound and consider his future.

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In a dark room, Var Briggs stood before a shimmering projected image in a corner of the bridge of the *Basilisk*. The former first officer could feel the air grow heavy as the projection came to life in front of him. Standing nearly seven feet tall, it was an image of a pale robe with a cowl. An unseen face was cloaked behind the hood's shadow, disguising not just its identity, but its race as well. Even without seeing the dread face, Briggs knew that its mood was sour.

"I thank you for responding so quickly, sir," Briggs said, performing the best bow he could muster with broken ribs. He shivered, hands shaking in the glow of the projected light. He was not accustomed to addressing Sagan's master.

"Where is his body?" the hazy figure replied in a cold, mechanized voice.

"Sagan went down with the *Blue Horizon*, sir," Briggs added. "He..."

"His body, Briggs," the voice snapped. "I want to know where his body is."

"The Spatial Police Force retained him, sir," Briggs stammered. "Maybe on Joplin. We don't know where..."

"Sagan was destroyed."

Briggs stopped, still quaking in the sight of the pale image.

"His body experienced a metabolic breakdown," the image replied in its cold, mechanical purr. "Sagan has decomposed by now, his body is a stew of fetid, broken pieces that the authorities will never be able to learn anything from. It was my design. He was wise in not telling anyone else about it."

Briggs held his breath, unsure if he had just made a mistake. He fidgeted for a moment, and then attempted a smile. "That's very wise of you, sir..."

"Do you think you will be able to command the *Basilisk* when it is repaired?" the voice purred.

Briggs stood tall, set his jaw firmly, "Yes sir, I'll take her and destroy the *Blue*—"

"You'll do no such thing!" snarled the voice. "Sagan was a fool off on his own initiative when he took on the *Blue Horizon*. He endangered my ship and the rest of his crew when he did that. Ships and crews cost, and I have no onus on the elder Sinclair or his people. They have their problems to deal with at this point."

“Y-yes sir,” Briggs said, nodding in agreement. “And what of Natasha?”

“*Captain Natasha Khasho is also not a matter for your concern. You will receive new orders when the Basilisk is ready and you will act only on my command. See to your healing, Captain Briggs,*” the voice trailed off as the image de-phased.

Briggs turned and ambled back to his lounge chair. He stared out the thick glass view port to the black cityscape outside. *Captain Briggs...* it sounded so alien.

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In a vaulted hall, ringed upward with seats and lit with pure white lights, the congregation of delegates from all the inhabited worlds had gathered in the Planetary Alignment Legislature located on Alexandrius. Each of the populated worlds had sent five representatives, with ambassadors from non-surrounding planets representing the ecological and political needs of the worlds without sentient life. The hall buzzed with voices here and there as the new representative from the white planet Argeia took the podium.

It was an intimidating place to say the least. Situated at the bottom of the egg-shaped hall, delegates had to look up to all of the other members of the PAL. A short, stout Kastan named Bon Widi addressed the Legislature in accented Standard with an air of confidence as he accepted the charter that welcomed Argeia to the Alignment. The alien Kastans were a felinoid race of unknown origins and even more obscure culture, having no genetic ties to any of the original Terran colonies.

Widi was broader than most of them that had ventured out into the cosmos—considerably less well known than hired killer Jape Devon or the musical group *Superconductor*, whose one album had to be circulated on black markets because it never should have left the planet Argeia.

Senator Ferry, representative of Alexandrius, stroked his chin in thought as the strange alien addressed his colleagues. It was the same tired diatribe about bright futures and such, and it ran boring in his ears. But the canine was more concerned with the dark figure standing just to the Senator’s left. Senator Widi had not introduced his colleague, whose dark leather clothing stood out in stark contrast to the Senator’s billowing white robe. It was like a black knight protecting an overlarge magistrate, and the expression on its countenance told Ferry that its owner did not want to be here standing on ceremony.

Until six months ago, the Kastani of Argeia had been reluctant to join the Alignment. However, a trade negotiation and the opening of a faster route to worlds with ore and resource deposits had garnered the Kastani the favor of their new friends. But Ferry sensed something was wrong with the situation—something he just couldn’t put his finger on.

Widi finished his presentation and was met with a standing ovation from the gathered Legislature. The dark figure bowed and whispered into his ear, then turned on its heel and left the Legislature Hall. It passed by Ferry as it left and the canine Senator got a glimpse of the tunic it wore beneath its black cape. It was a blanket of expressions; the tanned leather surface of the skins of stitched-together faces of fallen enemies, sheared from their skulls at death. Ferry shrank from the grisly visage as it passed by, and the figure stopped to look at him. Beneath the cowl was an old, haggard face that had seen too many years and wars; the eyes burned dark green beneath gaunt brows. Ferry knew in an instant that the Kastan did not want to be here, watching his world’s sovereignty evaporate before his eyes. He turned and continued out the door as Bon Widi strode across the hall and took his seat.

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"This is incredible," Cindy mewed as the ship sailed under a massive, arching column. A shy glint of light blue shone on the horizon as the only indication that there was something beyond. All around, smooth white buildings seemed to fall with liquid ease into one another. The city was no mongrel conglomeration of edifices built independently of one another, but a single, flowing ocean of architecture that stretched on to the horizon. The bridge crew was focused upon the middle vidscreen as the city-state spread out before them, a gleaming white and silver ocean seemingly made of crystal and ice. In fact, the glittering structures were composed of a metal that could only be found in one other location, and that had dried up six years prior.

"An entire city made of Siilv," Renny whistled, awestruck at the spiraling, organic buildings and crossways that hung in space.

Captain Sinclair, however, found himself having to pay more attention to the flying than he usually did. Something about the Siilv metal in this quantity was playing havoc with his instruments and he had to fly into the spaceport manually. Something about the way the buildings caught and scattered light made even that difficult, as angles changed and performed in ways he was not accustomed. He stayed in the open as much as possible, but often found himself compensating for the strange effects when he had to pass close to structures or under vaulting walkways.

"Samantha," he said, diverting his attention when the chance came.

For a long moment, there was no reply, and then the canine responded in a whisper, "Yes?"

Merlin pulled his eyes away from the vidscreen long enough to see his crewmate staring at the city vista, clutching at her lapels. Tiny streaks of tears spilled down her cheeks.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

Snapped back, she caught herself. "Sorry... it's just... so beautiful."

"I know," he replied. "Please get on the Com and get some landing details?"

She turned with slightly more professional air than usual to her console and keyed in the information they had received from the shipper on Earth. The key-code would connect the ship with the spaceport where they would land, meet the customer, and deliver their goods.

Before she had a chance to hail anyone, a strangely-accented voice responded in Standard on the audio communicator, "Release your controls. We have you."

The sticks suddenly became heavy in Merlin's hands, and the wolf fought the urge to wrestle them back into his power. However, he released the controls and found them moving on their own.

"Excuse me," he asked at the panel, "but what's going on here?"

"We have you in our guidance beacon," the exotic voice replied. "We will guide you to the Nikke dry-dock. Relax and enjoy the ride."

Merlin's heart suddenly leapt into his throat as the ship began to speed up. It glided through quickly-shrinking apertures in the structures before it and rounded corners that seemed to converge against the horizon in unhealthy ways.

After several seconds, he realized that even though the ship shot through the structures, slashing around the flowing, organic buildings at wild speed, that they were not touching any of them as they moved. After several seconds of heart-pounding fear, the vidscreen filled with an immense, eggshell-colored dome. This, he had seen in a manual, was the Nikke Intergalactic Dry-dock and Spaceport — or NIDAS as it was commonly called.

Merlin studied the screen before him and drew back. The structure below was seamless, a sheen of chromatic energy on its surface flamed like a bubble on a soapy counter. At the base of the dome, a few dozen bodies moved.

Then the ship got closer to the beige dome, and the other crew members began to turn his way. The *Blue Horizon's* speed had not diminished, and they were fast flying toward the structure as it almost seemed to lurch out toward them.

"Captain?" Renny asked, a worried expression crossing his face.

"Uh—" Sinclair said into the receiver.

A black fissure appeared in the bubble—a vertical slot that stared back at them as if a feline eye. The ship turned onto its side with a lurch, shot through the opening, and into the bubble, continuing its rotation until it slowly came to a stop inside the massive structure.

Inside the dome, a plethora of ships from all over the Planetary Alignment sat docked, as their cargoes were loaded and unloaded. The *Blue Horizon* moved toward an occupied stall before banking right and gliding into an empty spot on one of the three ringed levels within the dome.

"Thank you for flying Kastani Air," Pockets chimed.

As the ship settled, Merlin checked his instruments to find that the engines had been shut down several minutes before, and that the landing gear had already been engaged.

"Who—?" he looked to Renny, but the cheetah shook his head in response.

"Full service, I suppose," Merlin replied a little uneasily, knowing an outside power could govern his vessel so well without him ever authorizing or releasing control. "All right everyone, we've got cargo to unload. Snap to it."

The bridge crew filed out of the bridge, through the corridor to the lift, down to the cargo hold to meet with the others. Settled into the NIDAS, the crew still felt apprehensive about their arrival. The beauty of the city below had been muted somewhat by the loss of control upon approach. When they reached the hold, Durant detached the braces with a hiss of escaping gas as a pneudraulic whir engaged and the bay door slowly yawned open.

Merlin stepped toward a single crate tethered near the cargo ramp and looked around the inside of the NIDAS port. Three stories of vehicles parked inside the behemoth structure, all along the curvature of the inner dome. Each compartment was sealed off from the next by a series of force fields that resonated in regular pulses of energy. The wolf looked to the outer wall to find a gleaming black machine attached to one wall. The spherical object had, as its one decoration, a blinking red eye and a hum as it made slight calculations.

"What *is* that?" Pockets asked, sidling up to the captain.

"Oh, they're gravity regulators. We've seen those on Hestra. They adjust to conform to the specific needs of the ship crews that park here. See the force fields?"

He nodded.

"Those compartmentalize each of the sections, so that each crew that arrives can have enough time to acclimate to the heavier gravity on this planet. If we'd just stepped off of the ship into Argeian gravity, we'd all weigh about 250% of what we do now and it would be difficult to breathe, much less move. The GRs will slowly break us in so we can get used to it."

Near the black sphere, a door spiraled open and the bay filled with flashing yellow light. A tall, metallic figure emerged from behind the door and stepped forward. Durant and Pockets both turned to the sound of a warning klaxon and grinned. The white-gold figure strode quickly, despite its mass and apparent weight, toward the ship.

"Everybody step back, okay?" Durant said to the other crewmembers, walking deeper into the empty cargo bay toward the refrigerated storage lockers on the bulkhead wall. He

tapped a control on one and twelve locker doors swung open in unison, chilled vapors dissipating rapidly in the warmer compartment.

The form stepped forward with heavy mechanical movements, and the captain saw that it was actually a Kastan in an augmented suit. The alien gave him a friendly smile, extended one of the thick, robotic arms and spun a large pincer. From a small portal on it, a slip of paper emerged from a slot.

Merlin took the paper, instantly noting the material was so thin and light as to be almost insubstantial. Printed across it in Standard was:

SS *BLUE HORIZON*, PA REGISTRY 1138.  
SHIPMENT K-T421, BLUE DIAMONDS AND  
FROZEN STRAWBERRIES. PLEASE STEP BACK.

He motioned to his crew, and the mechanical loader stepped up into the cargo area and strode into the hold to where Durant directed. The Kastani loader wrapped pincers around the nearest crate and pulled it with a frozen *crackle* up from the floor of the first locker. He then turned and loaded the crate onto a wide floating pallet that had sailed in after him.

Durant grinned out at Pockets, approving of the mechanized loader and making a note to check price and availability when he got the chance.

While the Kastan was loading up the pallet, Merlin and Renny carried the single box of diamonds down the ramp to the floor outside and set it on the ground.

Standing beside his captain, Renny looked off into the open central area of the NIDAS. A low hum of energy filled the place, sounds of machinery and the occasional shower of repair sparks echoed off the walls. But in the center of the place was a circular station with three Kastans moving to answer questions, distribute information, and help a few other aliens gathered around the circle. The station was in three concentric rings, the two inner rings stacked progressively higher.

"Looks like a help desk," the captain interjected. "Why don't you go down there and see what's going on about accommodations?"

The cheetah looked around for a ladder or staircase, but his eyes lighted on a panel near the edge of the compartment. He approached it and found the words "For Assistance" printed in Standard above a green button. Smiling to himself, he pressed it and waited for a representative or elevator lift to come to his response.

Instead, the second ring of the circular desk rose – with no visible means – to the second level and hovered in midair. At his feet, a shaft of light sliced across empty space and ended at the edge of the help desk. When he did not move, the pretty alien behind the desk smiled and motioned him forward. Gulping his courage, Renny stepped forward onto the shaft of light and found it solid. Then, with a pleasant grin, he crossed the space between himself and her desk.

"Welcome to the NIDAS," she purred in the exotic, throaty Kastani accent. "You had a question?"

"Yes, we're the *Blue Horizon*, delivering blue diamonds and strawberries... we were wondering about accommodations, hotels and food places."

The alien tapped a floating keyboard before her and a blue-green screen appeared before Renny, flashing a series of images, symbols, and snowy data too fast for his eyes to process. A moment of shock overcame him and he stepped back in reflex, but then the images disappeared and the pretty Kastan was handing him a gray sliver of metal. "This is the key to your suite."

"But... what?"

"Thank you," she said, and motioned for him to return to the ship. Renny turned reluctantly around, pocketed the key, and mumbled to himself about the inefficiency of the service as the ringed desk floated up to answer a question on the third level. He noticed also that as he walked, the light bridge disappeared the moment after his foot rose from it. Uneasy, he quickened his pace—only to find the bridge kept pace with him—until he reached the safety of the docking bay structure.

He approached the captain and extended the key. "Here we are... this is the key to our suite."

The captain turned it over in his hands, "Only one?"

"One," Renny replied, "but it's in ten different compartments with three baths and a common living area. We've got a decent view of the city from a large window and an allowed pair of five-star restaurants within walking distance of it. We all have one dinner for free at one of them during our stay, included as thanks for bringing the strawberries."

"What about recreation?"

"There are hover, battleball and other zero-G rec areas in walking distance, plus traditional tennis and volleyball courts and a pool as well. Actually we can leave now and get rested right away and the bay crew will take care of everything."

Merlin had to do a double-take at that, "Oh... your assistant was that informative?"

"She hardly said—" Renny started, but caught himself. The cheetah suddenly realized the wealth of information he had just passed to his captain, having heard only a few words from the alien girl. "She barely said anything, actually. She just showed me this blitz of... images and... other things..."

"She flashed it directly into your brain," said a new voice. "It's more efficient than having to work a map or brochure, isn't it?"

Merlin turned to see a small, thin Kastan approaching them. He was coal-gray, with slightly darker hair draping his shoulders. He wore a lighter gray uniform with highly polished jackboots.

"Hello, I'm Cibao. Welcome to Nikke. I would have been here sooner, but there was a holdup with welcoming one of our military commanders back from a long journey. Please accept my apologies, as we've been having some troubles with customs and miscreants in recent weeks. Perhaps you are aware of the goings-on in the Legislature?"

"We are, but don't worry, we understand that there are many responsibilities all around," Merlin extended his hand, but the diminutive Kastan did not take it.

"Please, come and rest yourselves," he invited, oblivious to the gesture. Merlin motioned to his crew to follow, but Durant elected to stay back to close and lock the ship when the unloading was done.

After the others had filed out of the bay, the large grizzly bear stood out at the top of the ramp watching the single Kastan grabbing the last of the cargo. The alien handled the material with the competence of years of steady performance, seeming to dance in the heavy mechanical suit. Then his attention was drawn away by a shaft of white light that sliced into the dome, and a single ship entering the protected area inside. Durant could make out a faint trace of gray lines running to the ship's hull and decided that those were the control emissions. But as the new ship moved toward its compartment, something strange happened.

The Kastan guided his loader and the full pallet out of the ship, but when he got down to the ground floor. He looked up abruptly as the sound of engines flared in the center space, and the clumsy black vessel began to shudder. The soft blue lights of the port suddenly went red, and an alarm sounded, piercing and shrill.

Durant heard a Kastani curse, delivered in the hissing language of that people as the black ship was hastily dropped into the nearest cubicle without the grace extended the *Blue Horizon*. Red lights ringed the cubicle as the force fields glowed orange and a voice from inside the ship began to scream, "*For Shällachma!*"

A moment later, a thunderous roar shook the NIDAS when the cube filled with flame and slashing shrapnel as the ship blew apart inside the containment field. A billowing, scorching cloud smashed against the energy field, boiling uselessly against the defensive wall until, its rage spent, it evaporated into a cloud of thick black smoke.

The clatter of running feet and raised voices, shouts and warnings filled the air as an emergency crew sped to handle the situation.

"What was that?" Durant inquired aloud.

"Terrorist," came the eccentric Kastani accent. The loader driver continued, "From the planet Brandt, they continue to attack us supposedly in the name of one of their gods. They think us abominations so they hire other alien ships to do this."

Durant ground his teeth in a snarl, watching as a stream of white liquid pumped into the damaged docking chamber.

\*\*\*

Cindy snuggled into the comforter on her bed, luxuriating in the unbelievable softness of the fabric. More delicious than velvet and smoother than satin, the Kastani bedclothes were already proving to be the best she had ever felt. Quartered with Samantha, both had to resist the urge to strip to their fur and enjoy the comforter when they had first touched it. No doubt this was material that had provoked the creation of many cubs and kits in the past.

Samantha withdrew from the washroom shower in a bathrobe, still roughly toweling her fur dry, to see Cindy soaking up the luscious feel of the bed. She grinned at her friend and indicated that the shower was now free. Cindy moued softly, then went into the washroom to get rid of several days of accumulated yuck. When she had closed the door, Sam eyed the bed with particular delight, dropped her robe, and nestled into the comforter again.

She decided that she could learn to like it here. Then, as the comforter slithered across her thighs, she realized just how long it had been since she and Merlin had spent time together.

\*\*\*

"Having fun?" Merlin inquired, also emerging from the shower as roommate Renny pummeled a wooden structure in their room. Standing six feet tall, the thick object could spin at its base, but occasionally locked into a spot to offer resistance as the cheetah launched fists, feet, elbows and knees at its many protruding arms.

"This is great!" he chirped, slamming against one appendage. It spun around and swung another arm at the back of his head, but the cheetah was too fast for it. "It's like they made all these rooms specifically for us!"

Merlin grinned at his crewmate; it was true. Both of their full-sized beds were covered in the most wonderful bedding, and a sliding partition could be pulled out for privacy should one or the other decide to invite company for the night.

"Go," Merlin waved a finger in the direction of the washroom, "get clean. You smell like old socks."

Renny quit his pummeling and struck a martyred pose. "Aah! My feelings are cut to the quick!" Then, in a flurry of motion too fast for Merlin to see clearly, he finished off the practice dummy with an all-out assault that spun it to and fro several times before spinning it completely around. Then he went into the shower with a grin.

\*\*\*

Renny and Merlin stood outside Cindy and Samantha's room, and the door opened as the cheetah stepped up to inquire on them. Cindy appeared in front of him with a grin.

"We were just going to see if the two of you were hungry for dinner," Renny said with a smile.

"I would be delighted," Cindy said, offering a dainty hand for him. As he took it, she looked past him to Merlin. "Captain, Miss Holden requires your presence."

Merlin shrugged at the mouse's formality, moved past the pair of them and into the room. Cindy stepped quickly through the door and closed it behind her.

"What was that about?" Renny asked, perplexed.

"I think," she purred, "that they need some time alone. Now, how about that dinner?"

It took a moment to dawn on the cheetah, but then a face-splitting grin crossed his lips. He curled an arm around the mouse's shoulders and led her away.

\*\*\*

In the room, Merlin stood in shock as Samantha Holden stretched out on the bed before him, a rumpled bathrobe on the floor beside it. Something in the geometry of the room—or perhaps the color palette—seemed to accentuate every smooth curve and taut line of her body as it lay on the comforter. Her silken, quivering form melted into the fabric as if she were a drop of honey, and she ran her fingers through the luxurious stuff in a lover's caress. She was the vision of a ripe, succulent peach in the eyes of a starving man.

The captain gasped despite himself. He had never seen her looking this gorgeous. His eyes found themselves riveted to hers as his ears alerted to the excited, almost laborious breathing, a throaty growl punctuated it. He saw a look on her face that communicated more than words, more than an abundance of words, ever could. That face was one without shame or fear or reservation. It brooked no questions and offered no apologies: it was the kind of face he would remember until his dying day, and her feminine scent spoke to him in volumes.

Merlin moved purposely toward her. She did not have to tell him what she wanted.

\*\*\*

The Aurn building on the faraway world of Sillon was a broad, tall structure composed of glass and steel. Lit up with a thousand lights, it was one of the most glittering night spots in the Planetary Alignment, even if the distance to get there was initially daunting. Under a velvety blanket of stars, a gala event was taking place in the name of Intergalactic Aid, the charitable foundation responsible for brokering the newfound resurgence of industry on the planet Brandt. With the inauguration of the New Peoples' Party, the economy was starting to pick up again.

In truth, Intergalactic Aid had armed a group of insurrectionists, and an ensuing bloodbath had been swept under the carpet by a willing and obedient media. Key figures from

the IA had received positions in the new government, complete with large salaries and extremely loud titles.

A gray-cowled figure moved silently, gliding across the glistening floor like a shark. It passed through a throng of overly-dressed politicians, the kind who hugged your wife and kissed your children a little too long when a camera wasn't around. Here was a priestess of a High Order on Alexandrius in her decorous raiment, and there a famed philanthropist from Ganis in a pressed suit and rings that flashed too brightly in the harsh light. Over there was the businessman from Brandt, flanked by his obese human wife with cosmetics caked so thick that her face resembled a Kabuki mask. Voices passed in thick accents, dribbling through the room like globs of mayonnaise as the parties spoke of the bright future and their plans for helping business and industry grow now that Argeia had joined the Alignment. Strange it was that no Kastani had been invited to attend. A nearby band banged out a strained blend of several musical styles that merged in a stew of artistic incoherence.

The figure wove its way through the crowd almost unnoticed. It was too small and unobtrusive to be a threat, and the neutral gray clothing made it less than a wisp of smoke through the cigarette-choked room. It stopped in the dance hall and set a small, gray cylinder in a corner, then silently exited as quickly as it had come.

\*\*\*

Morning broke on Argeia and found the *Blue Horizon* crew at breakfast.

"I can't believe this," Renny said as he tapped his ursine friend with the back of one hand. The cheetah sat up straighter in his chair as his lip curled in disgust. Even Max turned away from the game on his tablet to see what was the matter.

"Whuzzat?" Durant asked through a mouthful of vegetables. The cheetah turned up the vidscreen volume:

*"This is Chung Wong reporting live from the Auryn building here on the distant world of Sillon. With the terrorist bombing of the Intergalactic Aid Foundation's gala last night, several key leaders in the organization are now presumed dead. SPF and medical forces are still clearing out the rubble, but spirits remain low. In this, the most desperate act of terrorism in recent history, there is little hope."*

"Whoa..." Durant added as the woman on the screen moved under a line of security tape and across ruined landscape. Then he noticed that the short Asian woman wore a RESCUE jacket reserved for qualified personnel.

"Excuse me sir," she jammed the end of a thin microphone into the equine face of a worried rescue engineer. "This is quite a lot of devastation. Do you think you can handle it?" The Silloni's jaw dropped as he sought a response, and she pressed the mike further toward him.

Suddenly the screen snapped to the shocked and angered face of Holly Harken at the INN correspondence desk. The brunette snarled, "What is that stupid bit—"

"Holly," a voice sharply called from off-camera, "you're on..."

"Jon!" Holly faced the camera, "get her off that scene, NOW!"

Renny and Durant both winced from the screen. They had never seen this side of Holly Harken before.

"Someone better tell Samantha," Durant rumbled.

Without another word, Renny dismounted his chair and was out the door.

\*\*\*

Samantha Holden ambled to the door and parted it only a crack. She and Merlin had not emerged for dinner, or for breakfast the next morning. When Renny reported the news, her fur was rumpled and she had a hastily-tied bathrobe around her body. However, he had never seen her look more relaxed and glowing.

"The Aurnyn building is on another part of Sillon," Samantha sighed, "but thanks for letting me know. There's no reason for Master Tristan to be in that part of the world. He wasn't a member of the IA, so I'm pretty sure that he should be okay right now."

"You sure?" Renny inquired.

"Yes," she responded. "I got a call from Senator Ferry, an old family friend who keeps track of things like this for me."

"Whoa... okay then," Renny smirked in appreciation. He knew that Sam was connected to people in high places, but a PA Senator was outside his imagination until that point.

"Who's there?" came another voice from behind her. Renny looked over her shoulder and saw his captain wrapped in the luxurious comforter, sipping from a steaming cup. He also noticed rumpled clothing lying helter-skelter on the carpet.

"Just me," Renny said. "A couple of us are going down to the rec area to see what all's available. Either of you interested in coming?"

Merlin chuckled and took another lap from his cup. "Nope, no interest whatsoever," Sam purred. "We'll catch up later, okay?"

Renny shook his head and departed with a giant grin.

Samantha closed the door behind him and turned to sit at the table with Merlin. In truth, she had already spoken with Senator Ferry. He had also relayed the growing tensions in the Legislature about the recurring acts of terrorism and the unease some had about Argeia joining the PA.

"Has anybody checked the ship recently?" Samantha asked.

\*\*\*

Pockets gasped audibly as the flat gray portal to the docking bay spiraled open as a great iris. Beyond the faint glow of energy shielding the *Blue Horizon*, a small ship hung in space above the customer service desk. Resembling a slender wedge of black ice, the craft was gently moved to occupy the space on the other side of his ship. Along its outer edge gleamed a bas-relief carving of a chaotic slash mark, a symbol of the house to which the pilot belonged. The raccoon grinned despite himself, and suddenly realized the bear standing beside him had moved toward the ship.

The *Blue Horizon* sat where they had left it, still upright on its thick landing gear beneath the dense Liquid Crystal engine. The weight of the engine made the stowed forward gear unnecessary, but it remained an unusual sight.

"Cool!" Pockets called after his friend. The bear turned to face his friend, and then followed the raccoon's gaze to the second bay where the black ship had landed.

"What is it?" the bear asked.

"That's good news!" Pockets responded.

Durant eyed the scene as a sliver of the black ship slid back and a short, compact body emerged from it. There seemed nothing unusual about the pilot; merely another Kastan. It was the first time he had ever seen one pure white, but that hardly mattered to him. The lithe creature dismounted his sleek craft and gathered a pack out of an unseen pocket in the hatch he had just emerged from.

*"Oh-dee-ay!"* Pockets called. The Kastan started at the cry and turned to face them. His face lit with a small smile before Durant's mouth fell open. This creature had the darkest, most soulless eyes he had ever seen. Unlike the other Kastani, whose eyes glittered with vibrant hues like normal, this one's sockets were a deep, flat black that reflected no light. Durant couldn't exactly put his finger on why that bothered him, even though he had seen many other races throughout the Planetary Alignment.

*"Oh-dee-oh!"* the newcomer replied in the grating, hissing Kastani accent. He approached the energy wall and tapped a series of switches on a nearby conduit, causing a ripple to appear in the fabric of the wall. A blinking green light on Pockets' side demanded a response, and the raccoon tapped an "okay" button near it. The ripple became a hole and the alien stepped through.

*"Jape Devon,"* Pockets said, softly so as not to be overheard by too many.

Durant found himself taking an involuntary step back at the sound of that name. Easily one of the most infamous of all creatures in the Planetary Alignment, the dark-eyed alien had a reputation as one of the most vicious killers in the PA — and yet his friend greeted him with jollity and affection.

*"Just here for a few hours,"* the Kastan rasped. *"Want to get a female?"*

*"No, sorry,"* Pockets replied. *"I'm on the job. Here, may I introduce Durant?"*

The bear was cognizant of a greeting, and extended his hand out of courtesy, but Devon didn't take it. He merely waved and spoke in his own language: *"prehtu nama."*

*"Come around to our place, I'd like you to meet my new boss!"* Pockets invited.

*"Certainly,"* came the response. As the two chatted, Durant turned to his ship to look it over for anything amiss.

\*\*\*

Lucas Sinclair sat back in the comfortable leather chair before his computer terminal. It had taken him three weeks of constant work, thirteen hours a day and no proverbial weekends. Crosschecking, verifying and strengthening the code. This program, specifically ordered by his still-unseen employer, had to be the best that he had ever written.

His programming skills had come out naturally, fluidly as productivity had become his new goal in life. The young wolf stood and hobbled over to a second computer system, sliding a thin, black crystal into the reader. The system immediately scanned the crystal, a small green light indicating that it was in sync. Normally the light would go off, but this one stayed on.

The screen flashed once, filled with a nightmare of flashing lights and colors, then fell silent as a curl of smoke spilled out of the core drive. Lucas took the destroyed computer apart and withdrew the primary drive to find that it too, was suddenly a worthless piece of plastic and metal cables. He tugged the crystal out of the receptacle with a grimace. It was ready. His heartbeat thrummed in his ears, his face hot with blood. He stripped off his clothing.

He thumbed a keypad and waited. Two minutes passed before a featureless pale face appeared on his slateboard monitor. *"Sir,"* he stated, holding up the disk, *"the computer virus is finished."*

*"Excellent,"* came the reply. *"Put it on the counter and lie down."*

Lucas licked his lips in anticipation and obeyed, stretching out on a padded bunk nearby. A series of tones sounded in the empty room, and his body filled with an unbelievable pleasure. The disrupters placed throughout his body could not only bring pain, but ecstasy as well. This one sent him into paroxysms of bliss; a one-way ticket to Nirvana as his heart raced,

his brain activity spiked, and his entire body burned like a brand. The young wolf whimpered like a pup as the spasms wracked his form, howling with labored breath as all his pleasure centers threatened a surge coursing through his body. Over and over the undulating gratification continued, until it abruptly stopped as he was filled with a cold emptiness. It was like slamming into a wall.

Lucas sat up immediately, gasping and choking at the sudden deprivation. "But I did it!" he cried to the room. "Please!"

"I believe you," the voice rasped, and the image faded. "Deliver it to me."

Lucas leapt up, struggled into his trousers, and hustled down the hall to pass the thin crystal on to one of the nameless other lackeys his employer kept as a transporter.

\*\*\*

"Well, this is *great*," Merlin growled. A screen flashed before his face, stating in Standard that all transports were quarantined for another day while the assassin's vessel was investigated. While the lupine captain understood the need, he disliked the inconvenience. The Kastani had offered to contact the next shipper and inform them of the delay, but Sinclair declined. It would be better to make up the time in flight than call ahead and risk the possibility of losing a job on an unscheduled stopover.

A bell chimed and Merlin approached the door. Finally out of the bathrobe, he was fully dressed and ready for almost anyone. However, on the other side of the door was an alien he had never seen before, with a bright and beaming Pockets standing beside it. "Yes?"

Pockets bowed slightly, "Captain Sinclair, I have someone you should meet. May we come in?" A strange look crossed the alien's face as it regarded the captain. Devon pressed one palm over his breast in approximately the place his heart should have been and whispered something in his language.

"Sorry?" Merlin asked.

"*Prehtu nama*," Devon responded. "Just noticing how close you've been to death."

Merlin shrugged and led them to the table in the center of the room. Cindy had taken up with Renny and he had moved in with Samantha for reasons nobody bothered second guessing. "Who am I meeting today?" The wolf didn't extend his hand this time, now aware of Kastani rituals.

The dark, lifeless eyes reflected none of the pure white light in the room as it spoke, "Jape Devon." A look of astonishment and chilled fear crossed Sinclair's face. He took a step back despite himself.

"It seems my reputation precedes me," Devon said with a tight grimace.

"Oh no," Pockets reassured him, "nothing to be worried about, Captain. Jape's harmless when not on assignment."

"I'm—a little shocked, actually. When I got into this business I wanted to keep a low profile," Sinclair said, warming to the idea that his life would never be what he predicted.

"I wish I could say that this visit is all social, but there's business involved. My employer allowed me a bit of time off to visit some family here on Argeia, but didn't stay around to wait on me. She gave me a deadline to get to a rendezvous point and I'm a bit low on fuel. I'd like to contract your ship to transport my vessel and myself to Earth."

"Can't you just refuel here?" Merlin asked.

"Uhh..." the alien's eyes narrowed to slit, unaware of how much he should tell the wolf. "My vessel uses a particular type of fuel not indigenous to this world."

“Okay,” came the uneasy reply, “don’t all space traveling vehicles use liquid crystal engines? Or do you incorporate the blue diamonds?”

“Neither. Mine is... unique.”

“He works for Natasha, remember her?” Pockets interjected in a whisper. Devon started at the mention of that name, but Merlin only scrubbed his chin with one finger. Apparently this was fairly common knowledge. He shot the raccoon a grim look that told him to mind his manners.

“We’d be traveling empty anyway. Can you pay a fair fee?”

Devon picked up the wolf’s slateboard from the table, scribbled a figure on its screen, and then passed it to Sinclair. The wolf regarded it with interest, and nodded.

“Well then, we’ll be leaving as soon as the NIDAS releases us. As you probably know, there is some investigation going on and —”

“I’ll take care of that. When would you like to leave?”

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Master Tristan sipped his evening tea from an exquisite China cup. Clad in only his black velvet robe, the tall and elegant unicorn-like male decided that tonight would be a good night to turn in at a sane hour. Having dedicated a good portion of his staff and resources to assisting the wounded and dying at the Auryn building on the other side of the world for the past three days, exhaustion was starting to take its toll on him. Here in his virtual ivory tower on Sillon, Tristan could look out from any of eight tall, wide apertures on the entire spread of t resort. For some evening air, a short path led to an observation balcony extending like an outstretched palm from the bulb atop the thick tower. It was gravy, he knew, to have a sanctuary like this: pretentious and vain, but he had earned it. From this vantage point, the red-purple horizon stretched out as a ghostly ribbon in the failing light of dusk. None of the chamber lights burned now; he liked the dark of evening.

Tristan took the chance to look out from the nearest view-port. Below the tower was a celebration in full swing, with music, lights and fireworks. He sighed quietly, used to the distraction by now. An act of terrorism on one part of the planet did not halt the merriment in another. A good party, after all, did not stop for anything.

He felt — rather than heard — a soft footfall near the edge of his massive, open chamber.

“Peri?” It was common for the servant girl to deliver a luxurious back rub as he readied himself for bed. However, she did not emerge from the doorway. Tristan swept the vista with his eyes and saw nothing apart from the violet draperies blowing in the warm, gentle wind.

“Who’s there?” the dark Silloni called into the billowing draperies. Stepping out of the darkness like a jaguar, a small, compact shape entered the master’s private chamber. Swathed in an all-concealing gray robe, it could not have been more than five feet tall. A hand peeked through the draping fabric, revealing a metal staff a good three feet long. The staff glistened with slick, dark blood.

Tristan knitted his brow, dropping the fragile cup to the floor where it burst in a shower of fragments. He backed instinctively, the tang of danger suddenly hot on his tongue. The door was behind him, and no one could climb the sleek walls of the ivory tower. The intruder made no movement save a slight cant of its hooded head as Tristan drew a heavy metal blade from behind the headboard of his massive bed.

“Who are you?” he asked in a voice that surprised even him.

The stranger snapped its wrist once, spinning the small staff in a peculiar arc. One end of the short staff telescoped back as a double-curve of polished blade licked out in a hiss of pneumatic pressure, and the metal snapped open like a spider's unfolding leg. The intruder moved it coolly in the half-light of evening, as if offering it for examination. It was a double sickle, its second curved blade bolted on a hinge at the tip of the first. The robe parted on the other side, and a mocking, gloved hand beckoned him forward.

Tristan swapped the sword from hand to hand, weighing his adversary unsurely. If it was astute enough to find its way unannounced into his private chamber, it was likely an adroit fighter as well. The gray form did not move, but merely waited for the Silloni to strike first. Tristan moved cautiously forward and the intruder let him. Nearer and nearer he was allowed to draw before a slight flutter appeared in the gray hooded garment before him, like the arch of a coiled serpent about to strike. He was almost on top of it, and with his superior size and reach could easily smash it in two. This above all else warned him to be cautious of this adversary.

The sword flashed, slicing down on the gray form and striking the marble floor with a sharp *kang* as it missed its deftly moving target. Like an adder, the intruder lashed out with its hinged weapon, whistling through the air as it made a full revolution. The scorpion's-tail weapon reached further than he had anticipated, and nicked the Silloni's nose with its razor tip.

Tristan closed the distance between them and slashed out with the heavy blade, finding purchase and knocking his attacker back a good eight feet through the air. Its body was solid, hard and dense, but he was certain that it should have been a killing blow; nothing could have survived that swipe without being cleft in half. Still the whirling gray dervish slid across the floor to a stop before curling back around itself.

It moved across the smooth, marble floor, close to the ground as the wicked, hinged blade whipped back and forth before it. The hood concealed its face, but beneath he could see the blackest of eyes set deeply beneath a heavy brow. It opened its mouth to snarl, revealing translucent fangs slick with blood.

*"What are you?"* the black Silloni rumbled in a cold, astonished tone.

It snaked across the floor toward him again, whirling low. Most enemies tried to launch themselves against his impressive height and were easy to deflect. However, this one stayed low, beneath his normal reach and keeping him off guard. The Silloni parried in a tempest of flashing steel, striking low and on either side of his adversary before bringing his weapon up to strike from above. The stranger raised its weapon high to deflect the blow, only to see the Silloni blanch and pull the blade back. Tristan rotated his hips and planted a hoof in the stranger's breast with all the strength of his massive thighs. The intruder shot across the floor in a straight horizontal line to smack against a pillar in a bone-crushing impact. Stunned, it nonetheless regained its footing and stepped back into the battle.

Metal crashed against metal in the close quarters, neither of the combatants gaining much ground. Tristan's body and mind, forged like fine steel through countless decades of combats real and exercised, worked in harmonic concert. However, this foe was as well-trained in the arts as he, and in several that he was not. He found himself matched, despite his long years of many disciplines.

Tristan slashed down with his blade, cleaving a glancing blow on the whirl of gray fabric as the stranger spun to the left, legs flailing out to anchor its acrobatic leap. The Silloni compensated with a flick of his wrist, swinging the blade on its axis up to follow the movement. In a rush of adrenaline, he felt the blade find purchase in a whorl of cloth. He spun the sword, twisting it in the offending fabric — too fast, too easy.

A movement at the edge of his vision caught his attention, and he swung the cloth-wrapped blade out to meet it. The attacker, now devoid of his concealing cloak, glided to a stop on padded boots, sliding underneath the blade's arc and smoothly under the Silloni's hooves. Tristan leapt straight up, barely avoiding the wicked sickle's serrated edge as it slashed toward his belly in a flash of polished steel. Too late, he could not recover the blade as the wrapped fabric snarled the edge of a bedpost. The Silloni released it as he struck the marble floor with a deep, resonant thud of his hooves.

He could see it now, fully in the evening light. It was a rough humanoid shape; an alien he had never laid eyes on before, in a soft gray tunic that made its movements difficult to track in any light. It was as though a collection of ashes had formed into a man's body. Soft-soled boots made its steps soundless. A slash of dark blood mottled the front of the tunic, but Tristan could not tell if it was its own. Its arms were open, its empty hand spread wide to invite another round of combat. However, most horrible, the wicked, translucent teeth split the face in a hideous, taunting grin.

It charged him, now sure of success. However, the direct assault was met with a heavy fist from the Silloni, swiping across the killer's face and sending him sprawling to the marble floor again. Tristan moved to crush it, stamping heavily on the stone as his foe tumbled end over end to evade him. The elder Silloni followed it around the floor, determined never to allow it to gain equilibrium enough to rise.

Then in a swift movement, one hoof slammed down on his attacker's left wrist. Tristan pressed his weight on the captured limb, but the bones remained unsplintered, the flesh unorn. A crack appeared in the marble as he ground down on it, but the wrist remained intact. The assassin planted both heels into his prey's gut and Tristan stumbled backward.

The assassin moved again, a pirouette of deadly motion as its dark gray tunic fluttering with its impossible, gymnastic revolutions. It was dancing toward him, arrogantly sure of itself. With another volley of slashes, the killer pummeled his prey while Tristan deflected the blows with a heavy serving tray scooped up from a table. The steel sparked, flashing in the half-light like lightning bugs in a cacophony of musical *pings!* It was fast—almost too fast for the Silloni. The venerable warrior could feel his age creeping up on him in his ragged breath. This invader was a warrior in his prime, moving like quicksilver and driving him toward his own balcony.

Drapery billowed around the pair as Tristan was forced out onto the walkway overlooking his resort. The music and revelry below drowned out the vicious battle high above, and his own guards were heedless of his plight.

Tristan dropped to the floor, slashing a hoof under his opponent and whirling it in a practiced sweep, tangling the legs of his attacker. The cocky assassin was caught off guard and plummeted to the hard, smooth marble with a smack. Tristan recovered quickly and launched himself forward to tackle his foe.

In the split second between that moment and his striking the ground, the assassin was up on its feet again, flashing the curved double blade over his prey's neck. Tristan felt a sudden, stabbing agony in the center of his forehead. Fingers of anguish slashed out above his eyes, clawing down the sides of his skull as another vicious slice of the blade crashed down a second time. The pain shot down his neck and into his shoulders, weakening the already stumbling Silloni with its sheer intensity.

In another moment, the pain slammed into his head and neck with a force unimaginable. The blade slashed down another time, hacking through the spiral bone in the center of Tristan's forehead. The horn separated with a terrific, thick boom that sounded like a cannon in the

master's ears. He screamed despite himself as his drained muscle and sinew quivered in torment.

The pain reached down into his breast, tearing at his living heart as he collapsed to the cold marble. The master ground his teeth, overcome with a wave of nausea and hopelessness as the reality of what had just happened set in. A deep, eviscerating despair filled him like a vile acid. For a long moment he lay unmoving on the floor, eyes and teeth clenched as he awaited the inevitable blow.

The blow never came.

Tristan raised his face to see the assassin standing above him, unmoving even to draw a breath. The black, lifeless eyes reflected the glittering lights of the resort below, and a cold smile spread across its face as it regarded the spiral of bone lying in a pool of its own fragmented dust. With a smooth, effortless movement, the killer kicked the master's horn over the edge of the balcony where it spun into the blackness below.

Pausing long enough to see the terrified look on Tristan's face, it whirled again and disappeared over the edge of an aperture, seizing its discarded gray cloak from the heavy blade in a smooth movement of one arm.

Tristan reached up gingerly to inspect the thick nub of bone between his eyes, nerves flaming like sentinels when his fingers touched the exposed marrow. Far below, the celebration continued. A good party, after all, did not stop for anything.

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A receiver flashed on the wall as the com-link beeped, demanding Merlin Sinclair's attention. Odd, he thought, that he would be getting any communications at this location. Nonetheless, he put down his bag and moved to the console embedded in the wall. The letters across the screen read HESTRA in Standard, and the wolf wondered who would be calling from there. He tapped keys.

"Yes?" the wolf asked.

"*Captain Sinclair?*" a husky, tired voice rumbled over the speaker as the vidscreen displayed a simple message: *image not available.*

"Yes," Merlin replied. "How can I help you?"

"*It's Taro,*" the voice rasped.

In two words, the sum of months of worry and wait slammed into Merlin like a physical blow. All of time and space stopped in that moment as his mind fought to grasp the image of Taro Nichols. She was there, wounded and bleeding from the belly in the dark corridor of the broken *Blue Horizon*, flashing red and yellow lights filling her face with an eerie glow as she ended the life of the dread pirate who had wanted to kill him. He felt the moment like a weight on his breast, forcing the air from his lungs. He blinked twice before remembering to breathe. "Taro?"

"Yes," the voice replied. "*I'm on Hestra with relatives. They're taking care of me.*"

"But..." he stumbled for words, "well, not to be rude but..."

"*Why am I still alive?*" he could hear a grim chuckle through the receiver. "*I've been asking myself that for months now. Nobody's explained anything to me and I have decided not to look a gift over too well. I don't have long to talk so please tell everyone that I'm okay.*"

"Sure," he said, still bewildered.

"*I'll contact you later when I can. Thanks for everything.*" Her last words bore the ring of a heart making a supreme effort to force air through lungs. As the line went blank, Merlin stood

in stunned silence before falling to one knee on the floor, catching his face in his hands as the flush of relief filled him. His whole body shook as he accepted the knowledge and allowed his emotions to overcome him.

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As the *Blue Horizon* lifted out of the Argeian atmosphere, Baath Cibao sat before a vidscreen watching the news. Holly Harken was reporting yet another act of terrorism in the Planetary Alignment. A block of apartments near the Legislature had been detonated an hour ago, but only a few casualties had been reported; a few building workers, some passers-by, and only one resident who had gone back for a report he had left there accidentally.

Harken sat grim-faced as a photo of Senator Byron Ferry of Alexandrius scrolled up the screen.

**COLD FIRE**  
By Steve Carter

*The Heir Apparent, Part 2*

*Captain's Journal*  
*SS Blue Horizon, PA1138*

*The Blue Horizon and crew are performing well, but the political situation across the PA has deteriorated. On our way to Earth, we've received news that further acts of terrorism are being committed all over the Alignment. The Legislature has also been grid-locked for weeks now as several planets fight each other over trading rights with Argeia. Everybody wants a part of their rich deposits of Siilo metal, the most valuable resource in known space to humans and furs alike. Having just left that world, we can understand why. It doesn't exactly help that the Kastani are totally unselfconscious about their wealth. They don't flaunt it, per se, but they do have a sense of pride about it that would be considered arrogant or taboo elsewhere. They're wealthy, but they wear that as if they don't care.*

*What concerns me is stories I'm getting from Devon about how some worlds want to destroy them rather than have the Kastani form alliances with their competitors. Intergalactic capitalism just became more cutthroat than usual. It's all that Jo Chan can do to keep things orderly, and I fear that her popularity might be waning. History teaches us that arguing and a certain amount of dispute are good because when they stop, the shooting starts. My fear is that the way things are going, it might stop soon.*

*It's been unusual traveling with our temporary passenger, Jape Devon. I was not aware of many of Kastani practices, but the strange alien has made our lives interesting. For one, I don't think that he sleeps more than an hour a day at the most. The rest of the time, he's barely still. His metabolism is so high that he's constantly in motion and rarely ever sits down for anything. I've also never seen any creature that eats only once every other day, and dumps an entire salt shaker onto its food.*

*He's been good for recreation and training with Renny, Durant and Samantha. They've taken opposite shifts so that Devon can share some of his combat expertise in hand-to-hand with them. Devon has also begun teaching Pockets his native language and our engineer is almost bludgeoning us with his new vocabulary. Somehow, I don't think he's got it exactly right, though.*

*Weller Tagon is making noise in the Legislature about his losses in the recent rashes of violence, despite that he's a small-time business operator in an insignificant town on the devastated world of Quet. His broadcast two days ago sent Max into a catatonic relapse that I've never seen before. Samantha found him curled up in a corner, eyes wide and shivering in panic. It was a surprise, considering all that he's lived through in the last year. His former master's voice alone provoked a spontaneous flashback to a life of abject terror, of living only from one moment to the next and not knowing when any unaccountable violence would be perpetrated against him. It makes me sick to think that I dealt with that scum at all, but Max is okay now, following some time talking with Cindy and lots of TLC from those who care for him.*

*Merlin Sinclair*  
*Captain, SS Blue Horizon*

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Legislature Speaker Jo Chan grimaced, her face a tight mask of anger and frustration; things were getting out of control too fast. She'd been shocked by the speed and voracity with which other worlds had fallen onto the newest member, *demanding* that they share their commercial wealth immediately like ravenous animals on a fallen prey. Brandt had appeared with a number of new trade tariffs which had somehow become retroactive to their loss of Siilv metal, based on a standard of "access equality" that had not been clearly defined. Dennier and Mainor had each been attempting to woo the Kastani with a variety of bribes and veiled threats.

Other worlds which, in better times, would have conducted themselves were joining the pack mentality. Even though it had entered the Alignment with a full disclosure agreement standard to inclusions, Argeia refused to disperse its mineral deposits to the rest of the planets in the demanded quantities. Entreaties and higher prices met with the same resounding rejections. Members of Intergalactic Aid demanded a boycott, and many of its members made speeches about "emergency powers" and "accommodating intervention," using their recent loss on Sillon as an emotional cudgel. Nobody wanted a fight. Nobody wanted to back down. Kastani ambassadors were recalled from several worlds.

At the back of her memory, she remembered something from the history of Earth. Residents of one continent had gone exploring and found a whole new continent, and over the next hundred years had simply taken it over from its primitives by force and deception. She saw the same thing happening with the Kastani, only it was arguably the primitives who were moving on the technological, moving to overwhelm them by sheer numbers as a mob descending on an Ivory Tower.

The Speaker sat back in her chair before the console in front of her. An incoming message had informed her of another act of terrorism; a physical assault against Silloni magnate Tristan, which had left the former Regent crippled and hospitalized with a severed horn. Silloni horns were not magical, as was the legend of the unicorns they resembled, but they did serve as housings for a thin, vital gland which provided a catalyzing enzyme for certain functions of spinal control.

The severed horn had been discovered in the early hours of the following morning and a transplant was being scheduled already. Without his horn in good working condition, Tristan would have to spend the rest of his life connected to a support machine. The humiliation was emasculating.

Silloni officials had, understandably, kept this event a secret to all but the highest offices. Tristan's description of his assailant matched closely with the generic look of the Kastani, and the fact that he had been unable to crush its arm with his massive hooves made obvious that it had the Kastani's super-dense body. The weapon it had used was consistent with the other violent attacks reported in recent weeks.

"So," the silver fox whispered to herself, "it's a Kastani terrorist." In a few hours, Argeia would move out of its sun's unusual magnetic field and she would be able to contact either Senator Widi or Commodore Blanc, the dark warrior who had accompanied the Senator to the Legislature at Argeia's induction.

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On a dark outcropping of an unfinished metal structure on Dennier, a long sliver of black stretched out against the purple horizon. Angry bands of red clouds stretched across the sky as the sun sank behind the mountains and dusk deepened into night. The stealthy ship had arrived on the planet several hours before, undetected by the Planetary Defense Grid. Swathed in a draping gray cloak, a single body manipulated a hand-held communications port, signaling on a fluctuating-code frequency. Buffets of wind fluttered through the fabric of its clothing as the silhouette stood against the sky, unheeding of danger.

*In pain there must be gain.* The mantra, excerpted from an interpretation of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, was burned into Conn's head at an early age at its master's teaching. There had always been pain, fear and anger. Its Master had made certain that pain was a constant fixture in both their lives and the lives of those they employed.

But pain is a handle that fits many tools, and is multifaceted in its own right. Pain can be physical or psychological, brief as an instant or lasting for generations. It can be applied strategically for a single purpose or as a blanket over many purposes. It can be real or imagined.

Of all these, this last was the most useful. *Imagined* pain can be more useful than real, because its source can be anything you wish. Hurt an individual and he will hate you for it. Convince him that others have or will hurt him, and he is a slave bound to your service. Convince a people that they have been hurt by another people or some unseen evil, and you have an army. Convince all people that all others will cause them pain, and you have an empire. There is a kernel of truth in that idea, and that truth makes it so easy to use the pressure any way you like.

*"Tell me what you have learned,"* the voice hissed through its mechanical resonator.

Standing reverently before the white-green projection, the gray-cloaked assassin nodded its head in deference. Its black eyes reflected no light from the cool illumination of its communications port. "Dennier and Mainor mean to move against Argeia and neither is aware of the other's plan," it replied with exotic accent. "They don't know of the Kastani defensive capabilities apart from the Planetary Defense Grid."

*"Take the Vault to the Mars Colony, Bova,"* the projection instructed. *"It's a nice, out-of-the-way locale without much traffic and will be difficult to trace. Deliver the Cold Fire there and make sure that it gets a wide dissemination, especially to junior military members from as many fleets as possible."*

*"It will be done, my master,"* the dark-eyed assassin purred.

*"You have served me admirably, Conn,"* the mechanized voice rasped. *"And you will reap your rewards."*

Conn closed the Com unit and turned it off, tucking the device into its chrome beltline alongside the sonic device it had used to punish Lucas Sinclair. It looked down on the city below, toes of its soft white boots just over the edge of the precipice on the unfinished building, and checked a timepiece. The Kastan warrior listened for the soft, rhythmic thumping of the rotor blades and was rewarded with a flood of white and blue lights rising up before it. Local authorities — just what he had been waiting for.

"You there!" a voice boomed on a loudspeaker. "You are in an unauthorized area! Please remove your vehicle and come down to the surface!"

Conn stood, unmoving, as the helicopter turned to the side. A uniformed coyote stood in an open bay door in it, flashing her badge with one hand on her pistol. She winced at the sight of it and its dark, lifeless eyes. The Kastan cocked its head to one side, looking at her curiously, and she jammed a finger at the ground, demanding again that it come down to the surface. It cupped a hand to one long, tapered ear as if to say it could not hear her, and pulled a slender

device from its case on the back of its neck. With a flick of its wrist, a cascade of hot, green light flashed in its hand, and it hurled the flare at the helicopter.

Too late, she saw the weapons of the black ship arc toward them, trained on the green light. Conn fell to one knee as blisters of rapid energy fire spat out of the guns on either side of the lone figure, slashing through the night air and slamming into the hulk of the aircraft. Rocking off their axis, the rotor blades ground to a halt and splintered, gears screaming with effort. The engines sputtered, fingers of electricity gripping around it as it plummeted down to smash in a boiling cloud of flame below.

Conn peered over the side of the ledge, watching the scene below. Several seconds passed, and no survivors appeared. It stood and boarded its ship, and the black wedge craft lifted into the sky. Minutes later, Conn broke through the atmosphere and into the inky blue-black of space.

The dark-eyed warrior moved controls on the panel before it, igniting a particular cell that had been acquired from the devastated hulk of Sagan's *Basilisk*. Conn had found the compartmentalized Vault technology stolen from Natasha to be useful in its tasks. It cut travel time from weeks to seconds, and its missions had the feel of randomness that it enjoyed. To be everywhere at once was a killer's dream.

With a bony hand, Conn moved the control. Its cruiser was enveloped in a whorl of blue light, and then was gone.

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Samantha Holden stood with Max in one corner of the rec deck, watching the events taking place there. In a cleared out area, Jape Devon was fighting Renny and Durant for practice and exercise. The crewmates had been training with him for some weeks now, the Kastan giving them free lessons in hand-to-hand combat to keep himself entertained. He taught them to work together, to know one another's movements and communicate with body language in prosecuting a melee against him. This had resulted in a number of whacked fingers, tails and heads, but they improved. They learned to use Renny's reacquired speed and agility with Durant's strength and constitution. The two forged a silent bond that began to bleed into their working relationship; each almost seeming able to sense the other's thoughts.

Now near the end of the trip from Argeia and entering the Sol system, this was the second time they had fought with real, bladed weapons. The cheetah had armed himself with a pair of rapiers he had been learning to use, and the bear fought with a long, double-ended pike. Devon had given them one instruction: *kill me*. They weren't holding back, either. Working in concert with coordinated movements, the pair had kept their prey on guard for over twenty minutes. Devon was training them not to fight, but to *kill*, and each of the crewmates still found himself matched by the assassin, even now.

Jape Devon whirled a traditional Kastani weapon they had never seen before. He called it a Delta, explaining that the actual Kastani word would be impossible to pronounce. It began as a metal ring with three equally-spaced shafts extending slightly more than two feet out from the rim. With a flick of his wrist, each of the shafts had lashed out with a locking, dual-edged blade which extended the weapon another two feet in all directions. This presented the unenviable fact of having two blades pointed at one's opponent and one blade pointed at oneself. Only a master dared approach such a weapon. As Renny parried the slashing tri-blade with one of his rapiers, he understood the alien's order to tie his tail to his leg. The Kastan leapt and spun through the air like a ballet dancer, slashing with his weapon with a master's ease and

adroitly keeping his own appendages out of harm's way. It was incredible how fast the action played out before the two spectators.

Bombastic classical music played on the sound system behind the fierce fighting, a quick staccato of horns over an oppressive bass and augmented by long chants in some ancient language. Max watched the action with a dazzled expression, boxing absently at the air in complete hero worship. Samantha tried to control her breathing as she stood, waiting for her turn with the Kastan sensei. Devon had, at some point, offered to teach each of them a fighting style, and had found an already competent opponent in the canine.

One of Renny's sabers wrested free and whirled through the air, but he continued to press the Kastan with his other weapon. Durant stayed arched up to attack from above, guarding his flanks with the lower end of the pike as Devon aimed a disemboweling stroke at him. The three blades kept them both at bay no matter what they did. The classical piece ended with a fierce roar and the three combatants immediately fell back, drawing away from one another and heaving with exertion. The crewmen fell back onto a couch, each burying his face in a cup of nutrient-rich water.

There were no comments, no advice exchanged. Renny and Durant would critique one another later; each already knew the mistakes he and the other had made in prosecuting this battle. Devon merely lapped from a small glass of a thick, orange liquid before stretching his arms out and drawing the Delta blades back into their switchblade scabbards with three resolute *snak!* sounds. The killer set his weapon aside, selected another, then thought again and replaced in its case.

He stepped back out into the practice area, where Samantha stood waiting for him. Devon scratched his chin a moment and motioned for Max to come over with her. The teen did as commanded, sitting down directly in the center of the fighting area. Devon placed the decanter of the odd orange fluid on his head, and instructed Max to hold it there and not move from his spot. The two adults stood on either side of him, and each fastened a thong around a wrist, then to one another's wrist, securing each combatant to the other.

Max suddenly began to feel extremely mortal.

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A light flashed across the screen on the bridge of the *Horizon*. It was an incoming communication from a scrambled source. Cindy regarded it with interest—they were pretty far out for a message to arrive on a rotating-scramble code. Coded signals got static and interference from stellar magnetic fields and other impediments, a rotational code would be unperceivable.

She tapped a key, "This is the *Blue Horizon*, go ahead."

"My name is Robbins," the voice replied. "I'm trying to contact Jape Devon. Is he available?"

*That's odd*, she thought, Devon's presence had been kept in absolute secrecy. Nobody needed to know they were transporting a known assassin on board their ship. "I'm sorry, but there's no one by that name with us."

"*That's fine*," the voice crackled, "I only wanted to ask him to contact his ship. Robbins out."

Cindy tapped her chin. She pressed a lighted key on the panel before her.

"Yes?" Merlin's voice answered.

"I just got a message from someone named Robbins, he's trying to contact our passenger."

"Pass the message on to Devon. He can find a means of contacting his friend if he needs to."

\*\*\*

Max sat frozen, even though the game had ended moments ago. He shivered where he sat, the decanter of fluid still resting atop his head as the two winded combatants sat to the side, congratulating one another.

"Y'okay, kiddo?" Renny called from across the rec area. The youth, still tense with fear for self's own life, slowly turned his head to face the voice, and felt the tense muscles in his neck protest against it.

"Yep!" Max squeaked.

"He'll be okay," Devon chuckled, "just give him a moment to catch up with the fact that he's still alive."

"Mr. Devon," came a voice over the intercom. *"We've had a message from someone called Robbins. He is asking that you contact your ship."*

Devon pursed his lips, turning to Samantha, "We can continue this later, if you want." Without waiting for a response, the Kastan turned and left the rec area.

\*\*\*

"Talk to me," Jape Devon cheerfully commanded the console before him.

"Devon," came the raspy female voice of his captain, *"Good show getting in with the Horizon people. How goes it?"*

"I don't think they're ready for what's coming," he replied. "This is not a battle-hardened crew; this is a traumatized family unit. They're going to lose it if things go to hell."

"You underestimate the civvies," she said. *"Listen, I want you to meet me in orbit over Ganymede on the far side of Jupiter on your way back out from Earth. Tell only who you must, and only at the last minute. Earth is not a good place for me to be around right now."*

"Something up, miss boss-lady?"

*"The political situation is getting worse by the hour. As you are aware, the poorer worlds have been launching terrorist attacks against some of your institutions. They're frontal assaults and generally easy to spot, but what worries me is that intel says Dennier and Mainor are actually arming up to invade Argeia with Earth funding them. Are your people equipped to handle an assault from multiple worlds?"*

"If they try to invade, they're all going to die," he said absently, as though it was to be expected.

*"You've made that clear before. You also know that I've never bothered interfering with other worlds' affairs, but this touches us deeper. I trust your estimate, but it's better to have too much defense than too little. If inter-spatial commerce allows this sort of thuggery, it'll threaten the already tenuous situation we've had up until now. Allowing the abridgement of Kastani property rights will pave the way for other worlds to follow, and I want us to be there if things get ugly."*

"Gotcha. We're going to be stopping at the Mars Bova colony. Anything you need?"

"You," she said, *"talking and breathing. In the interim, continue to get the Horizon crew trained in combat arts and I'll meet you at Argeia. Out here."* The communicator clicked off.

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Bova Colony, Mars.

It just looked awful. Samantha stared out of the thick window at the ship as it sat on a landing platform. Terraforming in the Gustav Crater around the Bova Station was still in progress, and the planet's rusty red landscape made the *Horizon* look like an ugly bruise. She moved her glance over the collected faces. This was not like most other spaceports. Clutches of immigrants, women carrying wailing infants and day laborers clamored around the passenger terminal. It was like a bus station in a seedy part of town.

Nevertheless, it was a paying job and she had to keep that in mind. Durant was outside the ship under the protective dome, directing the loading crews with a breath mask across his muzzle as octagonal crates of Martian hematite went into the cargo bay. The atmospheric condensers were not working to full capacity today and even within the dock areas of the station, precautions were still needed. In the distance she could see plumes of crimson dust spewing up as heavy machinery tilled the iron-rich soil and made way for a new superstructure to add on to the spaceport.

*Strange, she thought, that a world so close to one of the most industrialized planets in the PA would be so underdeveloped in this day and age.* Still, even on her own homeworld there were bad sections of town only a short walk away from good.

Nearby, a vidscreen displayed the breaking news story that intergalactic industrialist and philanthropist Victor Faltane had arrived on Argeia to help broker a resolution to the conflicts plaguing the planet. His expertise in intercultural relations and trans-world trade would help ease tensions there, it was hoped. The first candidate had ended in a stalemate, which was to say he had proven far too brash and disruptive for the job.

Samantha frowned upon hearing the man's name. To her knowledge, and of her captain's, Victor Faltane was nothing more than a black marketer they had once bought arms from for the previous vessel to carry the *Blue Horizon* name, and who had then paid their services to deliver industrial equipment to Brandt afterward. That he had farther reaching intergalactic influence was quite a surprise.

A finger tapped her shoulder and she turned to see Renny extending her a steaming cup. She took it with a smile of thanks and turned back to the window.

"Pretty rough, isn't it?" he asked.

"Mm-hmm," she mumbled, sampling the drink and suddenly wondering whether or not it would be polite to spit it out before her tongue shriveled. He could see it on her face as she swallowed with an effort.

"Sorry about that," he added. "It's the cleanest thing I could find at the café."

"No problem," she said, setting the cup down on the sill. "It's... probably an acquired taste."

On the vidscreen above, newscaster Holly Harken added that outside the sovereign space of the planet, a group of transport vessels—and their escorts—were gathering for the eventual resolution.

"Something on your mind?"

"Naah. I just haven't been feeling up to snuff lately."

"Problems?"

"Feeling queasy after long sleeps, that's all."

Renny grinned, "Yeah, that happens to me too at the end of a trip. Something about new climates and all."

Samantha shook her head with a smile. *Yeah, that was probably it.*

\*\*\*

"What the..." a grizzled tiger rumbled from his command seat.

Across the Alignment, the engines of luxury liner *Argonautia* slowed to a stop. The liquid crystal thrusters, previously glowing with blue-white energy, slowed to a halt. Lights on the bridge blinked out in sections, each panel of the vessel fell silent and dark.

"Sir," one of the bridge crew cried, "ships' systems are failing all over. LightDrive engines are offline and going cold."

"Get me engineering," the tiger rumbled.

"Internal communication is down, sir," another voice added.

"Get some runners and find out what's going on," he ordered, "and get some lights on in here!"

\*\*\*

"Could you just stop *breathing*, please?" Devon growled. A short, middle-aged human stared incredulously at him and mumbled something under her breath before huffing off toward another customer. "Your heartbeat annoys me too!" he called after her.

"That could have been more tactful," Pockets mused, thumbing through a box of customer service cards.

"I hate pushy salespeople," Devon replied in a deadpan snarl. "Middle-age clerks trying to foist on me things I've already told them I don't want are particularly annoying."

"You'll never work for greeting cards if you keep that up, Jape."

"I'd rather have a jalapeño enema. Find what you're looking for?"

Pockets drew a white card out of the box. "Hah! *Exactly* what I'm looking for, actually!"

Devon read the card over his friend's shoulder. "Illudium Q-36 Virtual Reality set? Why that?"

"Recreation," the raccoon replied. "Maybe even help out with some repairs and upgrades when I get the software installed."

"I thought you walked on steam already."

"No, I *make* the steam that others walk on. I walk on molecules," he chirped, and approached the counter. The man behind the counter disappeared behind a curtain.

"That's a video game," Devon said, noting the card.

"That's a video game that Samantha can help me reverse-engineer into a diagnostic tool for the ship's systems. A regular diagnostic would cost three times as much and I'd have to purchase proprietary upgrades almost immediately because they let these things fester on the shelves till they're borderline obsolete. I can manipulate this any way I like because it's just the base model," Pockets beamed.

"Oh," Devon struck a martyred pose, "you mean you're a *thinking* customer?"

The dealer returned with a plastic box stamped *Fragile* in several languages, and the purchase was quickly concluded. The man slipped a second thin crystal in with the game.

"What is this?" Pockets asked.

"It's freeware. Some kind of promotional video or something."

Pockets shrugged and the pair left the store.

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"Captain," a voice called.

The *Argonautia's* commander, Gordon Ransdell, turned his flashlight to the voice coming from the hallway before him. "What's the story, Brisbane?" he asked.

"We're at a loss, but the ship's computer systems have all crashed. There's nothing but a buzz of low-level static filling all the systems and we can't get into the terminals because they've all been locked out with some form of encryption we've never seen before."

"Which means what?" the feline growled.

"Which means that, for all practical purposes, we're dead in space. Engineering, life-support, they've *all* failed on us."

"How long to get things back? We don't need to be here out of power in a well-traveled travel artery."

"We're affecting that as we speak, sir."

Suddenly the ship shuddered, a deep metal screech followed by an explosion that sounded like thunder on the bridge. The crewmembers were thrown against chairs, consoles, the floor, and the walls.

Ransdell dragged himself to his feet despite the pitching ship, and looked out the viewport. Below the front deck of the ship, he could see another dark shape jutting from the side of his vessel at an irregular angle. It was long and slender, but otherwise he couldn't make it out.

Suddenly an explosion flamed in space, a ribbon of orange fire slashing out of the hull like a whip, lashing out into the blackness of space. Then he saw it: the outline of another vessel. Black and powerless, the other ship had traveled on inertia alone to slam into the side of his ship.

\*\*\*

The *Horizon* continued on its way after Mars. Standard shore leave was exempted this time because nobody wanted to be around a colony that hadn't finished terraforming. There were too many possibilities of accidents and breakdowns in the environmental systems, and their status as transients meant they weren't covered by any insurance policies the terraforming companies had.

There was also the political situation, and it was accepted practice at times like these not to spend too much time on any given world. The ship had been quarantined on Argeia, but following some of Devon's negotiations, the crew was allowed to leave.

"How many people have you killed?" Max asked.

"A lot," Devon replied, offhand and without much emphasis.

Cindy cast the Kastan a sidelong glance, wondering at his informality. "Just *a lot*? That's all?"

"Well, I don't remember every single name, though there are a few that do stand out above the others. Why do you ask?"

"We've never had a professional murderer on board..."

"Not murderer," Devon chided, "an assassin. A murderer is a person who acts on impulse or passion. A murderer is a person who takes an innocent life."

"Isn't that what you do?"

"Not in the least. A single job of mine equates to roughly two hundred fifty thousand credits at least. You don't spend that kind of cash on an innocent person. There has to be a very profound reason why you want someone dead. Trust me, everyone that I've contracted upon deserved his destiny long before I got involved."

"It just seems so... awful," the mouse said, a little pout of disgust on her lips.

Devon turned his chin up, as though looking at the ceiling, "Let's see... I've taken out two drug czars, an embezzler, a saboteur, three doctors..."

"Doctors?"

"Yes, but not the kind you're thinking of. These were professional torturers. All the better ones are physicians and psychologists."

"You don't say," she scowled.

Devon leaned forward, a small smile tugging at his lips, "I hate to burst your bubble, but these people exist and must be dealt with. There are things out there in the stars that you don't even want to know are being practiced. They serve a purpose, diabolical as they might seem to the uninitiated eye. Espionage, assassination, political torture... it's all out there, and your governments use it as well as any other, despite whatever song and dance they give you about their morality. You'd be surprised not just at how many know about these things, but how many know *how to do them*."

"You paint a very grim picture, Mr. Devon."

"Possibly. You laud police and the military for keeping you free, for fighting the good fights all over space, don't you? They do a lot of dirty work in foreign places in hostile conditions and they get recognition for it. They get shiny uniforms and put on parades. There is honor in what they do, and they should rightly be honored for doing it. However, they also have to follow certain procedures and protocols or the people they go after are considered 'victims' of *their* behavior, and are freed. But what we do in my community goes largely unrecognized. Ours is a shadowy peacekeeping profession, without all the brass and pomp. Others serve *the law*, visibly, as the law is a visible thing. Unfortunately, laws depend on language, which is a difficult thing to enforce from one culture to the next. We are not outside of or *above* the law, we are facilitators of the principle *behind* the law when a violator is unattainable by conventional methods of enforcement. Think of me as a kind of undercover policeman who is allowed to circumvent procedure for the principle goals the laws are meant to uphold, and you'll be just fine."

"So it's not what you do, it's why?"

"No, no," he purred, his voice dropping perceptibly, "it is *very much* what you do that makes all the difference. On my world, there was once a guild called the *Hunt*, a secret society dedicated to a similar principle but whose motives I would not have agreed with. They were the bodyguards of our Great Benefactor, Rhane Blanc. They were clandestine and precise in such a manner that you might even consider them terrorists. Rhane kept them on a short leash until a time came when one of them, Bon Venger, betrayed and murdered him. We're not certain what happened after that, but Venger disappeared and the Hunt has not been seen since. Only one of their members has been identified, and he is now Fleet Commodore. He and Bon Venger were the only ones of the Hunt who was not..." Devon spoke a word in his native language, consisting of many consonants and hisses.

"What is that?" Cindy asked.

The Kastan pointed to his black, unreflective eyes, "One of us. We are a separate breed from what you would consider 'normal' Kastani. We share a genetic lineage, but with... *other* factors included. The Hunt's mission in life was to protect Rhane from the other Great Houses, the Nikata and the Sigue. However, ten years ago a Nikata fell in love with a Blanc and they joined. It was the first time the two Houses had done that, and a tenuous peace ensued. That peace was augmented with the birth of their first child and two years later, Sigue House crumbled. That left only the Nikata and Blanc, and they had forged an alliance. The Hunt was

out of a job, so they turned their skills outward, hiring on as bodyguards and killers. The most notorious of them was Conn Navarre."

"Who was that?" Max asked.

"Conn Navarre was unique. It was a unit, not a person. Nobody knows its whereabouts, and —"

The lights in the cabin faded, flickered, and fell to black.

"Nice," Devon quipped, "who knows any scary stories?"

\*\*\*

"*We have a problem,*" Pockets drawled into the intercom from his terminal in engineering.

Merlin, suddenly surrounded by darkness, tapped his bridge com-unit. "What's up?"

"*We're losing power... I'm not sure why.*"

"I've got static," Renny said, his computer console flickering on and off haphazardly. From the other side of the room, a slate of touch pads sparked, and a purl of smoke spilled from between two panels.

"What the—?" Lorelei pulled her fingers back from her console. "What's going on here?"

A panel of lights flickered and dimmed. That was their guidance system.

\*\*\*

"It seems awfully convenient that Mainor had initial access to the Siilv deposits even though we filed for them first!"

The Senator from Mainor stood, aghast and spitting her words. "We filed documentation three days before the representatives from Dennier! Those documents were lies when you wrote them!"

Moments later, the lupine Senators from Dennier and feline Senators of Mainor leapt from their places, streaking across the floor with faces twisted in hate. The floor of the Legislature erupted in howls and catcalls, accusation laced with venom. Chan motioned to Maku, a human sentry standing nearby. The man assumed a position beside her, but left his pistol sheathed as he glanced at three other security men. The men stepped in to break up the cat and dog fight that included fangs, jaws and claws.

"This is getting us nowhere," Jo Chan stated, berating Senators on both sides of the House. "Argeia's inclusion into the Alignment was contingent upon their sharing resources, yes, but that generosity is being abused already by..."

"Who's paying you?" shouted one voice; the Senator from Dennier.

"No one is paying me," she replied, "the rules of the Alignment Trade Council specifically state that no world will be *forced* to provide any resources to any other except as compensation for damages, following an investigation and due process."

"There are those," came a rich, textured voice, "who believe that in this time of interplanetary crisis, certain provisions must be made out of necessity to preserve interstellar commerce. It's been done before."

Jo Chan turned to the representative from Crescentis. "Only in times of war or extreme peacetime conflict."

"I would like to avoid a peacetime conflict, Speaker Chan," he rolled. "Do recall that Senators Ferry and Chenna of Alexandrius have been recently gathered unto God, and that

Intergalactic Aid has been targeted for terrorist acts. It seems that since Argeia's inclusion into the Alignment, things have gone from normal to bad, to worse."

"Through no direct action of the Kastani," she corrected.

"No? Isn't their refusal to provide their resources according to our needs provoking these events? Senator Widi," he indicated an empty seat, "has even departed our council for his homeworld after only a few weeks."

"Senator Widi has other affairs, of which you are completely aware."

"Aware, yes. Some of us are *very* aware of what is going on here."

A moment of pregnant silence filled the hall as eyes darted suspiciously around, then fixed on Jo Chan. The Speaker began to feel very uncomfortable... knowing full well how rampant gossip could spread around the intellectually-incestuous Legislature.

"I think that I would like to look over the Legislature expense records, if you don't mind," he needed.

"Are you insinuating something?" she replied, formally and in a businesslike tone.

"Oh no... do any members of this noble body feel they have something to hide?"

\*\*\*

"I think I know what it is," Pockets rumbled, extricating himself from a mesh of optical wiring inside an exposed panel. Around him stood Merlin, Cindy, and Durant.

"I'm all ears," Merlin replied, drawing his jacket closer around himself. The environmental systems had sputtered on and off, trying to come back on with the ship's redundant safety features, but ship-wide, the mainframe had all but gone offline completely.

"It's a virus," the engineer reported, "but none like I've ever seen before. I'm pretty sure it was off that freeware crystal that I tried out this afternoon. The first thing it hit was our communications, then guidance & navigation, and then life support. It doesn't know what to do with the engine protocols because I've got the Vault information that we got from Natasha in there. Even though we can't use that technology for lack of decryption, it's effectively put up a barrier that keeps the virus from fully crashing the ship's system."

"Thank goodness for dumb luck," Durant growled.

"A computer virus?" Samantha asked.

"Yes, and it's pretty bad. It gave up trying to crack the engineering section, but from what I can tell it's eluding detection by re-encrypting itself every fifty milliseconds. Decoding it is like trying to dig a hole in sand, it keeps shifting. Sneaky little bug."

"What can we do to remedy this?" Merlin growled.

"Well," the raccoon ground his teeth, his mind racing through the possibilities, "I suppose we could try interfacing with the system through the virtual reality equipment, since it's not presently connected to any infected systems and I can firewall against the virus now that I have a partial idea of how it works, but it'll take some time."

"How much time?" the bear asked.

"That's the tricky part. I'd have to go through about three million lines of code before I could isolate the viral strain; I'd have to retain what I'd seen—make notes as I go—and I'm not sure that's even possible with that much code to have to decipher. But I'd say it'll take us forty-eight hours at least."

"How much life support do we have?" Merlin countered.

"About five hours," the raccoon replied, deflated at the thought.

"And you don't know if you can read the code well enough?"

"Reading the code is no problem, as it's straight binary. It's retaining what I need to know and being able to reapply it where it needs be that's the hard part."

"It would take a miracle," the captain rumbled with a sigh.

"Or," Samantha added, "an eidetic memory."

\*\*\*

The Citadel building in the center of Donisia, the acknowledged capitol of Argeia, stood as a sparkling monolith among the Siilv structures. The arrogant column of the white metal stood perpendicular to the ground, its architecture such that it magnified its surroundings instead of dwarfing them. An arc of white light shone through the carefully planned refractors near its crest, making the Citadel look like an archer's bow drawn to the sky.

It was fitting, Faltane thought, since the Kastani constantly strove to excellence in their own lives and culture. The human philanthropist stood looking out of the large pane in his ambassadorial quarters, the last alien currently breathing Argeian air now that all the others had been banished to their homeworlds. Victor Faltane had been a major player in brokering this peace, and now he waited on an audience with Senator Widi.

The double-doors to his chamber parted and the ambassador turned quickly. But this time it was not Widi, but a smaller Kastan. His face had the smoothness of a boy, but he was many times the man's age already. Jean Blanc, son of the late Rhane Blanc, entered the room with a confident air. The diminutive Kastan wore the silver braid of the Blanc clan and a mesh of gilded mail over his left shoulder that signified his direct lineage from the Great Benefactor. His ancestry allowed him a high position in the temple and a permanent chair in any ruling body he wished.

"I am told," Jean purred in accented Standard, "that you wish another audience with Bon Widi?"

"I do, Your Grace" Faltane nodded his head slightly in respect. "I believe that the others gathering above your sovereign space are not evil, but simply misguided. I believe that with the proper encouragement, they can be made to disperse peacefully, but they will need a show of faith on our part."

The smaller Kastan allowed a slight smile to warm his face. "And what would you recommend?"

"A small envoy, Your Grace," he continued. "Yourself, the Magistrate, Senator Widi... a few others – and perhaps the Heir Apparent."

"Kehaan?" Jean asked. Such a request was a shock; *nobody* requested Kehaan, no matter the tenuous diplomatic situation. The Heir Apparent was a mere boy, and an extremely valuable one as the first progeny of the two great Kastani Houses Blanc and Nikata.

"Yes, I believe that the presence of a youngster will prevent unnecessary fighting. No one would attack an envoy knowing that a very young child was aboard without risking the wrath of the Legislature."

Jean thought for a moment. "That would put him in danger."

"What danger with your defenses in place?" Faltane countered.

Jean scratched a finger across his chin, still not convinced. "I would have to speak to my brother on this matter first."

"He would say no to anything."

"But I must seek his counsel."

"Do as you must," Faltane purred. "The first son of Rhane Blanc must attain what permissions he is compelled to." Faltane's face remained impassive, a show of goodwill and subservience, but a momentary flicker in his host's eyes, a flaring of his nostrils, told the human that his jab had worked.

Jean nodded and turned, trying not to show his consternation at the barb. Faltane turned back to the Citadel outside his window. The time for diplomacy was coming to an end and, he thought, so would the civility if something wasn't done soon.

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"You sure that you're up for this?" Merlin asked.

Renny Thornton strapped the VR interface goggles to his forehead, "I can't make any promises, but I'll do my best." The cheetah lay down on the medical examination table, a spider web of wires connected to the goggles and sensors registering his vital signs. The surgical database was triple-shielded against power fluxes, and was the only remaining terminal in operation. It was their one way in.

"Okay," Pockets began, "you'll be riding on a beam of electronic data, shot directly into your brain. The way this VR works is that it stimulates pre-existing brain pathways so that what you are going to be experiencing is going to have a feeling of *deja-vu*. Your mind will accustom itself to the digital information and show you the virtual world as an extension of your own memories. You will not have to speak or move, but you will have to get used to navigating your way through using only your mind."

"Gotcha," Renny replied.

"I need you to look for the mainframe and sever it from all input/output channels. If we can salvage that, we can wipe the rest of the ships' systems and piece things back together from there with maintenance backups. Since you are going in after a virus, it is probably going to manifest itself as some sort of massive, terrible natural disaster you've lived through... are you prepared for that?"

"Aah yes, it's Barbara all over again," the cheetah replied.

"Hurricane?" the raccoon asked.

"Last girlfriend."

"Right..." Merlin added. "When you're ready for a breather, say '*end of line*' and we'll get you out of there. Don't be gone too long."

Although Tanis had remained quiet through the instruction, he was focused intently upon the monitors for the cheetah's vital functions. He looked up, gave Samantha a brief nod and then returned his attention to the scanners. The Border collie wished Renny luck and then plugged him in.

\*\*\*

Normally structures in the Argeian capital of Donisia are white, silver or some similar shade. But sitting unobtrusively within a ring of towers was a smooth, flat structure that seemed to be made of jade. It had been erected over a thousand years earlier, but no aliens had been allowed to enter this small building.

The structure was merely the tip of an immense, underground complex, a bunker as well as meeting hall, blast-shielded so well that it could withstand any conceivable bombardment from the ground, the air or space. Within the conical egg of the inner meeting

hall, a harsh, white light streamed down from above. The heavy, gothic presence of Commodore Blanc filled the room like an oppressive blanket. As he stood draped in a flat black cloak and his tunic of stitched faces, the old warrior's voice echoed off the inner walls of the ancient oubliette.

"Above us, just out of our sovereign space are ships from several worlds. Most of them are freighters, but some of them are fighters. They claim that they are here to protect themselves from each other, but refuse to allow us access to their weapon systems for our review. Our scanners have detected that some of the vessels are already loaded with cargo, but that cargo has been shielded from detection. We gave them our hand in peace. They have chosen to soil that hand by assaulting our citizens and attacking our spaceport," he rumbled. "We gave them our hand in fortune. Now they hover above us, demanding as a right our resources of Siilv, which we would have provided them in a free exchange of goods. They offer us the hand of brotherhood, they give us the fist of a master closed around a whip. I was opposed to this from the very beginning. We must end this, *by any means necessary.*"

At the end of a table, a Kastani woman older than the commodore stood in a draping white robe. At the center of her breast hung a heavy, silver stone on a silver chain. The down of her body was ash gray, and she kept her long, gray hair swept back over her ears. She spoke in a deep, rasping voice. "Commodore, you are the protector of our world, but I cannot authorize a first strike against the other worlds at this time. We have already expelled nearly all foreigners from our soil. The negotiation process must continue a while longer, but do call in the Last Line and get rid of that blockade."

In the darkness surrounding the speaker, one figure sat in deep anxiety. His great-uncle's words filled him with dread, and his great-grandmother's order chilled him even more. No more than a boy, he could feel cold fingers crawling up his spine as he pondered the ramifications of what he was learning here. There had been other conflicts in the past, lost in antiquity since his world had begun its era of seclusion. This was not just a single event, he understood, but the beginning of a chain that would alter his life forever.

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Renny could not close his eyes... he had no eyelids. He had no body; he was only a disembodied consciousness. Around him were sights, sounds, smells and sensations that he could not blot out. It was not like all those vids he had seen where the virtual world was identical to the real world: this was completely different—a disorienting bombardment of information.

Splayed out before him like a Terran Christmas tree, a myriad of colors and textures, shapes and ideas played out in seemingly chaotic patterns, melding into one another and breaking apart. Sometimes the objects kept their original shapes, other times they morphed into composite objects or totally different concepts altogether.

*What's going on here?* he wondered. *I was supposed to...* Renny cleared his thoughts and concentrated. If this was his own mind, he should have control over it. He ordered himself to focus on one thing, deciding that it should be: *where do I find an answer?*

Suddenly a door appeared before him, the peripheral stimulations dulled to a buzz of low-level static. The door was familiar... dark blue with a metal sheen to it. It was, he understood, the first door he had opened when he arrived on the *Blue Horizon*: Merlin's den. This is the way in. He pressed the door gently—not with his hand—and it slid to the side. In the space beyond the door was a long hallway that sloped down to an abyss.

He didn't want to look down into it, but he did anyway. The abyss was bottomless, spiraling down to a pit that groaned and rumbled like a tempest. It was not black or gray or some other color he knew... it was totally without recognizable form. It was, he realized, what a blind person might perceive in the absence of sight.

He looked up at the jamb and saw the caduceus, the serpents curled around a sword, and realized this was the firewall between the medical computer and the rest of the ship's systems. Renny felt a cold, mechanical chill fill him: *Don't pass through the door.* If the virus could do this to the ship, he didn't dare venture what it could do to the electrical circuitry system of his mind.

The pit swirled down into oblivion, a thick, cloying miasma threatening to devour him if he drew too close to it. He knew, without any clues he could pin down, that it saw him and wanted to consume him too. Across the pit was the remainder of the hallway, leading off to a cycling sphere with a sixteen-digit string of binary code in gigantic numerals. It was the mainframe, and between the very core of the onboard computer systems and him was the virus. Tendrils of inky black stretched up toward the mainframe, like putrid veins returning to the heart.

*Great, he mused. My brain has a flair for the dramatic. Wish I could have a little help here; the Blue Horizon is counting on me.*

In the instant Renny thought of his ship, a shining gray button appeared before him, with the word HELP spelled out in his native Kantan tongue across its face. He pressed it, and a menu flashed up with only the word HELP as an option. It struck him that his mind was interpreting his need for help by making him access his memories in a logical pattern. He mentally shrugged, pressed the word HELP, and heard a faint voice say the word aloud.

Beyond the door and within the reach of the Cold Fire virus, a flash of energy appeared, stretching out into the rough shape of a body before solidifying into clarity. Renny flinched at the sight of it... he knew that face.

*You, he thought. What are you doing here?*

\*\*\*

*"Samantha?"* Cindy mewled over the intercom.

The Border collie stiffened reflexively; she never liked that tone in her friend's voice. She turned to face the monitor. "Yes?"

*"There's a text-only message I think you should take."*

Unsure, she pressed the glowing keypad just above her, "I'll take it here."

Samantha activated her communications port, and in less than sixty seconds the scrolling data, triple encrypted across the Privateers Channel 13/666, played out the news that Master Tristan had been attacked in his home, and that his attacker had severed the alicorn that he had spent his life growing.

Merlin glanced up from Renny's side at her gasp, but she continued staring at the message, her face a blank mask of emotions he could not read. Samantha sat motionless, consciously aware of a new emotion growing inside of her—one she had never experienced before. She stood up and darted for the nearest lavatory, throwing her face over the sink and retching into it as her captain moved forward to her side.

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In the endless expanse of cyberspace, the image of Lucas Sinclair rippled before Renny Thornton.

*"Thank you for remembering me. Although our last meeting ended badly, I need your help now. The virus you face was designed by me, though under the threat of agonizing pain and certain death. I don't know if I'm going to live very long after I finish writing this virus program, but I want you all to know that I never meant any harm in our previous encounters. I never knew how good I had life until my freedom was taken away from me in a way that no prison ever could. If you are seeing this message, I'm probably dead already.*

*"There is a presence that I cannot describe to you because little information has been made available to me. However, I have decoded some of the information and can tell you that this virus is the second step in a process that will cause many deaths. The first step was the bio-virus released on Hestra. I cannot say for sure if this is the ultimate end of the person doing this, but here is how you stop the computer virus. I have placed in this sub-code all of the information necessary to inoculate controlling systems against the virus as well as predict a few things that this person has planned, but even then I don't know if I have the full picture. This virus... this Cold Fire... is only one link in a very long chain."*

Renny contemplated this new information, unsure if he should trust Lucas Sinclair. However, it seemed genuine, and a look back at the abyss helped prod him in the direction of faith.

*"I'm really frightened. I know you don't owe me anything and I wouldn't blame you for leaving me to die, but if there is a drop of pity in you, please help me. And if you don't help me, help the others who may suffer a similar fate to mine."*

Lucas' still image faded, replaced by a string of code: sixteen numerals and symbols of the wolf's native language. Renny memorized the repeating formula and remembered, "End of line." It would take an effort to force his mouth to move, he knew, but instead he turned.

Renny Thornton moved toward the door that separated his consciousness from the virus. As he drew nearer, another black tendril slithered forward from the pit to greet him. There it hovered, a dark and foreboding presence, seeming to slather as this new thing to devour came closer. The cheetah mentally inhaled, then leaned forward and kissed the tendril, reciting the formula at the speed of thought as he did so.

The effect was instantaneous.

\*\*\*

In Sickbay, Renny's body wracked with a sudden spasm, ripping off one of the sensors. Durant and Tanis rushed to his side, the bear pinning him as the fox prepared a solution to steady him. Pockets stood to the side, anxiously worrying his hands and unsure what was going on.

The cheetah's eyes flew open and he ripped the web of wires from his body, squirming out of the bear's grasp and bolting upright on the padded table.

"Easy!" Durant urged, placing a hand back on his shoulder to ease him back down. But Renny brushed his friend off with a heavy breath, shaking his head and rubbing his hands to get feeling into his fingers.

"How long was I out?" he asked.

"About twenty minutes," Pockets replied. "What did you find?"

Suddenly the lights in sickbay fluttered back on, as did those in the hallway. Computer systems booted back to life, running system diagnostics and recoveries.

"This is a good sign," Durant commented.

"There's," Renny began, pausing to drain a glass of water Tanis offered him, "...there's a solution to the virus, built in like a back door."

"That's a hacker's trick," Pockets added.

"Yes, and we need to get it out to the whole of the Planetary Alignment." The cheetah stood on wobbly legs, catching himself on the edge of the padded table as he moved toward the nearest console that had fully recovered. There, he referenced the keyboard for Dennieran language symbols and typed in the 16-figure code to disarm the virus. He then collapsed in mental exhaustion.

In an instant, Durant was at his side, carrying him back to the sick bed where Tanis reattached the sensors. Pockets saved the code to a data crystal and dashed for the lavatory where Merlin was still attending to Samantha.

\*\*\*

His long, black ship cruising silently through the blanket of stars, Conn peered at his vidscreen. For the last three weeks the drama had played out: ships losing power, systems crashing... the planet Kantus had been widely infected with the Cold Fire and was now in a state of total chaos. Only Quet and Fyn had been spared, and mostly because their worlds were low of technology. Conn had monitored the transmissions of fighting the virus, and they all ended with star vessels dying, whether resulting in explosions or the personnel within them expiring to asphyxiation or the absolute cold of space.

Then came a faint message from the Sol system. The word *cure* had been used, and a *sixteen-figure solution*. The Kastan boosted his reception, determining that the signal was still weak due to the source's power systems not yet being fully online.

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"We've found the path around it," Jape Devon announced.

*Outstanding,*" Natasha replied over the scrambled channel. *"We'll be right there to transport you via Vault to Argeia so we can stop this. Things have really gone to hell and I don't know how much longer we're going to be able to avoid a fire fight."*

Merlin Sinclair, standing at Devon's side, asked, "Can we afford to wait twenty-four hours for the Vault drives to recharge?"

A moment of nervous tension passed as Devon considered his next words, but Natasha's voice interrupted instead, *"Oh we're under that time limit now, don't worry."*

"Shouldn't we take this directly to the Legislature so they can get the word out?"

*"It would be more advantageous to take it to Argeia. Every computerized planet has their latest and greatest hardware at the embassies there and it'll be easier to share it now that the Legislature is, for all practical purposes, disbanded."*

"That's not good," Merlin rumbled.

*"Speaker Chan almost got killed trying to restore order," she continued. "We need to get this done as soon as possible. Give me your coordinates."*

\*\*\*

Conn turned the black sliver of his ship around; he would have to abort this mission for the more pressing matter at hand. There was no way from his current position that his own Vault had enough reserve power to leap to the Sol system, but he could easily make Argeia.

He encoded a message to his destination: *Meet me at the NIDAS.*

The grim warrior activated the Vault system, and in a ring of blue-white flame his ship was gone into folded space.

\*\*\*

In the velvety blackness of space, the planet Argeia glowed like a white pearl against the dark, undulating void. High above, clutches of more than fifty ships from other worlds—grouped together by tenuous loyalties or to match weapon systems against one another—waited like vultures over a dying corpse. Some small craft ran exercises, larger ones simply sat in space like predators waiting to fight one another for the spoils of the planet below.

Diplomacy in the Planetary Alignment Legislature had broken down completely, and nobody knew who was in charge now that the planets weren't talking to one another anymore. Vessels from Dennier and Mainor, particularly, hedged their dominance uneasily above the glittering white world. Ship captains had been under pressure from their representatives to keep frosty—the situation might be resolved at any moment, or it might require “decisive action to protect our vital interests in the Alignment.” Certain planets had even deployed battle cruisers to protect their transports under just the same assertion.

Ensign Jace McGregor operated the scanners of the *Variant*, a Dennieran transport ship sitting in high orbit, just out of Kastani sovereign space. He was thinking of his wife and two cubs back on Dennier, and making plans to improve their lives once he was allowed his fair share of the Kastani Siilv. The *Variant* was a transport vessel for sure, but the ensign on loan from the Dennieran Navy knew that they were also carrying explosive munitions for a reason he had identified to himself only as “just in case.” It was an old description, but the Terrans had a name for this type of vessel: a Q-Ship.

They had been there for more than a week, keeping a sharp eye on the Kastani Planetary Defense Grid. The PDG, an energy field that could withstand bombardments from space, would be activated if the government of their world intended to make any movements against the gathered armada, and by the time any ships could be launched from the surface, they would be ready to bat down any resistance.

A blip appeared on his screen, flashing rapidly. Perplexed, he pressed a switch beneath the flickering light. The ensign knitted his brow as he read the data scrolling across his screen:

*CLASS G SPATIAL DISTORTION IN SECTOR TWO*  
*CLASS G SPATIAL DISTORTION IN SECTOR THREE*  
*CLASS G SPATIAL DISTORTION IN SECTOR FIVE*  
*CLASS G SPATIAL DISTORTION IN SECTOR EIGHT*

The first officer saw the spool of messages, and made her way over to peer at his screen. “What is that?” she asked.

“I don't know...” he mumbled.

“Some kind of malfunction?”

“Maybe. I'll run a diagnostic,” he said. McGregor tapped switches and baseline codes ran through his console. Everything checks out. “Hmm... I don't know what's causing this.”

"Try it again," the first officer began.

"Ma'am?" another voice called. She turned her face to the voice, to find an expression of stark terror on her crewmate's countenance.

"What is wrong?"

Mutely, he pointed at the vidscreen.

\*\*\*

"Sir," a Kastan in a smart, sharply-pressed uniform reported.

"Go," Commodore Blanc replied, looking up briefly from the control console before him, his haggard features bathed in the red light of the Command Center.

"The Last Line has arrived."

"Give me an open communication line," he ordered.

\*\*\*

"My... God!" the first officer rasped.

Filling the vidscreen before them, four *Hammerdine* Dreadnoughts, painted flat black to match the inky darkness of space, emerged from fiery rings of blue-white energy into the space between Argeia and the assembled armada surrounding the planet. Each of the ships dwarfed any other vessel in the invading armada, and with the subtle movements of yawning hatches, began to spill out tri-winged fighters like an angry swarm of insects. Hundreds of small vessels began to converge on the conglomeration of alien ships.

"Get the crews to their ships!" the first officer cried. Others on the bridge scurried, panicky and uncoordinated. This wasn't supposed to happen.

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"Destroy them all," Commodore Blanc purred into his transmitter, the words relayed to all four of the Dreadnoughts in a moment.

## THE DEATHS OF GODS

By Steve Carter

*The Heir Apparent, Part 3*

*Captain's Journal:*

*The Lady of Dreams, volume III, section VI:*

*Merlin Sinclair and his people have docked with my ship and we are currently recharging the Vault engines for another leap back to Argeia. We have just received word that a massive firefight has begun there and from what we know of Kastani technology – especially their defense systems – we know that the envoys from other worlds are about to be wiped out completely. They earned it, but I'd like to help avoid a wholesale slaughter if I can.*

*Four of the original ten Hammerdine Dreadnoughts are engaging the invading forces from other worlds. I'm not terribly surprised that the Kastani own them, as they're the only planet with the wealth to purchase and maintain them, especially with the efficiency and stealth they have. They are, to the best of my knowledge: the Vindicator, the Starfist, the Prophetic, and the Triumphant. The Lady of Dreams is, of course, a refit of the original Sylvan, which was decommissioned some years ago. Of the five remaining ships, the Cibola was gutted and turned into a museum, the Colossus was destroyed in a failed attempt at hyper-drive, the Aristotle was self-destructed to keep it from falling into enemy hands, and the Olympic was apparently driven into a white dwarf by some idiot who wanted to effect time travel and didn't know it was a binary system (too many Stellar Journey reruns, I'll bet). That leaves us with the thorny trivia question: what of the Super-dreadnought Atlas?*

*Where is that damned planet killer?*

*The Kastani will probably be jamming everything within the area, so we're going to have to get Devon to contact one of the Hammerdines and get us a meeting with one of their officials. I sincerely doubt they would be interested in intercepting any encoded files from us, even if it is the solution to the Cold Fire virus, which they managed to contain on their own through their own technological measures.*

*Whatever happens, I know we're going to pull through this. I just hope we don't touch off a universal Armageddon in the process.*

\*\*\*

*i. fortuna plango vulnera*

*"Under the tongue root a battle most dread,  
and another raging, behind, in the head."*

*-Cad Goddeau*

The tall vixen stood before the collected members of her crew and those of the *Blue Horizon*. "Okay," she announced, "I want to make this perfectly clear. We're up against an enemy who can blast us to atoms in a microsecond, and intel says they'll be engaging the aligned forces against them soon. If we Vault into the firefight currently going on over Argeia, I

want you to have expected *anything*. I want contingency plans with redundancies for the redundancies. I want all our weapons and power systems checked every ten minutes or as often as possible. I want everyone accounted for at all times; we don't know to what level they've developed their own Vault technology and I don't particularly want to find out in any major hurry."

She turned to her seconds. "Mr. Robbins and Mr. Sinclair, if *Satan himself* shows up—and knowing our luck he will—I want you to have seen it coming."

Both men nodded. "Ashe?" she asked.

"Weapons are ready for hand to hand if the situation gets to that point," a lanky human, whose right hand had been replaced with a crude prosthetic one, replied. He turned in the general direction of the *Blue Horizon* crew, waving with the prosthetic hand.

\*\*\*

Natasha sat behind her ornate desk, Jape Devon and Merlin Sinclair across from her. The only object on her desk was an iron sculpture of the English letter *E*. She had once commented that no matter what happened, that particular paperweight would never be lost on anything she did; unfortunately, there were few who actually understood the reference.

"Okay, give me the bad news," she said.

"We look like we're in good shape," Devon said, "but there are going to be some casualties on our side. Do you want to know who they are?"

"No, I don't want any prescience about that," Natasha said. "Are we going to win?"

"I can only feel life," Devon added, "I cannot predict the future."

"Uh—what?" Merlin asked, utterly confused.

Devon turned to face him. "Do you remember when you and I first met? I told you I was surprised about how close you'd been to death."

Merlin nodded, recalling when he had absently dismissed that morning at the quarters on Argeia.

"A certain breed of my people, we" he spoke a word in his native language, "who have black eyes, can... I don't know how you feel about metaphysics or religion or mysticism, but we can *feel* the presence of life and, sometimes, how close someone's come to death. We call it a *lifeprint* because no two are ever exactly alike. Basically Captain Natasha wants to know what I saw at the crew briefing today."

A curiosity entered Merlin's mind, but he didn't voice it. Devon read his expression and replied, "Good idea; never ask a question you don't want an answer to."

\*\*\*

The Dennieran vessel *Variant* rocked in space, having been the first ship to fire against the Kastan fighters. Ribbons of flame rose from structural splits in the hull, spreading out like cracking glass as the ship protested and succumbed. The *Variant* was doomed before her captain even got to the helm, but instead of buckling and falling to her death in the thick shielding of the Planetary Defense Grid, its explosion lit space with a force five times what a freighter of her class would merit. The entire cargo section blasted out in a shower of multicolored light as the combined-effects-munitions stored on the Q-ship ignited in a chain reaction. Two Kastani fighters were slashed with shrapnel from the explosion, and the nearest Alliance vessels were physically displaced by the spatial shock wave.

On the planet surface below, Commodore Blanc observed the explosion and turned his head to face the Promagistrate. No words were exchanged, only a hard stare from the Commodore to his boss. The venerable head of state gripped the heavy silver stone on her breast and nodded: if this was an armed invasion, all bets were off.

The Commodore turned to the only officer in the command center clad in a light blue uniform. "Mainor, Dennier and Earth," he rumbled.

The officer turned to face a terminal, inserting an identicard and entering a series of codes. He relayed the message on a quad-scrambled channel, directed at one of the darkest and least-explored areas surrounding the Planetary Alignment.

\*\*\*

Samantha sat on a recovery bunk in the *Lady of Dreams'* medical treatment center, slumped over with hands clasped between her knees and her head hung low. It was unimaginable, this thing that had happened to her master.

The door slid open and Cindy entered, sitting down beside her on the small bed. The mouse said nothing, but allowed her friend to feel her company. Samantha sighed heavily, rubbing her eyes and gulping down her anguish.

"It was such a shock," she said.

"I know it was," Cindy replied.

"They gave a description of the Kastan who did it. Devon looked at it and said that he recognized it as one of those Hunt creatures that he told us about. But he doesn't know why they would do something like this because it's out of their nature to attack aliens."

"How do you feel about it?"

"Feel?" Samantha looked up, fighting off her own emotions—trying to stay in control. "I want *revenge*."

Cindy blanched, but didn't pull back. "That's a perfectly normal thing to feel right now."

"But it's wrong," the collie replied. "Revenge is not a worthy goal. It does my master no honor to disobey his teachings, but I just—" she clutched her hands into fists, grinding her teeth.

"*Feeling* anger and *wishing* revenge is not the same as *acting* on them, nor is it dishonorable. It's a completely reasonable reaction to a totally unreasonable situation. You feel a lot of conflicting emotions right now? Torn between what your gut tells you and what your discipline demands?"

"Yes," Samantha snarled.

"You're frustrated, and rightly so," her counselor said. "You wish you'd been there when it happened because you'd have given your life to protect your master."

Samantha's face fell into her hands, and a flood of emotion overcame her. Cindy wrapped a comforting arm around her friend, drawing her into an embrace.

"The best we can do for Master Tristan now is to be strong, and to be there if and when he needs us," she soothed.

"Yes," a third voice added. "He needs our strength to recover on his own." The two women turned together to see Jazz, the *Lady of Dreams'* Silloni communications officer, standing in the doorway. Samantha connected her face to a distant memory in a heartbeat.

"Laura!" the collie murmured, her voice laden with disbelief.

"Yes," the lithe Silloni replied, entering the room with a slight shudder of humility.

"Our Master tasked me to find you," Samantha added. Cindy could feel an emotion between the two women, but also a wall of formality she could tell both were struggling to maintain. She couldn't decide if it was surprise, recognition or some unpleasant sentiment both were hiding. But Samantha's expression softened by degrees, so she allowed the scene to continue.

"Um..." Samantha turned slightly to face Cindy, "This is Laura, Tristan's long lost daughter."

The Silloni girl shifted uncomfortably, momentarily breaking eye contact with the others. "Among my crew, I am known to them as *Jazz*," she murmured.

"I see," Cindy replied. "And you two know one another?"

"We trained together as children," Laura added. "We were one another's partner, actually."

"Cindy," Samantha added, "Laura and I were raised together as sisters."

\*\*\*

On the other side of the Alignment, a clutch of life pods floated listlessly in space, further and further away from the flaming hulk of two collided ships. The *Argonautia* was destroyed, death was everywhere as dark pods drifted through frozen space, and Captain Ransdell's face had fallen into a lifeless, ashen mask. There were three others in the pod with him: a human woman from third class, a young feline girl in a party dress who had curled into a fetal ball and lay weeping on the floor, and a raccoon dressed in patched coveralls. The raccoon had discovered a way to restore life support to their pod before the temperature dropped below freezing, but communication was still out.

Captain Ransdell held a mirror, reflecting light toward the raccoon as he stared out the thick glass at the other pods floating aimlessly in space, their gray faces lit with orange in the blaze of the two lost ships. Some had been affected by the shockwaves of other explosions, sending them hurling out into oblivion. He began to feel an icy chill overcome him.

But one of the ship's journeyman engineers, Jasper Porter, continued chewing his ever-present cigar, crossing wires and manipulating circuitry to get the pod's communications up and running. There was *no way* he was going to die like this, not after all he had survived up to this point.

\*\*\*

The *Lady of Dreams* appeared out of a slash of blue-white energy, out of range of the cloying ball of warring vessels surrounding the planet Argeia, the smooth gray wedge of starship moving toward the fray with incredible speed. Two *Hammerdine* vessels appeared against the white pearl of the planet while the other pair was barely visible as gaps in the vista of stars beyond the battle. The sheer size of the battleships ensured they could not be missed. On the edges of the battlefield, damaged hulks of defeated ships listed slowly off to ignite in flashes of multicolored flame, or implode in showers of sparks.

Standing at the bridge of the ship, Natasha, Merlin and Jape Devon watched as the scene played out before them.

"You were expecting this?" Merlin asked.

"Yes," she replied. "Years ago when I left Brandt—as a political exile—I came here on the advice of a friend. The Kastani funded the refit of a decommissioned *Hammerdine* if I shared the nascent technology of Vault Drives with them."

"You?"

"Us, really," she turned to Devon. "What's it look like."

"You don't want to know," the black-eyed alien replied, observing the battle with cold indifference. "You have about thirty seconds."

Communications officer Jazz punched in codes on the communications monitor before her, entering the coded message Jape Devon had given her before the ship entered Vault. She repeated the message several times, not receiving any response.

Suddenly one of the black *Hammerdine* ships ceased fire against the blockade vehicles, slowly turning on its axis toward the *Lady of Dreams*.

"They know we're here," Natasha said, and the bridge lights went red.

"Incoming transmission," Jazz commented.

"Receive," Natasha barked.

The spherical holograph dropped its tactical display of the battle ahead of them and phased into the image of a grim figure. Devon stepped forward and engaged the holograph in the eccentric, throaty Kastan language, speaking so rapidly that neither ship's captain could keep up with what was being exchanged. The dizzying, chattering noises wove a linguistic web that sounded more like code than speech.

"What's he saying?" Merlin asked.

"I think he's telling them that we have the Cold Fire virus solution, and that we're here to help. They know me and that I'll do what I can to defuse the situation. That we have one of their own on our side doesn't hurt, either."

In a sharp, crisp movement of his body, Devon ended the conversation with the figure, and the image faded before them. He turned to his captain, "They will entertain a small envoy," Devon replied, "but they'll still hold off the blockade."

Natasha turned to Merlin, "Take Devon and a couple of others and present them the solution. We'll watch things topside."

Merlin nodded, leaving the bridge with a parting wave. "Take care."

\*\*\*

"Okay, when we get down there it should just be a simple matter to find someone in charge. If they know we're coming, they'll no doubt have someone waiting at NIDAS to greet us. This shouldn't take long," Devon said as the crew filed onto the *Blue Horizon*. "The fact that this is the ship that brought a few tons of strawberries doesn't exactly hurt our chances, either."

"Are they really that much of a delicacy?" Merlin asked as he, Devon and Renny rode the lift up to the flight deck.

"Quite. You made a lot of friends just by bringing them."

"That's strange, considering how abundant they are on Earth," Renny commented.

"You didn't eat any of them on the trip, I see," Devon grinned at the navigator.

"No," the captain added as the two hustled toward the bridge, "we never touch the cargo except to inspect it for damage."

"You brought a special breed of them to us; super-potent and genetically engineered to our physiology. The regular ones that grow wild on Earth are poisonous to us."

"And those we brought?" Renny asked.

"Were they in any other environment, explosive. That's why you had to transport them frozen."

Merlin stared incredulously at him, "No one told us that."

"What client sent you?"

"Victor Faltane. He was helping broker the treaty with Argeia and he can be a pretty decent guy to deal with. He helped me out of a tight spot on Earth not long ago."

Devon's expression changed to disgust. "I never cared for him, myself," the Kastan growled, knitting his brow at the thought. "Too much of a bleeding heart."

"Well, we can worry about that later," Merlin strapped himself in, as he and Renny readied his ship for departure. Devon left the launch to them and departed the bridge.

The others onboard were readying their weapons in the recreation area. Ashe, from the *Lady of Dreams*, was polishing the barrel of his double-barrel shotgun. Devon shot him a knowing glance, "You're not going to need that."

Ashe chuckled, "You use your weapons, pal. I'll use mine."

Devon shrugged and turned to Samantha and Jazz, sitting together, each with a steel katana across her lap. "That's not going to work," he offered. "If we're going down armed, I'd recommend your bringing the Siilv katanas from my case. You and Jazz know how to use them, right?" The Kastan crossed the room and withdrew a pair of katana blades, the blue-white glint of Siilv shimmering down their edges. The two women reluctantly set aside their own weapons and took the two blades he'd offered.

"We do," Samantha said. "But wouldn't it do much better to bring guns?"

"Not by any stretch of the imagination. Trust me," Devon advised, "the last thing you want to do is go up against a Kastan using anything other than Siilv. The double-knitting of our physiology would bend your steel and repel your bullets."

Ashe clacked his shotgun shut, pretending to aim at a target with a smug grin; it didn't appear as if Devon's warning meant anything to him. His shells were anything but normal munitions. They were fortified with steel-jacketed slugs propelled by high-powered explosives and he was prepared to see what they would do to that Kastani physiology.

\*\*\*

"Commodore," a raspy officer's voice stated.

Tabia Blanc rose from his command seat and moved to one side of the room, noting the officer's screen. "What is that?"

"That would be the *Lady of Dreams*, Commodore."

"Doing what?"

"They're sending an envoy to the NIDAS to bring us information. It's a gesture of goodwill, an attempt to curb the hostilities."

"And they're bringing it to us?" The commodore considered it for a moment, and turned toward the door. "Continue the assault, but keep watch on that *Hammerdine*. None of the others pose a threat, but Captain Natasha does. If she interferes, stop her."

The Promagistrate stepped forward, placing a hand on Blanc's shoulder, "The Heir Apparent should be moved from this place to the stronghold."

Tabia surveyed the scene before him. His second could have things well in hand. "I'll take care of it personally," he replied.

\*\*\*

The *Blue Horizon* dropped out of the *Lady of Dreams* cargo hangar, the ship's engines engaging seconds after the abrupt departure and the freighter descended to the flashing wall of crisscrossing energy. The planetary defense grid was a shield of negatively charged ions so powerful that it played havoc with any missile guidance system that was not keyed in to its specific frequency. Merlin punched in a coded signal he had received from Devon's communiqué with the larger Kastan ship, and a cat's eye aperture appeared in the shielding, just large enough for the ship to pass through.

Natasha looked across the field of stars at the eruptions of flame and energy from the ships around the planet. The others were putting up a valiant fight, but four Dreadnoughts would soon make short work of them. Nearly one third of the allied vessels had been destroyed, including two of the largest cruisers. True to the articles of war, the Kastani had not attacked the medical frigate, but several of the smaller fighters were beginning to take cover behind its bulk, sniping at the enemy fighter swarm from there. That protection wouldn't last long, she realized.

Then a particular vessel caught her eye. It was a long, slender ship with a red Valkyrie on the side. It was the crest of the Hestran monarchy. "What ship is that?" she asked.

Robbins tapped keys, "That's the *ArvaMonica*, Ma'am."

"Damn," she growled, watching the nearest *Hammerdine* turn slowly toward the Hestran vessel. "Move to intercede."

The whole bridge fell silent, the crew turning as one to her. Robbins spoke first, "Intercede?"

"Put us between the *ArvaMonica* and that Dreadnought," she crossed the bridge to assume the center seat. Robbins obeyed without question, but the others on the bridge sat in stunned silence. The tall vixen looked around, "We're just going to protect that ship, not engage anyone further. The *ArvaMonica* is the flagship of the Hestran monarchy and they're likely to have important technology that we dare not lose."

The others began to work in earnest, some not entirely sure of this move.

"Take battle stations," the captain said. "Prepare to assume Combat Configuration."

The bridge crew strapped themselves into their positions as the order was repeated throughout the ship.

\*\*\*

The captain of the *Vindicator*, moving to intercept the Hestran flagship, noted a flashing light on her dash. Something unexpected was happening, and she turned her view screen to face the new threat.

In the distance, the gray *Hammerdine* with the bright yellow smiley-face was moving to intercept them. The captain scratched her chin, concerned at this new event. The intel she had just received was that the new ship was not a combatant, and yet it was moving to intercede. She barked an order at her security officer and the tawny Kastan relayed it to a flight of six fighters returning from their last engagement for further orders.

As the fighters moved into a defensive formation between the two massive warships, something totally unexpected happened. The *Lady of Dreams* slowed to a crawl, and the fore section split apart down a seam in the middle that ended where the huge smiley-face began. In the weightlessness of space, the huge sections moved faster than the *Vindicator's* commander expected. Likewise, the aft third of the ship dropped visibly, the trio of engines flickering out

one by one as the rear of the ship clamped against the bottom. The split fore sections folded open, momentum spinning the ship so that it pointed down toward the planet. The engine turrets of the ship now resembled legs, and two sections on the sides of the ship began to move outward as the conical bridge moved up to sit squarely on what was becoming a humanoid configuration. It was a feature unique to the *Lady of Dreams* – the Kastani had helped create that particular aspect at Natasha’s request.

“Open fire!” the *Vindicator’s* captain shouted. “All weapons!”

\*\*\*

It had always been easy before.

“Dammit!” Natasha snarled, her ship rocking with the force of impact as another *Hammerdine* fired on them. “Return fire,” Natasha ordered, “evasive!”

The bridge buzzed with activity as the front of the *Lady of Dreams* illuminated in a wall of green light and flame, slashing from and at her superstructure. “Continue with the transformation.” Suddenly the ship groaned with a sound like grinding metal, sending a shudder through the bridge.

“Ma’am!” a voice called, “the conversion circuitry has been damaged at a critical juncture at one of the cyclor units and we can’t complete until it is repaired.”

“What?”

“The other ship... they’re more powerful than we anticipated. They’ve pierced our shielding.”

Natasha glared coldly at him. She wanted *all* contingencies planned for. “Fix it,” she growled.

“It is... external, ma’am,” the crewmate gulped.

“You mean,” she rumbled as another titanic blast rocked the transforming ship, “that one blow has disabled our transformation processes?”

The crewmate nodded. Natasha turned back to the viewer, “Last time I try experimental technology in combat. We lost some psychological advantage, but we can *still* fight.”

Robbins leapt up from his terminal, “I have an idea.” The cougar darted out of the bridge area and down the hall.

Natasha turned back to the crewmate, who sat transfixed. “Well what are you waiting for? *Get on with it!*”

\*\*\*

The cargo bay yawned open in the open port, lit with low lights that bathed the formerly bustling area in blue. Gravity, they noticed, had not quite been adjusted to their physiology and their bodies were sluggish. Even Jape Devon, normally a whirlwind of activity in the slack gravity of the starships, slowed now that he was back in his element. The Kastan departed the freighter with Merlin, Samantha, Jazz, Renny and Durant in tow while the others stayed behind to guard and watch over the ship. Devon, prepared for anything, had the ring of scabbards—his *Delta*—on hand. The place was deserted, save for a small, sleek ship that shone like chrome in the half-light of the hangar, and the violet staff cruiser belonging to Victor Faltane.

“We need to go this way,” he indicated a staircase in the deserted hangar dry-dock and the party swirled down the spiral stairs to the floor of the dry-dock area. Renny noted that the three-ringed help desk was still active, but that it was also decorated with hieroglyphics he had

not noticed before. *Strange*, he thought, that he could remember all of the details that had been implanted into his mind at this location, but not the existence of those symbols. The center ring also hovered above them, descending rapidly.

"Through there," Devon pointed the party to a large door on the other side, around the customer service desk.

The center ring descended, and two bodies swathed in long cloaks, one snowy white and one light gray to match their body fur, stared back at the party. The hoods draped back, revealing the faces of two black-eyed Kastans.

Devon took a back step, Merlin saw in the expression on his face that these two were *not* escorts.

"Conn Navarre," Devon breathed. As if receiving their cue, the two creatures unhooked their cloaks and allowed them to drop. The gray-toned one was clearly female, her bosom pinned flat with a wrap around her torso. Both of the new arrivals blanched at Jape Devon; having not expected to see him here.

"You said Conn Navarre was something like a robot," Merlin said dryly.

"No," he replied, "it's a two-person *unit*, Conn *and* Navarre. *Hunt* always works in pairs."

The two Kastans drew their weapons: Conn a tri-bladed Delta and Navarre a wicked double-sickle, one blade hinged at the end of the other. Samantha recognized the latter weapon as the one described by Tristan's wife Guinevere, and the killer's form was the collection of ashes thrown together in the body of a man.

A moment later, Merlin noted that a hand lay limp on the floor in a ribbon of black blood that spilled around the corner behind the bottom ring of the help desk.

Ashe looked across at the two black-eyed Kastans and their bladed weapons, and drew the shotgun from its sheath on his back. He stepped forward with an arrogant swagger, weapon at the ready. "See this?" the man beckoned the two figures, indicating his raised weapon. "This is my *Attitude Adjuster!*"

The Kastans looked at one another skeptically, readying their metalloid weapons for an attack.

"Right," Ashe said, and blasted at Conn, his weapon making a deafening *boom*. The assassin swept out with one hand, clenching his fist a moment after the shot echoed through the hangar. When he opened his hand, a clutch of smoking steel pellets fell to the floor, clinking uselessly against the metal and rolling away.

Ashe stepped back, whistling in astonishment.

"I'll take care of these two," Devon added, stepping forward with his Delta weapon at the ready. He immediately found himself flanked by Jazz and Samantha, their Siilv weapons already drawn.

"Okay, I guess *we'll* take care of them," Devon corrected.

Renny and Durant stood forward with them, "We're with you," the bear said.

"No, you're with *me*," Merlin barked, leading the rest of the pack toward a nearby portal. The two assassins leapt from the center ring onto the middle in the beginning of pursuit, but were met there by the three other combatants.

\*\*\*

Tim hurled himself out of the portal, the grasping arms of his exosuit swinging him around to land heavily against the outer hull of the ship. This would be dangerous, but it had

to be done. The young mouse immediately spied the damaged section of the ship and moved toward it with all the speed he could muster. Space around him filled with flashing light from weapons, explosions, and crackles of energy rebounding against shielding. Tim was glad for the electromagnets on the skin of his exosuit clinging to the surface of the *Lady of Dreams* as he knelt on the gray metal to make his repairs on the cyclor unit.

The panel was already fragmented, so the boy pulled it completely off. The cyclor was damaged, but salvageable; he got to work. Suddenly a blast rocked the plate he rested on as a fighter swooped by, slashing at him on the ship as he tried to work. Tim blanched, shuddering in the shockwave of the discharge before returning to his work. He read in the onboard sensors that the ship was swinging back around for another pass. *It was trying to kill him!* Another barrage of fire lit the space around him, scorching the metal plate again and threatening to ignite his exosuit as well. The flashing cascade of fire passed again, but the ship swung around for another attack.

Tim began to feel an emotion grow inside his gut; he ground his teeth and looked back at the approaching fighter. *This, he realized, is what adults must feel when they say they're pissed off.* The boy saw shrapnel fly loose from the scored area and realized that the ship was firing depleted uranium slugs—he mentally calculated the weapon system onboard.

The boy moved to his left, popping the latch on another panel while covering the cyclor unit with his body. He retracted the hand unit from his left arm and snaked out the hard, thick transfer cable, jamming it into an open power socket in the ship. Tim turned, locking onto the ship's skin with the magnets on his boots, and retracted the right hand unit, replacing it with a cutting laser as the fighter swooped in close. He ground his teeth, fully aware that he was going to die if this didn't work.

Tim fired the slash of red laser in the approximate direction of the fighter, zeroing its tracer in on the forward turret. Inside the barrel of the front-mounted repeater gun, the laser ignited the ammo cell, setting the shell off inside the barrel. In a microsecond, the remaining rounds ignited and ruptured, and the fighter exploded in a blaze of yellow and green flame.

Tim sighed heavily, removed the transfer cable from the socket and returned to his work on the cyclor unit.

\*\*\*

Tabia Blanc departed the command center and stepped into a shaft of white light in the atrium outside. A collection of officials stood by, including the human Faltane, who stood near a small, crème-colored youth. The Commodore faced a lavender-clad female standing with her hands on the child's shoulders.

"There has been a change of plans; a new threat is involved now. We must take the Heir Apparent to safety," he rumbled.

"What's happened?" one voice asked.

"Captain Natasha has arrived onto the scene. She possesses the firepower and military competence to pose a threat. I doubt she will, but she is still an alien and thus unpredictable."

"I'll take him," Faltane chimed in, offering a hand to the youth. "The peace process is better served with someone other than the Kastani handling such an important task."

"No, you will not," Tabia snarled, not breaking his gaze from the caretaker.

"But I can help protect him," Faltane urged.

"From *what?*" the grim warrior needled.

"From... *whatever*," he added. "Your defenses are strong, but there will always be the unexpected to deal with. I'm well-known enough that any surprises might be short-circuited."

"You exaggerate your importance and the possibility of the unexpected."

"Did you expect the *Lady of Dreams*?"

Tabia considered it for a moment, and waved his hand. "No, but there is no need for you to be involved with this matter beyond this point. The Heir is entirely too important. I'll take him to the stronghold myself." The Commodore took his nephew by the hand and led him away, three other Kastan sentries accompanying them.

"*I insist*," Faltane pressed.

The group of gathered bodies turned as one to face the human. One just did not *do* that when Tabia Blanc had spoken, and the retreating backs paid him no heed.

Victor Faltane ground his teeth, angry and frustrated at this turn of events. He couldn't believe how quickly his plans were falling apart. He started after the departing group, but hands restrained him as the Commodore departed the scene with his entourage and the youngster toward the hangar where the military commander's private shuttle resided.

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## *ii. pictures at an exhibition*

Outside the planetary orbit of the Mainor, space blistered open with rings of blue-white energy. The planetary defense grid immediately flared into life, the system alarming the remaining ring of military vessels surrounding the globe as a long wedge of starship appeared against the blackness of space. Spread out before the defense vessels was a ship twenty miles long - easily five times the size of a *Hammerdine* Dreadnought.

In the front of the vessel, the triangular wedges split apart to reveal a concave disc, thick cables stretching from the main batteries to each of twenty focus points around the disc. Without preamble, ribbons of dense energy flashed across the face of the disc, concentrating into a glowing ember in its middle before focusing into a single stream, blasting out of the front of the Super-dreadnought with tremendous force.

The beam smashed into the planet, buckling the surface of a continent and blasting through the defensive vessels, scattering them like gnats. Atmosphere seethed out from the contact point, clearing away from the blistering surface as a pulse erupted from the supergun, slamming into Mainor like a fist. Half the world's ocean flash-boiled, leaving a scorched plain in its wake. The beam punched through the planetary crust, penetrating the mantle and sending ribbons of heat and energy into the core.

The planet caved in around the impact point like a punctured ball, ribbons of magma spewing out of its hulk as a noxious cloud of poisonous steam began to spread out over the crushed surface.

The beam stopped, and the forward section of the Super-dreadnought slowly closed. The Kastans practiced massive retaliation, and Mainor's participation in the blockade and near-invasion of their world, according to their principles, signified an abdication of their right to live. The planet would take weeks to cool and contract, disintegrating into a dead hulk of rock floating in space, and what population remained would almost surely die before help arrived. With its Vault temporarily exhausted, the Super-dreadnought *Atlas* rotated on its axis toward Mainor's sister planet and the next participant in the blockade, Dennier.

\*\*\*

With Tim back inside and safe, the *Lady of Dreams* had completed its transformation. High above the atmosphere, the massive mechanoid form moved quickly to intercept the other Dreadnought, propelled on the ship's thrusters in its leg sections. The *Vindicator*, having no such configuration, turned the whole of its batteries against the new threat.

The transformed mechanoid shuddered under the barrage of laser fire, beaten like with the force of a tempest of flashing, surging energy as it pressed its advantage. The huge mechanical hands slammed into the body of its opponent, rending metal and ripping the hull open down its lateral axis. The *ArvaMonica* took the opportunity to turn in space, getting away as fast as it could from the battle raging before it.

The *Lady of Dreams* suddenly was blasted by a thick, green blast from the *Triumphant*, which had altered its battle stance to face them. The dreadnought was taking damage from a nearby Mainoran battleship, and had turned its massive bulk into a planetary shield against the allies that now took advantage of the ship's preoccupation with the giant mechanoid.

Natasha recovered from the shaking floor, raking her hand over a bleeding mouth. "Oh no," she growled. "They're not taking us out that easily."

Robbins, without command, moved from his engineering section to a gunner's station. "Preparing the Woofer, ma'am."

"Draw back so we can get a clear shot," she ordered. The *Lady of Dreams* propelled itself back several hundred yards from the wounded *Vindicator*, which began to rotate up and away on its Y-axis from its opponent. In its wake, a swarm of tiny fighters swooped forward, attacking the mechanoid with thousands of blasts of white-green laser fire.

"Mr. Robbins?" she stated.

Robbins was watching a red bar on his monitor slowly climb as a gentle hum filled the sparking, shuddering bridge. "Almost there."

"Almost isn't good enough!" she called. The cougar's right hand twitched over a wide, red pressure switch while the left clicked off toggle switches as the red bar rose. Suddenly the bar turned white and he turned slightly in the seat.

"Grab something," he ordered the bridge.

\*\*\*

For a moment, there was no sound on the ship-wide communicators monitoring the battle. The eruptions, explosions, and screams of wrenching metal all around were hushed in an instant, leaving only multi-colored flares and trails of thick smoke against the white pearl of the planet below. Even the lights of the bridge dimmed slightly as the ship strained under the weight of its weapon.

Then, as if in answer, space rippled around the *Lady of Dreams*, a wrinkle in the fabric of space spread out from the center of its mass, spreading out like a cone and shooing the mass of fighters away like a sweeping hand. The *Vindicator* shuddered, its great body trembling with heavy, ultra-low frequency vibrations as whole sections broke off, splintering first in slivers and then in massive blocks of rending metal. The Dreadnought cracked in the middle, each of two sections twisting off in opposite directions.

Communication channels were suddenly filled with distress calls, earsplitting alarms that drowned out even the returned-explosions of the battle surrounding them. The *Lady of*

*Dreams* had been propelled back several miles from the force of their super weapon, but it was slowly moving back into position to face the *Triumphant*.

\*\*\*

Below, the Promagistrate watched the screens displaying the battle high above them.

"Report," she ordered to no one in particular.

"The *Lady of Dreams* has developed a weapon for which is presenting an unexpected threat to our Dreadnoughts."

"I understand," she replied, moving to another console. The elegant leader inserted the heavy silver pendant into a slot and opened a console. The keyboard moved away to reveal a wide, spiraled slot which spun open. A heavy silver ball rose from the gap, displaying a projected image of Argeia above. Movement in the command center halted as Promagistrate Bianca Nikata threw up a red crosshairs and placed it squarely on the *Lady of Dreams*.

"Warn our ships that we're opening a conduit," she purred.

\*\*\*

The pair moved like quicksilver, their bodies a blur in the flashing metal of their weapons and fluttering fabric of their tunics as Conn and Devon fought. Back and forth, trading and deflecting blows with the precision of surgeons, trickles of black Kastan blood spattering their clothing from what winning thrusts each had made. The males danced through the hangar area, bounding off walls and pillars in acrobatic movements that made the battle seem more a dance than a life-and-death confrontation, pirouettes of deadly grace as the pair moved serpentine around the deserted dry-dock. Each of them fought to kill, each skilled in the combat arts of his people, each determined to outpace the other—neither gained or held the upper hand for long. No words had been exchanged; it was poor form to speak to someone you are trying to kill. Taunts, accusations and other such things were for amateurs and those who had watched too many vids.

For a moment the two broke apart, circling one another as they allowed their weapons to catch and scatter the light of the hangar. Each appraised his opponent's aura, neither able to read correctly through the haze of physical exhaustion. A moment later, their battle re-engaged, the blue-white metal of their weapons creating an odd concerto of musical chimes.

On the widest ring of the help desk, Navarre found herself matched by two adversaries. They fought like the Silloni magnate she had dispatched, and she wondered if the canine had been a student of that one, since the Silloni girl *certainly* had. Their Siilv katanas slashed through the air, and the Kastan killer had to counter attacks from both sides at once with her wicked sickles.

The Kastan moved toward the Silloni girl, engaging her more fiercely as the collie pulled back to catch a momentary breath. The Silloni parried a flurry of blows before Navarre lashed out with a kick that sent her to the smooth surface of the ring. She then moved back to whirl a glancing block up against the canine's weapon.

Samantha brought down her blade with a fierce resolve, its razor point directly at the killer's face as both combatants heaved in exertion. A quick look backward confirmed that the Silloni was on her feet again, her weapon ready to come down if the Kastan dropped her guard.

Navarre lashed out at Jazz with the double-sickle while slamming a heel into Samantha's gut and sending her to the floor. The collie fell backward, dropping the katana from heavy hands as the Kastan turned to face the Silloni. The pair whirled their weapons in a tempest of flashing metal as Navarre feinted several blows to the girl's spiral horn, a calculated psychological attack on her fear.

\*\*\*

The *Triumphant* had moved back, so had the *Prophetic* and the *Starfist*, leaving the planet protected only by its defense grid. Captain Natasha felt a cold chill ripple up her spine as she watched them withdraw.

"Ma'am," a young jaguar at a console said. "There's something coming from the surface of the planet. It is very small, but it has a weird energy signature."

"Show me," she said, peering into the screen at a tiny white dot, sizzling up from the planet at them. "Magnify," Natasha ordered, and the image boosted up.

Slashing up from the planet's surface, a tiny white ring—the size of a basketball—was hurtling toward their ship. Against the white planet and its sizzling silver defense grid, it had been imperceptible. "Let's get the hell out of here..." she began.

Too late, the transformed *Lady of Dreams* began to move its massive bulk away from the minuscule object hurtling at it. But the white ring never got close enough to hit before it flared, creating an infinitesimal black spot, invisible against the dark of space, in the center of its diameter.

The *Lady of Dreams* shuddered, wrenched with an attack rivaling the force of thousands of weapons. The whole ship protested with an ear-splitting scream as the limbs lurched forward, stressed metal splintering off at its weakest junctures. The tiny ring drew matter greedily toward its center, where smaller ships disappeared in a space the size of a pinprick. The Dreadnought and several of the surrounding allied vessels were ripped apart in an instant, the legs and arms of Captain Natasha's mechanoid disappeared into the tiny, black event horizon. An instant later, the weapon imploded into a whorl of dust, taking whole starships and deformed, wrenched metal within its tiny wake before disappearing altogether. What remained of the *Lady of Dreams* twisted haphazardly in space, spinning out of control without its propulsion systems, sucked away with the legs of the massive mechanoid form.

\*\*\*

Merlin didn't know quite what to think as he stood before the tall, slender figure of Bianca Nikata. The Kastan Promagistrate was not beautiful per se, but her bearing and the quality of her presence radiated a magnificence he couldn't quite put his finger on. She was flanked by two very tough-looking guards, one male and one female, and Victor Faltane stood behind her with an expressionless face. The *Blue Horizon's* captain could tell that this was an awkward scene for him.

"I understand that you have some information to give me?" she purred in unaccented Standard. The Promagistrate didn't bother looking at Renny or Durant as the two put up a front before her two bodyguards. Merlin could feel the four warriors sizing each other up with a sensation like electric current.

"Yes," Merlin replied, slightly comforted that there was no language barrier. "We were able to decode the Cold Fire virus using a keycode provided to us by the one who wrote it."

“Wrote it?” Faltane interjected. “How do you *know* who wrote it?”

Merlin sighed heavily, unwilling to implicate his brother, despite their troubled relationship. “The author of the virus is apparently being kept as a prisoner somewhere by the terrorist group behind all these attempts to disrupt the Kastan inclusion into the Planetary Alignment. He embedded the keycode antidote within the virus itself and we were able to extract it.”

“And this keycode,” Nikata added. “You have it?”

Merlin produced a thin crystal from his jacket pocket. Another Kastan appeared from behind the Promagistrate and snatched it from his hands, disappearing as quickly as she had come.

“I understand that you recently transported a shipment of strawberries?” Nikata added, in the tone of light conversation.

“Uh... yes,” Sinclair wondered about the battle raging in the sovereign space overhead, “Will there be a cease-fire on the events going on right now?”

“Of course, business still. Yes, there will be a cease-fire,” she replied. A moment of pregnant silence followed, broken by the reappearance of the Kastan who had taken Merlin’s crystal. The lackey arrived more slowly, with an air of satisfaction. There followed a short, sharp conversation in the Kastan language that Merlin couldn’t follow, but it appeared that they were satisfied with what they had found. However, he made out the words *Dennier* and *Earth* in the cacophony of clicks and hisses.

The lackey disappeared again, and Nikata smiled warmly. “Under the circumstances, Argeia will be withdrawing from the Planetary Alignment. We are grateful for your contribution to this matter, Captain Sinclair, but your presence here is no longer appropriate.”

Merlin sighed in relief – he hated tense situations and the loss of this new world would be a scar on the Alignment, but he was neither politician nor diplomat, and he was glad that the end was in sight.

However, from the corner of his eye he noticed Faltane flinch. The look crossing the human’s face was hard to read, but Merlin got the distinct impression that he had somehow stolen the diplomat’s thunder. He shot what he hoped was a conciliatory look in Faltane’s direction, which fell flat when the Promagistrate turned with a dismissive gesture in their direction and departed the scene.

Moments later, Merlin Sinclair and Victor Faltane stood alone in the atrium, the archers’ bow arc of light glancing off the citadel in a large window behind them. Renny and Durant shrank back, unsure of what to do next.

“You’ve...” Faltane said slowly, “just saved an awful lot of people.”

“Yeah,” Merlin replied dryly. “Sorry about that.”

“No fault, no penalty,” Faltane said. “Sometimes diplomacy fails and action wins.” The human smiled, clapping a hand on Merlin’s shoulder. “I’m just glad that this is resolved.”

Despite the man’s amity, Merlin could feel a tension in the grip of the hand on his shoulder. Things had clearly not gone the way Faltane had wanted them to.

“I need to get back to my crew,” Merlin added. Faltane nodded.

\*\*\*

Natasha ground her teeth as a plume of flame boiled up from the body of the *Lady of Dreams*. That blow was fatal... her heart sank as the weight of that fact sunk in. This ship, in which she had devoted the last decade of her life and most of her investment money, was

everything she had lived for. All the technology she had created and commissioned, all the advances she had made, all the memories that these walls held were going down. It was a dream, and it was *her* dream that was dying before her eyes. Ship systems were sparking, ribbons of electricity snaking across panel boards as her bridge crew fought to keep control of the faltering mech.

“Crew,” she announced, her voice choked, “abandon ship. There’s nothing else we can do at this point – and I’m not going to let them take me.”

The others didn’t move – stunned to hear those words from their captain.

“*Move it!*” she shouted. There followed a stampede of bodies, gathering what they could and darting down the hallway. In a few seconds, only Robbins, the boy Tim, and the quartermaster Jacob remained.

“Why am I not surprised,” she rumbled. “Jacob, take Tim to a life pod.”

“I’m not leaving,” Tim said, bluntly stating a fact not open to debate.

“Do as I say, boy,” she growled. Jacob took the youth by one hand, but he pulled away, closing the space between himself and his captain with a determined grimace.

“I’m not leaving,” he begged, his voice on the edge of tears. “I love you.”

A moment of tense silence filled the bridge, and the captain sighed. She knelt down before him, taking the boy in a tenacious embrace. “I love you too, kiddo. But you have to go on without me,” she soothed.

“But I don’t want to!” he protested, emotion overcoming his voice as he clutched her closer. The two stayed like that for several long seconds, each drawing strength from the others’ embrace as explosions continued to fill the doomed bridge.

“Tim,” she purred, “I need you to forgive me.”

Tim tensed, “For what?”

She drew him closer, hugging tightly – too tight. Bewildered, the boy tried to push away before he realized she had opened the battery pack on the belt of his endosuit and cut the power to the relays. In another instant, the boy sagged in her arms, the technological exoskeleton no longer giving him the power of movement. She allowed him to fall away, and their eyes met. The look on his face carried one word: *Why?*

Natasha couldn’t find a reply, but rather slid another object into the battery pack on the rear of his suit. She lifted her face, “Jacob.”

The quartermaster stepped forward and hefted the boy into his arms, then turned down the hall. Tim squirmed mightily with a will that could have moved a mountain, protesting in a sob-wracked howl. Captain Natasha ground her teeth, fighting not to hear his frustrated screams echoing down the hall.

“Robbins,” she added. He was at her side in an instant. “Let me know when all the life pods are deployed.”

“Of course,” he replied, taking a position at a functioning console. “Watch out for that smoke.”

“Thank you,” Natasha said, moving away from a trickle of fumes at her ankles, swallowing absently and rubbing the tears from her eyes as the first flock of life pods launched from the body of the faltering hulk of the *Lady of Dreams*.

\*\*\*

Jazz leapt up and across to the next inside ring, taking a moment to catch her breath before the killer followed her in a somersault meant more to confuse than impress. Still, the Kastan backed away from her opponent, hands apart in a deliberate gesture of challenge.

Jazz didn't take the bait, but stepped back toward the fallen collie nearby.

"Sam?" she shouted, never taking her eyes off the killer.

"I'll... be right there!" the collie gasped, gathering herself together again. Her katana had fallen over the side of the desk, and she fumbled for it.

In a lightning move, Navarre was across the circular desk and before her, lashing out with the pole arm. The Silloni matched her, pressing forward. The move surprised the Kastan, and she found her ankles tangled in the length of her own weapon. Jazz thrust forward, her blade finding purchase in flesh as a ribbon of black liquid spat out of the contact point before Navarre tumbled off the perch and back onto the outer ring where Samantha had finally gathered herself. As she fell, Navarre made a sound unlike anything they had ever heard before, the front of her tunic now mottled with her own oily blood.

The exclamation caused Devon and Conn to flinch, their own black eyes darting to the scene below for an instant. Conn's countenance fell for a fraction of an instant, but long enough for Devon to know that the scene below bothered him.

Devon moved forward, pressing his momentary advantage, drawing one of the three blades back into its scabbard to give himself more maneuverability with the weapon. Conn followed suit in an instant, the two killers' weapons flashing, whirling still as they moved serpentine across the polished floor of the open NIDAS hangar. They were moving closer to a large, heavy gate sealed shut with an exotic whorl on symbols across its face and a bracer.

A moment later, the hangar filled with an audible rumble at their side. Both the males started at the sound as the gate slowly rose, and Devon suddenly saw a noticeable black halo instantly flashing behind Conn. He dropped, lashing a swirling leg out at Conn's ankles, tripping the killer up in a tangle of limbs before dashing to the side to seek cover behind a pillar, his weapon retracting into a sharp *snak!* as he almost flew through the air.

And there, on the other side of the gate, was Commodore Blanc, the Heir Apparent, and the small entourage that followed them. The Commodore's eyes fell on the black-eyed Kastan lying winded on the floor before him, its tunic mottled with black blood, and his face turned up in a sneer.

Jape Devon had never seen another like himself panic. Conn, the cold-blooded assassin who had seen and caused enough tragedy to steel himself against seemingly anything, began to wail and crawl backward in a desperate scramble to put distance between himself and the uniformed warrior before him. He threw his hands up before his face to ward off any attack. There was a terrifying hiss as Tabia Blanc drew from a pocket a small, sharp object that shimmered in the half light of the hangar.

"*Seek,*" the Commodore commanded the tiny device, and it flashed out of his hand under its own power, leaving a blue-white trail in its wake. In an instant, it bored through the assassin's up-thrust arms with an impacting boom, burrowing into the viscera of his neck. Conn struggled on the floor for an instant, his body wracked with spasms as the tiny object burrowed through his neck and into the skull, then erupted from the top of his head as thick black blood churned out in torrents to spill over the polished surface of the hangar floor. The assassin's body lay in a crumpled heap, spasming and twitching as the Commodore approached it.

The entourage led the child to the silver ship as Tabia shielded the grisly scene with his cloak. Jape Devon stood completely motionless behind the pillar, hardly daring to breathe as the group passed by him, moving toward the sleek silver vessel parked nearby. There was a sizzling sound, as a laser cutting flesh, emanating from beneath the draping leather cloak as the party ushered the youngster into the vessel. Tabia whirled around to follow, pocketing the

silver weapon as the assassin's dying discharge slowly faded into the fabric of his black clothing.

Tabia stopped, looked around to see a Silloni female and some sort of canine near the help desk, resolved that they must be attached to that group of aliens bringing them the *Cold Fire* solution, and then turned to walk toward the ship. Less than a minute later, the ship lifted on repulsors and slipped out of the NIDAS in a whisper of engines.

It took a moment for his heart to stop pounding, but Jape Devon slowly moved from around the pillar to note the neatly severed body of the assassin Conn lying in a pool of slippery, thick blood, the flesh of his face sheared neatly off and the underlying tissues spreading his face out in a rictus grin. Devon's eyes flitted to the other side of the hangar where Samantha lay in a pool of blood, Jazz attending her as a gray shape moved from behind the help desk, stealthily stalking around to them.

He moved without thinking. With a burst of energy from reserves he didn't know possessed, Devon lashed out with his Delta, hurling the weapon at Navarre as the three blades slashed out of their scabbards. The deadly projectile whirred across the hangar, slamming into the help desk between the assassin and her prey. Jazz turned, fumbling with the katana as her muscles ached with exhaustion.

Navarre's face jerked toward Devon, falling on the ruined body of her partner as it pulsed black blood onto the metal floor.

\*\*\*

*No going back now.*

The *Lady of Dreams* buckled in the vacuum of space, its spine broken and the massive hulk slowly spiraling toward the planetary defense grid below, trailing thick columns of smoke and noxious fumes as the great ship expired. Life support had sparked out a few seconds before and what air and temperature remained on the bridge was disappearing fast. In the center of the massive area, Natasha sat on the broad center seat with the huge cougar who had been her second for years. The two shared a bottle of the captain's best brandy, holding hands as the fore section of the ship snapped, groaning under the weight of release as kilometers of metal twisted and screamed.

As the gleaming orb of Argeia's white star appeared, splitting over the horizon like a crescent, the cities below glittered like jewels beneath the chromatic defense grid. The two smiled, looking into each other's eyes. "We never had to take any of it seriously," Natasha said, and pressed her mouth to his. Robbins seized her in his arms and drew her close, dropping the bottle to the carpeted floor of the bridge as a maelstrom of electric sparks erupted around them.

The ruined hulk of the mighty ship descended further, its body convulsing as a living thing in the spasms of death, before striking the planetary defense grid of the planet below. The *Lady of Dreams* glanced off the energy shield, igniting brighter than a solar flare, filling space like the flash of a star, and then sizzled out into a cloud of thick, gray smoke and debris.

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Navarre pointed the double-sickle weapon at Devon as the black-eyed Kastan crossed the hangar for them.

"Oh no," Jazz snarled, "*you're mine, bitch!*" She launched at the killer, the blue-white metal of her Siilv blade stabbing through the spaced between the extended blades of Devon's

Delta. Navarre blanched and fell back, swooping under a blade and knocking the fatigued Silloni girl down. Samantha was getting to her feet again, and the assassin's lip curled. There was no way she was going to be able to handle three foes at once, especially another Kastan. Better to take care of these two and beat a hasty retreat.

The killer lunged to one side, caught herself as Jazz moved to compensate, and slashed her blade wide, aiming at Samantha's middle. The blades slashed through space, the end of the second blade finding purchase in Samantha's body, sending her to the floor with a weak scream. Navarre stopped, taking a moment to watch the prey fall, just as she had watched her master quiver in agony after his horn had been severed.

It was so easy to kill these off-worlders, she thought, that a sense of satisfaction was barely palpable. Navarre turned to face Jazz, and found a heavy fist slamming into her gut. Jazz had recovered quicker than she had thought, and the assassin found herself tumbling backward, her lurch interrupted by a searing pain stabbing in the back of her abdomen as her descent ground to an agonizing stop. She glanced back to see that Samantha, her hands clutching at her middle as blood coursed over her fingers and onto the Japanese tunic beneath her jacket, held the grip of the katana that now stabbed forward out of her gut. The wicked double-sickle clattered to the floor beside the assassin.

The moment stopped, as if suspended in space, the two women staring into one another's faces. Devon's footfalls stopped as Navarre coughed up a burst of oily black blood and Jazz stepped forward with her katana upraised.

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Promagistrate Nikata returned to the underground complex beneath the jade bunker. The elegant Kastan found her staff assembled there, including Jean Blanc, Tabia's brother.

"It has been brought to my attention that Commodore Blanc has slain a member of the original Hunt in the hangar," she began. A murmur of disbelief spread through the room, but quieted when she spoke again. "He did not have time to search for its counterpart. In addition, the solution to the rancid Cold Fire computer virus—which has caused the Alignment no end of death and tumult—has yielded more information than Captain Sinclair advised us of. It contains a trace code back to Hunt equipment. We now know that it was merely one link in a long chain designed to disrupt our world and usurp our power. The acts of terrorism which we thought random were to purpose, and the slain Hunt was their architect from what information we now have. This is the legacy of that cult, and all the more reason why they need to be stamped out."

She turned to the boyish Jean, "We will not be re-establishing diplomatic or trade relations with the Planetary Alignment, but please extend our thanks to Jo Chan for all her efforts." Jean bowed graciously in acceptance.

"The Heir Apparent is to safety now," she continued. "We can only wonder what would have happened if the Hunt had gotten access to him."

There followed a general noise of agreement from the collected voices.

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Merlin entered the hangar of the NIDAS to a sight he knew he would dread. At one end of the open area lay the twisted and broken corpse of one assassin. No one else was visible.

The captain, Renny and Durant looked at one another, and then moved forward into the hangar.

"Samantha!" Merlin cried.

"Here!" came Jape Devon's voice from the other side of the help desk. The captain ringed the desk at top speed, skidding to a stop before a broken husk of a body. The other assassin lay before him, her body slashed repeatedly and expired. Laura had sustained a number of cuts and probably had a broken arm, and Devon was mottled with black bloodstains and cuts of his own. But what held his gaze was the sight of Samantha lying in Laura's lap. She was bleeding from the middle, and bore several other, smaller wounds.

Merlin fell to his knees before Samantha, drawing her into his lap with quivering arms, overcome with anguish. He was awash in emotion and a pain he never knew he could feel. It was as though the viscera of his breast were torn out, but much moreso than he had felt when he had thought Taro lost. His mind wracked with all the things he should have said, all the things he should have done, but never took the time. The wolf threw back his head in a howl of anguish, jostling her body in his pain and frustration.

Samantha groaned, one hand clenching involuntarily at her middle as her captain shifted her. She was alive, but unconscious from fatigue and loss of blood. He pressed a hand over her middle, feeling the lateral slash across her flesh. It was not deep, and there were no exposed organs.

"My people can get her fixed up," Devon offered. "She'll live."

"We have to get her to the *Lady of Dreams!*" Merlin barked.

"No..." Devon said quietly, "we can't do that."

"Why not?"

"Because," his voice trembled slightly, "there is no more *Lady of Dreams* to take her to."

Stillness filled the hangar, oppressive and weighty at the words Devon spoke. Renny, Durant and Ashe stood in silence as Devon strode over to the help desk and tapped keys on a glowing panel. "They'll be here shortly. They'll take care of her."

But Merlin drew Samantha closer, placing his hand over her bloody middle and keeping the pressure on it.

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### iii. *forces of nature*

Samantha was taken to a medical facility in Donisia, the center of the capitol city and only a few miles from the NIDAS. Physicians saved her life, making a devastating discovery at the same time. None of them spoke Standard, so they related their findings to Jape Devon, who explained to Merlin that there had been complications, but that everything would be all right. Samantha would have to undergo physical therapy and take it easy for a few months, but she would live.

Devon left it to Samantha to tell him the rest of the story.

The white pearl of the planet Argeia slowly slipped out of sight as the *Blue Horizon* drew away. What remained of the blockade of ships still sizzled and sparked as hulls collapsed and the occasional explosion lit the black of space around them. Rescue ships had arrived and recovered most of the survivors, and more ships were arriving now to remove the blasted hulks of the destroyed vessels. The Hestran flagship had gratefully collected all of the life pods from the *Lady of Dreams*, and Jazz—as their ranking officer—had taken the time to make sure they

were all right. Each of them would later be processed and sent back to their respective homeworlds, but she took custody of the emotionally devastated Tim herself, having special plans for his future. Merlin Sinclair looked out the observation window, his emotions a maelstrom inside.

Samantha was doing better, but would need weeks of rest and during that time, they would have to—he stopped... who did he think he was kidding? He wanted to hold her and stay by her side, but he needed to be strong now for the rest of the crew. She was resting quietly, healing with all the support that Tanis could give her. Merlin sighed, remembering how welcome Natasha had been when they had crashed after vanquishing Sagan. But that chance was gone now.

When Merlin had returned to his ship, a news flag had been waiting. The luxury cruiser *Argonautia* had been rescued in deep space, following a collision with another ship, and his former chief engineer Patch had been aboard. Patch had made it to a terminal and sent a message to his brother, and Pockets had asked that they meet him at a rendezvous point.

Victor Faltane strode up to stand beside Merlin before the observation window, the long drape of his traveling cloak trailing behind. He found his presence comfortable, even though the human's composure had been tense and guarded, like a thin sheet of muslin stretched tightly over broken glass.

"It's a shame," Faltane began. "There were such great things that we could have been to each other, but greed had to get in the way and now they're all but lost to us."

"History," Merlin began, hoping that some deep, cosmic comment would reveal itself to him, "is full of such events." The canine suddenly felt as though it wasn't much in the line of deepness, but then he realized that he was too tired to make any such statements.

"As it ever will be," Faltane responded, unfazed by the comment, staring out the window as the last vestiges of the white orb passed out of sight.

"It's a pity that we lost the *Lady of Dreams*, too," Merlin mused. "Vault technology would have been an incredible boon to us all."

"Vault technology has more applications than most people think. Natasha had an incredible idea, but limited herself to applications of travel across only distance. Strange, considering that she was such an inventive venture capitalist. It would be interesting to see what might have happened if other developers could have gotten access to that."

Faltane turned to face Sinclair, extending a hand. "Thank you for escorting me back to Earth. My staff and I are quite grateful."

Sinclair took the offered hand, "It's the least we can do to help you. Your assistance in brokering this, even the way it ended, will be something I at least will remember. We've lost so much, from Senator Ferry and all those poor people who died in the terrorism, to Captain Natasha. So many important and influential people... it's like all the gods have been snuffed out."

Faltane sighed with a shrug. "True, and we will mourn for all of them now that this is over. On the other hand I wouldn't say it was a total loss. We now have a fresh supply of Siilv back on the market. You know, it's like my father taught me, and what I've taught all my own staff members."

"What is that?" Merlin asked.

"That in pain, there must be gain." The human smiled, drew the hood of his pale cloak over his head, and returned to his tiny ship in the *Blue Horizon's* cargo hold.