



Blue Horizon
Book Three

BLUE HORIZON, BOOK THREE

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Dedication

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

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Introduction

Welcome to the third installment of the *Blue Horizon Captain's Journal*. Book Three contains the longest episodes of the series, and wraps up a satisfying seven-year project. I have gained numerous friends over the course of these thirty-one stories, and it is with pleasure that I have been able to present them to you in both online and printed formats. When we first met Merlin Sinclair in Book One, he was an easy-going captain of a single freighter in the business of moving cargo across the Planetary Alignment of worlds. By the time you have read through to the final tale, it is clear that the wolf and his expanding company have gone through many changes, some for the better, and some not.

Although this is a science fiction tale, I have attempted to portray these characters in a realistic light, each one true to his or her established personality, and all of them developing in the natural course of time. In these final nine stories, you will see pieces of the larger puzzle finally come together. Things hinted at throughout the first two volumes will fit into place as secrets are unveiled and hidden dangers revealed. It is a time of change and a time of growing. Our cast of characters will see loss and reunion, redemption and revelation, and they will all experience the closeness of an extended family.

In some respects, it was hard to bring the series to a close, as these characters had become a part of my own family over those seven years. *Blue Horizon* has been my child, but all children grow up and need to eventually be on their own. There are more projects in the works, and there is the possibility that I may one day return to the *Blue Horizon*, but for now, the two-tone blue flying saucer will continue on its deliveries as it has. The cast of characters may change here and there over time, but this is as it is in real life. Life itself is fluid and so are the adventures of the *Blue Horizon*.

Thank you for joining us along the way, and may the wind be at your back.

– Ted R. Blasingame
2004

P.S.

This book of tales represents the third 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 Three

EXPANDING HORIZONS

By Ted R. Blasingame

SS Blue Horizon PA1138

Captain's Journal

I need a vacation.

My crew and I are tired. We're worn out from our adventures, and resulting from recent events of such enormous circumstance, our immediate future looks uncertain in the business of interstellar commerce. We escorted Victor Faltane and his aides to Earth six weeks ago, and without anything else on our delivery schedule following the delivery of Martian hematite for the Terraformation Corporation, I plotted a course for Dennier from there. My sister and brother-in-law have wanted us to stop in for an extended visit for some time and this looks like the perfect opportunity for it. Instead of occupying a rental pad at the spaceport, Bill has invited me to set the Blue Horizon in an empty field he owns adjacent to their home for the duration until business picks up again; this whole incident with Argeia has disrupted interstellar commerce across the Planetary Alignment and another forthcoming customer might be a while.

Our next pickup after Argeia was to be on Mainor, but for all practical purposes now, it doesn't exist anymore; everything on the rest of our previous schedule has been withdrawn by worlds now distrustful of one another by this whole affair. Once on Dennier, I'll grant indefinite leave to my crew, as we have no indication of when we'll have another interstellar delivery. I have already instructed everyone to try to stay nearby in case one does come up, but they are otherwise free to do as they wish. At least this time, I have reserves in the company account in the event of extended down-time.

Jape Devon has departed us for a long-needed vacation of his own. An edict was issued from his government that the black-eyed members of his race like himself are now persona-non-grata, and for all practical purposes he can never go back home. There's now considerable antipathy against Kastani in general and I've read reports of lynching in places. Rather a depressing end to have to come to after all he has done for the safety of the Planetary Alignment as a whole. Trusted by my crew, I offered him a place amongst us, but he declined, assuring me that we would be safer without him and that he could survive well enough on his own.

Samantha is recovering well. The Kastans' quick medical action kept her from losing more blood and they did a good job on her. If her current healing is any indication, she will either have little or no scar left beneath her fur when she's fully recovered.

She can sit up now without pain, but she still has to stay off her feet for a while. Pockets added anti-grav generators to the bottom of a small, backless seat cushioned with a large red pillow, with an attached a small platform where she can rest her slateboard as needed so she can still access the main computer. We've already gotten used to seeing her float around the ship on it, and she likes it so much that she told Pockets that she might continue to use it even after she's back on her feet.

Diplomatic relations throughout the Planetary Alignment are currently under extraordinary stress. This has been a period of change like no other I have seen in a long while – so much has happened

in such a short period of time. There is even talk of new aggression between Nalirra and a sister world that isn't a member of the Planetary Alignment that has made Tanis nervous.

Due to the siege against Argeia, or the Siilo War as it has since become known on the news vids, interplanetary commerce and trust have broken down almost completely throughout parts of the Planetary Alignment. What is left of Mainor after the attack by the Kastan's super-dreadnought is a darkened rock of death. What atmosphere remains of the fused planet consists of opaque, poisonous clouds, and released heat from its core is trapped beneath a virtual greenhouse that has efficiently killed all life on the once-populous world. Probes sent to the surface by SPF investigators last only a few minutes before breaking down in the heat and acidic atmospheric conditions. Natives of Mainor who were offworld for one reason or another now have no home to return to. It's a stark reminder to the rest of the Planetary Alignment how close Dennier and Earth were to the same fate. For all appearances, Mainor now resembles Rombess, the small poisonous world closest in orbit around our sun, and I'm told the environment is similar to what naturally exists on Venus in the Sol system.

Devon explained that at the heart of every dictatorship is the idea that there is no rule of law superior to the will of those who hold power or the ideology they are promoting. Such was the position of several of the worlds in the PA when we invited Argeia to join our ranks. Argeia has slammed its doors shut for obvious reasons, but there are now a few thousand tons of Siilo on the market again. It will be enough to keep Brandt going for ten more years if only they use it, especially now that Intergalactic Aid has been dissolved. I suspect they will probably hoard it to drive up prices, but in doing so, their economy could break down further. As if that was not bad enough, more of the unstable corollary element, Ionic Siilo, has shown up as well. I.S. is so volatile that it vibrates slightly in your hand, sort of like putting your tongue on the ends of a small power-pack. Ionic Siilo could possibly replace liquid crystal as a cell fuel, but there just isn't enough of it outside of Argeia.

The Lady of Dreams was lost in the fighting. Despite her reputation as a pirate, Captain Natasha acted valiantly. A few of her surviving crew members have stated that it seemed the Captain's purpose in the whole affair was not to exploit the situation to her advantage, but it was her intention to act as a deterrent to those hostile to Argeia. Unfortunately, her intentions were misread by the Kastans, who attacked her Hammerdine with one of their own as she tried to protect an important Hestran vessel merely by its presence. The Kastans fired upon the Lady of Dreams without provocation, but Natasha refused to sit idle. Once her vessel was actively attacked, she returned aggressive fire in self-preservation. Unfortunately, the Lady of Dreams didn't survive a final assault from an unknown weapon launched from the surface of the planet.

In the short time I'd known Captain Natasha, I had grown to respect her brilliant mind, and I believe I was beginning to understand her goals, if not her methods. Due to her gallant actions which resulted in her end, the Hestran monarch has cleared all past charges against her and has even given her the title of Hero. Given her personality, I don't know what she would have thought of that, but I'm sure it makes the Hestran politicians feel better about themselves for surviving a place where they shouldn't have been in the first place.

Laura Jazz – Laura to us, Jazz as she was known to the crew of the Lady of Dreams – has left for Sillon to rejoin her family, and she has taken young Tim Mo with her on the long voyage. She grew attached to Natasha's cabin boy during his rehabilitation and will take him on as her personal ward. Certainly, her father would welcome them both.

Pockets had a chance to look over the boy's endosuit construction and he was impressed. Endosuits are commonplace for visitors to heavy gravity planets like Hestra, but Natasha's design is far more sophisticated than those currently on the market. Although she was the communications officer, Jazz was also one of her captain's many engineers and enjoyed my chief's enthusiasm for her captain's technology.

During his examination, Pockets discovered a capsule filled with data crystals in the empty battery pack, so he removed them for further study. He restored Tim's power supply, and Cindy worked with the boy to help get him past the emotional trauma. It was heart-wrenching work, given the hardship Tim has endured in his short life. I can only hope that on Sillon he can find something to fill the gap left in his soul.

Pockets has been reviewing the investigative reports concerning his brother's ship. The cruise liner, Argonautia, was destroyed in a collision with another vessel due to a malfunction caused by the Cold Fire virus. From what I've heard, it had a crew of nine hundred with over fourteen hundred passengers on board at the time, but there were less than seven hundred survivors picked up in escape pods afterward.

Jasper Porter was one of those survivors, along with the Argonautia's Captain Ransdell. All surviving crew members have been detained for questioning by the ship's parent company as they investigate the situation on why a pleasure cruise ship was in a war zone. We have had no word when or if Patch will be assigned to another company ship, but Pockets is hoping we'll get the chance to see him again before he's shipped off elsewhere.

We've had no leads to Lucas' whereabouts following the war. As much as I hate to admit it, things could have been a lot worse if my flea-bitten brother hadn't encrypted the solution into the virus itself. There's a very high probability that he's dead, a casualty of the war, and all I can do is hope he lived long enough to know he helped stop that war; considering he lived the life of a drifter, however, we may never get any word on his fate.

Merlin Sinclair, Captain

Cindy tapped a pad and then spoke over the ship-wide intercom, "I've disabled the artificial gravity," she announced. "Air Authority has cleared us to land outside the spaceport traffic and we're now approaching the approved landing site at the Wallace residence. We'll be on the ground in just a moment."

Merlin checked his controls and gently lowered the freighter onto field adjacent to the house that belonged to his brother-in-law. Merlin and Renny went through their shut down checklist as Cindy rushed through a side door of the bridge.

"Okay, we're down," the wolf said. "Cindy, please tell everyone..."

"She's gone to the head," Renny said.

Merlin looked back toward the door to the lavatory and shrugged. He stood up, moved to the Com terminal and turned the intercom system back on.

"All hands, listen up," he broadcast. "For now, you can bunk in your quarters on the ship or take advantage of my sister's hospitality in their home. You're free to go wherever you wish, but take a DataCom with you anytime you leave the vicinity. We don't have any other jobs lined up at the moment and may be down for a while, but you never know when you might need to get in touch with me or one another." He shut off the intercom and then leaned against the console.

"I wonder if your sister knows a local gal I can snuggle up with," Renny mused.

Merlin grinned at his feline friend. When he'd first come on board as the *Blue Horizon's* new navigator, Renny hadn't had much experience with women, but in the two years he had been there, the cheetah had grown more outgoing and flirtatious.

When Taro's fate had been uncertain, Renny's attitude had been dark and withdrawn, but after Merlin had received word that she was alive and recuperating on Hestra, the

navigator's outlook had improved tremendously. Renny had accepted that the vixen may never return to life on a freighter following such a traumatic experience, but she was alive and that's all that mattered.

"I thought you and Lori ..."

"Not in a while," the navigator replied with a shrug as he stood up and stretched his arms. "Our cute bunny has plenty of attention from the other guys. She and Pockets already have a date into town planned after we all get settled."

"Well," the captain replied, "I'm sure you can find someone quickly enough."

Renny grinned at him as the pair headed off the bridge. "Are you and Max staying here with your sister?"

Merlin nodded and then they moved toward the lift. "Of course, she wouldn't have it any other way," he said. His face grew serious before he added, "I also need to tell her about Lucas."

"Yeah, he surprised me, too."

Cindy opened the door of the small toilet and peeked out onto the bridge. Seeing it was empty, she moved across the room to the Communication terminal and keyed up a recent message. She stared at it for a moment with a frown and then quickly deleted the communiqué. This was not a day she wanted to face.

Durant was already at the controls of the *Blue Horizon's* large bay door and had begun to raise it before anyone else had descended from the upper decks. They had no cargo to unload, but after all their time in space, the hold could use a good airing out. Even before the panel lifted above his knees, he could smell the fresh aroma of a recent spring rain, as well as the salty flavor of the nearby sea. The bay door faced the east and the morning sunlight began to stream into the hold. The bear whistled a nameless tune softly to himself as he waited for the door to finish rising. His first order of business would be to get a ride into town to find something sweet to eat.

He heard a quiet shuffle outside the door and looked down to see a pair of booted feet below the rising panel. He stared at the boots curiously, and as the door cleared his field of vision, his eyes went wide.

Standing before the load master was a shapely female fox with fur of ginger, white and black. She was dressed in a pair of loose-fitting denim jeans and a powder blue sleeveless blouse with half the buttons open from the top. Clipped to the fur near her left ear and swaying in the breeze was a blue-tipped white feather hanging from a small ornate disk. She stood with her weight centered mainly over her left leg and a hand rested on her right hip. Beside her was a small red suitcase. The vixen wore a large grin above orange, slotted eyes.

He started to take a step forward, but suddenly became lightheaded and began to tilt. Taro Nichols rushed forward and took the heavy bear in her arms. Without dense Hestran musculature, she wouldn't have been able to manage his bulk, but it seemed she was in good physical shape. She set him upright and smiled into his puzzled face.

"Hello, Durant," she said happily.

Durant shook his head to clear the cobwebs and then returned her smile. "It sure is good to see you again, girl," he said softly, his large brown eyes growing moist. He drew her into a warm embrace, but she had other plans. Taro rose up on the tips of her toes and gave him a lingering kiss on the lips; it was the first kiss she had ever given him in all the years they had

known one another and it was warm and full of emotion. The accountant nearly melted beneath her before she finally drew back a step.

Durant looked down at her with a smile that wouldn't leave his face. "How did you know we'd be here?" he asked as he reached toward the intercom control.

The vixen shushed him with a raised finger to her lips and looked past him into the cargo hold. "I'll answer all questions later," she replied. "Don't broadcast my presence to anyone else yet. I want to greet everyone as they come out."

Durant looked a little uncomfortable. "We've had a few changes in personnel since you've been gone," he told her.

Taro looked at him with an understanding smile. "Well, I *have* been away a little over a year," she said. "I suppose I should have expected that." She studied him a moment and asked, "Are you feeling okay, Durant?"

"Sure, why wouldn't I?"

"You look tired, and even a little... *grizzled*." She smiled a little when she said the last word.

Durant chuckled. "I'm getting old, girl," he said to her. "This whole mess we just got out of does have me feeling tired, though. I need the vacation." He reached up and stroked the soft feather near her ear with a smile. "This is a nice touch."

"Thank you, it was a gift." Taro gave him another hug before she stepped back. "Okay," she said, "besides me, who else has gone?"

"Patch left us for a job as an engineer on a cruise liner," Durant answered, "but then his ship was lost in a collision with another when that Cold Virus hit. I heard he made it out in an escape pod with his captain and is now awaiting assignment to another ship."

"Wow, that's tough."

Durant shrugged. "Yeah. Anyway, we've acquired two more crew members, Cindy and Lorelei. You'll meet them in a bit."

The red fox nodded and then glanced back up at him. "And the others?"

"Still alive, kicking and causing a fuss," he said with a chuckle. "They'll all be glad to see you. How long is your visit?"

Taro looked at him for a long moment with an expression that almost looked as if his words stung. Finally, she settled on a humble expression and replied, "Durant, I'm not just here for a visit... If Merlin will have me back, I'd like to crew with the *Blue Horizon* again."

The bear pulled her back into a soft hug and said, "You've been greatly missed, Taro. Because of this war mess, we don't have any current contracts, but I'm sure Merlin will be glad to see you again."

Taro looked up around her when she finally pulled away. "The new ship's bigger," she said. "I almost didn't recognize her when you landed, but Merlin's sister said this *was* the *Blue Horizon*."

"Where *is* Shannon?" he asked, looking across the grassy field toward a large nearby house.

"She's making sure the guest rooms are ready. You know her, Durant. It's just she and Bill, but she's still a homemaker."

"Hey, Durant," Pockets' country accent called out from the interior of the cargo bay, "You wanna come with us? Max and I are..." The voice ended in a small squeak and then running footsteps came from the shadows. Taro turned with a smile as the short raccoon jumped up into her arms gleefully.

"Taro!" Pockets exclaimed cheerfully. "Goodness, but it's great to see you!"

"Hello, Pockets," she said. The red fox closed her eyes and held him warmly for a moment. As with Durant, she gave the raccoon an unexpected kiss, letting her lips linger before she finally set him on his feet. When she looked down at him, the diminutive engineer was rubbing tears from his eyes. Standing behind him was Maximillian, and it was her turn to stare in wonder.

The German shepherd youth with the light blue eyes was no longer a scrawny, former slave and cabin boy. He had to be seventeen years old by now, she thought to herself. He had grown taller and a little muscular since she had last seen him, and he also looked as if he was more confident with himself. She was unaware that Samantha had been instructing him in the Silloni martial arts, and that he had been weight-training with Renny. He had matured a lot in recent times and was beginning to look like an adult.

"Do you remember me?" she asked him. He had been on board less than a year at the time of Sagan's attack and she didn't know how much he might recall of her.

"Aye, I do," Maximillian replied, his hands in his pockets. "Are you feeling better?" he asked.

Taro walked up to him and put her hands on his shoulders. "Much better, thank you," she said. She gave him a gentle kiss on the lips and then pulled back to wink at him. "You're looking good, Max," she said to him. "I'm glad to see you again. Have you become a gourmet cook by now?"

Pockets slapped the canine on the shoulder with a laugh, and then looked up at the vixen. "Actually, he's becoming a very capable *mechanic* now, Taro," he explained. "Max is more comfortable with engine grease on him than cooking oil. Someone else feeds us these days."

"Yeah," Max finally spoke with a smile, the feeling of her kiss still lingering on his lips, "I didn't really have a knack for the kitchen."

"Don't let him kid you, Taro," Pockets said. "He did just fine keeping us fed, but he wanted the chance to learn how to maintain the ship instead."

"Taro!" Tanis raced across the empty cargo bay, and grabbed her into a fierce hug with his eyes closed tightly against her chest. Taro lifted his chin to pull his pointed nose from her cleavage, and when he opened his eyes, the desert fox's eyes were moist. She kissed her former lover deeply.

"Whoa-ho," a new voice said with a giggle. "Who's Tanis so wrapped up in?"

Taro pulled away from the medic and looked up to see a grinning white rabbit standing beside them. Tanis turned to look and winked at the ship's cook.

"Taro," he said, "this is Lorelei, the one who feeds the hungry masses these days."

"Taro!" Lori said with a big grin and clapped her hands together. "I've heard so *many* good things about you."

"Thank you, Lorelei," the vixen replied pleasantly.

Samantha floated up to the group on her anti-grav chair and said, "I wanna hug, too!"

Taro looked down at her friend, and her eyes went wide at the sight of the bandages wrapped around her middle. "Ohmigosh! What happened to you, Sam?" she exclaimed as she knelt down in front of the Border collie.

"I tried to follow in your footsteps," Samantha said with a grin. "I tangled with someone who wanted to gut me."

Taro's own eyes grew moist and she leaned forward to give the Border collie a warm hug. "Are you going to be okay?"

"Yeah, I'll be fine with some rest. My wounds weren't nearly as bad as yours."

"Thank goodness! You'll have to tell me all about it later."

"We've missed you so much," Samantha said to her with emotion. "So very much!"

"I've missed you all, too," Taro whispered in a choked voice.

"What's going on?" another new voice asked merrily. "Looks like a reunion!"

"Cindy, this is Taro," Lorelei said.

"Oh."

Taro stood up and gave the newcomer a friendly smile, but the mouse didn't return the courtesy. The vixen started to open her mouth to say something to break the sudden awkward silence, but a body of golden yellow fur and black spots jumped in front of her.

Without a word at all, Renny wrapped his arms around her and picked her up, the excitement in his large eyes sparkling. When he put her back down, he leaned her backward and kissed her long and hard. It didn't matter to him who was watching. He pulled away after a moment and allowed her to catch her breath as most of the others chuckled.

"Renny, dear," Taro said to him in a soft voice, a finger tracing light patterns across the front of his shirt, "I'm glad to see you, too." She let her eyes glide over his physique and then returned her gaze to his uncertain expression.

The cheetah looked deep into her eyes and swallowed. "The last time I saw you," he said with difficulty, "you'd been sliced open by that demon and you were dying. I've had so many nightmares."

Taro bit her bottom lip and gently took his face in her hands. "I'm alive and the demon is dead," she said. "I've had a long road to recovery, but I'm back in shape and doing well."

Renny finally smiled, and then his eyes fell upon the feather she wore. He was about to ask if it had any special meaning, but his thoughts were interrupted.

"Aren't you eggs gone *yet*?" a voice said to the small crowd from inside the ship. "You have money in your accounts and time on your hands to scatter. You *are* free to leave."

Taro pulled away from the cheetah with a grin and jumped into the surprised arms of the *Blue Horizon's* captain with an uncharacteristic squeal of delight.

"Oh my..." was all he managed to say before she greeted him with a warm kiss on the lips. It was the first time Taro had ever kissed the wolf with more than just a peck on the cheek. Merlin felt his head swim, from the kiss and the shock of actually seeing her in the fur. When she finally let him go, Taro grinned at him with crinkled eyes. The wolf gaped at her, his voice lost to him.

Taro laughed and then looked at the group around her, shrugging her shoulders sheepishly.

"I'm so glad to see all of you," she said. "I sent Merlin a message saying I would meet you here, but I wanted to surprise the rest of you. Did I succeed?"

"You certainly did!" Pockets piped up.

Merlin looked puzzled, but finally found his voice. "Message?" he asked. "I haven't heard from you since that brief communiqué months ago to let me know you were recuperating on Hestra." He turned to look at Cindy, but she stared down at her own feet. He furrowed his brow and started to say something, but Taro put a hand on his arm.

"Shannon wanted me to tell you all to go on up to the house as soon as you arrived," the vixen said. "She will start supper in earnest as soon as she gets the chance to see you all."

"Where's Bill?" Merlin asked.

"He had to run in to town to take care of a spot of business, but should be back within the hour. He was already gone by the time I arrived."

Everyone began walking across the field toward the large house by the sea, but Taro turned to Merlin. "Captain?" she asked. "Durant said you don't have any job contracts right now, but when you do, I'd like to help out if you think there might still be a place for me on your crew." Everyone stopped to look back at them and a few quick glances went toward Cindy, but the wolf was oblivious to them. He smiled with a canine grin and gently put a hand on the fox's shoulder.

"Durant's had your account on standby all this time," he said cheerfully. "I'm sure we can find a place for you."

"Wonderful!" Taro replied delightedly. She turned and looked toward their former crewmates. "I'm glad to be back!" The faces that looked back at her contained mixed expressions and she was puzzled. Briefly, she wondered if they even *wanted* her back, but then Renny grinned at her and gave her a wink. Merlin motioned toward the house and the group took his hint to resume walking.

Taro strode forward to walk beside Samantha's floating pillow. Renny assumed a position on her other side and he listened in quietly as the Border collie began to fill her in on all that happened in her absence.

Durant held to the back of the group, and a soft tug of Merlin's sleeve made the wolf slow down. "Y'know, boss," the bear said quietly to his captain, "now that Taro's back, you might want to make her your first officer again."

Merlin looked at him and replied in an equally quiet voice, "You don't like the extra pay?"

Durant grinned. "The pay is good, but that comes with the duties of the job. I'm already pulling triple duty with my hands full of the business accounts and taking care of our various cargoes too. Honestly, as far as I'm concerned, she's welcome to have that responsibility back. It would free me up to focus on the more important work I'm best at."

The captain nodded. "I'll consider it, Durant, but she's also been gone for a year. Our crew, the ship and even some aspects of the business have changed during her absence. Until she gets reacquainted with everything, it wouldn't be fair to everyone else to put her over them so soon."

"So, what are you going to do with her?" the load master asked. "We've kept her account open and you've made sure a balance was maintained in her absence, but what job are you going to pay her to do?"

Merlin glanced toward the vixen, who was showing off her Hestran fitness for Max by picking up Renny and Tanis in each of her arms. After a moment, his gaze shifted to Cindy. She looked uncharacteristically gloomy and it suddenly occurred to him what it was that bothered her. In his original interview with her on Pomen, Merlin had told the mouse the position he was hiring for was temporary, dependent upon whenever Taro ever returned to the *Blue Horizon*. Now that the vixen had indeed returned to them, and he had just told her in front of everyone that she could have a job back on his ship, he was certain that Cindy felt her days of employment were over, even though she had been with them a little over a year.

The captain frowned and shook his head. "I spoke before I thought," he told his ursine friend. "That's not like me, but I was so excited to see Taro again that I just didn't even think about Cindy."

Durant glanced at the mouse and nodded slightly. She was walking with the others, but her movements were listless and her eyes downcast; even her tail was limp behind her. "When are you going to...?" he asked, letting his words trail off.

Merlin looked at him and shook his head again. "Taro will need to get reacquainted with the business, so there's no need to rush into this." He bit his bottom lip and then added, "I'm not sure how this is going to work out, Durant, but eventually I *will* have to let Cindy go. At the moment, however, I still need her right where she is. We've got to line up some customers as quickly as we can."

"May I make a suggestion?" the bear asked.

"Anytime."

"What if you reinstated Taro as first officer, but kept Cindy as the Customer Liaison instead of giving that job to Taro? I know you are determined to keep your promise and bring Taro back into the crew, but..."

Merlin put a hand on the bear's arm and they both stopped to talk as the others continued. "I know you're just trying to help keep me from laying off Cindy, but if Taro's *only* job was being first officer, she wouldn't have much to do, and to a certain degree we can't just give Cindy the axe after all the help she's been as our collective therapist."

"So," Durant repeated, "what are you going to do?"

"I don't think I can just drop Taro into her old position without some retraining," Merlin said, thinking aloud, "so I might put the two of them working together whenever business picks up again. Later, if I see that Taro might be able to handle it by herself, *then* I might have to let Cindy go. I don't have any other positions to fill."

Durant made a *tsk* sound. "Do you really think Cindy's going to be happy retraining her replacement?"

"Probably not," the captain replied, "but what choice does she have as a temporary employee? If she refuses, I don't have another job for her and will have to let her go. The provisional consideration was in the contract she signed with a thumbprint."

The two of them fell silent as they walked, but then Durant looked over at the wolf. "What about the home office?" he asked. "We'd discussed creating one at some point."

Merlin looked up at him. "I'd forgotten about that, actually. With the decrease in interstellar commerce throughout the Planetary Alignment, I hadn't seen a need to pursue the idea further."

"Yes, but it has to pick up again," the brown bear replied. "You have to plan on that."

"Well, I did want to put the office here on Dennier."

"Despite the war, the Kastans *did* pay us well for the strawberries, blue diamonds and our help, not to mention Devon's addition and the fee as Mr. Faltane's escort," Durant reminded him. "Rezo paid off the loan on his decrepit ship last month, so that's more in the coffers. You *have* the money to get a home office set up before business picks up again."

"How about a PR campaign to promote the *Blue Horizon's* business?" another voice suggested. Merlin and Durant looked over at Tanis, who had dropped back to talk to them.

"You heard what we were talking about?" Durant asked as the desert fox fell into step with them.

"With receivers like this," Merlin smirked as he thumped one of the fennec fox's subject ears, "are you kidding?"

Tanis grinned and playfully hid his face in the crook of an upraised arm. "Yah, I'm guilty of eavesdropping!" he whined.

"A public relations campaign, eh?" the captain repeated. "That might not be a bad idea."

"Why wait for the business to pick up on its own?" Tanis asked. "Create some ads, use yer resources to yer advantage."

"What resources?" Durant asked.

"Well..." Tanis rubbed his chin as they neared the Wallace home. "Whether or not ya planned it, the *Blue Horizon* is well known in the PA because of our trip to Sillon when that other star blew up, as well as our fight with Sagan at Crescentis after his atrocity on Hestra. Samantha is friends with Holly Harken of INN news, and Cindy used to work for an ad agency. That looks to me like..."

"When did Cindy work for an ad agency?" Merlin asked. "She didn't list it on her résumé."

"It didn't have anything to do with the job she was interviewing with ya for, so she didn't think it was necessary to mention it."

Merlin frowned. "A résumé is supposed to encompass your experience, no matter where you've worked. How did *you* find out about it?"

Tanis smiled. "If ya spend a lot of time with her, she opens up nicely."

"Like a flower," Durant mused with a little smile.

Merlin stared at the pair a moment, wondering at the connotation behind their statements and then decided not to inquire further. Instead, he shrugged his shoulders and looked at his accountant. "I think his idea has merit."

Durant nodded. "I agree. It's worth looking into."

"Okay," Merlin said, "I'll talk to Cindy and Taro about it tonight."

"Look at Cindy, boss," the bear said. "You probably should talk to her sooner than that or she's going to be depressed all day."

Merlin nodded. "Good point. I'll discuss it with her now before I talk to Taro." The *Blue Horizon's* crew had arrived at the front doorway to the Wallace's house, and Shannon was greeting everyone with a hug and a reminder to remove their shoes before entering. The gray and brown female wolf was delighted to see everyone, her tail wagging happily behind her, and she did her best to make sure they all felt welcome in her home.

Merlin tapped Cindy on the shoulder, motioning for her to take a walk with him. "May I talk to you, please?" he asked quietly. She looked at him with doleful eyes and nodded, following him back away from the crowd.

Cindy made no sound as the two of them headed across the cropped green lawn toward a small gazebo nestled beneath a copse of danra trees. *This is it*, she thought. *I'm getting the axe*. The mouse stepped up into the structure meekly. Merlin sat down on the wooden bench seat and motioned for the mouse to do the same. Instead, Cindy merely stood in front of him, her eyes focused on her feet, and her hands clasped together.

"Cindy," the wolf started in a gentle tone, "I have a proposition for you."

The mouse looked down at him, "I remember," she said. "I was only temp help until she returned."

"True, that is written into your contract," Merlin admitted, "but I'm not ready to release you just yet, if you don't mind staying on with the company."

Cindy looked at him, puzzled. This was not what she expected. "Oh... okay," she said slowly.

Merlin gave her a bit of a smile hoping to ease her fears a bit, and then he began to detail the plan of setting up an advertising campaign to generate business for the ship. She was quiet during his explanations, but by the time he finished, she was relieved and not altogether displeased with the turn of events.

"Thank you, Captain," she said meekly. "Since you told us about the message you got from Taro a few months ago, I knew she'd be back." She looked away briefly and added, "I've been dreading this day ever since."

Merlin put a hand gently on her shoulder. "Cindy," he said, "you've been a valued member of my crew and have made some good friends. I still need you to help me out, if you'd like to stay."

"Yes, sir, I would."

"Before all this mess with Argeia, Durant and I were making plans to set up a home office for the business here on Dennier. Originally, the purpose was to take over the duties of Customer Liaison to find and secure deliveries for the *Blue Horizon*."

"That means you were planning to abolish my position anyway," Cindy said with a frown.

"Well, yes and no," the wolf replied. "I had intended to replace the on-board position with a *Business Coordinator*. Instead of someone on the ship trying to seek out future deliveries and then coordinating all the specifics for pickup and delivery, the home office would focus primarily on promoting the business and getting the jobs. The Business Coordinator would then get back with the actual client contacts to work out the particulars for the pickup and deliveries: where, when, who to meet, and such."

Merlin leaned back against the railing behind him, putting his arms up across it in a relaxed manner. "It would have actually lightened your workload, but you'd have been working in conjunction with those in the home office."

"I see now..." Cindy said with a hand beneath her chin, "Taro has come back, and since you'd promised to hold a position for her, you want her on board as Business Coordinator. And... since business is rather scarce at the moment, you plan to set up a home office here on Dennier to promote the *Blue Horizon*, and want me to do your advertising."

"Something like that, yes."

"It certainly does sound appealing."

"Would you be interested in the job?" he asked. "It would still mean leaving the ship, but as the one running the home office, it'll come with a nicer salary than what you're getting now." He gave her a figure and her eyes widened in appreciation.

"How can I pass up a deal like that?" she asked with a smile. "Yes, I would like that very much."

"Thank you," Merlin said with his own pleasant smile. "Durant and I will probably begin looking for a location to set up the home office in a couple days. Once we've found a suitable place, we'll need to stock it with furniture and supplies, and then set up interviews for the other positions."

"Other positions?"

Merlin grinned. "I don't expect you to do all the work by yourself. I'll put you in charge of the office and hire two others to divide the rest of the work up between. As I understand it, advertising is a lot of work and you'll need the help."

"May I help you get things set up?" Cindy asked with a smile.

"I was hoping you would volunteer," the wolf replied.

"Thank you, Captain."

He studied her briefly and the look in his eyes grew dark for a moment. "Now... there is a matter I need to ask you," he said in a tone she'd hear from him before. Her shoulders drooped and she looked down at her feet.

"Did you intercept a message from Taro saying that she would meet us here?"

Cindy hesitated, then nodded. Merlin sighed audibly. "Did you try to deliver it to me or anyone else?"

Cindy shook her head after another hesitation. "No, sir," she murmured. "I... deleted it."

"Any others?"

"No sir, just the one."

He reached out with a finger and put it under her chin. He lifted her face until she met his amber eyes and she visibly flinched at his directness. "Don't ever do that again," he said in a stern tone. His voice was quiet, but there was no missing the command behind it. "If I find out you've withheld information from me again, there will be consequences. Do you understand me?"

Cindy nodded again, swallowing with difficulty. "I understand... sir. I'm sorry."

The wolf held her gaze for a heartbeat more and then his expression softened. "Apology accepted," he said in easier tone. He used the back of his finger to lightly caress the edge of one of her ears. A shiver went through her and she looked up in disbelief. He gave her a light smile and she found herself responding in kind.

"Listen, Cindy..." the captain said quietly. "Please don't let this color your opinion of Taro. She helped me set up the business when I started and she'd been a good friend. The two of you will be directly working together as a team once everything's up and running, and since she's been out of practice for a while, she'll need you to help get her back in."

"Yes, sir," the mouse said with a small smile, having recovered from her rebuke. "I'll be her Wingman," she assured him, referencing a military term her veteran father had often used.

The wolf twitched his whiskers in satisfaction and then nodded toward her. "So, with that out of the way, do you still want to work for me?"

Cindy's mouth quirked up into a smile. "Yes, sir, I do - that is if you still want me working for *you*."

Merlin grinned, stood up and extended a hand toward her with his tail wagging gently behind him. "Durant will work up a new contract for you in a day or two."

The mouse took his hand, shook it with a relieved expression and said, "Thank you, captain." When he released her hand, however, she slipped her arms around his neck and gave him a quick peck on the cheek.

When the two of them returned to the house, the others noticed the relaxed smile on the mouse's face as soon as they entered the main gathering room. Merlin gave his sister a warm hug and exchanged a few pleasantries with her before he moved to Taro and asked to speak with her alone.

Pockets elbowed Renny and gestured toward the mouse with the drink he held in a hand. "What's up with her?" he asked in a whisper. "She looks too happy to have been let go."

"Maybe he gave her a good separation bonus," the cheetah replied.

"That can't be it," Pockets said. "She wouldn't be over there grinning so much if she'd just gotten the axe, bonus or not."

"I don't know. Maybe the captain will explain shortly."

Taro readily agreed to the idea and promised to get back into the swing of things as soon as she could. Merlin told her of his plans for the home office, and asked her to work out a partnership with the mouse. The two of them would be dealing with one another on a regular basis in the new business setup and it would be better for everyone involved if they cooperated right off.

While Merlin and Taro were discussing matters, Durant took it upon himself to inform the rest of the crew on what was going on. He had intended to wait and let the captain make the announcement, but Cindy had already started to talk about it, so he thought he should take the lead to make the *official* announcement. He detailed the new direction of the *Blue Horizon* business and fielded their questions. Since their interstellar delivery schedule had been disrupted, and there were no other jobs in their immediate future, everyone was in agreement that advertising was a good venture. Durant also made sure to let everyone know that promoting the business was Tanis' idea. It would be a change in operations for the business and he wanted credit given where due.

Merlin knew that if he and Taro went back into the house together, the vixen would be set upon to tell her story before she could catch her breath, so in order to give her a little respite before dropping her into that situation, he offered to take her on a tour of the ship. The current *Blue Horizon* was now a little over a year old, but it was new to her. Taro had never been on board an H-model *Okami* freighter before and was delighted with the tour. He let her pick out her cabin from those not occupied, and she was amazed at the amount of room now available to them.

Nearly an hour had passed when they returned to the house. The first one to greet them was Bill Wallace, a solid black wolf with piercing yellow eyes. He smiled when he saw Merlin and gathered him up in a warm embrace. The brothers-in-law had always been good friends, and each was glad to see one another.

"Brother Bill," Merlin said with a smile, "it's been a long time."

"Yes, Merle, it has," the black wolf replied. He slapped the captain on the back so hard the other nearly fell over, but Merlin still had him in an embrace and slapped Bill's back equally as hard in return. Bill responded with another pounding, of which Merlin repeated. For a moment, they pounded one another with strained smiles until Taro forced them apart with a grin.

"Okay, boys," she told them. "I'd rather get my hug now, instead of watching you two trying to burp the testosterone out of one another."

Bill grinned and pulled her into his arms. "It's good to see you again, Taro," he told her. "Shannon said you'd arrived while I was in town."

"I'm glad to be back, Bill. It's good to see you again, too."

Bill gestured toward the others gathered in the front room and said, "Come on in and make yourself comfortable. Shannon and I have something to announce." Merlin looked at him, but Bill only gave him an innocent smile. The wolf and the vixen removed their shoes at the door and followed him inside.

Taro sat on the couch between Renny and Tanis, and Merlin stood behind Samantha and her floating pillow. Shannon went to stand beside her husband in front of a dormant fireplace and shared a quick smile with him.

"As most of you know," Bill said, "Shannon and I have lived here in this place for nearly ten years. It's a large house comparatively, but it looks like we'll need to build on a few extra rooms. It was confirmed last week that Shannon is pregnant with pups... four, to be exact."

"Wow!" Pockets said in surprise. "Four!"

"Four?" Merlin asked with a silly grin.

"Oh, come now! Four to six pups are not uncommon for wolves," Shannon explained with a laugh.

"Way to go, Bill!" Renny said.

"Way to go, Shannon!" Lorelei countered.

"Have you picked out names yet?" Cindy asked.

"No, not yet."

"When's the due date?" Samantha asked.

"In about two and a half months."

Taro grinned widely. She knew that Merlin's elder sister had wanted pups for a long time. She got up and gave Shannon a warm hug. "I'm so happy for you," she told her.

"Uncle Merlin's going to be *real* uncle," Max said with a grin.

Bill smirked at his brother-in-law, and pointed a finger at him. "This means you'd better come to visit more often so my children will grow up knowing their uncle," he said.

Merlin moved forward and grasped hands with him. "I will try," he promised. Then he moved to give his sister a hug. "Congratulations," he told her. "I know you've really wanted this."

Laudatory conversations went on for several minutes before the commotion quieted again. Bill got a couple of chairs from another room, and then he and Shannon sat down. Shannon looked to the red fox and smiled at her.

"Taro," she said with a wave of her hand toward those in the crowded room, "this bunch won't disperse until they hear your story, so I guess it's your turn to talk."

The vixen got up from the couch and moved to stand beside a tall grandfather pendulum clock that was in need of rewinding. She couldn't figure out what to do with her hands, so she held them together and looked out across the faces that were watching her expectantly.

"After Sagan..." she started, "I passed out. I have no memory of the crash itself or much of what happened to me immediately afterward, but I later woke up from a coma on *Hestra* in the care of a medical facility. I was surrounded by strangers, doctors, nurses and specialists, and when I asked them why I was there, no one would give me a straight answer. My wounds were still not healed enough for me to begin physical therapy. Because I had spent so much time away from the heavier gravity of *Hestra*, my body had to re-acclimate first, so I continued to warm my bed for another two months, slowly regaining my strength."

Taro put her hands behind her back and leaned against the wall as she continued. "At the start of physical therapy, I discovered my therapist was a relative of my father, who had not been in Taquit at the time of Sagan's biological attack. I'd never actually known Leslie Rhinehart, but I'd heard my father talk of his favored cousin in the past. Although a distant relative, I took comfort knowing I was not the only survivor of our family following what happened in Taquit."

Everyone in the room was focused on her words and she could see Renny swallow in anticipation for her to go on. She shrugged and continued. "Nearly four months after coming out of my coma, Dr. Rhinehart finally let me see the official report they had on me. I had been taken from the crash site to Pomen by someone they wouldn't name, and later transported to *Hestra* by the same person when I was stable enough to move."

"That would be Captain Natasha," Pockets interrupted.

"Natasha..." Taro repeated. She nodded her head and smiled to herself at an old memory, but then she shook herself from her thoughts and continued with her narrative.

"I was given emergency treatment to keep me alive, but due to my specific physiology, it was necessary to transfer me to a *Hestran* hospital. It was there I later came out of my coma, following numerous surgeries to repair the damage. I received three organ transplants and several blood transfusions before I was stabilized. In the end, I was eventually released, and it

was then I discovered all my medical expenses had been paid. I didn't know who had done it, but thinking on it now, it was probably Natasha."

She wrapped her arms around her middle and shrugged. "I had no idea where to go after that. I had no immediate family and my hometown was gone, so Leslie rented out a room in her home to me, and let me stay with she and her husband. She later introduced me to several more of my surviving relatives." A gentle breeze caressed the curtains of Shannon's open windows, and the smell of the sea wafted through the room. Taro stared outside for a long moment, her thoughts going back in time.

"While living there, I got in touch with some of my old business contacts, and was able to track down the *Blue Horizon's* delivery schedule; I followed your progress for a while, and wondered how all of you were doing. Several months after moving in with Leslie's family, Adam Singlebet of *Dragon, Wolf & Tiger*, came to our town for a dual concert with singer, Dahlia Neko. They had to hold it in a low-gravity auditorium made for such events. I got word to him and managed to get backstage. Adam remembered me from when the *Horizon* brought him, Brand and Carsen back from Sillon. He invited me to a gathering after the concert, and it was then I discovered he and Dahlia were headed next to Dennier for a multi-city tour with one stop in Grandstorm. I sweet-talked Adam into letting me ride with them to Dennier. Once in Grandstorm, I only had to wait for your arrival."

She smiled at her friends, but the sudden quiet of the room was disturbed by the sound of crying. Tanis looked over at Lorelei and put a hand on the sobbing rabbit's shoulder. "What's the matter?" he asked her.

Lori looked up from her hands and stared at him through wet eyes. "I'm so... *moved*..." she gasped. "I'm so h-happy she's back!" A few more sobs shuddered through her, and Tanis turned grinning at Taro with a shrug.

"Lori," Pockets said to her with a smirk, "you don't even *know* Taro. Why are you crying?"

The cook looked up again, and then she rushed across the room to give Taro a warm hug. "Her story tears at my heart..." she cried. Taro grinned in embarrassment and quietly stroked the fur on the back of the rabbit's head. Lori looked up at her, and in a sorrowful expression, she said, "They've told me so much about you that I feel you're *my* friend too!"

Taro chuckled and returned the hug. "Thank you, Lori. I'd like to be your friend, too."

A chime sounded from another part of the house and Bill left the room. A moment later, he returned and motioned to Samantha. Sam activated the controls of her floating pillow and followed him out of the room.

With Taro's story finished, the vixen was suddenly besieged with other questions and comments; she seemed happy to answer them all and fielded them one by one. Shannon walked over to her brother, who looked up at her expression with a puzzled face.

"Renny told me about Lucas," she said quietly,

Merlin glanced down at his feet for a moment and then nodded when he looked back into her amber eyes. "He finally did some good," he said in a muted voice. "Someone else saw his potential and forced him to use his talent to create the computer virus that caused so much trouble, but on his own, he took a gamble and encrypted the antidote solution for it deep into its code. I doubt he knew for certain anyone would examine the code so closely, but he took that chance. In the end, that's what saved us - saved a lot of people."

"Is he... still alive?"

Merlin sighed quietly. "I don't know. Probably not."

Shannon moved forward and pulled her remaining brother into an embrace, moisture glistening on the fur beneath her eyes. "Has he redeemed himself?" she asked him. Merlin recognized the tone of her voice, and knew it was not a rhetorical question. She wanted his honest, personal opinion.

"Yes," he said a moment later. "For all the headaches and heartaches he's given us over the years, I would say Lucas has cleaned his slate. I just wish we could tell him."

"Me, too."

Samantha came back into the room a little while later, but it was difficult to read the mixed emotions on her face. Pockets went over to her and looked at her with worried eyes.

"What is it, Sammy?" he asked.

The Border collie looked around the room and noticed everyone's attention had shifted over to her. She folded her hands together in her lap and Bill put his hands on her shoulders from behind.

"That was Master Tristan," she said. "He says he's recovering well, and that he's happy his daughter was returned to him, but the reason for his call was about my father's company, Holden Pharmaceutical."

"What happened?" Tanis asked.

"As most of you know, even from the distance of Sillon, that Master Tristan has overseen the interests of the company as specified by my father's will," she explained. "Since he has not been able to attend board meetings and such in person, a trusted otter named Stelan Willamette was appointed to sit in for him in his absence."

She looked up at Bill and patted one of his hands. "For some time now, Master Tristan has been grooming Alex Rogers to take his place in my father's company. Alex is a lifelong friend and the *Dragon Loft's* assistant executive. Most of you met him when we made the journey to Sillon. On a recent trip to the main offices on Alexandrius to check up on something for Master Tristan, Alex did a close examination of the company records and discovered that Willamette has been dipping into *my* personal trust fund that was set up when I was a pup. My lawyer was called in, and Jackson Wyatt confronted Willamette with irrefutable evidence and a roomful of detectives. He was given a choice. He could refund the trust fund with interest and resign quietly, or legal - and public - action would be taken with the hard evidence Alex had discovered. Willamette chose to resign."

"That's terrible!" Pockets exclaimed.

Samantha nodded. "Had he not been caught, I would have soon lost my fortune. However, that's not the end of the story."

"There's more?" Durant asked.

"Now without a resident CEO for Holden Pharmaceutical, Master Tristan put in Alex Roger's name before the board of directors. With Tristan's strong endorsement of his capabilities, and a complete grilling by the directors, Alex was voted in and is now the CEO of my father's company." Samantha smiled a little and shrugged her shoulders. "I've known Alex longer than even Merlin, and I trust him fully with dad's business. He's now living on Alexandrius in the capitol city, where he can oversee the company in person at the corporate headquarters."

"Wow," Lorelei replied with a lopsided smile. "A bad situation turned out good, even if it *is* for a company that makes something as useless as drugs." Sam shot a withering glance at the rabbit, but didn't favor her with a response.

"Even that's not all," Bill said.

Sam turned and looked at him with a puzzled expression. "More?" she asked.

"Mr. Rogers is currently on his way here."

"Huh?" Samantha said in surprise. "He's coming here? Why?"

Bill smiled down at her and replied, "To see *you*, my dear. He heard you were injured by the same people who tried to kill Master Tristan and insisted on visiting you."

"That's a long way to go just to visit a sick friend," Cindy observed.

Taro snickered and Renny looked at her sideways. "What's with you?" he asked with a smile.

The vixen grinned at the Border collie across the room from her. "Samantha's not *just* an old friend," she said. "Alex has had a crush on Sammy for a long, long time!"

Sam's eyes widened. "Uh..." she started to say, "Uh, no... he's just a friend."

"Sure he is," Taro teased, "but I know personally he'd like to be more."

"Personally?" Merlin asked.

It was Taro's turn to shrug her shoulders. "I flirt with Alex every time I see him," she explained with a twinkle in her eyes, "merely because I know it embarrasses him. He's always turned me down, and he once told me he was holding out on the hopes of one day getting together with Sammy."

Everyone looked back to the canine with smiles. "It makes sense," Tanis said. "They're both Border collies."

Samantha cleared her throat and said, "C'mon guys. Alex is only a longtime friend; a handsome friend, but only just a friend." No one replied to her unconvincing comment, and they all just smiled back at her with knowing looks. Samantha growled lowly to herself and then moved her floating pillow to Merlin's side. She put her arms around his waist and rested her cheek up against him to show everyone where *her* feelings lay.

Later that night, Taro and Renny were out on the sandy beach near the Arvallian Sea, a short distance from the Wallace home. Both small moons were full, and the couple had been chasing one another along the shore. At the moment, the two of them walked slowly through the knee-deep waves, since there wasn't much of a sandy beach beyond the water at that point.

"Taro," the cheetah asked after a long silence, "how are you doing?"

The vixen looked at him sideways and replied, "I've already told you my story," she said. "What else do you want to know?"

"I was really worried about you," Renny said. "I've thought about you a lot during your absence."

"That's sweet. I'm glad I wasn't forgotten."

"Never!" Renny chewed on his bottom lip for a moment. "May I ask you a personal question?"

Taro stopped and turned to look at him with a smile, her feather swaying in the breeze. "Sure."

"What about us?" he asked quietly. "Will we pick up again...?" His voice trailed off.

The red fox tilted her head to the side and took his hand as they resumed walking. "Possibly, but give me time," she requested. "I've been away a long while and need to adjust to having a normal life again." She looked at him with a smile and then added, "Besides, I hear you've become quite a flirt, yourself. I'll bet you've been keeping the other ladies on board busy. You can't have been *too* lonely."

"I will neither confirm nor deny that supposition," he replied with a snort, "but I've missed you specifically. For a long while I wasn't interested in anyone else."

"Well," Taro said with a wink, "I shouldn't think it will take me too long. I've already got my strength and agility back."

"Think you're strong enough to wrestle me?" Renny asked with a smirk. He had not received the reply he'd hoped for, but he was willing to be patient longer. In its place, he felt playful having her back.

"Strong enough?" she repeated in surprise. "Have you forgotten where I'm from?"

"Not at all, foxy lady," he answered, "though some people change over time."

"So you think you can stand against me, kit?"

"Let's find out, if you think you are up to it."

Taro grinned at the cheetah, suddenly curious when he took a stance he'd never used before. *This could be interesting...* she thought. She took a step toward the navigator, but he waited for her to come to him. She obliged and reached up quickly to grasp his shoulders. However, he sidestepped briefly, took her extended arm, and whirled around to place himself immediately behind her. The move surprised her, but she countered his move with a sweep of a leg toward his.

Renny anticipated the tactic and *walked up* the leg she swung around, and then swiftly gathered himself around her middle, throwing her completely off guard. Then he slid a leg down the length of the one she used to support her weight, and curled his knee around hers to pull inward. While it was difficult to move the dense Hestran muscles of the vixen's leg, he was successful in altering her balance; she fell backward onto the sand with a surprised look. This had all taken place within a few seconds.

"Wow," she said with a grin. "You've never been able to do that to me before." He only smiled back and waited for her to regain her feet. She stood up before him and he assumed a different stance, with his arms crooked and his hands rigid and upright. She decided a different strategy and moved in to slap his hands aside in rapid succession. In another unexpected shift, Renny was able to counter every move she made, and in a flash of movement, he had her in a headlock. She struggled to free herself from his arms and actually found it difficult.

Renny smiled down at her and winked. Taro grinned and said, "I do believe you've gotten stronger and quicker."

"In many ways," he purred. Then just as quickly before, he maneuvered himself around her and planted a kiss full on her lips.

Taro snickered, but gave in to the temptation and returned the kiss. *What the heck*, it had been a long time, and she found herself enjoying the banter and play.

Tanis looked through screens of the local news of Grandstorm on his slateboard while sitting in the dining room of the Meers Restaurant, a favored place in the middle of town they had been going to lately. Cindy sat across from him, finishing her lunch while the tan fox sorted through the classified ads.

"I'm not really seeing a lot of vacancies," he muttered. "Most of the office spaces in the city just aren't available."

"We'll have to keep looking," the mouse said around the yellow vegetable she was eating with her hands. "The captain put me in control of finding a place for the home office,

while he and Durant are giving interviews at Bill's business, but I haven't liked any of the places we *have* looked at. None of them were really suitable for our needs."

"Is there anything I can get for you?" another voice asked. Tanis and Cindy looked up into the canine face of a golden retriever, the owner of the restaurant.

"No, ma'am," Tanis said with a smile. "Lunch at yer place is always wonderful. Right now, I couldn't eat another bite!"

"That means I've done my job right." The large woman smiled and looked at the mouse. "What about you, honey?"

Cindy looked up at her and shook her head. "Not unless you can find us a vacancy in an empty office for our business."

The woman chuckled and lifted the coffee pot she held in her hand. "Did you two try looking out the window?"

As one, Tanis and Cindy turned to look out the front glass of the rustic restaurant. Across the busy street was a sign in a window that read:

*Office Space for Sale or Lease.
Ready for immediate occupancy.
13508 Timber Valley Road*

The building was small but self-contained. It was built in a similar style as the Meers Restaurant itself, with a rustic external appearance, but they could easily see through the empty front glass that the interior seemed spacious.

"Wow..." Cindy said in pleasant surprise. "We walked right by it to come in here and never saw the sign."

Tanis looked up at the retriever and gave her a grin. "That would be a wonderful location, providing the internal facilities are kept up," he said. "We've already looked at five other offices, and none of them looked very desirable."

The golden retriever pulled up a chair from an empty table and sat down with them. "It used to be a Savings and Loan office, but they relocated downtown. The place has been vacant for a year," she told them. "I know the owner of the place, and if you'd like to see it, I can arrange an immediate showing."

Cindy wiped her mouth with a napkin and slid her empty plate away from her. "As soon as we pay our check, we'd like to meet with the owner, please," she said.

"I have a deal for you," the woman said with a smile. "If you decide you want that place for your new office after you've looked it over, I'll let you have this lunch for free."

"Why?" Tanis asked suspiciously. "Is the owner of the office a good of a friend of yers?"

"You could say that," she replied with a smirk. "The place is mine."

Cindy grinned widely. "How soon may we look at it?"

"One moment." The woman stood up and moved to a feline waitress behind the counter. She spoke a few words to her, set down her pot of coffee on a warmer and then took off her apron. Then she returned to them with a small gray rectangular object in hand. "If you're ready now, we can go take a look at it."

"Wonderful!" Tanis said.

The golden retriever smiled warmly at him and introduced herself. "I'm Mrs. Meers," she said. "My husband passed away a couple of years ago. The office building was his, but those who took over the business moved to another location."

The trio darted across traffic to the opposite curb, and the retriever unlocked the door with the tap of a magkey. Tanis noted the door was made of sturdy virrin wood and it opened quietly on its hinges. The lights of the main room came on immediately, its controls set to sense motion .

Cindy whistled, duly impressed with the dark woodwork of the built-in book cases, file counters and corner trim. The walls were a soft coffee color, the floor was polished wood, all the lighting was hidden and indirect, and a large fireplace was an added bonus for the seasonal winter days of the coastal city. The front room was spacious, and as they moved to the back rooms, Cindy and Tanis thought each of them had a charm all its own. Through a door in the rear, they found a set of steps that went down below the foundation of the building. They led down to a metal-reinforced, storm shelter that was easily accessible without having to go outside to reach. In all, there were four rooms, a kitchenette, the storm cellar, a walk-in storage closet and a water closet.

After their tour, Cindy and Tanis looked at one another and smiled. Of all they had looked at, this seemed perfect and the location was in a prime part of the city. Only the price had yet to be discussed. They talked with Mrs. Meers at length, and in the end they agreed to lease it from her for a year. If the business had done well at the end of that time, the company would purchase the building from her.

Cindy had been granted the authority to sign any documentation for the lease, and within an hour, Mrs. Meers handed her several magkeys to the place and wished them well.

Merlin approved of the office and location, and had gone out immediately with Cindy to pick out furnishings for the place. Two days later, the crew of the *Blue Horizon* gathered at the new home office to unload the furniture and supplies from a delivery truck they had rented.

A curvaceous female mountain lion was painting the words, *Blue Horizon Freight Transfer* in an arc across the front window while Renny openly flirted with her. Taro grabbed the cheetah's arm with a grin and pulled her friend toward the truck to help her unload a heavy wooden reception desk for the front room.

In the back room of the office, Merlin introduced Cindy to her new co-workers.

"I believe you already know Keri Petrie," Merlin said with a smile. Cindy remembered the caffeine-addicted woman and rushed forward to give the brown mouse a warm embrace.

"How did you wind up *here*?" Cindy asked her with a grin.

"Captain Kegawa canceled all our contracts and sold off the *Hidalgo Sun* for scrap to pay off his loan and give us all our back pay," Keri replied with the shrug of her shoulders.

"He scrapped the ship?" Cindy asked with a hand up to her mouth.

"Yes, and I've been on Dennier the past month looking for work. When I saw the ad Captain Sinclair put in the paper for your new headquarters, I had to try for it." Merlin smiled when both mice looked his way. "It always helps when you know someone," Keri added with a grin.

"Cindy," Merlin said as he held out a hand to a petite ferret who stood meekly to the side, "this is Penny Pon. She'll be your receptionist."

"Hello," Cindy said to her with a smile.

"Hellohowareyoudoing?" the ferret said in an excited rush.

"I'm quite fine," the mouse replied with a laugh.

“You three can get to know one another later,” the lupine captain said. “Let’s get your office in order now, shall we?” He led them back toward the front room and glanced momentarily into another room where a team of technicians was installing industrial com equipment. Everything seemed to be going smoothly.

*SS Blue Horizon PA1138
Captain’s Journal*

It’s been a month since the home office was opened for business. It took a couple of weeks before we began to see any results, but due to the slow rebuild of interstellar commerce, the only inquiries we’ve gotten have been for intra-world deliveries from one place to another here on Dennier. Still, it’s income for the business and I’ll will take them as we get them.

Samantha is walking around fine these days, though she got so used to her floating pillow and slateboard platform that she continues to use it to interface with the VIS computer on board the ship. She seems to be in better spirits and brightened up when Alex Rogers came to visit her. Most of us already knew him, and it was immediately apparent that quite a change has come over the male. He’s no longer the resort lackey at The Dragon Loft. He is the CEO of one of the largest pharmaceutical companies across the Planetary Alignment and even I have to admit he looks good in a business suit. He holds his shoulders straight and isn’t afraid to look anyone in the eyes.

From what I’ve heard in the time he’s been in charge of Holden Pharmaceutical, Alex has implemented some changes in the business structure that has already started to show improvement in their profits and customer base. It’s clear that Master Tristan recognized his potential. Renny conjectures it’s nothing more than the Border collie’s herding instinct, but that’s just Renny.

Alex and Samantha met a number of times during his visit, but every time he wanted to get together with her she arranged for someone else to accompany them. I don’t think she distrusts him, but it’s more likely she’s hesitant to be alone with him now knowing the feelings he has for her. She likes him – likes him a lot – but she acts as if she doesn’t want to pursue anything further with him beyond their longtime friendship and their new business relationship.

The other members of the crew that she’s taken with her on their outings seem to feel they need to report to me everything that goes on between them. While Samantha and I have been casually intimate for years – a fact that has never been hidden from my crew – we’ve never been exclusive to one another. Does everyone think they have to protect my interests in Samantha? I know of a couple in my employment who thinks she should give Alex a chance and run the business with him as his mate instead of a business partner.

In the time between the small deliveries we’ve had, Renny and I have been teaching Max how to fly the Blue Horizon. Sure, he’s been trained on bridge duty during our routine flights between worlds, and he’s even managed to make some correct in-flight adjustments, but this is the first opportunity we’ve had to instruct him for launches and landings. We’ve had a few close calls, but I think he’s starting to get the hang of handling something the size of a four-story building. His largest problem seems to be adjusting for planetary gravity and shifting air currents with the mass of such a heavy vessel.

Primarily, it’s usually Renny or I that handle the critical launches and landings, but I require everyone in my crew to have the ability to fly the ship if an emergency ever arose where the two of us were incapacitated or unavailable. Every so often, I have one of the others do a launch or landing just to keep

them in practice. Max needs the same abilities as the others, so our current downtime has been the perfect time to teach him. I just feel sorry for the folk in the rural communities we've been practicing over.

We've also gotten word on Master Tristan. He's doing much better since his alicorn was grafted back on and it's had time to heal, though he's now considering full retirement. After his life as a former Regent and successful businessman, he's more than earned it.

Merlin Sinclair, Captain

Renny looked up at the darkening storm clouds overhead through a break in the trees and frowned as he, Taro and Tanis walked through a lush green park in the middle of Grandstorm dominated by trees with old gnarled trunks and branches and a thick canopy of leaves. They had just returned to Dennier following a couple of off-world deliveries that took them in turn to Alexandrius and Fyn, and were once again on their standard three-day shore leave before their next assignment. It had been three months since the home office had opened for business and things were picking up.

It was an odd thing to see advertisements on the INN broadcasts for *Blue Horizon Freight Transfer* as well as other StellarNet channels, but word had gotten out that the company was still in business after the messy events of the War. Cindy, Keri and Penny had their hands full and Taro enjoyed the familiar routine of coordinating efforts with their growing list of clients. It seemed unthinkable, but they'd actually had to turn away some delivery jobs while other freight businesses were scrounging to find work at all.

"I have another idea for promoting the company," Renny commented as they skirted around a park bench.

"Another one?" Tanis asked. "Cindy didn't think much of yer last idea."

"Yeah, well even *I* admit that one was pretty lame," the cheetah replied.

"Don't ya think we're getting *enough* exposure?"

Renny shrugged. "Too much work is better than not enough," he answered.

"So what's your new idea?" Taro asked.

"Maybe you can sweet-talk your friends in *DWT* to do a commercial for us," Renny said to the vixen.

"I don't know about that," Taro replied with a frown. "They wouldn't be advertising something like a new car or soft drink. As much as we like it, the *Blue Horizon* is just a cargo-carrier."

"Well, they don't have to sing a jingle or anything," Renny said with a shrug. "Just a nice instrumental in the background might work."

"It would be a lot cheaper just hiring local musicians for something like that."

"Maybe, but having a *name* band would be a bigger draw."

"Right. You can bring it up at the next budget meeting, love."

"I'm hungry," Tanis said. "Let's get something to eat."

"Yeah!" Renny agreed with a smile.

Taro welcomed the distraction and pointed ahead of them. "There's a hotdog cart up the street. Will that hold you?" she asked.

"Yeah, it should, but with Renny's appetite I want to get my order in first or there won't be anything left in the cart!"

"Hey!" the cheetah whined. "I can't help it if I have a high metabolism."

"That's exactly why I want to eat before ya do," Tanis said with a smile. They neared the small wheeled cart and the desert fox stepped up first. He looked at the short red panda behind the cart and began to order, "Hi, I'll have three Dennieran beef hotdogs with..."

"Rezo?" Renny asked suddenly. He leaned closer toward the cart, and stared at the vendor. "Rezo Kegawa?"

The red panda looked up at the cheetah, but didn't look as if he recognized him. "I'm not wearing a name tag," he replied suspiciously. "How'd you know my name?"

"Captain Rezo?" Tanis asked in surprise. "Well, I'll be... Captain Rezo, it's us, Renny, Taro and Tanis from the *Blue Horizon*."

"*Blue Horizon!*" the short red panda repeated in sudden recognition. "Tanis and Renny? Yes, I think I remember you now." He looked at Taro's figure in appreciation, but shook his head. "I'm sorry, miss, but I don't remember you."

"I don't believe we've met, actually," the vixen said with a smile. "I'm Taro Nichols, Business Coordinator for the *Blue Horizon*."

"Taro," Renny said with a smile, "this is Captain Rezo Kegawa of the *Hidalgo Sun*. We helped repair his ship some months ago."

Tanis realized that talk of the dilapidated freighter caused discomfort in the red panda. In his white uniform, greasy apron and paper hat, Rezo looked nothing like a freighter captain. He leaned on the cart and asked in a gentler voice, "Why are ya selling hotdogs?"

Rezo looked at the three of them and swallowed hard. "Well, uh... it's like this," he said with a frown. "I had to sell my ship as scrap and release the contracts on my crew so I could pay them and pay off my loan. This is the only job I could find for myself afterward." He wiped his hands on his apron with an embarrassed expression. "I even tried to get onto another freighter just as an extra hand, but times are hard for that line of work right now and no one's hiring."

"What happened to your ship?" Taro asked in a soft voice.

Rezo sighed heavily and shrugged his shoulders. "We'd picked up a shipment of canned goods on Mainor and had left orbit only *moments* before the Kastans destroyed it. We caught the edge of the shock wave and sustained heavy damage." He smiled thinly and gestured to both Renny and Tanis. "You two know how old and bad the condition of the *Hidalgo Sun* was. We managed to limp toward Dennier and had a tough landing that damaged the keel. It was beyond repair, so I had no choice but to sell it to a scrap dealer and use the money to pay off what I owed on the ship and to the crew. Since then, I've been working odd jobs just to eat and pay the rent where I've been staying."

"Wow, that's tough," Renny replied. "Our business has picked up so much that we'd send some your way if you still had your ship."

Rezo's frown deepened as they told him about their expanding business. At length, he sat down on his small wooden stool and leaned on the cart. "You three look like you're pretty hungry," he said. "If I give you some free hotdogs, would you ask Captain Sinclair if he can find a place on his crew for me?" His voice quivered a little, and he practically pleaded with them. "I don't care what position he can put me in, so long as I have can work on his ship."

Renny's stomach growled loudly at the subject of food and he looked over at Taro. The vixen moved around the cart and knelt down to look at Rezo in the eye. "I promise we'll bring it to Merlin's attention as soon as we get back to the ship," she said, "but you need the money and we'll *pay* you for all the hotdogs we eat, including everything that Mr. Vacuum Lips, here, can consume."

"Thank you, miss," the red panda replied with moist eyes. "Please tell Captain Sinclair I would be eternally grateful for his help once more." He scribbled his contact information onto a

paper napkin and gave it to her. "If you can convince him that he needs another hand, this is where you can find me when I'm not out here in the park. It... isn't much bigger than a walk-in closet, but it's all I could afford."

Later that afternoon, Merlin and Durant were sitting in the front room of the home office. Penny was out on a late lunch break and Cindy sat behind the desk in discussion with them. Durant was weary of the conversation, and it showed on his face.

"Cindy..." the grizzly said in a tired voice, "the three of you *have* to keep the receipts of company expenses so I can figure them in the books. I can't keep everything on the level *without* them."

"Even for things like paper cups and towels for the water closet?"

"Everything that you use company funds to pay for."

"That's such a bother," she said. "Some places don't even give receipts unless you ask for them."

"Then *ask* for them! Do you want to pay for the stuff from your own salaries?"

"Not really."

"Then you have to keep *all* the receipts and turn them in to me."

"Well, I *did* save the receipt on the shirts," she said as she rummaged through a shoebox on the desktop.

"Shirts?" Merlin asked. "What shirts?"

Cindy smiled as she located a yellow slip of flimsy plastic. "Yeah, I had company shirts made up with our logo on them. It's another source of advertising."

Durant groaned and looked over at the wolf. Merlin frowned and leaned on the desk. "I didn't authorize this," he said.

"You said I could buy things for the office." The mouse handed the receipt to Durant, and the bear's eyes widened. Merlin really didn't like that look on his accountant.

"For the office, yes," the wolf replied. He took the receipt from Durant and looked it over. "That's an awful lot of shirts," he said after a moment. "Quantity and sizes for everyone..."

"Hold on," Cindy said, "I'll show you what they look like. They were delivered this morning." She left the room momentarily, and Merlin leaned back in his chair with his arms crossed. The mouse returned with a smile, holding a gray shirt large enough for even Durant to wear. Across the left breast area was the name of the company in blue letters, written in the same stylized typeface as was on the front window. Below it was a logo that Jiro had designed ages ago, with the name of the ship and its registry number beneath it. Cindy turned it around and showed them the back. The same logo was larger, spread across the shoulders, with the advertising motto and address underneath.

"Interstellar Deliveries throughout the Planetary Alignment"
Competitive Shipping Rates – 9 Years in the Business
13508 Timber Valley Road, Grandstorm, Dennier

Merlin and Durant looked at one another, and finally the captain shrugged his shoulders. "Okay," he said with a sigh of resignation, "we now have company shirts for the

employees." He looked back up at Cindy and pointed a finger at her. "But... from now on, clear this with me or Durant *first* before you do anything else like this."

"Okay," Cindy said with an embarrassed smile. She handed the large shirt to Durant. "I promise."

There was a little jingle of bells as the front door to the office opened. The sky outside had grown dark and the overhead clouds were threatening rain. Renny was eager to get inside.

"Hi, guys," Cindy said to them. "What's up?"

Taro moved the wall near the dark fireplace as the two males took up positions around the desk. "We ran into an old friend," Tanis said to Merlin. "Do ya remember Rezo Kegawa?"

"The captain of the *Hidalgo Sun*?" Durant asked.

"That's him. We found him selling hotdogs out of a cart in West Park."

"Keri did say that he had to sell his ship," Cindy reminded them, "but she didn't mention that he was still in the area."

"He needs a job, Merlin," Taro said. "Renny and Tanis told me about the time you helped him get his freighter running again, but this time there's no ship to repair."

"Yeah, I told him we could send some work his way, if he only had a ship," Renny added. Merlin looked up at the cheetah at his words, and the navigator looked surprised. "What?" he asked.

"You just gave me an idea," the captain said. "Do you think you can find him again?"

"He wanted me to give this to you," Taro answered as she handed over a folded paper napkin. "Are you going to hire him?"

"I may actually have something for him, but not for the *Blue Horizon*."

"Here at the office?" Cindy asked with a frown.

"Nope." Merlin glanced at the napkin and then gave it to Tanis. "Call Rezo and invite him over as soon as he can get here."

"Aye, sir," the desert fox replied. He turned, left the room and then Merlin began to outline his sudden idea to the others.

Lorelei sat with her legs crossed on the floor of her hotel room, her attention riveted to a vidscreen monitor on a small wooden stand. She was overjoyed to discover the place was equipped to receive the StellarNet signal, which showcased popular programs from the various worlds of the Planetary Alignment. Her favorite cooking show was among those she was able to pick up, and she watched with rapt attention.

She was so intent on the program that she didn't hear the knock on her door. She wore a silly grin and sat only a meter away from the screen. The sound was turned up so she wouldn't miss a word of what the chefs said as they prepared the meals in a cook-off challenge.

"Lori?" a voice called through the door. "*Lori! It's me, Keri - open up!*"

Lorelei's eyes blinked momentarily as the voice filtered through to her mind. Fortunately for the mouse outside the door, the program broke for a commercial and Lorelei finally heard her. She set aside the salad bowl she held in her lap and wiped her hands absently on the multi-colored tee-shirt she wore over a pair of running shorts. She moved quickly to the door and opened it. Keri stood with her hands in her pockets and looked at the rabbit in concern, her nose wrinkled from the aroma of incense from the room.

"Hi, Keri, what's up?"

"Lori, didn't you hear me knocking?" the mouse asked as she stepped inside the room. "I've been out there nearly five minutes."

Lorelei smiled at her and tilted her head. "Oh, sorry 'bout that," she said as she gestured toward the vidscreen. "I was watching my favorite show and had it turned up."

"Yeah, I know," Keri said with a shake of her head. "I could hear it out there, as clear as if I were in here with you."

As if to punctuate her words, the music piped up from the small, overtaxed speaker and Lori's eyes grew wide. "It's back on!" she said excitedly.

"Lori!" the mouse said in frustration.

"Huh?" Lorelei asked absently. Her eyes were already focused on the screen.

"Merlin's calling a meeting in the office. You have to turn that off and come on." Lorelei didn't seem to hear her, as she watched the challengers engaged in their culinary battle. Keri exhaled and shook her head again. She walked across the room and picked up the vid remote from the coffee table in front of the couch. She shut off the unit and waited for the expected outcry.

Lorelei's eyes went wide and she began to tap frantically at the controls on the front of the set. Keri overrode her actions with the remote, and the doe began to whine in frustration at losing the signal.

"Oh *no*..." Lorelei whimpered. "What's happened to my show? I've got to find out who the winner is!"

"Lori!" Keri said in a loud voice, "We have to go. *Now!*"

The rabbit looked at her with wide eyes. "I can't go anywhere... I have to get my program back!"

Keri reached out, grabbed Lori's arm, and pulled her toward the door. "You'll have to catch a later show," she said. "Merlin wants everyone at the office, *now!*"

"But... but..."

A ripple of lightning snaked across the sky, illuminating the pane of glass like a flashbulb. Seconds later, a malevolent growl of thunder rattled the windows in the hotel room over the Meers Restaurant where Renny was staying. An involuntary shudder coursed through the frightened cheetah as he drew himself into a tight ball. He was huddled on the floor in an empty corner beside the bed, his knees drawn up to his chest, and his face buried in his arms atop them. The navigator could face many things, but he had not grown up around thunderstorms and they continued to unnerve him any time he was close to one. The tornado they had survived on Earth had only served to fuel his fear of them.

There was a knock on the door, but just as he opened his mouth to speak, another peal of thunder sent his face into his arms again. The knock repeated, and when he did not answer, the door opened a bit. Max stuck his head inside and looked around the apparently vacant room.

"Renny?" he asked. "Are you in here?"

A close lightning strike made a deafening *crack* and the lights flickered. The young canine heard a muffled gasp from behind the bed and he eased into the room, biting his bottom lip. His eyes widened in surprise when he saw the cheetah on the floor; he moved quickly to his friend's side.

"Renny, are you okay?" he asked. "What's wrong?"

The navigator's large yellow eyes peered up over his arms at the youth, and he swallowed with difficulty. "Don't... like... storms," he managed to say through clenched teeth.

"I remember," Max said with compassion. He looked up when the wind outside rattled the windows and then looked back at the cheetah with a frown. "It's okay, Renny," he said in a soothing voice, very similar to the one the feline had used with him in the past, back when he was a former slave and was himself very timid.

"Mrs. Meers said the storm's almost over and no tornadoes have been predicted," he added. Indeed, the deep rumbles that continued to sound were farther away, though still too close for the cheetah's tastes. It had never occurred to him there was a *reason* the area had been named "Grandstorm".

Renny felt foolish cowering from a storm, especially in front of a young canine who didn't seem to mind the thunder at all. He set his jaw tightly and forced himself to raise his head.

"What d-did you need?" he asked.

"Uncle Merlin's calling everyone together for a meeting," Max replied. "He sent me to get you."

"Tell him... to start without me," Renny said in a quiet voice. "I already know... what it's about anyway."

Max looked down at his hands a moment and then nodded to the cheetah. He knew what it was like to be frightened, and he was all too familiar with how storms affected the cheetah. "Okay," he said. "I'll tell him."

"Thanks..." Renny said. Another round of thunder lightly shook the house and he quickly buried his head once more.

Max stood up quietly and left the room. He glanced back at the door when he closed it behind him, wishing there was something he could do for his friend; Renny had saved his life during the tornadic storm in Woodward and comforted him afterward. For the past few weeks, Renny, Durant and Samantha had been training him in the techniques they had learned from Jape Devon, and as a result, he felt a lot closer to them. Renny was a good friend.

The young German shepherd bounded down the wooden stairs and waved to Mrs. Meers as he retrieved his umbrella from a canister by the door. Then he darted outside and ran across the street in the pouring rain. When he opened the door to the home office and pulled his umbrella in behind him, he saw the front room was packed. With the exception of Renny, all of Merlin's employees were there. The lupine captain sat behind the receptionist's desk with Durant, Cindy and Taro sitting up close. Leaning against the fireplace was the red panda, Rezo Kegawa.

Max put his umbrella away and stood beside Lorelei, who didn't look as if she wanted to be there. Merlin looked at him expectantly. "Renny's not feeling well," he told the wolf. "He said he knew what the meeting was about already."

Merlin nodded and then turned toward his people. "Due to the success of our home office, *Blue Horizon Freight Transfer* is back on track with a full schedule," he told them. "We've reestablished contact with old clients and have been bringing in new customers with our PR campaign. Interstellar commerce is still struggling to recover from the mistrust and other effects of the Siilv War, and many of our competitors still have not regained their feet, but we've had success with our advertising crusade. In fact — we've had *such* good luck that we've actually had to turn away the jobs that won't wait for an empty slot in our schedule."

Rezo crossed his arms and shook his head. "I'm happy for your growing business, Sinclair," he said in a voice that suggested otherwise. "You've already told me you don't need anyone else on your ship, so did you invite me here to gloat?"

Merlin acted as if he'd not heard the red panda's sarcasm and said, "The *Blue Horizon* has more work than we can handle, and I would like you to take up the surplus deliveries for us."

"With *what*?" Rezo asked, waving his arms in the air. "I don't have a ship *or* a crew."

"Hypothetically, *if* you had a ship, would you help us out?"

"Okay, hypothetically speaking, yes. I'd jump on it in a second. But why—?"

"I intend to buy another freighter," Merlin interrupted quickly, "to handle our surplus deliveries before our competitors can pick them up." Eyebrows went up all over the room, and there were whispered comments throughout the group. "If you're interested," he added, "I would like you to hire a crew for it and serve as its captain."

Rezo's mouth opened and closed before he finally managed to nod his head. "Keep talking," he said in near shock.

Merlin smiled. "Here's the deal. The new freighter will be a sister ship to the *Blue Horizon* and will be managed by this home office in the same manner as current business," he said to the red panda. "A portion of the profits your crew generates for the company will be earmarked as automatic payments on a loan for the new ship. At such time in the future when your loan is paid in full, you will have the option to stay with *Blue Horizon Freight Transfer* as a partner, retaining the benefits of the home office, or you can take the ship to go back into business for yourself."

Rezo looked stunned. Durant handed him a slateboard with a contract on its screen that had been put together earlier that evening; the panda looked it over silently. He noted a set salary for the captain, as well as specific per-voyage wages for the crew. The contract looked straightforward, and he didn't see anything out of place. He found it hard to swallow and he slid down the wall to sit beside the baseboard, the slateboard resting on his knees.

He looked up at Merlin and simply asked, "Why?"

"I need another ship to pick up our excess," the wolf told him again.

"But, why *me*? And why set it up so that a portion of the profits go toward a loan on the ship?" he asked. "You could easily keep the ship in your business and keep *all* the profits, with standard wages for the captain and crew."

Merlin got up and moved toward the panda. He squatted down to look him in the eye and replied, "A little over a year ago, someone helped *me* when my business was down. This is my way of extending that favor. That's something my parents instilled in me when I was a cub. If you think there's something in the contract you want to change, you and I can discuss it privately in the back room."

Merlin and Rezo stood up, and the panda moved to the desk. He glanced over the contract once more and then signed his name at the appropriate spot with a thumb print. He held up the slateboard to Merlin with both hands.

"I accept your terms as written, boss," he said with a smile.

Merlin offered his hand and Rezo shook it gladly. "Welcome to *Blue Horizon Freight Transfer*, Captain Rezo." A round of applause issued from the gathered crowd, and Pockets even let out a sharp whistle.

Merlin waved a hand over his head to get everyone's attention. "I still have another matter of business to announce," he said. All eyes were on him as he continued. "Per Durant's

request, and my approval, I am reestablishing Taro as my first officer. Her leave-of-absence is over and Durant says he doesn't want that job anymore."

"Were we too hard on ya?" Tanis asked with waggling eyebrows.

"I have too much on my plate to spend time looking over my shoulders after yahoos like you!" Durant replied with a mock growl. The effect was ruined, however, with the mischievous glint in his eyes.

Merlin grinned at the bear and continued, "Nearly everyone here knows that Taro was capable as my first officer and she has a long history with the company. She has agreed to resume her prior duties, so you'd better be nice to her."

*SS Blue Horizon PA1138
Captain's Journal*

Yesterday morning, Rezo and I took a shuttle to nearby Harmon to visit what was basically a "used starship lot" to find another Okami freighter – giving me flashbacks to my original purchase of the Blue Horizon all those years ago in the process. We'd first tried the original manufacturer, but it would be three months before we could get a new one from Okami, so I decided to look for a pre-owned vessel. As to be expected, the hyena who ran the lot was as crooked as the branch of a shrub, and even though he had one on the lot that was in good shape (from what I could tell), he wanted considerably too much for it.

While checking in with Durant, he suggested we try the local financial companies to see if there were any repossessed ships to look through. Sure enough, the first place we checked had two repossessed Okami freighters, in addition to a Sakura, a Prairie Dog, and two Guarana-class ships. One Okami was nearly as decrepit as Rezo's old ship, but the other was less than a year old and had been repossessed only a month ago. I had Pockets and Max fly out to meet us, and had them give the ship a thorough inspection while Rezo and I discussed matters with the financial rep.

When I inquired into why the ship had been repossessed, I got the reply I suspected. Someone had purchased the ship to expand their business just before the Siilo War broke out. With the economic crisis afterward, the poor coyote couldn't afford to keep it, so she let the bank have it back. My mechanics gave me a favorable report on the ship's condition, so I trusted their judgment and bought the freighter outright from the surplus business funds.

After taking possession of the vessel, the four of us flew it back to Grandstorm to record the title transfer with the PA Registry. Since Rezo would be master of the new freighter, I gave him the liberty of naming the ship. He was rather timid when he asked if he could reuse the name Hidalgo Sun, since the old vessel was no longer in service. Seeing as how I had done the same thing with my own freighter, I approved his request. It didn't hurt that the new ship was only a darker shade of scarlet than his previous vessel had been.

Captain Rezo was unable to rehire all of his old crew members for the new Hidalgo Sun. It's been too long since he released them from their contracts that some of them have already found other jobs, so he's currently taking interviews for the remaining positions.

This has been an interesting time. Almost nine years ago, I bought the first Blue Horizon and decided to go into business for myself. At that time, I couldn't foresee having an expanding business like the one I'm now in charge of; interesting how things turn out.

Merlin Sinclair, Captain

Rezo looked up at his new boss, nervous to please the wolf. Merlin sat alone behind a desk in a back office, scowling at the report he held in his hands. Durant would again have to instruct the three working the home office on the proper procedures for requisitioning new supplies. HQ might coordinate and find jobs for the two ships, but Durant was still the Business Accountant for the company, and everything had to go through him *first* before new purchases were made.

Merlin looked up and saw the red panda fidgeting before him. He hadn't noticed when Rezo had entered the room, but he set down his slateboard to give him his full attention. "What can I do for you, Captain?" he asked.

Rezo swallowed and answered, "You wanted to meet my new crew as soon as I had them all assembled. Everyone's out in the reception room."

"Did anyone from your old crew come back?"

"You already know about Keri," the panda replied. "She prefers her job here in the office. Not that I really mind," he said in a lowered voice. "I never thought she really enjoyed being out in space - and I don't think she's ever liked me anyway."

Merlin raised an eyebrow. "Continue," he said.

"Right. In the time since I released them from their contracts, only two have found permanent jobs they want to stay with. Do you remember Toni Delondin? She was hired by an accounting firm on Kantus. My chief engineer decided to retire and open up a coffee shop right here in Grandstorm."

"Yeah?" Merlin asked with interest.

Rezo nodded. "Alice's still in the process of getting it set up for business. It's only about six blocks from here, too. She wants to feature exotic coffees from around the PA."

Merlin smiled with an even bigger interest. The wolf was well-known for his love of coffee. "I'll have to look up this new business of hers. Okay, who else?"

"The rest of my old crew were willing to leave their little jobs to come back to work for me... or rather, some weren't interested until they found out they would actually be working for *you* instead."

Merlin frowned at that last statement. "What about the vacancies?"

Rezo gave him a tired look. "Two hundred forty-seven people applied for three jobs," he replied. "It took me a week to visit with everyone, and another two days to make my decisions. Durant gave me some good suggestions that helped me decide who to pick."

"I've always relied on Durant's counsel when hiring others. I don't know what I would do without him," Merlin remarked. "Okay, fill me in on those you picked."

Rezo nodded in reply. "I've chosen Sheila Aval, a twenty-seven year old kangaroo as my supply officer and our cook. She's worked at three supply-related businesses and comes highly recommended. She's never been in space before, and is looking forward to it."

"Wait," Merlin said, "she's never been in space before?"

"Not once, but she says she's looking forward to it."

"Captain," Merlin replied slowly as a new realization came to him, "just how many of your old crew was able to *pilot* your ship?"

The odd question took Rezo by surprise, but he put a hand under his chin and glanced toward the ceiling as he searched his memory. "Let's see, besides myself... Jonesy, Mark, Tsarina, Alice and Pax."

"That's less than half your crew."

"Uh, yeah. Is that a problem?"

Merlin told him about his standard policy, that every crew member be able to fly the ship in the event of an emergency. Rezo swallowed as he listened. This was something that had never occurred to him on his own vessel. Finally, Merlin said, "After you and your crew have gotten familiar with the new *Hidalgo Sun* and are used to working on the schedules that HQ will set up for you, I want you to begin training all of your people to fly your ship. Even my seventeen-year-old mechanic is capable of flying the *Blue Horizon*. If you can get just one certified as a pilot each time you land, it shouldn't take more than a few months to get your whole crew rated properly."

"Uh, okay," Rezo said with a frown.

"Who else?"

"Danaher Tillane is a thirty-six year old bobcat. He'll be my accountant, and he's also an experienced computer hack. He's pretty serious-minded and is very good juggling numbers," Rezo said. "I've already introduced him to Durant since the two of them will be working together with the finances." He leaned forward with a frown. "He's from the backwoods of Fyn," he whispered.

"Will that make a difference?"

Rezo shook his head. "Probably not, but he has a funny way of speaking."

"Okay, that makes two. Who else?"

"I hired the last guy just this morning... someone who already knows your crew."

Merlin raised an eyebrow. "Oh?" he asked. He privately hoped it wasn't someone from Armando's ship.

"Jasper Porter."

Merlin blinked several times in rapid succession. "Patch?"

"That's him. He said he'd just been released from his former employer, a cruise line I believe. It seems he was a survivor of a ship that was a victim of that nasty computer virus. His company had too many displaced employees after that, and he was one of them."

"Jasper's twin brother serves on the *Blue Horizon*. I wonder why he didn't let us know he was in the area."

"I dunno," the red panda replied. "He saw my advertisement for interviews, and applied for chief engineer. He said he wasn't aware the application with my ship was for your company and he almost turned down the job when he found out."

Merlin frowned. He thought he'd parted ways with Jasper on decent terms, so didn't understand the apparent animosity the raccoon had for him. *He probably blames me for his situation*, the wolf thought to himself. If he'd let Patch know about the new ship only an hour earlier, it was unlikely he would have left the *Blue Horizon* to sign up with the Merriam Cruise Line in the first place. Patch was originally the chief engineer on Merlin's ship, but went to a vessel as just one engineer of several on a team. Staying in contact with Pockets, Patch knew his brother was now the chief engineer on the *Horizon*, and probably knew if he came back, that Pockets would retain his position. On board the *Hidalgo Sun*, Patch would be *chief* engineer again.

Merlin was well aware of Jasper's qualifications, so he nodded quietly. "Okay," he said at last, "let's go meet with your crew."

Pockets was furious. He stood nose to nose with his brother and ground his teeth together. "You could have *asked* for your old job back!" he said angrily, his arms up in the air for

emphasis. "I know more about the new *Blue Horizon* than you do, but I would have *handed* you the chief spot if that's what it took to get you to come back."

"Jerad..." Patch growled in a voice that proved he had expected a reaction like this, "you and I *both* know that Captain Sinclair wouldn't set me in a position above you on a ship I knew nothing about." He stepped back from his sibling and crossed his arms. "At least on the *Hidalgo Sun*, I'll be in common company. No one on this crew has served on an H-model *Okami* freighter before."

When Merlin and Rezo stepped into the front room and heard the argument, the wolf almost thought he was looking at mirror images. The brothers had always been near identical in appearance, but usually Pockets was a cheery soul and easy to identify by his manner and a ready smile. In his rage, Pockets now resembled Patch more than he had ever done so in Merlin's memory. Rezo was about to break up the conflict, but Merlin put a hand on the red panda's shoulder and put a finger to his lips to quiet him before he spoke.

"Do you remember the letters you sent me after you first got the new *Horizon*?" Patch asked his brother. "Remember your excitement discovering the upgrades and changes from the old G-model?" Pockets nodded quietly. "I want to make those discoveries for *myself*," Patch said as he gestured to the rest of the *Sun's* crew. "Most of us know what it's like to serve on an old ship, and we're all looking forward to finally having one that's up-to-date."

Pockets lowered his chin and nodded as Patch continued. "You finally have your own engine room, Jerad," he said in a softer voice. "I want mine, too. The job on the *Hidalgo Sun* is a good opportunity. We'll both still be working for the same company, just not on board the same ship."

Patch held out a hand to his brother, sincerely hoping he would take it. Pockets moved forward and hesitated. He looked up into his sibling's eyes, and then jumped forward to embrace him tightly.

"I'm sorry," Pockets said in a choked voice. "We've been together most of our lives... Being apart from you has been harder than I thought."

"I know," Patch replied with a hard swallow. "I know." They stood embraced for a moment, and then stepped back to give each other a smile.

"Now that *that* is settled," Merlin said from across the room, "welcome back to the business, Patch."

Jasper Porter looked up and gave the wolf an uncharacteristic smile. He walked over to grasp hands with him. "Thank you, Captain," he said. "Glad to work for the company again." He looked over at the grinning red panda and shook his hand, too. "And thank you, Captain Kegawa, for hiring me."

"You're welcome, Patch," Rezo replied. "You have a good reputation and I'll be glad to have you in my crew." Then he turned toward the others and gestured to the wolf beside him. "Sheila, Danaher," he said to the kangaroo and bobcat at the front of the group, "this is our boss Merlin Sinclair - the owner of *Blue Horizon Freight Transfer* and captain of our sister ship, the *Blue Horizon*."

The bobcat, Danaher, stared at Merlin with piercing eyes. "I happy to meet you," he said in an accent the wolf couldn't identify. "We glad what you do for us."

Merlin took the bobcat's offered hand and shook it gently. Despite being of a smaller breed of feline, he was fully as large as most in the room. "I'm pleased to meet you as well, Mr. Danaher. Please tell me, where are you from?"

Danaher nodded and replied, "Yes, I from Gohl. Left six years ago."

Merlin tilted his head to the left slightly. "Gohl? I'm not familiar with that place."

Rezo looked up at him with a smile. "Gohl is a region of Fyn," he reminded him.

"Ah, I see. Welcome to the business, Danaher."

"Thanks you."

"Hi, I'm Sheila Aval," the kangaroo said with a big smile when Merlin turned to her.

"Hello, Sheila," the wolf replied, "and where are you from?"

"Right here on Dennier, sir. I'm a home girl. I grew up down the shore in Anaran."

Merlin chuckled and shook her hand. "Welcome aboard."

"Delighted to be here, sir!"

The wolf nodded to her and then moved out into the room. He looked down at two of the shorter members of the *Hidalgo Sun*, a female ringtail lemur and a male orange tabby cat. The feline smiled at him, giving an almost-imperceptible bow of his head. "Hello, Captain," he said. "Remember me?"

Merlin nodded. "Sean... Jones, if I recall correctly."

"Yeah, that's me. Everyone usually just calls me *Jonesy*. I'm the first officer again and the ship's Business Coordinator."

"I believe your name is Rixy?" the captain asked of the lemur.

She smiled, but shook her head. "You're close, Captain. It's *Riki* - Riki Nori."

Merlin returned the smile. "Ah, my apologies. You take care of communications, yes?"

"That's right," Riki replied. "I'm also a bit of an electronics technician."

"She's also our *self-appointed* morale officer," Jonesy quipped.

Merlin nodded. "Nothing wrong with that," he said. "Every ship needs one."

"Anyway, thank you for the opportunity to work for you, Captain Sinclair," Jonesy said. "These aren't good times to be without a decent job."

"True, too true," Riki agreed.

"Welcome to the company," Merlin told them.

He gave them a nod and then made his way to the back of the room, where he saw Durant seated in a visitor chair facing the *Sun's* doctor, Carmen Burgess. The two ursine friends had their heads close together, speaking in whispers. Merlin remembered that the two of them had maintained a loose, long-distance relationship, so he backed away to let them visit. He could talk to Doctor Burgess at a later time.

He saw Max chatting with a large palomino horse, who was busily brushing his mane with a worn brush. Similar as a species to the Silloni, he had hooved digitigrade feet but his arms ended in long-fingered hands.

"Max and Pax," Merlin said with a smile. "How are you, Mr. Paxton?"

"Howdy, Captain," the equine mechanic replied. "I'm doing right good today, 'specially with my ol' job back! I missed workin' on starship engines... I've been in an auto garage the past few weeks and those small toys are more difficult to maintain."

"Well," Merlin replied, "we can all hope your new ship won't actually need you to work on it for a while. If you and Patch keep it well maintained, it'll be a good ship."

"Yessir, Patch n' I have already been talkin' about that very thing."

"Patch seems like he's looking forward to working with Pax, Uncle Merlin," Max said in a quiet voice. "I've told Pax about some of Patch's habits, so he won't be too surprised when the bagpipes come out."

Merlin raised his eyebrows. "I thought Patch lost his bagpipes in the crash," he said.

"He bought some more," Max replied.

"Oh, my..." Merlin whispered in mock horror.

A movement in the corner of his vision drew the wolf's attention to an ebony figure dressed in a teal jumper, standing behind the horse. It was the jaguar, Tsarina Ahnya. She'd been talking with Tanis, and surprisingly, Renny and Taro. She stopped to look in his direction, but the wolf maintained his composure. The sight of a black jaguar still brought back memories of Sagan, but enough time had passed that he knew could handle himself better. Since she was now on his payroll, he knew he had to put such uneasiness aside and go speak with her.

"Excuse me," he said to Paxton. The horse nodded courteously and Merlin moved off toward the small group.

Tsarina watched him with steady amber eyes at first, but averted them in submission when he stopped beside her. "H'lo, captain," she said in a quiet voice without looking back up at him. Tanis regarded Merlin without a word, but the expression on his face spoke a clear message. Renny and Taro seemed to be at ease with her presence, and so should he.

Merlin bent down so that his head was lower than hers was and then turned his head so that he was looking up at her. "Hello, Tsarina," he said with a smile. "Did you lose something?"

A smile crept across her lips and her eyes twinkled. "Only my dignity," she replied as she lifted her head. Merlin stood up and grinned at her.

"Well, if that's all, I think you'll be okay," he said. "Are you ready to start navigating around the cosmos again?"

"Aye, Captain, I am," she said. "When do we leave?"

"Don't be in too big of a hurry!" Taro said with a laugh, "We still have to line up a few jobs first, and your ship isn't even stocked with general supplies yet."

"Ah, okay," the jaguar replied.

Merlin put a hand on Tsarina's shoulder and said to her, "Welcome to the company."

The jaguar grinned widely, sliding her shoulder under his arm so that she was up against him, and then put a hand on his chest. "Thank you, Merlin," she said. "How shall we seal our contract?" She batted her eyes and he could feel her purring up against him. He grinned foolishly and peeled her arm from around his shoulders.

He waved a finger in her face and said, "You've already signed your name to the contract. You don't need to do anything more for me."

"I don't *need* to," she admitted, "but I could *offer* more..."

Merlin cleared his throat and Renny stepped in. "Here," the cheetah said with a tongue across his lips, "I'll take his place."

Tsarina looked at him playfully. "Oh, really?"

Renny took a backward glance at Taro, who only laughed at him.

"Don't let Tsarina intimidate you, Captain," another voice said.

Merlin looked up at the large human who had walked up beside him. The wolf smiled and nodded his head in acknowledgement. "She moves fast, doesn't she, Mr. Littlefeather?" he asked.

"About as fast as your cheetah friend," Mark said with a grin. "Hello, Captain."

Merlin offered his hand to the man and shook it pleasantly. "Hello, Mark, how have you been?"

Taro looked at the wolf strangely. Ever since the end of their first voyage together, Merlin would have little to do with humans and would have *never* prompted a friendly handshake with one in the past. It seemed she had more catching up to do on what she had missed in the time she had been away.

Merlin Sinclair applied his thumbprint onto the appropriate spot of the contract before him and slid the slateboard across the table to the otter sitting opposite from him. The business clerk looked over the electronic document and then nodded in satisfaction. He took another look at the financial transaction receipt that had paid for the vessel in full, and then smiled at the wolf.

“Thank you, Mr. Sinclair,” he said cheerily. “I will have the PA registration set up for you and then you’ll be ready to go.” Without waiting for a reply, the otter got up from his seat and left the small cubicle.

Merlin sighed and felt pleased. With two freighters and a home office in full operation and repeated visits back to Dennier a decided part of the new business, he had felt a company ship for the boss was in order. He knew there would be times he would need a vessel to make trips in that did not require the use of either freighter, so he had gone out on his own to shop for a viable ship. He usually put his profits solely back into the business, so he felt justified spending a bit on himself this once.

The one he had finally chosen was small enough that he could fly it between cities without needing a spaceport landing pad, but it also had long-range LightDrive capabilities should he need to go off-world in it. It could sleep up to three and required only a single operator to fly it. He had chosen the latest model *301 Starwolf*, a sleek red and black sport design that was currently popular across the Planetary Alignment. It was small enough that when not in use, he could park it in a hangar on the back of Bill’s place — or even in the empty cargo bay of the *Blue Horizon* herself if the need ever arose to transport it somewhere not under its own power.

A few moments later, the otter returned to the cubicle with a thick packet of actual printed material in hand. He set it on the table between them and pulled the contents out of the envelope. He picked up a small, sealed container and handed it to the wolf.

“Here are the security codes for your onboard systems, Mr. Sinclair. The Registry number is PA30578 and it is listed as the *SS Christopher Watson* – reflecting your father’s first and middle names, I believe you said. A copy of your title, registration and transaction is here, as well as all user manuals and service data crystals.”

He smiled at Merlin and held out his hand. “It’s been a pleasure doing business with you, Mr. Sinclair. It’s one of our finest ships and I’m sure you’ll be happy with it. You’ll be able to pick it up tomorrow afternoon after we’ve installed the options you ordered.”

Merlin stood up and took the otter’s hand with a smile. “Thank you, Mr. Tochigi. I appreciate all the help you’ve given me.”

Two freighters from Dennier were on separate voyages coordinated through the new home office. En route to the world of Ganis, the *Blue Horizon* was hauling the entire stock of a new department store going up in Sogor. Their sister ship, the *Hidalgo Sun*, was on its first flight as a member of Merlin’s team toward Fyn with farming equipment.

Just before they’d left, however, the Spatial Police Force had sent two officers from the Grandstorm office to interview the *Horizon’s* crew in detail concerning their experiences on the derelict *Walkabout*. There had been no new developments in the investigation, but debris from the vessel’s destruction had been located in the vicinity they’d reported and it was determined

further interviews were necessary. This took only the bulk of an afternoon, so the *Horizon* was able to lift off on schedule and be on her way.

In the darkness of his room, Merlin sat up on his bed and rubbed his eyes at the sound of an insistent chirp. The wolf felt for the intercom switch with his eyes still closed and tapped it lightly. "Yes, what is it?"

"Merlin? *There's an important call for you,*" Samantha's voice emanated from the overhead speaker.

"Who's it from?" he asked groggily.

"*Prime Minister Nishalt of Tanthe.*"

Merlin opened his eyes blearily and swung his legs off the edge of the bed. "Stall him, Sam, so I can unruffle myself and get the sleep out of my eye-pits."

"*I told him you were sleeping. He wouldn't be too surprised if you look ruffled.*"

"Thanks too much..." he grumbled. He pulled on a blue muscle shirt and slipped his brown flight jacket over it. He smoothed down his pants and ran a brush through the fur on his head. It wouldn't stay down, so he grabbed his hat from a wall peg and perched it between his ears as he headed out the door for the bridge.

He composed himself before opening the door, and then walked casually toward the center seat. Samantha remained seated at the Com station and introduced him to the coyote on the center vidscreen. "Prime Minister Nishalt," she said, "this is Captain Sinclair."

"*Good evening, Captain,*" said the voice from the system speakers. The coyote was dressed in a black suit with red highlights and he held himself with regal bearing, even if he were not an actual member of the Aris bloodline.

Merlin gave him a short bow of courtesy and replied, "Good evening Prime Minister. I did not have the opportunity to meet you during our last visit to your world."

"*Yes, I have heard much about your visit, Captain. I was incapacitated at the time. It is good to finally meet the King's hero.*"

"King's hero?" Merlin repeated slowly.

"*It was your discernment that resulted in an heir to the throne.*"

"An heir..." Merlin looked perplexed.

"*Captain,*" Nishalt said, "*I have been instructed to present to you an official announcement from King Adion Aris that his royal daughter, Tinara, has given birth to a healthy male pup.*"

Samantha grinned widely and Merlin smiled back at her. "Please give the royal family my deepest congratulations, sir," he said to the screen.

"*I will, Captain. Thank you. However, Prince Kal also wanted me to relay to you some details surrounding the birth.*"

"Yes?"

"*There were three pups in the litter, but only the one male endured. One male and one female did not survive the birthing.*"

"Oh no..." Samantha said with her hands to her mouth.

"Please give my..."

"*The royal parents are doing fine,*" the Prime Minister continued. "*They are saddened by the loss that was not altogether unexpected, but are comforted with their remaining prince.*"

"Excuse me, sir," Samantha asked, "have they chosen a name for the pup?"

Nishalt smiled gently and nodded. "*Prince Merlin Sel Aris.*"

Merlin grinned widely. "I didn't think she would actually do it," he replied.

"*What was that, sir?*"

“Before we left Tanthe, Princess Tinara commented that should they have a son, the pup would be named after me. It surprises me that she actually did this.”

“May I inform the royal family of a visit, Captain?”

Merlin bowed again slightly. “I have a current schedule to maintain, Prime Minister, but I am sure I can find a visit to see my namesake in there somewhere.”

“I will inform Prince Kal that you will contact us as soon as you are able so we may make arrangements.”

“Thank you, sir. I would be most grateful.”

“Then, fare well, Captain.”

The connection ended and Sam looked up at him with a smirk. “You have a royal kid named after you,” she teased. “And just think, if you had given in to the Princess, the pup could have been yours!”

Merlin glanced away briefly with an expression of uncertainty, but then he looked back at her with a light smile. Had Samantha looked away at that instant she might not have seen the momentary change to his countenance.

“Who knows what might have happened?” he replied with a casual shrug.

OPERATION RAINBOW

By Ted R. Blasingame

*Blue Horizon PA1138
First Officer's Diary*

There are times when being one in charge of an interstellar cargo carrier takes an unexpected turn. Life aboard a freighter is supposed to be quiet. This is the main reason why I sought work on such a vessel in the first place all those years go.

Some of our competitors describe our crew as a "family" that sits around, trades snack trays and gushy sentiments with one another for all occasions. Merlin doesn't deny that he handpicked his crew of individuals to be of good character. When we're locked into a tin can together for weeks at a time with no way out, what you don't want are enemies on board. Nerves are strained enough as they are at times, even in this group, but for the most part everyone on the crew does get along with one another relatively well.

There are always exceptions to the rule. Samantha and Lorelei sometimes argue about pharmaceuticals, and Tanis and Renny have butted their heads together on more than one occasion lately. Those two have been friendly rivals since they first met, but some of us have had to break them up just short of a fistfight at least three times in a fortnight.

News of growing tensions between Tanis' homeworld of Nalirra and a neighboring non-PA planet has put our medic on edge and his temper's been touchy lately. Of course, Renny needles Tanis every chance he gets, which only causes more friction. I've counseled both of them separately, but it hasn't seemed to have done much good, as the two of them continue to bicker over things that would normally be shrugged off. If this continues, I'm going to have to recommend the captain to penalize one or both of them with a financial docking; if counseling doesn't work, hit them in the paycheck.

It doesn't help matters that after our current delivery, we'll be heading toward that very region. The Roppa system is a potential war-zone right now, and this makes us all uneasy despite that we're being well-paid. Tanis has been in to see me a few times concerning the possibility of danger, and I think his nerves are getting worse. I've not seen him like this in a long time. He's been one of the more stable guys I've known.

We are currently nearing Alexandrius with a load of imported lumber we picked up from a supplier on Ganis, and should be on the ground in a couple of hours. Hestran virrin is a type of wood in high demand on Alexandrius, so the value of our cargo is rather expensive. Samantha is looking forward to a short visit to her hometown while we're here, and as a chance to get away for a couple days, I'm going with her. The rest of the crew can spend their standard shore leave as they wish.

And... speaking of things Hestran, our new sister ship, the Hidalgo Sun has just delivered a load of textiles for a clothing factory on Hestra, but they didn't actually land on Hestra herself, but rather on the Vashon moon at Sharra Base. When Hestra joined the Planetary Alignment, Sharra Base was established on Vashon as a transfer station for ships, personnel and visitors not equipped to handle the heavier Hestran gravity. Made up of transparent, pressurized geodesic domes, Sharra has grown over the years to the size of a small city to support the personnel and all guests. Hestran Drop Jumpers will be

used to ferry the goods down to the planet afterward, but Rezo's crew won't be involved in that operation. Any shore leave he grants them will be on Vashon, but at least Sharra has plenty of hotels and shops for them to visit.

Rezo seems pleased with his new ship and crew, and the reports that Durant gets from the home office on Dennier tell him the combined profits of both vessels in the company are already looking good. Pockets and Patch communicate on a regular basis, as the Sun's crew is slowly getting used to the H-model freighter. Pockets and Max have already worked out the particulars of this ship enough that when something new comes up to repair or maintain on the Hidalgo, all Patch or Paxton have to do is contact us. Apparently, there's a few bugs in the systems on that ship that we've not had to deal with on this one, but so far, they've been able to handle everything that has reared up.

Merlin has left me in charge of things while he takes a bit of personal leave. Bill and Shannon have been pestering him to get back to Dennier to see their new cubs, and the royal family of Tanthe has been awaiting a visit from him so he may meet the new prince who bears his name. He booked a public transport from Ganis to Dennier and should arrive there sometime tomorrow. After a short vacation with his sister's family, Merlin is going to fly the smaller SS Christopher Watson to a mountain fortress on Tanthe, where Prince Kal and Princess Tinara are currently staying with their infant son. Samantha wanted to go along, I'm sure, but I don't think she mentioned anything to the captain about it. Personally, I would have liked to have gone myself, but this is Merlin's time to spend with his extended families.

It's been a long while since I was placed in complete command of the Blue Horizon. Merlin rarely takes time away from his ship, so my position as first officer doesn't usually see much more authority than the times when he's asleep or very busy and doesn't want to be bothered. Aside from the little altercations between Tanis and Renny, things seem to be going smoothly.

-Taro Nichols

"In news from Earth, Tokyo Tower fell again today amidst the rampage of another giant monster. This fire-breathing turtle has risen from the sea and is on a march across the main island of Japan. Citizens are on the run, but aren't worried, as this common occurrence takes place on a regular basis. New construction materials for Tokyo Tower are already being pulled from an awaiting warehouse and reconstruction workers are standing by. We'll let you know more as the information comes to us. In sports news from--"

Penny clicked off the remote to the waiting room vidscreen and cleared away the wrappers of her lunch. Cindy had gone out to eat with her architect boyfriend, and Keri was away running errands, so the lithe ferret had the place to herself. It had been a quiet day. There had only been one call from Ganis for someone needing five sets of large Taiko drums delivered from Earth for some kind of ancient ritual, but the delivery wouldn't need to be made for several months.

There was a small jingle of bells; Penny looked up from the desk with a smile.

A short desert fox dressed in a dark green shirt and black slacks walked in with a small round watermelon wrapped up in a rope net dangling from one hand. He glanced around the office before moving to the receptionist's desk.

"Welcome to *Blue Horizon Freight Transfer*. May I help you?" Penny asked him.

"Hallo," the fennec said hesitantly, in a slightly accented voice. "I am looking for Arktanis TeVann. I was told he worked here."

Penny nodded. "He does work for this company," she told him, "but he's currently serving on board the *Blue Horizon* and won't be back on Dennier for some months."

"Ah," the tan fox replied, as he scratched one of his enormous ears. "I had hoped for the opportunity to see him. It's a matter of urgency that I contact him."

"May I know the nature of this emergency?" Penny asked. "If it's sufficiently important, I can relay a message to his ship's captain."

The fennec smiled down at the ferret. "The message I have for him will affect his immediate future. I—"

"Are you his brother?" she asked him in an excited voice.

The fox shrugged. "In a manner of speaking, perhaps," he replied, "as we are both from the same region of Nalirra. My name is Shoji Locke, and—"

"What's the watermelon for?" Penny interrupted again.

The stranger sighed. He set the melon on the desk, and gave it a small push so that it rolled inside its net toward her. "As Arktanis is not here, you may share it with your office co-workers."

"Oh, thank you!" Penny replied with a grin. "The girls are gonna love this."

"Now, as I was—"

"You said you were from Nalirra," the ferret interrupted yet again. "Are you here about the delivery?"

"No," he said with a dark frown. Talking to this person was a chore. "I'm not here to make a delivery."

"No, silly," Penny replied, "we have a delivery to make to Nalirra next week— a full shipment of food, I believe. I thought maybe you were a representative. We have a second ship that's been hired to deliver more of the same, so we—"

The fox looked at her quietly for a moment, chewing on his lower lip as she rattled on. He was on Dennier on official business for his government, but had taken time out from his busy schedule to visit the offices of Tanis' employer. He had just about decided to turn and walk back out of the door when the desktop Com unit emitted three quick chirps.

"You're in luck, Mr. Locke," Penny said cheerily. "That's the *Blue Horizon* calling in now." The fennec waited patiently while she made the connection and then informed a grizzly bear on the screen of the visitor's request. "Tanis will be on the link in just a moment, sir," she said to him.

Blue Horizon PA1138
First Officer's Diary

The Blue Horizon is on its way to Nalirra, under the pretense of making a standard delivery of emergency food the Nalirrans are stockpiling in preparation of war against their neighboring world, Oe'Tanata. The Hidalgo Sun is a day behind us, having been hired to deliver more of the same. Our delivery is a legitimate job for the company that was already on the schedule, but I say 'under the pretense' because our voyage to this world has another purpose with more importance.

Nalirra is rumored to be building up their forces for a strike against Oe'Tanata. There have been recent aggressions between the two worlds over matters that INN or other news frequencies have been vague upon reporting. The tension is growing and Nalirra is recalling past military personnel who are

still capable. Recalls have been going out to all the worlds of the Planetary Alignment as they try to relocate bodies to match their records.

One of Tanis' trusted friends contacted him a couple weeks ago during a visit to the home office to let him know that his personnel file had been reclassified as a "rainbow document" – a collection of files made up of past military personnel currently off-world, but which have training the Nalirran military deems necessary for a first assault. Tanis' medical background and piloting skills have put him on a list that can only mean he will be among the first recalled into service if war actually breaks out. By Nalirran law, he's legally bound to return to service if recalled, no matter where he may be or what he may be doing.

Concerned that he will be drafted once again into the armed services in a time of war, we are going to use our current scheduled job to Nalirra as a front for an attempt to infiltrate the military personnel database. Locke has supplied coordinates on where to meet him, and will make arrangements to get Tanis inside. I don't want to worry Merlin about this during his vacation, so I've not said anything about this in my daily reports. I'm not entirely sure he would approve of getting involved in a covert operation like this, so I'll take full responsibility should something go wrong.

We have an extra bit of help in this, as well. Tanis' friend, Clarence Duffy, took a quick flight from Fyn and met us just before we left Alexandrius. Duffy was informed by Locke that he was also on the rainbow listing and asked to be included. The Siberian husky brought along several Nalirran desert uniforms that he thinks will fit some of us for this operation.

As if we didn't have enough on our minds, Pockets and Duffy took an immediate disliking toward one another. There haven't been any arguments between them, but you can feel the tension in the air whenever the two of them are in the same room together. I've asked Pockets about it, but all he does is shrug me off, saying it's nothing. I don't like this, as Duffy seems on the up and up to me and Tanis seems to trust his friend.

As we approach the Roppa star system, Duffy has assembled a small team to infiltrate the compound consisting of Tanis, Samantha, himself and me. We've been going over the plan and studying maps of the building we will be getting into. Locke was quite thorough in the information he's provided to us. Sam scanned the floor plan maps and is in the process of converting them to a 3D rendition for use with Pockets' VR software in an effort to help us all learn the layout of the facility.

Renny wanted to join the team, but Tanis pointed out that there are no feline types in the Nalirran military and that he would give them away immediately. The Nalirran enemies, the Tanatans, are almost primarily big cats such as leopards, cougars, lions, jaguars – and cheetahs.

This is okay by me since Durant still needs a crew to make a showing of a freighter delivering its cargo, and the tension between Tanis and Renny would be a distraction where the team will need to stay alert. Those remaining with the Blue Horizon will have their hands full unloading a cargo hold packed with food containers stacked nearly two stories high. It's a good thing this version of the Blue Horizon is equipped with cargo moving cranes in the hold – something the old ship didn't have. All in all, this could get tricky. I just hope all goes well.

Merlin reported in a bit ago just to let me know that following his family visit, Bill will be accompanying him in the Christopher Watson to Tanthe. His brother in law is taking the trip as convenient to resolve business issues for his company in another city of Tanthe. Afterward, Bill will return to Dennier with the Watson and Merlin will later take a public transport from Tanthe to rendezvous with the Blue Horizon on the next leg of our schedule after Nalirra.

–Taro Nichols

Tanis switched on the lights to Sickbay and plucked a white lab coat from a wall hook near the door. He motioned a male Siberian husky into the room with a smile. "Welcome to mah la-bor-a-tory..." he said in the creepy accent of a popular horror film character from Earth.

"Cute," the canine said with a lopsided smile. "What do you need me to do?"

"Take off yer shirt and sit up on this stool," Tanis told him while removing medical instruments from their stays in a wall cabinet. The husky closed the door behind him and did as he was told, while the medic placed the tools of his trade on a plastic tray.

"Do you remember the Well of Luck?" Duffy asked as he absently ran his fingers through the dusty gray fur of his chest and scratched at an itch.

Tanis nodded with a smirk. "How can I forget?" he asked. "I got the chance to examine it from the inside out."

The husky chuckled as his friend took out a stethoscope, daubing the business end of it with a cleanser. "I just bought the land it's on," Duffy said. "I began clearing away the brush around it, and I've made a nice, wide pathway to the nearby road with steps along that hill you rolled down."

Tanis put the stethoscope up to the canine's chest. "Take a deep breath, Clarence. Then ya can tell me why ya wasted yer money on that worthless pit."

"I'm going to open it as a tourist spot," the husky said before taking a deep breath.

The door opened and Max walked in. "What going on?" he asked with a grin.

"Just giving Duffy a routine physical," Tanis said as he let the stethoscope drop to his chest. He entered a few figures on a slateboard and then looked over his other instruments. "He's not been off Fyn for so long that I'm surprised he was even allowed on Alexandrius without updated inoculations." He glanced up into his friend's pale blue eyes and asked, "Just how long *has* it been since yer last physical?"

Duffy shrugged his shoulders as Tanis consulted a chart on the husky's physiology. "I dunno," he replied. "Ten years, maybe."

"Why so long?" Max asked casually. He noticed a spot of grease on his denim shirt, and licked his finger to try to rub it out. He needn't have bothered, as it only smeared and grew in size.

Duffy smiled at the youth. "After I got out of the Nalirran service, I went hopping around the Planetary Alignment as a space jockey for an interstellar transport for people who needed to get from one planet to another cheap. I got tired of being on the go all the time, so I found a nice and quiet place on Fyn to relax and live off some investment returns that were doing well." He winced when Tanis shined a bright penlight into his left eye. "Until I got the call from Shoji, I haven't been offworld since."

"Was there something you needed, Max?" Tanis asked absently as he prepared an instrument to take a tissue sample for routine DNA testing.

"Yeah," Max suddenly remembered. "Pockets wanted to borrow some of your rubbing alcohol."

The fennec didn't look up as he calibrated the instrument in his hands. "Go ahead, but only one bottle this time," he said. "I don't know what he does with the stuff down in the engine room, but I need it up here where it belongs. I don't want to run out again like our last voyage, when he used up all I had in my stores."

"I'll tell him," Max said as he moved across the room to a supply closet.

"What's the little squint using it for?" Duffy asked with a frown.

The canine youth grinned at him as he headed for the doorway with a bottle in his hand. "Fuel," Max replied as he left the room.

Tanis glanced up at Duffy in surprise. "I'm not sure if I even want to know what it's for," he muttered.

The husky maintained a neutral expression as Tanis pricked his skin with a tiny needle. Just before the youth disappeared from sight, Duffy had seen a second bottle tucked covertly under the boy's arm, out of view from the desert fox. He allowed himself a canine grin when Tanis turned the other way with his sample.

Durant awoke with a start, realizing he had drifted off to sleep while reading printed periodicals he had picked up on Alexandrius. He had fallen asleep sitting up on the large bed in his quarters; all the cabin lights were still on. He'd spent several hours at his desk downstairs poring over the accounts and felt he needed a break, so he'd retired to his rooms with new magazines and a box of sweets.

There were nearly thirty of the publications scattered over the bed amidst the candy wrappers and he knew he must look like a slob. His eyes roved over the colorful cover of one publication and then gathered it together with the other magazines, stacking them neatly on a night stand. He tossed the empty wrappers into a waste bin beside the bed and brushed the crumbs from the Terran Southwest blanket that covered the mattress.

He quietly crossed the room to his closet, shedding his shirt and pants at the laundry basket. He needed a shower and quickly picked out clothing to put on afterward. As he peered into the closet, he heard a small double *beep* from the front room. He grinned from ear to ear and moved to the other room.

He sat down in the wide chair in front of his cabin computer terminal and smiled at a small animated figure of a dancing envelope prancing around the screen. He placed his finger on the monitor's surface over the envelope, and immediately a message opened up for him.

Dear Leo,

The Hidalgo Sun is running smoothly today, a welcome change from yesterday's excitement. Sheila's a decent enough cook, but three people got sick from a casserole she'd made the day before; I had to pump one stomach and take care of the other two with medication and tender care. Littlefeather is still feeling the cramps from the pump and isn't a very happy patient. I convinced the captain to let Mark rest up the few days before we get to Nalirra. He'll need all his strength in time to unload our cargo. Patch and Riki are faring better. I dispensed medication that took care of their sicknesses, but everyone else seems to be wary of our cook today.

I've heard Rezo talking to Jonesy about our current assignment, and he's nervous about the trip into a risky area. His plans are to deliver our cargo and get out of there as quickly as possible. He's denied us shore leave and Riki and Pax are rather upset about it. Both have been pacing the central corridor in agitation.

Tsarina wants me to ask you send her love to Renny. She was disappointed that she didn't have time to get together with him when we were all on Dennier together, even though he acted like he was interested. Tsarina is a big tease with the guys, but I think she's more than just a little taken with your navigator and can't wait until she can get him alone.

Anyway, enough about the others. How are you doing? The last letter I got from you mentioned that you've been feeling tired all of the time, no matter what you eat or how much rest you get. As your friend, this has me mildly concerned. As a doctor, this has me worried. Something like that doesn't happen without a cause. It could be something as trivial as a vitamin deficiency or as serious as a disease.

Please, get Tanis to give you a physical soon, darling. Whatever it is, you should get it taken care of as soon as possible. It's best to treat it now before anything gets out of hand.

As for me, I'm doing fine. Nothing really of interest to tell you, except perhaps to let you know my Pop has finally remarried. It's been nearly twenty years since we lost Mum, and it's good to know he's found someone again. My brother and his wife attended the small ceremony they had, and they say he looks ten years younger with his new bride. I wish them both well.

I miss you, Leo, and wish we weren't on separate ships. If Tanis ever decides to leave the Blue Horizon and finish up his medical degree, please let Captain Sinclair know that I would transfer to your ship in a heartbeat. It's not bad here on the Hidalgo Sun, but I'd rather be with you. You're warm and snuggly and I miss your arms around me – and seeing your smile. I think I miss that most of all. I do wish Rezo would change his mind and let us stay a couple days after landing. From what I understand, we'll be landing at the same warehouse where you'll have unloaded your cargo. Hopefully, your ship will still be there by the time we arrive.

Well, my dear friend, I will close for now and send this on its way. I look forward to your letters and hope you do the same for mine.

*With great love,
Carmen*

Durant smiled at the message. "Yes, Carmen," he said to the quiet room, "I *do* look forward to your letters very much." He closed his eyes for a moment, leaning back in his seat. He had not told her about their secondary operation concerning the rainbow documents. He didn't think anyone would be specifically monitoring his mail, but he didn't want to take that chance with the ship so close to Nalirra. In a potential war-zone, security measures were going to be heightened and he didn't want to chance giving away their mission with an intercepted message. He decided just to send her back a nice note to let her know how he had been doing since his last letter to her a week ago. He leaned forward to the terminal and began typing, his shower postponed.

Clarence Duffy walked quietly around the central corridor of the crew deck, his hands behind him and his thoughts on the upcoming mission. He was now dressed in the tan uniform of the Nalirran military, which consisted of nothing more than loose-fitting shorts adorned with pockets the *Blue Horizon's* engineer would love, and a simple vest also with multiple pockets, that was adorned with no more than a spot for his rank insignia. Locke would provide those before they made planetfall. It had been over a decade since he had worn one of the uniforms and he had forgotten how stiff and stifling the material and had been over his fur. He had suggested each member of the team wear them for several days to get used to the feel before they got to their destination. They needed to appear as if they were military personnel who wore them every day of their lives. Samantha had tried several fabric softeners, but the fibrous material refused to feel soft. Everyone, including himself, grumbled about having to wear them, but it was a necessity that Shoji had stressed to them.

When he had first come on board the *Blue Horizon*, Duffy had immediately felt out of place in this tight group. Tanis was the only one on board he had known and he had been spending most of his spare time on board with him, usually reminiscing about old times. The spare moments were few, however, as he wanted to get the team prepared for their task ahead. He had also had trouble keeping his eyes off of the two females who were going with them; the

garments really accented their assets nicely. Neither of them seemed to mind, however, especially the vixen. Still, he had to keep his mind on their task. He couldn't afford to be distracted once they were on Nalirra.

Basically, the details of the mission were simple. Shoji would meet them and take them into the records facility with falsified identification, and then they would be split up and assigned to separate document areas. As paper and crystal-recorded documents were not allowed off the grounds, they would have to destroy the hardcopy folders for Tanis and Duffy on location, a difficult task with the place fully staffed. Samantha's expertise with computers would be needed to locate and delete the electronic backups.

Unfortunately for them, the locations they would have to infiltrate were at opposite ends of the building, some on different floors. The paper copy of the document could be in any one of the Rainbow Rooms. As a secondary course of action, if the document could not be eliminated, they were to alter the contents to show the person had perished somewhere. It had the potential of cutting off any military benefits they still enjoyed, but it would keep them from the war.

Security after hours was usually tight, even at a records facility, so the plan was to attempt the tasks during standard business hours. There were more people around, but he felt they would have better access to the material they needed and the bustle of activity would camouflage their acts.

Tired of walking in circles around the corridor, Duffy decided to see who was on bridge watch. If he remembered the schedule he had seen posted on the ship's network, it should be Samantha; he wanted to talk to her a little more about her programming background.

He heard a soft humming sound behind him and the husky turned to look. Moss floated toward him, its primary green eye fixed upon him. It rotated a couple of its metallic whiskers as if it were thinking about something.

"Hello, Moss," Duffy said with a grin.

"Meow!" the little flying saucer responded brightly. "Meooowrrr..." Then, without studying him further, it floated down the corridor to the nearest lift and activated the doors with a signal to the main computer system. Duffy idly watched it enter the lift and the panels close behind it.

He turned and headed toward the bridge.

"Taro, things like this are hard for me to say, but I wanted you to know that you're the first woman who's ever completely captured my heart... you've fulfilled all my fantasies, all my dreams - and you're the only one I've ever felt this comfortable around. You're the best friend I've ever had and are the most wonderful, beautiful woman I've ever known."

The red fox looked up into his feline eyes, with moisture in her own. She gave him a tender smile, and gently brushed the fur on his left cheek. For most of her adult life, Taro had enjoyed pleasure where she found it, thinking nothing of a serious relationship, but this one had gotten deeply into her heart and she knew that she loved him. She opened her mouth to speak, but he put a finger to her lips with a quiet *Shhhhhh*.

"My head tells me to run the other direction," he said in a voice barely above a whisper, "but my heart is the one ruling me tonight." He moved his hand under her chin, and cupped it for a moment as he swallowed, never taking his eyes off her own. Finally, he steeled himself and said to her in a voice that was much more stable than he felt inside, "Marry me?"

Tears welled up in Taro's eyes. Somehow, she had known what he was going to ask her that night. He had been extra affectionate for days and their lovemaking had been different, more tender. She'd caught him looking at her more than usual, no matter what room or chamber of the ship they were in, and whenever he was near, he had made an effort to make sure he had touched her at least once. She had never known anyone who enjoyed tactile physical contact quite as much as he did.

Once again, she opened her mouth to speak, wondering to herself what reply would leave her lips. As a young girl, she had dreamed of getting married and settling down, but had later abandoned that fantasy when she could find no one with whom she would want to spend the rest of her life. Outside one another's species, she'd never be able to have any children with him, she knew, but she didn't care. She loved him.

The *Blue Horizon* suddenly jolted beneath them and they tumbled out of the bed together amidst the pillows and blankets. He looked up in alarm at the sound of a second explosion that rocked the ship. The lights flickered and they could feel the sudden cessation of the constant vibration in the deck plates caused by the engines.

"What the-?"

"All hands! All hands!" Samantha's voice sounded over the ship's intercom speakers, "We're under attack! Pirates!"

Taro looked up in sudden fear when her lover scrambled to his feet and jumped into his trousers. He looked back down at her with a worried look and then bent down to kiss her quickly. The ship jolted once more and without another word, he grabbed a sword from a wall board; then he was out the door heading toward the bridge, his shirt and boots left behind.

The vixen sat stunned for a moment longer. Had she been about to say what she *thought* she'd been about to tell him? She climbed back up beside his bed, searching about the room for her scattered clothes. She felt as if she was moving in slow motion and time seemed to drag as she moved around his cabin. *Pirates?* she thought to herself. *Now?*

"The other ship just hard-docked with us!" Samantha's voice exclaimed over the speakers. "We're being boarded!"

Taro suddenly shook her head free of its whirling thoughts and dressed quickly. A moment later, she bolted out the door. Pockets was standing in the corridor looking frightened, wrapped solely in a towel and dripping wet from an interrupted shower.

"Lock yourself in your room!" she commanded, running for the lift. Taro waited impatiently for the panel to open, and then jumped inside when it did. As the elevator descended, she switched off the lights in the small chamber so she wouldn't present herself as a target when she got out. When the doors parted, she peeked out into the dim cargo hold, hearing grunting voices and the sounds of a fierce struggle. There was a sudden yelp that cut off too abruptly, and the sounds of fighting ceased. Taro's nerves felt as if they were suddenly on fire.

She eased herself out of the lift, skirting around the perimeter of the crates and containers of their cargo. She could still hear voices on the opposite side of the hold, but there didn't seem to be any further fighting. The voices were hurried, but triumphant, and she recognized the sounds of plunder as the pirates began taking the contents of the *Horizon's* cargo.

Taro slipped on something slick on the floor, and looked down at her feet. Her nose picked up the scent of blood even before she saw the growing puddle in the dim light of the hold. She put a hand to her mouth to stop herself from screaming when she saw the body from which the precious liquid freely flowed. The vixen sank to her knees, her throat constricting in horror as she stretched out a shaking hand. It was *him*, and the murderers had done the job with

a slash across his throat. The feline's unseeing eyes were rolled upward, focused toward infinity; blood spilled from his nose and mouth, as well as the wide opening in his neck.

Taro tried to close his wound with her hands even though she already knew he was dead, and for the first time in ages, she cried. The lift open again behind her, and a moment later she heard the captain gasp when he found them. The wolf's eyes blazed in anger as he gripped his broadsword, and then he ran out after the pirates that were raiding his ship. Durant arrived a moment later, similarly armed, and found the vixen sobbing over Jiro's body.

Taro felt a start and opened her eyes suddenly. She blinked several times, realizing she was sitting up in bed, panting in heaves. Through the moisture in her eyes, she looked down at her hands in the dim light of the room, but saw no bloodstains there. She felt slightly sick to her stomach in the hot room. It had been a long time since she had dreamed of that day Jiro had died at the hands of pirates – the same pirates that had later almost killed her as well. Perhaps it was anxiety of the upcoming mission that affected her dreams.

She closed her eyes and leaned against the wall beside her bed for a moment, willing her heartbeat to slow down. She got up after a bit and moved into the lavatory to wash her face in the sink. She dried her face fur with a soft pink towel, and then looked up at herself in the mirror for a moment, her nerves still raw. She cleared her throat, and felt the muscles still tight. Thirsty, she put a small paper cup under the faucet, but changed her mind. She wanted something stronger than water.

Taro rarely drank liquor, as it clouded her mind and she didn't like to lose control of her thoughts – especially when she was in command of the ship – but she felt a tiny amount of Klovosk wine from Mainor would help calm her nerves and allow her to get back to sleep. She hung the towel neatly on a brass ring mounted to the wall, and then quietly moved through the rooms of her quarters to the corridor.

Moments later, she stepped out of the lift onto the recreation deck. All the lights were out except for the wall-sized vidscreen. Max danced in choreographed time with a pop music video, dressed in a pair of denim shorts and a white shirt with billowed, long sleeves. On the screen, a lop-eared bunny not much older than himself danced and gyrated around a brightly lit stage with a large team of other male and female dancers of mixed species. He'd not heard the lift door open, and he spun around with a flourish perfectly choreographed with the actions on the screen.

Max let out a yelp of surprise when he saw Taro's amused expression as she leaned casually against the galley counter. She was dressed in an oversized pink tee shirt that hung to her knees and her familiar silver ornamental disk with its blue-tipped white feather was clipped to the fur behind her left ear. He scrambled for the remote and muted the sound when she started clapping.

"You're a very good dancer, Max," she said with a wide smile. "Are you planning to sign up for her entourage?"

Max coughed into his hand, and glanced up at the screen. "No," he replied, embarrassed, "but I do like her music."

Her quest for a drink forgotten, Taro laughed and looked back up at the video that continued to play out. "Max," she said, "Pixly Dixly's energetic, choreographed music videos can't disguise the fact that she only has one hit with which she's re-done, re-arranged, re-filmed and re-released a half dozen times to fans like you who don't seem to notice..."

Max looked back up at the screen, the expression in his eyes clearly showing that she was correct. He hadn't noticed Pixly's career pattern before. He frowned, feeling embarrassed, and turned back to look at the vixen. "I, uh, well..."

Taro smiled and walked over to him. She put a hand on his shoulder and said, "I'm sorry, Max. I didn't mean to tarnish your perception of someone you like." Both of them looked back up at the screen yet again. In silence, they watched the lop dance around. Finally, Max shrugged his shoulders.

"That's okay," he told her with a canine grin. "I still like the song."

Taro shook her head and gave him a *tsk*, but she did it with a smile. "You're allowed to like who you want, Max," she said at last. "I'm heading back to bed now, kiddo. You can go back to your dancing."

Max watched her until she disappeared into the lift before he took the mute off the sound system. He thumbed the control, reset the video to play again from the start, and grinned up at the screen.

Arktanis TeVann sat on a small swivel stool at a counter in Sickbay, quietly studying the results of Duffy's physical. He stared at the computer terminal as it presented its data, and he chewed absently on a tongue depressor while he tapped in notes onto his slateboard. Everything seemed to be normal and Clarence Duffy appeared to be in good health. His cholesterol was lower than usual, but that was nothing that would hinder him in anything he did. There were no Fynian viruses or bacteria that the inoculations had not been able to take care of, and the medic didn't see anything to concern him. Despite his high-profile living a decade earlier, the quiet life in the mountain air had apparently been good for Duffy.

The medical computer did find something of interest, however, and it had been flagged for his attention. Tanis was no expert with deoxyribonucleic acid, but a software routine had discovered mitochondria DNA markers in the pattern similar to another in the database. Tanis looked to see who it was - and raised his eyebrows when he read the name.

The desert fox put an elbow on the counter, resting his chin in his hand as his thoughts began to whirl. *Was it possible?* he thought to himself. He tapped out a few commands on the keypad with his free hand and then waited for the results. He got his answer a moment later and then sat up with crossed arms.

Tanis tossed his chewed tongue depressor into the refuse bin without looking. He licked his lips and then calmly rubbed his eyes. After a moment in thought, he saved the information into a password-protected file and then turned away from the terminal to begin pacing around the room.

He had mixed feelings over what he had found. Either it could be good news, or it could completely ruin someone's day. He wrestled with his thoughts for a moment on what he should do, and then decided that something of this nature should be handled delicately by someone better suited.

His mind made up, Tanis turned back to the computer and opened up a new communication message. When he finished typing, he attached the file he had saved with all the information he had on Duffy's DNA pattern and the data that had been brought to his attention, and then hit the *Submit* command to send it on its way.

The *Blue Horizon* was six hours away from Nalirra. Renny had all the lights on the bridge down to a minimum as he concentrated on keeping the ship steady. Another vessel was alongside, positioning itself to line up with the *Horizon's* main hatch.

"XK101 extending its tunnel," Durant's calm voice said from the bridge speakers.

"Aye to that," he responded.

The other ship was metallic green, its fuselage long and slender. There were three engine pods clustered together on the aft end and there were atmospheric wings folded back out of the way along its sides. The computer had identified it as a Nalirran military transport identified only by its registration number. Renny had been uneasy when it had slipped in beside them with its weaponry calmly trained upon the freighter.

Down on the cargo deck, Durant monitored the controls of the main airlock. Taro waited beside him for the tunnel to lock onto their ship and pressurize. Tanis, Duffy and Samantha stood behind them, small duffels at their feet. Samantha consulted a slateboard she had with her and then nodded to herself when she got the response she wanted.

A few moments later, Durant opened the internal airlock hatch. Standing just inside was a black Labrador in a Nalirran desert uniform that matched those the team was wearing. He wore an insignia that Durant didn't recognize.

The senior officer on board, Taro stepped forward and offered a hand to the canine. The Labrador gave her a crisp salute before extending a massive hand to shake hers with a smile.

"Welcome," she said to him. "I'm Taro Nichols, presently in command of the *Blue Horizon*."

"Thank you, captain" the dark canine replied in a voice so deep it almost rumbled. "I am Kor-Chief Allano." He glanced at her uniform and then said, "The moon is exceptionally bright tonight."

Taro nodded, recognizing the code phrase. "It is indeed, Kor-Chief," she replied, "but the craters are dark."

"Kerchief is an odd first name," Samantha whispered to Tanis.

The medic replied in an equally quiet voice, "Kor-Chief is his rank, Sam, not his name."

"Oh."

"Bar-Lieutenant Locke sent me to transport your team down to Mucot Airfield on Nalirra; he will rendezvous with you there," Allano said to Taro. "Are you ready?" His large brown eyes glanced over at the others in uniform.

Taro turned to the grizzly at her side. "Durant," she said, "you're in command of the *Horizon* until I return. If Merlin calls and happens to ask about me, just tell him I'm indisposed."

"Aye to that," Durant said. "You all be very, *very* careful," he said. "This whole thing makes me nervous."

"We plan to, Durant," the vixen said soberly. "Keep a candle lit for us."

"I will."

Taro turned toward Samantha, Tanis and Duffy. She nodded and everyone picked up their equipment bags, moving as one toward the hatch.

"After you, Kor-Chief," the vixen said.

Allano glanced up at the feathered ornament in Taro's fur with a raised eyebrow. "You'll need to leave that behind," he said. "It's not a part of regulation uniform."

"Ah yes," Taro said with a smile. She reached up with one hand, unclipped it from her fur, and handed it to Durant without another word.

Durant watched the team file through the airlock until Samantha, the last in line, stopped and tiptoed up to give him a hug.

"We'll be back soon, Durant," she promised him.

"Take extra care, Sam," he replied. "I don't want to have to give the boss any bad news."

"See you soon," she replied and then floated out after the others. Durant closed both the inner and outer hatches after he watched the team disappear into the other vessel. The extension tunnel was depressurized from the other end and then it detached from the *Horizon's* hull.

Moments later, the *XK101* moved away and then quickly sped off into the darkness.

Merlin laughed and grinned at the Border collie beside him. He was quite surprised to discover Alex Rogers in the mountain fortress when he had arrived. The new CEO for Holden Pharmaceutical was on Tanthe for a business conference concerning the company and while there, Alex had met Lady Ayana, representative for Royal Business Interests and cousin of Princess Tinara. There was an immediate attraction right off and they had spent a good deal of time together even after the conference had ended. Lady Ayana had invited Alex to accompany her to visit her aunt the Queen, and had been in the fortress at the time of Merlin's arrival.

The lupine captain knew that Alex had maintained a lifelong crush on Samantha, but it was nice to see the handsome collie with a lady of his own. Merlin had always gotten along well with Alex, but there had always been an underlying tension due to the feelings they both shared for Samantha. Merlin didn't get that sensation from Alex this time, no doubt because the collie had someone new to occupy his attention.

They had enjoyed supper together, laughing and relating past adventures, but then he had left them together in the dining hall to retire for the evening.

When Merlin opened the door to the high-ceiling room he had been given, his attention was immediately drawn to a flashing red light on the screen of his slateboard. He closed the thick wooden-plank door, unconsciously bolting it behind him. The room was lit by a single torch in an iron holder mounted into the stone block wall, and the wolf's amber eyes reflected the flames as he approached the heavy wooden table next to his bed.

The Aris mountain fortress was equipped with modern conveniences, but to maintain the castle's rustic medieval appearance, power and data lines were discreetly hidden behind draperies and wall boards. His room was equipped with hidden indirect lighting, but since the torch was already burning for him, he saw no need to change the illumination.

Merlin loosened the leather laces across the front of his tunic and pushed the billowing sleeves up his arms as he reached for the slateboard. He sat in a cushioned oak chair and then tapped out his passcode. At once, the screen came to life with three messages that awaited his attention. The first was from Taro. It was her routine report on the running of his ship. As there was usually nothing of importance in the reports, he tended to save those for last each night. The second message was from his sister as a follow-up to his visit, and the third one was from Tanis.

The wolf frowned when he saw "*Eyes Only*" written in as the subject of the last message. That was never a good sign. He glanced back toward the door to make sure he had locked it behind him and then keyed in their shared decryption code to unlock the message that Tanis had safeguarded. He had no reason to mistrust the Aris royalty – they had helped him on more than one occasion out of friendship – but he still valued his privacy on matters concerning his ship.

When the message opened, the first thing he saw was Duffy's medical report. Merlin knew that Clarence Duffy was a friend of Tanis' who lived on Fyn. The message was brief, although it didn't explain why Duffy was on board the *Blue Horizon*, but Tanis had a theory that he wanted to bring to the captain's attention.

Merlin read the message twice and then pored over the data. He was no medical expert, but he understood enough of what Tanis reported to know why it had been sent to him. There were no detailed descriptions or fanciful opinions in the message. Tanis had simply given him the results of what he had found.

He sat there for several long moments and mulled over what he had read. The odds of something like this ever coming to his attention were extremely slim, yet it had happened. Merlin shut down the message and then moved to the large bed that practically filled the room. He kicked off his soft-sided boots and then stretched out on his back. He stared into the flickering flames of the torch, letting his mind wander.

Now that he knew what he knew, there was a tough decision to make. What should he do about it?

Lorelei had her hands up on the glass of the forward windows of the bridge, her nose pressed up between them as she strained to see the landscape below them. She was standing between the Navigation and Communication stations, her fluffy tail practically in Renny's face as he calculated minute changes in their trajectory toward the Juxenlow Airfield. Normally this might have been enjoyable for the cheetah, but it was distracting while he was working. When she bumped into him for the third time, he reached up, grabbed her cottontail and pulled her backward into the Com station chair beside him.

"Down!" he growled at the rabbit.

Lorelei looked over at him with a hurt expression. "What was that for?" she whined, rubbing the base of her tail. "I just wanted to see!"

Without looking up at her, Renny leveled a hand toward the engineering station across the room, farthest from him. "Then go stand over there, Lori," he said. "You keep bumping into me here and I can't concentrate. The airfield's long-range homing beacon is broken, so we can't rely on the computer to get us there."

The white doe got up without a word, looking back at Durant. The grizzly occupied the center seat, guiding the *Blue Horizon* down toward a semi-barren desert littered with high rocky mesas standing guard over a wide, dry riverbed that meandered between them. Without taking his hands from the controls, the bear motioned with the nod of his head toward the other seat, but gave her a friendly smile to ease her injured pride.

Lorelei moved across the room and took her place at the forward window again so she could see. The sky was completely devoid of clouds, though she could see a dust storm off in the far distance. The mesas below were wind-carved into massive, towering columns. The ground beneath them was rocky and sandy, with only the occasional oasis interrupting the landscape. They were still too high up for her to distinguish settlements, but she could imagine seeing people scurrying amongst the rocks below.

Durant followed the coordinates that Renny fed to his terminal, adjusting their trajectory to a lower altitude. Lori felt her stomach lurch with the drop and grinned as if she enjoyed a roller coaster ride. The ground jumped up toward them at an alarming rate, but Durant was in full control of the guidance shifts. It had been a while since he had handled a landing, as Merlin

usually took care of that, but Durant enjoyed himself, knowing that Pockets and Max had the control systems in optimum order.

The *Blue Horizon* dropped ever further and then leveled out over the dry riverbed. The mesas whisked by in a blur; Durant felt the smile on his face grow as he banked around one that came up in front of them.

Renny looked back at him with a grin. "You're enjoying this just a little too much," he said.

Durant responded only with a smile of his own, keeping his attention on the instruments. "Is the artificial gravity still on?" he asked casually.

Lorelei glanced down at the station beside her. "Yeah, want me to turn it off?" she asked.

"No, leave it on for the moment," Durant said with a twinkle in his eye, "but I *do* want you to turn the inertial dampers up to *Full*, please."

The rabbit did as requested and then looked over at him. "Why did you have me do that?"

Durant only smiled, and Renny suddenly *knew*. He had flown through thunderclouds with Merlin at the control too many times and recognized that particular look. "Lori," the navigator said, "You'd better sit down and buckle yourself in." Then he got on the intercom, and relayed the same suggestion to Max and Pockets in Engineering.

"*We're already strapped in,*" said Pockets' voice from the bridge speaker.

Renny looked back at Durant and nodded. "Okay, big guy - have your fun!"

Without bothering to reply, Durant adjusted the guidance shifts, suddenly flipping the *Blue Horizon* up on its port side. The freighter zoomed in between two mesas that Renny quickly decided were too close together for his tastes. When they emerged on the other side, the ship spun around on its axis and then righted itself so that Durant could lower its altitude and increase their velocity. The ship was suddenly speeding toward a distant range of hills, barely high enough to miss the tops of the sporadic tropical trees below. A wave of sand billowed out behind them like the wake of a boat over water.

Suddenly there was a beeping from the Com station Renny glanced over to look at it. "Ah, it's about time," he said. He unbuckled his harness and moved to the other panel. He picked up the com headset and adjusted it around his ears. "We've come into range of the secondary beacon. Better rein it in, Durant."

The load master nodded and altered course to gain altitude once more. When he was above the height of the oncoming hills, he lowered their speed and began watching for new local coordinates to come across his station monitor.

The *Blue Horizon* slowed over the low hills, but terrain still went by in a blur. Moments later, they left the hills behind and the topography below began to change. Green oases began to spring up in abundance and the horizon before them appeared lush.

Durant slowed the ship even more and finally Renny gave him a thumbs-up. "We just received permission from Juxenlow to approach and land at the airfield," the cheetah reported. "Coordinates coming to you now."

"Aye," replied the grizzly. As he expected, Juxenlow was located near the lush area just ahead. Lorelei unbuckled her harness and moved back to the forward window. The *Blue Horizon* was low enough that the sparse vegetation below came and went at an incredible speed; the blur of the landscape began to change from mostly browns to a mixture with hues of green.

"There it is!" Lorelei said excitedly. She pointed to a small airfield at the edge of an area straddling the desert and forest. There were only a couple buildings with several miscellaneous craft parked around the largest structure; several of the smaller ships were dusty and looked as

if they'd not moved in months. The landing strip for winged aircraft didn't even have a real control tower. It was a small glass booth set into a top corner of the warehouse closest to the runway. Despite the forest a short distance away, the place looked desolate.

As Durant slowed the ship and extended the landing gear, Renny nodded quietly to himself as he received instructions over the Com headset. "Set us down on the west side of the warehouse," he said over his shoulder, "between the red and white *Okami* and that light blue *Prairie Dog* freighter."

The load master proved a moment later that he was a capable pilot despite his earlier wild flying. He set the *Blue Horizon* on the landing pad between the two freighters with only the barest of bumps. He and Renny began shutting down the systems when the Com system beeped. The navigator thumbed the control and said into the headset microphone, "This is the *SS Blue Horizon*."

He listened for a moment and then said, "Just one." He frowned suddenly and an angry expression crossed his features. "Now, wait just a—" Renny closed his mouth, and listened a moment more before finishing his conversation with "Aye, it's understood." He pulled the headset from his ears and tossed it irritably onto the console.

"What's the matter?" Lorelei asked.

Renny snorted. "That was the control tower," he explained with ears flattened against his head. "They wanted to know if we had any felines in our crew. I told them there was just one and they demanded that whoever it was to stay on board the ship!"

Durant looked at the navigator and shrugged his broad shoulders. "Do you blame them?" he asked. "The enemy they're gearing up to fight is feline. That's why you couldn't join Duffy's team, remember?"

"But, I'm not their enemy!" Renny said in a huff. "We've been cooped up in here for two weeks. I need fresh air!"

"Sorry, Renny," Durant told him, "but you'll have to stay on the ship. After the cargo has been unloaded, you can keep the bay doors open and set up a chair near the door if you want – but if you set foot onto Nalirran soil, you could be shot."

The cheetah grumbled something beneath his breath and stormed off the bridge, leaving the others to complete the system shutdown. Durant shook his head and then touched the intercom control. "Pockets?" he asked.

"He's already headed to the main hatch. You want me to call him back?"

"Not necessary. I just wanted to remind everyone not to mention Tanis and the others while we're here."

"Aye to that," the youth replied. "Are the five of us going to unload this mountain of cargo, or are the Nalirrans going to do that for us?"

"I haven't heard yet, but I'll head out to the warehouse office in a moment to find out," Durant answered. "It wouldn't hurt to have your work gloves ready."

"Okay, we will."

Moments later, Durant stepped out onto the dusty ground and walked toward the buildings. The office beside the warehouse was unimpressive. It was a small box of a building with a roof of red tiles that had faded in the desert sun. The structure was made of dried clay and wood, and the windows were simply openings in the walls. There were hinged shutters to fasten against the occasional dust storm and thin curtains moved in a slight breeze, but otherwise the place was open-air. There was a small sign written in Standard beside the open door that read, "Juxenlow Airfield".

As Durant approached the single step up to the door, a large buffalo wearing what looked like a thin Roman-style robe suddenly filled up the opening. "Hello there," he said in a gravelly voice.

Durant gave him a nod and replied, "Hello back." The buffalo gave him a friendly nod and allowed Durant to step past him into the building. Once inside, the grizzly had to let his eyes adjust to the relative darkness of the interior.

"What is it *now*, Mr. Corwin?" a voice asked irritably.

Durant cleared his throat. A harried young hyena seated behind a desk piled with hardcopy papers and cardboard folders glanced up at him. A half-buried nameplate on the desk identified him as Sal-Sgt. Veers. "You're not Corwin," he said flatly. "What do you want?"

"I'm Durant, load master of the *Blue Horizon*," the grizzly replied. "We just landed."

"*Blue Horizon*?" the hyena repeated as he rifled through the worn pages of a ledger. "Oh yes, right. There are two other ships to be unloaded ahead of yours. Tell your crew to stay put and we will get to you as soon as we can. If you have any felines on board, they are not allowed outside of your ship."

Veers went back to his paperwork, ignoring Durant further, so the bear turned and went back outside. The buffalo was still standing there, his thumbs hooked into the waistband of his robe, staring off across the tarmac.

"Little snot's strung rather tight, wouldn't you say?" the buffalo said with a smirk.

Durant nodded and managed a weak smile. "A bit, yes."

The buffalo turned to him with an extended hand. "Name's Abner Corwin," he said. "I'm captain of the *Sandburr* over yonder."

"I'm Durant, load master of the *Blue Horizon*," the grizzly repeated what he had said earlier. He glanced over to the *Sandburr* with the notion that while the *Prairie Dog*-class of freighter had a lot of cargo space inside, its rectangular shape looked unwieldy for atmospheric flight.

"Where is your Cap'n, Mr. Durant? Still on his bridge?"

"Captain Sinclair is currently taking personal leave to visit family," Durant replied. "I'm in command in his absence."

The buffalo nodded. "Let's hope you aren't in any hurry," Corwin said. "I've been here since yesterday and they still haven't brought in anyone to unload my ship. They're short-handed, y'know. I told him we usually unloaded our own ship, but Veers told me in no uncertain terms that it was not allowed here."

"Are you next to be unloaded?" Durant asked.

"The *Cherry Blossom* is ahead of me, and then I'm next before you." He rocked back and forth on his heels and added, "Captain Ros isn't too happy right now. They won't let anyone from her ship outside, and she's been here longer than me and my bunch."

"Why won't they let them off the ship?"

"They're all feline -- the whole lot of them is cats," Corwin replied with the shake of his head. "The Nalirrans threatened to shoot anyone from that ship that sets foot on their dirt."

"I have one on board they've forbidden to come outdoors," Durant said. He shielded his eyes from the sunlight to watch movement inside the *Horizon's* open bay. "If you've been here since yesterday, what is there to do while we're waiting?"

Corwin looked at him and shrugged his shoulders. "There's a café inside the warehouse where you can get coffee and a bite to eat, but otherwise there's nothing here. The nearest civilization is ten miles to the east, but there's no public transportation to get there. I haven't even seen a military transport for the poor souls who work here. I don't know what else to

suggest, unless if some of your crew would like to get together with mine for cards or something.”

“We appreciate the offer, Captain Corwin,” Durant told him. “I’ll inform my crew.” He gave the buffalo a friendly nod and then walked back out to the *Blue Horizon*. With nothing to do off the ship, the rest of them were just about as limited as Renny.

The *XK101* touched down on an isolated airstrip seemingly in the middle of the desert, three hundred miles to the west of Juxenlow at almost the same time the *Blue Horizon* landed. From all appearances, Mucot Airfield had not been in use for some time. There was a single shack next to the end of the runway so sandblasted by desert winds that holes had been worn into the corrugated metal sides. Its roof had also been peeled back partway to reveal the rafters beneath at some time in the past.

There was a tan truck parked next to the shack waiting for the winged transport. A single individual stepped out when the ship taxied up to it. A fennec fox in a Nalirran military uniform walked toward the main hatch. Moments later, the airlock opened and a mechanical set of steps unfolded to touch the dusty ground. Tanis was the first to emerge from the ship into the hot, arid air. He twitched his left ear and looked down at the other desert fox waiting for them below.

He kept his face somber and effected a crisp salute when he stepped out onto the sand. The officer returned the salute and it was only then that Tanis grinned and extended a hand.

“Locke!” he said in a hushed voice. “I can’t say I’m glad to be here, but it’s good to see yer face again.”

Locke smiled and clasped hands with him. “Likewise,” he replied.

He glanced up toward the hatch when Taro stepped out into the sunlight. “Wow...” he said in open appreciation of the red fox’s curvaceous form. Taro grinned and made her way down the steps, followed by Duffy, Samantha and Kor-Chief Allano. The Labrador saluted Locke.

“Bar-Lieutenant,” he said.

Locke returned the salute, but gave the pilot a frown. “You’re a half-hour overdue from your reconnaissance, my friend,” he said. “You’d better get the *XK101* back to your base before they send someone else out looking for you.”

“On my way, sir,” Allano replied. He hopped back up the steps as Locke led the others toward the truck. The steps retracted, the hatch closed automatically and the engines began to spin up. Locke led the new arrivals out away from the ship, but he waited until it taxied back down the strip before he turned to the team he had gathered.

“I am Bar-Lieutenant Shoji Locke,” he said to the two newcomers. “I’ve been tasked with gathering information for our government on past military personnel in order to draft them back into service preceding an action upon our neighboring world, Oe’Tanata.” He nodded toward Tanis and Duffy. “I’ve known these two for ages and I’d rather not see them have to go into combat since both of them have already served twice in our military, Nalirra’s service term limit. Each has already saved my life on separate occasions, so I’d like to return the favor.”

“Shoji,” Tanis said, “this is Taro Nichols and Samantha Holden. They’ll be helping us with *Operation Rainbow*. They have skills that will be an asset.”

“Hello,” Sam and Taro said in unison.

Locke nodded to the both of them with a cordial smile, "I recognize you both from your photos. Pleased to have you with us, ladies," he said. "The facility where the documents are stored is staffed eighty percent by females, so you should fit right in. Your help is greatly appreciated." He tilted his head and looked at Samantha once more. "How are you feeling?" he asked. "Are your injuries healed well enough for this?"

Sam rubbed her middle absently. "No worries. I can do this," she said. Locke took her words at face value, giving her a nod.

He glanced over at Duffy. "How are you, Clarence?" he asked.

"I'm a little rusty," Duffy replied as he scratched an ear, "but anxious to get my name out of the running for this senseless action that Sed Amittias is planning. Good to see you again, Shoji."

Locke reached into the truck, retrieving a packet of material. He handed this to Tanis. "These are falsified IDs, rank insignia for your uniforms, and transfer papers authorizing your entrance to the Personnel Facility," he explained in a louder voice as the *XK101* took off toward the horizon. "With this sudden increase in workload, numerous others have been transferred to our facility on a daily basis to help out. No one's going to bother asking why you're there and they won't even notice a few extra bodies."

Tanis pulled out several smaller envelopes from the larger one and distributed them to the team. "Taro," he said as he handed one to her, "is now Sal-Sgt. Genera Ralaney, transferred over from Balan Command. Sam, yer new identity is Sal-Sgt. Jeska Anteola. Ya have come in from the computer facility at Yashe-Nor. Duffy will be Bar-Lieutenant Ridel Roscom from Fengail Station, an ex-pilot who's been grounded by an injury." He glanced at his own envelope and said, "I am Den-Medic Lylas Kykendol, and I've been demoted from Kor-Chief at Sardis for insubordination with a high-ranking officer."

"You were insubordinate?" Samantha remarked with a smirk. "Imagine that."

"If everyone will climb into the back of the truck, we'll be on our way," said Locke. "We still have a two-hour drive to the facility and there's another stop to make before we report in. I suggest all of you try to get familiar with your new identities."

"How did you get away from your job to come get us?" Samantha asked.

Locke opened the door to the truck. "I had orders to pick up more personnel. That's the other stop I have to make - to pick up my legit transfers."

The truck had been rumbling along the dusty desert road for nearly an hour. Locke informed them it would be another half hour before they would pick up his other personnel. Taro rode up front with the short tan fox, casually chatting to while away the time; the others rode out the bumps in the canvas-covered back.

They'd discussed their mission until they were all tired of the subject and had fallen silent during the hot and dusty ride. Tanis stared dully out the open back of the truck, letting his eyes unfocus with the retreating terrain. Duffy had his eyes closed and Samantha was toying with a palm-sized slateboard programmed with all her familiar decryption software.

After a long while, Tanis rubbed his eyes and glanced back at the Siberian husky who seemed to be unaffected by the heat. He assumed the canine's double coat of fur insulated him against the heat as well as cold temperatures. "Hey, Duff," he said quietly.

The husky opened his ice blue eyes and looked over at him. "Yeah?" he replied.

"Have ya ever been to the pleasure houses on Quet?" Tanis asked casually.

Samantha looked up the medic, giving him an odd look for asking such a thing, but Duffy didn't seem bothered by such a personal query. He answered the question without really seeming to think about it. "Yeah, but it was a long time ago," he replied, "after I left Nalirra." He stretched and arched his back. He glanced at his watch and saw there was still plenty of time to kill. He closed his eyes again and said, "I transported miners to Quet several times and usually stopped in to play while there. Not much else to do on that rotted planet, but I was paid well to ferry workers in so they could dig for micranite."

"When was that?" Tanis asked carefully. Samantha gave him another dirty look. Perhaps this was what old military buddies talked about, but it didn't seem the kind of topic Tanis would normally bring up; he was usually vocal about *avoiding* pleasure houses like a plague. He ignored Sam's gazes, staring back out at the receding road behind them.

"I dunno..." Duffy replied lazily, "probably around eighteen years since I was there last. Why - you thinking of going and need a recommendation? The ones I went to probably aren't there anymore."

"I'm not making any plans to that place," Tanis answered, "but I've heard things about the spaceport there. Just wondered."

"Forget it," Duffy said after a moment. "Unless you're just desperate for attention, I wouldn't bother with Quet's pleasure houses. The best ones are on Mainor."

"Were on Mainor," Tanis reminded him with a frown.

"Yeah... I suppose that moves Kantus up to the number one spot, then," Duffy replied. "Not that there's much chance of me ever getting back there again -- not for that reason, anyway."

Tanis nodded and let the conversation die. Samantha watched Tanis closely and she could practically see the wheels turning something over in his mind. If she knew him as well as she thought she did, his question to Duffy had been anything but casual.

Durant was against the idea, but Renny's insistence had finally won out. Since they were informed that it would be another full day before the *Blue Horizon* could be unloaded, the navigator had no intention of just sitting on his hands. He had struck up a friendship across the com with Captain Victoria Ros of the *Cherry Blossom* wanting to visit with her and the rest of her feline crew. With the Nalirran restrictions, however, he was forbidden to leave his ship even just to get over to the other freighter.

After making a suggestion to Ros, it was decided to couple the two ships together with their extension tunnel so they could move between the two freighters without violating the Nalirran edict. Durant had been opposed to it, not so much for the logistics of aligning the ship hatches, but for the fact that the extendable tunnel was designed for zero-gee use only. Its bottom was not built to withstand weight in a planetary environment. When Pockets suggested that Renny could float across on Samantha's anti-grav computer cushion, Durant finally relented.

The *Blue Horizon* had to lift off a few meters above the ground, and then rotate on its axis until its hatch lined up with the *Cherry Blossom's* main airlock. The move caused quite a stir with Sal-Sgt. Veers, but by the time the hyena had managed to get someone to answer his rants over the Com channel, the deed had been completed and the *Horizon* was resting on the ground once more.

Renny could hardly wait to visit with Captain Ros; he was on his way to find the floating pillow as soon as he had powered down the flight systems.

"Report in to your supervisors," Locke told the new transfers after the truck had come to a halt outside the Personnel Facility. He pulled a notepad from his vest pocket and flipped it open. "Guidonay, report to Gun-Sergeant Wibberly on the third floor in section four. Masari, you and Jitloff report in to Raf-Captain Bokmun on the fourth floor in section three."

"Yessir," replied a young jackal who had been leering lustfully at Samantha for the past hour. The other two, a Cocker Spaniel and a golden retriever muttered their acknowledgement and trudged toward the building without looking back. It was clear neither were happy with this reassignment.

Locke moved closer to his team and lowered his voice after the others had gone. "Just a final word..." he said. "As you can tell from those two, morale isn't very high at this place, so when you meet someone in the halls, try not to look anyone directly in the eye. You might give yourself away if you seem too friendly or direct. Don't seem too cowed if a superior officer confronts you, either. They don't really expect much cooperation from the new personnel brought in, and they don't really even care. The work is important to Nalirra, but I can tell you that nobody here gives a rip."

The desert fox gestured toward a small metallic insect clinging beneath the lapel of his vest collar. "I'll be monitoring Duffy's miniature DataCom units if you get into any trouble. Try not to use them if you can keep from it. They have a short range that won't extend far beyond the walls of this building, but I have no way of knowing if their signals can be monitored here." He looked at each one of them and then asked, "Any last questions before we go in?"

No one said anything. They'd gone over their plans and rehearsed their parts so much in the last couple of weeks that they all knew what they were to do. Locke nodded, and then motioned for them to follow him to the main entrance to the place.

The Personnel Facility was a multi-level block building, the outside appearance nondescript against the surrounding scrub vegetation, tropical trees and sand dunes of the oasis. Samantha was beginning to wonder if all of Nalirra was this arid and dusty, even though Tanis had assured her that only a small part of this continent on the planet was desert region. The claycrete blocks of the building's exterior were weather worn and crumbling in places, and the solar panels atop the roof were in poor shape. There were other outbuildings surrounding the structure in the small post and all looked as if they were in serious need of repair. Locke opened the front door gently; the rusted metal handle was loose and the hinges protested against the grit between them.

The team moved inside. It took them a moment to let their eyes adjust to the dimness inside while people hustled up and down the hallways, most laden with stacks of paper-filled folders. Taro blinked several times and noted that the interior was not getting much brighter as her eyes adjusted. Half the bulbs in the light panels above were off, and those that did burn illuminated the entrance hall only enough for them to see where they were going.

"No wonder morale's down," she whispered to Samantha. "I'd be depressed if I had to work in this dim light all the time, too."

"We had a severe dust storm last week that sand-blasted the solar panels on the roof," Locke explained. "Power is low and is limited only to important equipment. Of course,

everyone feels there is a need to run *their* systems due to the increased workload, but things like coffee pots and water fountains aren't currently allowed."

Tanis moved up to Locke's side to whisper something to him and Taro smiled to herself at the sight of the two fennec foxes walking side by side. Tanis was an inch shorter than Locke was, and his facial markings were a little different, but to someone who didn't know Tanis as well as she and Samantha did, the two of them might have looked like brothers.

Locke led them across the small entrance hall to a cross corridor, and without a final word, Locke led Sam and Taro toward the right, while Tanis and Duffy turned to the left toward a nearby stairwell. *Operation Rainbow* had begun, and each of them would now have to rely upon their memorization of the building's floor plan and their current identities.

At the stairwell, Tanis and Duffy separated. One file storeroom was on the first floor around the next corner, but a redundant file room was on the fourth floor at the opposite side of the building near the Infirmary. Duffy continued down the hallway. Tanis disappeared up the stairs.

Tanis fought the urge to take the steps two at a time, but someone was descending from the second floor with an armful of folders. An Irish setter glanced over at him above the top of her load, but she didn't smile. She stumbled trying to find a step, almost falling headfirst, but Tanis stretched out an arm and caught her about the waist. Papers from the top three folders plunged off her stack and scattered below, but at least the young canine had not joined them.

"Th-thank you, sir," she muttered to Tanis. "I might have..."

"Pick up yer papers," the desert fox grumbled. He resisted the urge to give her hand, but he had to play his part, being inconsiderate to the lowly file clerk.

"Yessir," she mumbled. Tanis left her to navigate the rest of the paper-strewn stairs with the armload of folders. When he reached the second floor landing, he proceeded through a door into a busy office and skirted between the cubicles as if he was familiar with where he were going. No one looked up at him. None asked his business. They were used to seeing new faces on practically an hourly basis, so he wasn't even noticed.

He had to mount two more sets of stairs to get to the document center where he'd been assigned to work, and from memory he placed the next stairwell at the other end of his current room. Uniformed canine personnel sat at their desks poring through documents, new and old. Only a select few actually had working computer terminals to research those off-world who had separated from Nalirran service. The overall disarray of the entire undertaking encouraged Tanis. *Operation Rainbow* could actually work out as planned.

Locke glanced over his shoulder past the women behind him, noting with relief that the long corridor they had just traversed was still empty but for the three of them. He led them around a corner into a darkened hallway toward a solitary red light at the opposite end. There was a closed door beneath the scarlet illumination and even in the dim light, they could see the panel was locked.

"I wasn't able to get all of the security codes," Locke admitted in a soft voice to Taro and Samantha. "I had hoped to figure out a way to get past this door into the computer room before you arrived, but I got sidetracked."

Samantha nodded in understanding, reaching into a pants pocket to retrieve her small slateboard. She tapped in a few commands and then placed a sensor cap up to the electronic lock mechanism beside the door. Before the *Blue Horizon* had broken through into a time of

prosperity, she and Pockets had often picked mechanical and electronic locks in order to filch material for the ship, so there were a number of tricks she could try. The Border collie worked with the lock for several moments before she bit her lip in frustration.

"The cipher code must be a locally-written program," she whispered at last. "It doesn't follow the patterns of what I'm experienced with. I'm not sure I can easily break it."

"I can break it," Taro said confidently. Samantha looked up at her in wonder. She hadn't been aware that her friend was experienced in cipher-lock decryption, but she moved out of the way to let the vixen have access to the control panel.

Instead of working with the terminal, however, Taro stepped up to the doorframe, centering her fingertips near the edge closest to the panel. She took a deep breath, let it out quietly, and then dug her fingers into the thin metal door facing.

Taro had such control over her Hestran-born muscles that it was often easy to forget the strength she possessed. Samantha watched in awe as the metal slowly buckled beneath the vixen's fingertips. When Taro had a solid grip into the door, she braced herself and then began to exert herself along the door facing. The metal gave out a long, low groan, and then a *pop* as the locking mechanism separated from its housing inside the wall. The door slid sideways into the opposite wall with only a light touch. She turned and looked at a grinning Samantha - and a frowning Locke.

"What's the matter?" she asked him.

"A broken door will be reported," he replied disapprovingly, "especially one *forced* that now has the indentions of your fingers permanently embedded in it. We could have found another way in."

"Oops..."

Locke looked back down the dim corridor with a sigh. "This room is seldom visited," he said after a quiet moment, "so we'll have to hope it won't be discovered until after we're gone." He turned on a single desk lamp just inside the door and motioned for the others to follow him. Once they were inside, he slid the damaged panel back into place. He moved past his partners, leading them through a number of cubicles with darkened computer terminals, past a row of large memory servers to the only desk with a functioning screen.

"Why isn't this place in use?" Taro asked. Without responding, Locke took a seat at the desk and tapped in a few commands. A security message appeared instantly. He input a string of symbols and was rewarded with a double beep.

"Okay, we're in," the desert fox said. He glanced up at Taro. "There are access terminals to the database from the other offices in this building, so there's no need to do anything directly at the computer center except for maintenance."

"Then why did we break in here?" Samantha asked. "Couldn't you have just placed me at a vacant desk with a terminal to do my work? Seems like it would have been easier, especially since you went to the trouble of making it appear I was a transfer to this place."

Locke nodded and twitched his whiskers. "That was my original plan," he said, "but with our low energy supply right now, all the available terminals that we can spare power for are currently in use. It would be suspicious to take someone else from their overworked job to have you jump in for an hour's work." He gestured toward the computer before him and added, "This terminal is on at all times, so there won't be any power consumption problems by having you access the database from here."

"I see," the collie replied.

"Okay," Locke said as he stood up. "You know what to do from here. I'm going to take your friend to her assignment now, but I'll be by later to check in on you."

"Yes, sir," Samantha replied, taking the seat in front of the computer.

"We'll shut what is left of the door behind us, so that it will appear to be closed in the dark hallway."

Taro looked embarrassed, but said nothing. Samantha nodded to the fennec fox without another word and then turned to study the screen before her to determine which operating system it might be using. She nodded to herself and began typing in commands before Taro and Locke were back out into the red illumination of the corridor.

Clarence Duffy stiffly saluted the young officer behind a desk piled high with papers, folders and data crystals. "Bar-Lieutenant Ridel Roscom, reporting for duty, sir," he said.

The jackal saluted indifferently and then held out his hand without even looking up from a large spreadsheet. Duffy handed him his forged orders and waited patiently. "Roscom..." the officer muttered as he glanced over the documents. "Ex-pilot... grounded from Fengail Station... injury... Right." He handed the paper back to the husky and then motioned toward the door without looking up. "Out in the hall, turn left, four doors down to Rainbow Room Three. Val-Corporal Szabo will tell you what you're to do. Now get out of my sight."

"Yessir," Duffy replied with another salute. The jackal returned the salute lazily and picked up another spreadsheet.

The Siberian husky left the room and headed down the semi-crowded hall, amazed at the lack of interest on everyone's part that he met along the way. The hallway was painted in various shades of tan and yellow, illuminated somewhat by a single dim light panel in the ceiling halfway down the corridor. Duffy almost missed the door marked, "Rainbow Room Three." He growled lowly at a Private blocking the door with an armload of folders and then pushed his way past him into the room.

Duffy quietly closed the door behind him and frowned at what he saw. The room was small, containing wall-to-wall bookcases filled with a rainbow-assortment of folders. Two large desks occupied the sparse area in between, facing one another and piled high with folders that were red, blue, yellow, green, purple, pink or black. Each color appeared to be coded for a different purpose; most were bulging with thick sheaves of paper documents and photos.

He heard a shuffling behind one of the stacks of folders. He peered around to see a lanky young hyena with thick round-rimmed glasses poring over the contents of a folder. Duffy cleared his throat and the man jumped.

"Are you Val-Corporal Szabo?" he asked.

The startled hyena nodded and saluted him casually, not bothering to wait for the reply. "What can I do for you, Bar-Lieutenant?" he asked in a slow drawl, "I'm busy and behind in my work."

"I've been assigned to help you," Duffy replied. "My name's Roscom."

Szabo looked up at him with possibly the first hint of a smile that he'd seen since entering the facility. "They sent a Bar-Lieutenant to *help* me? Well, sir, come right in and find a chair if you can. My name is Tage Szabo."

Duffy shoved his orders into one of the pockets of his vest and then began to remove a tilting stack of folders from the only other chair in the room next to the second desk. There was no room on the desk for them, so he set them gingerly onto the floor, trying not to let the stack fall over.

"So, what's the purpose in all this?" Duffy asked. "I've just been transferred here, something about helping out the Personnel Effort."

Szabo smirked at him. "We have to scour through all these documents, looking for viable candidates of past service members to recall into action," he replied. "The hardest part of all this is reading through everyone's files to see what skills they had, and then track them down to see if they're still alive to draft again."

"What about those who've already served the two-term limit?"

"Doesn't matter. They're calling back everyone with skills they can get their claws into, even if they're old and decrepit. The two-term limit was recently abolished by Sed Amittias, but I think General Duular tried to oppose him on it."

Duffy picked up a blue folder from the top of the stack at his right elbow and opened it up before him. He felt a tingle travel up and down his spine when he recognized the name and photograph inside. "I knew this guy," he said somberly.

Szabo stood up and peered over the folders to see which one the husky was looking into. "That's Sean Rennin," he said, "I did some research on him last week, but was unable to find his current whereabouts. I have that one set aside for another department to do deeper research."

"Forget this one," Duffy said as he handed the folder to his new partner. "He was a shyster lawyer with a wife and thirteen half-witted children. He was living on Mainor when the Kastani slammed it."

"Is that right...?" Szabo mused as he flipped through the folder again. He reached into a box on the floor beside him and drew out an empty black folder. He transferred the contents of Rennin's folder to it and then set it aside in a different stack. "That takes care of that one," he muttered.

He pointed to the stack on Duffy's left and said, "Those haven't been researched yet, if you wanna start with them. If you find a viable candidate to bring back, transfer that person's documents to a white folder and give it to me. Stephanie will come in periodically to take them to Processing, where they'll use the information to send them a Draft Notice." He explained the rest of the rainbow assortment of color-coding for several minutes. When he finished, he shrugged his shoulders and then returned to his own work.

Duffy glanced up at the folders surrounding him, feeling daunted by the task. Locke had said that there was only one copy of the original paper document that could be *anywhere* in this building, in addition to an electronic backup copy. Samantha should be able to find the backup by hacking into the computer system and doing an automated search, but how was he going to find his and Tanis' documents in all this?

"Rainbow Room Two," Locke said to Taro when they neared a wooden door with a frosted glass window with a crack across one corner. Taro peered around his shoulder when he opened the door. It was a huge room filled with multicolored folders in bookcases and filing cabinets, and was staffed with twenty other individuals bustling back and forth through the narrow aisles between the desks and voices chatting in conversation.

Locke motioned her in and shut the door behind them. Few workers paid them any attention as they skirted around stacks of folders, data crystals and large metal-bound books.

"Hah - more fresh meat for the dungeon and she doesn't even look very smart. Perfect for this place..." muttered a sarcastic voice from a cubicle they passed. Taro stopped and looked at the Pomeranian who had spoken.

"Careful," Taro growled at her. "I bite."

"Hah!" the woman said haughtily. "You're just another floozy who - *urk!*" Taro reached out quickly with one hand, snared the dog's throat in a vise-like grip and locked eyes with her. The Pomeranian grabbed her wrist, but was unable to remove the hand from her neck. Locke watched in amusement, but made no move to stop anything.

The Pomeranian began to gasp for air, the pink areas of her face beginning to turn blue as she beat weakly against the fox's hand. Before she had the chance to pass out, Taro released her and stood up to her full height. "You were saying?" she asked dryly.

The room was silent but for the raspy breathing of the Pomeranian who sat limply in her chair. Taro turned and surveyed the room; spectators immediately pretended to go back to their respective tasks. When she looked back down at her antagonist, the woman glared at her and gasped, "I have nothing more to say to you..."

"How wise of you," Taro said with a tight-lipped smile. "Remember that and we should get along fine." She looked at Locke and nodded as if to say, *Lead on...*

The desert fox continued down the aisle. Conversations started up behind them in earnest whispers and chuckles as they moved around a corner. "She deserved that," he said quietly. "Flores has been here the longest and she detests *everyone*. If you were really assigned to this place, your little act back there would have given you a lot of allies in the workforce."

"There are idiots everywhere," Taro muttered with a sigh.

A moment later, Locke stopped beside a cubicle at the back corner of the room that was full of green folders. "I'm going to start you off here," he said, "and then I need to get back to my office. Any last questions?"

The vixen shook her head. They had already covered her task in detail. It was time to get to work and do what she was there to do. Locke nodded. "Good luck," he said with a wink. "I don't think the locals will give you too much trouble."

Tanis walked into Sickbay and pursed his lips. The Personnel Facility was so overwrought with its current workload that papers, rainbow folders and more boxes of the same had been stacked in the medical room. A small space on the countertop contained bandages, antiseptics and a few bottles of aspirin - not much more than the contents of the generalized First Aid kit he carried in a vest pocket. The rest of the cabinets, chairs and even the emergency gurney were all filled with personnel documents.

Two medics, a red fox and a beagle sat on the floor, their backs up against plastic boxes and slateboards in their laps as they pored through file folders. He cleared his throat and one of them looked up at him.

"Yeah? What do you want?" the red fox asked in annoyance.

"I'm Den-Medic Kykendol," Tanis replied irritably. "I've been assigned to help ya yahoos."

"Pull up some floor and grab a box," the beagle said as he looked up. "I'm Den-Medic Doral and this is Den-Medic Liam. We got here yesterday."

Tanis nodded and sat down beside the more-talkative Doral. "Tell me what which folder color means what and I'll get started."

The beagle picked up a handful of them from the floor in front of him. "Red means that the person who left the military went out on bad terms, but have the most-needed skills for a conflict," Doral explained. "The government will want to know what the circumstances were when they left."

"Okay, got it."

"The blue folders are similar. These people also have the skills greatly needed for a battle situation, only these left the service with high commendations. Yellow means they're branded as cowards, but can still be usable. That *probably* means they'll be among the first bodies sent to the front lines, y'know."

"Ouch."

"Green means they're offworld, readily available, and are anxious to get back into the fight, but need transportation back to Nalirra. Orange means their whereabouts are currently unknown, but further investigation will be required to find them."

"What about the purple one?"

"Undesirable. Do not recall under any circumstances."

"Why?"

"Among other reasons, they'll likely turn on their comrades at the first opportunity just because they've been given weapons and will have too much fun using them."

"The black folder means they're dead," Liam muttered dryly. "I wish my C.O. were one of them for sending me to this pit."

Tanis looked at the red fox and frowned. It only been a couple years since he had left the military himself, but he still remembered how miserable life in the Nalirran service could be. He sincerely hoped he and his teammates were successful in locating and purging his own rainbow folder. In the event it could not be destroyed, perhaps he could simply transfer the contents to a black folder to let the government think he had perished somewhere.

Samantha sat back in her chair and heaved a great sigh of relief. Hacking into the system computers had been nervous work. Locke had gotten her into the main interface, but it had been up to her to get past certain barriers in order to find the information they needed.

The electronic backup versions of Tanis and Duffy's rainbow documents had been well protected behind security measures, but unlike the door's lock encryption, the main operating system of the Nalirran personnel database was a familiar one from Alexandrius that she had experience getting around. Once she had managed to get past the barriers, it was a matter of hunting down the documents she sought.

She located Tanis' backup document almost right away; it had not yet been accessed by any of the system terminals. However, she lacked sufficient access rights to delete the file. No matter what she tried, the document could not be purged from the database. The information itself could be changed, so instead of simply marking him as deceased, she rewrote her friend's background to reflect a different individual in the altered document with no connection to Arktanis TeVann at all. With a satisfied smirk, she replaced the fennec fox's photograph with "image not available," reset the name to *Armando Jensen* with "last known location" marked as "interstellar freighter captain, *Savannah Hunter*, PA1012."

She had more trouble locating Clarence Duffy's electronic document. It had been accessed earlier that same day, but had not yet been flagged for processing. It had most likely been cross-referenced with someone else's folder, so it would be tricky to alter it as she had with

Tanis' document. She had to trace where it had been accessed from and make alterations to that document as well. In all, it had taken her a little over two hours to make her edits and then back out of the system quietly as so not to leave traces of her own trespasses.

Samantha left the system terminal just as they had found it, retracing her steps back out into the dim corridor. She slid the door panel that Taro had damaged back into place, wiped it down to remove fingerprints with a handkerchief from a pocket, and then hummed quietly to herself as she made her way back to the main hall. When she got to the junction, she remembered that she should have contacted Locke about her success before leaving the computer room, but he had not yet checked back on her. From her memory of the VR practicing they had all done with the building's floor plans, she thought she could make her way to Locke's office.

"Hey! What are you doing here?" a voice called out. Samantha turned to see an angry hyena approaching her. His hunched shoulders were so broad that the two buttons on the front of his ill-fitting vest threatened to pop off at any moment. He stopped, stood nose to nose with her and stared at her with bloodshot eyes. "Well?" he growled.

"I, uh, was looking for the latrine, sir," she said quickly.

"It's back *that* way!" the man said in a gravelly voice, pointing up the hallway. "You should know that."

"I, uh, was just transferred in this morning, sir," she said with a gulp, trying not to flinch from his severe halitosis. "I didn't know where..."

The hyena grabbed her wrist and pulled her with him as he stormed into the direction he had just come from. Samantha could do nothing more than go along with him, wondering if he knew he had caught an intruder. She knew her Silloni and Kastan fighting techniques could likely subdue this guy, but that would call down more attention than was safe at this point.

The man stopped in front of the women's latrine and pushed her toward the door. "Get in there and do your business!" he commanded. "When you're done, we're marching straight to my office."

"Sir?"

"*Get in there!*" he bellowed.

Samantha jumped through the doorway into the latrine, her nerves shaken. She looked around a dingy and dirty room that contained two stalls but no other door out. It didn't look as if the place had been cleaned in a long time and one of the stalls was out of order. Paper towels, neglected combs, and other remnants of makeup kits littered the single counter and the floors. A single dim light illuminated the room. She didn't know what the hyena was going to do to her in his office, but if she had to incapacitate him and escape, she prepared herself for that possibility. She took several deep breaths and discovered she *did* need the facilities after that encounter, but was reluctant to do so in that filthy place. However, the need was stronger than her pride. A moment later, she readied herself and stepped out into the corridor where the hyena waited for her.

"Done?" he growled.

"Done, sir," she replied without looking him in the eye.

"Okay," he said in a calmer voice. He led her up the hall, this time without touching her. "Like you, I'm new to this place and I'm having a little trouble with the terminal in my office," he explained in an almost-civil tone. "I need you to transcribe some documents into the central computer for me."

He stopped at the open door to a tiny office and pointed toward the only desk in the room. A barely readable nameplate next to the computer monitor identified him as Bar-

Lieutenant Grun Tola. "Here's my workstation," he said. "Give me your name and I'll make sure your supervisor is informed that I've borrowed you for another assignment."

Samantha sat down in the desk chair under a single dim light and replied, "I'm Sal-Sgt. Anteola," as she offered him her fabricated identification. He waved it away without giving it a glance.

"Who's your supervisor?"

"Bar-Lieutenant Locke, sir."

The hyena nodded and pointed to a stack of green folders on the left side of the desk. It was teetering, on the verge of falling over onto Samantha's lap. "See if you can figure out how to get the information from those folders into the system."

"Yessir," Samantha replied.

The Bar-Lieutenant nodded and moved to stand behind her. He wanted to watch her work. She was relieved to know she had not been discovered, but with this guy hovering over her, she would have no opportunity to report in to Locke to let him know where she was and what she was doing.

"Sir," she said hesitantly, "my supervisor?"

"I'll call him when I've seen that you can be a help to me," he growled in her ear.

"Yessir." Samantha sighed inwardly and gave her attention to the screen. If she could perform this task quickly, perhaps she could be on her way.

Captain Victoria Ros handed a glass of beer to the cheetah before her, sinking down onto the velvet cushion beside him on the couch. Renny took the drink with a smile and sipped it. He tried hard not to grimace at the flavor of the cheap beer, but swallowed it quickly.

The black and white female cat leaned closer to him, resting her chin on his shoulder. "If you ever decide to leave the *Blue Horizon*, you'd be welcome on my crew," she said with a purr. "My folks seem to like you well enough, and I think I'm starting to adore you, myself."

Renny looked away from her green eyes and glanced around the recreation deck at her other crewmembers that were scattered about the room. The *Cherry Blossom* was the same model of *Okami* freighter as his own ship, though it had been decorated with a more plush design. Merlin had never been much of an interior decorator of his ships, but this vessel was pleasantly cozy. He glanced back down at his glass and considered the irony of serving him a cheap drink in the midst of extravagance.

He looked back at the captain and gave her a warm smile. "Your ship has a nice feel to it," he admitted to her, "and everyone's tried to make me feel quite at home - especially the ladies."

Victoria laughed. "This is the first time I've had you to myself all day. I'm pleased you like it here."

"Everyone seems friendly enough," Renny remarked. "The guys want me to join them later in a chips game. I'm surprised none of them seem too bothered by the attention their ladies have given me."

Victoria grinned and snickered. "Don't be surprised," she said in a sly voice. "I'm sure they welcome the distraction."

Renny looked at her; he suddenly felt a common bond with the other guys of her vessel. The women had hardly left him alone since he had boarded their ship. He couldn't remember a time when he had been in so much demand.

Victoria ran the fingers of one hand across the black fabric of Renny's shirt and then toyed with the top button. "Care to see the inside of my cabin, dear?" she asked. "I have a special present I'd like to give you." Renny swallowed as she gave his neck a gentle lick and felt the warmth of her body up against him.

Duffy heaved a heavy sigh and sat back in his chair. He had been hunched over folders for hours and his lower back was aching. The light was not good in the room and he rubbed his tired eyes. He looked over at Szabo. The glazed look in his coworker's eyes must have matched his own. It didn't take much imagination to wonder why morale was so low in this place.

A young Irish setter named Stephanie had been by their office to collect completed white folders twice since he had been there; other than her, Duffy had seen no one else.

"When do we get to take a break?" he asked as he rubbed the soreness in his back.

Szabo snorted and looked up at him. "When you go home at 1900 hours," he said.

"What about meals?"

"Nobody told you to bring your own?" Szabo asked him with the shake of his head. "You can eat at your desk while you work, but you have to bring your own food. The cafeteria was converted to more records space, so they don't have the facilities to feed us. It's also cheaper for them if they don't have to supply meals."

"Wonderful..." Duffy muttered. "I can't wait to get out of here."

"Keep dreaming, Roscom." The lanky young hyena took off his thick, round-rimmed glasses and dropped them lightly on top of a folder. "Once you've been assigned here, you don't go anywhere else. This is the armpit of the Nalirran Military... a dead end for your career." Szabo stretched his arms and looked up at the only picture in the room that was tacked up on the backside of the door. It was a faded and torn poster, promoting the glories and benefits of life in military service. A male hyena, a female desert fox and a broad-shouldered male bulldog were snappily dressed in their uniforms, armed to the teeth and beating down silhouetted feline opponents. "I'd give anything to get out of this pit and join some real action," Szabo said wistfully.

Duffy frowned. He'd had his own share of fighting as a combat pilot, and while it wasn't as boring as work in a personnel facility, there was no real glamour in killing others. He was trained well enough that he would kill if he had to, but actively seeking to get into a fight was no longer a dream of his own.

"Have you ever killed anyone, Szabo?" he asked his coworker.

The younger man shook his head. "No, but that doesn't make me a wimp," he said defensively. "I *want* to fight for Nalirra!"

The Siberian husky shrugged his shoulders. "Well," he said quietly, "maybe you'll get your chance when this thing gets started."

Szabo's shoulders drooped. "No," he said, "no chance for me." He picked up his glasses and put them on. The thick lenses made his eyes look twice their normal size. "With eyes like mine, I'll be stuck in this place pushing paper for the rest of my military career."

When Duffy didn't have a reply to his words, the young hyena shrugged his shoulders and looked back down at the folder he had been reading earlier. "Better get back to work," he muttered.

"Yeah," Duffy said slowly.

"Captain Ros?"

"Yes, Benson, what is it?" Victoria replied to the intercom channel in a dreamy voice. She lay next to Renny with her eyes half open, a silk sheet covering them both. The cheetah was sound asleep at her side, lying on his stomach, his face buried in a pink pillow.

"Juxenlow has just informed us that a team has arrived to unload our cargo," said the voice from the small speaker set in the ceiling of the darkened room.

"That's good news, Ben. Will they let us out of the ship to get some fresh air now?"

"We're still forbidden to touch their soil, Captain. There's a military guard standing by with orders to shoot any of us who disobey. Any fresh air will have to come to us through the open bay door."

"I didn't expect any different," Victoria admitted. "Okay, I want you, Chang and Tremus down in the cargo bay to supervise the unloading. Don't stray beyond the bay doors or I'll have to inform your sweethearts on Fyn that you've been skinned and hung out to dry."

"Aye, Cap'n," her first officer replied. "Unloading should start right away."

"Hey Roscom!" the bespectacled hyena said to Duffy with a mischievous grin. He held up a blue folder. "This guy looks like *you*! Can you believe his luck - he's going to be one of the first guys going to the action!" He held up a black and white photograph of a younger Siberian husky.

Duffy felt his hackles rise. "What's the lucky fellow's name?" he asked hoarsely.

Szabo glanced at the label on the folder. "Clarence Daniel Duffy," he replied. "*Clarence!* His parents must have hated him to saddle him with a name like that! Sounds like a complete loser."

Duffy felt the blood drain from his face. Szabo was not looking at him or he might have gotten suspicious, but instead he studied the document. "This guy's living in the backwoods on Fyn, but he's about to see some action in spatial combat," the hyena said casually. "I envy him and his chance to kill Tanatans right off the cuff, but even after this war gets started, I'm going to be stuck right here, pushing more paper. Why can't we have the electronic, paperless society that other worlds are using?"

Duffy felt as if the time had slowed to a crawl as he watched Szabo pick up a white folder, transfer the contents of his own personnel file into it, and set the empty blue folder aside. He watched mutely as the hyena picked up his pen and began to fill out the form to process the information as someone else to draft back into the military. After several long minutes, Szabo finished the form, dropped it into the folder, and then set the document file aside on top of the stack of others he had already worked on.

Duffy could now feel the blood pounding in his temples, his heartbeat racing as his coworker picked up another folder to look through. He knew he would have to wait a few more minutes before he could attempt to take his file from the top of the stack or Szabo might suspect something.

He swallowed quietly and looked down at the folder on the desk in front of him. The information he had been looking at qualified for its own white folder, so he decided to take a chance. He would fill out the form on this person and then put it on top of the stack as Szabo had done, but would try to slide his own folder out from under it covertly. To destroy it, he

might have to claim a necessary trip to the bathroom and flush the contents before returning to continue his search for Tanis' folder.

Duffy picked up his pen and grabbed a blank form. While he slowly filled out the information, the door to the room opened. Stephanie walked in and grabbed the stack of white folders from the edge of the desk. Duffy looked up in alarm, but had to bite his tongue to keep from barking at her to stop. The young Irish setter left with her armload without a word to either of them, and Duffy suddenly stood up to follow her.

"Where are *you* going?" Szabo asked as he looked up at him.

"Latrine," Duffy answered with a forced grimace. "I'll be right back."

"Right."

The Siberian husky shut the door behind him and he glanced up the hallway toward the girl. He trotted after her and lunged forward when he got right behind her. He bumped the box out of her hands as if he had tripped, scattering white folders across the floor. The canine cried out in alarm, but he kept his eyes on the one that had been on top, knowing that he had to grab it at all costs.

"Sorry about that, Stef," he said in an embarrassed voice.

"Thanks, really great," the girl grumbled with a frown. She'd already gotten into trouble three times that day, and she would probably get a lashing if her supervisor saw the mess at her feet. She knelt down to pick up her folders. Duffy bent down to help her. Other people moving through the hallway stepped around them without a second glance.

A door opened in the hallway nearby and a high-ranking jackal stepped out of a noisy office. He saw the scattered folders and the two individuals picking them up. The officer stormed over to them, placed his right boot on top of a folder and crossed his arms across his narrow chest.

"*Stephanie!* What's going on here?" he asked in a huff.

"Oh, crap," the girl said beneath her breath; it was her supervisor. "J-just a little accident, sir," she said in a louder voice. "We'll have these picked up and on your desk promptly, sir."

"Girl, you are *not* going home tonight!" the officer barked in a voice louder than necessary. "You've been in *enough* trouble today that you may not go home for a bloody *week!* I'm going to give you *so* much work to do that if you ever decide to cause me any more trouble, you'll be cleaning the crapped-in *toilets* in this building with your own personal toothbrush!"

The jackal went on ranting at the shaking girl and Duffy felt guilty for getting her into trouble. She was nearly in tears as her superior officer detailed his views on her parentage and his opinion of her family genetics. Duffy looked for his folder, and saw that it was beneath the officer's boot. He continued to pick up folders until the man suddenly stopped his tirade, looking at him coldly.

"Get back to your assignment, soldier..." the jackal said between clenched teeth.

"Yessir!" Duffy stood up, saluted with a jerk, and then retreated back down the hallway to the stuffy room where he had spent the last few hours. He stopped at the door and noted that the officer was verbally abusing the young Irish setter again while she scrambled to pick up the rest of the folders.

Finally, the man lifted his boot and let the girl have the last of the folders. She picked up the dusty folder and followed her supervisor into his office, her tail tucked firmly between her legs. The door slammed behind them and Duffy was left in a corridor that was suddenly as quiet as a tomb without the officer's bellows, despite all the people moving by with their armloads.

He walked around several people toting boxes, moving to the door where his folder had disappeared. He opened it a crack and peered inside. He saw the officer sit down at a desk in a corner and watched Stephanie set the folders down in front of him. The jackal waved her away and picked up the first folder on top of the stack. Duffy noted with a sinking feeling that there was a distinct boot print across the white surface of the folder in the officer's hand.

The Siberian husky closed the door and leaned against the doorframe with his eyes closed. There was nothing more he could do here. He had failed to keep his folder from going into processing. He knew with cold realization that he would be drafted back into the Nalirran military.

Lorelei stood outside the cargo bay, shielding her eyes against the sun as she searched the sky for a reddish-orange freighter. Ninety minutes earlier, the *Hidalgo Sun* had called in to say they had reached standard orbit over Nalirra and had received clearance to land as soon as they were in optimum position. They were now on their way down into the atmosphere and Lori was excited about seeing their sister ship again. Ever since Merlin bought the second *Okami* freighter and welcomed Rezo's crew into the company, Lorelei had become close friends with several of them. She was especially fond of the first officer, Jonesy.

The white rabbit was dressed in a yellow halter top and a tan pair of extremely small shorts, distracting the workers unloading the *Cherry Blossom* with the way her fluffy tail spilled out over the top of her waistband. She let out a small cry of joy when she saw a sparkle of light approaching the airfield. She began hopping up and down, her cottontail bouncing with the action.

Inside the *Blue Horizon*, Durant was at the Com station on the bridge with the headset across his ears as he spoke into the tiny condenser boom microphone. He rubbed his palms on the powder blue shirt he wore as he sat nervously awaiting the other vessel. He was just as excited for the opportunity to see Carmen again as Lorelei was of seeing Jonesy.

"Yes, that's right," he said. "They aren't letting felines off the ships, so you'll have to keep Tsarina and Jonesy on board while you're here, Captain. We've had to confine Renny inside the ships, although there's really not much to do outside the *Horizon* anyway."

He listened to the red panda's reports a moment more and then explained how the *Blue Horizon* and the *Cherry Blossom* had been coupled together. They exchanged a few more words and then had to close the conversation so Rezo's pilot could concentrate on landing procedures.

Durant sat back in his chair with a frown. He tapped out the calling code on the Com terminal and then waited for a reply.

"This is the *Cherry Blossom*," said a female voice over the speakers. "What can I do for you?"

"This is the *Blue Horizon*, Missy. I need to speak to Renny."

"I think he and the captain are still –"

"Please," he interrupted, "this is important."

"Alright, but I don't think he'll be happy." The circuit went quiet for a few moments and Durant fidgeted, wondering exactly what he was interrupting.

"Durant!"

"Renny, sorry to bother you, but..."

"That's okay, I needed the break. Whatcha need?" The cheetah sounded as if he were in a better mood.

"I need you back over here pronto so we can uncouple the ships. The *Hidalgo Sun* will be landing shortly and I want to set up our two ships in the same way."

"*The Hidalgo Sun? Yeesh, I don't think I could handle Tsarina right now...*" the cheetah's voice groaned quietly over the Com speakers.

"Renny," Durant said in an authoritative tone, "that was an order."

"*Aye, captain, sir,*" Renny said with a laugh. "*I was not complaining – just let me say my good-byes and I'll be floating over.*"

"Thank you. Make it quick."

"*Right.*"

Durant shook his head and then keyed in another call code.

"*You've got the Sandburr, friend. What can we do for ya?*"

"This is the *Blue Horizon*, sir. I need to speak to my two crewmen who are currently on board your ship."

"*Going to call them back to duty?*"

"Yes, I'm afraid so."

"*Wonderful!*" the other voice said. "*I can't prove it, but I think that raccoon of yours cheats at cards...He's taken most of us for what little credits we had!*"

Durant smiled. "Well, if you'll just send them back to me, you can tell them we have company coming."

"*Okie dokie, Horizon. I'll first have to find out which of our gals has the younger guy in her quarters, but I'll get 'em back to you pronto.*"

"Thank you. I would appreciate it." As Durant closed the connection, he took the headset off and laid it on the console with a twitch of an ear. Max with a woman? He thought he remembered something about the German shepherd having been neutered at a young age. Visions of Max spending time in a woman's cabin didn't seem right somehow, even if he *had* grown up working in a pleasure house.

Bar-Lieutenant Tola stood up. Samantha could hear his joints creak as he let out a large belch. She blinked rapidly from the resulting odor, trying to keep her mind on her task. Transcribing the information was menial work that didn't require her level of expertise to do – it was likely this guy just wanted her to do the work for him.

"Keep working, Jeska," he told her. "I'm going outside for a smoke."

"Yessir," she replied mechanically.

She slowly counted down a minute before she heaved a sigh of relief. She reached up behind her lapel, depressing a tiny button on the bug-like transceiver Duffy had designed.

"*This is Locke,*" a whispered voice sounded near her ear.

"Samantha reporting in, sir," she said.

"*Go ahead.*"

"Mission accomplished with the electronic records for Tanis and Duffy," she told him, "but an officer saw me in the hallway and commandeered me to do his computer work for him. I've been in here nearly two hours, but this is the first chance I've had to contact you."

"*I understand. Which office are you in?*"

"Bar-Lieutenant Grun Tola is the name on the desk-plate."

"*That figures. Okay, I'll get you out of that lazy bum's area. Just play it cool until he tells you that I've jumped down his throat for taking one of my employees. Did he say where he was going?*"

"Outside for a smoke. He's been gone about three minutes."

"Understood."

Samantha kept an ear out for footsteps. "Any luck on the others?"

"Partially. Your vixen friend found and destroyed Tanis' physical document, but Duffy had the misfortune to see his own folder walked straight into Processing. He was unable to retrieve it in time."

"That's bad news. Anything we can do about it?"

"I'm afraid not. We've all been waiting for word on your task, so now that you've reported in your success, I'll need to recall the others and get the four of you out of here before you're caught."

"Yes sir," Samantha said soberly. "This means that Duffy will be going to war."

"Very likely. If Sed Amittias has his way, a first strike against the Tanatans will probably begin just as soon as we can recall all these people we've been researching here."

"I hear Tola's footsteps. Signing off." Samantha clicked the tiny button and then looked up at the door just as it opened. The hyena smelled strongly of pungent cigar smoke, but seemed calmer.

"How's it coming?" he asked.

"Only two boxes of folders to go," Samantha replied.

"You can handle it, girl."

There was a sudden buzzing from beneath the desk. The hyena reached down between Samantha's legs, brushing up against her crotch with a lustful grin as he retrieved the Com receiver. Sam suppressed the urge to break off his fingers one at a time and force them down his throat. It was difficult to remember the role she had to play.

"This is Bar-Lieutenant Tola," he said importantly. He listened for a moment with a frown. "Yeah, she's here at my desk. Now, listen, I need her to—" He grumbled under his breath, and then nodded to the receiver. "Yessir, right away."

Samantha scooted back away from the desk to allow him to hang up the Com, mindful not to let him near enough to touch her as he did before. Tola made no effort for a repeat, however. He frowned and gestured with his thumb toward the door over his shoulder.

"That was Locke," he said with a grumble. "He wants you back, so go on. I think I've watched you enough to figure out how to do the rest myself."

It's my chest you've been watching, not the computer... Sam thought to herself.

She quickly left the room after giving him a sharp salute, and as soon as she was out of earshot of his office, she activated the bug again. "I'm on my way to your office now," she reported quietly.

Meet us at the front entrance. I'm giving the recall now.

"Yessir."

Samantha sighed and rubbed her eyes before retracing her steps to the front of the building. It had been a long day. She would be glad to be back on board the *Blue Horizon* with plans to take hot immersion bath to soak her fur.

"Max, may I talk to you for a moment?" Durant asked the young mechanic as he and Pockets walked in through the open cargo bay doors.

"Sure," the canine replied with a smile. Durant led him into his small office at the back of the hold and closed the door behind them. The cool air of the office was refreshing after walking across the arid tarmac from the *Sandburr*.

"What's up?" Max asked after taking a seat on a stool in the corner. He put his feet up on the stool's rungs and crossed his arms behind his head. Half of the buttons on his shirt were unfastened and Durant frowned at them.

"I heard you've been spending time in a woman's cabin on board the *Sandburr*," he said in a fatherly tone. "Is this true?"

"Yeah, Jeanette has Pixly Dixly's new video and I asked if I could see it," Max explained with a shrug. "Is there a problem?"

Durant suddenly felt foolish at suspecting the boy of having relations with a female. "No, no problem," he said with a smile. "Merlin would have my hide if you got into trouble while he was away. I was just checking up on your activities."

Max grinned and then narrowed his eyes. "Ah, I know what you were thinking," he said in a sly voice. "Sorry to disappoint you!"

Durant chuckled. Max could see right through him. "Well, yeah," he admitted, "You're an adult now, and some ladies might -"

"Uncle Merlin's already given me the sex talk, Durant," Max said with a laugh. "I became legal when I turned seventeen, so he wanted to enlighten me on what goes on out in the universe." He shrugged his shoulders again and tilted his head to the side. "Not," he said, "that I could go very far with my altered equipment, I'm sure you know."

"Yes, I know... but at the same time, there are plenty of other things that a young fellow can get himself involved in, and a number of problems that can arise from them. I suppose getting a girl in trouble isn't in the cards, but she might get *you* in trouble if you aren't too careful."

"Well," Max countered, looking completely unabashed, "you also have to remember where I grew up and what I've seen with my own eyes at *The Wild Star*, some out in the open, some from peeking through holes in the wall boards. I already knew most of Uncle Merlin told me, but he cautioned me too."

Durant scratched his head, feeling embarrassed. "Okay, Max, I apologize for prying into your personal life."

"Apology accepted," the young canine said with a smile. "You probably still think of me as a scrawny little fifteen-year-old, fresh out of slavery, don't you?"

"Sometimes, yes," the grizzly admitted. "That was only two years ago, but I admit you've grown and matured a lot since then. We're all proud of you, Max."

"Thank you, Durant. That's nice to hear. It took a long time for Sam and Pockets to break me of my old way of life *and* my old way of thinking." The young mechanic walked over to the load master and looked up at him. "I love this ship and I want to make my own place here among the crew."

Durant smiled warmly and proffered a hand. "You have your place, Max. Never doubt yourself about that."

Tanis poured some water onto a handkerchief and put it over his nose. The evening ride to Mucot Airfield in the back of Locke's personnel transport was hot and dry, and a strong tail wind blew their own dust back into the canvas-topped truck, making eyes sting and breathing difficult. He and the others rode on top of sandbags that had been piled behind the cab, and most were leaking from rotting fabric, adding to the swirling dust.

Locke was alone in the cab behind the steering wheel, but he preferred the silence as he drove. Kor-Chief Allano was to meet them at the airfield to take them back to a rendezvous point with a small private craft that would later transfer them to the *Blue Horizon*. The others behind him were tired and weary of the day, and Duffy had sunken into depression at having failed to retrieve his own document.

Taro sat beside the Siberian husky and tried to cheer him up, but he was in no mood for the attention she gave him. Samantha rested with her head on a sandbag, using it as a gritty pillow as she fought off a growing headache. They all rode in silence for miles as they passed a mixture of desert and forested areas. They were parallel to a concrete aqueduct slowly flowing with brown water and bordered with thick brush in places near the road.

Just a few miles from their destination, the truck lurched to a sudden stop and the four passengers looked up toward the cab. Through the back glass, they could see the look of surprise on Locke's face. Before any of them could crawl out of the back of the truck to find out what the desert fox had seen, they heard a muffled *boom* followed by several more in rapid succession.

Tanis jumped out the back onto the sunbaked road, and then darted around the truck to look. Duffy, Taro and Samantha joined him, and the small group stared in open-mouth surprise at columns of gray-black smoke rising above a distant hill. They could barely make out several small dots buzzing around in the air near the plume.

"The airfield's under attack!" Locke exclaimed as he stepped out of the truck cab.

"It's the Tanatans!" Tanis growled. "It's a first-strike!"

There were several more muffled explosions, and there was a momentary pause before they saw a tremendous fireball rise above the hill.

"There goes our ride!" Duffy said in alarm.

Locke shielded his eyes, straining hard to look at the attacking dots. "Get away from the truck!" he said suddenly. "*Now!*"

Everybody scattered as several of the distant dots grew larger, moving on a direct course along the road. Tanis, Taro and Samantha dove into the aqueduct beneath the dirty water, while Locke and Duffy jumped into the bushes on the other side of the road.

The dots became boomerangs, small curve-winged craft bearing down upon the truck. There were no streaks of energy or bolts of lightning to indicate that weapons had been fired, but the very air seemed to ripple. Locke grabbed his head in pain with a sharp shriek, and then the truck jumped from the ground, erupting into a ball of flame with a deafening *KA-BOOM!* The flyers continued on without returning to inspect their handiwork – they were headed straight toward the facility the team had left behind an hour ago.

Debris from the truck and road rained down into the aqueduct and the bushes. Duffy tumbled down into a small washout gully formed by the occasional flash flood. He managed to avoid the pelting debris, but he came to an abrupt stop hard against a tropical tree. Samantha eased her nose above the surface of the canal water, but had to dive again to avoid the twisted remains of the truck's steering column. Other pieces of the transport dropped over Taro and Tanis, but miraculously they were able to dodge them all beneath the water.

Samantha nosed up for air once more, but there were no more vehicle parts raining from the sky. She reached up to the concrete curb of the aqueduct and hauled herself up onto dry ground. Tanis and Taro were downstream, both gasping for air as they made their way out of the water. She glanced around the sky to make sure none of the Tanatan flyers were heading back toward them. When she ascertained they were safe for the moment, she looked back at the

blackened, junk-strewn spot on the road where the truck originally sat. The tops of several trees had also been blown apart, with leaves and splintered bark scattered everywhere.

"Is everyone okay?" Taro asked as she pressed dirty water from her fur. She sat on the side of the canal with her legs dangling and dripping.

"Tanis!" Duffy's voice called out weakly from the bushes on the opposite side of the road. "Get over here, quick!"

The medic stumbled over a scorched drive shaft from the truck toward his friend's voice. Taro and Sam followed him. "Over here," Duffy said when they dashed past him.

Tanis turned and saw the husky kneeling beside Shoji Locke. The other fennec's eyes were open and fixed, but there was no life in them. His head was somewhat misshapen, and blood issued from his ears, nose, mouth and several splits around his skull.

"Ohmigosh!" Samantha clasped her hands to her mouth. She sank to her knees in the sand, swallowing hard.

"What happened to him?" Taro asked hoarsely.

"It was that Tanatan weapon," Tanis said as he knelt next to his friend and closed the staring eyes. "It had to be." Although he knew better, the medic felt for a pulse in Locke's neck. There was none.

Duffy looked up at the sound of more explosions in the distance. Tanis looked at him and noted some blood in the husky's fur. "Let me look at ya," he said to him. Duffy nodded and closed his eyes as the tan fox examined him.

"Yer *Well of Luck* must've rubbed off on ya," Tanis told him as he pulled out a slim First Aid kit from a vest pocket. He picked out an antiseptic and a ball of cotton. "All ya have is a small cut and a bruised lump on the noggin."

"I rolled down an embankment and tackled a tree," Duffy explained without opening his eyes.

"That's probably what saved you," Taro added. "It got you away from the effects of that weapon. Locke was not so fortunate."

All four of them could not help but glance back at the one who had engineered Operation Rainbow. He died when he had been trying to get his friends out of going into a senseless war.

"Take off! Take off!" Renny shouted into the Com microphone. Durant was in the center seat of the bridge as the *Blue Horizon* lifted ponderously from its place on the tarmac, while the cheetah tried to coax the other freighters into following them.

The Juxenlow warehouse and its office was ablaze in roiling black smoke and expanding fireballs while Tanatan fliers systematically destroyed the place. The *Sandburr* had taken an indirect hit, but the damage was too great for aerial flight. Captain Ros of the *Cherry Blossom* had held off her takeoff long enough for Corwin and his remaining crewmembers to scramble on board her ship, and then she was airborne as well.

In the cargo bay of the *Horizon*, Pockets slid across the tilted floor, his small hands flailing. He managed to grab the webbing over a pallet of goods secured to the floor and held on tight. The bay door was still open as burning Juxenlow shrunk beneath them. Max was in Durant's office, clinging to the desk as he punched the intercom button.

"Somebody please turn on the inertial dampers and the gravity!" he exclaimed. "We can't get to the cargo bay door controls to shut it until you do - and we can't get back to engineering to do it from auxiliary either!"

"Aye to that!" Renny's voice crackled from the small speaker set into the ceiling of the booth. "Both are active now, Max – we need that door closed before we reach orbit!"

Max didn't wait to give him a response. It was already getting hard to breathe in the thinning high altitude air as the *Blue Horizon* sped toward space. He ran around the perimeter of the hold toward the gaping emptiness beyond the bay door. The wind whipped at him furiously. It took all he had in order to pull himself along the wall safety railing toward the controls to close the cargo hold. He reached the primary airlock and then struggled the last few feet to the main door control panel.

Just as the young canine stretched out toward the terminal, he chanced a glance outside that made his head swim from the shifting perspectives. The *Blue Horizon* was tilted and banking so that he had a clear view of the dizzying depths below. He could see the leading edge of the *Hidalgo Sun* as it raced up behind them, with the *Horizon's* own flexible extension tunnel dangling beside it, having been ripped away during the sudden launch.

Max punched a sequence of buttons and the bay door began to close slowly. With that process executing, he left the terminal and shouted above the din of the rushing air. "Pockets!"

"I'm still here," the chief engineer's voice came from somewhere on the other side of the large room full of cargo that had not yet been unloaded at Juxenlow. "I've twisted my left ankle, Max. I'm going to need your help into Engineering."

"*Blue Horizon* – this is Rainbow Team. Are you there?" the fox said into her DC on an encrypted frequency. She sat in the shade next to the aqueduct, the others gathered nearby as they rested in the evening heat.

"Can't talk right now, Taro," Durant's voice returned in a rush. "We had to make an emergency launch..."

"We've been attacked by the Tanatans, Durant," Taro said quickly. "Our transport's been destroyed and we're on foot in the desert. We don't have a way to rendezvous with you."

There was a long pause before the grizzly replied. "*Juxenlow's been destroyed too,*" he said in a voice that indicated he was trying to divide his attention between important tasks. "*We've just attained orbit with the Hidalgo Sun and another freighter, but I think some of the small flyers that hit the airfield are in pursuit. I have your signal coordinates and –*"

Taro heard Renny's voice in the background say, "*We've got a handful of flyers on our tail, Durant! They're firing at –*" and then the signal went quiet. Taro looked up into the eyes of her friends and swallowed hard.

The *Hidalgo Sun* had just left orbit to descend once again into the Nalirran atmosphere. Six of the Tanatan flyers followed the three freighters from Juxenlow, and they were firing upon them as they drew closer. Fortunately for the larger ships, engines with more power kept them out of the range of the frightening ripple guns, but only just.

Renny knew the *Blue Horizon* was the only freighter present equipped with combat weaponry and he was aware the Tanatans would catch them quickly enough. It was time the *Horizon* took defensive action against their attackers.

At once, two of the flyers peeled off to follow the *Hidalgo Sun*, but Renny targeted them both individually before they were able to cause any damage to the other freighter. It was the

first time the cheetah had used the shock thread emitters in a situation other than target practice, and discovered the system's range was greater than those of the Tanatan weapons. Both enemy vessels shook themselves apart, the sudden decompression from failed air seals causing them to explode into pieces that would fall back into the atmosphere and burn up on reentry. He hadn't wanted to kill anyone, but for the moment, the *Hidalgo Sun* was safe.

"The *Cherry Blossom*, Durant!" Lorelei pointed out the front window.

"I see them!"

The *Blue Horizon* reversed course and bore down upon the Tanatan flyers. None of them knew if their standard defense screens would stand up to the ripple guns, so Renny prepared to act quickly. It was imperative he take them out before either the *Cherry Blossom* or the *Blue Horizon* was hit. He fired at the two nearest to Captain Ros' ship, destroying one of them. High speed debris from the one slammed into the other, and both of the small crafts exploded near enough to the *Blossom* that he could see the shock wave hit the freighter's interstellar shields, visibly shaking the vessel.

"Are you alright?" Lorelei asked over the Com headset she wore.

"We're shaken, but I think we're all okay," Victoria's voice emanated from the speakers. "Thanks for the assist!"

The *Blue Horizon* rocked suddenly and the bridge lights flickered. "We've been hit!" Renny exclaimed. There was another violent jolt and the guidance shifts tried to jump out of Durant's hands.

"Where'd they get us, Pockets?" the grizzly bear said into his microphone as he spun the ship on its axis to face the flyers. He accelerated with a sudden burst of speed that surprised the smaller craft; both of them veered off to avoid being smashed by the large blue flying saucer. Ramming them had not been Durant's plan, but the move worked nonetheless. Renny targeted one as they passed, and in a heartbeat sent the vessel to join the others in oblivion.

"Pockets?" Durant asked. "Where—"

"Keep your shirt on," the raccoon's harried voice replied. "We're busy!"

The bear's eyebrows lowered in agitation. He bared his teeth as he whipped the ship around to remove the last of the Tanatan flyers from the area, praying that there were no more on their way.

The *Blue Horizon* bore down upon the final enemy vessel, their roles reversed. The flyer was fleeing the larger vessel and it became apparent to Renny that its guns could not fire behind it. He locked the targeting scope onto the flyer and let Durant get closer.

"I'll give you a countdown, Durant," he said without taking his eyes from his readout monitor. "When I reach *one*, take us over the top of the flyer as steep to vertical as you can."

"Got it."

The Tanatan flyer zigzagged back and forth, but the targeting computer was already locked on and tracking it effortlessly. "Five..." Renny intoned, "Four... Three... Two... *One!*"

The cheetah pressed the firing button at the same time Durant pulled back hard on the guidance shifts. The small flyer shook itself apart violently, the *Blue Horizon* soaring overhead and away from the scattering debris.

Renny did a sensor sweep of the area, but there were no more Tanatans in pursuit. Durant changed course so he could draw up alongside the *Cherry Blossom* to match her speed and trajectory.

"Pockets?" Durant tried one more time into the microphone.

"One of the ripple gunshots hit our interstellar shields, Durant," Max's voice responded. "It almost punched a hole right through it, but we were able to increase the signal strength enough to deflect

it. *We've had a huge power drain and may need to replace a few of the shield transmitters, but otherwise Pockets thinks we're okay.*"

"Good work, you two," Durant said with a sigh of relief. "There may be more, so do what you can to keep us safe."

"Aye to that!"

"What do we do now?" Duffy asked.

Tanis heaved a big sigh and tossed a pebble into the running water below them. He stared after it, listening to the relative quiet that surrounded them to let it calm him. "Looks like we're in for a long night," he said after a moment. "The sun's going down and we have no idea which direction to hike to find the next settlement."

"I'm so tired and hungry," Samantha said wearily, "that I don't think I'd make it very far."

A stomach growled loudly, but no one made claims to its hunger.

Duffy looked up into the deep red sky at a reflection high up in the clouds. "I just saw a ship," he said quietly. "We'd better get under better cover than this."

Nodding her agreement, Taro motioned with her hand toward a thicker cluster of tropical vegetation across the road, not far from where they had buried Locke. It would offer the best protection from sight should one of the flyers return to seek out survivors.

"Uh oh..." Samantha said in alarm. "They've found us anyway!"

Everyone dove under cover, looking out at a rapidly approaching set of landing lights from the west. Tanis growled lowly to himself, wishing he'd brought a gun, even though he knew a sidearm would have made him suspicious in a personnel facility.

A hot wind blew sand in their faces as an oval-shaped craft grew larger and extended its landing gear.

"It's the *Hidalgo Sun!*" Taro exclaimed in relief. She jumped up and ran toward the reddish-orange freighter.

"Taro, wait!" Tanis shouted, "It could be a trick!"

The main airlock of the ship opened barely a moment after the vessel touched down; a tanned human male stepped out and waved to them. It was Mark Littlefeather.

Taro rushed forward and leaped onto him at the last second. She hugged him warmly, giving him a big kiss on the lips before he had a chance to say anything.

Mark coughed and grinned. "Uh, hi, Taro," he said in a startled voice. He turned and looked at the rest of her team approaching them. "We heard you needed a lift."

"What about the *Horizon?*" Tanis asked. "They were under attack when we were last in contact."

The Amerindian load master ushered them all toward the airlock. "They were fighting back when Cap'n Rezo ordered us down here to get you guys," he said. "I had no idea your ship was equipped for combat!"

"It was a gift from the Tanthean house of Aris," Samantha informed him.

"We've got to get out of here before the Tanatans or the Nalirran Aerial Forces detect your presence," Duffy said, "if they haven't already."

Mark shut the airlock door behind them and then thumbed the intercom. "Okay, Captain - everyone's on board."

"Aye, Littlefeather," Rezo's voice called back. "Take them up to Carmen, please."

"Aye, sir."

The ship lurched suddenly and the *Hidalgo Sun* was airborne again. Mark motioned them to follow him toward the lift. "Dr. Burgess will look you over and then you can all rest in the common room."

Samantha ran fingers through her dirty and matted fur. The water in the aqueduct had not been very sanitary. "Can we clean up first?" she asked.

"After the Doc has looked you over," Mark replied, "you can use the showers in the spare cabins." Duffy's stomach growled and the human nodded. "I'll have Sheila prepare something for you to eat, too."

"Many appreciations," the husky said with a thankful smile. "I haven't eaten all day."

Durant looked at the time and frowned. The *Blue Horizon*, *Hidalgo Sun* and the *Cherry Blossom* had all been clustered together on the surface of an asteroid large enough to provide some gravity for six hours. As there were no other safe havens in the Roppa star system, it was the best they could do in a hurry. The Reytharsa Asteroid belt lay in an orbit on the outskirts of the system, the remnants of a planet that had exploded from within centuries earlier.

Full-scale war had erupted quickly between Nalirra and Oe'Tanata, and although the Tanatans had attacked first, Sed Amittias' forces had already been on alert and launched a counterattack almost immediately. The Roppa system was not currently a safe place to be, even for civilian spacecraft.

Durant drummed his fingers on the console before him. A Nalirran transport was supposed to have rendezvoused with them two hours ago, to transfer the food supplies that the three freighters had been unable to unload at Juxenlow. As yet, there had been no contact from the other vessel. The minutes passed in quiet concern.

Corwin's crew was getting along well enough with Captain Ros' people, though the bovidae captain was distraught over the loss of three people and of his ship, the *Sandburr*. The male buffalo had retired a year earlier from a major freight line based on Pomen, but discovered he missed the business and invested his money to buy a *Prairie Dog*-class freighter for odd jobs to keep him busy. Unfortunately, he'd never bothered to take out insurance on his vessel, so its destruction was a total loss. Three members of his crew had perished in the attack on Juxenlow, two of them sons of his sister. He didn't know how he was going to break the news to her.

Renny stared out the front windows of the bridge toward the nearby hull of the *Cherry Blossom*. He knew Victoria and her crew well enough to know that Corwin and his people would be given proper care during their stay on board her ship.

"There's an encrypted call coming in from Nalirra," Lorelei reported at a chirp from the com station. Durant looked up from the center seat and glanced over at the weapons console where Renny sat. He nodded to Lorelei and she promptly tapped in the decryption key, and then transferred the signal to the bridge speakers.

"This is the *Blue Horizon*," Durant said in a slightly raised voice, although the condenser microphone embedded into the pilot console would have picked up normal conversational tones.

"*Blue Horizon*," said a shrill voice from the overhead speakers, "*this is Nalirran Command. Transport vessel RK207 was to rendezvous with you, but was destroyed by our enemy en route to your location.*"

"I was afraid of that," the grizzly replied. "With such a long period of silence, we feared this might have happened."

"Regrettably, we can spare no more ships right now. We can't send anyone else out to get your cargo."

"Is there a place we can take it for you?" Durant asked. "With the conflict in full-swing, I suspect you're going to need the supplies even more now."

"This is true, Horizon, but unfortunately there's no neutral territory in Roppa at the moment. You could be attacked anywhere you tried to go, and we can't spare any vessels even to protect your leaving our star system. We've not been able to locate the Tanatan carriers that brought the small fighters to our world, so you'll need to watch your backs."

"Since the combined cargoes of our three vessels were paid for in advance by your government, we need to know what to do with them," Durant said with a deepening frown. "We have other destinations on our delivery schedule and won't be able to wait for long."

"One moment, please, Blue Horizon."

"Standing by."

Another voice piped up from the speakers. "I hope they don't expect us to haul their food back to Alexandrius and put it into storage for later delivery," Captain Ros said dryly. Apparently, Lorelei had keyed in the other freighter to receive the conversation as well.

"Most of it's non-perishable," Durant replied. "If we —"

"Blue Horizon, thank you for standing by," the previous voice cut in. "Nalirran command authorizes you and the two other freighters with you to take what replenishment supplies you need from the cargo you are carrying and to jettison the rest. It's recommended that you leave our star system as quickly as you can and make a break for battle-free space."

Durant blinked several times. "Sir," he said carefully, "I hope you realize your statement voids your contract. We won't be able to issue reimbursement payment for the delivery we've attempted to make."

"Understood, Horizon. You've fulfilled your part of the contract by making the delivery, but now I strongly advise you to leave as quickly as possible."

"Aye, sir, we will depart at once. Thank you for your business, and may God smile upon your world," Durant said at last, remembering a common Nalirran sign-off.

"Thank you, Blue Horizon," the voice replied. "May God smile upon your vessels."

"Hello, listeners, this is News Around the Alignment and I'm Holly Harken of the Interplanetary News Network. At the top of the news this hour, Planetary Alignment member Nalirra has been attacked by their neighboring, non-PA world, Oe'Tanata in a first strike that resulted in over eight thousand casualties. The sneak-attack by small, stealth Tanatan flyers were able to penetrate Nalirran space without prior detection and were able to cause devastation with never-before-seen weapons of destruction.

"Already under an alert for such an action by their neighbor, Nalirran General Duular of Kardon immediately launched a counterattack upon Oe'Tanata, using conventional fuel-air bombs over several major Tanatan cities. As INN has been unable to get anyone safely into Tanatan space, we have been unable to ascertain the death toll there.

"Fierce fighting has erupted upon the surface of both worlds and in the area of space in between. Nalirran officials have advised that all private and commercial spacecraft avoid the Roppa star system. Although well within their right to call upon other worlds of the Planetary Alignment to assist an ally in a time of war, Nalirra has not requested assistance, preferring instead to fight their own battle.

“Word has it that Nalirra had already been gearing up to draft thousands of off-world ex-military personnel for such an effort, but during the first-strike by Oe’Tanata, several key records facilities were destroyed before many recalls could be sent out.

“Nalirran Spokesman Messala Golgoh has asked us to announce that anyone with Nalirran military experience still capable of fighting should return at once to defend their homeworld.

“Not much else is known at this point, but Nalirran Command has promised the Legislature to keep the council abreast of conflict events. We at INN will relay what news we can, as we get it. You can count on Holly to keep you informed.”

FAMILY TRADITION

By Ted R. Blasingame

SS Christopher Watson, PA30578

Personal Journal

Bill and I are currently on our way to Tanthe, where we should arrive in another couple of hours. This is the first opportunity I've taken since leaving Dennier to make an entry to my journal. My brother-in-law is currently resting after a four-hour shift at the controls, and now it's my turn again to mind the store. We left Dennier three weeks ago and have occupied ourselves during the voyage with books, videos and catching up on one another's adventures. Taro is currently in charge of the Blue Horizon while I'm taking personal leave, and I know she's a capable commander.

It was nice spending time on Dennier with Bill, Shannon and their four cubs. The children are already several months old, and as with all canine types, they've grown quickly. Jacob has solid black fur like his father's, was the first-born of the litter, and he's already asserted himself as alpha of the other children. He takes the lead in everything they do and often growls at the others if they don't obey him well enough. Marissa looks just like her mother, down to her mask and the single brown spot on the back of her left ear. She's a little cutie and it's clear she does all she can to endear herself to everyone's hearts. Jaran is a chubby little thing who sleeps a lot. His coloring resembles my own, but has tan mixed in with his fur like his mother's. And then there's Shane... he's playful and into everything. He loves the attention and he's already grown quite fond of me during my short visit. He loves to snuggle and was in my lap as much as possible. Shane has turned out to be quite a charmer, and he already knows how to use his personal cuteness to get what he wants. He has a light tan fur with a cinnamon sprinkling, with the same pattern shape around his eyes that I have.

When it was time to depart, it was almost heart-breaking. All four of them howled in distress when they realized I was leaving. Then they wailed harder when they discovered their father was going with me and would be away from them nearly two months. I know Shannon doesn't like the business trips that Bill sometimes has to make to other worlds, especially now that they have cubs, but fortunately he doesn't have to make them very often.

I know it's only coincidence, but Bill's company is sending him to Tanthe to smooth out a few difficulties they're having at their branch office in Spurlock, a tropical city on the other side of the planet from Aris Grand.

After I disembark, Bill will take the Christopher Watson on to Spurlock, and then back to Dennier by himself when he's finished his business. My plans are to visit with Kal, Tinara and their son for a week, and then I will take a public transport back to rendezvous with the Blue Horizon on Crescentis.

-Merlin Sinclair

"Christopher Watson, PA Registry 30578, you are on schedule and authorized to enter Tanthe airspace as prearranged. You will proceed at once to coordinates being transmitted to you now."

The lupine captain looked away from the image of the lean coyote on the vidscreen and glanced toward the navigational terminal. "Pardon me," he said with a frown, "but these are not the coordinates for Aris Grand."

"Good evening, Captain Sinclair – it is nice to see you again," replied a rich baritone voice.

Merlin looked up from the bridge controls toward the vidscreen mounted above the forward windows. Unable to leave the controls of the pilot seat, Merlin tried to make a short bow while sitting. The monarch on the screen smiled at his attempt and nodded his acceptance of the effort. "I am pleased to see you as well, Your Majesty," the wolf replied. "Thank you."

King Adion Aris nodded and leaned back in his plush leather chair. As was his personal habit, the monarch dressed all in matching solid colors – this time he was in rich purple. *"When I heard you were returning to our world to visit my royal grandson,"* he said, *"I was delighted to know you would honor us with your presence once again. I thank you, Captain."*

Merlin glanced down and adjusted a control. "I was prepared to set down in Aris Grand, your Highness," he said, "but the Air Authority has directed me to coordinates far to the south of your capitol city. Is this correct?"

"The coordinates are correct, Captain. You are to land at Tanager Castle, a fortress that has been the traditional birthplace of monarchs in my family for generations. As Prince Merlin will one day rule Tanthe, we felt it was appropriate that his birth should take place there. That is where your new heading will take you, Captain."

"If I may ask, how is the young prince and his parents?" Merlin asked.

"They are all well. Thank you for asking. Kal and Tinara are thankful for their child. The loss of his siblings was regretful, but this young one is healthy and has already shown signs of strong character. Furnishings have already been prepared for your arrival at Tanager and everyone will be most pleased to see you." The king glanced down at something, and then looked back toward the camera. *"You are not on board the Blue Horizon? Has something else happened to your vessel?"*

Merlin shook his head with a smile. "I have taken personal leave away from the *Horizon* to make this trip, your Highness," he said. "The *Christopher Watson* is a private cruiser to use for opportunities like this. My first officer is overseeing the operation of the business while I'm away. I will be here six days before I will need to return."

"Ah, I see. Well, Captain, I know you have a landing to coordinate, so I will leave you to it. My daughter and her husband will be looking forward to having you with them."

"You won't be there, sire?"

"No, Captain. As much as I would like to spend all of my time with my grandson, I still have a world to rule. They have attendants to see to their wants and wishes, though security there will be high to protect the new heir. I trust you should not have any trouble. The Christopher Watson has been given clearance to enter Tanager airspace to land on the premises. Prime Minister Nishalt will meet you upon your arrival. It is possible that I may be able to make a visit at some point during your visit, but I will make no guarantees."

"Thank you, Your Majesty. I appreciate the trust and honor you give me. I am about to begin deorbit, so I must sign off for now."

"Enjoy your stay, Captain. Aris Grand, out."

Merlin switched off the vidscreen and was about to turn toward the navigational console when he felt a hand on his shoulder. "I knew you were chummy with Tanthean royalty, but I didn't realize it would be the king to greet you!"

Merlin looked up at the black wolf beside him and smiled. "King Aris did the same thing the last time the *Blue Horizon* came to Tanthe, and that was before he even knew who we were. It must be some sort of personal practice to greet everyone who comes to his world."

"Tanthe does a lot of trading with the rest of the Planetary Alignment," Bill commented. "You'd think the king would be too busy to greet *every* ship that came here."

"I know. His motivations have puzzled me, too, but I will not pretend to know the mindset of such an individual. Better sit down and strap yourself in. I'm activating the heat shields and am ready to take us down."

Bill moved to the other seat on the bridge and fastened the harness across his waist and chest. He picked up a pair of dark goggles from a storage bin and handed another pair to his brother-in-law. Merlin put the goggles on top of his head and then thumbed several controls on the panel before him. With a satisfied nod, he pushed the goggles down over his eyes and grasped the guidance shifts with both hands to begin their descent into the atmosphere. He angled the nose upward so that the stronger shields on the lower section of the craft would take the brunt of the heat buildup, and immediately the small ship began to buck beneath them.

The forward windows lit up in blinding shades of orange and white, and even through the dark lenses, Bill and Merlin squinted in the brilliance. Long moments later, the *Christopher Watson* passed through into the atmosphere. Merlin leveled out the sleek red and black *Starwolf* to a smooth ride on a pair of narrow wings that quickly slid out from the fuselage. The forward windows were dark, but the nighttime sky was clear of clouds. Infrared circuitry in the windows activated at the touch of a button; the ground far below them stood out in eerie green relief.

"I've got the landing beacon," Bill said as he glanced at a flashing blue light on the instrument panel before him.

"Nav computer is keyed in," Merlin said. "We should touch down in about forty-five minutes."

"How do I look?" Merlin asked Bill as the two of them headed toward the main hatch through the ship's narrow corridor. Merlin was dressed in a stylish amber dress shirt, black slacks, and a pair of black boots; his beloved naval hat had been left back aboard the *Blue Horizon*. Bill wore a standard business suit of dark blue, which combined with his black fur, made him look rather ominous. Merlin didn't mention this fact, however.

"You look gorgeous," Bill teased. "You don't have anything to be concerned about."

"I hope you're right." Merlin stopped by the controls of the airlock and punched up the three-digit sequence to open it. There was a hiss of air, and then the hatch swung outward on pneudraulic arms. The cobblestone landing pad they had set down on was illuminated by a ring of torches. The autumn night air was cool, but pleasant with the smell of piñon smoke in the air. The towering walls of the castle were faintly illuminated by other torches in place around the forested courtyard.

The castle was an anachronism: stone and mortared walls, softly fluttering banners, but no trace of vine weaving up its many faces, as though the castle breathed with a life of its own and shirked creeping decay. The wolves had seen ruins of ancient places and historical reconstructions, but this was a place untouched by the ages, kept up by dedicated servants who ensured that it remained just as it had been when it was young generations ago. The castle

existed in both the modern and ancient worlds at once, and the pair could feel a tangible presence like an ancient god looking down on modern creatures invading its slumber.

Armed guards surrounded the *Christopher Watson* just out of the light, but Bill picked out their forms with ease. The frown on Merlin's features indicated that he had seen them too. Merlin picked up a small duffel, slinging the bag over his left shoulder. They moved down the small ramp to the ground and then waited for an escort.

A tall coyote dressed in a dark brown suit with a red tie stepped out from the shadows toward them as soon as they left the ramp. He held himself with a regal bearing, striding forth without hesitation. He gave a quick glance at Merlin's garments and duffel bag before he smiled thinly and extended a hand.

"Captain Sinclair, it is so nice to meet you at last. I am Prime Minister Willingham Nishalt."

"Thank you, sir." Merlin replied and shook hands with the man. "This is my brother-in-law, Bill Wallace."

Nishalt nodded toward the black wolf, but didn't offer his hand. "Your flight plan to Spurlock is on file," he said flatly. "We won't keep you any longer. You may be on your way."

Bill frowned at the tone of the coyote's voice, but nodded. He turned to Merlin and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Take care and enjoy yourself, Merle."

"Thank you," Merlin replied. "Safe journey, Bill." The black wolf turned without another look at the Prime Minister and walked up the ramp into the *Christopher Watson*. Nishalt gestured for the lupine captain to follow him away from the ship.

Prime Minister or not, Merlin stopped and turned toward the coyote with narrowed eyes once they reached the edge of the torchlight. "That was unnecessarily cold," he said with a low growl in his voice. One of the nearby guards stepped forward with his weapon brandished, but Nishalt waved him back.

"Your relative does not have business at Tanager Castle, Captain," the official replied, unfazed. "With the young heir to the throne residing within these walls, we will take no uncertain risks where his safety is involved. You are the King's hero and have been approved to visit the royal family, sir. That wolf who came with you has not."

Nishalt resumed walking as the *Christopher Watson's* engines started up, but Merlin stood his ground. "That's no reason to be discourteous," the lupine captain said over the rising din. "You could have allowed him a few moments of fresh air, at the least. We've been on a ship for the past three weeks. He would have left shortly anyway, without your snobbish attitude."

The Prime Minister turned and looked back at him with an upraised eyebrow and a deepening frown. "You don't hail from a culture of nobility, and thus have no real grasp of what it means to possess title. You don't understand the need for protecting against degenerates and their demands for ransoms. I am certain that you believe your companion is of good character, but I would be remiss in my duties if I allowed a stranger to enter the *sanctum sanctorum* of our noble seat. For the sake of the royalty," he said sternly, "this discussion is at an end. Your presence is awaited."

The *Christopher Watson* cut in its thrusters and leapt toward the sky with a blast of air around the landing pad. Nishalt grabbed his tie to keep it from flogging him in the face, and looked thoroughly annoyed. Merlin hesitated a moment more, and then moved to the Prime Minister's side. Together, they walked along a series of stepping stones through a manicured lawn toward the castle's main entrance, a pair of huge wooden doors on balanced iron hinges.

A pair of guards opened the doors when the Prime Minister approached. Merlin noticed the suspicious stares as they passed inside to a dimly lit corridor. The wolf felt uneasy here,

more than he had at the capitol city palace in Aris Grand. This was medieval, and it looked as if the coyotes had kept up that particular appearance purposely. One of the torches mounted above their heads made a loud sizzling *pop*, and Merlin started in spite of himself. The place was eerily quiet, their footsteps echoing in the long chamber.

"Is this whole place dark or is it kept this way to intimidate visitors?" Merlin asked dryly. "I suppose I should expect to be quartered in the dungeon."

"Much of Tanager Castle is dark," the Prime Minister admitted, "but you will not have to reside in the lower levels, I assure you. You have not yet been demoted from King's Hero to mere Prime Minister."

Merlin glanced at him sharply and saw the wry smile on the coyote's face. He sighed and nodded his acknowledgement of the Prime Minister's little joke. He disliked Nishalt, but *for the sake of the royalty*, he would try to behave and keep further thoughts to himself.

They soon came to a branch in the corridor. Nishalt led him into the left-hand passage. Their footsteps quieted as they stepped upon exquisite green and gold rugs, and the lighting increased dramatically. Merlin could hear someone singing to the accompaniment of a harp from a large chamber up ahead.

He glanced over at Nishalt and saw the Prime Minister with a bit of a smile. They entered into a great hall lit by hundreds of white candles from eight chandeliers hanging from the vaulted ceiling. Braziers of open flame lined the walls to provide a modicum of warmth, while lush draperies adorned the walls to keep it in. Bronze and iron statues of Tanthean heroes occupied each corner of the room. Clutches of robed monks moved in the shadows, conspicuously out of the open light. Behind the pair, an old man followed, swinging a censer in their wake. They walked down an aisle between rows of theatre seats, toward an upraised dais at the far end of the chamber where a pair of elegant thrones sat empty before velvet drapes of purple. Before the thrones at floor level were several ornate seats, where a small group lounged comfortably, listening to the harpist sing.

A Border collie turned and looked up at the approaching pair. He jumped up with a wide grin. "Merlin!" he cried in surprise.

The lupine captain smiled and walked over to the canine, who had turned to the harpist to apologize for his outburst. "Lady Ayana," the collie said as the beautiful coyote lass set down her harp and stood up to meet the stranger, "this is Captain Merlin Sinclair, the king's hero and also a good friend of mine. Merlin, this is Lady Ayana Kojote, cousin to Princess Tinara."

Merlin bowed to the woman. "Your Grace," he said, shifting his duffel bag off his shoulder to rest on the floor beside his feet, "I am pleased to make your acquaintance."

"I have heard much about you," Ayana said in a quiet voice with a pleasant smile. "Between stories from Tinara, Kal and Alex, I've come to believe you are quite the dashing hero."

Merlin raised an eyebrow and looked over at Alex Rogers with a grin. "You've been telling tall tales again, my friend. Stretching the truth can get you into trouble." He looked back at Ayana and gestured toward the collie. "Alex and I have known one another for many years, milady, but he does not know me as well as he thinks he does."

"Oh, yes I do," Alex countered with a grin.

"Truth or tall tale," Ayana said with a giggle, "you are well thought of in this place." Merlin glanced over at Nishalt at that comment, but said nothing more than "Thank you."

"Please join us and relax," Ayana offered. The other three women who reclined in the seats smiled up at the wolf with enticing eyes, but otherwise remained silent.

"I'm sorry, Your Grace," Nishalt said, "but the Princess is awaiting Captain Sinclair in the library. We must be on our way."

"Of course, Prime Minister," the coyote woman said with the shrug of her shoulders. "It was nice meeting you, Captain Sinclair. I'm sure we will have the opportunity to talk later."

Merlin gave her another short bow and then looked over at Alex. "Yes, I'd like to visit with both of you again soon. I'm especially interested in finding out how Alex wound up here."

Nishalt cleared his throat and Alex rolled his eyes. "We'll talk later, Merlin."

The wolf bowed toward each of the ladies, and then hefted the duffel strap back onto his shoulder. He quietly followed the Prime Minister across the chamber to another corridor. Ayana watched him go, and then turned her attention to a female Irish setter closest to her.

"I can see why the Princess is interested in him, Linn," she said with a mischievous smile. "Do you think he'll do it?"

Linn licked her lips, and then glanced over at Alex before she answered. "He's a wolf. Of course he'll do it, milady. I've heard stories about them."

Alex looked at the women when the other two ladies joined in and giggled together. "Do what?" he asked. "What do you have planned for Merlin?"

Lady Ayana narrowed her eyes impishly and grinned. "There is a family tradition the Aris royalty practices," she told him. "I suspect that Captain Sinclair will be introduced to it shortly."

"What kind of tradition?" the Border collie asked. "He won't be in any danger, will he?"

Linn laughed aloud, but clamped her hands over her mouth quickly with wide eyes. Lady Ayana chuckled and replied, "That depends on your definition of danger, I dare say, but I assure you that should Captain Sinclair take part in the tradition and succeed, he will enjoy many rewards from the House of Aris."

Alex looked at each of the ladies in turn, but somehow didn't feel assured. There was something about the expressions on their faces that bothered him.

Prime Minister Nishalt led the wolf up a flight of circular stone steps to the next level and then along another torch-lit corridor, where they passed armed sentries along the way. Merlin was certain they had crossed the length of the fortress itself, and wondered if they were headed for one of the high towers.

He didn't have to wonder about it long. They entered through a pair of polished wooden doors into another large chamber, though nowhere near as massive as the throne room downstairs. This was well-lit and extravagantly furnished with chandeliers, sculptures, potted plants and ornate furniture that were all surrounded by floor-to-ceiling shelves of books - some of which looked to be centuries old. The overhead ceiling was painted in various shades of blues to represent the cloudless sky of a warm spring day, and the columns that held it up were covered in flowering climbing ivy.

Almost before Merlin could take in all the details of the room, a young female coyote in a light dress of powder green stood up from a high-backed chair with a large leather-bound volume in her hands. She turned to face them with a pleasant smile. Despite the lateness of the hour, the woman's brown eyes were clear and alert. Nishalt did not have to give the wolf an introduction. The Prime Minister saw the simultaneous grins on the faces of both Merlin and the princess, and allowed himself to relax at last. Without another sound, Nishalt withdrew from the room to give them privacy.

"Merlin..." the coyote lass said with a twinkle in her eyes as she set the book on her chair, "I am ever *so* glad to see you again!"

The wolf stopped, set his duffel on the floor, and then bowed slightly toward her. He took her right hand and licked the back of it gently before he looked back up into her eyes. "It's good to see you too, Princess," he said in a smooth voice. "You are looking well."

Princess Tinara stepped up to him and gently caressed the fur of his left cheek with a hand. "I have missed you, mister wolf," she said in a quiet voice. She slid both of her arms up over his shoulders and drew his face down to hers. She boldly kissed him on the lips and lingered for a long moment before she released him.

Merlin slowly stood up straight, feeling very much at risk. He expected guards to come rushing in to save the princess from the big bad wolf, but no one else entered the library. He looked down at her in surprise, only to see her quietly chuckling. Before he could find his voice, Tinara took him by the hand, and led him toward an empty chair facing the one she had vacated. Merlin sat down, the princess picked up the book from her seat, and then she sat down with the tome in her lap. The book looked as if it might have been recently printed; Merlin could even smell the newness of the paper pulp.

"Princess..." he said cautiously, "that was a very dangerous thing to do. Prince Kal might have walked in and..."

"My husband is asleep, dear wolf," she said in a quiet voice in keeping with standard library etiquette. "His day of business was long and full, and he won't disturb our visit. The servants have also been instructed not to enter this chamber."

"Are you happy with Prince Kal?" Merlin asked bluntly.

Tinara grinned at his boldness. "Yes, very much. I have never regretted marrying Kal Navar, but I will never forget the time you and I had together, Merlin."

"That was a short visit, Princess, and we didn't really do anything. Why would you treat me as if I were a childhood sweetheart?"

"Short as the visit may have been," she said as she opened the large book to a place marked with a purple ribbon, "your presence those two days changed my life. Things would have been very different for me had your ship not lost its cargo. *Merlin Sinclair* and the *Blue Horizon* have been written into Aris history."

She turned the book in her arms so that its open pages faced the lupine captain. He leaned forward to look at a painted portrait of himself that took up one third of the left-hand page beside paragraphs of text that were sprinkled with his name. The reproduction showed him in his brown flight jacket over a white shirt, blue trousers, black boots and his captain's hat. He was standing in a spaceport with a book at his side in one hand, and the other upraised to shadow his eyes as he looked off toward the distance. Merlin raised his eyebrows and sighed as he sat back against the soft cushions of the chair, not believing what he had just seen.

He sat quietly for several moments, and then looked up at the coyote when she closed the book and set it on a short table beside her chair. "Princess..." he began. When she looked back at him, he dismissed what he was going to say and instead asked, "How is your son?"

"He is growing quickly, as all canine pups will do," she replied. "He has an abundance of energy, loving to run everywhere he goes. Kal has already begun taking him to places around the kingdom, and we've begun teaching him about his heritage. Would you like to see him?" she asked.

Merlin nodded, thankful to have changed the subject away from himself. He disliked the attention he seemed to have garnered by the Aris family, but as they had been the ones to gift him with a ship so he could stay in business, he was grateful and tolerated their idiosyncrasies.

“Won’t he be asleep at this time of night?” he asked, glancing at a grandfather-style clock that stood nearby. Tinara stood up and offered him a hand. He took it courteously and got up from his chair. With a pleasant smile, she led him toward another door at the back of the room.

“Yes, he is a sound sleeper,” Tinara replied in a quiet voice. “It’s unlikely he will awaken if we look in on him.”

Merlin nodded silently and followed her out into the torch-lit corridor, their hands still clasped. It was only a short walk before they stopped before a green door. She put a finger to her lips and then quietly pushed the door open on well-oiled hinges.

Inside, the room was lit by a single candle that dimly illuminated a bed chamber. Merlin’s eyes adjusted quickly, as the corridor had not been much brighter, and he saw a pair of small fuzzy ears poking out of the sheets that covered a curled form. A plump woman sat with a book in a chair beside the bed and looked up quizzically at the princess. Tinara whispered something to her, and then the woman bowed and left the room quietly.

The wolf moved to the vacated chair and sat down in it. He reached over and gently pulled the lightweight sheet away from the small face, hardly daring to breathe.

Merlin Sinclair smiled pleasantly at the young coyote that bore his first name. Although there was neither species nor blood relationship here, there was an uncanny resemblance between their faces. The young prince bore his parents’ tan fur coloring, but the shape of his cheeks and nose was oddly similar to Merlin’s lupine face. He was only a few months old, but the canine was equal in development to a human child four years old.

The pup breathed quietly, his mouth partially open in his slumber. His head rested partially on a curled arm and partially on his soft pillow, and his other hand lay open beneath his chin. Merlin swallowed quietly and reached out to brush down the soft cheek fur of the youngster’s face, wondering what it would have been like to be a father raising a son.

Tinara watched the expressions play across Merlin’s face, and recognized the family instincts surfacing in the wolf. She put a hand to her chin as she mulled over the thoughts in her head.

There was a small whimper, and the princess’ thoughts were brought back to the present. The youngster opened his eyes sleepily and looked up at Merlin’s silhouette in the dark room.

“Papa?” the boy murmured. His little nose was quivering, and his little sleep-fogged mine was seeming confused by the strange scent. Tinara was about to correct the mistaken identity and introduce the wolf to him, but Merlin leaned forward and whispered to the child.

“All is well, little one,” he said quietly. “Go back to your dreams.”

“Yes, papa.”

Merlin kissed the child on the forehead and the boy snuggled closer to his pillow, his eyes closed and a look of contentment on his face. Merlin watched the young coyote a moment more before he stood up and walked over to Tinara’s side. He touched her lightly on the arm and then both adults left the room.

The child’s caretaker reentered the chamber and quietly shut the door behind her following a quick bow to the princess. After the door had closed, Merlin looked over at Tinara, a pleasant expression on his face.

“He’s a nice-looking boy, Princess,” he said quietly. “If it is permitted, I am looking forward to spending a little time with him while I am here.”

Tinara nodded and opened her mouth to reply, but she suddenly put a hand to her mouth to cover a yawn. "Please forgive me," she apologized. "It's late and I've been awake since early morning."

Merlin smiled and nodded as they neared the library door. He was still operating on Dennier-time and was far from sleepy, although seeing her yawn made him do the same. "I think we should call it a night and resume our visit in the morning, Princess."

Tinara nodded her agreement, but a moment later she looked over at him with a frown. "Merlin..." she said slowly, "you have forgotten my request."

"Request?"

"When you were here last, I asked you to call me by my first name at times when we're alone. I dislike living under a lens all the time and it would please me to have a friend address me as one. You've done nothing but call me by my title since you arrived."

"Ah yes, I remember," the wolf replied with a smile, "but you were not married then, and were so infatuated with me that you hadn't realized Kal's interest in you."

The princess stopped just inside the library door and turned to face him with a grin. "My request still stands, mister wolf," she said. "If you and I are alone together, you are allowed my preference. Please address me by my name."

"If that is your royal wish, I will abide by it."

"It's my *royal* wish that you *ignore* my royalty for now." The princess winked at him and they moved back into the library. Merlin walked over to his abandoned duffel and hoisted its strap back up onto his shoulder.

"If you will call someone to take me to my room," he said, "I will leave you to retire for the night. Unless, of course, I am to stay in the library."

"Ask me nicely, using my name," the princess said with a very quiet voice, "and you can stay in *my* bed tonight."

Merlin blinked twice before he realized what she had just said. He looked at her incredulously and swallowed. "Won't you be cold sleeping on the floor?" he asked cautiously.

Tinara giggled. "I'm only teasing, mister wolf," she said in delight. "There is a room of privacy already prepared for you. It's nice and cozy, and is not far from the suite where Kal and I are staying." She chuckled at his unbelieving expression. "If you'll follow me, I'll take you there myself and leave you alone until tomorrow."

The lupine captain nodded, but said nothing more. Tinara shrugged and walked across the library with him following closely behind. They moved out into the corridor where Nishalt had brought him in, and then turned down a side passage that he had not been in before. Within a moment, they stopped beside a heavy door of wooden planks.

"This is your room," the princess coyote said as she gripped the iron handle and pushed the door open for him. Merlin walked inside and gave the torch-lit room an appraising glance before turning back to his hostess.

"Very nice," he said. "I think it will be just fi—"

While he was speaking, the princess shut the door behind them, and then threw herself into his arms. She kissed him deeply, wrapping her arms around the back of his neck to hold him close. Merlin resisted only briefly, but then dropped his duffel and returned the kiss. When they parted a moment later, Merlin put his hands on her shoulders and then looked down at her. He started to say something, but she tiptoed up and began licking the sides of his snout. Their bodies intertwined, the supple caress of her form driving him on, flaming through his veins like warm venom as he helplessly submitted to his impulses. Her perfume was doing something to his will, but finally he realized what he was doing and pulled away.

“Tinara,” he said in a breathless, but stern voice, “you are desirable, but I won’t put my head on a chopping block for you. Please... return to your husband before this goes any further.”

“You misunderstand the importance of your head to me,” she purred back.

“This is not a trade,” he half-growled.

The princess looked up at him with admiration, her lips parted slightly and her eyes alive with an inner fire. She looked as if she was going to argue, but instead she nodded and stepped back away from him.

“Good night, mister wolf,” she said quietly but in no way upset. She turned, opened the door and then left without a backward glance. She pulled the door shut behind her, and the wolf was left in the silence of the room.

Merlin waited a few moments to allow her time to go, and to give him a moment to clear his head. He then moved quietly to the door. There was a simple heavy bolt lock and he slid it aside to secure the panel, not caring if she heard. He then picked up his duffel, taking it to a large fluffy bed that practically filled the room. Beside the bed was a polished wooden table adorned solely with a pitcher of iced water and an ornate metal stein. He filled the cup and then gulped it down, willing his heart to calm. He drank a second cupful, though more slowly as he tried to relax by thinking of other things.

He set the water and the mug aside, and then turned back to the bed. He opened his pack and took out a slateboard datapak that bore the logo of the *Blue Horizon* across its outer surface. On the small table beside the water jug, he set up the slateboard. There was a small beep as the unit activated from its small, but efficient power pack. The room was lit by a few small torches sitting in iron braziers mounted into the stone block wall, and the wolf’s amber eyes reflected the flames as he watched the commands scramble across the screen. A moment later, his messaging program interfaced with the castle communication system that had already been authorized to allow it.

He sat down in a heavy oak chair at the table and then tapped out his passcode. At once, the interface came to life. Two messages awaited his attention. The first was from Bill, letting him know he and the *Christopher Watson* had arrived safely in Spurlock. The second was from Taro. It was a routine report on the business under her command. It was all rather boringly uneventful and Merlin was satisfied that all was well during his absence.

Despite his earlier yawn, he was not sleepy. There was enough of a time difference for him that he would not be ready for bed for a few hours yet. He glanced around his room at the purple and gold tapestries that covered the stone block walls, and his gaze fell upon a single large painting that hung on the wall above the bed. He had not really noticed it before, but now that it had his attention, he groaned audibly. It was the original oil painting of him that had been reproduced in the princess’ new history book.

Merlin stood up and walked around the bed to stand in front of the painting. He reached up, grasped the wooden frame, and lifted it off of its wall hook. He lowered it to the ground and then turned it so that the portrait faced the wall. He would put it back in its place before he left the fortress, but for now he didn’t want to have to look at it. From the pattern of portraits, statues and other displays throughout the castle, it was apparent the Tanthean coyotes were passionate about their hero worship.

Suspicious by nature, Merlin walked to each of the tapestries and tapped on them. Behind one was a hidden closet full of medieval-looking clothing that had been provided for him. Behind another tapestry was a door that he opened cautiously; it revealed an elegant washroom with an all-species squat toilet and it came complete with a large sunken bathtub big

enough for two people, much like the one he had in his quarters during his first stay in Aris Grand.

The wolf smiled and nodded to himself. A lighter was on the counter beside a vial of bath oil, and there were many aromatic candles placed around the washroom. He lit them one by one, quietly humming to himself. He distrusted the large mirror facing the bath, and he found several soft towels in a cabinet to cover its surface with.

Shortly thereafter, hot water filled the tub as Merlin eased himself down into frothing bubbles. The aromatic candles mixed with the water to weave an intoxicating miasma about the captain. As it would not be a good idea to roam the castle alone at night in his boredom, he would spend his waking time alone relaxing.

Merlin awoke the next morning to a beam of sunlight shining in his face. He had not noticed the skylight in the ceiling of his room the night before, but by the time he had finished his bath, he had been drowsy enough to go on to bed and gently drift into slumber. His sleep had been dreamless and restful, and as he stretched, he realized that he felt good. There was nothing like a relaxing immersion bath to soothe tired muscles and nerves. Unlike a lot of folks, Merlin never had difficulty sleeping in unfamiliar places.

He allowed himself to lay there in bed for another twenty minutes before he felt the call of nature. He decided to dress native today, so after relieving himself, the wolf moved to the closet to see if there was anything in his size. Not surprisingly, *everything* in the wardrobe was his size. The servants had done their research well.

He picked out a pair of dark brown breeches, a hunter-green vest over a white tunic with leather laces across the front and billowing sleeves. He doubted the soft-sided, leather foot coverings would be as comfortable as his boots, so he left them in the closet in favor of his own. Thusly dressed, he finally uncovered the bathroom mirror and studied his appearance. Just a brush through the fur on his head and across one cheek would make him presentable. He was pleasantly surprised by the fit of the pants. Even the tail flap was at the right height for his anatomy – something he almost always had to have altered to fit him properly every time he bought new clothes. As soon as he unlocked the bolt, a small and plump coyote woman came over to him, bowed and then looked up at him with a warm smile.

“Good morning, milord. May I attend you?”

Merlin nodded and returned the smile. “Coffee and a light breakfast would be nice, if you please.”

“Yes, milord,” the woman replied. “If you will follow me, I will direct you to the dining hall downstairs.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” the wolf answered. The small woman turned after another bow and then he followed her through numerous spots of sunlight from overhead windows. Their short journey took them past a large set of glass windows, and Merlin stopped to look down upon the courtyard two stories below. The grass was lush green and rainbows of flowers were everywhere, especially up next to the ancient stone block walls. A few of the panes were partially open and Merlin could smell the freshly-watered plants on a small breeze. Gardeners were at work caring for the vegetation, and several people reclined on the lawn in the morning sun.

He could also smell the aroma of fresh coffee and he turned back to the woman who patiently waited for him. He gave her a smile and with a nod of her head, she led him to the

circular stone steps he had ascended the night before. The woman had a little trouble negotiating the first step downward with one foot, and almost stumbled out into open air. Had Merlin not reached out to snare her arm, she might have been seriously hurt.

"Careful, now," he said as he put her back on an even level.

"I'm sorry, milord," she mumbled. "My ankles aren't what they used to be."

"That's quite alright, ma'am," the wolf replied. "If you will just give me directions, I think I can manage to get there without getting lost, so that you won't have to bother with the steps."

The coyote woman looked up at him with an expression of gratitude and nodded. "Thank you, milord. My ankles appreciate your kindness." The directions she then gave him were fairly simple, and she bowed again when he thanked her and made his way down the steps.

Several moments later, Merlin found himself greeted by a well-dressed servant at the door to the dining hall. He was led to a long wooden table where two people occupied seats near one end.

Prince Kal Navar stood up with a smile as soon as the pair walked in. His companion got to his feet, putting his hands behind his back as the prince grasped hands with the wolf.

"Merlin Sinclair," the prince said the name with enthusiasm. "It is nice to see you again!"

The lupine captain grinned openly. "Good to see you, too, sir," he said. "At least this time I lost neither my cargo nor the ship itself."

Kal chuckled and turned toward the other man. "Merlin, I would like to introduce you to—"

"Prime Minister Nishalt," the wolf finished for him as he turned to face the other coyote.

"You two have met?" Kal asked.

"Last night," Merlin answered. "He met me and my brother-in-law at the landing pad."

"I trust you slept well, Captain Sinclair?" the Prime Minister asked politely.

"Very well, thank you."

Kal motioned toward the seats at the table, and then said to Merlin as the three of them sat down, "If you will give Mr. Hivez your preference, he will have breakfast prepared for you."

Merlin looked up from his seat and smiled at the servant who had shown him into the room. "Coffee, beefsteak and some fruit would be nice, thank you," he told him. Hivez gave him a short bow and then moved off toward the kitchen.

"Where is your brother-in-law?" Prince Kal asked as Merlin turned back toward him.

The wolf looked quickly at the Prime Minister and then answered, "He had business in Spurlock that he needed to attend to."

"Pity," the coyote prince replied. "He would have been welcome to stay the night before pressing on to his destination. I imagine the both of you were tired of looking at the inside of your ship for the past weeks. I would have liked to have met him."

Merlin saw the Prime Minister's left eye twitch at those words, but he decided not to press matters. "Perhaps another time, sir," he said with a shrug. "His company invests in Tanthean stocks and he makes periodic visits to Spurlock."

"I see. So tell me," Kal said casually, "how have you been?"

With breakfast completed and the casual conversations over, Merlin and Prince Kal left the dining room to walk along the corridors alone in silence. The Prime Minister had remained with them throughout Merlin's breakfast, and despite his earlier rudeness, the lupine captain had found him to be an interesting individual once he had loosened up a bit.

Merlin chuckled and Kal glanced over at him with a smile. "What's so funny?" he asked. "I wouldn't have imagined the Prime Minister to have a sense of humor," Merlin replied.

"Why is that?"

Merlin told him about their meeting on the landing pad, and Kal listened with interest. "So *that's* what those looks between you two were about," the prince remarked. "I apologize for him, Merlin," he said after a moment of thought. "He's a good man, but he's paranoid about anything happening to my son. Having strangers so close to the boy makes him nervous."

Merlin nodded. "I thought as much, but as he *is* a Prime Minister, he could have handled it a little more... *diplomatically.*"

"I agree. I'll have to talk to him."

"Please don't," the wolf said. "Talking together with him this morning has loosened him up toward me, I think. I don't want to put a strain back into our association."

Kal grinned widely and put a hand on his shoulder. "You act more like a diplomat than he does," he said.

Merlin shrugged his shoulders. "I *have* to be," he said. "I have twenty-one people working for me, each with different temperaments. I could also tell you frightening stories about customers I'll never deal with again." He looked toward the former Royal Secretary and noted that while he had become a part of the ruling monarch's family, Kal was still easy to talk to. He liked the man. "When do I get to visit with your son?" he asked after a moment.

Kal smiled. "Right now, if you'd like. He's outside in the sun right at this time, likely rolling around in the grass or chasing his nanny."

Merlin returned the smile. "Lead the way."

Moments later, they moved through a pair of wooden doors that opened out into the courtyard. Merlin immediately recognized the area as the one he had seen from above. As soon as Kal was noticed, a servant rushed over to greet him.

"Good morning, Your Royal Highness," the elderly gentleman said with a pleasant smile and a regional accent so thick it was difficult for Merlin to make out his words. "Is there anything I can get for you, sir?"

"Nothing right now, Daron." Kal replied. "The King's Hero wishes to visit with my son."

The old coyote squinted in the sunlight at Merlin and nodded his head. "Pardon me, sir, but I've not seen a wolf in ages and now you are the second one I've seen today."

Merlin looked amused. "Second?" he asked.

Daron nodded and then looked back toward Kal. "A gray wolf made a delivery from Tanager Village this morning," he replied.

"A relative of yours?" Kal asked.

Merlin raised both eyebrows and looked at the prince in amusement. "Do you think I'm related to every wolf in the Planetary Alignment?" he asked.

Kal shook his head with a grin. "No, of course not. Did this wolf have a name, Daron?"

"I heard Mrs. Nores call him Jorge, sir."

"That's not a name from my family tree," Merlin remarked.

"Papa! Papa!"

Kal turned quickly and got down on his knees in the grass. Merlin saw the same small coyote he had seen the night before jump into his father's arms.

"Hello, son," Kal said. He wrapped his arms around the child and then picked him up.

"Gimmee a shoulder ride!" the boy said excitedly.

"Have you been a good boy?" Kal asked. The child became suddenly interested in his fingernails and shrugged his shoulders.

"Uh huh," he muttered unconvincingly. He then noticed the wolf as if seeing him for the first time. "Who's that?" he asked. Kal opened his mouth to answer, but the lupine captain smiled.

"My name is Merlin," he replied.

"Hey, that's *my* name!" the boy exclaimed as Kal set him on the ground.

"Of course it is," the wolf said in a near-whisper as he knelt down beside him. "I'm you."

"Me?" the boy asked with wide eyes.

"Yes, you. I've come back in time to see myself as a boy." The wolf winked at Kal, who grinned back.

"You're a woof!" young Merlin replied. "I'm not a woof! You can't be me!"

"Oh, yes, I can," the captain countered. "I can prove that you and I are the same person."

"How?"

"Well..." Merlin Sinclair said slyly as he reached out a hand toward the boy, "I know that you are ticklish...*right here!*" He leaned in with a finger and wriggled it against the young boy's ribs. The small prince squealed in delight and tried to dance away from him, but Merlin snared him in his arms and pulled him close. The other servants who had been with the boy came running over in alarm. Kal put out an upraised hand to assure them the child was okay.

"I also know that your toes are *very* ticklish, too!" the adult said as he gathered the kid up in one arm. He flicked off the small sandals in one swift motion. He wriggled a finger beneath two of the boy's toes and the young prince squealed out in laughter.

Despite the boy's apparent enjoyment, the lupine captain realized the concern he had caused in the royal caretakers and stopped his attack. The child looked up at him and wiped tears from his eyes with a wide smile and a fit of the giggles.

"Are... are you really me?" he asked at last, in awe.

The wolf set the boy on the grass beside him and shook his head. "No, I was just pretending," he admitted, "but my name is Merlin. I'm a friend of your family."

It was probably the thing that happened next that endeared the child to him. Young prince Merlin stuck out his tiny hand and said, "Pleased to meetcha, Mister Merlin."

Once again, Merlin found himself in the fortress library late in the afternoon. His companion this time was Alex Rogers, the Border collie that had been Samantha's childhood friend and was the current CEO of her father's company. Alex studied the history book that the princess had opened the previous night. Merlin felt uncomfortable with the sly grin on the canine's face as he perused the wolf's portrait.

"Looks just like you," Alex said finally. "Even down to the captain's hat you usually wear. I almost didn't recognize you last night without it."

"Yeah, my crew has been kidding me for years about it being a permanent fixture on top of my head," Merlin said with a smile. "Even Samantha claims that I can't give an order unless I'm wearing it."

Alex grinned. "No, all *you* need is just a healthy set of lungs to bellow out your commands."

Merlin smirked at him. "I'm a space captain, not a sea captain, matey." Alex laughed and closed the large book. It was heavy and he wanted it out of his lap, so he set it on the floor beside his chair. "So, what brings *you* to a secluded mountain fortress on Tanthe?" Merlin asked.

Like the wolf, Alex was dressed in local medieval fashion, and he unconsciously toyed with one of the lacings across the front of his scarlet tunic. "I came to Tanthe a week ago to attend a business conference for Holden Pharmaceutical," he said. "At the gathering, I was introduced to the Representative for Royal Business Interests, a comely young woman named Lady Ayana Kojote. We had a lot of business to discuss, so I invited her to dinner." Alex grinned at Merlin's smile and continued. "It wasn't until later that evening when I discovered that she was Princess Tinara's cousin. I was introduced to Queen Sechsi at the estate where Ayana was staying during the conference."

"How did you wind up in Tanager Castle?" Merlin asked.

"After the conference ended, Ayana and the queen intended to pay a visit to Princess Tinara and her son, and they invited me along," Alex explained. "I was so taken with the Lady that I couldn't refuse. She and I have spent most of our waking hours together since we got here."

"You sly dog," Merlin teased him. "Is the queen still here? I haven't seen her."

Alex shook his head. "No, she's already returned to Aris Grand, but I understand that she and the King may be returning in a day or two."

"Where's your cruiser? I didn't see it on the landing pad."

Alex raised his eyebrows and looked embarrassed. "It's back at the Avolane spaceport, where the conference was held. I'm here until Lady Ayana allows me to take a transport back to my ship."

"Essentially, you are her prisoner in the castle," Merlin laughed.

"You could put it that way," the Border collie replied with a wide grin, "but I'm not complaining. I've really enjoyed the time with her. She has a lot of the same interests that I do. Did you know her name means *eternal flower*? She does remind me of a flower, and I've grown quite fond of her petals."

Merlin leaned forward and studied the canine with interest. "If memory serves me correctly," he said at last, "I have only heard you talk about one other woman like this before, Alex."

"Uh..."

Merlin waved his hand through the air nonchalantly. "Don't worry about it. I won't mention your Lady to Samantha. She'll find out soon enough, now that you're courting royalty. It'll probably be on INN before long."

Alex looked alarmed. "I hadn't thought of it that way," he said. "Ohmigosh..."

"Let's just hope the tabloids don't pick up on it first." Merlin looked up at the sound of footsteps and recognized Mr. Hivez. He gave the man a pleasant smile and a nod when he stopped beside the two friends.

"Gentlemen," he said, "If you will follow me to the dining hall, your presence is awaited by the Royal Family."

Merlin Sinclair knew that Alex had kept a lifelong crush on Samantha, but it was nice to see the handsome collie with a lady of his own. Merlin had gotten along well enough with Alex, but there had always been somewhat of an underlying tension due to the feelings both of them shared for Samantha. Merlin didn't get that impression now from Alex. The Border collie had someone new to occupy his attention and Merlin was happy for him. The two of them had just left Lady Ayana, Prince Kal and Princess Tinara in the dining hall, and were heading for their own rooms, laughing and joking together.

They bid one another good night and then Merlin opened the door to the room he had been given. His attention was immediately drawn to a flashing diode on his slateboard terminal. He closed the heavy wooden-plank door, unconsciously bolting it behind him. The room was still lit by a single torch in an iron holder mounted into the stone block wall, though he could tell immediately that it had been replaced sometime during the day. The wolf's amber eyes reflected the flames as he approached the heavy wooden table next to his bed.

The Aris mountain fortress was equipped with modern conveniences, but to maintain the castle's rustic medieval appearance, power lines and data transmitters were discreetly concealed behind draperies and wall boards. His room was also equipped with hidden indirect lighting, but since the torch was already burning for him, he saw no need to change the illumination.

Merlin loosened the leather laces across the front of his tunic and pushed the billowing sleeves up his arms as he reached for the slateboard. He sat in the heavy oak chair and then tapped out his passcode. At once, the screen came to life with three messages that awaited his attention. The first was Taro's routine progress report. As there was usually nothing of importance in the reports, he tended to save that one for last each night. The second message was from his sister as a follow-up to his visit, and the third one was from Tanis.

The wolf frowned when he saw "*Eyes Only*" labeled as the subject of the last message. That was never a good sign. He glanced back toward the door to make sure he had locked it behind him and then keyed in their shared decryption code to unlock the message that Tanis had safeguarded. It wasn't that he mistrusted the Aris royalty – they had helped him on more than one occasion out of friendship – but he still valued his privacy on matters concerning his ship.

When the message opened, the first thing he saw was a medical report for Clarence Duffy. Merlin remembered that this was a former military buddy of Tanis' who lived on Fyn. The message was brief, although it didn't explain why Duffy was on board the *Blue Horizon*, but Tanis had a notion that he wanted to bring to the captain's attention.

Merlin read the message twice and then pored over the data. He was no medical expert, but he understood enough of what Tanis reported to know why it had been sent to him. There were no detailed descriptions or fanciful opinions in the message. Tanis had simply given him the results of what he had found.

He sat there for several long moments, mulling over what he had read. The odds of something like this ever coming to his attention were monumentally slim, yet it had happened. Merlin closed down the slateboard and then moved to the large bed that practically filled the room. He kicked off his boots and then stretched out on his back. He stared into the flickering flames of the torch, letting his mind wander.

Now that he knew what he knew, there was a tough decision to make.

Merlin awoke with a start. A slender hand caressed the fur of his right cheek, and before he opened his eyes, he'd recognized Tinara's scent. He looked up into her brown eyes in the light of a small candle that had been placed on his night stand; his blood suddenly went cold. "Princess?" he asked hoarsely. "What—?"

Tinara placed a finger on his lips and leaned forward to lick his cheek. When she pulled back, Merlin realized that she wore a short purple silk robe that barely covered her slender form. His eyes grew wider when she stood up and let it slide off her shoulders to land quietly at her feet. She watched his eyes rove quickly over her body, and she smiled at his look of surprise.

"Princess... no," he said after swallowing deeply. She turned around to let him see her from all sides, that her fur had been well-groomed from head to toe, and then she moved back to his bedside, her tail wagging gently behind her. The wolf glanced quickly at the door to the room and noted that it was still bolted. *How had she gotten in?*

"Merlin... yes," she responded as she sat down beside him. "I need you to tickle my toes tonight." She pulled down the thin sheet that covered the wolf, and noted with satisfaction that he had worn nothing to sleep in.

Merlin sat up, pulled the bed sheet back up over his waist, and then put a hand on her shoulder to keep her at arm's length. "You are married, have a son and are the king's daughter," he said quickly. "I'm *not* going to do this!"

Tinara smiled, undaunted. "Dear wolf, let me tell you about an old Aris family tradition," she said. She moved to the foot of the bed to allow him some relief, but didn't bother to cover her graceful curves from view. "Every generation or so, it is traditional for female members of the royal family to take on an outside lover to infuse new blood into the bloodline after they've married and had their first child."

Merlin furrowed his brow, but said nothing.

"There are no secrets to be hidden here. This is done with the full expectation and knowledge of the woman's husband," she continued, "as well as her immediate family."

"Kal knows? An-and... the King?"

"Of course!"

"But—"

"You won't lose your head over this," she assured him. "As the King's Hero, you will be honored ever more. Besides..." she said with a seductive glance, "I've fantasized about you ever since your last visit to Tanthe."

Merlin let out an audible sigh and looked at her with uncertain eyes. "Princess..." he began.

"Tinara," she corrected him.

"Tinara," the wolf repeated, "not long ago, I might have been willing to take part in your family tradition. You are... *very* desirable. I've always been a willing partner to those I've shared myself with, but now..."

The coyote woman tilted her head. "But now?"

"I don't know if you remember Samantha Holden. She was with me during our last visit."

"Another Border collie like Alex Rogers, I believe," Tinara replied with a nod. "What about her?"

"She and I have known one another most of our lives. We've always been close, but over the past year, we've been settling into an exclusive relationship with one another. I don't want to do anything to ruin what I have with her."

"Are you going to marry her?" the princess asked bluntly.

"That's not something we've really discussed," he replied after a moment's hesitation, "but at this time, Princess, she's the only one I wish to be with."

Tinara crawled up across the bed and then pushed him back into a reclining position. She stretched out on top of him and his sheet, and then lifted her chin so that she was looking up at him, nose to nose. "Not to worry, dear wolf. You won't lose your Samantha over this. I won't require anything from you except one night as tradition allows. Afterwards, you may return to her without concern."

"Without concern?" Merlin responded with growing indignation. "You are coyote and do not know what it means to be a wolf. Since our species are compatible, if I take part in your *tradition*, you will be expecting children to result from this bloodline infusion -- and then expect me to leave my child or children *behind*? Princess, if I should ever sire a cub, it's strongly built into my nature to *be there* as its father, to protect and to raise the child as my family. I can't do this with the offer you present to me!"

"Merlin..."

The lupine captain put his hands on both her shoulders and lifted her up so that he could slide out from beneath her and the sheets. He stood up beside the bed in nothing but his fur and looked down at her disapprovingly.

"Princess," he said quietly, "I like you very much. You are young and very beautiful, but I cannot be a part of this."

"Merlin..." she repeated.

"No, Princess. I mean it."

Tinara sat back on the bed, her knees drawn up to her chest. As a princess, she had never been refused anything she had asked for in life, but twice this wolf had refused her. What had first been feelings of disappointment suddenly erupted into resentment and anger.

She was a princess!

Tinara slid off the bed and snatched up her robe angrily. She drew it around herself and gave the wolf a cold glare before she picked up her candle and stormed across the room. Merlin watched her slide behind one of the tapestries hanging on the wall, and then she was gone, leaving the room in sudden darkness.

Merlin could have sworn he had checked behind that tapestry and had found only a stone wall, so he fished a flashlight from his duffel and rushed over to pull it aside. There, as it had been during his initial inspection, was a stone block wall that felt just as solid as any other in the castle. He had heard tales of labyrinthine passages built into the walls of noble castles, and knew that the Princess must know a secret control to open his room into such a passage.

He searched for several minutes, but was unable to find a means to open it. The wolf turned around and leaned back against the tapestry, resting his weight on the wall behind it and thinking to himself in silence. He could still smell her ready scent in the air and had to rub his eyes to rid himself of the memory of her body up against his.

He turned off his flashlight and stood there in the darkness, but his mind could still see her standing before him. He shook his head in frustration and moved across the room back to the bed. When he crawled beneath the cool sheets, Merlin closed his eyes and let his mind

wander back over her words. The offer had been tempting, but he was a wolf and responsibility to family was strong in him. So long as there were no offspring, Merlin was content to enjoy the females he had given attention to in the past, but should he ever father a child, he would willingly take his mate for life. It just was not in him to create a child and then leave, and that's what *they* wanted.

Merlin took his breakfast alone in the library, instead of the dining hall. He was well aware that his morning absence would be duly noted, and his assessment was proven accurate when Prince Kal entered the book-filled room and walked directly to him with a frown.

"Good morning, Captain," the coyote said to him in a strained voice. "Mrs. Nores told me you had requested your breakfast in here. This is most irregular."

Merlin nodded and took a lap from a coffee cup on a tray on a table next to his chair. "I needed time alone this morning."

"Are you okay? How are you feeling?" Kal noticed that the wolf was dressed in his own clothing today, rather than the local garments that had been provided for him.

Merlin considered his words before answering. "How am I feeling?" he repeated. "I got very little sleep last night and am probably a little cranky this morning. I decided I wouldn't be very good company over breakfast... especially if the Princess was there."

Kal looked over at him in puzzlement. "She didn't spend the night with you?" he asked.

Merlin set down the cup and looked up at the prince with narrowed eyes. "No, she did not," he replied through tight lips. "You *knew* she was in my room last night."

Kal shrugged his shoulders. "Of course I knew," he answered nonchalantly. "It's a family tradition."

"So I've been told."

Kal tilted his head and saw the wolf's tail twitch in agitation. "Is there a problem?"

"I take it that you have not spoken with the Princess as yet."

"I've not seen her since last night," the coyote replied. "I slept in my son's room, and we rarely share breakfast together anyway."

Merlin speared a small chunk of beefsteak from his food tray with a tiny fork and dipped it in a bluish sauce. "I opted out of Princess Tinara's offer to take part in your tradition," he said after he had eaten the morsel. "She was not happy about it, but I sent her away."

Kal stared at him in amazement. "You turned her down?" he asked. "Why? Didn't she explain the reason and the need for the tradition?"

Merlin's frown deepened. "First of all, I want you to know I find the whole situation highly uncomfortable." Kal opened his mouth, but Merlin held up a hand and continued. "I've never gotten involved with a married woman before - even with one whose entire family knows and approves of such an action. It doesn't matter whether or not she is of royal blood; I simply *cannot* father a child and then leave it behind."

Kal's breathing had gone shallow. "Even if that were not the case," Merlin added to the coyote's look of disbelief, "I am already in an exclusive relationship," he explained.

"Samantha Holden?" the prince asked. When Merlin nodded, he smiled and said, "She doesn't have to know, my friend. You could fulfill your duty here and..."

"No."

Kal was getting flustered. He had not been reared as royalty himself, but he had been raised with the Aris family's interests firmly in mind and the whole kingdom world had

knowledge of the old tradition. Merlin's refusal was not something he had been conditioned to expect.

"Merlin," he tried again, "I implore you to reconsider our tradition. You are not a coyote, but we are close enough in species for a successful mating; your blood will help *strengthen* future generations of the royal family. This is not just an affair with a princess you will be having. This would benefit all of Tanthe. The King was in full agreement when your name was brought up to fulfill the tradition after our son was born."

"Kal," Merlin said, purposefully dropping the man's title, "if I do what you want, it's going to harm the friendship between me and the house of Aris."

"No it won't, my friend. This tradition has been acceptable on Tanthe for generations," the prince tried to reassure him. "You don't have to be concerned about me getting jealous of you for sleeping with Tinara. I'm okay with this and the child would be *well* cared for."

"You are *missing* the point," Merlin said with an exasperated shake of his head as he got to his feet. "I - *will not* - participate. The answer is *No*. You will have to find someone else to sleep with your princess."

Prince Kal looked at the lupine captain for several long moments with his brow furrowed and his fists clenching. There was too much at stake for this kind of attitude, and he was sure this disturbance in their plans would not sit well with the monarch.

The lupine captain of the *Blue Horizon* looked up into the clear blue sky above the castle grounds. He allowed himself an audible sigh as he and his companion watched banners on parapets sway lazily in a light breeze. This visit had turned out to be more stress and less relaxation than he had anticipated, and he was anxious to be on his way. However, the main purpose of his visit was to see the young prince who bore his name, and he wanted to spend more time with him.

It had taken some coaxing for the boy's caretaker to allow the wolf to take the young prince outside into the garden without her, but she had finally relented when he reminded her that he was the *King's Hero*. At the moment, Merlin Sinclair and Merlin Aris were alone together as they moved among flowering shrubs and bushes along a stone walkway.

The young prince was not interested in the beauty of the garden. He stared up at the wolf as they walked, one hand holding onto the adult and the other with a finger lightly resting against his lower lip. When they came upon an ornate marble bench, they stopped to rest.

Merlin Sinclair smiled at the child. "Is there something you would like to do, your Highness?" he asked.

The boy's face brightened. "Shoulder ride!" he said in excitement.

"You like sitting up high, do you?"

The prince nodded vigorously and Merlin chuckled. "Okay, one shoulder ride coming right up!" On cue, the young coyote turned around so that his back was to the wolf. Merlin picked him up beneath the arms and hefted him up over his head so he could straddle his neck with his little tail hanging down behind them. The prince put his hands underneath Merlin's chin and held on as the adult stood up.

"Yaaaay!" the boy exclaimed. Merlin Sinclair began walking through the garden again, mindful not to take the boy under low tree branches. It felt nice to spend some time with a child. Merlin had always liked children; he had always thought he would have some of his own, but life as a freighter captain didn't present the best of environments to raise them.

The garden pathway opened up into a maze-like arena with few overhead branches, so the wolf held onto the boy's legs firmly and began to trot. The prince giggled with each bounce and seemed not a bit afraid. Merlin made a few wrong turns in the maze, but eventually the pair of them arrived at the opposite entrance. It was not as large a maze as he had seen in Aris Grand, so had been easy enough to wind through.

The wolf panted as he set the boy back onto the ground, and then lay on his back in the grass beside him. The air was thinner than he was used to at this mountain fortress, but he had not really noticed it until the physical activity. Young Merlin sat down next to him, and began pulling up grass a blade at a time with one hand while holding them in the other.

"What is it you are doing there?" the lupine captain looked over and asked with a pleasant smile.

"Pickin' grass," the youngster replied, as if that explained his reasons perfectly. Merlin Sinclair smiled and watched the industrious look on the boy's face as he seemed absorbed in his task. Finally content, the wolf laid his head back and stared up at the flags swaying in the breeze high above them.

Then he saw a small hand move into view above his face and open its fingers. Grass dropped lightly onto Merlin's face. He brushed the blades from his fur as the youngster giggled at his expressions.

He rose up on one elbow and looked over at the boy. "Is that funny to you?" he said to him in a playful tone.

Young Merlin laughed again and nodded. "You're funny!" he said with a grin.

"Want to see some magic?"

The boy's eyes grew wide. "Yeah!"

Merlin fished around into his pocket and pulled out a Dennieran coin that he had forgotten to convert back into PA-standard credits. He held it up between two fingers so that the bronze-colored coin glinted in the sunlight. The prince watched with rapt attention as Merlin hoped he remembered how to do this particular trick. Tanis had spent hours trying to teach it to him on their last voyage and he had nearly always flubbed it.

The wolf moved the coin slowly back and forth, and watched the boy's attention lock to it as if he were a mesmerized serpent. Merlin made up a couple of magic words and suddenly said, "*alie samanra*" to his hand. With the flick of his wrist, the coin disappeared.

The young prince opened his mouth in awe. "Where'd it go?" he asked. He grasped the wolf's larger right hand and turned it over, but the coin was nowhere in sight.

"It's up here," Merlin said. He reached toward the boy's head with his left hand, and then tickled the fur just inside the child's ear, making it flick involuntarily. When the prince looked up at his hand, the bronze coin was once again glinting in the sunlight.

"Wow!" the boy exclaimed.

"I would have to say the same thing," a feminine voice said. Both Merlins looked up into the smiling face of the Tanthean Queen. Sechsi was dressed in a casual gown of beige with gold-colored trim and her fur was groomed into a silky texture that shimmered in the sunlight.

Merlin Sinclair got up to his feet, brushed the remnants of the grass from his tunic, and then bowed to her. "Good afternoon, your Highness," he said formally.

The elder female coyote put a hand on his head and then withdrew it. "Good afternoon to you too, Captain Sinclair." When Merlin looked back up at her, she smiled warmly to him. "It is good to see you again."

"Likewise," the wolf replied. "You are looking well."

"Thank you."

"She *is* rather beautiful, isn't she?" another voice asked in rich baritone words.

Merlin bowed again as King Adion Aris stepped up to his queen's side. "Hello, your Highness," he said.

The king, dressed all in dark greens, put his arm around the wolf's shoulders and said, "Nice to see you again, Captain. I was hoping to find you before you left. I understand you are leaving earlier than originally planned."

The wolf nodded uncomfortably. He didn't want to have to explain that the royal family tradition was the reason for his early departure. Instead, he just said, "Yes sire, I'm glad you had time out from your busy schedule to visit."

The queen took her grandson into her arms and quietly walked back toward the garden maze, leaving the two adult males alone on the lawn. Merlin watched them go, and then swallowed when he noticed the king's intent stare.

"I would like to have a discussion with you," the monarch said to him in a tone that Merlin couldn't quite decipher. He nodded quietly and then the king dropped his arm from the wolf's shoulder. He began walking across the lawn with Merlin at his side.

"Now that you have taken part in our family tradition," the king said in a quiet voice, "I would like to present you with a gift of our appreciation."

"Sire," Merlin said, "there's been a—"

"I am prepared to back your company with enough financial assistance to—"

"Your Highness!"

Adion looked up sharply at the wolf's raised tone, and immediately noted the wolf's apparent distress. "Yes?" he asked in concern.

"I have not taken part in your family tradition," Merlin said cautiously.

"What is that you said?" the king asked in puzzlement. "I was told you would be taking my daughter into the bedchamber last night. Has something happened to her?"

"Princess Tinara is fine, your Highness," Merlin said quickly. "The problem is with myself. I—"

The king looked at him and nodded knowingly. "I see, young man," he said in a lowered voice. "We were not aware of any medical—"

"The issue is neither medical nor physical, your Majesty," Merlin said in a rush. "It was a conscious decision on my part. I declined." The king stared at him a moment, unable to fathom what he'd just heard. Before he could remark, however, Merlin began to relate the same reasons he had given to the Tinara and to Kal.

From a window two stories above them, the princess in question watched her father and the wolf with a sly smile. Merlin Sinclair had refused her advances, and he had refused her husband's council; he would not be able to refuse the *monarch* of an entire world.

Although she could not hear their words, she could see the wolf's arms gesturing as he gave up his excuses to the king. Her father interjected his own comments here and there, but the lupine captain continued to resist. Tinara watched in interest as Merlin became less and less animated in his arguments. The king occasionally nodded in rapt attention. She saw her father put an arm across Merlin's shoulders and wave wildly in the air with his other hand for several moments.

After what seemed an eternity to the princess, the wolf said a few things more to the monarch and then King Aris brightened, nodding his head. The two of them shook hands, and then the princess sighed and nodded to herself. She *knew* her father would get through to the wolf. This night would mark another entry into the Aris history books.

Early the next morning, Merlin met Alex Rogers on the castle landing pad beside a small, two person hovercraft that had been delivered for them. The sun had not yet crept over the distant mountains, and Merlin resisted a yawn as he stepped up into the aerial vehicle to put his duffel into a storage compartment.

"Good Morning," the Border collie said with a yawn of his own.

"G'morning," Merlin responded. They crawled up into the narrow seats and he looked over at his companion. "I really appreciate you taking me to the Vilnia Spaceport. The *Sagittarian Arrow* leaves in three hours."

"Sure thing. I trust you said your good-byes to everyone," Alex said.

"In one way or another," the wolf replied, securing his flight harness. "It was a long night."

Alex nodded with a smile as he pushed his tail through the standard opening in the back of the pilot seat. He took a headset down from a clip above him and pulled the boom microphone around his chin to his lips.

"Sky Patrol," he said into the communicator, "this is Tanager Transport Gee-Eee-Three-Nine. We are preparing for momentary liftoff from Tanager Castle, bound for Vilnia Spaceport. Authorization code Alpha-Omega-Zero-One."

"Tanager Transport GE39, this is Sky Patrol. Royal authorization has been confirmed and your flight path has been registered. Launch when ready."

"Acknowledged, Sky Patrol."

Merlin allowed Alex to go through his pre-flight checklist quietly, and he let his gaze shift out the forward window toward the castle walls. His eyes roamed up to a lighted window and he could see a silhouette framed against thin curtains. It didn't take much imagination to recognize the princess' form as she watched him from above. He sighed in spite of himself.

I should have never come to Tanager Castle, he thought to himself. For the sake of everyone involved, it would have been better if I had stayed on the Blue Horizon.

A moment later, Alex increased power to the rotors and the hovercraft left the landing pad. Merlin's stomach gave a small lurch as they rapidly passed the princess' window, and then they were away, heading rapidly toward the south.

They flew along in silence for several minutes before Alex cleared his throat. "Is everything alright?" he asked. "You seem... preoccupied."

Merlin looked over at him, the Border collie's patches of white fur bathed in luminescent green from the instrument panels in the pre-dawn darkness. "Just wondering if I made the right decision," he said after another moment of silence. He closed his eyes and then leaned back in his seat.

"Lady Ayana told me about the Aris family tradition, but also told me you were hesitant," Alex said uncomfortably. "It sounded like an odd custom to me, but their reasons seemed sound." Merlin nodded absently and Alex chewed on his bottom lip at the silence. "You've been on good terms with the royal family for a couple years now," he added. "It seems like you would have been the ideal choice for something like this."

Merlin looked over at him again and appeared to be choosing his words before speaking. "Alex, he said, "I know you've loved Samantha for many years, but—"

"But, now I'm interested in Lady Ayana," Alex finished for him. "I feel like I've let Sam down, Merlin, but I've never been able to talk her into settling down. She likes space-travel too

much." The wolf looked at his friend in amazement. This was not what he was going to tell him, but apparently the canine had these thoughts on his mind.

"I've always hoped that Sam and I would be married and have a litter of pups," Alex continued, "but I'm afraid our time apart has weakened me. When I saw Lady Ayana... I fell in love again." He didn't see the look of amusement on the wolf's face at his comment about marrying Samantha, which was probably for the best. They had a long ride ahead of them to the spaceport, so Merlin let him talk.

"You know that Sam and I grew up together," Alex continued. "I've adored her since childhood – and even after the death of her parents, when she went to live with Master Tristan, I stayed in contact with her. When I came of age and could leave home, I moved to Sillon so I could be near her."

"I thought you moved to Sillon for the prestigious education you got there," Merlin replied.

Alex shook his head. "Not originally. Once there, I had to do something so that I could be near Samantha. I studied hard and then made myself useful to the Silloni Regent, who just happened to be her legal guardian." He glanced over at the wolf and his eyes glistened in the instrument light. "My plan might have worked if Tristan had not sent her to a university on Alexandrius at her own request."

"Which is where I met her..." Merlin said.

"I have a confession to make," Alex said after a moment of quiet.

"Yes?"

"I resented you for a long time," the Border collie admitted. "It took me a long while to realize that she wasn't coming back to Sillon. When you bought your ship and she convinced you to let her join your crew, I thought it wouldn't last, even for that one year period you'd agreed to let her serve with you. She later returned to her company as planned, right back into the routines she'd had before she'd left, but then she went a little crazy and rejoined your crew the next time you landed on Alexandrius, causing a major uproar with the board members. Honestly, I didn't think you two would still be jumping around the cosmos together nearly ten years later. I kept hoping she'd eventually want to settle down, so I bought a house near the *Dragon Loft* and furnished it with the things I knew she liked."

Alex shrugged his shoulders and sighed. "She's never seen the place, doesn't even know it exists, and I've been living in it alone for the past five years."

"I'm sorry about that, Alex," Merlin said quietly.

The Border collie flashed him a lopsided smile. "Oh, don't worry about it now. I stopped resenting you some time ago, for her sake. You're her best friend and I've grown to like you, too. You've been good for her and I can honor that."

"Thank you."

Alex sighed and corrected their course a bit. "Despite my love for Samantha," he said, "I'm afraid that her absence has made it easy for me to take an interest in Ayana. I don't know where our relationship might take us, but as you mentioned earlier, I don't want Samantha to find out about it from some tabloid paper on one of the PA worlds."

He reached into a pocket in his flight jacket and pulled out a data crystal inside a protective metal container. "I need you to give this to her for me when you get back to the *Blue Horizon*." He handed it to Merlin without taking his eyes off his instruments.

Merlin held it up to the green panel light and saw the label: *To Samantha from Alex*. "What is it?" he asked.

"A private message to explain things to her," Alex replied. "I can trust you not to read it?"

"Of course. I'll make sure she's the only one who sees it."

"Thank you, Merlin. I really appreciate it."

The wolf pocketed the container and both of them fell into silence as the hovercraft approached the edges of the spaceport traffic.

Merlin reached beneath him to adjust his tail with a frown. Amazingly, the First Class accommodations on such a commercial transport seemed to be more cramped than his freighter, and while the cost had been expensive, the cabin he shared with an elderly human lecturer was tiny; it was apparent the chair was *not* designed for someone with a tail.

He sat stiffly at the only desk in the small cabin, watching newscasts on a small vidscreen mounted to the top of a cabinet. His roommate, Professor Wombles was currently away having his morning meal, so Merlin had the place to himself.

He'd left Tanthe a week ago on the commercial starship, *Sagittarian Arrow*, which was headed to all three worlds located within the Goldilocks Zone of the Lia-Noa star system, where he would depart at Crescentis to rendezvous with the *Blue Horizon*. He had misgivings about going to Crescentis again – the last time he and his crew had been there, they had been shot down by pirates. Had it not been for the timely arrival of the *Lady of Dreams*, none of them would have survived the crash.

However, their next job was there and he was ready to rejoin his crew, although it would take another two weeks to arrive. That was a long time to be cooped up in a small cabin with an old man who loved to talk constantly. The gentleman had really done nothing against him, but it was almost enough to make Merlin want to start avoiding humans again.

The lupine captain stared at the tiny vidscreen a moment more and finally shut it off. He stood up from the ill-fitting chair, moved back to his bunk and stretched out on his back.

He lay there for a long while, trying to let his mind relax, but his thoughts turned to the information that Tanis had sent to him. King Aris had granted use of his scientists to examine the genetic data report for him and their conclusion confirmed his medic's hunch. There was no doubt about it now, but Merlin still was not sure about what he needed to do.

Since Taro had finally given in to her conscience and told him about Operation Rainbow, he was fairly certain that Duffy could be recalled to active duty on Nalirra if his folder information had been processed before the facility was destroyed. Would it be fair to keep the knowledge from him – knowing that he could die in the war – or would it further complicate matters?

Merlin sighed and rubbed his head in frustration. He didn't even know the Siberian husky, but he felt some sort of responsibility with the information. However, that was not his major concern. Probably the biggest uncertainty on his mind was wondering how Max would react to the knowledge that Clarence Duffy was his biological father.

Thoughts of family shifted Merlin's memories back to Tanthe. After what had happened at Tanager Castle, he wondered if he would ever be able to go back there. The whole situation had been a tangled web, but after everything that had occurred, Merlin knew that for the sake of family and for the sake of a child, he *knew* he would have to go back.

RISE OF THE BAMBOO WIND

By Ted R. Blasingame

In the darkness of space, the color of an interstellar vessel can be hard to determine, but in the case of the *SS Savannah Hunter*, it wouldn't have mattered much if the wedge-shaped freighter had been in a spotlight. Its ridged hull was painted a shade of green so dark that it was almost black. Even the cabin portholes were polarized to let little, if any, light out into space. The exception to this was one tiny room on the starboard side beneath the bridge where the window polarization had not worked in months. The room was poorly insulated, often cold and served as the First Mate's office.

As the *Savannah Hunter* approached the watery world of Crescentis, a passing orbital satellite detected the solitary light floating through space. The instrument's purpose was to alert ground-based tracking systems of approaching ships that would be delivering much-needed cargo to the island colonies that supported the fishing fleets, but the collective budgets of the settlers were not endowed well enough to afford top-rated equipment. The vessel's freighter profile should have triggered an alarm at a tracking station on the nearby planet. Instead, it merely registered the dim light emitting from the solitary window as glowing space dust being drawn into the planet's gravitational field; it was quickly dismissed as anything of importance.

JW Chon sat in the small room that served as his First Mate's office and the chair underneath him groaned beneath his weight. The classic panda pored over the account books and snorted to himself. Were it not for him, the captain's business would have gone bankrupt long ago and they would likely have all been out on the streets of some forgotten town on a backwater world.

Captain Armando Jensen had no sense of business, and as far as Chon knew, the Mainoran lion had never personally taken care of the company that his father had given him years ago. The *Savannah Hunter* was a *Sakura*-class freighter only five years old and already it was in poor shape due to the plethora of unsavory help that had worked its maintenance during that time. Although the ship was Armando's, he was the captain in name only. Ever since he had hired Chon as his accountant and delegated his duties to him as his First Mate, business for the wedge-shaped freighter had steadily increased, in both quantity and quality. JW Chon had a good head on his shoulders that was keen with business savvy and numbers. He was also a natural leader.

It had been said by competitors who knew them that for the past three years, the real captain of the *Savannah Hunter* was JW Chon. Armando may own the vessel and the business, but he was merely a figurehead these days. He had given Chon full authority to run the ship for him so that he could spend his time and money on the things he wanted. Chon took his occasional orders with the proverbial grain of salt and then ran things his own way. The business was better for it.

Unfortunately, there was a high turnover in the crew of the *Savannah Hunter*. Those who signed contracts to hire onto the freighter often jumped ship at the next available port.

Although without any real power on board his own ship, Armando was not an easy man to be around. He ranted often when he didn't get his way and pounded on anyone who happened to be near him, whether or not they were responsible for his plight. The crew roster for the ship had been fluid, whether there was any kind of contract or not.

Besides Armando and Chon, only one other crewmember had stayed on throughout all the changes. A small runt of a ferret named Lon Hunkle had become Chon's right hand flunky. He was king of the brown-noses and was delighted to have Chon's trust. He didn't have a specified job on the ship other than to follow the panda's orders, but he obeyed without question and Chon rewarded his loyalty.

For the past year, the crew of the *Savannah Hunter* had consisted entirely of individuals shanghaied by Chon and Hunkle. JW Chon was afraid of no one, including Armando, and was often forced to assert his authority with everyone brought on board the vessel. His soft appearance was deceptive. As yet, he had not lost a fight even against aggressive predator types.

Most of the crew had developed a fear of Chon's wrath, but the majority of them respected him even if they harbored hatred for kidnapping them for his crew. They worked hard when he gave them assignments, and while some escaped at their ports of call, most stayed on board the ship. Chon paid them well, but while the lot of them didn't want to be there in the first place, they waited patiently until the ship might return to their homeworld before jumping ship. It was a wise person who didn't want to escape only to be stranded somewhere far from home.

The crew recognized Hunkle for the weasel he was and often plotted to do nasty things to the little snitch. The ferret kept Chon informed of everything going on aboard the ship, which had often been in time to foil a mutiny or other disruptive action. The panda was in the business for the money and didn't intend to let disgruntled employees get in the way of ship operations. Lon Hunkle had been instrumental in keeping that order.

JW Chon snorted to himself in impatience as he tallied up Armando's personal expenses. The captain's quarters were more luxuriously equipped than any other cabin on board, whether it was the expensive linens for his bed, various books, magazines and comics, the audio and video equipment, or case upon case of *Adirondack's Exotic Honey Mustard* for the galley. Armando loved honey mustard with *everything* and demanded that the ship be well stocked for all his meals.

Unfortunately for Chon, who managed the business account, Armando rarely saved his receipts for the purchases he made on their planetary stops, so keeping the books in line was often frustrating. Fortunately for the rest of the crew, Armando didn't venture out through the corridors of his own vessel very often. Instead, he usually locked himself up in his quarters throughout most of the voyages, emerging only to eat his meals or to give his First Mate some new order that would likely be ignored.

When he did happen to roam the passages, Armando often saw faces among his crew that he didn't recognize. When asked, the hapless individual would usually respond with something like, "Mr. Chon brought me on board." Since Armando trusted his First Mate's judgment implicitly, this was usually enough for the lion.

The panda stared incredulously at the one receipt in his hand that Armando *had* remembered to turn in to him. It was for a box of costumed super hero comics from their last stop on Pomen.

Chon heaved a sigh, set the receipt and his pen on the ledger book before him, and then rubbed his eyes. Something had to be done or the *Savannah Hunter* would go bankrupt - not

from a box of comics, but from everything else Armando acquired in impulse without reporting. He sat back in his chair and it gave another groan beneath his weight. He put a hand under his chin as his thoughts whirled over several ideas to bring in more money for the business. However, all of his thoughts kept returning to the same conclusion.

JW Chon began to smile. It was a smile of amusement at first, as if the thought was merely a fanciful dream, but then it transformed to a grin that spread across his whole countenance. If handled just right, the *Savannah Hunter's* financial problems could very well improve. He allowed himself to laugh aloud, something he didn't do often, and it felt good to do so.

He stood up from the chair, moved soundlessly out of his office and into the corridor. He had another job for the ferret.

Lon Hunkle's tiny eyes shined in delight in the dim illumination of the corridor. The mask of brown fur around his eyes gave him a mischievous look that was enhanced by the tip of pink tongue sticking out between his lips.

The diminutive ferret carried a folder of papers in both hands, and he was careful not to let any of them drop to the floor. A jaguar dressed in a pair of denim shorts and dark green vest stepped out into the hallway. She scowled when she saw Chon's little snitch.

"What are you up to now?" she growled unpleasantly.

Hunkle glanced up at her and shrugged his shoulders. "I gots requisitions for the captain to sign," he replied.

"More acquisitions? Who is it this time? Another snooty cook like that poodle we picked up on Sillon last year?"

The ferret grinned, but shook his head vigorously. "No, F'hile, nothing like that," he said. "Not another hand, just something for the ship."

F'hile Mavron crossed her arms and leaned against the wall. "C'mon, weasel, spill the beans. What's going on? You don't ever look this pleasant unless you're doing someone dirty."

Hunkle snorted. "You're too suspicious," he said to the mechanic. "Sometimes things *are* as simple as they look. Mr. Chon sent me to get the captain's signature. Nothing more."

"On paper?"

"On paper. You know the captain doesn't trust slateboards."

The feline glared at the smaller fur. "Watch your step, ferret. One of these days you're going to be alone in a remote place on this ship without Chon's protection."

Despite his diminutive frame, Hunkle was unafraid. "Oh really?" he said. "I would imagine that Mr. Chon might find interest in knowing where the spare silver relays that went missing from the engine stock room last month have turned up. Very interested indeed..."

F'hile looked uncomfortable. "How did you...?"

"Doesn't matter," the ferret said as he resumed walking down the corridor. "Mr. Chon doesn't have to find out, but should anything happen to me, he has instructions and the passcode to access my personal diary. It's quite possible he might see something in there."

F'hile watched him go silently, biting back a retort to the ferret's subtle threat. With another growl beneath her breath, the mechanic turned and headed aft.

Hunkle chuckled to himself as he neared the captain's quarters. He really hated that room, but he had a job to do. He reached up and knocked on the green painted panel just beneath the seal control. A moment later, an annoyed growl emanated through the door.

"What is it?"

"It's Hunkle, sir," the ferret answered. "I have papers for you to sign."

The metal wheel in the center of the door turned and there was a tiny hiss as the door seal vented. The pungent aroma of incense filled the corridor as the door opened. The large frame of Armando Jensen towered over the ferret and glared down at him. He wore a silk bathrobe of gold and black thread with stylized dragons battling across the surface of the material.

"Who sentchu?" the Mainoran lion growled at him.

"Mr. Chon, sir. I have papers for you to sign."

"What's it for?"

"Mr. Chon needs your approval to invest a bit of the ship's funds in stock for *Adirondack's Exotic Honey Mustard*. He has a contact to get them at a good price, and word has it the company's worth is about to go up."

Armando's face lit up. "That Chon's the best guy I ever hired to work for me. He *knows* how much I love that stuff seasoning my food!"

Hunkle held up the folder containing two sets of papers toward the lion and then produced a pen for him. "Just sign the flagged line at the bottom of page five of both sets and Mr. Chon will take care of the rest."

Armando flipped directly to the last page of each document and then took the pen from the ferret. He signed each one against the door with a flourish, and then gave the pen and folder back to the ferret with a grin.

"Here ya go, Hunkie," he said. "Tell Chon he's earned his pay for the day."

"Aye sir, I will."

Armando nodded and then disappeared back inside his room. The door handle turned to reseal the panel, and then the ferret opened the folder to look at the documents the captain had just signed.

"This is gonna be *good*," he whispered to himself.

Several hours later, Lon Hunkle watched the landing of the *Savannah Hunter* from an observation cubicle beneath the floor of the cargo bay. He lay on his belly on worn cushions in the small enclosure, watching the evening clouds push past the wedge-shaped freighter on its way toward the watery surface of the planet. This was his favorite place to be during landing operations, as it gave him an unobstructed view of what lay below them. It was also the safest place for him, as it was an area not well known to the rest of the transient crew. It took a crawl through a service tunnel between the double hulls of the ship, and most of the species on board would have a tough time negotiating the cramped passageway had they even known about it. The same could be said for the other service tunnels that ran throughout the ship, which the diminutive ferret used frequently to move about unobserved.

The observation window on the bottom of the *Sakura*-class ship was made of Ganisan glassteel that could withstand temperatures far greater than most planetary reentries. Even through the brunt of the *Savannah Hunter's* descent into the Crescentis atmosphere, Hunkle had never been uncomfortable while watching the colorful display through darkened goggles. That was behind them now, and the lithe ferret enjoyed the view as he munched on a sugary snack treat from Earth.

The destination of their cargo of standard colony supplies was currently near the solar terminator, which would mean the local time was dusk over the island. Red and orange clouds were now above the green ship as they neared a tiny landing strip that was set up to accommodate both spatial and aerial craft. Within moments, the ship would be safely on the ground and the crew would assemble to unload their payload.

A movement outside from the starboard signaled the ferret that Chon had initiated the landing sequence. A set of massive caterpillar tracks extended beneath the ship and the ground rapidly rushed up toward them. Hunkle took that as his cue, swallowed the last of his snack and then started back through the narrow tunnel to the nearest access panel.

By the time it took the ferret to reach his exit, the ship had landed and powered down. He opened the panel inside a modified storage locker and quietly closed it behind him; it would not do to have a disgruntled crewmember discover the entrance to his labyrinth. He opened the locker door behind a stack of cargo cushions, and then moved along the outer edge of the hold toward the cargo bay doors. He could already hear the huge seals release their locks and knew that Justin was anxious to get the work out of the way.

The load master was probably the least resistant to work on the freighter he had been shanghaied on than any of the others on board. The malamute enjoyed hard work and preferred to unload their cargoes as manually as he could get away with. Hunkle knew that Justin longed for the day when the *Savannah Hunter* would return to the northern regions of Kantus so he could jump ship and rejoin his family, but Chon was no fool and had no intentions of making another delivery to that area just so he could keep him.

"Alright, you mugs," a deep voice rumbled from the back of the hold. "Let's get this stuff unloaded quickly. The locals will want to have their evening meals soon and will be annoyed that we've arrived so late in the day!" The crew members that had gathered looked up at the large black and white panda that approached them from the lift and decided it was time to break off the idle chatter. Lon Hunkle picked up the slateboard that held the manifest from the workbench where Justin had set it down, and then took his place at the panda's side on top of a cardboard box as work gloves and moving jacks were taken out of storage. The dock master had not yet arrived from the nearby warehouse, but Chon always liked to get things going before the officials arrived.

Chon gave his diminutive friend a nod and then cleared his throat again. "I know the past few weeks have been rough," he announced to the working crew, "so I've arranged a little entertainment to boost your morale." There were murmurs and grunts of disbelief, but several of them looked up in interest. "As soon as the captain gets here, I'll show you what I mean."

He looked back down as his sidekick handed him the manifest, and asked out of the side of his mouth, "Did you bring it?" Hunkle nodded vigorously and pulled a small camera from the pocket of his vest. "Good," Chon said quietly. "Keep it handy."

"The *Savannah Hunter* sure has a hard-workin' crew!" another voice bellowed out in satisfaction. "Barely on the ground and everyone's already hard at work... That's what I like to see!" Almost as one, everyone stopped what he or she was doing and looked up at the large Mainoran lion that had arrived on the scene. He wore a brightly flowered shirt and a pair of loose tan slacks. Everyone wondered what the panda had in mind, but now that their captain had shown up, they were soon to find out.

Chon walked over to the lion and gave him a salute; it was something the panda hated doing, but was required by the captain when his First Mate reported to him. "Everything is on schedule, sir," he said formally. As expected, Armando was anxious to get off the ship, so he began walking toward the bay opening as the panda went over the manifest with him.

"Listen, Chon," the lion said as he grimaced in anticipation, "I'll let you handle this as you always do. There's a nice lil' club down on Argyll Street that has a lioness dancer to put all others to shame. By local time, she should be starting her show pretty soon!"

"Captain," Chon said in a slightly over-loud voice, "I'll take good care of the ship. Here, you might need this tonight." The panda pulled out a small envelope from a shirt pocket and handed it to the lion. Armando opened up the envelope in curiosity and pulled out a glossy strip of paper. He looked at it closely in the fading sunlight and laughed out loud. He reached out, grasped his First Mate's hand and shook it cheerfully. Hunkle quickly took a picture of the scene as Armando nodded his head.

"A voucher for an extra hundred credits!" the lion said merrily. "Extra spending money for my good time tonight!"

"You accept the money?" Chon asked in clear voice.

F'hile Mavron narrowed her eyes as she watched the proceedings. *Something smells rotten*, the jaguar thought to herself.

Armando laughed. "Of course I accept it!" he replied. He shoved the voucher into his pocket and then slapped the panda's shoulder

"You had better spend it wisely," Chon said in a sudden change of voice. "It's all the money you have left to you."

Armando snickered and grinned at the panda. "Surrrrre, it is," he chuckled. "Listen, Chon, I hate to break up our little jokey session, but I need to get to my show."

"You're free to go," Chon said in a darker tone, "but don't come back. You're not welcome around here anymore."

The only sound that could be heard in the cargo bay was the crash of ocean surf not far from the landing pad. None of the crew dared to breathe and everyone seemed anxious to hear the next words from their leaders.

"What?" Armando asked half-heartedly. "What did you say to me?"

Hunkle hopped off his box and scrambled over to Chon's side to hand two things to him. The panda held up a multi-page document so Armando could see it clearly. "Do you recognize this?" he asked.

The lion shrugged his shoulders and peered closer at it. "Not really," he admitted. Chon flipped to the last page and held it up so that the handwritten signature of *Armando Jensen* was visible to the lion, as well as the nearby crew.

"This is a legal document that you signed last night, Jensen," the panda explained. "For the price of one hundred credits, you have sold the ship, the company and all interests of the *Savannah Hunter Freight Services* to one Jiawen Chon of Brandt - that's me, if you're too thick to realize it."

"You're joking, right?" Armando asked with a swallow.

"I'm as serious as a heart attack."

"*I didn't sell my ship to you!*" Armando roared.

Undaunted, Chon held up the other object that Hunkle had given him. "Here is a photograph of you and I shaking hands on the deal, with you accepting a one hundred credit voucher." The panda handed the document and photograph back to Hunkle, who quickly shoved them into a large envelope. He retreated several steps and looked back up at the lion with a satisfied smirk.

"*You tricked me!*" Armando shouted into the panda's face, his fists clenched tightly. "That lying weasel told me that document was to buy stock in my favorite mustard!"

"You should always read what you sign," Chon said evenly. He had been ready for Armando's bluster and was more than prepared for what he knew would happen next. "You no longer have a ship, Jensen," he said with a sneer. "You've been trying to bankrupt the business your *daddy* gave to you, while I've been trying to keep it above water. Now you're stuck, without a ship, without a business... without any money but the one hundred credits in your pocket."

"I trusted you, Chon!" Armando roared. "You *BETRAYED* me!" He jumped for the panda, but Chon had expected it. For all his bulk, Chon stepped aside quickly and Armando stumbled past him. Before the lion had a chance to regain his feet, Chon brought a muscled arm up and drove his fist into Armando's chin in a powerful uppercut.

The Mainoran lion didn't hear the cheers and jeers from his former crewmembers. He fell backward, tumbled over the top of a cargo container, and landed headfirst between two more boxes. Before he could get up, Chon grabbed Armando's collar and hauled him back out into the open. The panda shoved another fist into his former captain's middle; Armando doubled over with the forced loss of breath. The lion was normally a competent fighter, but he'd been taken totally off-guard. He sank to his knees and fell over onto his side, his arms clutching his stomach.

Armando looked up at the panda towering over him and swallowed hard. "Chon..." he said in a strained voice. "Don't do this to me... I've always been good to you... trusted you with my business..."

"Armando Jensen," Chon said down to him, "you are a *liability* to the business. We can't even keep a solid crew with the way you manhandle everyone. With you out of the formula, we can change the way we do business. This ship can recoup its losses and start taking in a *real* profit for a change. I've been running this ship for the past three years despite your ignorance, and now things are going to get better."

Chon looked over at the sound of footsteps and nodded to Hunkle, who wrestled with the weight of the box he had been standing on earlier. He removed the lid to disclose that it was full of colorful publications, and then he dropped the box on the floor beside the lion before retreating behind Chon.

"What's that?" Armando wheezed.

"All the comics you're so fond of," Hunkle replied with a cackle. "On top, there's also a set of the bill of sale documents you signed with an original handwritten signature. Feel free to have a lawyer look it over for you for its legality!"

"Take your box and get off my ship, Jensen," Chon said in a menacing tone. "The sale of the *Savannah Hunter* is legal and binding, and now it's mine. If you make any attempts to retake the ship, I'll have the SPF issue a watch for you as a pirate. Now... *get out.*"

Armando coughed into his hands and gathered himself together. As he stood up, the lion roared with the breath left in him and launched himself at Chon. He drove his head up into the panda's chin and then punched him in the side as hard as he could, while holding onto him with his other arm. Chon had seen Armando tense his leg muscles and recognized the stance for attack, but the lion was quick. Despite the pain in his chin and his side, Chon swung a powerful arm and drove his fist into the lion's left temple twice, very fast. Armando grunted and dropped amidst the sparks within his vision.

JW Chon rubbed his chin and then picked up the large lion in a fireman's hold. He carried him to the edge of the bay door and then tossed Armando out into the dirt. A moment later, the feline's box dropped onto the ground beside him. The crew erupted into cheers and applause.

Armando shook his head and hauled himself up onto his feet. The tendons in his neck were taut in fury and he took a step back toward the ramp up into the ship. As one, the assembled crew lined up across the entrance to confront his return. The lion had been completely unaware of their personal animosities toward him, but he suddenly realized they all sided with Chon. They all looked as if they were eager for a fight, simply waiting for the excuse to jump him; he knew he couldn't take them all on at once.

Dazed, dejected and beaten, Armando picked up his box and slinked away into the darkening night.

*Blue Horizon, PA1138
Captain's Journal*

I have finally been reunited with my ship and crew. Since my voyage to Crescentis from Tanthe was a longer one than the route the Blue Horizon took from Nalirra, my people have been here awaiting my arrival for nearly a week. They've taken the time for shore leave to enjoy the sun, sand and surf of Emmett Island.

While it's true that Crescentis was not one of the original Terran colony worlds, enough settlers from other PA worlds have populated fishing colonies on practically every major island on this planet. Thirty years ago, the fishing fleets organized and formed their own government, and were later granted entry into the Legislature as another Planetary Alignment member. Emmett Island is one of the larger landmasses, though at only twenty miles wide and thirty-seven miles in length, and it has a population hovering around five hundred thousand.

There's plenty to do here and my crew has enjoyed the time off, but since I have been in space for the past three weeks, I gave everyone another two days of shore leave. I need the salty sea air in my lungs to flush out the scent of that old man I was cabined with for so long. I have no way of knowing what he thought of me, but although he was a nice enough gentleman, I honestly hope never to meet him again.

The island where the original Blue Horizon crashed is on the other side of the planet from us. Thankfully, we have no need to visit that vicinity. None of us has a desire to see it again.

I've been informed that Clarence Duffy caught a public transport back to Fyn a couple of days ago, so I've missed the opportunity to talk to him about Max. This is the kind of thing I would rather not discuss with him over a Com channel, but I don't know if we'll be back on Fyn again before he's recalled into active duty.

Merlin Sinclair, Captain

Samantha stretched and wiped the sleep from her eyes. She glanced over at the softly snoring form beside her and smiled. She blew lightly into Merlin's left ear and watched it twitch, but the wolf continued to sleep. It had been a while since he had been as affectionate toward her as he had been since his return from Tanthe, but the night had been wonderful. She and Merlin had been casual lovers for years, but his attitude toward her in recent months had become more focused.

Neither of them had ever maintained an exclusive relationship with one another, but she found that she now enjoyed his full attention – especially since she was not really interested in anyone else on board. She and Tanis hadn't shared personal time in nearly a year and there had been no one else in her life. Lorelei had recently admitted that she had been unsuccessful in

luring the captain to her own bed more than once, and that her feelings had been a little hurt. Fortunately for the rabbit, Lori had plenty of other willing partners on board the freighter to take her mind off of it. She'd never brought it up again.

Samantha looked over at Merlin again. She touched noses with him softly and his breathing slowed for a moment before returning to its normal sleeping pattern. She smiled, brushed his cheek fur gently with a finger and then left him alone. Was the relationship she maintained with him now exclusive? It wasn't a thought she would mind if it were true, but she felt she really wanted to know. She didn't want to assume anything, as Alex Rogers had done.

She had read Alex's private letter with mild amusement. She'd not been oblivious to Alex's infatuation with her, but she'd never felt a romantic attraction to him, despite their shared species and history; he was a close friend and nothing more. Apparently Alex had long hoped that the two of them would be married and raise a family together, but Samantha was happy that he'd found someone else to occupy his thoughts.

When she looked at Merlin again, his amber eyes were open, watching her. "G'morning," he whispered.

"Good morning, love," she replied. "How did you sleep?"

"Good and restful. You?"

"I slept well," Samantha replied quietly, "but I dreamt..." She cut herself off and lightly bit her bottom lip.

"But you dreamed..." Merlin prompted.

"...that – that someone took you away from me."

Merlin stared at her for a long moment, wondering if she were precognizant. "What happened in this dream?" he asked finally, prompting her again.

"I dreamed you got serious with someone and wanted to settle down with her," the Border collie admitted in a small voice.

"I *am* serious about someone," Merlin replied.

Samantha stiffened and wondered if she wanted to hear more. "I...uh..." was all she could say.

"The one I'm serious about is *you*, Sam," Merlin confessed. Samantha searched his eyes for any sign of amusement, but his gaze was steady. He didn't appear to be joking. "You're the only one I want," he said a moment later.

Renny picked up a figurine from the shelf before him and looked at it dubiously. He and Pockets were in a small beachside curio shop where they had been for the past half hour. The cheetah and raccoon didn't normally pal around together on leave, but they'd shared a cab from their hotel to the same area of town. Both had begun walking in the same direction, and both had stopped at the same café to eat. When they'd finished their meals, Renny and Pockets continued their route about town together. The navigator had never really considered Pockets to be of much interest to him, but had never had anything against him either. Their browsing had taken them to the boardwalk near a sandy beach and the two of them had gotten along well.

As to be expected, Pockets tended to talk shop about the ship's systems that he either maintained or repaired, and it had actually been interesting to the cheetah. Renny was an experienced pilot and often boasted that he could drive or fly anything created if given a few

moments to examine the controls. He had studied engineering during flight school, but his passion had been in the area of the actual control of the systems, rather than their inner working mechanisms.

Nonetheless, he knew enough that Pockets' rambling actually made sense to him. During their stroll along the boardwalk, the thought occurred to the cheetah that he should probably volunteer to help Pockets and Max in the engine room on occasion. It wouldn't hurt to know more about the ship he flew and lived in.

The figurine Renny picked up was of a squat, fat pig sitting in a lotus position, both hands outstretched together as if holding something, with a thick tongue protruding from its lips. He assumed the ugly little thing was designed to hold a stick of incense in its hands, but wasn't quite sure. It might be something Lorelei would pick up, but he set it back onto its dusty shelf and looked toward the front counter where Pockets was bargaining for something he had found.

When he walked over to see what his crewmate was haggling over, he raised his eyebrows in curiosity. The item in question was a simple-looking wooden tube with a pattern of holes along its length; it tapered to one small end with an opening in it. Moments later, the shop owner nodded, resigned to the deal.

"Okay, you little thief," the Irish setter said at last, "you can have it for thirteen credits – but I assure you it's worth *twice* that price!"

"Thirteen credits," the raccoon nodded in satisfaction. He looked up at Renny and winked at him as the canine took his money.

"What is that thing, Pockets?" the cheetah asked. "It doesn't look like any kind of tool I've ever seen you use before."

Pockets grinned up at him. "It's not a tool, my friend. It's a birthday present for Patch. It's called a *woder*... it's a music instrument from Ganis, similar to one he lost in the crash."

"When's his birthday?" Renny asked. "I know yours is coming up in a couple months."

The raccoon stared at him in amusement. "Renny," he said with a grin, "Patch is my litter mate."

"Yeah, I know. What's that got to do with it?"

"We have the same birthday, you nut."

"Oops..." Renny said with a lopsided grin. "I forgot."

Pockets laughed at him and then took the wrapped package the storeowner handed to him. "Nice doing business with you," he told the man. The Irish setter nodded without another word and then the two *Horizon* crewmates left the shop together. The morning air was pleasant and lazy clouds floated high above the as they continued on their way.

"Does this outfit make me look fat?"

Taro Nichols looked up at the rabbit that examined herself in a triad of mirrors outside the dressing room. She shook her head. "No, Lori," she replied, "but the tail flap *is* too low for you. If you wear it like that, you'll be showing more than your cottontail when you lean over."

Lorelei turned her hips toward the mirror and then bent over. "Whoops..." she said with a giggle. "I want to entice the guys, not give them a free show! The top straps are a little tight, too." She began removing the pale pink overalls she had tried on.

"Better take it off inside the booth, Lori," Taro said. A pair of teen felines had stopped to stare at Lorelei as she unfastened the straps to the garment. Lori looked up and saw the guys

watching her with lecherous grins. She gave them a seductive wink, but withdrew into the dressing room cubicle before undressing further.

Taro looked back at the two males and furrowed her brow. "*Scram!*" she hissed. Both cats nearly tripped over one another in their haste to retreat. When the peeping toms had gone, Taro returned her attention to the garment she had considered buying, a medium green sleeveless blouse with a loose turtleneck. She walked to the mirrors that Lori had vacated and held the garment up beneath her chin. The shade of green accented her reddish-orange fur nicely, and she nodded to herself in satisfaction. The price was reasonable and it looked to be the right size. All she needed was to try it on, so she moved into the dressing cubicle adjacent to the one Lorelei had gone into.

"May I ask you something, Taro?" Lori asked through the door as the vixen removed her purple blouse.

"Sure, Lori, what is it?"

"Have you slept with all the guys on board the ship?"

Taro froze and grimaced. There were women in the other dressing room stalls and she didn't normally discuss her bedding habits in public. "No," she answered cautiously.

"Tanis and Renny?"

"Uh, yeah." Taro set her blouse aside and then pulled on the new one. She didn't understand why mirrors were not installed *inside* the dressing rooms, but she could tell just by looking down at herself that the fit was good. She opened the door to walk out and noticed a brown eyeball peering at her through the opening of another door. She ignored the eavesdropper and went out to look at herself in the mirrors. Lorelei stepped out beside her a moment later. She wore a red bikini that barely covered her furry assets.

"With the exception of Max," the rabbit said casually, "I've had them all at least once." She studied her appearance and nodded in satisfaction as Taro walked back into her dressing room without another word. "Of course," Lori said in a slightly louder voice so her friend could hear her, "I'd give him a try too, but I've heard he's been altered. It wouldn't be the same."

"Lori..." Taro said in a quiet voice that she hoped would carry only to the rabbit, "let's not discuss this here."

"Why not?" Lorelei responded as she returned to her own cubicle. "I don't care if anyone knows that I like the guys."

"That's because you're a *slut!*" said a new voice from outside the stalls. Whoever the person was, they could hear her stomp away. Undaunted, Lorelei laughed aloud and changed back into her own clothes. She'd picked out three outfits she wanted to buy and folded them neatly atop one another on the tiny bench inside the cubicle.

In the dressing room next to her, Taro sighed and shook her head in disbelief. She enjoyed the company of males herself, to be sure, but she'd never been as free spirited as the rabbit. In the months she had been back on board the *Blue Horizon*, Taro had tolerated Lorelei better than anyone else on the crew, but the more time she spent with the ship's talented cook, the more she realized just how trying the girl could be.

"Wow, Tanis, look at the design of that house!" Max said as he pointed to a Terran Victorian-style home across the street from the shore boardwalk they strolled along. The canine youth stared up at the high roof and decorative mauve trim of the pale blue structure. A human couple relaxed on a porch swing on the veranda and Max thought the place looked peaceful.

When he didn't get a response from his companion, Max turned to look at him. Tanis had stopped and leaned against a wooden rail. He stared out to sea, a breeze cupping his large ears and the wide sleeves of his orange tropical shirt, but he didn't look as if he actually saw the ocean or the fishing fleet off in the distance.

Max wiped sweaty palms on his *Blue Horizon* tee shirt and frowned. Tanis had been preoccupied a lot on their last day of leave, and Max wished he knew what was bothering him. Samantha had taught the German shepherd youth to be bolder when he wanted to know something, and Max nodded to himself. He still had difficulty mustering up the nerve to look for answers at times. His childhood of submissiveness was not always an easy rearing to get over.

"Penny for your thoughts," he said to Tanis.

The fennec fox looked over at him with a crooked smile. "What does that mean?" he asked.

Max shrugged with a grin. "I was just wondering what you were thinking about," he admitted. "I heard that phrase when we were on Earth, though I'm not sure what a *penny* is..."

Tanis sighed and nodded to his young friend. "I think it's one of their local coins," he said. He glanced back out toward the ocean again and then shook his head. "I was thinking about Nalirra," he answered. "I have no desire to join a senseless war, but it *was* my home for the first half of my life."

"Does your family still live there?"

"I'm not sure," Tanis admitted. "I haven't talked to any of them in a long time. I don't even know if Pop is still alive. He and Mum were doing okay the last I heard, but he's up in years. There's been nothing in the news about whether or not any of the Tanatan attacks have hit their area, but there are no military bases in that region, either." He fell silent again and Max saw the distant look return to his eyes.

Several quiet moments went by and then Max asked, "How long have you known Mr. Duffy?"

Tanis looked over at him. "Clarence? What made ya bring him up all of a sudden?"

Max shrugged and began walking. Tanis followed him and they stepped off the boardwalk onto the beach sand. "Thoughts just jump into my head sometimes," the canine youth replied with a smile.

Tanis scratched his chin. "Well... I first met Duffy during our original draft into the Nalirran military service," he said. "We were in boot camp together and were later assigned to the same squadron. I became a pilot and he was my mechanic. It wasn't until after my first conscription ended that I went into the medical field. Clarence and I stayed in contact after we split up and have remained friends."

"What's conscription?"

"That's when yer leader sends ya off to war, risking death, disease, famine, maiming and blinding whether ya believe in a cause or not. Most cultures did away with it a long time ago, but it's tyranny's first line of self-defense."

"Oh... anyway, I didn't get to spend much time around him on the flights he was with us," Max mused as they walked up a sandy dune. "I was just wondering what he was like."

"Duffy's a good guy," Tanis said. "He's good with machines, and as a friend he's fairly reliable. I wouldn't trust him around yer girl, though."

"My girl?" Max asked as they trudged down the other side of the dune. "Does he know Wendy?"

The desert fox laughed aloud. "No, Max, I meant in general. He loves the ladies and has been even known to play around with those who have steady boyfriends."

"How do you know that?" Max asked carefully.

"I once caught him in bed with my cousin, and *she* was engaged to be married to someone else at the time."

"Oh... What about money?" Max asked. "Does he have a decent income?"

Tanis stopped at the bottom of the next dune and looked at his companion with narrowed eyes. "Yer being awfully interested in his personal affairs, Max. What gives?"

Max stuck his hands in his pockets and looked off toward a red and white lighthouse farther up the shore. He didn't answer for a moment and Tanis was about to repeat himself when the youth shook his head.

"Uncle Merlin told me something about him last night," he explained.

"What was that?"

Max looked into his friend's eyes and shrugged, something the youth tended to do a lot. "He said that Duffy was my father. I was just curious to know a little more about him."

Tanis bit his bottom lip. "Do ya believe it?"

"Sure," Max replied. "He told me how you discovered our similar DNA markers, and how King Aramis had it confirmed for him."

"King Aris," the fox corrected.

"Yeah, him." Max started up the next sand dune and said, "It fits, y'know. I never really knew my mother either, but I knew that she was a pleasure girl somewhere else on Quet. I grew up around a lot of those girls at the *Wild Star* and often saw them turning tricks, so I know there was the occasional pregnancy. I have no doubt that's how I was born."

"And yer okay with this?"

Max smiled. "Why not?" he asked. "It's no real shock to know my biological father was still out there somewhere. It was just a fluke that I actually met up with him, without either one of us knowing it at the time."

"For a kid, yer acting rather mature about this whole thing," Tanis said in amazement. "Okay, so ya have accepted that it's probably true. How do ya feel about Duffy being yer father?"

"I don't know yet." Max said. "I haven't made up my mind on how I feel. Duffy's a complete stranger to me, but I know he was your friend. That's why I asked you about him."

"Has anyone contacted Duffy about this?"

"No, uncle Merlin was going to do that for me, but I asked him not to tell him just yet," Max replied as he reached the top of the dune. "I want to sort this out on my own a little more. I think that —"

Max stumbled and almost fell. Tanis could see the youth's look of surprise, so he scrambled up the rest of the way to join him. As soon as he crested the dune, he saw a body lying at the bottom of the dune next to a cardboard box, partially covered with newspapers.

The medic scrambled down toward the person and he knelt in the sand beside the large form. When he leaned over to take a look at the face, Tanis gasped in surprise.

"Armando!"

At the sound of his name, the Mainoran lion opened his eyes. He lifted a sandy paw to shield his eyes from the sun and squinted up at two silhouettes staring down at him. "Whut?" he asked groggily. "What do you want wit' me?"

"Aren't ya Armando Jensen?" Tanis asked.

The lion lifted his head and focused his eyes on the fox. He looked familiar, but he couldn't place him. "Who wants ta know?" he responded cautiously.

"What are ya doing out here on the beach? Is yer ship nearby?"

Armando shook his head. "Got no ship no more," he answered remorsefully. "Chon stole it from me." He looked over at the German shepherd boy with ice blue eyes and suddenly recognized the logo on his tee shirt.

"*Blue Horizon!*" he said in recognition. "You're with the *Blue Horizon*?"

Max nodded. "Yeah," he replied. "You've heard of us?"

Tanis laughed. "Of course he has, Max. Armando was our most annoying competitor and quite the pain in the neck. It doesn't look like we'll have to worry about *him* anymore."

"Listen," Armando said as he crawled up onto his knees. Sand clung to his slept-in clothing, the party shirt and pants he had been in when he thought he was going to a dance club before he got booted off his ship. "I know me and Sinclair have had our differences, but can you ask him to take me to my dad on Mainor? My dad will pay him well."

Tanis snickered. "Whoa, there, ya idiot," he said. "There are two things wrong with yer request."

"Whut?"

"First off, I don't think Merlin would give ya the time of day. Ya have been a thorn in his side since you two first met and I think he'd be unsympathetic to yer plight. Yer also forgetting Mainor was blasted to a smoldering rock. If yer Pop was there, he won't be helping ya anymore."

"Oh..." was all Armando could say. He didn't look as if he really missed his old man, but it was easy to tell he realized his predicament had worsened.

Max frowned as he listened to the exchange. He remembered hearing Armando's name on the ship, but as he didn't know the guy, he didn't understand why Tanis treated him so callously. He opened his mouth to say something, but Tanis motioned for him.

"C'mon, Max," he said, "let's leave this loser. We should get back to the ship." The two *Horizon* members began walking away in the shifting sand, but the lion got to his feet and followed them, his box clutched in his arms.

"No, please!" Armando pleaded. "I got nowhere to go now. Take me with you!"

"Don't follow us!" Tanis said over his shoulder to him. "Yer presence is not welcome!" When he saw that his words were being ignored, he started trotting away. Max had to do likewise to keep up. When he looked back, Armando was still shuffling along after them.

"Go away!" Tanis shouted.

"Ask Sinclair to hire me!" the lion shouted back. "I need a job!"

"Go away!" Tanis repeated. He motioned Max forward and the pair of them broke out into a run.

By the time Max and Tanis arrived at the warehouse on rented bicycles, the rest of the crew was already unloading cargo from four panel trucks and taking it in though the open bay doors of the *Blue Horizon*. Merlin crawled out of a truck and looked up at them as they arrived.

"You're late," he said with a frown.

"Yeah, sorry about that," Tanis said as he pulled off his sunglasses by its elastic strap. "We ran into an old buddy of yours and had a tough time ditching him."

"Buddy?"

Max waved at Lorelei and then ran into the ship to grab his work gloves. Tanis helped his boss load a crate onto a flatbed cart.

"Yer pal, Armando Jensen," Tanis replied with a smirk.

"Great," Merlin grimaced as they set down the crate. "Is that idiot here, too?"

"Yeah, he's stranded and wanted us to take him on as hired help."

Merlin straightened up and looked at Tanis. "Stranded?" he asked. "What happened to the *Savannah Hunter*?" Before Tanis could answer, Merlin held up a hand and shook his head. "No, I don't even want to know. He probably got drunk at some bar and his crew accidentally left him behind," he said as he crawled back up into the truck. "He can eat rocks for all I care."

Tanis grinned and shook his head. "Yeah, I thought as much. Okay, I'll tell ya about it later after we've launched," he said. "Ya should get a snicker out of his predicament."

"I doubt I'll want to hear about it," Merlin grumbled as Renny shoved another box toward him from inside the truck. "Go get your work gloves and help Pockets over in truck three."

"Aye, Captain."

Almost as soon as Tanis walked away, Merlin had already forgotten about Armando. Whenever they were moving cargo, he always cleared his mind of distracting thoughts in order to get everything moved, weighed and placed to Durant's direction inside the hold. Unfortunately for him, that particular distraction suddenly reared his head.

Armando nearly fell to his knees right beside Merlin's flatbed cart, panting for breath and holding his sides as he leaned against the cart. He dropped a box at his feet; comic books and a manila envelope spilled out onto the concrete tarmac. He had been running, fearful that he would miss the *Blue Horizon* before take-off. The wolf turned at the sound and then flattened his ears in disbelief. A low growl filled his throat. "Get away from my ship!"

The Mainoran lion managed to straighten up and looked at Merlin in relief. "Sinclair," he gasped. "Gimmee a job! I need your help!"

Merlin knew this particular irritant wouldn't just get up and leave without a confrontation, so he motioned to Renny to take a break and then turned back toward Armando.

"I own two freighters that are doing well," he said dryly. "Why would I give any of my customers to my chief competitor?"

"You don't understand," Armando said as he tried to catch his breath. "Chon stole my ship and business from me. I don't own 'em anymore and I'm stuck here. I need you to take me with you."

"Wait a minute," Merlin said with an upraised hand. "How did your first officer take your business away from you? That's not just something you can shoplift from a coat pocket."

Armando fidgeted and looked at the manila envelope on the ground his feet. "He tricked me into signing papers that said I sold everything to him," he said humbly.

Merlin stared at him in amazement for a long minute as he worked out in his mind what the lion had just said. "Was... there a monetary transaction," he asked slowly, "or did you just donate your livelihood at your signature?"

"No... he gave me a hundred credits."

"One... hundred... credits...?"

A look of amusement crept across Merlin's features, and Armando felt worse than ever when he saw a smile form. Merlin shook his head. "If you can be tricked into selling your ship and business for a mere ©100, you have no right being in charge of your own business, Armando, even if it *was* given to you by your daddy!"

The lion stuck his hands in his pockets. He was starting to get hot under the collar, but had enough sense to know that he couldn't afford to make the wolf upset at him. "C...can I buy passage on your ship to your next destination?" he asked meekly. "I don't want to be stuck on Crescentis."

"You want to buy passage on the *Blue Horizon*?" Merlin repeated with an upraised eyebrow. "Do you think you can afford it?"

"All I have left is eighty credits," Armando admitted in a quiet whisper. "You can have it all."

Merlin looked up at the large person before him without a trace of intimidation. "Eighty credits," he repeated. "Get lost, Jensen. I have no reason to ever see your mug again."

"Sinclair... please..." Armando said weakly. "You've helped other people before. Why won't you help me?"

Merlin narrowed his eyes and looked at him darkly. "Because you've often tried to *hurt* my business and you can't be trusted," he said to him. "I don't mind honest competition, that's what makes the economy better, but I've tracked you at times and know about the dishonest means you've used to get and cheat your customers. Your first officer did me a favor, Armando. I should send him a gift in thanks."

"But..."

"Get out of my sight, Jensen," Merlin growled, "or I'll have the Port Security escort you from the premises in manacles."

Armando heaved a great sigh and looked around. The entire crew of the *Blue Horizon* had gathered around them and all were staring at him in either disgust or indifference. Several looked as if they were preparing to fight. Without another word, he knelt down, picked up the contents spilled from his box, and then tucked them all under an arm. He turned and then trudged away from the ship.

Merlin shook his head and then noticed his crew standing nearby. He didn't feel like discussing the matter further, so he clapped his hands and said, "All right, the show is over, people. We've got cargo to move!"

"Meow..."

Durant ignored the floating saucer that greeted him and entered the lift to head up to his quarters. The launch of the *Blue Horizon* had gone smoothly and the ship was now two hours into its journey to Kantus, loaded down with self-regulated, cold storage containers of fresh seafood from Crescentis. As Pockets was especially fond of seafood, the load master knew he would have to set up a perimeter alarm around it to keep the raccoon out of their customer's goods. First, he needed sleep. He felt tired and thought a short nap would help to perk him up.

Moss turned in mid-air on its axis and watched the grizzly bear go, studying him with its shimmering green eyes and twitching its metal whisker antennae. When it had registered the closed lift doors, it turned and moved out into the hold on a routine security sweep, its quiet whirring of internal mechanisms the only sound in the dark chamber. For its first random check, Moss altered its course and shot straight up toward the cargo bay's ceiling, two stories above. The small flying saucer stopped and then floated quietly beside the overhead cranes when it detected a stress fracture in one gear wheel. It logged the matter into a file that would flag the chief engineer the next time he signed into the engine room terminal. It continued on, its scanners penetrating the dark recesses until it was satisfied there was nothing out of the

ordinary to report. Slowly, Moss spiraled back down toward the cargo pallets secured to the *Horizon's* deck plates, where they barely took up half of the lower capacity of the hold.

The saucer moved quietly around the perimeter of the crates, reading individual systems maintaining each container's interior temperature, and making note of those that showed any fluctuation in the normal settings monitored before launch. As it moved around almost lazily, the upper scanning eye changed from green to a red inner light. It stopped in its path and changed subroutines for a new set of scanning protocols that tied it in with ship's security files. There was a change in atmospheric pressure registered on the other side of a large box and its auditory sensors picked up a slow, regular pulse of sound. It checked its records, searching for signatures. It ran in a microsecond a profile on each of its records, and found no match.

Back in his cabin, Pockets looked up from his workbench and saw a flashing green light on his cabin terminal. He reached up, tapped a series of switches on a console, and patched his way into Moss' infrared video capture. He swore suddenly, pulled a small microphone from a receptacle on the terminal, and thumbed its pickup switch.

"Moss, security routine gamma-gamma," he asked into the microphone. "Don't let it out of your sensor range."

Following its new command, Moss responded with a simple flashing light on the engineer's console, instead of its normal "meow".

Pockets keyed the intercom switch to the bridge, and the first officer's voice came back to him immediately. "*This is Taro,*" she said.

"Pockets, here," the raccoon said. "Moss just discovered an intruder in the cargo bay."

"*Why does this always seem to happen on my watch?*" the vixen asked. "*Does Moss have an ID on the stowaway?*"

"No, the signature doesn't match that of anyone who's ever been on our ship before." Pockets knelt down, pulled out a slim case from under his workbench, and opened its top. "I've got my *Binfurr* rifle and am heading down to the cargo bay to make sure whomever it is doesn't move."

"*Okay, I'll inform the captain. Be careful, Pockets, but hold back until I can get Durant and Renny down there, too.*"

"Thanks, Taro." The raccoon closed the intercom circuit and then checked to make sure the rifle had a full clip. He pulled a second clip out of the case, shoved it into one of his many coverall pockets, and then was out the door headed toward the lift. Renny burst from his nearby cabin dressed only in a pair of blue athletic shorts and joined the engineer as the lift doors opened.

The cheetah saw Pockets' rifle and frowned. "I should have brought mine, too," he mused as the doors closed and began its descent.

Pockets reached into a leg pocket and pulled out a slender, sheathed knife. He handed this to Renny with a smile. "Better to be prepared," he said. Renny pulled the blade from its sheath and could tell it was razor sharp even without testing it. "It's made of Damascus steel," Pockets told him.

Renny put a finger to his lips as the lift stopped and the doors parted. They crept out into the dimly lit cargo bay and the cheetah immediately caught movement on the other side of the hold. Renny gave Merlin and Durant a silent wave. The grizzly returned the greeting with a nod and hefted his own rifle to the ready.

Pockets pulled out a small device from a belt pouch and consulted the readings displayed there. He gestured with it to the right and whispered, "Moss is stationary over there

about twenty paces, at the edge of the crates." Renny nodded and hefted his blade as they moved quietly in that direction.

Merlin and Durant reached the location first. Moss turned and scanned them briefly, but under the security protocol it now followed, the small hovering saucer made no sound in greeting. Merlin gripped an antique broadsword in one hand as he eased his nose up to look over the crates beneath the sentry unit. He turned back to Durant and nodded as Pockets and Renny arrived. He didn't seem to be surprised at what he had seen on the other side.

"Get out here, Jensen!" Merlin said in a loud voice. Since they had all been stalking quietly in the dark hold, the wolf's voice seemed louder than necessary; Pockets started in surprise. There was a shuffle behind the crates and then the head of the Mainoran lion appeared between two of them. Armando looked surprised that he had been discovered so quickly after the launch and wondered if the *Blue Horizon* possessed internal biometric scanners. He saw the rifles and blades and meekly raised his hands above his head.

He saw Merlin's scowl as he crawled out of his hiding place and then dropped to the ground in front of him. "Listen, Sinclair, I don't mean any harm to your ship or crew," he said quietly. The captain put the tip of his sword up against the lion's breastbone.

"I'm not quite sure how you got on board my ship," Merlin said with a growl, "but I know an easy way you can leave."

Armando glanced suddenly at the nearby airlock and swallowed hard. "Now... w-w-w-waitaminute!" he stammered quickly. "Don't space me, please!"

"Why?" Pockets asked coldly. "You're using up our oxygen."

Armando lowered his hands and Merlin pressed the blade tip into the thin fabric of the lion's party shirt. The point barely penetrated, but Armando got the message and nodded his head. He put one hand slowly into his pants pocket and then drew out several silver coins. He held them out to the wolf and said plaintively, "Eighty credits isn't much, but this is all the money I have in the universe. Please take it."

Without shifting his eye contact, Merlin scooped the coins from Armando's hand and handed them over to Durant. "Now, you're broke," the wolf said as he lowered the sword to his side. "You have no money, no ship, no business and no life. What do you expect me to do about it?"

Armando swallowed and sat down on a nearby crate. He lowered his head and put his massive hands in his lap. "Gimme a job," he said humbly. "I'll work for my passage."

"What can you do to earn it?" Durant asked. "Are you a mechanic... a computer tech... a cook...?"

Armando looked up soberly. "I really don't know much about any of that," he admitted. "I've always hired other people to do those jobs for me. I used to work with a load master before I got my ship, though."

"That's convenient," Durant snorted, "since the cargo was weighed, placed and secured before we launched."

"So..." Merlin asked dubiously, "what job on my ship are you applying for?"

Armando recognized the sound of resignation in the wolf's voice and felt inspired. "I dunno... give me anything. I'll clean your clothes, wash your dishes and help you move cargo..."

"We won't be moving cargo until we land a month from now," Durant replied.

Merlin sighed and then looked at his crewmates. They *knew* he would never jettison anyone short of an attacking pirate, but he didn't like having to cater to his former competitor.

"Alright," he said at last, "you can stay until we get to Kantus, but you will have to earn your passage, Jensen."

"Thank you, Sinclair."

"You will address him as *Captain*," Renny spoke up.

Armando nodded his acknowledgement and then slowly got to his feet. "Thank you, Captain," he said.

Merlin gestured to the bear at his side. "This is Durant. He'll be in charge of your work assignments, but you will follow the orders of anyone else on my crew if they have something for you to do."

"Yessir."

"I've got something he can do," Pockets said. He thumbed the safety on his rifle and slung it over his shoulder.

"Good," Merlin replied. "Armando, this is our chief engineer, Pockets. He'll get you started."

The raccoon smiled slyly at Renny and then headed off toward his engine room with the lion in tow.

As soon as they were out of sight around the perimeter of the cargo bay, Renny chuckled. "I hope that guy's not too fastidious," he said with a grin.

"Why's that?" Merlin asked.

"Pockets thinks some beach sand might have blown into the landing gears while we were on Crescentis. He was intending to clean them out and re-grease them during the voyage. I think he's going to make Armando get dirty and do it for him."

Durant groaned and his companions looked up at him. "Sorry to burden you with him," Merlin said, "but I thought you could probably handle his work assignments better than anyone else."

"That's not what has me concerned, boss," the bear responded with a frown.

"What is it?"

"Armando only has one set of clothes with him," he explained, "and I'm the only one on board who has anything big enough for him to wear."

"Oops..." Merlin said with raised eyebrows. "During our next landfall, we'll buy you some replacement clothes from the ship's funds."

"Thanks, boss."

Tanis shook out the wet brush he had been using to comb the dirt out of Lorelei's pelt and then dipped it back into the bath. "There's sand all in yer fur," he said to the rabbit sitting in the water in front of him. "I don't have this much in my *own* fur, and I spent more time on the beach than ya did."

The bunny smiled at him over her shoulder and snickered. "I don't suppose that you're a *desert* fox means your fur is better equipped to ward off sand than mine?" she asked as she tickled his toes beneath the water.

"Stop that!" Tanis commanded with a smirk. He dropped his brush and it made a *splunk* as it hit the water. He reached into the water to retrieve it and Lorelei suddenly giggled.

"Watch where you're grabbing," she teased.

"I can't," the fennec replied with a straight face. "The bath's too murky with yer dirty water." Lorelei giggled again and squirmed. She lay back against him and pinned his arm between them.

"Gotcha!" she said with a snicker.

Resigned to his fate, Tanis leaned back against the side of the bathtub, causing her to lean back further. She rested the back of her head on his chest and smiled up at him.

"So," she said after a moment, "what did you and Max do today?"

"We mainly just talked as we wandered around the beach town," the fox replied. "He asked me some questions about Duffy and I told him about Nalirra."

The rabbit frowned. "That doesn't sound so exciting," she said. "How are you handling the whole war thing?"

"Okay, I suppose," he replied. "It's not easy seeing yer homeworld bombed apart by the very people yer government was going to bomb first. However... I cut ties with home years ago and I have to keep reminding myself that."

"What about your friend, Duffy? Does he know he's Max's father?"

Tanis looked down at her in quiet shock. "How... did ya know about that?" he asked.

Lorelei grinned. "I saw your notes in Sickbay. You left your slateboard out on the counter with the screen on them."

"I see... Have ya told anyone else about it?"

"Renny, Taro, Pockets, Samantha and Durant were all eating lunch when I mentioned it."

"Lori... that means *everyone* on board knows about it now. For Max's sake, we weren't going to tell anyone else!"

The rabbit shrugged her shoulders. "Oops," she said. "Too late now."

"I just hope Max doesn't think I betrayed his trust," Tanis replied solemnly.

Armando Jensen grumbled and growled to himself as he left the engine room and headed for the nearest lift. He was tired, wanted to crawl into bed in the cabin that had been assigned to him, and sleep for the rest of the voyage. He had been on board the *Blue Horizon* for nearly eight days and he had hardly had any time to rest. It seemed that at least half the people on board the ship had gone out of their way to find degrading assignments for him to do. He had done everything from scrubbing toilets with a toothbrush to vacuuming floors and washing dishes. He had been made to crawl into a filthy maintenance tunnel between the double hulls of the ship that was not designed for someone of his bulk, to get to greasy gears that he later discovered were just inside a large access panel in the engine room. He had mashed his fingers reorganizing equipment cases for the load master so they were arranged by size, and had gotten callouses on his knees picking fur out of the air reclamation unit filters. He had already lost track of the other little disgusting jobs that had been found for him, and he strongly suspected some of the things he had been assigned had never been done before by *any* of them.

He had taken to griping about everything in sight, even though he was constantly reminded just how *fortunate* he was to be a privileged passenger instead of free-floating in space. The only ones who hadn't treated him like dirt were the rabbit who cooked for them all, and that canine boy who seemed to look on him in pity. Armando didn't mind pity from Max. At least he hadn't made him wash his socks as the cheetah had done.

He heard a sound ahead and looked up to see what it was. Durant was sitting on the cold flooring of the hold outside a locker full of cargo tie-downs, tarps and cables he had been looking through. Armando thought the bear looked winded, and despite the dirty assignments that had been given to him, the lion thought the load master needed a hand up.

"Are you okay?" he asked. "You need some help?"

Durant looked up at him and shook his head as he massaged his left arm. "Just feeling a little light-headed," the bear replied in a raspy voice. "It's nothing."

"You need me to help you clean up this stuff?" Armando asked. "You don't look too good."

Durant waved a hand at him and swallowed. "No, just go on, please."

Armando shrugged and shuffled off toward the lift, thankful he had not been berated or given something else to do. He was sincere when he offered his help to the bear, but wasn't bothered to have that help denied.

Durant watched the lion disappear into the lift and then turned over so that he was on his hands and knees. He closed his eyes to gather his bearings and then slowly stood up. He wavered a little, but remained on his feet. He glanced at the stuff he had pulled out of the locker and decided it could sit there a while longer. The grizzly bear made his way to his office at the back of the cargo bay and shut the door behind him.

Merlin kicked off his boots and sat down on his bunk with a sigh of relief. He had just turned over the bridge watch to Samantha and he was more than ready to relax for a bit. Granted, that duty while the ship was on automatic was dull and boring, but despite the non-activity, it usually drained whoever released it to the next person.

The wolf wasn't sleepy, but he didn't really feel like doing anything else at the moment. He looked over at the small table beside the bed and picked up a printed novel he had begun reading earlier. He thumbed it open to the page where his bookmark resided and made himself comfortable against his pillow. No sooner had he settled into the first paragraph, the intercom chirped at him.

The captain groaned and closed the book as he leaned over to tap the remote beside the lamp. "Yes?" he grumbled.

"*Sorry to bother you, dear, but Cindy's on the line for you,*" Samantha's voice said from the overhead speaker.

"Patch it through."

"Aye."

"*Captain! Captain Sinclair!*" another voice issued from the speaker.

"Hello, Cindy," Merlin replied. "What is up?"

"*Bad news, captain...*" she answered. "*Brandersen Electronics has cancelled our contract!*"

"Brandersen? Isn't that who we're supposed to pick up our next cargo from on Kantus? A breach of contract is serious, especially with the distances we have to travel."

"*Marcus Brandersen himself called to make the cancellation.*"

"Brandersen has been a repeat customer for years," Merlin growled. "Why would he pull out all of a sudden? His business hasn't been doing *that* badly."

"*Captain...*" Cindy seemed hesitant and paused before continuing. "*Another freighter offered Brandersen a better price on the same delivery, so he went with them instead.*"

"We had a contract that was agreed upon *weeks* ago," the wolf said angrily. "We have to schedule our shipments in a series or we'll lose money. Start searching for another customer from Kantus to Alexandrius in order to keep up the rest of our delivery schedule."

"*Already on it!*" the mouse replied over the speaker.

Merlin hit the intercom button again.

"*This is Samantha.*"

"You hear all that, Sam?"

"Yes, I did. That jerk..."

"Contact Jackson Wyatt and see if there's any action our lawyer can take against Brandersen for breaking contract."

"That'll be a pleasure."

"First see if you can get Brandersen on the line for me and pipe it in here. I want to find out who stole our job from us."

"Right away."

"So much for taking it easy," Merlin muttered beneath his breath.

A moment later, the intercom chirped and a deeply gruff voice spoke from the speaker. "This is Marcus Brandersen."

"Mr. Brandersen," the wolf said, "this is Captain Sinclair of the *Blue Horizon*. I'm calling about..."

"You want to know why I cancelled your services. Yes, I was expecting to hear from you."

"Would you mind explaining why you dropped us while we're currently on our way to you?" Merlin asked in a strong tone. "You've done business with us for a long time. Why would you bail out on us now?"

"Captain, you've always given me fair market prices for your deliveries to other worlds in the *Planetary Alignment*," Brandersen replied. "As a businessman, I'm always on the lookout for more economical means of shipping my goods, since the cost for deliveries from one planet to another are phenomenal. Nevertheless, times change and other freighters sometimes offer better prices. That's fair competition, Captain Sinclair."

"I don't have a problem with the concept of competition, Brandersen, but we had a contract! You're bound to it until the deal has been completed. If you like this other freighter so much, you can wait until your next delivery to hire them!"

"Contracts mean nothing to me. The *Savannah Hunter* will be here a full two days before your arrival, Captain, and –"

"The *Savannah Hunter*!" Merlin croaked.

"Yeah, that's right," Brandersen replied. "That's the name of the ship that belongs to a new freight business called *Bamboo Cargo Services*. I understand her captain is having the name of the ship changed soon, but that doesn't concern me. I need my goods moved quickly and they offered the same delivery at a cost of ©40,000. That's ten thousand credits cheaper than your usual price for deliveries between star systems."

"Mr. Brandersen," Merlin said through clenched teeth, "I agree that competition is good. If you had been approached with that price, I would have matched it to keep you as a customer. That's still something we can negotiate if you're interested."

"Sorry about that, ol' boy. At first, he offered to do it for ©45,000, but I told him it wasn't enough of a discount to warrant my interest. That's when he dropped it to forty thousand credits. I couldn't turn down that price, then. That's the way the business goes, Captain. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to get back to my dinner guests."

"Mr. Brandersen, we had a legitimate contract signed weeks ago. Since you are unwilling to honor that agreement, you can expect to hear from my lawyer over this incident. Prepare to spend the money you think you just saved." Merlin jammed his thumb down on the connection switch and disconnected the conversation before the bulldog had a chance to say anything more.

The wolf nearly tripped over his boots as he stormed out of the bedroom into the front room of the cabin. Angrily, he kicked them up against a wall and then growled beneath his breath as he departed his quarters. The first person he saw in the corridor was Armando.

"*Jensen!*" he shouted. "Get over here!"

The weary lion sighed aloud, but ambled toward the captain with dark eyes. "What do you want?" he said with impatience. He desired nothing more than to clean up and go to bed, and he didn't care if the captain of the ship wanted him to do something more or not.

"I just got word that the *Savannah Hunter* managed to take away our next delivery job," Merlin growled.

"Did they, now?" Armando said with sudden pleasure. He drew himself up to his full height, towering over the wolf. "That serves you right, Sinclair. Right after the Siilv War, finding shipping jobs was difficult, and every time we turned around, some job we tried to get had already gone to one of your ships!"

"That's fair competition!" Merlin replied darkly, unfazed by the lion's size. "Your ship just took a job that was *already* contracted to us. I ought to jettison you right now!"

"That's not *my* ship anymore, remember?" Armando sneered. "Chon's your competitor now - not me, and believe me when I tell you that he's a shrewd character. You'll have to compete harder now that he has the business. He'll do things that I wouldn't have considered to get your customers."

"That sounds unlikely," Merlin said with narrow eyes. "I kept tabs on your activities and know about some of the things you tried."

"Oh, you think so?" the lion snorted.

"Tell me, why did your deal with the black market on Nalirra fall through a couple years ago?"

"The SPF was tipped off to what we - hey! How did you know about that?"

"I *told* you I was aware of your activities," Merlin answered. "If that deal had gone through, you might have ruined chances for any other honest freighting company from ever using that travel route again!"

Armando stared at Merlin for a long while and the corridor became eerily silent. He could hear whispers from inside a nearby door, likely some of the *Horizon's* crew eavesdropping on the conversation that could hardly be called quiet.

"So, you're the one who tipped off the SPF on me..." he stated dangerously. "That deal would have gotten me completely out of debt, Sinclair. Lucky for me, we got out of the area before the SPF discovered which ship was involved." He moved toward the wolf and clenched both fists. "I should thank you properly for that," he snarled.

"Take another step forward," hissed a voice from behind him, "and no one will ever find your body."

Armando moved only his eyes and looked at the muzzle of a weapon that had appeared at his temple. Without looking, he could sense the presence of someone else behind him, also likely armed. The lion chose to relax his hands and took a cautious step back to his former position. Renny kept his rifle aimed at Armando's head, and Tanis moved forward to show the lion that his weapon was also ready to do business.

"Lock him in his cabin," Merlin said without taking his eyes off the lion. "He'll stay there until we can kick him out on Kantus."

Armando looked back at Merlin and gave him a wry smile. "At this moment, I hate JW Chon for taking my ship and business as much as you hate me. However, I know him well enough to know that your easy days in this business are over. He's going to make it tough on

you even if he has to cut his prices to underscore every delivery you try to get – that is what he tried to talk me into doing, but I didn't want to lose the money to gain the jobs. He's more determined than I was."

"Get out of my sight," Merlin growled. "I don't want to see your face again until we land."

Max grinned as he floated near the ceiling of the cargo bay. In order to repair a faulty gear system, Pockets had prompted Durant to make sure everything was secured in the hold so he could turn off the gravity plates. He and the young mechanic were hovering around the cargo crane near the top of the two-story chamber, their tool belts floating lightly at their waists.

"Okay, lad," the raccoon said, "I've got the pins loose. Ease the primary gear out toward you, but don't let that cable near your ear wallop your head."

Max gingerly grasped the piece of machinery and braced his feet on the supports on either side of it. With the pins free and the gravity off, the gear slid out of its housing with minimal effort, but it jerked momentarily as it came loose and sent the German shepherd youth floating away.

"Whoops!" Max said. He turned his body so that his feet were out in front of him and eased his toe to the upper support beams of the hold to stop himself. "This reminds me of when we were on the *Walkabout*," he said with a laugh, "though without the pressure suit."

Pockets nodded and his assistant came drifting back with the gear in hand. "Perhaps," he said, "but without the carnage."

Max came to rest lightly back where he had started and held out the gear. "Yikes," he said with a frown. "I had nightmares of that woman's body for weeks!"

Pockets took the gear and hooked an elastic tether to it to keep it from floating out of reach. He turned to his other side, latched onto an identical cog from a packing crate, and then passed it back to the young mechanic. "I don't doubt you did," he said. "That wasn't easy to go through."

"I kept seeing her face," Max mused quietly.

"Why don't we talk about something else," Pockets suggested, "while we get this replacement cog into place."

"Right," Max agreed. He lined up the part into its new housing and had to hold onto the surrounding supports to work it back into place without pushing himself backward. "So, why do Uncle Merlin and Armando hate one another?" he asked.

"No one's told you?" Max shook his head. "Well, those two have disliked one another since they first met."

"What happened?"

"It was about five years ago," Pockets explained as he lined up a series of pins to secure the cog. "The *Blue Horizon* had just received clearance to land at the Arnsberg Spaceport on Mainor and was on final approach when this dark green freighter shot past us. Arnsberg was a busy place and landing spots were at a premium, so the *Savannah Hunter* tried to jockey past us to get to the only remaining available pad first – despite that *we* were the ones given permission to land."

Pockets motioned for Max to hand the floating cable to him so he could thread it through the gear pulleys. "Anyway, Merlin gunned the *Horizon* to take our promised spot. In the race to land, our two ships got too close and jostled against one another. Both ships and their cargoes

sustained damage; Merlin managed to get the *Horizon* in first, but nearly crashed in the process. Armando's ship wound up clipping the spaceport's control tower and almost killed seven people. Luckily for him, no one died, but he got into hot water with the local police over it and his father had to pay for the damages. Armando claimed he had the right of way since his company was *based* on Mainor and should have been allowed to land first. His cargo delivery was late and a costly portion of Vaterfin Crystal was broken. He tried to sue us, but since the *Blue Horizon* had records of receiving official landing clearance, the case was thrown out." Pockets shrugged his shoulders and added, "There's been bad blood between those two ever since."

"No wonder there's more to this than just a competitive rivalry," Max mused. "It's too bad they can't put that behind them."

"Well," Pockets drawled, "that was only the beginning. We've had run-ins and even a few brawls with Armando and his crew on several occasions. Believe me when I say that there are few of us older folks on this ship who have any kind of respect for Jensen. Now that the *Savannah Hunter* has a new master, things might improve."

"Improve? From what I've been hearing, this Mr. Chon is meaner than Armando."

Pockets smiled. "I wouldn't say he was meaner," he said. "Chon is a better *businessman* than Armando and will take more competitive steps to make his new company earns respect and a clientele that will stick with him. I've met him on a couple of occasions and he's a smart cookie. He won't make the same mistakes that Armando made."

"I just hope he won't do something *harmful* to our business," Max replied. "Samantha said he's already after our customers."

"If it's a legitimate competition, Merlin knows how to play that game," Pockets said as he secured the cable tightly with a small spanner.

Merlin kicked off his boots and crawled onto his bunk. He reached over to the small bedside table and picked up the novel he had tried reading earlier. He thumbed it open to his bookmark and made himself comfortable against his pillow. No sooner had he settled in to the first paragraph, the intercom chirped at him.

The captain groaned, rolled his eyes, and then snapped the book shut. He leaned over and tapped the remote beside the lamp. "Yes?" he grumbled.

"*Sorry to disturb you, boss,*" Durant's voice said, "*but you have an emergency call from Mrs. Meers.*"

"Mrs. Meers? Alright, pipe it in here."

"*Aye, sir.*"

"*Captain Sinclair?*" Merlin recognized the voice of the golden retriever who ran the Meers restaurant on Dennier.

"Yes, Abigail, this is Merlin. What can I do for you?"

"*I hate to be the one to tell you this,*" her voice said from the overhead speaker, "*but your office across the street has been broken into.*"

"Broken into!" Merlin repeated in surprise.

"*That's right. I've already called Cindy, and she's over there now with Penny, Keri and the police. When I came to my restaurant this morning to start preparing for the breakfast crowd, I noticed your front window was smashed in.*"

"I... I see," Merlin replied in a stunned voice. "What else can you tell me?"

"Keri was over here a little bit ago, all shook up. She told me that all the computer and communication equipment has been smashed and their paper records are scattered all over the place. Furniture has been overturned and light fixtures were torn off the walls. No one was hurt, since it was done during the night when everyone was away, but they're all pretty scared."

Merlin cleared his throat and ran a hand through the fur on his head. "Thank you for calling me," he said after a moment. "You've been good to my girls ever since we set up shop. I appreciate your friendship. Will you give a message to Cindy for me when you get a chance?"

"Yes, I will."

"After the police are done with them, tell them to take off a few days to gather their wits and then call me back when they're ready. I will have Taro handle the business end of the company from here, so we'll need the calls automatically routed to us. Daily backups of the office records are routinely uploaded to us. I'll have Durant contact our insurance company on the damage to your building, and we'll coordinate their investigation with the local police."

"I understand and will make sure they get the message. Anything else?"

"Yeah," Merlin replied. "When they're ready to get back to work, have them get the office back into order and then look into a good security system for the place."

"Okay, Captain. I'll take care of it for you."

"Thank you so much, Abigail. You're a wonderful person!"

"You have good people working for you. I only wish I could do more for you. Well, good-bye, Merlin. I'll relay your messages and then I need to get back to work."

"Good-bye, Abigail. Thanks again."

Merlin closed the connection and then sat back on his bed. *It never rains...* he thought to himself. He frowned at the book that was still in his hand. He tossed it back to its place on the bedside table and then reached for his boots. He had to work this out with Taro and Durant before they lost any more time.

Armando paced back and forth the length and width of the cabin that had been assigned to him. Despite that it covered three separate rooms, the accommodations were still smaller than what he was used to on the *Savannah Hunter*. It was true that he often locked himself up in his cabin during the voyages between planetary systems, but that was different from being *confined to quarters*. They had cut off his communication and video feeds to the terminals in the cabin, and he was locked out of the computer system as well. As it had been an unoccupied cabin, there were no real personal touches to the rooms. There were no pictures on the walls, curios in the cabinets or even books on the shelves. The lion was bored beyond boredom. Even his box of comics no longer interested him.

The cute bunny girl brought him meals twice each day-cycle, but she was always accompanied by another armed crewmember. At least he had been loaned some clothing that fit him somewhat. The load master's pants and shirts were still a little big for the Mainoran lion, but none of the others on board was near large enough for their clothes to get into. He currently wore a pair of cinnamon-colored breeches and a burgundy, short-sleeved shirt with an open collar. His own soft-sided boots were travel-worn, but more comfortable than anything else they had found for him.

Armando glanced at the door and snorted, wondering how hard it would be to force it open. There was no place he could go with the ship still out in deep space, but it would be better than being cooped up inside one cabin.

He walked to the door and examined it. A small access panel four inches across was in the wall near floor level on the right side. He picked up a butter knife from his meal tray and then stretched out on his stomach near the panel. He pried at the cover and managed to work it loose. A moment later, he had exposed four optic cables and a flexible pneumatic conduit.

Armando studied the configuration for a moment, as he tried to remember his basic flight system repair training. He was not sure what he was doing, but relied on instinct alone. He grabbed the pneumatic line and then gently twisted it back and forth where it connected to the thick doorframe just inside the airlock pane. He worked it for a few minutes and was about to give up when it came loose with a sharp *pop!* Armando smiled when the internal door shuddered for several seconds and then became still once again.

Tentatively, he got up on his knees and then leaned against the door with his hands. He pushed toward the right, and the door panels parted quietly. He picked up the butter knife, stuck it out of the door slightly, and then looked closely at the reflections on the silvery metal surface. There was no movement to the right. He turned the blade toward the other side and noted no movement to the left. Satisfied he wouldn't be caught right away, Armando stepped out into the hallway and then closed the panels behind him. As he had been fed recently, no one would be checking in on him for a while.

He moved toward the left and passed several doors as he crept past each one. He stopped when he saw a blue door painted with the image of a golden sailing-ship's wheel. He stepped toward the bridge entrance, but then hesitated and changed his mind. He continued around the curved corridor and quickly found the lift. He punched the call button and within a moment, the doors parted for him. The lion stepped inside and hit the button marked "Level 3". The door shut and the lights dimmed momentarily. When the lights brightened up again, the lift doors parted.

Almost immediately, he could hear labored action music and the clash of metal upon metal. He eased his nose out of the lift and saw Merlin and Renny both dressed in some type of white outfit over their fur, practicing sword techniques with thin rapiers. He watched for several minutes until Renny lunged at the wolf, his blade tip missing his opponent only by Merlin's sudden turn to the side. The captain followed through, whipped his blade up and sideways, effectively knocking the rapier from his navigator's hand. It clattered to the floor and rolled across the carpet until it came to rest against Armando's boot.

Merlin and Renny saw the lion at the same time. Both stood extremely still when Armando bent down and picked up the cheetah's sword. "You two are very good," he said quietly.

He carried the blade toward the combatants and tested the air with a couple of quick swishes. "I've always thought these things were for sissies," he added as Merlin raised his own weapon in the event a new match was about to begin. Armando smiled toward him, but tossed the rapier back toward Renny, hilt-first. The cheetah caught it easily and then looked toward his captain.

"Personally," Armando continued, "they're no match for a pistol."

"As you aren't equipped with a gun at this moment," said another voice, "you're at a disadvantage."

Armando turned his head and found Pockets looking up at him. Moss floated quietly beside him, both its eye lenses fixed upon the lion. The raccoon held a rather large and heavy-

looking wrench in his hands, a cross expression on his features. The tool was nearly half as tall as the engineer himself was, and was smeared with grease on one end. Armando smiled.

"I didn't come up here to pick a fight," he said casually, putting his hands into the pockets of his trousers. Merlin closed the distance between them and eased his rapier tip up to the lion's broad nose.

"If I recall correctly," the wolf said with a growl, "you were confined to quarters. What are you doing here?"

"I was bored," he said with a shrug. Merlin lowered his blade with a frown. "You've had me locked up for days with nothing to do," Armando added. "You've given me no books nor audio or video feeds to help pass the time."

"You haven't earned those rewards," Renny said. "You stowed away on our ship, have breathed our air and eaten our food. You've done nothing to endear yourself to us."

"I've done *all* the filthy little jobs you've found for me to do!" Armando said in his defense. "I've *worked* for my passage and I want to move around to see more than just the insides of one cabin!"

"Aboard the *Savannah Hunter*," Merlin said, "did you expect the captain's commands to be law?" He picked up a cloth from a nearby chair and began to wipe down his blade.

"Of course I did," Armando replied. "If I caught anyone disobeying something I told 'em to do, I would pound 'em into the deck plates."

"I am captain of the *Blue Horizon*," Merlin said as he put his rapier into a felt-lined case. "While we were still on Crescentis, I told you that I didn't want you on my ship, yet you stowed away and then expect to be left to your own wishes." He stood up and faced Armando as Renny put away his own blade. "You disobeyed the Captain's Law, Jensen. In your words, do you think I should 'pound you into the deck plates' now?"

Armando looked uneasy. "Listen, Captain," he said quietly, "all I want is a break."

"Arm or leg?" Pockets asked from the side. Armando shot the engineer a dark look; the continuous jibes were beginning to get to him.

"Just cut me some slack, will you?" he asked Merlin. "I've had it rough lately."

Moments earlier, Merlin had considered doing just that. He was tired of their feud and only wanted to be rid of this guy, but it seemed Armando was never apologetic for anything. He seemed too smug. He was not exactly sure what he was going to do with the lion, but before he had thought it out further, his mouth seemed to speak of its own accord.

"I really couldn't care less about your situation," he said coldly. "You'll always be a loser."

Armando Jensen had lost his ship, his business, his comfort and his pride in the space of a week. His stress level was higher than it had been in a long time, and Merlin's last comment set him off. Before anyone could think, Armando slugged the wolf without warning.

Merlin's head rocked back from the force of the impact and an explosion ripped between his ears. He spun around, fell sideways over the back of a recliner, and his head bounced off the carpet. His vision went black, and for a moment, he forgot where he was.

He shook his head and immediately regretted it. His jaw hurt on the left side and he had to blink several times before he could get his bearings back. This only took a few seconds, but when he was fully cognizant again, he realized that Renny and Armando were slugging it out with one another. Both were fast, but neither managed to avoid the other's punches. He saw another movement from the side and looked up in time to see Pockets swing his huge wrench at Armando's left ankle. The Mainoran lion roared in pain and fell to the floor as the heavy, greasy wrench slipped out of the raccoon's small hands.

Renny took this to his advantage and jumped on Armando's chest to pummel his face with both fists. Merlin stood up shakily and moved toward the commotion. Any pity he might have felt toward his old competitor had vanished completely and he had no qualms about kicking the lion when he was down. He stumbled trying to walk and suddenly found himself sitting back on his tail on the carpet, still dazed by the unexpected blow to the head.

Amidst the cheetah's blows, Armando managed to grab one of Renny's wrists and jerked sideways as hard as he could. The navigator gasped in pain and followed his wrist as Armando threw him off to the side. The lion rolled up onto his hands and knees, but a punch to his ribs made him collapse again. Forcing himself to move, Merlin knelt next to him and threw another punch to Armando's jaw. From the other side, Renny kicked out from his prone position and caught Armando in the other side. The lion curled up to protect his middle and gasped for breath. He gathered his strength and was about to get back up on his hands and knees when there was a *thud* at the back of his head. He dropped to the carpet and stopped moving.

Pockets dropped the spanner he had pulled out of a pocket and laid against the back of the lion's head, and moved to Merlin's side.

"Are you okay?" he asked in concern.

The captain wiped away blood from a split lip. Pockets helped him up onto a chair and Merlin gingerly felt of his sore snout. "I'll make it," he said after taking inventory of his limbs and digits. Renny rolled over so that he could sit up, but held pressure against his injured wrist.

"What about him?" the cheetah said between pants.

"He's out cold," Pockets replied. "I hit him with a number eight hydra-spanner."

"Better get Tanis up here to make sure you didn't crack his skull."

"Why?" the raccoon asked defiantly. "I hope I *did* crack it."

Merlin looked over at him wearily. "Just get Tanis," he repeated.

"Right, boss." The engineer purposely walked slowly across the room to the intercom control, an act that didn't escape Merlin's notice.

Renny gestured toward the unconscious form of Armando with a grimace. "Now what do we do with him?" he asked. "If he got out of his cabin once, he can do it again."

Merlin rubbed his jaw again and found it hard to think. "Dunno," he replied.

"Would it be too much to ask to just jettison him?"

"Yes," Merlin replied with a smile that hurt for him to make. "I know it would make you happy, but we can't do that."

"Aww, gee..." Renny said in a childlike voice, "you're no fun."

"However," the captain said in a lighter tone at an idea that came to him, "I think I know how to keep him out of our fur until we land."

"Hold still," Tanis admonished his captain. He daubed a foul, blue-soaked cotton swab on Merlin's split lip and the wolf winched again. "It's been a while since the last time ya got involved in a brawl, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Merlin replied through the stinging of the antiseptic. He sat on a small stool in Sickbay while his medic looked him over. "I suppose I had it coming to me, though," he added.

"Why's that?"

"I've done nothing but degrade Armando since we saw him on Crescentis."

Tanis tapped him on the chest with a claw tip. "Aren't yah supposed to be the *good* guy?"

"I suppose I could have been more lenient," the wolf admitted, "but I have to admit I've enjoyed having the upper hand on him."

Tanis *tsked* and took a look at the bruise under the fur on the left side of Merlin's jaw. "I could debate ya on *who* had the upper hand in this fight," he chuckled.

"I should have expected him to be in for a fight," the wolf said, "but he took me by surprise. At least Renny got to hit him a few times." Tanis looked over his shoulder at the cheetah stretched out on a nearby gurney, snoring softly. There was a gel cast around his left wrist where the lion had broken it with a small fracture, and the painkillers had worked their magic on the exhausted navigator.

"Well, ya should be happy to know that Armando had more cuts and bruises that either of ya," the tan fox replied. "Lucky for him, Pockets didn't break his neck with the wrench. I suppose Armando has a thicker skull than normal."

"I could have told you that without a medical examination," Merlin said with a stinging smirk. "He's never had a good head for his own business."

The intercom chirped and Tanis moved to the small panel near the door. "This is Tanis," he said into the tiny condenser microphone.

"Tanis? Is the captain in there with you?" Samantha's voice asked.

"I'm here, Sam," the wolf replied.

"Cindy called just a few minutes ago," she replied. "I knew you were still being attended to, so I went ahead and talked to her myself."

"That's fine. Tanis has seen to our injured egos. He says we'll be back to our normal surly selves shortly."

"Nice."

"What did Cindy have to say?"

"While she and the others were cleaning up the mess at the home office, Keri found a sealed envelope addressed to you. Neither she nor Penny can recall seeing it the day before. They're afraid to open it."

"What did you tell them to do?"

"I said I'd ask you about it first, since it was addressed specifically to you."

Tanis whispered something to the wolf and Merlin frowned. "Get Cindy back on the line and tell her to have it opened and analyzed only by the authorities, and *not* to open it herself."

"Okay, I can do that. Why?"

"Tanis said there's a chance it might be booby-trapped somehow, either with a chemical agent or a spring-loaded explosive. Let the police handle this as another possible threat."

"That's a lovely thought. I'll pass along your orders right away."

"Thanks, Sam."

Tanis closed the connection and looked back at his captain. "I don't like the sound of all this," he said quietly.

When Armando regained consciousness, he felt strange. He was sore and aching, but was unable to move his arms. His eyes were open, but he couldn't see anything except a fuzzy light somewhere in the distance. It took him a moment to remember the fight with Sinclair and the cheetah, but was unable to recall how it ended. He could feel a bandage wrapped around his head, however, as it was a little tight.

He strained his eyes at the light and it suddenly dawned on him what he was seeing. The dim illumination was coming from the door of Durant's cargo bay office, two stories below him. Armando's eyes widened and he struggled against his bonds.

"Sinclair, you wretched cur!" he shouted out in fury. He began to swing back and forth from writhing about. *"Get me down from here!"* His voice echoed in the vast chamber but he received no reply.

Inside Durant's office, the grizzly bear smiled and got up from the seat behind his desk. He walked out into the cargo bay and looked up in the direction of the shouting, but couldn't see Armando in the darkness, bound hand and foot and hanging from a harness clipped to the overhead crane hook. The *Blue Horizon* was due to land in a couple of days, and all Durant had to do to block out the lion's shouts of indignation was close his pressure door.

"Sinclair!" Armando's voice echoed, followed by a string of profanity in several languages.

Durant shut his door to continue work on the accounts.

The *Blue Horizon* was a day away from Kantus and Taro had little luck trying to find another customer to replace Brandersen. She was tired, frustrated and was about to give up and tell Merlin they would have to fly empty to Alexandrius when the Com panel chirped.

She tapped the control and spoke into her headset microphone, *"This is the SS Blue Horizon. How may I help you?"*

"Blue Horizon? Good - I'm glad I got through! We've had a winter blizzard hit the city and we've had trouble getting off-planet signals for several days."

"How may I help you?" Taro repeated patiently.

"Yes, right. My name is Crispin McDowell and I manage the Kantus district office for Book Depot. We've had a massive order from Alexandrius for a great number of printed book titles and we need to get them delivered to Oshua as soon as possible. I heard your ship would be on Kantus soon and was looking for a contract. Are you interested?"

Taro smiled. *"Yes sir, we would be happy to take your order. Our usual delivery price from one planetary system to another is ©50,000, but we're willing to—"*

"Listen, I know it's standard procedure to give your crew a few days of leave every time you land, but if you can make a quick turnaround and be on the way to Alexandrius with our cargo within a day of your arrival, I'll pay you ©60,000 in advance."

"This must be a fairly important set of books," Taro said cheerily. *"I'm sure Captain Sinclair will be only too happy to make an exception to our standard rule for your case."*

"Wonderful, Horizon. I have heard good things about your company. You will need to pick up our cargo at the Wiltz Warehouse in Oshua. Everything will be in cargo trucks that can be driven into your cargo bay and secured without having to unload them."

"If you will send me your contact and financial information, I will get with Captain Sinclair to make the final arrangements."

"Thank you, Horizon. I'm now sending information to you now via encoded carrier."

"Data just received. I will contact you within the hour, Mr. McDowell, to finalize the contract and get the landing coordinates."

"That will be fine. I look forward to doing business with you."

"Blue Horizon, out." Taro made a few notes into the computer log and then reset the Com terminal for the intercom. A moment later, the panel chirped.

"Yes?" came Merlin's weary voice.

"This is Taro, captain. I've just secured a contract to replace Brandersen."

"Excellent!" the wolf replied in a sudden change of mood. Taro relayed the conversation she had had with McDowell to its ending. *"That's good news, Taro. Please finalize everything and put it through just as you described it. Then inform Durant to arrange receipt of the advance funds from Book Depot. Since our turnaround will be quick, tell Lori that she is excused from cargo duty. She will need to get her replacement stock for the galley purchased and onboard in a few hours' time before we transfer to Oshua for our pickup."*

"I'll get on it right away."

"One more thing," Merlin added. *"Even though McDowell has his inventory conveniently loaded into trucks, I want them searched before we put them into the Horizon. This would be an equally convenient way to sneak a bomb on board the ship. After what happened at HQ, I want to be a little more cautious."*

"That's a good idea. Okay, I'll get the ball rolling."

"I appreciate your good work, Taro. Thanks."

"You're welcome. Taro, out."

"Mr. Sinclair," a gray feline said from the main vidscreen of the *Blue Horizon's* bridge. She was an officer of the local police force in Grandstorm, Dennier, dressed smartly in a dark green uniform with a gleaming silver-plated badge over her left shirt pocket.

"Yes?"

"I'm Officer Dana Deonta of the Grandstorm Eighth Precinct. I wanted to contact you about the suspicious package that was found in the midst of your office break-in."

"Go ahead."

"It was tested for biological threats and mechanical triggers, but it turned out the envelope itself was safe to open. However, the note that was inside was important enough to warrant our attention, and we wanted to let you know that we'll be on the lookout for further trouble around your office."

Merlin frowned. "What did the note say?"

The feline officer frowned and nodded. *"The message reads..."*

"We're all here, Captain," Rezo Kegawa's voice emanated from the Rec Room's vidscreen speakers. The large vidscreen panel was in split screen with the entire crew of the *Hidalgo Sun* on one side and the three from the home office on the other. The crew of the *Blue Horizon* was gathered in front of the vidscreen and Merlin stood in front and off to the side so that everyone could see him. He wore his flight jacket and captain's hat formally to look like the commander of his group.

The wolf cleared his throat and nodded toward Rezo. "By now, everyone here knows about the company office break-in," he said. "Nothing was actually taken in the incident, but office equipment was destroyed and everything was scattered throughout the rooms. In the midst of the mess, a sealed envelope was found addressed to me that had not been in the office the previous day. The local authorities took the envelope to their lab to test it for biological contamination, but found it safe to open. Inside, however, was a letter of serious consequence."

The captain looked over the faces of his gathered crews from all three locations and then read from his slateboard. Everyone listened in rapt attention. He cleared his throat and read a transcript of the message.

"Merlin Sinclair of Blue Horizon Freight Transfer,

"A year ago, you were warned not to rebuild your business. Despite this, you have put two new ships into operation and have pulled in a nice profit for your expansion. This first attack on your home office is the result of your sin, but won't be the last."

Merlin looked up and added, "The note was unsigned."

"That doesn't sound good at all," Rezo said. "When were you warned before?"

Merlin looked up at the red panda on the vidscreen. "Right after we lost our previous model *Blue Horizon*," he answered, "we were staying at the Tanthean embassy on Pomen. While there, I found a note stuck to my apartment door that warned me not to attempt to rebuild my business. It was also unsigned, but at the time I strongly suspected it was someone from Sagan's crew who planted it there."

"You don't sound like you think that's who it is now," Keri said from the home office.

Merlin shook his head. "No, in light of our recent loss of a customer due to the bold actions of another freighter, I'm starting to suspect the perpetrator is Jiawen Chon, current owner and captain of the *Savannah Hunter*."

"Do you have proof that he's the one?" Patch asked from the *Hidalgo Sun*.

"No, I don't," Merlin admitted. "I have no more proof than I did when I got the other note. It seems to be too much of a coincidence to dismiss, however."

"From what Armando's been telling us," Renny spoke up, "this Chon guy could very well be desperate enough to do something like this."

"Yes, but did this Chon have any reason to threaten you while you were down before?" Mark Littlefeather asked.

Merlin put the slateboard into a pocket of his jacket. "No, and I'm not saying it is Chon behind the notes," he said, "but it's possible he was intending to take the *Savannah Hunter* away from Armando even back then and wanted to keep our possible competition out of the way for his plans."

"So, what do we do now?" Rezo asked.

"As we have no proof on who is behind this," Merlin replied, "we're going to have to be on our guard. I want everyone to be extra-cautious around the people we come into contact with in our business. Don't let anyone board the ships without a specific reason for them to be there. If you have a customs inspector, make sure that person is accompanied by a chaperon from the crew while they are aboard. Don't bring any guests on board while you're on shore leave, and don't give out any tours. If anyone gives you a gift before takeoff, be sure to inspect it before it's brought on board."

Merlin crossed his arms. "We've been threatened, attacked and threatened again, and now we have to be alert for more attempts to disrupt the company business. It may not only be office equipment or documents that are smashed next time. Until we know *who* is stalking us, I don't want anyone I employ to get complacent, even when we're out in space and weeks away from any planet."

The captain looked at his chief engineer and said, "Pockets, I want you to share your mobile sentry system plans with the home office and the *Hidalgo Sun*. I want a Moss unit

constructed and operational in all three places, and I want the security protocols in their programming strengthened."

"Aye, captain," the raccoon answered. Durant grimaced at the order, but understood Merlin's reasons.

The wolf looked back up to Rezo. "I don't know of anything else to do at this point, other than just stress that we have to be alert to further attacks that may take any form. I know that you will be making landfall on Quet soon. Be cautious, Captain. That would be a place ripe for something like this."

"Understood."

"Cindy, I want you to hire security guards for the home office. Be very picky about who you hire and make sure their references are checked thoroughly with the local police. Until this issue is resolved, I want someone in that office around the clock at all times."

"We'll take care of it right away."

Merlin looked around at the twenty-one people in his employment and then sighed. "Life working for a cargo-moving company is supposed to be mundane, but someone else has caused this situation. Be careful in everything you do from now on, and be alert. There's nothing more I can say."

Merlin and Renny began shutting down the ship's flight systems as usual, but the thoughts running through the wolf's mind were far from routine. They had just landed in the snowy city of Askran on Kantus and he knew that Durant would already be opening the bay doors of the hold to prepare their cargo for unloading. When he stood up from the center seat, Samantha looked over at him from the Com console.

"Max said that Armando's causing a fuss," she reported with a frown, taking off her headset. "No one can get near enough to him to let him off the sky-hook."

"You'd think he would welcome the chance to get off our ship," Renny commented dryly as he locked down the rest of his controls.

"Where does he get his energy?" Merlin wondered. "I thought he'd be weak from hunger for hanging up there for two days."

"That's what he's complaining about," Samantha replied. "He hasn't been fed since we put him up there and he stinks from soiling himself. Now that he's been lowered to ground level, he's thrashing about to try to get his hands on anyone."

Merlin thought about this for a moment and then gave her a look of resignation. "Call the local authorities. Report him as a captured stowaway and tell them we need them to take him off our hands. I won't press any charges, but I want him off the premises as soon as possible. Tell them they might have to stun him."

Samantha nodded. "I'll get right on it."

Renny rubbed his gel cast in annoyance. His wrist was itching, but he couldn't get to it. "Durant will have to forget about getting his clothes back," he muttered.

"We won't have a standard shore leave this time," Merlin reminded him, "so he'll have to wait until our next port of call before he can replace them." He looked up at Samantha on the Com talking to the local police, and then frowned when he looked back at Renny. "I hate to do this to you, friend, but since your wrist won't let you help us unload cargo, I'm giving you the chore of cleaning the cabin Armando occupied during his stay with us."

"That's right," Renny grumbled. "Pick on the invalid."

Due to their quick turnaround, the *Blue Horizon* departed within twenty hours of landing. Lorelei managed to get the galley restocked for their next voyage and the cargo had been thoroughly searched in Oshua before they let it on board the ship. They found no hint of trouble and were able to make their launch window in time. Max was up and out of his cabin as soon as Durant had given the All Clear over ship-wide intercom. He headed toward the bridge, but as he reached the door, the blue panel slid aside. Merlin and Renny stepped out together.

"Durant's on bridge duty," the captain said. "Is there something we can do for you, Max?"

The young canine nodded. "Uncle Merlin, may I speak to you privately?"

"Go right ahead," Renny said with a smile. "I'm heading toward the galley to find something to eat."

"Thanks, Renny," Max said. The cheetah sauntered off toward the lift, leaving the two of them alone.

"You want to talk in my den or my quarters?" Merlin asked him.

"Your quarters, if you don't mind," Max replied. The wolf nodded and led the way around the curved corridor to his cabin. The door opened at the touch of a button and Max followed him inside. Merlin took a seat on one end of his front room couch. Max took the other.

"What's on your mind?" the captain asked him.

"It's about what you told me concerning Clarence Duffy," Max answered, looking at the carpet beneath his feet.

"I see, okay."

Max fidgeted a moment, his hands clasped together between his knees. He wore a black tee shirt and tan carpenter pants that had a few tools inside the large leg pockets. He opened his mouth to speak, but a wrench settled in his pocket with a loud *clink* in the quiet cabin. Merlin smiled and said in a soft tone, "You're picking up Pockets' habits."

Max grinned and nodded. "I don't have quite as many tools in my pockets as what he carries on him at all times," he said with a chuckle. Sensing the ice had been broken, he swallowed and said, "From what you and Tanis have told me about Duffy, I have to concede that he probably is my father."

"It helps to have an open mind about it," Merlin agreed.

Max swallowed again and then looked up into the wolf's amber eyes. "What... what is this going to do to *our* relationship?" he asked.

Merlin leaned forward and rested his arms on his legs. "I don't see how this should change anything between us, Max," he replied. "Do you think it should?"

"Since you know he's my real father, are you going to make me leave the *Blue Horizon* to go live with him?"

Merlin straightened up at that. "Make you leave?" he repeated in quiet surprise. "Listen, Max, even though I became your legal guardian and am your adopted kin, you are now an adult by Dennieran standards. That kind of decision is not up to me anymore - it's yours to make. If you don't want to leave the *Horizon*, you're welcome to stay. I've had no plans to get rid of you."

"Thank you."

"So, how do you feel about Duffy?" Merlin asked

Max tilted his head slightly and shrugged. "Well, I can't say that I hold anything against him for not marrying my mother," he said. "I was really young when she sold me, so I don't remember much about her anyway. Duffy seems okay, but I don't really have an interest in going to live with him either."

"Max, Duffy isn't even aware he has a son. If you want to keep things as-is, I'm more than willing to keep you in my family."

"Thanks, uncle Merlin. I wish to stay."

The wolf smiled. "Great! I didn't want to have to hire anyone else anyway."

"May I ask you a big favor?"

"What do you want, a bigger allowance?" Merlin asked with a large smile. Max returned the grin.

"Please don't tell Duffy what Tanis discovered," the canine replied. "It would only complicate everybody's lives and I believe I like things just the way they are. If I decide to tell him, I might want to do that myself."

Merlin stood up and offered a hand to his nephew. "Sounds like a reasonable request," he said as Max shook hands with him. "However," he said, "you should go to each person on board and make the same request. Lori's already blabbed it throughout the ship."

"Yeah," Max replied with a smirk, "I know."

When Merlin and Max walked onto the rec deck a few moments later, the captain noted that nearly everyone was there, watching INN on the large vidscreen panel. Max ran to the galley to get something to snack on and Merlin walked over to the nearest couch. He stood behind it with his hands in his pockets as the dark-haired, human news anchor shuffled the pages before her and looked at the camera with a grave expression.

"Hello, listeners, this is News Around the Alignment and I'm Holly Harken of the Interplanetary News Network. The latest reports on the Roppa System War confirm that Nalirra has suffered tremendous losses to Oe'Tanatan attacks. The Nalirran fleet is down to one-half its original strength and its government has recalled its heavy cruisers from bombing their enemy planet just to maintain a line of defense. Casualties are heavy and Nalirran Personnel Forces are scrambling to draft as many off-world citizens as possible to keep up the front. The draft has been met with mixed results; in some cases, military SPs have had to be called in to forcefully take personnel back to Nalirra."

Lorelei sat on the floor between Tanis' legs and she could feel how tense his muscles were. She glanced up at him and saw his attention riveted to the images of defensive battles on the surface of his homeworld that played in the background behind Holly. His eyes were hard, and she could see his lips drawn taught as he fought to control his emotions. Her heart went out to him. She laid her head on his knees and gently wrapped her arms around his right leg.

"Casualties on the Tanatan world are still unknown. Attempts to get reporters into the area have met with disaster and even a few civilian deaths in that arena. Sed Amittias has issued no official statement as yet on the fighting, and still hasn't requested assistance from other PA worlds, but associates to the dictator have anonymously reported that his mental condition is borderline unstable. While Amittias has not requested military assistance, the hospitals of Nalirra are in desperate need of medical supplies. Earth, Pomen and Alexandrius have already responded by sending relief supplies with heavily-armed escorts on their way into the war zone."

Taro looked at the screen and a shiver ran through her. Her memory of Shoji Locke's demise was still fresh in her mind. She didn't think she would ever forget the sight of his split

skull from the Tanatan ripple gun, especially knowing just how close she and her friends had come to the same fate. She started at the sight of similar victims on the news report and Renny gasped for breath from her sudden constricting grip on his injured wrist.

"Sorry, luv..." she whispered, releasing her hold on him. Holly continued on for several minutes before the images behind her stopped. She brushed a hand through her volley of hair and then reshuffled her pages that served no purpose other than a prop.

Next to Tanis on the couch, Samantha leaned over to him. "What's this all about?" she asked him quietly. "No one seems to know why your world is at war."

Arktanis swallowed and looked around the room at his crewmates. "I've been away from home news for too long," he said in a muted voice. "Nalirra and Oe'Tanata were colonized in the system around the same time, but developed apart. They've always left one another alone, but from what Holly reported about Sed Amittias' mental condition, it's possible he tried to extend his dictatorship off-world." He closed his eyes and dropped his chin to his chest. He let out an audible sigh. "Ya'll saw the images from the news report..." he said somberly. "I actually recognized a few faces of people I once knew, their heads busted open and their abdomens split apart from those terrible enemy weapons."

The fennec fox looked up and behind him at Merlin, his expression forlorn. "When we went in to destroy mine and Duffy's personnel files, this is what we wanted to avoid," he said. "I'm not against fighting for my world when there's a proper cause, but this war is pointless. Amittias is not even telling his people what they are fighting for, so there's no *patriotic* reason to take part in it. I know this makes me look like a draft-dodger," he said lowly. "Maybe I am, but..."

"No one thinks of you that way, Tanis," Merlin said with a hand on his friend's shoulder. "The heavens know how glad I was to leave my own military unit after the Dennier-Mainor conflicts. I'm sure I can speak for everyone when I say that your career in the medical field is more important than fighting and killing for an unknown purpose."

Tanis was thankful for his captain's words, but he snorted in personal disgust. "No offense to ya, Merlin, but I'm not much of a physician on a space freighter. I never got to finish my medical degree to become a fully licensed doctor - I was short one semester of graduating when I was recalled into active duty four years ago. I suppose I should have gone back to the university when I finished up my service time, instead of coming back to work for ya again as a medic."

"You still can, you know," Pockets said in a quiet voice. "We're glad to have you here, Tanis, but no one would fault you if you left us to further your career."

Tanis looked up at the engineer gratefully. "I appreciate that, Pockets," he said with genuine feeling, "but right now that's not an option. No university in the PA would accept me when there's an open call for citizens to return to Nalirra to fight. Perhaps later when this is all over, I might try to finish up my degree somewhere."

Merlin gave a little squeeze to the desert fox's shoulder and nodded. "Whenever that time comes," he said warmly, "you can count on us for personal references."

"Thanks," Tanis said, seeing the friendly faces around him. "That means a lot."

"Hey, what's this?" Durant asked suddenly. Everyone's attention returned to the vidscreen to find video images of rioting outside a prominent building on Pomen. Holly had continued her broadcast during the *Blue Horizon's* personal conversation.

"...just as devastating to other parts of the Planetary Alignment," she said, "*Interpost* has just laid-off some three hundred fifty thousand employees and closed its doors, citing embezzlement and internal tampering by its committee members. In an age of routine spatial travel and advanced tachyon

communications technologies, there are times when physical packages must still be shipped between the worlds of the PA. Interpost was created thirty-five years ago to handle this interstellar postal traffic, and with its sudden collapse, the company has effectively stopped millions of small-scale shipments without a backup plan for billions of customers on seventeen worlds.

"The PA Legislature convened for an emergency meeting today to address the problem. An investigative team was selected to begin an immediate, full-scale investigation into the Interpost shutdown, and in a PA-wide broadcast transmitted roughly an hour ago, Senator Wrigley of Pomen addressed the Legislature to announce temporary measures.

"In a mandatory declaration, all interstellar freight and shipping companies are ordered to help out in this time of need." Several of the gathered crew looked quickly at Merlin, but he only shrugged to indicate he had heard nothing of this beforehand. "Directives will be sent out en masse within the next few days to all known interstellar freighters, but INN has received an advance copy of the message that will soon be distributed all over the PA.

"Every vessel shipping goods from one world of the Planetary Alignment to another will be required by a new law to take on as many parcels as is possible upon each voyage to maintain a semblance of order for customers on all the affected planets. Each ship will be paid a flat fee of ©5,000 for each delivery of postal crates it makes along with its normal business. However, each vessel that lands and does not release a shipment of the mail will be fined ©5,000. All freighters currently en route between worlds are exempt from this fine until their next planetfall, but any ship that launches toward another PA-member world will be required to carry mail to its next destination."

Holly nodded again off camera and then looked back with a smile. *"We will take a short break for this station identification. When we come back, I have some good news from the world of Tanthe."*

"Whoa..." Pockets said when he muted the broadcast audio. "That came out of nowhere."

"Not really," Durant said. Everyone turned to look at him. "Interpost has been going up on their shipping rates every year for the past five years, but their fleet of delivery ships is getting a bare minimum of maintenance just to keep them flying. They haven't purchased any new ships in nearly eight years, despite their price increases."

"Holly said there were allegations of embezzlement," Samantha said. "That probably shows where all the monies have gone. Looks like their bookkeepers couldn't cover for them any longer and just shut down operations."

"How badly is this going to affect us?" Taro asked.

Merlin spread his hands outward and smiled. *"At first glance, I can't see how it would hurt us at all," he replied. "It's rare we're fully loaded to every cubic area of space in the hold, so taking on a few more crates each time isn't going to affect our schedule or business, unless it's to add another five thousand credits to the coffer each trip."*

"Since you put it that way," Renny said, "I don't see why the Legislature would need to fine anyone. I would think every freighter out there would be pleased to add a little extra to their incomes without doing anything else to really earn it - especially with the way the economy is right now."

"Holly's back on with the news," Lorelei said.

"Welcome back to News Around the Alignment. I'm Holly Harken of the Interplanetary News Network. Many of my viewers will recall the excitement and celebrations on the world of Tanthe when Princess Tinara Shei Aris, the second daughter of King Adion Aris, gave birth to the new official blood heir to the throne, Prince Merlin Sel Aris. We have received word earlier in this broadcast that the Princess is pregnant yet again, the result of an ancient tradition enacted to infuse new blood into the family line using an unrelated lover. Details on the conception and the surrogate father have not been

released, but the royal family is celebrating their good fortune with worldwide festivities. Stay tuned, folks. You can count on Holly to bring you the latest updates as soon as they are known."

"What do you know about that?" Renny said. He looked over at the captain and flashed him a wide grin. "Your royal girlfriend found herself another man!"

"Yeah," Taro said with a smirk. "I'm surprised she didn't try to get *Merlin* for their traditional practice!"

Samantha looked up at the lupine captain, who stared at the screen with an unreadable look on his face. He didn't respond to the jovial jabs at his love life, and the Border collie felt a sudden cold feeling along her spine.

Night and snow were falling over the suburb of Askran on Kantus. Armando Jensen sat on the floor in the middle of his studio apartment eating a meager supper. After spending a night in jail, he had quickly managed to find a job moving boxes at a local warehouse, and had been able to convince the foreman into an advance on his first paycheck so he could secure a place to live. Despite the lion's shortcomings, he was a strong worker when prodded and warehouse work didn't require too much thinking. He'd done well enough his first few days that the foreman had agreed to keep him on.

He had only been in his tiny apartment for two days and the only furnishings he could afford were a lamp, a pillow, a space heater and an insulated sleeping bag. He had been eating off paper plates, drinking out of plastic cups and frequently ate out at convenience-food establishments as he had nothing yet to stock in the refrigerator. Other furniture would have to come later as his pay was issued, but for now his living was rather Spartan.

Armando had just finished eating his meal and immediately wished he had more of the same. He had found an inexpensive place that served honey mustard with their meals and he tended to frequent the establishment. He crumpled up the juvenile green and yellow paper wrappings and tossed them into a plastic sack. He didn't have a communication set, so he couldn't watch the news or listen to music and there was little else to do. Still moping about the loss of his livelihood, the lion gloomily reached for his worn box of comics, the only personal possession left to him from the *Savannah Hunter*.

Before he could get started, however, there was a loud knock on the apartment door. He grumbled something about salesmen keeping late hours, got up off his sleeping bag and trudged to the door. He opened the panel and was about to mouth off his irritation when he noted that the pair of Rottweilers that stood at his front door were dressed in full-length, tan uniform coats; both carried a sidearm.

"Yeah?" he said as he picked up his coat off the floor near the front door and struggled into it. The air was crisp and flakes of snow blew in past his ears.

"Excuse me; is there a Mr. Jensen who lives here?"

"That's me."

"You're Armando Jensen?"

"Yeah, that's right. What do you want? I don't want to buy anything."

The two Rottweilers looked at one another briefly, and then one pulled out a slateboard from a briefcase he was carrying. He tapped open a file and then read from its screen. "Armando Jensen, age thirty-seven, the son of Arturo and Shawnetta Jensen?"

"Yeah, that's me! Now, what d'ya want?"

In unison, both Rottweilers pulled guns from their holsters and let him see the business end of their barrels. "I'm afraid you're under arrest, Mr. Jensen," one of them growled. "We had a hard time tracking you down, but we have you now."

"Arrest? What for?"

"We have a rainbow document that says you're claiming to be a former army military technician in the Nalirran armed forces. As there are *no* felines allowed in the Nalirran forces, you must be a spy against our war with Oe'Tanata."

"Now wait just a—" He swallowed his words when the other canine shoved his weapon up beneath his massive jaw.

"We can do this the easy way," the Rottweiler growled, "or the hard way." He cocked the hammer on his old style revolver. Armando swallowed, but said nothing more.

The other guard opened a clip on the side of his belt and pulled out a set of thin manacles made of a metal alloy that was more than strong enough to resist the strength of the Mainoran lion. He commanded Armando put his hands behind him and then secured the bracelets around his thick wrists.

"Come with us," the canine with the gun instructed. Armando followed him meekly, the other guard bringing up the rear.

"I didn't do anything," Armando said plaintively. "I don't know anything about no rainbows or a war with tomatoes. I ain't never even *been* to Nalirra!"

"Shut up," the guard in back said with the nose of his weapon gouged up into the middle of the lion's spine. "You can wail your excuses all you want in front of a Nalirran military court."

Armando may not have possessed a very good mind for business, but he was no idiot either. He sized up the two guards and weighed his chances for getting away as they walked down the icy stairs of his apartment complex to the darkened street below. His chances of escape died when they reached the ground level and he saw three more armed Nalirran canines near a personnel carrier full of other captives. He doubted he would be able to get far on the snow-covered ground before being shot.

He didn't know that the guards had originally come to his address to draft him into military service, nor did he know anything about an altered rainbow document that had been processed with his name and family information before that facility had been attacked. Rather than Arktanis TeVann, whose information had originally been on the document, it was Armando's data that had been processed.

The guards put him in the back of the transport with a crowd of bewildered canine draftees and then climbed into the cab of the vehicle themselves. Armando Jensen looked at the faces around him and heaved a big sigh. *Could this get any worse?* he thought to himself.

The *Savannah Hunter* had just cleared Kantus orbit and the bridge crew worked quickly to prepare its LightDrive engines to increase speed for their destination on Alexandrius. JW Chon watched his people keenly from a station near the back of the bridge and nodded to himself in satisfaction. Ever since he had rid the ship of its former owner and captain, Chon had noted a marked improvement in the attitude and performance of those who staffed the dark green freighter. It was amazing that such a small thing could improve morale so much.

"We're in the clear, sir," a koala bear told him from the navigational station. "Ready to increase to cruising speed on your command."

“Very good, Mr. Netter,” the giant panda said approvingly. “Increase speed, Mr. Sitka.”

“Aye sir,” responded the mouse occupying the pilot’s seat. “Increasing to cruising speed now. We will attain optimum velocity in approximately four hours, sir.”

“Okay, listen up everyone. I want you to lock down all systems and put the ship on auto-pilot,” Chon said. “Everyone is to assemble in the Rec Hall in fifteen minutes for some important announcements I want to make to everyone in person.”

Without another word, the bridge crew did as they were told and set all their systems to automatic function. The captain knew that Hunkle would be informing the rest of the crew of the assembly, and by the time he stepped into the ship’s largest crew chamber, all hands would be present. Sure that his people would follow this command, Chon left the bridge and headed for his quarters to pick up a slateboard.

Twenty minutes later, Jiawen Chon walked into a room packed with his personnel. Lon Hunkle ran up to him and executed a sharp salute. “All personnel present, captain.”

Chon smiled and gave the ferret a nod of approval. He moved to the front of the room and stepped up onto a metal box that Hunkle had arranged for him to stand on. He put his hands behind his back and looked out over the faces of the seventeen individuals that made up his crew. He was dressed in a pair of tan pants and a red vest, and was comfortable in what he was about to announce.

“The first thing I want to tell you,” he said in a friendly tone that carried in the quiet air, “is that I am pleased with the performance of this crew in the wake of change.” There were several whispers between people. It was probably the first time any of them had received a kind word from the panda since they had been shanghaied to the crew. “There are more changes to be made, but some of the decisions will be your own,” Chon continued.

“Now that Armando Jensen is no longer in the picture, I would like a stable and secure crew aboard this ship.” He was amused by so many unblinking stares. None of them was aware of what he was going to say, including Hunkle. “Now, I know that you were brought aboard the *Savannah Hunter* against your will, and I know that many of you have been looking for any excuse to jump ship and return to your homes. As part of the changes around here, I have a proposal for all of you. If you will *willingly* stay on board with me for just two more voyages, I will freely release you if you wish to go back to your homes.” There was a sudden, almost simultaneous intake of breath by many in the crew. *Was he serious? Could they go home?* Lon Hunkle’s mouth dropped open wide. He couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

“If I lose you all,” Chon said with a shrug of his shoulders, “so be it. *However...* if there are any among you who would wish to stay and work for me under a *standard legal contract*, I will grant to each person a competitive pay raise, as well as a full benefits package.” More whispers filtered through the crowd. “I have no doubts that many of you will choose to leave, and for the positions vacated, I plan to lawfully hire new workers to fill them. A lot of freighting companies went out of business after the Siilv War, so there should be plenty of former cargo-movers willing to sign a standard contract to crew for me.”

He looked around, recognized looks from several he knew would be gone no matter what he offered them. “If there are *any* who will agree to stay beyond two more voyages, you will be treated well and with respect, but under a contract I will expect nothing less than honest hard work and your loyalty. This ship is in the business to make money, and it will take an effort on everyone’s part to keep the business running well – especially since single-ship cargo movers like this one are dropping out of operation at an alarming rate due to large-corporation freightliners like TranStar Shipping expanding their territories and making smaller hauling jobs harder to find.”

He pulled his slateboard from a vest pocket, tapped open a screen, and then held it up before him. "One last thing and then you will be free to go back to your duties," he said. "I submitted registration for a new name for this vessel this morning, and as soon as we make our next landing, I will be having the exterior hull repainted to a cool-blue shade of white, with green and gold trim to reflect the new incarnation of this business. It's time to distance ourselves from Armando's reputation and drop *Savannah Hunter* altogether, so we are now operating as the *Bamboo Wind*."

OUT OF ORDER

By Ted R. Blasingame

Blue Horizon, PA1138

Captain's Journal

It's been smooth sailing since we left Kantus, unless you can count a few of the crew having some kind of flu-like symptoms. Our cargo hold contains four large trucks loaded down with books from Book Depot to be delivered to Iverson, Alexandrius. I might have to consider hauling our cargo like this more often. It didn't save us any time loading up the ship, since we had to manually inspect the shipment for possible tampering from our unknown antagonist, but the subsequent time to reverse the process once we reach our destination will be greatly reduced.

This was a replacement customer for Brandersen Electronics, who cancelled our contract to give their business to the Savannah Hunter - which I have since learned has been renamed the Bamboo Wind by the ship's new owner, Jiawen Chon. There's been no further word on this guy's operations, and in view of what happened at the home office, I am suspicious of him. Likewise, we've heard nothing more from Armando, so perhaps he's out of our fur for good.

Cindy has hired two security guards for the home office, one for the evening shift and one for the early morning times. One is a wolf named Bob Robinson and the other is Stuart Sloan, a mastiff who prefers to go by his nickname, Stu. Both are ex-military and come with references that the SPF was good enough to check into for us. On board the Hidalgo Sun, Patch has already built a Moss unit based on Pockets' designs. Cindy contracted out a local shop to build a Moss unit for the home office, but they've not yet received it. Although there are already such flobots standard on board exploration ships like those in the Firebird Fleet, I think Pockets is planning to apply for a patent for his Moss design and then submit the plans for the unit to the Okami Corporation in hopes they can become standard on all their ships.

Our lawyer's already leaning hard on Brandersen for the breach in contract, and despite that Brandersen has been a repeat client over the years, I hope Mr. Wyatt burns the guy's biscuits for his arrogance. Still, this whole mess has me rethinking the business a bit. Blue Horizon Freight Transfer has done well since we expanded our reach, but I realize that in such hard economic times our prices might be a little steep. I have instructed the home office that when dealing with a customer that is hesitant with our prices to offer a lower rate by ©2,000. If the customer is still hedging, she has my authorization to work with them ©2,000 at a time, though limited down to a ©6,000 discount, in an attempt to secure their business. Obviously, this policy is not to be promoted to the public, but is an internal matter. Hopefully she won't have to drop our fee that far, but if that's what it takes to keep our customers, it may have to be done.

There's been no word from Clarence Duffy since he returned to his home on Fyn, and Tanis is concerned about his friend and the continuing Roppa War. The Oe'Tanata forces are still pounding Nalirra with unpredictable strike patterns, and it's clear that Sed Amittias is in way too deep. Still, the dictator hasn't called upon any of the other PA worlds for assistance other than medical aid. Unfortunately, it's apparent that the Tanatans are far better equipped for this war despite their own

losses. They have the upper hand in this conflict and haven't backed down. Only time can tell how much longer Nalirra's government can hold out.

Merlin Sinclair, Captain

"WaChoo!"

Max looked up from the spanner he was calibrating with a small tool. "Bless you," he said for the tenth time, using a courteous phrase he'd heard while on Earth. Pockets blew his nose on a handkerchief he produced from his coveralls, and then rubbed his eyes with his other hand. He sniffled and then looked over at the trainee mechanic.

"D'ank you," he said through a stuffy nose, which he again blew into his handkerchief. "Ugh."

"You aren't looking very well," Max said to him. Pockets nodded in agreement, and then returned his attention to the monitor on his workbench. "Why don't you go lie down for a while," the youth suggested, "or go see Tanis?"

The raccoon shook his head with a sniffle. "Mahss reporded a probleb wit the ladding gear mechadism lass night," he said with clogged sinuses. "Id looks serious, Magx."

"What's wrong?"

Pockets pulled out his handkerchief and wiped his nose again. "The speudraulig eggstender is leaging fluid from the bood gasgedt. If the gasgedt idsn't reblaced before we get to Aleggsandrius, we bay not be able to eggstend the ladding gear."

It took Max a moment to work out what Pockets had said, but he thought he understood. "We have to replace the boot gasket in the spadraulic extender in the landing gear before we get to Alexandrius?" he asked.

Pockets nodded and blew his nose again. "Id's not an easy job," he gasped. "Id'll take bo' of us worgin in crambed quarters to ged the ohd one out, and a harder timb puddin' the dneuw one bagk in."

"Do you think Armando damaged it when you sent him in to grease the gears?"

"Poz'bly, bud I don' thig he coud ged in ta where ids at. E's too big." WAchoo!

"Bless you. We still have a few days before we land," Max said, worried for his friend. "You should have time for a few hours of rest, anyway."

Pockets shook his head and just waved him off. "I'll redst lader," he said. Max frowned dubiously. The chief engineer was not breathing well and his eyelids were half closed as if the dim light in the room was painful to his eyes. Max went back to his calibration and just shook his head in concern.

Durant trudged out of his quarters in a dark green bathrobe over his shorts and a tee shirt, feeling as if his head was going to fall off his shoulders to bounce along the corridor. He'd been awake most of his regular sleeping period with a stuffy head, and the sinus drainage had given him a sore throat. He felt miserable, and while he usually resisted taking medication, he knew he would only find relief in Sickbay.

As luck would have it, Tanis was in the room studying a screen on notable medical universities. He looked up when Durant noisily blew his nose into a paper tissue. He frowned and shook his head at the sight of the load master.

He *tsked* at the bear and motioned toward the single bed in the middle of the room. "Have a seat, m'friend," he said. "I wondered how long it would be before ya shuffled into my sick bay."

Durant glared at him through bloodshot eyes and just nodded in reply, his throat too sore to speak. Tanis opened a clear jar on a nearby counter and pulled out a simple wooden tongue depressor. He pulled a penlight from the pocket of his white smock and then held the flat stick up to Duran's nose.

"Open wide," he said. The bear did as he was told, but felt like he was going to gag when the medic pressed down on his tongue. Tanis peered into the grizzly's throat with his light and frowned to himself. He released the bear and stepped back. "Ya have a lot of drainage," he said. "How's the head?"

Durant swallowed hard and then replied as gently as he could, "Stobbed ub. Feels lighg idz gonna 'splode."

Tanis nodded in reply and then disappeared into a back room. When he emerged a few moments later, he held two bottles out toward the accountant with one hand. The other hand was resting inside the pocket of his white lab coat. One of the bottles contained several large blue pills and the other held a vile-looking green liquid. Durant took them reluctantly.

"Swallow a tablespoon of the syrup every four hours," Tanis instructed. "That will help relieve the soreness caused by yer drainage. If ya take one of the pills every twelve hours with some food, that should help relieve the pressure in yer sinuses." Durant nodded his head and immediately regretted the motion.

"Whut 'ave I got?"

"Considering where ya picked it up, I would wager ya have the *Waxflatter* virus. It's a native viral infection of the region of Kantus we just visited where it's been recently rampant. It's not too nasty, but bad enough to make most folk fairly miserable. It doesn't take much exposure in cold weather to catch it."

Durant looked at him through tired eyes. "I thod we were vaccinated from all dose thigs for Kandus..."

"Well, I suppose that's one that didn't get into the normal inoculations," Tanis admitted. "I may have to immunize most everyone on board for it. Would ya like some immediate relief?" Durant nodded again. Tanis waggled his eyebrows and then pulled his other hand from the pocket of his smock. It held a capped syringe. Durant instinctively backed away. Tanis smiled and pulled the cap from the thin needle. "Turn around and show me a full moon," he ordered.

"Uh uh..." Durant gasped. "No needles, please..."

"Listen, I know ya *really* don't like needles, but if ya want to get better, yer going to have to listen to yer doctor and take yer medicine properly."

The bear growled lowly, but knew the medic was right. He turned around, dropped his shorts to the floor, and pulled aside his robe. He leaned up against the bed, rolled his eyes to the ceiling, and waited for the expected sharp sting; it came a heartbeat later.

"Ow!" he gasped through a stuffy head. Tanis daubed the needle mark beneath the fur on the bear's right buttock with a cotton-swab daubed in an amber liquid, and then ejected the syringe into a bin marked with a triple-bladed biohazard symbol.

"I hade thadt! I wish you still hab thadt bressure-hybo," Durant gasped. "It didn'd hurd as mudch."

"Sorry, but it doesn't work right anymore," Tanis replied. "Instead of a nice little *snik*, it now grabs the skin and won't let go. I just haven't gotten around to replacing it as yet."

"Jusd by kine of luck..." the bear muttered.

"Now," the desert fox commanded, "I would recommend getting something in yer stomach and then taking yer pills before going back to bed for rest."

"Danis," the bear said as he pulled his shorts back up to their proper place, "I gan't go back to bed. I hab worg to do."

"Not today, ya don't," Tanis said with authority. "To bed with ya. Rest and medicine is what is going to make ya better, not more work."

Suddenly Durant felt extremely tired, and after a moment nodded his acceptance. "First food," Tanis reminded him, "then to bed."

"Right," the bear replied. He gathered his robe around himself with what dignity he could muster and then left Sickbay.

Tanis frowned to himself. This would get around the crew and probably distress everyone but the canine types, since Waxflatter didn't have much effect on them as a species.

Lorelei stared mutely at the grizzly bear sitting at the galley table as he quietly lapped the hot tomato soup she had made for him. The load master looked absolutely miserable, but the *Horizon's* cook wasn't much more animated than he was. Unlike Durant, she was breathing fine, but she ached all over and felt lethargic. She wasn't quite her normal bubbly self, but the grizzly hadn't even noticed when he had come in to ask her for something to eat so he could take his medicine.

Even in her current state, she still worried after her co-workers. She had offered to replace his blue pills with an herbal paste she kept in her quarters for sinus infections, but he waved her off, telling her that Tanis had already given him a shot. All he wanted was something to eat that wouldn't aggravate his sore throat. Normally, she would have berated him for going to Tanis for drugs before coming to her first for a natural remedy, but at the moment, she didn't feel like bothering with it. She had given him soup without argument and then quietly cleaned up her pan and utensils.

Lorelei checked with Durant to make sure he didn't need anything else, and once she was satisfied that he would not require her any further, she took the lift down to retreat to her cabin. *A nice herbal tea should help perk me up*, she thought to herself.

When Taro stepped off the lift onto the recreation deck in dark green shorts and a tan halter top, she was pleased to find the room vacant, though Moss floated quietly over the galley stove monitoring its diminishing heat. She had not seen Durant shuffle off the lift several moments before she got into it herself, but thought it had an odd medicinal smell, like cough syrup.

She moved to the forward curved wall of the room and hummed quietly to herself as she tapped out a few commands on the computer terminal. The room was suddenly filled with active music and she began to sway her hips and tail to the steady beat. In perfect time with the music of a veteran star, Taro tapped out a few more commands and then glanced back at Moss.

The small saucer-shaped unit suddenly sunk from sight and she could hear it bang against a countertop.

"Meoroow!" Moss squawked as it compensated for the sudden increase in gravity. It reappeared over the galley counter, reoriented itself, and then flew directly at her. The fox thought it was going to ram her, but it swerved around her and then stopped above the computer console, its whisker antennae rotating in agitation. *"Meow. Me-meow..."*

Taro suddenly felt lighter as the gravity plates in the room returned to ship-normal. She slapped a hand down on the counter and felt it give a little. "Moss!" she said in a voice raised above the din of the music, "I want the Rec Room's gravity to match Hestra-normal!"

The small unit rotated on its axis until it stared at her with its two sensor lenses. *"Meow?"* The offset, upper lens changed from green to blue.

"Put it back where I had it!" Taro commanded. Without further hesitation, Moss raised the gravity of the rec deck to the level where the first officer had originally set it, and then made its own internal compensations. Then it moved away from her toward the back of the room.

Satisfied that she had her music and gravity where she wanted it, Taro swayed her hips back and forth while moving to the exercise equipment on one side of the room. She loaded up the barbells with a set of weights on both sides that would have normally bested Renny at ship-normal gravity. She then slid beneath the crossbar with her feet planted firmly on the floor. The Hestran fox lifted the barbell up off the rack with some effort, and then began to press the set in time with the music.

Ten minutes had passed when the lift door opened and Taro heard curses intermixed with her music. She set down a pair of dumbbells she had just started working out with and looked toward the door. Merlin was sprawled out on the floor, struggling in vain to stand up and gasping for breath. Taro ran to the computer terminal to reset the room's gravity and shut off the music. She began to feel lighter when she rushed over to the captain.

She helped him roll over and sit up. He looked up at her with a puzzled expression, and then ran his fingers through the fur on top of his head, looking for his hat. Taro picked it up off the floor and handed it to him.

"What happened?" he asked her as he sat back against the lift doors.

"Sorry about that," Taro replied. "I had the gravity set higher so I could get in some exercise."

Merlin looked at her and shook his head. "You had it set for Hestra, didn't you?" he muttered.

"That's right," she admitted. "I don't get a good workout if it's set to ship-normal. If I don't exercise periodically, my muscles might start to atrophy again," she explained as she helped him stand up. "It took me a while during my convalescence to get re-acclimated to Hestran gravity since it had been years since I'd last been there. I've tried to get in an exercise session like this at least once a week since I've been back, but I usually try to do it while everyone's on a sleep period."

Merlin felt a twinge in his left ankle when he stood up. He had crumpled on top of his foot as soon as he stepped out of the lower gravity of the lift. "Ouch," he yipped. He massaged it and looked up at his first officer with a weary expression.

"I came up to get a late-night snack," he said as he limped toward the galley. The vixen followed him to the table and he waved casually back toward the lift. "Do us all a favor, Taro... Next time you want to do something like this, hang a note inside the lift so the rest of us mere mortals will know we might break a leg if we step out into the room without an endosuit."

Taro looked embarrassed. "Sorry about that, Merlin. I'll make sure there's a note next time."

"Thanks," the wolf replied wearily. "As penance for crippling me, you can make me something to eat." Taro smiled and nodded. She moved into the kitchen and Merlin picked up a remote off the table. He aimed it at the dark vidscreen at the fore end of the room and switched it on. The channel was set on a cooking frequency, indicating that Lorelei had probably been the last one to use it. He tapped in the channel for INN and sat back to wait for his food.

Popular news anchor Holly Harken was on the screen, dressed totally in denim with her dark hair pulled back into a stylish ponytail. Apparently, it was a dress-down day at her studio. Merlin turned up the volume and listened to the human woman as she covered the maiden launch of the first of five new vessels whose mission would be to explore the areas of space beyond the perimeter of the Planetary Alignment worlds. He listened idly for several moments, but then perked up when someone off-camera handed her a sheet of paper.

"Pardon me for this interruption in our profile of the Firebird Fleet, but INN has just received information concerning the Roppa War between neighboring planets Nalirra and Oe'Tanata. Ever since this conflict started a month ago, it has been unclear to observers what started this bloody campaign. Earlier today, an anonymous source within the Sardis Citadel in the region of Braf has revealed that Sed Amittias initiated the kidnapping of the Tanatan Emperor's youngest daughter, using hired feline pirates from Brandt. Our source tells us that Amittias intended to use the three-year-old child as leverage in his mounting campaign against the Tanatans, but the kidnapping was mishandled and the Nalirran dictator is now on the run while his world is suffering the massive retaliation by superior Tanatan forces.

"INN was able to get this information out of Nalirra only because our source reports that Sed Amittias has taken the child and has fled into an underground labyrinth somewhere beneath the desert region of Kardon, leaving the remaining government officials to deal with the Tanatan onslaught."

The intercom beeped in the *Blue Horizon's* Infirmary and Tanis chose not to look up from his work. He had just started cutting into the dried-out gel material of Renny's cast and frowned at the interruption. The cheetah looked at him in concern, but Tanis shook his head very gently to let him know his arm was in no danger from a distraction. He increased the speed of the tiny circular blade that began to separate the cast material. Renny held his breath, but it was not an easy thing to do with running sinuses. The apprehension of the cutter digging into him outweighed the dripping from his nose, so he tried to quell the urge to wipe his nose with the handkerchief he held in his free hand.

A moment later, the door to Sickbay swished open and Merlin limped inside. "Tanis," he said. "We just -"

"Don't distract him..." Renny hissed at the captain. Merlin stopped just inside the door and saw what the medic was doing. The news could wait.

After several agonizing moments, Tanis shut off the cutter and then pried the cast away from Renny's wrist. At once, the cheetah began scratching at the sweat-matted fur that had finally been exposed to fresh air. He chirped unconsciously as he rolled his eyes in paroxysms of long denied relief.

"Careful!" Tanis scolded him, "or ya'll scratch all the fur off yer arm!"

"Ah, but it feels so good..." Renny purred.

Tanis just smiled and gestured toward the sink beside the cheetah so he could properly wash his arm. Renny stuck his arm beneath a stream of cool water and started working a liquid soap into the fur to cleanse it.

The medic tossed the remnants of the cast into a waste receptacle to be incinerated later. He looked over at the wolf and immediately noted how the captain favored his ankle. "What happened to ya?" he asked.

Merlin lifted up his foot and grimaced. "Taro had the Rec Room gravity turned up so she could exercise," he explained. "I collapsed as soon as I got off the lift."

"Ouch," Renny said in sympathy. "That happened to me last week."

"I ordered her to put a note in the lift next time she does it," Merlin said.

"That why yer here?" Tanis asked.

The wolf shook his head. "No, we just caught an INN report about Nalirra," he said. Tanis and Renny listened in rapt attention as Merlin related the details of the news spot. When he finished, Tanis spat out a string of curses in his native language. The words were meaningless to Renny, but Merlin winced with understanding.

"I knew Amittias was ambitious," the desert fox said at last, "but I didn't think he was *insane!*"

"I don't understand," Renny said as he dried off his arm. "Why would anyone do something that crazy? Surely he would have scoped out the military strength of Oe'Tanata *before* doing something like this. He *had* to know the Tanatans would clean his clock. He and those poor Nalirrans aren't holding up very well against them."

Tanis let out a deep breath and then nodded. "Right," he said in a clipped tone. He looked up at the cheetah and then gestured toward the arm that was now free of its cast. "Try not to task yer arm too much for the next week," he said in a professional manner, "unless ya just like visiting my Infirmary."

Renny rubbed his arm with the towel again unconsciously and then shook his head. "That's incentive enough," he said appreciatively. "Thanks."

Without another word or a glance to the captain, Renny walked out of the room, taking the drying towel with him for the laundry. When he was gone, Merlin studied the fox. "How are you feeling about this situation?" he asked.

"Feelin' what I can, and a few things I shouldn't," came the reply. "To be totally honest, with those critters fighting against my own people, it's hard to talk with Renny sometimes."

"Is it because he's feline?"

"Yeah," Tanis sighed. "I know it's wrong and he's not responsible for it, but..."

"You're angry, frustrated and he shares enough qualities with the bad guys to make a convenient target."

Tanis grumbled, "Yes."

"Renny is your friend, Tanis." Merlin placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. "I appreciate and admire that you're strong enough to put your professionalism before these issues."

Tanis managed a wan smile. "Thanks, boss."

"Now," he said, "how about taking a gander at my ankle?"

Pockets aimed his flashlight torch down into the maintenance access tunnel and frowned. The light was mounted to an elastic strap fitted over his head and provided an illuminating

brilliance from a tiny bulb powered by a sliver of Ionic Siilv. Max wore an identical lamp and followed the raccoon into the small passageway. He was larger than the chief engineer and would have a harder time negotiating the tight quarters, but knew his help would be needed. Unlike Pockets, he didn't wear coveralls every waking minute while on board, but while working on the ship like they were today, he'd donned a pair of light blue coveralls he'd picked up on their last stop, the garment containing equally as many pockets as the raccoon's.

While seemingly ready to do his work, the engineer appeared lethargic and didn't look at all well. Max had tried again to convince Pockets to take a bit of a rest before tackling a job of this magnitude, but the engineer was adamant about taking a physical look at the leakage in the landing gear extenders before doing anything else. Once done, then they could plot out their course of action to begin the repairs.

Max readjusted the rubber kneepads he wore and then followed Pockets on his hands and knees into the access tunnel. As they crawled, he idly thought back on the days he'd read about when the first Furs could walk on all-fours just as easily as upright, but further genetic tinkering had made them strictly bipeds. Being a tool-using quadruped would have been handy moving through close quarters like this, but those days were gone for the Furs of the Planetary Alignment.

He could hear the raccoon gasping for breath and sniffing, but resolved not to say anything more. Pockets was starting to get cranky every time he brought up his health.

They crawled along for several minutes before they came to a cross-junction in the passage. Pockets consulted numbers stenciled onto the ceiling that denoted internal grid locations and grunted in satisfaction. He turned to the left and started down another tunnel. Two minutes later, Pockets stopped, his head hanging low between his arms.

"What do you see?" Max asked. He couldn't tell what the engineer examined.

"I'b seein' spods in frond of my eyes," Pockets replied weakly, "and I feel lige I'b gonna throw ub..."

Max looked alarmed. This was no place to be getting sick. "Let's go back," he suggested. To his surprise, he saw Pockets' light bob up and down in agreement, and then the raccoon began to back up. Max had no choice but to return backwards along the crawlway. When they reached the junction in the passage, Max backed up further to allow Pockets to turn around so he could crawl out head first.

Pockets stopped at the junction to get his bearings and Max pointed in the correct direction. The raccoon looked up wearily at the canine and swallowed hard. "Mags," he said, "I'b goin' to see Tanis. See if you cand assess the dabage on your own and led be know whad you fide. Maybe by the time I'b get back, we can get started."

Max had no delusions that Tanis would actually allow Pockets to go back to work, but he thought he had learned enough from the chief engineer to examine the landing gear on his own. He had studied the layout diagram along with Pockets and he knew what to look for.

"Go ahead, Pockets," he said. "Go take care of yourself. I can look it over down here."

Pockets nodded and felt another wave of nausea come over him. "Guud boy," he muttered. He began trudging along the tunnel back to the engine room. Max watched him go for a moment to make sure his friend could indeed get back on his own, and then nodded to himself.

He pointed his lamp back up the direction they had been traveling and then started on his way.

Samantha rubbed her eyes and then shook her head to clear the cobwebs from her brain. It had been her turn for bridge watch and she had occupied her time by doing file maintenance on the ship's computer system. Voshnesinski Information System computers were generally considered to be among the most reliable throughout the Planetary Alignment and required little maintenance, but there were times when the computer tech in her just *had* to tweak the system here and there.

She had installed a provided firmware upgrade to the VIS Geo-25 system during their last voyage and everything seemed to be functioning more efficiently. What she did during this particular downtime consisted of nothing more than locating and backing up old personal files that she and other members of the crew no longer needed in certain places within the memory. She had just completed tagging over seven hundred individual files and the process for backup had been initiated. Now all she had to do was relax for a while.

The Border collie stood up from the terminal she had pored over and stretched in satisfaction. She leaned forward on the engineering station and peered out the windows at the stars. Just off-center was a yellow star of a brighter magnitude than the others around it were. That would be Centaurus, the primary sun of Alexandrius, Fyn and Hestra. Slightly to the left was a bluish-green smudge in space, the Van Conner Nebula, a constant source of irritation to freighters due to pirates. However, the Spatial Police Force had been patrolling the region on a regular basis for the past few months, and reports of trouble in that area had been greatly reduced and all but eliminated.

Samantha put her finger up to the forward glass and placed it over the top of Centaurus. She then traced out an imaginary design with other lights to form a star picture. From this position in space, it was not a real constellation she drew, but she was bored and had a good imagination.

There was a chirp from the console to her right, so the canine moved to the Com terminal and tapped out several buttons. "This is the *SS Blue Horizon*," she broadcast. "What can we do for you?"

"*Samantha?*" asked a familiar voice.

The collie smiled. "Hello! Yes, Cindy, it's me. How are things? We lose another customer?"

"No, Sam, nothing like that," the mouse replied with a chuckle. "*I don't always call when there's trouble... We have another job, but I wanted to ask Merlin about it before I make the assignment.*"

"Is it a big delivery, or a problem with the customer?"

"*The delivery is sizeable, but neither that nor the customer is the problem. There's no actual problem with this one. I just wanted Merlin's advice.*"

"Okay, I'll get him for you." Samantha touched the intercom controls and waited for the response.

"*This is the captain,*" said the wolf's voice a moment later.

"Cindy's on the line, Merlin," she told him. "She needs to pick your brain about a potential cargo."

"*Alright, Sam, pipe it in here.*"

The Border collie rerouted the call, but decided to listen in to see what was on the mouse's mind.

"*Hi, Cindy, this is Merlin. What can I do for you?*"

"*Hello, Boss,*" the mouse replied. "*I received a delivery request from Aris Grand a little while ago. They need a shipment of expensive textiles delivered there from Alexandrius. I know both the Blue*

Horizon and the Hidalgo Sun will be on Alexandrius within a few days of one another, but Captain Kegawa will be there before you will. In fact, he should be landing in a few hours."

"Okay, so what's the dilemma?"

"Well, I know you're pretty chummy with the royalty on Tanthe and thought you might like the Horizon to take the job rather than Hidalgo."

"No," Merlin said without hesitation. "If the remainder of his schedule can handle the job, have Rezo make the delivery."

"There's no problem moving his schedule around," Cindy replied in a disappointed voice. "But your schedule's also flexible right now."

"No, give it to the Hidalgo Sun."

"But, I thought – ?"

"Give it to the Hidalgo Sun."

"I was sure you would want –"

"Cindy, do I have to repeat myself again?"

"Uhm, no sir. I'll make the arrangements with Captain Kegawa."

"Anything else?"

"No sir, that was all."

"Good night, then. I'm going back to bed."

"G'night, sir."

When both sides closed their connections, Samantha reset the controls on the Com terminal with a frown. She would have loved to visit Tanthe again, but didn't understand Merlin's adamant refusal to return to the capitol city. Merlin had been extremely quiet about his last visit to see the royal family and the longer he went without telling anyone about what happened there, the more concerned she grew. There were rumors among the crew that he'd had relations with the Princess, but he would neither confirm nor deny the crew's teasing about it. If asked about it directly, he would either change the subject or just act as if he'd not even heard the question.

Samantha sat down in the center seat and rested her chin on the back of her right hand. *It's like he wants to avoid Tanthe*, she thought to herself. There was something Merlin wasn't telling them, and the more she thought about it, the more she wanted to know.

By the time Pockets had made his way back to the engine room, dropped his lamp and tool belt and shuffled to the elevator lift closest to him, he was so weak that he could barely stand up. He had thrown up once in the small lavatory in the engine room, although he knew without a doubt that there was more in him that could easily follow.

The chief engineer rode the lift up to the crew deck and trudged out into the corridor. He saw no one, but didn't care. His quarters were nearby and the queasiness had increased. Rather than attempting to make it around the curve of the deck to Sickbay, he decided to make a quick dash to his cabin instead.

A moment later, Pockets was hanging over the toilet trough and throwing up hard. He labored for air and felt another surge well up inside him. He was overheated and panting didn't seem to help; he yearned for a cool towel for his forehead. His middle knotted up and he felt his head spin as his stomach turned itself inside out yet again.

Ten minutes later, he lay on the lavatory tile and pressed his brow against its cool surface. He was weak, light-headed and wanted nothing more than to lie down and die. *Yes,*

that sounded like an excellent idea – to be released from his misery. He opened his eyes and looked around slowly. There was a discarded towel lying on the floor nearby and he reached out to grab it. He used it to wipe the residue from his mouth and then set it aside.

Pockets crawled on his hands and knees. He passed the little workbench where he often spent his free time tinkering with some new tool or invention, but paid it no mind. He was in no frame of existence to play now.

When he reached the side of the bed, he managed to pull himself up and onto its soft mattress without bothering to get out of his tool-laden coveralls. He pulled back the covers and then allowed himself to plop facedown onto the cool sheets.

Now I can die, he thought to himself.

Max hauled himself out of the open access panel in the floor of the engine room and removed his headlamp and kneepads. He'd just surveyed the damaged boot gasket that surrounded a section of the spadrasonic extenders for the landing gear and it didn't take a chief engineer to recognize a cracked rubber covering leaking fluid. He had checked all four of the extender arms and it was the only one leaking.

Pockets had said that changing out the rubber boot would be an involved endeavor, especially having to do it in flight with the massive landing gear folded up inside tight recesses in the belly of the ship. The job would have been easier with the *Horizon* on a landing pad where they could have the gear extended out away from the ship. The young canine didn't believe that Pockets would be back anytime soon, so now he had to figure out what to do until the engineer did get back; it might be a number of hours, or even days, from the way the raccoon had looked.

Max decided to study the ship's tech manuals on the landing gear. Perhaps by the time Pockets returned, the mechanic would have a better understanding of the job they would have to do. He took his time and put away his gear, and a few moments later he was reading titles on the large, bound volumes of the Tech Manual library closet in Pockets' office. All the information was in the ship's computer already, but Max wanted to be able to put the manual out on the desk and read through it at his leisure. Max had always preferred reading from a printed page rather than from a screen.

The German shepherd smiled when he found the correct tome and pulled it off the shelf. The volume was heavy, thick with stain-resistant paper, but he managed to get it over to the desk with a little effort. He looked up when he heard a humming noise and nodded to himself when a small flying saucer floated into the room.

"Meow!"

"Hello, Moss," he said with a smile. The mobile sentry unit alternated different colors on its upper secondary sensor lens and then went about its business to monitor gauges and other settings throughout the engine room. Max watched it lazily for a moment and then returned his attention to the manual. Before long, memories of the things that Pockets had taught him about the ship came back to him as he studied the book.

The young canine sat back after a few minutes and smiled to himself. He felt he'd learned more about the *Blue Horizon* in the past year under Pockets' tutelage than he had learned about *anything* in all the previous years he had been alive. He hungered to learn new things and seemed to have a good retention for details. He shook his head in wonder and then returned once more to the large book.

"Tanis," Merlin asked as he limped into Sickbay, "have you found out what's going on with our crew?"

The desert fox set down the slateboard that he'd been using to inventory the medications in the cabinet and looked over at the captain. Merlin sat on the closest stool he could find and began to massage his sore ankle.

"It's not quite an epidemic, but there *is* something going around," the medic answered. "It's nothing really to worry about, in my opinion. It's just the *Waxflatter* virus."

"Waxflatter?"

"It's not serious, but bad enough to make those who get it feel awful." Tanis jumped up on a bed and put his hands in his lap. "We maintain a constant climate on board the *Blue Horizon*," he explained. "When we landed on Kantus and had to inspect the cargo outside before loading it on the ship out in the middle of the winter, most of the crew was not insulated with much more than their own fur and regular clothing. The Waxflatter virus is airborne and thrives in those conditions, but it's local to the region where we landed. More than likely, the Waxflatter virus is prolific but more benign in cold weather. The warmth of the *Blue Horizon* probably made it active, multiply rapidly and cause the illness. Of course, we have a recycled air supply on the ship, so I'm not surprised there are several on board who aren't feeling well. I took a small blood sample from Durant to test for it and he came up positive."

Merlin looked thoughtful. It had been a while since they'd had to move cargo in wintry conditions. Their deliveries always seemed to coincide with a region on each planet with decent weather, but this time they had had to operate in freezing temperatures. A few of the thinner-furred members like Renny had complained about it at the time. The wolf was probably better suited for the cold than most others on board, but even he didn't have his winter undercoat.

"So, who's healthy and who's not?" he asked.

Tanis looked upward in thought and then scratched one of his huge, wing-like ears. "Renny and Durant have come to me for medicine," he replied. "I tried to make them both go rest, but I think Durant's back down in his office going over the books some more."

"Yeah, that sounds like him," Merlin commented. "Who else?"

"Lori wasn't acting like her usual bubbly self, so I'd bet she's got it too. But, ya know her... she'd rather meditate, peer into a crystal, interpret tea leaves or toss bones to make herself feel better before she'd come to me for *vile and evil* drugs." Merlin chuckled and nodded. Tanis thought some more and said, "Samantha told me earlier that she was feeling a little stuffy, but otherwise was okay. She took some sinus medicine and seems to be fine for now." He looked at the wolf and added, "I've heard ya sniffing, too."

"Just a little. What about the others?"

"Well, I talked with Taro a little while ago and so far she's been unaffected by this. I haven't talked with Max or Pockets, so I can't give ya a status on their health at the moment. I think they're down in the bowels of the ship working on important repairs, and I didn't feel like crawling through grid supports to stick a thermometer in their ears."

"What about yourself?" Merlin asked. "After being in direct contact with sick folk, I don't imagine you are immune."

Tanis smiled. "Actually, I'm in good health," he answered. "I'd already taken some preventive medicine prior to landing on Kantus, so I think I'll make it through this okay."

Merlin nodded and then reached for a tissue on the counter next to him. He blew his nose and then sniffed again. "What have you got to keep me on my feet too?" he asked with a smile. "It seems like most of my crew could be down during this flight, and I don't want to be out of order, myself. What did you give Renny and Durant?"

"I gave a fairly mild antiviral and sinus decongestant to Renny, and an antihistamine and cough suppressant to Durant."

"What do you think *I* need?" Merlin asked with another sniffle. "If I can beat this before it gets worse, I should be okay."

"A simple antihistamine."

"Okay, I'll take it."

Tanis grinned and hopped down off the bed. "Alright, that can be done. I'll need ya to show me a full moon." He walked to the back room to get his medicine and Merlin looked oddly in his direction.

"What was that?" he asked.

Tanis returned to the front room and uncapped the fresh needle atop his syringe. "Drop yer drawers," he said with a smile. "I need a bare hip for this..."

"How about an arm?" the wolf suggested hopefully. "An arm would be really good."

"If you want to get better, follow orders. Otherwise, the captain can suffer with his minions."

Merlin swallowed. He wasn't afraid of needles, but he wasn't fond of them either, especially in the hip. Feeling hesitant, he turned around and unbuckled his trousers.

Durant blinked in rapid succession and then rubbed his eyes for the twentieth time. He was trying to locate a subtle discrepancy in the accounts that was nagging on him, but he found that concentrating on columns of numbers while his head was pounding was not making him very productive.

He picked up a handkerchief from the desk beside his ledger and blew his nose. He winced and closed his eyes. The pressure in his head had returned and his nose was raw from all the blowing. He set the handkerchief down and picked up his pencil to resume his work.

As he glanced down at the numerical columns, he had to blink several times to get the numbers to stay in focus. Durant coughed suddenly and felt his head balloon again.

"Forgedd dis," he muttered to himself. "I'b goin' bagg to bed..."

The grizzly closed his ledger and stood up, only to feel the room shift beneath his feet. He steadied himself against the wall and knew that if he was going to stay dizzy and eventually topple to the ground, it may as well be in his cabin and over his bed before he dropped.

Although unsteadily on his feet, Durant left his cargo deck office and headed for the lift.

Just missing Durant, Merlin took the lift down to the hold. The wolf stepped out near the engine room and wrinkled his nose at the familiar smell of grease and oil. He walked around to the door to the engineer's office and poked his nose in through the opening.

"Hello?" he asked.

"I'm back here, Uncle Merlin," said a voice from the rear cubicle. Merlin moved around the boxes of tools and spare parts that Pockets always seemed to have on the floor and then saw

Max dressed in coveralls, sitting at the raccoon's desk with several large volumes of engineering schematics and drawings spread out across the tabletop.

"Did you get assigned some homework?" Merlin asked with a chuckle.

Max looked up at him with a smirk. "No, I get plenty of that from Samantha," he replied. He waved a hand over the open books and said, "I'm doing my own research on the problem with our landing gear. I think I might be able to repair it myself, but wanted to make sure before I got started on it."

"By yourself?" the wolf asked as he rested on a corner of the desk. "Where's Pockets? I would think he'd be right in the middle of it himself. That's the kind of stuff he lives for."

The German shepherd nodded. "He *wanted* to be in the thick of it," he agreed, "but he hasn't been feeling well and went to go see Tanis."

"That's odd," Merlin said as he glanced up at several pin-up calendars from various worlds on the walls, displaying minimally-clad females of different species who were posing with oversized tools. "I just talked with Tanis and he hasn't seen Pockets at all. He thought you two were buried under the deck plates somewhere."

Max grinned again. "I've been under there three times today already," he said, "but Pockets left me to research the problem. I've not heard from him since he left."

The captain nodded. "I think I'll go looking for our missing engineer," he said with a frown. "If he didn't make it to Sickbay, he's probably in his quarters." He looked over the drawing layouts and gestured to them. "Do you understand all that?" he asked. Merlin was no stranger to working on ship systems, but sometimes engineering schematics were a little foreign to his comprehension.

"Most of it," Max admitted. "What I don't understand, I've been cross-referencing with the other books we have here."

"Wouldn't it be faster using the computer? I think he has all that information already loaded into the VIS system."

"He does, but I wanted to spread everything out where I can see it better and take notes."

"Well, good luck, Max. I'd assign someone else to help you work on the problem, but it seems most everyone else is out sick; I've got to help Samantha prepare meals for everyone, or I would help you myself."

The canine youth looked puzzled. "Everybody's sick?" he asked. "Is that what Tanis calls an epi... epidemic... uh?"

"Epidemic," Merlin corrected. "He doesn't think so, but he's giving everyone inoculations for it anyway. He'll probably be down to give you a dose later."

"Pills or needles?"

"Needle, I'm afraid," Merlin replied as he rubbed his hip.

Max made a face. "I'd rather take a pill."

"You and me both. How are *you* feeling?"

Max shrugged his shoulders. "I feel fine. I don't have any of the stuff that Pockets had, that's for sure. I'm getting hungry, though."

"That's a good sign," Merlin replied as he slipped back off the desk corner. "Lori's down with it, too, so Sam and I are making everyone's meals today. You can join us in about an hour, if you can hold off that long."

"I think I can make it," Max said with a grin.

"Okay. I'm going to go look in on Pockets. Have fun with your project, but let me know if you get in too big of a bind."

"Thanks, Uncle."

When Merlin knocked on the engineer's door for the third time, he frowned to himself. He tapped the touch pad beside the door and it slid aside quietly. He'd been afraid it would have been locked, but as it was not Merlin stepped inside the darkened front room.

"Pockets?" he called out. He sniffed the air and wrinkled his nose. He could smell sickness in the air. There was no reply, so he tapped on the lights and then made his way across the magazine-strewn room. He frowned at the condition of the cabin. Pockets was an excellent mechanic and engineer, but he had poor housekeeping habits. Magazines, books and paper notepads were all over the floor in seemingly random piles, and there were papers and pens all over the computer desk. Even at a quick glance, Merlin could tell that most of the newer publications sported pictures of the Firebird Fleet on their covers. The raccoon was always mindful of new technologies and he had a keen interest in exploration. Merlin had no doubt that Pockets would feel right at home on one of the Firebirds.

He reached the door to the bedroom and called out again. "Pockets? Are you in there?"

"Somebody shood me," a weak voice sounded from the darkness.

Merlin turned up the bedroom light just enough so he could see. He didn't want to trip over the strewn clothing all over the floor, but didn't want the lights bright enough to bother the raccoon. He approached the bed and found his engineer lying on his back, panting heavily with one arm resting across his eyes. He had not removed his coveralls and there was a foul wet stain across his chest.

The wolf sat down on the edge of the bed beside him and put a hand to Pockets' forehead. "Good night!" he said with widened eyes. He reached toward the intercom button on the lamp stand beside the bed and Pockets lightly grabbed his arm.

"Thad you, Cap'n?"

"Yes, I'm here, Pockets," Merlin replied. "Why didn't you tell Tanis you were this sick? You have a fever!"

Pockets let go of his arm and swallowed before answering. "Tried to..." he said weakly. "Coude't magg it that far... widout throwing ub..."

Merlin clicked the intercom button to Sickbay and the medic's voice piped in. "*Infirmary.*"

"Tanis, I need you in Pockets' quarters ASAP. He feels like he has a fever, and it looks like he's been throwing up."

"*I'm on my way.*"

Merlin switched off the intercom and then stood up. "Can you get up and out of your clothes?" he asked the raccoon. He grasped hands with Pockets and helped him sit up gently.

"Maybe," the engineer muttered.

Merlin walked around the bed and went to the lavatory sink. He picked up a washcloth from the counter and ran cold water over it. He heard the clinking of tools and then a louder *clunk*. He wrung out the cloth and then moved back into the other room just as Pockets was sliding under a cool sheet. Merlin daubed the cloth around the sides of the raccoon's mouth and then set it across his forehead.

"Captain?" a voice called from the front room.

"Back here, Tanis."

The desert fox walked into the room and switched the lights to full strength. Pockets groaned and draped his arm back over his eyes as the medic gingerly stepped over the

discarded, tool-laden coveralls toward the bed. Tanis pulled the damp cloth up and felt of the engineer's forehead. He frowned and then replaced the cloth.

"Why didn't ya tell me ya were sick?" Tanis scolded as he dug into the black medical bag he had brought in with him. Pockets only grunted at him. Tanis didn't find what he wanted so he put a hand into the large pocket of the white smock he wore and then pulled out small plastic pouch labeled *Refloxin*. He handed this to Merlin and said, "Go mix this in a cup of cold water, then pour it down his throat."

The wolf nodded and headed back to the lavatory. Tanis pulled out an electronic thermometer and placed the end of it inside Pockets' ear. With his other hand, he lifted one of the raccoon's hands and felt for the pulse. He watched the digital clock on the lamp stand and counted off the beats.

Merlin came back into the room with a white coffee cup adorned with a cartoon fish, stirring the contents with the handle end of a toothbrush. Tanis looked up at him and snickered.

"I couldn't find a spoon," the wolf explained at the medic's amused look.

There was a small *beep* and Tanis brought the thermometer's readout up close to view. "Mmhhh..." he hummed to himself. He stepped aside to let Merlin bring in the mixture and then started digging in his bag again.

The captain bent over the bed and said, "Drink this, Pockets."

"Whut is it?"

"I don't know," Merlin admitted. "Tanis said for you to take it."

"Then I don' wannit," Pockets grimaced. "He's tryin' to poison me for beatin' him at cards."

Tanis glanced over his shoulder and snorted. "For *that* I should let ya suffer," he replied. "I still say ya were cheating."

Merlin smiled and then held the cup up to the raccoon's lips. "Drink it, Engineer. That's an order."

Pockets complied and swallowed the lemony liquid. To his surprise, it didn't taste as nasty as he had expected. It took three swallows, but he finally emptied the cup.

"Good," the wolf said. "What is that stuff for?"

"It'll calm his stomach and help reduce his fever. Now he needs something a bit more unpleasant," Tanis said as he produced a syringe. Merlin winced when he saw it and suddenly felt his own needle wound throb.

The medic lifted up the sheet and then jabbed the needle expertly into the raccoon's bare hip. To his surprise, Pockets didn't flinch or even grunt. Tanis daubed the spot beneath the fur using a cotton swab coated with an antiseptic and then replaced the sheet.

"That will get him headed back to himself," Tanis told the captain. "Give him a couple hours for the mixture to work on his stomach and then have someone feed him something light. I'll check back in on him periodically."

"Thanks, Tanis," Merlin said. "I need to get up to the galley to help Samantha with the meals now." He left the medic with his patient and then departed the cabin.

Tanis sat on the edge of the bed and looked down at Pockets, who had his arm once again across his face. "Take care of yerself, partner," he said quietly. "We need ya up and about again." When he didn't get a response, he stood up and gathered together his things.

Pockets reached up and lightly grasped his wrist. "Thangs, doc," he whispered.

Tanis frowned. "I'm not a doctor yet," he mused aloud, "but I intend to be one day."

Max frowned to himself. He had waited for the chief engineer's return by doing research on the ship's landing gear. Pockets was undoubtedly sick in bed, but the repairs would take time and needed to be done before they could land at the destination they were speeding toward. Max believed he could make the repairs by himself, but he didn't know if Pockets would allow him to work on it alone. He wished he could take the schematics down into the crawlways with him to refer to while working. Unfortunately, the tomes were too large to lug around with him. He couldn't spend the time to crawl back and forth between the work area to the books and the canine was at a loss of what to do.

Max sat down at Pockets' desk, resting his chin on his hands. Pockets had taught him enough that the young mechanic was restless to get started and anxious to prove he could do it. He sighed in frustration and then closed the largest volume with a *whump*. The resulting poof of air from the book's closing caused a pamphlet-sized document to dislodge from a shelf above the desk and drop to the floor. Max picked it up to return it to its place, but then he saw what it was.

It was the homemade User Manual that Pockets had put together on the ship's Mobile Sentry System. There were design changes and new drawings stuck inside that denoted the differences between the current Moss and the previous unit that had been destroyed in the crash. Out of boredom and curiosity, Max propped his feet up on the desk and began to study the information.

Several minutes into reading, Max's eyes widened and smile crept across his lips. There was a reference to a function of the Moss unit he hadn't been previously aware. He read further with interest and then reached toward the computer terminal on the desktop. Referencing the pamphlet, Max accessed a software routine and then typed in several commands in a programmed sequence to recall Moss to the engine room.

"Durant?" Samantha stuck her head into the grizzly's front room. She heard a mumbled response from the bedroom so she moved through the room and to the rear doorway. "Durant?" she called again.

"Blease go away," said the accountant's voice.

"I brought you something to eat," the Border collie replied as she set a tray of food down on the table next to the bed. There was a huge lump under the covers, but no sign of a head. Despite this, weary words emanated from the light blanket.

"Don' wan any..." Durant said.

"Durant, you *have* to keep your strength up," Samantha said and crossed her arms.

"Don' wan any..." the bear repeated. "Jus' wanna be left alone."

"Durant..."

"Jus' leave it and go, blease..."

Samantha sighed with a nod. "Okay, Durant. I'll check in on you again later, but if I see that you have not eaten the good food I've brought you, I'll see that Tanis rigs up an IV to get the nutrients into you - and I know how much you like needles, my sick friend!"

There was movement under the covers and a cinnamon-colored snout protruded from under the blanket. "All right..." Durant said irritably, "I'll eat it. But blease make everyone else leabe me alone, 'kay?"

"Okay," Samantha agreed. "Just get well, please."

Durant slid a hand out of the blanket and his face emerged after it as he shakily picked up a small glass of juice with a straw from the tray. Samantha gave him a nod and then left the bear to his food.

Max grunted in satisfaction. It had taken him half an hour in multiple trips to get all the tools he thought he would need down in through the crawlway to the landing gear well, and another half hour to wrestle the replacement, three-meter long boot gasket into the same area. The crawlway, already crowded with just him, was now absolutely cramped. However, the schematic of the place showed two lower deck plates that could be removed to give him more room to work on the spadrasonic extender. There were three bright lamps giving the mechanic ample illumination and Max wondered briefly if this was what a cave might be like. The robust tunes of Pixly Dixly echoed through the lower cavities of the *Blue Horizon* and Max hummed along with it as he set to work to remove the access floor panels. Inane as she might be, at least she was consistent inasmuch as all her music sounded the same; Max could have white noise that wasn't too distracting.

"Meow?"

The canine looked up with a smile. "Just hold right there, Moss," he said in a reassuring tone. The small flying saucer hovered to his left and twitched its antennae slightly as it emanated Max's work music. Several moments later, the mechanic removed the deck plates and set them aside. He crawled down into the lower space and wriggled his toes inside his soft boots. They had started to cramp in the squatting position he had been in, but now that he had room to stretch out his legs a little, he got some relief.

He shined his headlamp around the area and recognized the layout from the schematics he had studied before. He had trouble remembering the sequence for draining the spadrasonic fluids without causing a mess, so he pulled a small notebook from a pocket and consulted some figures.

He nodded to himself and looked back up at the mobile sentry. "Okay, Moss, I need to see the plans for sub-section 121-661."

Moss turned on its axis and faced the nearest bulkhead. Its secondary lens became a projector as it displayed an image of the system plans the mechanic needed onto the wall. Max consulted the diagram and nodded once in appreciation for a good idea.

"That's good, Moss," he said. "Continue to hold that image until I need the next one."

"Meow."

Max began his work. He knew it would take a while to complete, and he was aware that he wouldn't be able to stop work once he began the repair work, but he was confident he could manage it. His only regret was that he had neglected to grab something to eat first.

Merlin frowned at the rabbit. He had stopped to check in on her condition and had been trying to leave for twenty minutes. Lorelei was not as sick as some of the others on board were, but she didn't seem to be handling being cooped up alone in her cabin very well. The fact that she had decorated her quarters in vibrant colors to fluoresce under black lights, with hanging crystals and magma lamps all around, it didn't seem like an ideal setting for someone sick, the captain mused to himself. In addition, her sickly-sweet music with birds chirping, water

babbling, and the rush of wheat fields in the wind seemed brain numbing to the wolf. No wonder she didn't want to be by herself.

"Merrrrliiiiiin..." Lorelei whined as she clung to the captain's arm. "Please don' go!" (sniff) "I need company... I'd's lonely here."

Merlin sighed and pulled his arm free of her grasp. It was truly amazing how strong she was for one who was ill. The wolf's stomach did a small flip when Lori wiped her streaming nose with the back of her hand and then wiped it on the front of her cotton night shirt. *Ugh*, he thought, noting the unused box of tissues on the bedside table. He grabbed the box and handed it to her.

"Lori," he said as she took it with a shrug, "I have others to look in on before I relieve Taro on the bridge."

"Nooo," the rabbit whined again. "Don't wanchu to go..."

"Sorry, girl, but I can't stay," Merlin replied as he took a step back out of her reach, lest she cling to him again. "Check StellarNet for the talk shows you like, or perhaps you can watch your favorite cooking show." The bunny looked up at him and pouted. She attempted to give him her best pitiful look. When he didn't seem moved by it, she nodded reluctantly and accepted the vidscreen remote he handed to her.

Before she could latch onto him or start whining again, Merlin gave her a nod and retreated quickly.

Max grunted and snorted as he tugged and pulled on the damaged boot gasket. As per the textbook, he had sliced the old gasket from top to bottom along its three-meter length, but despite this supposed freedom, the boot would not come off.

He was slippery from burgundy fluids that had been inside the landing gear extender and grimy from all the dusts and particles in the crawlway that adhered to him. He had drained the affected area before he had cut the gasket, but there had been a pocket of the spdraulic fluid trapped inside that had come flooding out after he had released it unknowingly.

He was more than a little annoyed at his condition, as well as the resistance of the gasket, but he was determined to triumph over the irritation. He slipped on the slick deck plates and fell once again. Moss let out a sympathetic *mew* at the canine's plight, but Max interpreted it another way.

He glared up at the small flying saucer that watched him and growled beneath his breath. "I will personally dismantle you with a sledge hammer if you've recorded any of this to show anyone!" he snapped.

Moss twitched its antennae whiskers and let out a small *mewip* noise in alarm. Unknown to Max, the small unit quickly erased a record it *had* made of the mechanic's progress and then deleted a redundant copy it had been storing in real-time on the ship's VIS computer system.

Without another word, Max turned back to the boot gasket and tried again.

"Come on, darling, you *have* to eat something," Taro said in a soothing voice. Renny looked up at her with puffy eyes and a forlorn expression. The cheetah was covered up in his bed by a dark green sheet. All other blankets had been pushed off onto the floor.

"Not hungry..." he replied. His companion knew he must be sick if he wasn't interested in *food*. Due his species' metabolism, Renny had an infamous, ongoing appetite that could best anyone on board the ship.

Taro absently toyed with the feather clipped on the left side beside her ear. "What can I do for you?" she asked gently. "I'll do anything you need or want me to do."

Renny closed his eyes and swallowed before he looked back up at her. "I could use some cool water," he said at last, "but not too much. My stomach is still tender."

The vixen nodded and got up to get his water. Renny didn't seem to be as sick as he had been earlier, but he was still miserable.

When Tanis stepped into Lorelei's cabin, he had to stop inside the door to let his eyes adjust to the darkness. He activated the light switch; the only thing that came on was a black light that made posters of bright colors flare out at him, but didn't do much to illuminate the room.

"Lori?" he called out.

"Bagg here," the rabbit responded meekly from the bedroom.

Tanis stepped gingerly through the room and made his way to the door in the back. Had it not been that all the cabins on the *Blue Horizon* were identical in layout, he might have had more difficulty finding his way without bumping into things. He managed to reach the darkened doorway and stepped through.

"Lori, it's me, Tanis. I got yer message that ya wanted to see me."

"Thangs. You can turn on the light."

The desert fox flipped on the overhead light and found Lorelei burrowed under a mountain of blankets. Only her ears and the pink tip of her nose were showing, as well as the edge of her right hip. He sat down on the edge of the bed and put a hand under her pillow to feel of her forehead. It was warm, but not as if she had a fever.

"What can I do for ya?" he asked quietly. A sparkling crystal on the floor at his feet caught his attention. He picked it up idly and looked back at the rabbit that now peeked out at him from under her pillow.

"I'b sick..." she replied in an embarrassed tone.

"Yes," he agreed. She had been ill while on board from time to time in the past, but would never call on him as a medic due to her belief in using natural remedies to take care of herself.

"I don'd thigk I'b getting any better..." she admitted. "I... I need somb help..."

Tanis raised his eyebrows. "Are ya sure ya want *my* help?" he asked as he put a hand into the pocket of his white lab coat. "I'm the evil one, remember?."

Lorelei glared at him, but then nodded. "I don'd agree wit' your methods," she said, "but nothig of mine is workig this time. I need some relief."

Tanis held up the crystal he had picked up off the floor and let it spin a little on its gold colored string. "I've heard ya give names to yer crystals," he said casually as he stood up and held it over her nose. "What's this one called?"

The rabbit stared up at the faceted orb and concentrated. "I thig that one is - *Oww!*" She cried out when she felt a needle pierce her hip and she looked up at Tanis in alarm. He wasn't smiling, but he appeared satisfied that his method of distracting her enough to give her a shot had worked. He daubed a small cotton swab on the spot he had pierced and Lori whimpered.

In a voice loud despite her sinus congestion, she called him a few choice names in several languages. Tanis was shocked, as he had never heard the gentle bunny use profanity before, but it was apparent she was well-versed in her verbal selection. He let her continue her tirade as he capped his syringe and replaced it into his pocket. Finally, when it appeared she had exhausted her vocabulary, Lorelei began to cry.

She reached out, took his wrist, and then pulled him down to her so she could bawl onto his shoulder. The fennec rolled his eyes, but allowed himself to be wept upon. He deduced that she cried not because of the needle, but because she had made the difficult decision to accept medicinal help. She probably feared it was something she would never live down, especially if Samantha found out about it.

"Lori, look at it this way: what I do is merely a refinement of holistic medicine. You believe in natural remedies, and all the ingredients that I use in my practice have to come from somewhere, right?"

From the dark look the rabbit gave Tanis, he knew his reasoning wasn't working with her.

When Tanis finally left Lorelei's cabin, she had cried herself to sleep. The medic felt confident that now that she had received a dose of medication that would fight the viral infection within her body, she would start to feel better after some rest. Of all those on board that had become ill, she was perhaps the least sick of them all.

The worst one had to be Pockets, however. The desert fox moved around the perimeter of the crew deck until he came to the chief engineer's quarters. He didn't bother to knock and went right inside. As soon as the door panel had closed behind him, he could hear the raccoon retching in the back room. He moved quickly, but didn't find Pockets in his bed. More retching came from the lavatory and Tanis shook his head. Apparently, the liquid he had had Merlin force him to drink earlier hadn't helped quiet Pockets' stomach.

He stepped into the bathroom and found the short raccoon huddled over the toilet trough. He had a blue cotton robe haphazardly wrapped around him that had residue from his current activity across the front of it. Pockets looked over at the medic with half-lidded eyes and looked exhausted.

"Help..." he said weakly.

"I'm sorry, Pockets," Tanis said as he grabbed a washcloth from the sink and then wet it down with cool water. "I'm surprised yer stomach is still this active after the *Refloxin* I gave ya earlier." He knelt down next to the engineer and wiped his mouth with the cloth.

"Threw id ub right after you left..." Pockets replied.

"Ah, so it didn't have a chance to work on ya," Tanis said. "Merlin probably used lukewarm water from the tap, instead of cold water like I instructed him to use." Pockets closed his eyes and panted without a word. "Are ya willing to try this again?" Tanis asked him. "I'll stay with ya this time to make sure it stays down like it's supposed to."

The raccoon nodded and Tanis pulled another pouch of *Refloxin* out of his black bag to fix another batch. "After I'm sure it stays down this time," he added, "I'm going to get an IV of saline to set up beside yer bed; yer going to need to help battling the dehydration."

A deafening roar filled the lower levels of the *Blue Horizon*. Max had dragged a suction hose down into the bowels of the landing gear crawlway and was earnestly cleaning up the fluids he had spilled earlier. Covered in the greasy fluid himself, he had stripped off the saturated coveralls after he had gone to get the hose and had taken a quick shower in the cargo deck restroom. He had donned another set of coveralls before resuming his job.

It had taken him nearly two frustrating hours to get the old gasket off the unit and out of the crawlway, but he had finally been successful in his task. Before he could begin the process of putting in the new gasket in the cramped quarters, he would have to clean up all the old fluids. Fortunately, the *Blue Horizon* was equipped with a high-powered vacuum system designed for such usage, although a pair of snug ear protectors was necessary to prevent deafness.

Once finished with the cleanup, he would have to inspect the landing gear extenders to make sure he'd caused no damage getting the old gasket out before beginning to install the new one. Once the new boot was finally in place, he would have to refill the area with fresh spadraulic fluid, a task he was sure would be just as unappealing.

Tanis stepped off the lift onto the recreation deck and glanced over at the wall-sized vidscreen that was currently tuned to an all-music channel. He recognized the band members of *The Jettisons* playing their instruments in what appeared to be an isolated canyon in some remote area of Earth. He didn't recognize the lyrics of the song, but he nodded in time with the music as he walked across the room to the galley.

"Hey, Tanis," Samantha said when he sat down at the counter. She was cutting vegetables into a clear broth in a pan on the stove and she was wearing Max's old apron; it had the cartoon figure of a canine on it, with its tongue sticking out the side of his mouth while holding a fork in one hand and a knife in the other.

"Hi, Luv," Taro said when she came out of the walk-in freezer with several packages of previously prepared meat. "The meals won't be ready for another hour yet."

"Hello, ladies," Tanis replied with a smile. "I *am* getting hungry, but I can wait. I'm more concerned about our ship full of patients. They're the ones who need to eat." He looked back at the vidscreen and asked, "Where's Merlin?"

"Bridge duty," Taro answered as she started to work on portioning out the frozen meat.

"Mind if I change over to the news?"

"Go ahead," Samantha replied. Tanis got up and walked across the room toward a couch. He found the remote on the floor beside a recliner and then keyed in the frequency for the Interstellar News Network before he sat down.

"...an hour ago. The allies of Nalirra are stunned and the PA Legislature is now currently in a closed-door meeting over the matter." Tanis stared at the screen in silence and both women in the galley looked up from their work. Holly looked off camera for a moment and then turned back to face the screen. "Excuse me, Viewers, but we're receiving more information at this very moment. While the data is coming in and being analyzed, we will replay the Tanatan broadcast."

The image of Holly Harken was replaced by a cheetah dressed in what appeared to be a tan robe adorned with small strips of colored fabric attached to a sash about his middle. The camera angle zoomed in shakily to frame just his face on the screen and his large, golden eyes were steady.

"This a message from Oe'Tanata High Council," he said in a voice that had an underlying thrum to it. From the way he pronounced his words, it was evident that he had not been speaking Standard for long, but was using the basic language to broadcast his message to the Planetary Alignment.

"Zed Am'tias, the leader of N'Irra is captured and is executed. The Emperor's kitten been restored to Mrr'Ranah Palace from N'Irra cavern. As of now, world N'Irra not-limits to your Planet-Lineup. Under Oe'Tanatan rule, N'Irra no more concern of your people. Our star system under Oe'Tanatan rule complete. Stay away, no come."

Tanis opened his mouth, but no sound came out. *This could not be!* Taro and Samantha forgot about their food and both came further into the room to stand behind the medic on the couch.

"Our world honored by Planet-Lineup for its inaction. Even during our fight, no other world stick snouts in business. Very wise. Continue this and no more trouble for all. Any outsider come to our system be destroyed, so be honored and stay away." The cheetah made a sign across his brow and then the screen went black.

"What about the citizens of Nalirra?" Tanis croaked. "What's to be done with them?"

Holly's face reappeared and her expression was grave. *"From all accounts," she said, "Nalirra has been completely taken over by Tanatan forces. Sed Amittias was captured in a desert cave earlier today and executed immediately by the forces that caught him. The Tanatan Emperor's daughter has been returned home safely, but the fate of the whole world of Nalirra is currently unknown. The transmission contained a direct order for all outside the Roppa star system to stay away, though praised the Planetary Alignment for not taking part in Nalirra's campaign against Oe'Tanata."*

"Holly," Tanis growled, "we just heard him say all that. Tell us something else!"

As if the human news anchor had heard him, the dark-haired woman picked up a common slateboard that had been placed before her and glanced over its screen quickly before looking back at the camera. *"Several Nalirran military cruisers on station within the Reytharsa Asteroid belt at the outskirts of the Roppa system have just been destroyed by Tanatan battleships. Among them were seven civilian cargo carriers and four personnel transports with Nalirran citizens trying to return to their homeworld, as well as incarcerated citizens of Nalirra being returned for active duty after having dodged their draft. There were no survivors."*

Holly looked a little shaken and added, *"An INN field crew witnessed the massacre and made their report... only moments before... before being destroyed as well. The families of the INN crew aboard the SS Cartouche will be notified before the names are publicly released."*

"SPF long-range sensors have detected a massive armada of warships patrolling throughout the Roppa star system boundaries, as a deterrent against further inbound vessels. All attempts to receive signals from Nalirra have been unsuccessful; it appears the Com-Net has either been jammed or destroyed. There are currently no more INN news correspondents within the Roppa area, so it may be some time before more is known. Until further notice, PA Legislature Speaker Jo Chan has issued an order that forbids attempted contact with either Nalirra or Oe'Tanata due to the dangers involved in that star system."

"What's going on?"

Tanis spun around at Renny's voice with clenched fists. The navigator was dressed in a blue and white cotton robe and had just stepped off the lift in search of something to eat. He was feeling better and ready to fill his belly. Tanis wore a scowl and pointed back at the vidscreen behind him just as the earlier video broadcast was repeated.

"My homeworld's just fallen!" the medic snapped at him.

Renny glanced up at the vidscreen at the cheetah's face that spoke to the unseen camera. He looked back at Tanis with the realization that the fox associated his species with the

individual on the screen. He held up his hands toward him with his hands open. "Hold on there, Tanis!" he said quickly. "That's not *me* up there!"

"Ya've not been very sympathetic to what's been happening to Nalirra," Tanis said darkly.

"That doesn't mean *my* people are the ones who have been at war with your homeworld," Renny replied in his defense. "I've not been too sympathetic because it was Nalirra that *started* the war."

"Yer a cheetah, just like *they are!*" Tanis took a step forward and Taro readied herself to intervene if he looked like he was going to jump the navigator. Samantha wiped her hands on her apron, preparing to do the same.

"There *aren't* any Tanatans in *my* bloodline!" Renny replied. "Get that out of your head right now!"

Tanis glared at him, clenching and unclenching his fists. Taro stepped around the couch quietly and then grabbed his wrist.

"Calm down, Tanis," the vixen said to him. As soon as he felt her hand on his wrist, he jerked his arm to pull it away from her, but her grip was too strong and held him fast.

"Let go of me," he growled at her.

Taro bent over and put her nose right into his closest ear. "I said '*calm down*', Tanis. That was an order."

The medic glowered at her for a moment and then glared back at Renny, but he relaxed his arm and finally looked away. Samantha grabbed the remote and muted the INN broadcast that had continued to recap the events. Taro released Tanis' wrist, but he made no other moves toward the cheetah. He took the remote from Samantha and turned the sound back on as he plopped down on the couch, sinking his head into his hands. He said nothing more to any of them and didn't look at Renny.

Taro sighed and looked apologetically at her lover. "He's been under a lot of pressure lately," she reminded him. "You would be too if your family and friends were knee-deep in war and you could do nothing about it."

Renny shook his head and then moved to a nearby recliner. If he was going to be accused of conspiring with Tanis' enemy, he wanted to know the situation. Samantha looked first at Renny and then at Tanis as they both kept their attention on Holly's report. She shook her head sadly and then returned with Taro to the galley to continue with their meal preparations.

Even while Taro worked with the food, she kept an eye across the room toward Tanis, watchful that the medic didn't make any threatening moves toward the cheetah.

"Moss, come up here and then please display schematic for sub-section 121-668," Max called out. He was four meters above the floor, clinging tenaciously to a folded arm of the landing gear extender. He had finally managed to get the boot gasket in place, but he was having difficulty trying to figure out how it connected to the top portion of the extender.

"*Meow, me-ow,*" the small flying saucer acknowledged as it floated up to the mechanic and then located a flat surface to project the requested diagram. Its lens lit up as the image appeared on a bulkhead. Max studied it for a moment, and then his eyes lit up.

"Ah, so that's it!"

It had been several hours since Taro and Samantha had gone around to all the members of the ship with trays of food, making sure everyone had been fed. While they were gone, Tanis had stayed on the recreation deck to watch INN for anything new that might come up, but Holly had been unable to do anything more than recap the whole conflict between the two worlds from its beginning until now.

There *were* reports of former Nalirran citizens and business associates with the planet that were outraged or fearful, but as to Nalirra herself, no more news had come out of the Roppa system on its population. Tanis could have easily watched the news from the screen in his quarters, but he had not moved from the couch since he had seen the initial report.

Arktanis knew he needed to get up and make the rounds to check in on those who were sick, so he finally forced himself to shut down the vidscreen and leave the rec deck. He had no intention of looking in on Renny, however. The navigator could nurse himself back to health, for all the medic cared. However, as he approached the lift, Tanis heaved a great sigh. He *knew* that Renny had nothing to do with the conflict on Nalirra any more than he did himself, but it was hard *not* to forget the Tanatan cheetah's face on the vidscreen as the fate of his homeworld was sealed.

"Moss, disengage engineering routine Alpha-Nautilus-03," Max said in satisfaction. "I'm finished with you."

"Meow!" The mobile sentry system alternated colors across both its forward sensor lenses, reoriented three of its whiskers, and then moved away across the engine room to resume its original programming. Max watched it float away until it was out of sight and then began to haul his tools up out of the crawl space tunnel so he could clean them and put them away.

He stopped to yawn and then blinked several times. He was *tired*, but satisfied that he had completed his self-appointed task. By himself, the young mechanic had replaced a difficult part in cramped quarters, but he had managed it with only the help of Moss and the ship's engineering schematics. Unfortunately, there would be no way to test to see if everything worked properly until they would be able to extend the landing gear. He sincerely hoped he hadn't missed something.

It would take him yet another hour to clean up the tools, but Pockets would hang him up by his tail if he didn't put them away in spotless order. The chief engineer may have a messy personal cabin, but he kept the *Blue Horizon's* engine room tidy and expected his trainee to do the same. Once the tools were accounted for and put away, Max intended to take a long nap before checking in on his boss. He hoped Pockets was okay.

Two days later, Pockets opened his eyes with the need to visit the head. He threw back the covers and moved across the room to the lavatory. A few minutes later, he stared at himself in the bathroom mirror and stuck out his tongue at himself. He sniffed the air a couple times and then decided that the foul odor he could smell was himself. He glanced back at his reflection with a frown. "You," he said to the other raccoon, "need a shower."

His reflection wrinkled its nose in sync and then he paused as something occurred to him. He sniffed the air again and sorted through the other scents in the air: medicine, soup and the lingering smells of dust and grease from his abandoned coveralls somewhere in the other room. Then he smiled. His sinuses were clear. He could smell and distinguish between things again.

Tentatively, he raised his arms above his head, but they didn't ache. He bent over to touch his toes, and to his delight found that he could. The raccoon spun around in glee and punched the air with his fists.

"Yes!" he said jovially, "Jerad Porter is back among the living!"

An hour later, Pockets had showered, dried and brushed his fur to perfection. He chose a clean set of coveralls from his closet and decided he would wash his laundry and bedding later. His sense of duty as the *Blue Horizon's* Chief Engineer was strong and he remembered that the landing gear would need to be repaired before they could land on Alexandrius. He couldn't recall just how long he had been ill, but he felt it was time wasted.

It would take time and Max's help to replace the damaged boot gasket on the landing gear extender. Normally, he would not have relished working on part of the ship in a hard-to-reach area of the ship where he would get filthy from the leaking fluids, but he was in such a good mood at feeling better that even that didn't daunt him. The important thing would be to get it done while they still had time.

The raccoon left his cabin and headed for the lift. He discovered he was famished and quickly decided he'd be a better engineer with a full tummy. At the lift door, he tapped the touch pad to take him to the recreation deck, but before the door closed fully, a voice called out.

"Hold it, please!"

Pockets jabbed the *Stop* button and the doors reopened. Samantha stepped inside with a smile. "Thanks, Pockets," she said.

"No problem," the raccoon replied.

"You're sure looking better," Samantha told him as the doors closed and the lift began its upward climb.

"Thanks, I feel a lot better - starving, but I'm better."

"You're just in time then," she said. "Everybody else should be up here for a staff meeting. I've just left the bridge on automatic with the auxiliary sensors routed to the rec deck."

Pockets looked up at her as the lift came to a stop. "Why wasn't I informed about the meeting? Merlin rarely has them."

"Tanis suggested we let you rest," the Border collie told him. "You were the sickest, but you look like you're back to normal now."

"I feel decent," Pockets agreed with a smile. The doors opened and the two of them stepped out into the rec room. The large vidscreen circuitry was off and the panel was now nothing more than a forward window with the backdrop of stars in space. There was a bright star directly ahead. The raccoon could smell Crescentan fish cooking from the gallery and his mouth began to water. His stomach growled in response and Samantha laughed. Gathered around the long galley table was the rest of the *Blue Horizon's* crew. Merlin grinned when he noticed the engineer's normal demeanor.

"Glad to have you back with us!" he said over the conversations around the table. Everyone else looked up and Pockets felt welcome to be there. Lorelei waved at him from the kitchen, her eyes bright as she tended to several dishes in the midst of preparation. Samantha sat down next to Tanis and gave him an elbow in the ribs to make him scoot over some.

"What's going on here?" Pockets asked the captain. "Are you giving out pink slips again?"

There was laughter all around, but something in the raccoon's mind picked out that Renny and Tanis were at opposite lengths of the table from one another. The pair of them normally sat close together to taunt or tease one another in fun, but neither of them even looked the other's way. Pockets took an empty seat between Samantha and Max.

"Well, at least you're no longer the living dead," Samantha added.

"*Braaaaains!*" Pockets grunted, feigning a movement toward Renny before shaking his head and demonstrating that it was a lost cause.

Merlin stood up and all eyes went to him. "Now that the gang's all here, I want to tell you all that I'm glad that everyone's finally back on their feet. This *Waxflatter* sickness has finally been eradicated, thanks to our good doctor—"

"Medic," the desert fox corrected.

"—thanks to our skilled *medic*," Merlin said with the slight alteration. "Nobody's getting canned," he said with a smile at Pockets, "but now that you're all better, I expect everyone to help get this ship cleaned up."

"Pockets' room needs priority disaster aid!" Samantha quipped. The raccoon looked embarrassed and grinned foolishly.

"We'll be landing on Alexandrius in about ten hours," the wolf continued, "and I want this ship in order *before* then. I will make an inspection of each compartment before I allow anyone out the hatch." There were several groans around the table. "We'll be down for *eleven days* on Alexandrius before our next job, and I don't want to come back to a filthy ship after a journey where most everyone's been ill."

"Captain," Pockets said meekly, "Max and I need to be excused from this cleanup detail."

"Not a chance, Porter," Merlin said with upraised eyebrows. "Your cabin is the worst of them all, and I'm not having someone else clean up after you, even if you *have* been sick!"

"If Max and I don't get the landing gear extender boot gasket replaced before we get to Alexandrius, we won't be *able* to land anywhere," Pockets said sternly. "Ten hours doesn't give us much time to..."

"Sorry, Pockets, but you can't use that excuse," Merlin said with a proud smile. "It's already been taken care of."

The raccoon looked puzzled. "Huh?" he asked. "Who?"

"Your trainee mechanic did the repairs while you were out of commission," Taro said.

Pockets looked over at Max, who appeared to be sitting up straighter than he normally did. "Max fixed it?" he asked incredulously.

"That's right," Merlin replied. "The rest of us were either too sick or too busy taking care of the sick to give him any help, so he took care of it himself, *by* himself. After he reported the completed job to me, I crawled down in there to examine it myself. The repair work he did was a classic textbook case and he did an excellent job."

Pockets sat there for a moment, and then he stood up and walked around the table to the young canine. He put his hands on the German shepherd's shoulders and Max looked up at him quietly with pale blue eyes. "Max, I'm proud of you," the engineer said. "If you managed a repair job like that one in conditions as bad as the one down there, you've got the potential to be a *great* mechanic!"

Renny laughed out and reached across the table to smack the table in front of the young canine. "Careful, Pockets," he said merrily. "Max will be taking your job from you soon!"

"Yeah, he'll be Chief Engineer before we know it!" Durant chuckled.

Pockets smiled at the others and then he looked toward the captain. "After such an accomplishment," he said, "I don't think we should consider Max a *trainee* anymore. He's proven himself a fully-fledged journeyman," he looked down again at Max, "and a valued member of the crew."

"Thanks, Pockets," Max said with an embarrassed grin. He still wasn't used to being the center of attention of the whole crew. "I'll try to live up to your expectations."

"You still have experience to gain," Merlin said with a smile, "but you've been a good student and Pockets is *apparently* a good teacher. You can learn a lot from him, even if he is a goober sometimes."

"Hey!" Pockets exclaimed.

"I can't believe it!" Tanis said in excitement. "We never thought we'd hear back from ya again!"

"Well, I never got a recall, so I'm still here on Fyn, although I'm not in my mountain cabin anymore."

"What made ya give that up?" the medic asked. "I thought ya loved that place."

"Oh, I still own it; I'm just not currently living in it. Do you remember that ramshackle place near the Well of Luck?"

"Vaguely, Duffy. I was tired and hurting from our ordeal. I seem to remember one being there, but I never gave it much attention. My only thought at that time was to get back to town before the *Blue Horizon* left without me. What about it?"

"I think I told you that I bought the Well of Luck and was going to reopen it as a tourist attraction. The shack was included with the property and I just finished renovating the building. It took some doing – there was a lot of mildew and rotting wood in the walls that I had to replace, but you should see it now. I have a back room that I'm now living out of and the grounds are nicely mowed and clipped. There are walking trails all through the woods and there's a small parking lot down by the main road where you tried to get yourself run over. I'm currently awaiting a shipment of curios and other souvenirs for the gift shop, and I'll be stocking the snack counter just before it opens. The place will officially be in business next week for tourists, and just in time, too. This whole part of the countryside is used for outdoor recreation and I'm right off the main road. It should bring in a nice little income."

Tanis made a face at the vidscreen where the Siberian husky was smiling back at him. "I can't believe ya think ya can make money from that stinking place, Duffy," he said in amusement, "but I do wish ya luck – with the Well of Luck!"

"Thanks, Tanis, I appreciate that. You wouldn't believe all the work I had to do inside the well itself, but I did find a few odds and ends down in there, including your little pendant. Want me to ship it to you?"

"No, thanks, ya can keep it as a bonus. So, what brings ya to give us a call?" Tanis asked.

"Well, I'm sure you've heard all about home," Clarence replied. "After our last visit to Nalirra, I figured you might have wondered about me, so I thought I'd check in."

"I'm assuming the attack by the Tanatans kept yer name from making it through all the channels to get you recalled into active duty."

"Yeah, despite all the trouble we went through to get our names out of the system, the enemy did it for us. Stroke of luck, eh?"

"If ya say so," Tanis said with a frown. He was quiet for a moment in thought and Duffy grew restless with his friend's mood.

"There's another reason why I called," the husky said at last.

"Ya need a loan for yer trinket shop?" Tanis replied with the familiar friendly twinkle in his eyes.

"No, it's nothing like that. I was just wondering how my son was doing."

The medic looked up at the screen in surprise. Did he really know, or was he fishing for information? "Uh, what are you talking about, Duff?" he asked.

Clarence chuckled and waved a hand in the air. *"You don't have to feign ignorance, Tanis. Max sent a letter to my cabin address to tell me about it. I just got it this morning."*

"And...?" Tanis prompted.

The husky grinned. *"I thought it was a joke at first, but he also sent along copies of the DNA comparison you did. That convinced me he was telling me the truth."*

"So... how do you feel about that?"

"Heh... Tanis, I hate to break this to you, but I was discovered by another puppy of mine a couple years back, the result of the seed-sowing I used to do those ages ago."

"Ya were a veritable lawn sprinkler," Tanis added with a smirk.

"Cute," was the wry reply. *"Max has a half-brother – probably others I don't know about. Unfortunately, when this other one tracked me down, all he wanted was to liberate me from my money. Legally, he couldn't really do anything about it since his mum was a pleasure girl and that's a risk of that line of work, but he gave it his best shot to intimidate me. That's the real reason why I was living up in the mountains. It was to get away from that guy. When he first contacted me, I tried to befriend him, since I am his pop, but he didn't care anything about that. All he wanted was money."*

"Ouch," Tanis said. "Why did ya leave yer retreat to run yer little tourist trap if ya were trying to hide from him?"

Duffy grinned. *"He tracked me down even there, but when he saw the condition of the place, he seemed quite put out that I wasn't rolling in money. I invited him to stay and live with his pop, but from that moment on, he wanted nothing to do with me. I think it embarrassed him."*

"I wonder what he would think if he knew ya had a nice bank account from those investments ya made on Mainor." Tanis laughed. "Just because someone has money doesn't necessarily mean he's going to live in extravagance."

"To be honest with you, Tanis, old boy, there's not much left over from all that. It cost me quite a wad to make that trip to rendezvous with you and then the return trip home. Travel between the planets isn't cheap, my friend."

"Ask ya something?" Tanis requested.

"Sure, what do you want to know?"

"With such a bad experience with yer other offspring, ya don't seem too bothered with Max contacting ya. Why?"

Duffy scratched an ear. *"It was what he wrote in his letter, Tanis. He told me that you'd found out about us and looked into it, and how your captain broke the news to him. He said he felt he had the responsibility to let me know, but he also apologized that he wanted to stay with the Blue Horizon, rather than move to Fyn to live with me. He was honest, Tanis, and he didn't want anything from me. He only felt I had the right to know I had a son in the event I wound up going to battle on Nalirra." Duffy's eyes grew moist and he stopped to wipe them, unashamed to do so in front of his long-time friend. "Max is a good soul, Tanis. I think he's had some terrific folk to be around after leaving the Dump. He's turned out alright."*

"We think he's a good kid, too," the desert fox replied. "He made a major repair on our ship a few days ago, all without the help of anyone else. If he hadn't done that on his own initiative, we'd be scrambling at this very minute to try to get the repairs done in time for our landing. He's a good learner and is doing well."

"Thank you for telling me that, Tanis. He may be my son, but we have separate paths to take. I'm sorry I wasn't there to help raise him, especially now knowing the environment where he grew up, but I'm glad he met your people. It's the best thing that could have happened to him. Tell him that if he wishes to write to me, not as a relative, but as a friend, I'd be happy to hear from him."

"I'll make sure he knows, Duffy."

"Looks like my time is up, so I'll have to sign off here. Take care, Tanis!"

"Take care of yerself, Duffy. I'm glad yer doing alright."

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

Merlin sat in the pilot seat, Taro was stationed at the Com terminal and Renny was at navigation. As usual every time the *Blue Horizon* approached her homeworld, Samantha was on the bridge in the engineering seat to watch the planet come up to meet them.

"Resetting ship's clocks to Iverson standard time," Taro announced over the intercom. "Local time is oh-eight thirty-seven."

The red fox received a signal in her headset and nodded to herself at the information scrolling across her station screen. "This is the *SS Blue Horizon*," she stated into her microphone, "Planetary Alignment registry number PA1138. We're coming in on standard approach vector for landing at the Aglet Spaceport in Iverson. We're a freighter with a delivery." She listened a second and then answered, "Book Depot." She received the transmitted coordinates on her screen and as she listened, her fingers glided across her panel to transfer the data to Renny's terminal. The cheetah set about programming the information into the main computer as Taro finalized their approach from the Alexandrius Defense Authority.

"ADA has given us the okay for deorbit, Captain," she said over her shoulder.

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

"Transferring navigational trajectory to your panel now," the cheetah answered.

"All hands, all hands," Taro announced on ship-wide speakers, "deorbit has begun. Strap yourselves in. We should be landing in approximately forty minutes."

Merlin moved the guidance shifts forward and the ship nosed down toward the blue world. Renny flicked a switch at his station and the forward windows took on an orange hue as the heat shields activated. There was a resistance to the controls when the atmosphere thickened with their descent. The blue oval-shaped freighter dropped quickly toward the planet's surface through a clear morning sky.

Thirty-five minutes later, members of the crew all over the ship swallowed in unknown unison. They all trusted Pockets' assessment that the repair to the landing gear while in flight by their young mechanic appeared to have been done correctly, but there was still a little apprehension now that the time for landing had come.

Merlin checked his readouts, adjusted his course over the countryside and dropped their speed. A small city appeared on the distant horizon and they could see other ships landing and launching over the metropolitan sky.

"Here we go," Merlin said. The wolf dropped the ship's altitude further, and then decreased its speed so as not to create a sonic boom to frighten to the non-sentient livestock below. The city approached quickly, and soon they were being escorted by a couple of smaller

guidance craft that Taro chatted with over the com channel. He dropped their altitude to twelve hundred feet and slowed to within flight speed limits.

"There's the spaceport," Taro said.

Samantha had been quiet throughout most of their descent, and with their slowed speed she unbuckled her harness and stood up for a better view of the city, which seemed to glow in the morning light.

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

"Aye, Captain," she answered, returning to her seat.

Taro engaged a few switches and then spoke over the ship-wide intercom, "Artificial gravity will be disabled in fifteen seconds. In another five minutes, we will be on the ground with full engine shutdown. All personnel report to the cargo bay in ten minutes for cargo detail."

The ship slowed even more and Renny glanced out the windows. They were moving beneath the spaceport traffic and on approach toward a small beige building. In large green letters across the top of the structure were the words, Book Depot. The *Blue Horizon* stopped forward movement above a paved surface ringed with flashing lights and began dropping slowly.

Merlin hesitated only a moment before he flipped the toggle to lower the landing gear. Renny jumped at the slight *click* of the switch and then grinned foolishly.

"*Landing gear has been extended and locked into place,*" Pockets reported in from the engine room. There was an almost tangible relief in the air from that announcement and then Merlin set his ship gently onto the pad with the slightest of bumps. Max had done his job right.

LIGHT A CANDLE FOR ME

By Ted R. Blasingame

Renny looked at his watch as the last of the transports drove away. With their cargo preloaded into trucks, it had taken less than twenty minutes for Durant to do the necessary electronic documentation with the Book Depot representative and for their supplied drivers to move the vehicles out of the *Blue Horizon's* hold. It was almost nine o'clock in the morning and Merlin had already told everyone that shore leave would last eleven days this time. All of the crew cabins had been inspected by the captain prior to landing and Merlin had given his okay that his ship had been cleaned well enough for them to go after their cargo had been unloaded. Even Pockets' quarters had passed inspection.

Renny and Taro had not spent much time with one another during their past few shore leaves, but this time they had agreed to be together during the extended vacation. They hadn't made specific plans as yet; they wanted to wait until they knew more about the city in which they had landed. Of those on board the *Horizon*, only Samantha and Merlin had been in Iverson before, but Durant had made noises about spending several days *away* from the city on a fishing trip. It seemed he'd already done some research and had some foreknowledge of the area, even if he had never actually been there.

Because of the trucks, there hadn't been much to do so far as unloading cargo went. The only thing they had really had to do was disconnect the stout chains and cables that had secured the trucks to the cargo bay floor during flight. On a normal job, it would take the *Horizon* crew an hour or more to unload the standard octagonal shipping crates into loading trucks or a warehouse, and longer if their client happened to ship their goods in dissimilar wooden crates.

Despite the quickness and ease of this particular unloading, none of them could leave until Merlin gave the word that they could go, and most of the crew was milling around the hold awaiting that permission.

Renny glanced up at a sudden roar and watched a *Seriola*-class heavy freighter take off from a nearby launch pad. It was long, cylindrical, and easily five times the size of the *Blue Horizon*. The glare of its engine triad was brilliant even in the sunshine of the clear autumn morning and it created shadows as if it were a small sun. He squinted as it turned 180° degrees on its horizontal axis, and even at this distance, he could read the large lettering of the ship's name: *Amberjack*. The cheetah's mouth opened in awe at the sheer size of the thing. He remembered hearing about it on a news feed not too long ago. Its sole purpose was to transport settlers to new worlds that the Firebird Fleet might find habitable, in addition to their families, livestock and supplies enough to colonize new lands.

After the *Amberjack* finished its rotation, it angled up and began to rise ponderously, but its sluggishness was deceptive. Renny watched it until the ship reached an altitude above the spaceport traffic, and then it vanished in a sudden burst of speed. Wherever it was headed, the *Amberjack* was fast on its way.

Renny yawned and stretched, but something familiar suddenly caught his eye as he returned his attention to the spaceport. He had not noticed it before, but there was a *Sakura*-class freighter on the landing pad next to them. Its exterior colors of bluish-white with green and gold trim triggered a memory and he suddenly felt the fur along his tail begin to stand out. As he gazed at the wedge-shaped cargo carrier, he could see its main hatch open. A large male panda dressed in a red vest and black breeches stepped out into the morning air and began walking directly toward the open bay doors of the *Blue Horizon*. A thin gold chain around his neck sparkled in the sunlight.

"Uh oh..." he muttered to himself. He glanced over to where Merlin had been talking over the details of their delivery with Durant, and noticed that the wolf was already headed out to meet the approaching visitor. Other members of the crew started forward until Durant cleared his throat loudly and held up a hand for the others to stop. Renny watched suspiciously as Merlin and the panda stopped in front of one another.

Merlin looked up at the taller panda, knowing full well whom he faced. There were many things he wanted to say at that moment, but his sense of diplomacy won out. "What can I do for you?" he asked stiffly as he fiddled with the cuffs of his bomber jacket.

"Captain Sinclair?" the panda asked. Merlin nodded and then the visitor held out a hand in greeting. "My name is JW Chon," he said with a slight bow. "I'm captain of the *Bamboo Wind*."

Merlin took the offered hand hesitantly and squinted in the sunlight. "Hello, Mr. Chon," he replied. "We've met before, though not formally."

"Yes, that's right," the panda said with a nod. "I remember. It was on Earth, in Tucson."

"Should I congratulate you on your promotion, *Captain*?" Merlin asked dryly. Chon recognized the tone in the wolf's voice and nodded again.

"I suppose that depends upon your perspective," he replied. He looked steadily at Merlin for a moment and then said, "The spaceport has a nice, but informal restaurant in the South terminal called *Feather Wings*. I would welcome the chance to talk with you a bit, and things are usually friendlier over a meal. It would be my treat, if you would join me."

Merlin raised his eyebrows. "Uh, sure," he said, taken off guard. "Do you mind if I bring someone with me? I promised her breakfast as soon as we'd landed."

Chon smiled widely. "Of course, bring along your lady friend. I'll pick up her check, too."

Merlin nodded slowly. "Alright, I accept. I have a few more things to take care of before I can leave my ship. Shall we meet you there in half an hour?"

The panda pulled out an antique Terran timepiece from a vest pocket and then nodded. "That will be fine. I'll see you there, Captain." He gave Merlin another small bow and then began walking toward the main spaceport terminal building.

"What was that about?" Renny asked a moment later.

Merlin looked over at his navigator and then scratched the fur beneath his hat. "I'm not sure, Renny," he replied. "I expected a fight, but instead I got an invitation to breakfast with him picking up the tab."

Renny licked his lips. "Breakfast?" he asked. "Can I join you... you know, just to make sure he doesn't jump you or something?"

Merlin turned and looked at him with a canine grin. "Sorry, Vacuum-Lips, but I'm taking Samantha with me."

The cheetah's whiskers drooped in disappointment. "Oh, I see how it is. I'm not good enough..." he whined.

“On the other hand, I suppose if Chon had to pay for *your* meal, his business would go broke and I’d be rid of another competitor.”

Renny put a hand to his chest with a grimace. “Oh, *that* hurt!”

When Merlin and Samantha entered the doors of the restaurant, they saw JW Chon immediately. He was across the room from the entrance, but his red vest stood out like a beacon against his monochromatic fur and he looked up at them with a smile when they approached.

“Please have a seat,” the panda said pleasantly. Samantha exchanged glances with Merlin before she slid into the booth.

“Thank you,” Merlin said after he had settled in next to her. “Captain Chon, this is Samantha.”

“Hello, Captain,” the Border collie said politely.

“Thank you for joining me,” the panda said with a nod of his head. Before he could say more, a waitress stepped up and set menus on the table between them.

“Welcome to *Feather Wings*,” the cougar said with a smile.

“You may order anything you like,” Chon told his companions. “This is my bill.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Samantha replied. She looked over the menu and was tempted to order the most expensive thing on the menu just because he had taken a customer away from them – but at the last moment she decided that she was better than that and ordered something only slightly less expensive. She watched his eyes when she gave her order to the waitress, but the panda didn’t even flinch. He actually smiled, which made her more uncomfortable.

Merlin gave his order to the waitress and then waited while Chon did the same. After she had left their table, the wolf leaned forward and looked up at their host.

“So,” he said warily, “what did you wish to discuss with me?”

Chon nodded his head. “Straight to the point, I see – no small talk to lead into the conversation,” he said as he leaned back in the seat. “Alright, Captain, we can go there. From the tone of our chat out by your ship, I think I can assume you are aware of the prior history of my freighter.”

Merlin nodded. “Formerly known as the *Savannah Hunter*, formerly captained by Armando Jensen,” he admitted. “We ran into him on *Crescentis* and he latched onto us like a leech, begging for a job.”

“Ah, I’m sure he gave you all the gritty details of our business transaction?” Chon said with a mischievous glint in his eyes.

Samantha nodded. “He said you tricked him into signing away his ship and business,” she replied.

The waitress returned with their drinks and then departed again quietly. Chon took a sip of his diet soda and then leaned upon the table. “Jensen has not run his own business in several years,” he said, “but he continued to spend the company profits on things other than the company, often leaving little for needed maintenance on the ship. For the *sake* of the company, I relieved him of the responsibility of overseeing the business. We’ve done much better for it since his departure.”

Merlin heard Samantha draw in a deep breath and could tell from the way her eyebrows drew together that she was about to give Chon her opinion of his business practices. “You’re doing well,” he said quickly before she could begin, “at our expense, I might add.”

Chon blinked twice and looked puzzled. "At *your* expense?" he repeated. "How? I've done nothing against you."

"You stole one of our long-time clients!" Samantha spat.

"Who are you talking about?"

"Brandersen Electronics," Merlin answered tonelessly. "He broke an established contract with us *in flight* to have his merchandise delivered by the *Bamboo Wind* instead."

"Brandersen?" Chon repeated quietly. "Well, *this* is a surprise... You can't blame me for this one. Marcus Brandersen contacted *me* to pick up his delivery for him. He said he'd seen one of our commercials on StellarNet and gave us a specific bid for our services. He said nothing of having a prior contract with you or anyone else."

"You don't know anything about it?" Samantha asked doubtfully.

Chon genuinely looked troubled. "I assure you this is the first I've heard of it," he replied. "I was glad to get his call since I was trying to establish a new clientele base." He looked at Merlin and raised an eyebrow. "If you and I had put in competing bids to Brandersen for his delivery, that would have been standard fare in the freighting business. As you are well aware, there are still parts of the Planetary Alignment still in chaos since the Siilv War. I *am* your competition, and I *will* promote my services as much as I can, but I wouldn't coerce a potential customer into breaking a *contract*. That makes for a bad reputation, even in these hard times."

"I see," the wolf replied after a moment of thought. "Brandersen was free enough to give out your name as the one who had taken our business from us."

"Is that so?" Chon asked with a furrowed brow. "I'll have to return the favor."

"Our lawyer has been in touch with him," Samantha said quietly, "and Brandersen has been fined for breach of legal contract. Between his fine and legal fees, he has incurred some debts over this affair."

"It's a good thing he's already paid me," Chon said with an appreciative nod. The cougar returned with their meals and the trio fell silent as the woman set out their dishes and then once again left without a word.

"What about your crew?" Merlin asked after a moment. "I was aware that you often had to *shanghai* your employees, as the saying goes."

Chon looked amused. "You were aware of that, eh?" he asked with a chuckle. "Jensen himself didn't even know that, although it was a necessity with him as captain. The *Savannah Hunter* had such a lackluster reputation with Jensen in command that we *never* had any applicants for vacant positions. Things have changed dramatically since his departure."

"You have a willing crew that is employed under contract?" Samantha asked between bites of her food.

"I do now," the panda replied. "That was part of the changes I made to the business. I wanted to be distanced from the *Savannah Hunter's* reputation in the cargo-moving community, which is one of the reasons I licensed the ship under a new name and registry. I gave leave of my crew for those who wished to return home, and initiated contracts for those hired to replace them. I still have a third of my old crew on board. Once they knew of Jensen's removal and my intention to provide contracts with paid benefits for any who would stay, there were several who were glad to sign up to stay."

Merlin nodded appreciatively as he took a lap of his coffee. If everything the panda had told them was true, his respect for this competitor rose significantly. Even if Chon *had* run a difficult ship under Armando's captaincy, he seemed determined to make up for it with his people.

"Congratulations on your business," he said at last. "Is this what you wished to discuss with me?"

"That's a good part of it," Chon replied. "I realize I didn't have to give you any kind of explanation on what I do with my own business, but I knew there was a lot of bad blood between you and Jensen. When I saw your ship land next to mine, I wanted to make it clear to you that he was no longer in the picture. I'm not asking you to become my partner or anything like that. We're both in this business for the same reasons and competition is good for the economy. If we're going to be rivals, at least we can do it professionally."

Merlin glanced over at Samantha and she gave him a small nod. He wiped his fingers on his cloth napkin and extended a hand toward the panda with a smile. "Unlike your predecessor, you seem to have a good head on your shoulders, Captain Chon," he said as they shook hands. "On behalf of the *Blue Horizon*, it will be good competing with you."

Durant touched a screen on his slateboard and showed it to Lorelei. The white rabbit was dressed in a vibrantly-colored tie-dyed tee-shirt decorated with numerous necklaces of crystals and beads, sandals and a pair of cutoff jeans. "Your pay was deposited to your account last night," he told her, "but try not to spend it all at once. We'll be on leave here longer than usual this time."

"Thankies, Durant," the rabbit said to him with a big grin. "I already have big plans for my time off." She waved a colorful pamphlet in his face and unfolded it with glee. "There's a Mystical Hot Spring not too far from here that's just *oozing* in therapeutic mud, and the air is soaking with natural incense." The doe grinned widely at a particular photo on the reverse side of the pamphlet and added, "Ooh, I can't wait for a full body massage by *this* buck - he's gorgeous!"

Durant cleared his throat and pushed the pamphlet out of his face. "That's nice, Lori. Enjoy yourself."

"I will, hon. See ya!" The rabbit put on a pair of pink plastic sunglasses over her eyes with the elastic strap around her head, and then slung the strap of an orange bag over her shoulder. She began skipping out toward the terminal building, softly humming to herself.

Samantha stepped up to the grizzly, leaned back against his arm, and batted her eyelashes at him. "Ooh, I *can't wait* for a full body massage, Durant!" she mimicked the rabbit's voice in sing-song when their cook had gone. Durant laughed and tapped at her name on his slateboard.

"You do that very well, Samantha," he chuckled as he showed the screen to her.

"Oh, please!" she said in mock indignation. "So, what are you going to do on *your* time off?"

"I'm going to rent a cabin in the woods in the Musty Mountains to the south of here," he replied as he pulled up the last voucher for Tanis. "I want to spend some time alone, away from ships, away from cities, away from people—"

"Away from medical attention..." Tanis interjected with a frown.

Durant ignored him and continued. "I want to relax, do some fishing and roam around under the trees with my toes in the dirt."

"Just don't run around as a bare bear," Samantha said with a chuckle. "Someone might mistake you for wildlife and make a rug out of you for their own cabin!"

Durant grinned at her. "I guess I can mark naturalism off my list, then," he said with a wink.

Tanis crossed his arms and looked up at the grizzly. "Ya've been dodging my requests to give ya a physical for a long time, Durant," he said. "At least let me check ya out before ya head off into the wilderness, just to be sure."

The accountant shook his head. "There's no need for that, Tanis," he assured him. "All I need is rest and relaxation away from the stress of our business, letting let my mind wander and unwind. I'll be okay. After that nasty virus, I need *clean* mountain air in my lungs."

"I'm not convinced," the desert fox replied.

"Well, I'm not taking you with me, if that's what you're wanting," Durant said with a shrug of his shoulders.

"What I'm *wanting*," Tanis said with a frown, "is just for ya to let me look ya over before ya leave. Nothing more. A few minutes are all I will need."

Durant shook his head. "Sorry, I don't have the time. I already have a cab on the way to take me to the aircar rental agency, and then I'll be on my way after I pick up a few supplies. Don't worry about me - I'll be fine."

Tanis' frown deepened, if that were possible. "I need to convince Merlin that an annual physical for all crew members should be made *mandatory*, my friend."

A horn honked outside the cargo bay's main hatch and Durant waved toward the cabbie that pulled up. "Time to go," he said with a smile. Samantha reached up to give him a warm hug and then looked up into his brown eyes.

"You take care of yourself, big guy," she said, "and enjoy your rest."

"I intend to," the grizzly replied. He reached out toward Tanis, but the fox hesitated a moment before taking the offered hand.

"Be very careful," the medic said. "Ya won't be close to help if something happens to ya out there."

"I will, Tanis," Durant told him. The cab honked again and the bear moved toward the bay door. He picked up his duffel bag near the door and carried it to the cab. Tanis and Samantha watched him until the vehicle drove away, and then the Border collie turned toward her companion.

"Why are you so adamant about giving him a physical?" she asked.

"Because he's hiding something from me," Tanis replied with the shake of his head. "There's something wrong with him, but I can't pinpoint what it is without an examination."

"He just got over that virus, Tanis. Didn't you give him an examination then?"

"No," Tanis answered as they started walking back toward the main lift. "He wouldn't let me do more than take his temperature and a small blood sample, neither of which showed me anything more than the virus. I need different tests. I don't have a suspicion of *what* is wrong with him - it's only a gut feeling that something's not right. I've had this feeling for months now, not just since the shipwide sickness."

Samantha glanced back toward the bay doors as they entered the lift and lightly chewed on her bottom lip. "I hope you're wrong, Tanis," she said with a worried voice. "I *really* hope you are wrong."

The door to Renny's quarters was open and Taro walked in through the opening with her slateboard in one hand. "Renny?" she ventured when she didn't see him.

"I'm in the closet," a muffled voice from the back room called out. The vixen made her way around the furniture to the back room and then poked her head inside the closet.

"What are you doing?" she asked with a chuckle when she saw only his feet and swishing tail sticking out from under hanging garments.

"I'm trying to find my duffel bag," Renny's voice replied. "It has all of my dress slacks in it. If you and I are going to be hitting the nightclubs and going to stage plays while we're in Iverson, I want to look better than my usual trousers and a tank-top."

"I don't think I've ever seen you dressed up before," Taro said with a vulpine grin. "This ought to be good."

"Found 'em!" Renny backed out of the closet and then stood up with a navy blue duffel bag that was partially full. He took it to his bed and then dumped out several wadded garments. "I might need to iron them first," he muttered when Taro picked up a pair of black slacks.

"Might?" she asked him with a *tsk*. "Honey, you aren't going *anywhere* with me in these things unless they've been thoroughly cleaned and ironed."

"That's what I meant," the cheetah replied with a smile. Taro gave him a dubious look and just shook her head. "I'm headed to the laundry room now," Renny said. He picked up the garments and Taro followed him out of the cabin toward the appropriate room on the other side of the ship from his quarters.

"I heard Pockets and Max talking about getting air tickets to Algegrath," Renny said as they walked. "What's there?"

"That's where the *Hidalgo Sun* is landing to pick up their mail and a shipment bound for Tanthe," the vixen replied. "Patch and Pockets planned to have a little reunion while they're there and Max just wanted to go along."

"Where Pockets goes, Max will follow." Renny remarked. "I just hope the little filch doesn't teach Max how to pick locks, too."

"Agreed. Now, let's get your slacks in proper order," Taro said when they reached the laundry room. She opened the door and suddenly threw up her hands. "Yech!" she exclaimed. A pungent odor escaped the small room and Renny's eyes began to water.

"I *wondered* how Pockets was able to get his cabin cleaned so fast for Merlin's inspection," the cheetah gasped and backed away from the door. Inside were tubs of dirty clothing that could belong to no one but their chief engineer. Apparently all the garments and bedding that had been soiled during his sickness were just dumped inside the laundry room.

"Merlin never inspected *this* room," Taro growled, "or Pockets would have been denied shore leave for three voyages!" She put a hand over her nose and reached inside the door to lift up the cover to a protected switch. She punched two buttons in a series beneath it and a small pump began venting the room's air through a duct leading out to the exterior of the ship.

"Come on," Taro said with a frown. "We'll just pack your slacks and take them with us. The hotel staff will get them cleaned and ironed for you."

"Sounds like a good idea," Renny grumbled as he followed the vixen back to his cabin. They walked a few steps in silence and then Renny asked, "What's everyone else got planned for our stay?"

"Durant's gone up to the mountains to get away from it all," Taro replied, "and Lori's gone to some New Age nature resort to soak in a mud pit. Pockets and Max, you know about... Merlin wanted to go camping, but Samantha wouldn't hear of it, so they're going shopping instead."

"Sounds like loads of fun," Renny remarked dryly. "What about Tanis?"

"He said he didn't have any plans, but was just going to wander around town and take it as it comes," Taro replied. "Perhaps he'll meet a nice young lady to entertain."

"Yeah," Renny mused, "with all that's happened with his homeworld, he needs something to keep his mind off of it. I'd invite him along with us, but he doesn't want to have much to do with me lately."

Taro turned to look at him. "You'd invite him along?" she repeated with a grin. "I didn't know you were into threesomes."

Renny felt his skin flush beneath his fur. "I'm not!" he said quickly. "I didn't mean that... I meant he could visit some of the sights with us!"

Taro laughed and winked at him. "Sure.... Okay, I'll ask him if he wants to go along. If he does, great. If not, at least we offered."

Merlin walked onto the bridge of the *Blue Horizon* and tapped on the light. Although they were now to be docked for over a week, he wanted to check things over a little before he would lock things down for the duration. Most of the crew had already gone by the time he and Samantha got back from their breakfast with Chon, though the last of them would be out soon.

He moved first to the engineering station to power down all but the security systems, and noticed a flashing red light when he was near the Com panel. He thumbed the switch beside the light and played back a stored message.

"Merlin! This is Riki - Captain Kegawa needs you to contact us as soon as you get this. We've had an explosion in the cargo bay! We're at the spaceport in Algegrath on landing pad seventy-one."

"That's terrible!" said Renny. Merlin looked up at Taro and Renny standing in the doorway. He gave them a frown as he sat in the chair before the station and punched up the *Hidalgo Sun's* calling code. It only took a moment for the signal to relay along the planet's orbital communication satellites to the other side of the world.

"This is the Hidalgo Sun," the lemur's voice said from the Com speakers. *"I'm sorry, but you've caught us at a bad time..."*

"Riki," Merlin said quickly, "this is Sinclair."

"Merlin! Thank goodness you called. It's terrible - something blew up in the -"

"Get Rezo on the line, please."

"Right away, sir!"

There was a pause and Merlin looked up at his first officer. "Do you think it's another attack, or a system malfunction?" Taro asked him.

"I hope we're about to find out," the wolf replied.

"Boss!" Rezo's voice rang out suddenly.

"What happened? Give me all the details."

"About an hour ago, we were loading crates into the cargo bay when Littlefeather accidentally knocked one box into another with the forklift as he went up the ramp into the ship. The crate fell off the lift and something inside the container exploded." They could hear the red panda swallow as he tried not to talk too quickly. "The explosion blew away half of the cargo bay door and damaged the main airlock. Mark was behind the glassteel windshield on the lift or he might have been killed. He and the forklift were blown halfway across the tarmac. He has a broken arm and some burns to both legs, but it could have been a lot worse."

"Anyone else hurt?"

"There are a few bumps and bruises from blown debris, but otherwise everybody else is fine, although shaken. Carmen and Tsarina went with Littlefeather in an ambulance to the local hospital about twenty minutes ago. Several fires inside the cargo bay ignited, but the fire suppressant system extinguished them before anything got out of control. The spaceport fire department is still examining everything to make sure nothing else is smoldering. I was talking with the police just now when you called and I really should get back down there."

"Okay, put somebody else on the line so I can get more details."

"Right... here's Riki again."

"I'm here, Merlin," the lemur's voice said.

"Riki, I want you to make sure everyone on your crew is issued a sidearm," the lupine captain said gravely. "Since all you are supposed to be hauling this time is textiles, there shouldn't be anything volatile within your cargo. This sounds like another attack on the company. There may be more forthcoming, so I want everyone to be on alert."

"That scares me," Riki replied. "There are some of us I'm sure have never used a gun before... I think those will probably be more of a danger carrying one than any other outside source."

"Nevertheless, I want it done. If you don't have any firearms, I'm authorizing you to purchase enough handguns for the crew – stunners at least."

"Yes sir, I'll make sure the word gets around."

Merlin looked over at Renny and knew the cheetah's concerned expression mirrored his own. "What else can you tell me?" he asked.

"The police have already been looking through the debris and found what they believe is a timer from the bomb."

"Wow, they work fast!" Renny replied.

"Their bomb squad moved in quickly," Riki agreed. "They were sifting through the debris within minutes of getting here. Apparently this is commonplace in spaceports these days and they are stationed nearby. They are currently going through the remaining crates plus the mail containers to make sure there aren't any others."

"What condition is the ship in?" Taro asked.

"As Captain Kegawa mentioned, our main airlock and most of the cargo bay door is in ruin. The blast blew out the windows of nearby buildings, and started a number of fires both inside and outside of the ship. The overhead crane is a wreck and the door to elevator lift is out of operation, making it difficult to get to the upper levels. Patch says he and Paxton can do most of the repairs inside the ship themselves, but until the airlock and bay door is replaced, we won't be launching anytime soon. Pax is currently examining the outside structure of the ship around the hold. The initial report he gave the captain a few minutes ago says that it appears to be intact. It could have been a lot worse if it had exploded after we'd taken off..."

"Mark's carelessness might have actually spared the ship," Taro remarked.

"What about the engines?" Renny asked.

"The blast never made it inside as far as the engine room," Riki replied. "The window in the door panel was blown out from the concussion, but the explosion didn't make it further. Patch says the engines are okay."

*"Riki," Merlin said after a moment of thought, "Pockets and Max are already en route to Algegrath. They were headed to your location to visit with Patch, but inform them that their shore leave has been cancelled. Their orders are to help Patch and Paxton make what repairs they can as quickly as possible. As for everyone else on the *Hidalgo Sun* who is able – their orders are to give the mechanics as much assistance as necessary. The rest of my crew has scattered on extended leave, so I can't send anyone else but them."*

"I understand, sir."

"Have Jonesy contact Interstellar Insurance to get the local adjuster over to take a look at things before the repairs start. This needs to be done pronto."

"I'll get your orders to the captain as soon as possible."

"One more thing," Merlin said. "I want you to hire local security guards to watch the ship around the clock until such time as the *Hidalgo Sun* can take off again. The business funds will pay their fees."

"Right away."

"I'm going to carry a DC with me while I'm away from the *Horizon*," Merlin added as he took one of the digital communication units from a drawer under the Com station. He examined its label and said, "I'll be on frequency channel 707 and will await any report your people might have for me. I'll stay out of your way, but if you need me to come out there, don't hesitate to call."

"Aye, sir," the lemur replied.

"Stay on your toes," Merlin said at last.

"Goodbye, sir," Riki answered. The signal cut off and then the wolf looked back up at Taro and Renny.

"Is our leave canceled, too?" the navigator asked.

"No," Merlin replied with the shake of his head. "There's no need for that, but I would caution you to be careful while you're out and about. If it's a terrorist attack against us as I suspect, our unknown enemy may know more about our delivery schedule and be aware of the location of the *Blue Horizon* in addition to the *Hidalgo Sun*. It might be a good idea if I hire guards to watch the *Horizon*, too. The ship sitting here alone during an extended stay would be too easy to sabotage."

"This is going to make for a nervous vacation," Taro mused, "if I have to watch my back everywhere I go."

"Well, you two will have to watch each other's back," Merlin replied with a wry smile, "as I doubt you'll be inseparable." He thought for a moment and then frowned again. "I would recommend the buddy-system for everyone so no one is caught alone anywhere, but unfortunately everyone else has already scattered to the four winds."

"We're going to ask Tanis if he wants to tag along with us," Taro said, "so he won't have to watch himself alone."

"You've already missed him," Merlin replied. "He left a half hour ago to find a travel agent to see what he could get into during his time off. He left me the address of the hotel where he's going to be staying, however."

"He should have gone with Lori," Renny said. "He might have had to put up with her eccentricities, but at least he wouldn't have been alone."

The wolf snickered. "I don't think he would have felt safe going to some of the places she intended to go," he said with a grin. "Lori's a great cook, but he knows that she's into some things the rest of us find odd."

"What about you and Samantha?" Taro asked. "You two have anything special planned?"

"Oh, I thought I'd drag him to all the intimate apparel shops and see if I could find something kinky that would fit him," Samantha said with a laugh from the doorway.

"Not on your life!" the wolf replied. He gave a lopsided smile to Renny and said, "She's been *threatening* me with non-stop shopping since we landed."

"I'd vote for camping, myself," the cheetah replied.

"You would," Samantha retorted, "although I'm sure you'd be just as happy playing with a ball of yarn."

"At least that would be more entertaining than a rawhide chew toy," Renny shot back with a grin. "Where's your flea collar?"

"It's packed away in the suitcase, cry-kitty." Samantha whacked the navigator on the arm with a wink. "So, what's everyone gathered in here for?" she asked. "Are you conspiring now that everyone else has gone?"

The levity in the room disappeared at once. "There's been an attack on the *Hidalgo Sun*," Taro said somberly.

"Huh?" asked the surprised Border collie. "What happened?"

Merlin, Taro and Renny took turns filling her in on the situation. After tense moments, she sat down in the center seat of the bridge, her eyes moist. "That's just awful," she said in a choked voice. "Merlin?"

The wolf shook his head slowly. "Rezo's people will start making repairs as soon as they can, but I need to call the SPF about this and inform the home office before we take off." He looked up at Taro and Renny and added, "There's no reason for you to stick around if you want to leave."

Taro reached into the Com drawer and pulled out another of the DCs. "We'll be on channel frequency 772 if anything more comes up."

"Right."

Taro exchanged glances with Samantha before she and Renny left the bridge. When Sam looked back at Merlin, he looked worried as he held up his DC. "I wish I'd had Durant take one of these with him up into the mountains," he said quietly. "We don't have any other way to inform him about the situation."

"I know," Samantha replied as she got up and moved to the wolf's side. She brushed her fingers through his head fur and said, "Durant's been looking his age lately. Maybe he'll have the chance to actually relax up there in the woods if he *doesn't* know about this."

"Possibly," Merlin remarked, "but you know we'll catch fire from him for not trying to reach him when he finally finds out about it."

"What's that?" Renny asked an hour later. He and Taro had stopped in a small street-side curio shop to have a look around. The vixen had picked up a small figurine from a shelf and was examining a label affixed to its underside.

Taro smiled and held up the ceramic figure in the palm of one hand. It was a red fox much like herself, but of the non-sentient variety imported from Earth ages ago that was common on some of the Planetary Alignment worlds. It was about the size of her hand and was sitting on its haunches with its head tilted in curiosity.

"Heh... that's cute," Renny said with a smile of his own.

"You like it?" Taro asked.

"Actually, yes," the cheetah replied genuinely. "Its facial markings are similar to yours."

"That's what drew me to it," Taro said. "If I were a wild fox, this might be what I would have looked like."

"You *are* a wild fox," Renny quipped, tweaking the base of her tail. Taro grinned and snapped her jaws playfully at him. "Well, that settles it," he said while withdrawing his credicard. "I shall have to have it."

"Uh-uh," Taro giggled as she clutched the figurine to her chest. "I'll buy it for you as a gift."

"A gift?"

"Yes, Renny, a gift. Something for you to remember me by if we ever get separated again. The purpose of a souvenir is to *remember*."

"In that case," the navigator replied, "I need to find one of a wild cheetah for you in return."

Taro chuckled as her friend began looking through the various figurines on the shelf. After a moment, he picked up another fox and shook his head. "Now, this is odd..." he said quietly. He held it up near his face and examined it closely.

"What's odd? Find another one that looks like me?"

"No..." Renny replied slowly. "*This* one looks just like my best friend from flight school!"

"Your best friend was a fox?" Taro asked.

"Yeah. Jerry wasn't Hestran, but he did look a bit like this little guy in the face."

Taro took a close look at the figurine Renny held and then looked up at him with a wink. "If *this* guy reminded you of him, your friend Jerry must have been quite nice on the eyes."

Renny chuckled. "Yeah, well, he *was* quite the ladies' magnet. I used to call him the *Foxenator* just to get a rise out of him, but he was basically a good guy. He was studying to be a doctor, but wanted a pilot's license too. He was more passionate about flying than anyone else in the school at the time and the women thought Jerry Somner becoming a doctor was the greatest thing since baked Jinkles."

"What happened to him?"

"He went on to be a doctor like he wanted," Renny replied as he set the figurine back on the shelf, "but wound up in a clinic in a backwater town on Pomen. The last time I heard from him, he was looking for an opportunity to leave the place. I don't think a small town office suited him very much. He likes flying too much to be stationary. As far as I know, he's still there as a general practitioner."

"Well, I'm going to take my counterpart to the register and have your gift wrapped," Taro said as she began to walk back up the aisle.

"Wait!" Renny said in sudden panic. "I still have to find your cheetah!"

Tanis looked at his reflection in the mirror and sighed. He didn't really feel like going out on the town, but he was reluctant to just stay in his hotel room and mope around. He *knew* he hadn't been very good company lately and knew he had to do something to break himself out of his depression, but it seemed like every time he turned around there was a news broadcast or newspaper article about what happened to Nalirra.

The Roppa War was over. Sed Amittias had been executed by the Tanatans and the Emperor's daughter returned unharmed. Nalirra was then claimed by Oe'Tanata as occupied territory, and as the *de facto* government, withdrew its membership from the PA with a warning for all outsiders to stay away from the Roppa star system. Unauthorized vessels entering the system were destroyed without preamble and all other communications on or off the planet were jammed.

In order to keep the peace, the Planetary Alignment Legislature had voted to honor the demands of Oe'Tanata. Aid had been offered to Nalirra as a PA ally repeatedly before the downfall, but since Amittias had continued to refuse help, the Legislature was now in no frame

to do anything more for the occupied planet. It had been summarily written off as foreign territory.

The desert fox often wondered *why* the fall of his homeworld upset him so much. He'd been happy to leave his birthplace - and his estranged family - far behind and was always hesitant to go back if the planet ever came up on the *Blue Horizon's* delivery schedule. He'd held no interest in ever returning to Nalirra, but now that the option was no longer open to him, he felt a deep regret that had been eating away at him. As much as he had wanted to be away from Nalirra, he *should* try to put it out of his mind and feel relieved that he would never *have* to return... but it was so very hard.

Tanis sighed again to himself and felt his stomach growl. He had not eaten all day, and now that it was early in the evening, he was famished. He had originally considered just having something delivered to his room, but he was tired of looking at the televid and wanted to get out for some fresh air.

He nodded to himself and knew getting out was the right choice. He dressed in casual dark pants and boots, with a loose, white short-sleeved shirt that was open midway to his stomach to allow his white ruff free. He reached back to adjust the tail flap at the back of his pants and then picked up a thin tan jacket in case the evening air was cool.

Tanis left the hotel room quickly and then shared the elevator to the first floor with a pair of female canines who studied him coyly behind half-lidded eyes. The desert fox might have taken up to flirting with them had he been in a better mood, but he tried to ignore them now.

When he reached the street, he wondered which way to go to find a decent restaurant. He almost hailed a cab, but at the last moment, he decided he would be a little adventurous and see what he could find on his own. He turned right merely at random and began walking along the sidewalk, his jacket draped over one arm and his hands in his pockets. There were many lights along this particular avenue and he could hear live music up ahead.

When he had walked two blocks, he discovered the source of the music. A tree-filled town square was teeming with crowds in what looked to be a celebration of some kind. A local band played on a raised pedestal and people of all species were dancing together in time with the lively beat in a merry atmosphere. Food and drinks were being passed around freely and there was activity everywhere. Tanis smiled in spite of himself when he saw a balcony above lined with dancing females in various stages of undress; some were close to being unclad altogether, preferring to let the night air flow all through their fur.

The desert fox had seen his days of carousing in the past, but he had never experienced a gathering like this before. The people who danced together didn't seem to have specific partners, but bumped and ground their hips, entwining their tails together with whoever was near them. He wondered what the celebration was for, but the beat of the music in his ears and the scents that reached his nose made his head swim. A banner loosely hanging from the side of a building displayed the words "*Loth'lan Ree*" in bold Standard red letters, but he had no idea what it meant.

He moved closer to the crowd to see if he might join in on the fun and suddenly found himself surrounded by six of the cutest young females he had seen in a long while. They were all of different species and they seemed to have zeroed in on the new male in their midst.

Suddenly eager to take part in this distraction, Tanis allowed himself to dance with them and felt a strong need to simply enjoy himself. Within moments, all previous thoughts of Nalirra were gone from his mind.

"The Robin's Red Breast?" Taro said with a grin as she looked at her feline companion. "Is this a night club or a love hotel?" she asked.

Renny gave her a smirk. "The hotel directory just called it a local bar. It didn't say anything about the entertainment."

"Ah," said the vixen. "Feeling like a last drink before we head back to the room?"

"Yeah," Renny replied. "Just something light. I know you don't normally indulge much in alcohol, but perhaps a little something to warm the blood?" He waggled his eyebrows and she laughed in spite of herself. They had spent the evening at a nice dinner and then had gone to a theater to see a local stage play. They had left the theatre and decided to walk around in the night air on their way back to their hotel. Taro and Renny had not had many opportunities to just get out and enjoy time together on the town and both of them had a good time that evening.

Renny pushed the door open and allowed his companion to enter first. As soon as the panels parted, they could hear live music and instantly saw a crowd of people out on the dance floor. It was moderately crowded and the air was smoky, but after a quick look around, the only seats available seemed to be up at the bar. Taro looked up at a male red fox that stood guard beside the doorway and gave him brief smile before she followed Renny across the room.

There was plenty of light to see by, but dark wood paneling on the walls and ceiling gave the room a shadowy feel. As they took two empty stools between a pair of dark-furred felines, Renny read the placard of the band and briefly snickered at the notion that none of the five musicians resembled the construction workers the name suggested.

Taro gave the bartender their drink order and then turned back to Renny. He had the fox figurine out on the bar and was stroking its back with a finger. "You really like that thing, don't you?" she asked with a smile. "You were petting it all through dinner."

"Yeah," the cheetah replied. "It's a new treasure." Their drinks were brought to them and the couple fell silent for a few moments while they listened to the music and watched the dancing. Both of them felt tempted to join the crowd.

"Why not?" Taro said suddenly as if reading his mind. Renny grinned at her and held out his hand in invitation as he pocketed the ceramic fox.

A little later, they returned to their stools when the band announced they were taking a short break. When they reached the bar, Renny took the figurine out of his pocket and set it back on the counter next to his glass.

"Where are you going?" he asked when Taro stood up.

"I'm going to take a little jaunt to the powder room," she replied with a wink. "I need to tinkle."

"I'll be right here with my girlfriend," Renny said as he lovingly stroked the figurine. Taro laughed and then skirted around the edge of the dance floor toward the public water closet.

Renny sat on his bar stool for several moments in silence until the band got up to play again. Only two of the musicians had returned to jam in a duet of energetic chords, but couples all over the room jumped back out onto the dance floor as if the whole group were playing again.

For several moments, Renny watched the dancers and caught the eye of a sultry calico dancing erotically. She made some rather suggestive moves in his direction and Renny swallowed in spite of himself. Distracted, he didn't notice the two felines who had been at the bar all evening get up from their stools and flank him.

In the midst of the loud music and dancing in the place, only the calico saw one of the jaguars suddenly put a fist into Renny's stomach. The cheetah was taken completely off guard and the second jaguar brought a knee up into his face when he doubled over. Renny dropped without making a sound and the dark pair grabbed his limp arms. They dragged him to the side of the room past dancers who paid them no attention and then disappeared into a side hallway. The calico closed her eyes and continued dancing as if she hadn't seen a thing. The jaguars moved purposely to the back exit and pulled Renny out into a dingy alley behind the establishment.

They dropped him to the newspaper-strewn ground and then one of the assailants kicked the cheetah in the side with the toe of his boot just as he was regaining his breath. Renny chirped in sudden pain and the other cat bent over to slam a fist into his temple.

Unable to do anything to defend himself, they began to beat and kick him vigorously; Renny had no strength in him to fight back and could do nothing more than lie there as he was beaten. He tried to protect his middle by curling up, but one of the attackers stomped on his ankle for his trouble. Renny yelped and tried to say something, but he was kicked again.

"All right, Zuberi, that's enough," one of the ebony cats said in a raspy voice. "Do it."

The other jaguar reached into an inner pocket of his jacket and pulled out an old revolver. He aimed down at the cheetah and rapidly fired three shots into him.

Without a look back at their victim, the dark cats split up and took off in opposite directions along the alley. A moment later, they were gone and Renny's body convulsed a few times between several garbage cans before growing still in the night air.

Taro stepped out of the ladies' room and glanced across the nightclub through the smoky haze and the throng of bodies dancing to the music of the live band. *Mountain Movers, Inc.* was only a local group, but they were skilled players and the vixen felt they could have held their own professionally were they to try. As it was, she had enjoyed the music and had danced a little with Renny out on the floor earlier. The cheetah had little experience with dancing, but he had done well enough to elicit advances by other ladies in the place.

She swished her tail in time with the music as she made her way across the nightclub toward the bar where she and Renny had been nursing their drinks. When she got there, her partner's barstool was unoccupied. Taro grinned to herself, sure the cheetah was out on the dance floor again, but when she turned to search the crowd for him, something at her feet caught her eye. She knelt down next to the stool next to her and picked up the ceramic fox figurine she had given him. Its tail was broken off, as well as the tip of the nose and one ear.

It was unlike Renny to knock something like that to the floor and leave it where it lay, especially after making such a fuss over how much he had liked it. The vixen suddenly became uneasy and began searching the crowd. When she couldn't locate him, she frowned and turned back toward the bar. She wondered if he had gone to the men's room and decided to wait for him. She held the trinket tightly in one hand and continued to look for him. After several minutes, there was still no sign of the cheetah, so she turned back to the bar.

The barkeep, a thin opossum in a white apron lustfully gaped at a nearby pair of scantily-clad young females gyrating to the music against their boyfriends. Taro reached out and tugged gently on his sleeve. The man looked annoyed, but nodded to her.

"Need a refill?" he asked with a gesture toward the empty glass before her.

"Where's my friend?" she asked him loudly. She practically had to shout to be heard over the music.

The opossum shrugged his shoulders and returned his attention to the dancers. Taro snorted and reached out again. She snared his apron and pulled him up against the counter. He looked up into her eyes wildly and struggled to get free.

"Lemme go, lady!" he squealed as he tried to pry her fingers from his garment. Her grip remained solid and she pulled him up off the floor across the bar so that he was eye to eye with her.

"Where is my friend?" she asked again in a menacing tone.

"He - he left!" the marsupial said quickly with a hard swallow.

"Left?"

"Yeah... he went out the back with two black cats!" he squeaked as he gestured to the exit at one side of the room.

The vixen released the bartender and he fell back onto his tail behind the bar. Taro pushed her way through the edge of the crowd toward the back exit. She reached the door amidst unkind jeers at her for brashly shoving through them, and then she darted into a small darkened hallway that serviced an office, storage rooms and the back door.

The exit was partially ajar and she swung it open quickly. She found herself in a narrow, garbage-strewn alley that stunk badly. She looked both ways along its length, but saw no one in the darkness. A single, low-powered bulb illuminated a small area near the door that gently closed behind her and blocked out the inside noise of the establishment. Taro was undecided which direction to take, but then she heard a raspy sound to her right. She turned toward a loose pile of newspapers behind some trash cans and recognized an out-flung yellow arm with a familiar black spotted pattern amongst them.

"Renny!" She scattered the garbage cans and moved quickly to kneel down next to him. She brushed aside the papers that partially covered him and suddenly drew in a breath of shock at the amount of blood that covered him and the papers around him.

"Oh my God, NO!" she choked as she reached for the vein in his neck. There was a pulse, but it was weak and his breathing was labored. It was hard to tell exactly *where* or *how* he was hurt from the amount of blood that covered him, but she had to risk moving him. He was practically holding hands with Death.

Taro stumbled as she picked Renny up from the ground of the filthy alley, though not from his weight, but from the emotional turmoil inside. Although his feline body had always been limber, he was now completely limp in her arms. Her white blouse soaked up the blood flowing freely from the cheetah's wounds when she held him close to her bosom.

"Renny!" she cried in a choked voice as she touched her nose to his. "Don't you *dare* die on me!"

There was no response from the navigator other than labored breathing, and Taro swallowed the bile that rose up in her throat. She turned with him toward the back door of the nightclub. She pushed her burden through the door and then weaved her way through the narrow hallway filled with empty liquor boxes. The din of music became louder through the corridor and she moved through it into a hazy, smoke-filled room. Couples continued to dance in time with the music in the dim light until a petite Cocker Spaniel saw the bloody body in the vixen's arms. She screamed and backed away into the crowd. Within a moment, the band stopped playing and others began talking amongst themselves in murmurs. Taro ignored them all and took Renny straight across the dance floor to the bar.

"Somebody call an ambulance!" she yelled above the crowd. Taro set her friend and lover on the floor beside the bar stools and then quickly whipped off her blouse. She tore it into sections, oblivious to the stares at her black lace bra, and tried to staunch his wounds with the fabric. The gathered crowd didn't do a thing to help her, but merely gawked at the injured cheetah and the almost-topless vixen.

A pot-bellied pig in a white shirt and red suspenders came out of the back with the bartender and rushed up to her. He pulled a thick cigar from his lips and shouted, "Whattaya think yer doin'? Get 'im out of 'ere! E's bleedin' all over my place!"

"Can't you see he's dying?" Taro exclaimed. "We've got to help him!"

The manager snorted and gestured wildly with both hands. "We see fatal brawls alla time, lady," he said hotly. "Get that corpse outside - you can wait for the ambulance out dere!"

Taro was getting frantic. Renny was too badly hurt for her meager treatment to stop his bleeding, and she fought back the tears welling up in her eyes. "Give me some *help*, somebody!" she shouted. Then she glared at the manager and the bartender, too. "I don't want to move him any more until the ambulance arrives. We're staying right here!"

The pig's brow wrinkled and his eyes narrowed. He raised his left hand and made a motion to someone across the room. Four security guards emerged from the crowd and formed a semi-circle around Taro and Renny. Taro looked up as one of them stepped forward and put a hand on her shoulder. She was about to break the male fox's wrist for his trouble, but felt his grip tighten with enough force that she couldn't move it easily. Not all foxes in the PA were from Hestra - in fact, they were a rarity since few Hestrans actually leave their homeworld. However, from the immobile grip upon her arm, Taro knew instantly that this fellow had the same dense musculature that she had.

"Let's make it nice and easy to the front curb, missy," the bouncer said in a low, but sympathetic voice. "The ambulance is already on its way."

Knowing there would be no further argument, Taro gently gathered up Renny in her arms and followed the fox through the parting crowd. She looked down at the cheetah and could see the pale palms of his hands getting whiter from blood loss. Her heart sank with the realization that Renny would probably never make it and the tears came freely this time. If only they had known the sequence of events over the past three days, Merlin might not have landed in Iverson at all. First the *Hidalgo Sun*, and now Renny. How many more tears might have to be shed before they were able to leave Alexandria?

Tanis snickered when the young Spaniel playfully nipped at one of his large ears. He looked up at her and pulled her down to the ground beside him. He smiled at her and then rolled her onto her back on the soft grass in the park so that she looked up at him. There were other couples lying in the grass all over the park and sounds of the celebration from the nearby crowd continued on.

"Ya still have not told me what this all festivity is about," he told her with a quick lick aside her muzzle. "Whatever it is, I like it."

The woman chuckled as she put her arms around his neck and shoulders. "It's a celebration of Life, my nameless friend," she replied with a smile. "Loth'lan Ree was the patron of *The Kiss*."

"Well, now..." Tanis said in a quiet voice, "I'm game to take part in local tradition, but my hotel room is about a block away, if ya don't mind."

The Spaniel laughed. "Too shy to play in public?" she teased. "Okay, we can disappear to your room for a while. My friends won't be looking for me anytime soon anyway."

Tanis grinned at her lithe form as he helped her to her feet. She grasped his arm and pulled him along as she began running in the direction of the only hotels on the street. The desert fox laughed aloud at her anticipation and they ran up the street together.

Moments later, they were in the lift heading up to his room, but they had already started kissing and licking one another's muzzles. The doors opened and a Chihuahua looked up at them in disgust. "Getta room!" he sneered at them.

"Good idea," Tanis responded with a laugh. "This way," he said as he pulled his new friend up the hallway. He opened the door with his magnetic key, but just as they entered the room, the comm handset on the desk began to buzz.

"Don't answer it," the Spaniel said as she traced a finger along her lips.

Tanis was tempted to ignore the phone, but he bit his bottom lip and replied, "Sorry, I have to. I'm a medic and always on call. It will only take a moment - stay hot, sweetie."

"Ooh, are you going to play *doctor* with me?" she laughed coyly.

Tanis licked his lips and then picked up the handset.

Taro looked up at the sound of approaching feet and jumped up from the chair she had been warming when Merlin and Samantha stopped before her. Tanis got to his feet slowly, concern clearly in his eyes.

"How is he?" Samantha asked as her eyes went to the vixen's blood-stained pants underneath a white medical smock she wore loosely around her shoulders.

Taro's eyes were bloodshot from distress and she stumbled over her words as she sought how to reply. "He, uh... I mean... uhm..."

"He's been severely beaten and has a concussion," Tanis answered for her. "He has three broken ribs, a broken ankle and the ligaments have been torn in his left wrist. Luckily, the bullets didn't hit anything vital, but he's lost a lot of blood and the situation is critical."

Merlin put an arm around Taro and she clung to him fiercely. "Is there anything you can do for him?" he asked the desert fox.

Tanis looked at the floor and shook his head. "Since I'm not a fully-licensed physician, they won't allow me to help," he said. Sam put a hand on his shoulder and he looked up at her with a frown. "I know I've not been very friendly to Renny lately," he said in a low voice, "but I would have never wished this on him. Despite our rivalry, he's been a good friend, even if I've acted like a jerk."

"He's been, uhm, unconscious since I found him in the alley," Taro said quietly. "Too much blood..."

"Are they giving him a transfusion?" Merlin asked. "Surely they -"

Tanis shook his head as he looked over at Taro. "There aren't many feline donors with his blood type in the area," he said. "That's all they would tell us."

Samantha moved to Taro. "C'mon, let's go get you into some clean clothes," she said gently.

"No..." Taro murmured. "I don't want to leave."

Samantha nodded. "Okay, I'll go get something for you." She looked up at Merlin and he nodded his approval. She leaned forward and touched her head against Taro's. "I'll be back shortly," she said.

"Thanks, Sam."

Merlin gestured to Tanis. "Would you accompany her?" he asked. "After what happened, I don't think I want anyone going out by themselves."

Tanis looked at Taro and hesitated, but then nodded. "Sure," he said.

"Thank you."

After he and the Border collie left, Merlin and Taro sat down in the waiting area chairs. Doctors, nurses and orderlies moved back and forth through the room for one thing or another and a monotone voice over the intercom droned announcements for phone calls or emergencies throughout the hospital. Merlin listened gravely as Taro explained all she knew of the situation, which really wasn't much. She had already given a statement to the policeman who'd been on duty in the emergency room and she was weary from worry.

There had been no more news concerning Renny, and when the medical staff was questioned, all they would say was to be patient. Taro finally stretched out on a bench seat with her arms folded beneath her head, while Merlin took to pacing the floor.

The only description local police could get of the two men who had left with Renny was they were "black cats". The marsupial bartender claimed ignorance to their exact species and there were no other witnesses who would come forth at the bar to give any leads. Merlin had known a number of black cats in his lifetime and the only one who had ever threatened him with harm was Sagan.

For a brief moment, the wolf's hackles raised as his mind entertained the idea that Sagan had somehow returned from the grave and he glanced quickly at Taro. *No*, he reminded himself with a shake of his head. Sagan was quite thoroughly dead. If Taro ripping his head around backwards hadn't killed him, the gelatinous goop his body had reduced itself to had finished him off. The SPF had never been able to give him an explanation for what foul thing had happened to the pirate's body.

Merlin ran a hand over his face and paced some more. He felt helpless, uninformed and was frustrated by it all. Only Renny could give anyone a clue as to what had happened to him, and he wasn't able to divulge any information on the matter.

It seemed that all they could do now was to wait for the doctors to give them any morsel of information.

"Captain Sinclair?"

Merlin started awake and his chin slipped off the hand he had been resting on. He looked up wearily and recognized the red and gray uniform of an SPF officer who stood in front of him. He nodded and rubbed his eyes. It was early in the morning and there had been no new word on Renny's condition. He had fallen asleep leaning on his hands on the arms of the chair, though his dreams had been troubled with images of Sagan.

"Yes, I'm Sinclair," he muttered through his hands. "What can I do for you?"

"Sir, I'm with the Spatial Police Force," the Siamese cat replied quietly when Merlin stood up before her. "I am Officer Sashay and this is my partner, Officer Wagner." The silver fox beside her nodded silently as Merlin's eyes moved to him. "We've just arrived from Algegrath, where we've been investigating the attack on your sister ship, the *Hidalgo Sun*."

Merlin felt himself coming fully awake and he looked around for his companions. Tanis sat on one end of a nearby couch, his head drooped forward as he snored softly. Taro still lay stretched on her side, but with her head in the fennec's lap. Her sides moved in the quiet

rhythm of slumber and Samantha occupied another chair, also fast asleep. Merlin motioned for the officers to follow him down the hallway. When they had rounded a corner, he turned back to face them.

"It's been a long night for them," he explained quietly. "I'd like to let them rest."

"We understand," Sashay replied. The feline nodded to her partner and then said, "Captain, we have reason to believe the attack on your sister ship is tied in with the previous threats you've received, as well as the vandalism to your home office on Dennier."

"I've felt that all along," the wolf replied. "While there's no proof, I also suspect the attack on my navigator last night is related."

"That hasn't been established as yet," Wagner said in a gravelly voice. "According to the local authorities, your friends were in a part of Iverson tonight that is well known for its crime rate. This could be isolated from the other incidents."

Merlin narrowed his eyes as the silver fox. "That doesn't convince me, officer," he said. "If the members of the crew of both my ships have been watched by these attackers, that bar would have only provided them with an ample opportunity *because* of the area's crime rate. This wouldn't be the first time that my ship has been stalked."

Sashay tilted her head and twitched her whiskers. "Oh?"

"Pirates have plagued me for years, officer," Merlin answered, "and one in particular monitored my movements enough that our final confrontation resulted in the destruction of my freighter."

"Ah yes, the incident at Crescentis with Sagan," Wagner said in remembrance. "That case file is well known to us."

Merlin lowered his head, and his voice, when he asked in hesitation, "Sagan *is* dead, yes?"

Wagner nodded at the wolf's apparent train of thought. "Yes, Captain, he's irrevocably dead. What was left of his body was taken to the labs on Joplin for further study. The remains have been divided up well enough for research among the labs that you don't have to be concerned with *him* coming back from the dead."

Merlin blinked twice and then allowed himself a small smile for the officers. "Of course," he said. "That was silly of me. I suppose the superstitions of my chief engineer got to me."

Sashay gave him a little smirk. "Jerad Porter, right?" she asked. At Merlin's surprised nod, she said, "I thought so. He asked us the same thing when we interviewed him." The wolf chuckled in amusement, but it sounded odd in his ears due to the current situation. "Anyway," the Siamese cat continued, "I know that your people here have already been questioned by the local authorities, but we would like to talk to them ourselves so we can keep the details straight from one person to another in this investigation."

"They'll still be groggy if you try to talk to them now," Merlin told her. "I'm barely coherent, myself."

"I'm awake enough to talk to them," said another voice. Wagner started suddenly at the words and he spun around to face Taro. The vixen was grooming her fur with a soft brush, and although her eyes looked weary, she seemed alert.

"Officers," Merlin said, "this is my first officer, Taro Nichols. She was with my navigator at the time he was shot. Taro, these are SPF officers Sashay and Wagner."

"What can I tell you?" the red fox asked. "I'm afraid I don't know who did it to him."

"We understand that," Sashay said with a gentle smile. "We'd just like to find out what you *do* know, even if you think something is insignificant."

"I will tell you whatever I can," Taro replied.

Lorelei Easter hummed softly to herself as she walked through the busy spaceport terminal. She twirled a daisy-like flower between her fingers that she had purchased from a vendor in the previous concourse and then placed it in her fur just above her right ear. Although she had only been away from the *Blue Horizon* for a day, she'd returned so she could retrieve some of her aromatic candles to burn in her room at the resort.

She neared the concourse terminal that led out toward the freighter landing pads and passed through the scanners without a problem. She smiled sweetly at the young feline who manned the station and then walked casually down the ramp to the outside, still humming to herself. The rabbit examined her painted claws as she walked across the tarmac, instinctively knowing which landing pad where her ship was currently docked.

"Stop right there, miss," a sharp voice called out. Startled, Lorelei halted and looked up into the deep brown eyes of a golden retriever dressed in a security uniform. He blocked her path, holding a semi-automatic rifle with its muzzle pointed generally in her direction, without directly at her.

"Oh," the rabbit said in surprise. She looked up at the ship they were guarding, thinking she had walked in the wrong direction, but she recognized the large oval shape of the *Blue Horizon* and its two-tone blue paint scheme. "Excuse me," she said with a smile as she brushed her hands on her rainbow-dyed tank-top. "I didn't mean to run into you."

She started to step around the canine, but he moved quickly to block her way. "Stop!" he repeated.

Lori frowned and tried to push past this rude person, but this time he brought the muzzle of his weapon quickly around and jabbed it hard into her side. She stumbled and fell to her knees.

"I told you to *Stop!*" the retriever commanded with a growl. Lorelei looked up at him, holding her ribs in pain with a hard swallow.

"What did you do that for?" she whined. "I'm just returning to my ship!"

"No one is allowed near this vessel," the man told her as two more guards came to his aid, a black bear and a white tiger. All three pointed their weapons at the cottontail rabbit and Lorelei finally realized they were not joking.

"What's the matter?" she asked with moisture rimming her large eyes. "What's happened to my ship?"

"Where is your identification?" the tiger demanded.

Lorelei stuck out her bottom lip and her eyebrows drew together in indignation at having her question ignored. She reached toward her back pocket and the tiger quickly brought his rifle to bear upon her forehead. She froze and then *slowly* moved to get her identicard. She removed it gradually without taking her eyes off of the long barrel pointed between her eyes. She held the card up just as slowly. The tiger snatched it from her hand and looked it over carefully.

"It's not one of the special issues," he growled at the retriever.

"Now listen," Lorelei said as she pointed suddenly at the *Horizon*. "That's my —"

The tiger growled at her sudden movement and quickly snared her wrist. He pushed her down upon the concrete tarmac and placed a foot in the middle of her back. "You were warned three times and had ample opportunity to leave, so you are now under arrest for violation of a

secure area," he said angrily. "I would advise you to stop resisting and to shut your trap! You'll have plenty of time to make your confession to a lawyer."

"But—!"

"If you say *one more word*, miss, you'll go unconscious on a stretcher!"

Lorelei looked at the boot near her face and she could feel the tears welling up in her eyes, as well as the cold barrel resting on her neck behind her left ear. She managed to nod her understanding and bit her bottom lip as she was pulled up to her feet. The tiger roughly drew her hands behind her and sturdy handcuffs were placed around her slender wrists. Without another word, the retriever escorted her back toward the terminal building while the other two guards returned to their station points in front of the *Blue Horizon*.

"Mr. Sinclair?"

Merlin looked up as an orderly approached him. Samantha and Tanis jumped to their feet and Taro stopped her pacing to run over to them. "You have news about our friend?" the vixen asked anxiously.

The beagle looked apologetic and shook his head. "No, I'm sorry I don't, miss. I came to tell Mr. Sinclair there's a call for him at the nurses' station."

Merlin nodded. "Thank you," he said. He followed the young canine back up the corridor without a look back at his friends.

"I can't stand this waiting and not knowing," Taro said in frustration. She clenched and unclenched her fists and went back to her pacing. Tanis looked at Samantha and just shook his head.

"I'm going to see if I can find out something from the doctor," he said. "Surely they can tell us *something*."

The Border collie said nothing as Tanis walked away and kept her arms wrapped around herself. From what Taro had told them of Renny's condition, she didn't hold much hope for the cheetah, and she felt guilty for feeling that way. She watched Taro pace the floor and recognized the expression on the vixen's face all too well. Renny had worn that look for months after the crash of the *Horizon* when they all awaited any morsel of information on Taro's fate. The difference was that Renny was here, now.

Merlin's footsteps brought her attention back to the present. She couldn't read his expression, but he picked up his jacket and hat from a nearby chair. "What's happened?" she asked. Taro appeared once more at his side.

"I have to catch a cab back to the spaceport," he said with a look of longsuffering. "Lori was arrested trying to get past the guards I'd posted around the ship. They're holding her in a security cell at the spaceport precinct and she's rather indignant."

Samantha raised a hand to her mouth, but she wasn't quick enough to hide the smirk on her face. Merlin twitched an ear at her reaction and then just shook his head. Taro looked at the collie in disbelief and then walked away.

"Well, anyway... I'm going to go vouch for her release," he said.

Samantha raised a hand in acknowledgement, but didn't dare to say anything for fear she would start laughing. The lupine captain sighed and then left the waiting room.

Merlin paid the koala cabbie for his fare and then trotted up the steps of the spaceport security offices. It was a small, unimposing building made of corrugated metal sides and a flat roof, with a simple light pole on each side of the glass double-doors. When he entered into the main lobby, he saw nothing impressive about the place. It consisted of nothing more than a dozen closely-set desks strewn with data crystals, folders brimming with papers and photographs. All of the walls were decorated with bulletin boards full of photos and pin-laden maps.

A uniformed human looked up at him from the first desk he approached. "Yes?" the red-haired man asked.

Merlin removed his hat and held it in his hands. "I'm Merlin Sinclair, captain of the *Blue Horizon*," he said. "I got a call—"

"Ah yes, you're here to identify a rabbit who claims to be your employee," the man said. "I'm the one who called you, Captain."

"Thank you, officer," Merlin replied. "I *do* have a cottontail named Lorelei Easter who works on my ship."

"Alton!" the human called across the room. "Take this guy to cell one-eighty-six and see if he can identify the gal in there." He looked back at Merlin and added, "If she's really yours and you can vouch for her, bring her back up here and you can sign for her release."

A broad-shouldered lion waved from across the room. "This way," he beckoned to Merlin. The captain wove his way around the desks and then followed Alton through a doorway into an elevator. When the doors closed and the lion tapped in a series of numbers into a keypad, Merlin felt uneasy. While the guard looked nothing like his old competitor, he couldn't stop thinking about the fight he'd had with Armando. Jensen might not have had a good head for business, but he was strong and packed a powerful punch. He rubbed his jaw unconsciously in remembrance and Alton looked down at the shorter wolf suspiciously.

A moment later, the lift door slid aside and they emerged into a chamber cut out of the solid rock strata below the spaceport complex. The lights were dim and a row of sturdy cages lined an aisle behind a heavy glassteel panel. A bulldog with a thick neck looked up from a desk in front of the panel and narrowed his eyes at the wolf.

"What'd dis one do?" he growled.

"Nothing," Alton replied with a lopsided grin. "He's here to take a look at your Easter bunny in 186." He handed his identicard to him.

The bulldog scanned the card with a desktop reader. He looked back at Merlin and shook his head. "I sure hope she's yourn," he said wearily. "She's been a thorn in my side ever since she got here." He tapped a complex code into a keypad and the glassteel panel slide aside.

Alton motioned for the wolf to follow him through the entrance, and once the pair of them had gone inside, the bulldog closed the panel behind them. Merlin swallowed unconsciously, but said nothing as the lion led him along the row. Most of the cells were empty, save for one or two individuals that Merlin thought looked to be no more harmful than vagrants. When they reached the farthest cell in the room, Alton gestured toward the bars.

"You know her?" he asked.

A white cottontail rabbit sat on a worn mat on the floor of the cell with her back to the door. Her head rested on crossed arms on top of her knees. Merlin sighed. He recognized the colorful tie-dyed tank-top she wore. "Lori," he said gently.

The rabbit's head snapped up and she whirled around in surprise. "*Merlin!*" she gasped. She crawled to the door and then looked up at him. "Please get me out of here," she pleaded. "These aren't nice people!"

Merlin looked up at Alton. "She's mine," he stated. The lion nodded and then gave a hand-signal back toward the bulldog. Almost immediately, the electronic lock on the cell door opened with a *clunk* and Alton pulled it open. Lorelei jumped up into Merlin's arms and began to bawl onto his shoulder. "C'mon," the wolf said. "Let's get you signed out."

They followed Alton back toward the front desk and a dirty poodle looked up at them mournfully from one of the other cells. "Take me instead of zat booney-rabit," he pleaded with an accented voice. "I am a *gourmet* chef and ken be of more use to you."

"You're no chef!" Lorelei spat at the canine. "You couldn't cook your way out of a school lunchroom!"

"Pierre!" the poodle said in a strained voice to a Manx cat in the next cell, "thees floozy can't talk to me in such a manner!"

"Oh, go soak your head..." hissed Pierre.

Lorelei stuck her tongue out at the poodle as Merlin pulled her away in irritation. When they passed through the glassteel panel the bulldog opened for them again, he grunted with a squint at the rabbit.

"The three of them have been at it like that all day," he said wearily to the wolf. He looked up at Alton and waved toward the elevator. "Get her outta here, please!"

Almost as soon as the elevator door closed behind them, Lorelei stuck her nose up against Merlin's and looked him dead in the eye. "Why did this happen to me?" she demanded from him. "We've never had guards around the *Horizon* before! Has it been repossessed? You should've never let this happen!"

"It was a security precaution after what happened to the *Hidalgo Sun*," Merlin said with a growl in his voice. If his cook wanted to challenge his authority, he would be more than willing to assert himself over her. Her attitude had not placed him in the best moods, especially after all the mental exhaustion he had been through that day. He reached up, placed one hand over her nose, and put some distance between their faces. Alton watched them curiously.

"The *Sun*?" she asked in surprise when he released her. "What happened?"

The elevator doors opened, Merlin grasped her wrist, and pulled her along. "I'll explain after we get your release signed."

It only took a few moments for Merlin to explain that the troublesome bunny was, in fact, one of his crew members; she had not been unexpected back at the ship and had not been given a clearance badge to get past the guards. As Sinclair had been the one to hire the security guards in the first place, there were no charges filed on Lorelei, and after the signing of a release form, they were free to go.

The human clerk gave Merlin a paper copy of the form; he folded it neatly and placed it in an interior pocket of his jacket. The lupine captain gave the man a nod and then said, "Please express my appreciation for a job well done to the guards surrounding my ship." Lorelei gave him an astonished look, but Merlin ignored her. "Had my friend here not been someone of my acquaintance, they might have actually caught a saboteur. Give them my thanks, please."

The red-haired man scratched his chin and smiled in quiet surprise. "I'll do that, Captain," he said. "I'm sure they will appreciate your words."

Merlin nodded and then led his employee outside the precinct. He hailed a cab, and as soon as they were inside and he had given the mouse his destination, Lorelei grabbed his arm and looked at him with fearful eyes.

"What happened to the *Hidalgo Sun*?" she asked. "Don't keep me in the dark!"

Merlin nodded quickly and then gave her an account of the damage to their sister ship. Moisture welled up in her eyes as he described the damage to the ship and the injuries to Mark Littlefeather, but when he went on to tell her about Renny, she broke down and cried.

Twenty minutes later, Merlin and Lorelei approached the Intensive Care station. A kittenish nurse smiled up at him, but instantly frowned when she recognized him.

"Hi, Gloria," Merlin said. "Has there been any news?" The feline swallowed and nodded.

"Your friend has taken a turn for the worse, I'm afraid," she said quietly. "Your other friends have been allowed into his room and are there now." She pointed toward a pleated white curtain hanging across a doorway.

Lorelei's bottom lip quivered and she left the station toward the curtain. Merlin frowned deeply and then pressed the nurse to fill him in on the details. When he entered the room a few minutes later, he found Taro, Samantha and Lorelei all clinging together and crying. Tanis stood next to the bed looking lost.

Renny lay unconscious on the bed with a white sheet covering him up to his neck. The cheetah made no movement, and had it not been for the shallow rise and fall of his chest, Merlin might have thought him dead – a conclusion that seemed imminent.

Tanis looked up at his captain and shook his head slowly as if reading his thoughts. "Renny's blood pressure has dropped dangerously low," he told the wolf through a raspy voice. "He is not expected to live through the night." Merlin nodded his understanding, but said nothing. He didn't know *what* to say in this situation.

"He's lost too much blood and the doctor told me there aren't many cheetahs on Alexandrius," Tanis continued, almost to himself. "If they can't find a donor quickly, he's not going to make it."

"The nurse told me they can synthesize a blood substitute for him," Merlin said at last in a quiet voice, "but it's a temporary solution that will only sustain him a short while longer. I gave them authorization to go ahead and try it."

"For what good it will do him," Tanis muttered, "I'd like to keep him around a little while longer."

Taro could hear the occasional beeps of the hospital room and they silently reassured her as she lay with her head next to Renny's arm on his bed. So long as she could hear the beeps, she knew her friend and lover still lived. She could hear a couple of the nurses talking quietly among themselves out near the monitoring station, and she recognized Tanis' soft snores from the other chair in the room. She didn't know where Merlin or the others were, but she didn't open her eyes to look. So long as no one was in an excited state, she felt no need for alarm.

There was some movement by her head and she ignored it in her exhaustion until something lightly stroked the ornamental feather clipped to her fur. She looked up suddenly and saw the fingers of Renny's hand moving. She stood up with a knot in her stomach as she leaned over the cheetah in the darkened room and saw his eyes opened to slits, the lights of the nurses' station reflecting in them. Taro choked back a sob and swallowed as she drew nearer to him. She could see his eyes track to her face and she could see recognition in them.

Renny raised his injured hand slightly and tried to gesture to her, but the action was weak. Taro reached over and lightly grasped his good hand to let him know she was there with him. She was so overjoyed to see him awake that she couldn't find her voice. Quiet tears flowed into her cheek fur.

"Ta... ro..." Renny said with difficulty. The tubes clipped to his nostrils gave his raspy voice a nasal quality as if he suffered from a cold, and his tongue was dry.

"Yes, darling," the vixen whispered as she leaned closer to him, "I'm here." She felt selfish for not waking the others to let them know their friend had regained consciousness, but she didn't want to leave Renny for any second he might be awake. Apparently, the synthesized blood they had given him earlier had been enough to raise his blood pressure, but with a quick glance at the monitor, she could tell it was still too low. She didn't know how much longer she might have with him and didn't want to leave him to get the others.

"You... okay...?" Renny asked in a voice barely above a whisper.

"Yes, I'm fine," she replied with a nod. "It's you I'm concerned about. Can you remember who did this to you?"

Renny closed his eyes, and for a brief moment, Taro thought he had stopped breathing. She jostled him gently and he opened his eyes a little. "Jaguars..." he said finally. "Two... of them... with black fur... I think. Was dark."

Taro nodded and began to stroke the fur of his left cheek with the back of her fingers. "We'll get them," she whispered in a hard voice.

"Heard doctor..." he said with a swallow. "Said I was... dying..." He closed his eyes again and the vixen's heart moved up into her throat.

"No!" Taro hissed. He looked at her again and she shook her head vigorously. "You're getting better, I swear it!" She put her hands gently on his cheeks and looked into his eyes. "You were hurt bad," she admitted, "but now you're coming back to us."

"Don't... think so..." he whispered. "Can't feel... legs..."

"That's the painkillers," Taro said in a rush. "You have to..." she choked up and wasn't able to finish her words. Renny saw her tears and felt himself drifting away from consciousness.

"Do something...?" he rasped. She wiped her eyes and looked back at him with a nod. "Light a candle... for me..." he said. Renny's eyes closed and then he went very still. Taro felt the fur on the back of her neck stiffen and she choked.

"Renny?" she asked. This time, he didn't respond or even move, and she felt the blood drain from her face. "*Renny!*"

"His blood pressure has dropped again," Tanis said from across the bed. Taro looked up at him with frightened eyes and then laid her head upon the cheetah's chest. Yes, there was still a heartbeat, though it was slow and faint, and she could feel from the rise and fall of his chest that his lungs continued to draw in air, albeit shallow.

Tanis sat up in the chair he had slept in and rubbed his eyes. "I don't think he's going to make it, Taro," he said gently. "Without a donor, there's nothing else that can be done for him."

The vixen glanced up at him with moist eyes, but kept her head on Renny's chest. "Yes there is," she said quietly. "I can continue to love him, Tanis."

The desert fox saw no accusations for his words in her tears that reflected the monitor lights, but he could think of nothing else to say. He nodded, stood up, and then reached across the bed. He lightly stroked her fur in compassion as she wept quietly.

“Watch your head, Max!” Patch growled around his cigar. A huge crate suspended from a rental crane swung by the canine mechanic’s ears and the German shepherd ducked in the nick of time. “Pay attention, boy!” the raccoon added with a raised eyebrow.

Max waved back without a word to acknowledge him, and then followed the moving crate until it was set down near the forward end of the *Hidalgo Sun*. The ship’s new Moss-unit floated nearby and monitored the activity with an occasional meow. Max hefted the crowbar he carried with him and began to open the wooden box. Tsarina and Riki followed his example on other sides of the crate; within moments, they had the top and three sides of the box removed.

The trio gathered around in the evening sunlight as Patch moved in and began to unpack the parts to the ship’s new main airlock amidst the blue smoke of his stogie. Fortunately for the business, the *Sun*’s chief engineer had been able to locate a local parts warehouse for the things they needed due to the commonality of *Okami* freighters. The parts for the larger cargo bay door would arrive on the following day according to the shipper, and they would have to be assembled.

While waiting for the airlock to arrive, Rezo had ordered everyone on his crew to assist in the repairs, inside and outside of his ship. Pockets and Paxton continued to work on the overhead crane inside the *Sun*’s cargo bay, while Sheila and Danaher repaired the internal lift that had been damaged. Even Jonesy and the captain worked together on the pressurized storage lockers around the perimeter of the hold that had been damaged by shrapnel. Doctor Carmen was at a local hotel looking after Mark Littlefeather as he recovered. She wanted to keep him away from the ship for the time being, and it took the polar bear’s long-suffering patience to deal with the human’s tenacity to get up so he could help with the repairs when he should be allowing the healing of his injuries to begin.

The weight of the new outer frame of the airlock was almost more than Max and Tsarina could lift to a standing position, but they managed to struggle it upright. They had removed the old hatch and frame earlier that day and had repaired the structure to the ship around where the new one would be installed. Riki rooted around inside the packing and found the purchase order slip and installation pamphlet wedged beneath the new hatch panel. It would take more than the lemur’s minute efforts to free the paperwork, so she went over to the hired crane operator to have him assist her with it.

Max exchanged grave looks with Tsarina. Despite their busy work schedule to make repairs to the ship, both of them were constantly worried about Renny. The cheetah was one of Max’s closest friends and it bothered him that he had left the *Blue Horizon* to come to Algegrath. His skills were needed here, but he would rather have been at the hospital waiting by his friend’s side.

It was no secret among the *Hidalgo Sun*’s crew that Tsarina held a crush on her counterpart on the *Blue Horizon*. Both were feline navigators and both were skilled pilots who loved to fly. When she had first heard the news of Renny getting shot, she had fainted and it had taken Carmen’s smelling-salts to bring the jaguar around again. She had bugged Riki for any news from the Iverson hospital to the point where the lemur had been convinced to carry a DC tied into relays from the Com station on the *Sun*’s bridge, just so she would be up on any news sent to them. It had never bothered Tsarina to know that Renny’s heart belonged to Taro, but that didn’t stop her for caring for him.

Pockets, on the other hand, was too immersed in his work to worry about Renny. He knew there would be nothing he could do for the cheetah had he been in Iverson and his help was needed here with his brother. Their anticipated reunion had been somber, but the siblings were glad to see one another. With tools in his hands and grease beneath his fingernails, Pockets

was totally absorbed with the task at hand. Major repairs to the *Blue Horizon* were so seldom that he often felt his skills might get rusty, so this was a great opportunity for him – despite the disaster that had caused it.

Captain Rezo Kegawa walked down the ramp of the cargo bay to the tarmac outside and looked up at the evening stars. The diminutive red panda heaved a quiet sigh and then looked over at the armed guards that had cordoned off a perimeter around the crimson freighter. He felt uncomfortable with them around, but after what had happened to his ship, he understood their presence. Temporary identification cards had been issued to the combined members of the two ships and it was mandatory to show them upon exiting or reentering the protected zone.

Rezo idly glanced up at a departing private craft and wondered who would do such a thing to them.

Morning had come to the Iverson hospital, and by some miracle, Renny still lived. He'd not made his way back to consciousness, but he still breathed on his own without a machine assist. Taro had spent the night beside him, sleeping fitfully with her head on the bed next to the cheetah's arm and dreaming of ebony jaguars wielding huge guns that she had been unable to stop.

When Merlin brought her some coffee from the hospital cafeteria, she straightened the pale green blouse that Samantha had purchased for her and then ran a brush through her fur. She took her coffee laced with cream and a little bit of chocolate, but she barely tasted any of it.

The lupine captain studied the monitor readouts with a frown and then turned back toward her. "I think you've spent enough time up here, Taro," he said quietly. "Let Tanis take you to your hotel so you can rest and clean up."

"No," Taro said as she tossed her empty paper cup into the trash bin. "I don't want to leave him."

Merlin moved to her side and then put a hand on her shoulder. "Taro, go. That's an order. Samantha and I will keep watch—"

"No!" Taro said defiantly. "I'm not leaving the hospital until... until..."

"You are refusing an order?" Merlin said in a low voice. He understood how she felt, but he had given a command. Taro looked up at him with dark eyes and pressed her lips together at his words.

"Yes... sir," she said hesitantly. "I am." The vixen's sense of duty made it hard to reject a command order, but this was not a normal situation. She tried to keep eye contact with him, but his piercing amber eyes went through her like a knife. She turned her head and lowered her ears, but didn't say anything more.

Merlin's heart softened and he patted her shoulder gently to let her know it was all right. He fully understood her relationship with the cheetah, and he also knew he would have reacted the same if it had been Samantha on the bed.

He looked up at the Border collie who had watched the exchange in silence and then he motioned her closer as an idea came to him. "Taro," he said gently, "I won't make you leave the hospital, but there is something you need to do for Renny."

The fox looked up at him. "What is it?" she asked.

"Come with me. Samantha will keep an eye on him while you and I take a walk down the hallway."

Taro looked up at him suspiciously, wondering if he planned to pull her into an elevator and force her to leave. However, he *did* say he wouldn't make her leave the hospital and she had never known him to lie to her before. Reluctantly, she stood up and Samantha gave her a reassuring smile. It took some effort, but she walked quietly behind her captain as he led her toward a corridor leading around a corner. She glanced down at Lorelei and Tanis, who slept against one another on one of the waiting room couches.

Her attention was on her feet as she trod the tiled floor, until she suddenly noticed a burgundy carpet beneath her. She looked up and discovered that Merlin had taken her to a hospital chapel. She looked up at him in dismay, but he motioned for her to follow him in.

The vixen closed the door behind her and the room darkened to the illumination of two large, aromatic red candles burning on the altar. She looked up at a stained-glass display on the wall of a human male brutally nailed to crossed wooden poles on a hill beneath an angry sky. She swallowed with difficulty and glanced nervously around the cushioned benches in the room. Merlin stood up near the altar and opened a wooden box beside it. From this, he pulled out two white candles and a couple of long-stemmed wooden sticks with blackened ends. He handed a candle and a stick to Taro.

"Our friend *may* not make it," he said to her in a voice barely above a whisper, "so let's honor him by lighting a few candles."

Tears suddenly came to Taro's eyes. She remembered Renny's request, but didn't think that Merlin had been awake during that conversation to hear it. Neither she nor Merlin were spiritual, but lighting a candle for the dead or dying was a practice held on many of the Planetary Alignment worlds, including her own Hestra, and she knew that her captain felt Renny needed all the help he could get. She nodded and fought back the tears as she followed the wolf's example.

Merlin lit the end of his stick from one of the large candles and then set his white candle near the center of the altar. He briefly closed his eyes, said a quiet prayer to God, and then silently lit his candle with the stick. Taro said a prayer of her own and then lit her candle. The two small candles looked inadequate to her, but she had fulfilled Renny's request.

She looked up when the door to the chapel opened and Lorelei stepped in. Her long bunny ears drooped as she looked up at Taro and Merlin, and her eyes were tired. She looked apologetic, but didn't say a word as she passed between them to the candle box. She withdrew four more candles, planning to light a few of her own for the feline navigator.

Samantha sat beside Renny's bed and watched his blood pressure monitor drop another number. Her mind was numb from worry. She had finally gotten to a point where she no longer held any hope for her friend and merely waited for the inevitable. The synthesized blood had helped him through the night, but there was only so much it could do for him.

She had watched Lorelei leave the waiting area and meander away up the hallway, and Tanis had checked in with her a few minutes later, only to leave again to head down to the cafeteria on the first floor of the hospital. A nurse had come in to check in on Renny, but had returned to her station after a solemn look at him. Samantha was alone with the cheetah and she leaned over him with sad eyes.

"I wish there was something I could do for you," she said quietly. "I'm going to miss having you around to banter with... things won't be the same without you, Ren-Ren." A single tear fell from her cheek fur and landed on his chest. Samantha absently touched the tear stain

on the bed sheet with a finger. "You and I were never intimate," she whispered, "but I've loved you like a brother. I'm already missing you, my friend..."

The Border collie looked up at the sudden sounds of activity as the nurse and several orderlies rushed into the room. "Please step aside, dear," the older nurse said as she gently slid between Sam and her friend. A gurney was wheeled in on the opposite side of the bed as the nurse unhooked the monitors from the cheetah. The orderlies worked together and lifted Renny from the bed and quickly moved him to the gurney; one of them transferred his IV bags to an upright hook attached to the gurney.

"What's going on?" Samantha asked desperately.

The nurse hesitated as the orderlies rushed out with the feline navigator, but only shook her head before she took off after the others who were now running up the corridor with the patient. Samantha started after them, but two security guards near the ICU station quickly barred her way.

"What's going on?" Samantha repeated to them.

One of the German shepherds shook his head. "We don't know," he said apologetically, "but you aren't allowed down that wing. You will have to wait until someone can come back to talk to you, ma'am."

Samantha looked up at him with a deep frown, but nodded her understanding. She turned and walked to the ICU station, where she motioned for the nurse on duty. "Can *you* tell me what's going on?" she asked. "Where did they take our friend?"

"Sorry, ma'am," the Irish setter replied. "Doctor Sado will send word out to you when there's something to report."

"But..."

"Sorry, ma'am, but there's nothing else I can tell you right now."

Samantha gave the woman a cross look before she left the station. She walked briskly up the corridor until she came to the hospital chapel and then burst in through the door. Merlin, Taro and Lorelei looked up at her amidst two dozen burning candles and the vixen stood up in alarm.

"Is he....?" she choked.

Samantha shook her head, but explained what had just happened. Merlin stood up with a look of apprehension on his face and moved for the door. "Stay here," he commanded them when the others began to follow him. "I'll see if I can find out what's going on."

The lupine captain stormed out of the small chapel and headed straight down the hallway to the ICU station. The nurse looked up and sighed, having expected this encounter.

"Where was Renny Thornton just taken?" the wolf asked in a rush. "I've just been informed that he was removed from his room in a hurry."

"I'm sorry, sir, but I can't tell you anything."

"You *can't* tell me anything, or you *won't* tell me anything?" he asked darkly.

The Irish setter stood up from her chair and leaned on the counter toward him. "Go sit down," the nurse said in a tone that identified that she'd dealt with demanding people before. "When the doctor has something to say to you, he will send someone out to say it."

Unused to having his commands countered, Merlin's hackles raised and he bared his teeth. "Get someone out here *now* to talk to me!" he growled. "I don't care if it's a blasted *janitor*, so long as it's someone with information I want to know! Renny Thornton is my responsibility!"

"What's your problem, buddy?" said one of the canine security guards from behind him. Merlin turned around and faced the pair of them with a dark look.

"The problem is that I'm getting the runaround from this nurse," he said. "I'm not trying to interfere with your hospital business. All I want to know is *why* my navigator was taken away so suddenly. A simple explanation will do."

"As the lady said," the other guard replied, "you'll be notified when the doctor has something to tell you."

"That's *not* good enough!" Merlin growled with his fists clenched. "Where was he taken?"

"Captain Sinclair?"

Merlin and both of the guards turned around to see a short brown bear standing just inside the door, his white smock barely containing his expansive girth and a grim look on his face.

"I'm Sinclair," the wolf replied. The bear motioned him to come forward and Merlin complied.

"I'm Doctor Sado," he said. "I'm sorry for the mystery surrounding your friend, but there wasn't time to give you an explanation and the nurse you were just talking to had not yet been given the information you sought. Time is working against Mr. Thornton and we had to act quickly."

"Thank you for coming to talk to me, sir," Merlin said apologetically. "Is Renny....?"

"Your friend still lives, Captain," the doctor told him, "although it will still be some time before we know how successful we are at saving him."

"What's going on?" Merlin asked. "He was taken in such haste that we assumed the worst."

Doctor Sado lowered his voice as he looked up at the wolf. "Another cheetah was brought into the hospital just a few minutes ago," he explained. "The young woman had severe trauma to the head and neck from a traffic accident and was DOA by the time the ambulance got her here. We were unable to revive her and the decision was made quickly to use her as a blood donor for your friend. Mr. Thornton was moved to the Emergency Room and has just begun receiving the transfusion."

"You don't look convinced this will help him," Merlin replied.

The physician sighed and shook his head. "The donor's blood is not an exact match, but the blood of cheetahs, even in its different types, is all very closely related. There is a chance her blood will work for him, but we won't know the results until later. There is still the possibility that the mismatch itself might be fatal if the antibodies in his system attack the new blood. All we can do now is let the transfusion do its job and then we wait to see how your friend reacts to it."

Merlin nodded and put a hand on the doctor's shoulder. "Thank you, Dr. Sado. All I wanted to know was what was going on. I won't keep you further from your job."

Sado looked up at him. "You should prepare your friends for the possibility that the transfusion may not help," he said. "Without another donor, there's nothing else we can do for him if this doesn't work."

Merlin nodded. He had already prepared himself for news of Renny's death and thought the others probably had as well, but he still needed to talk to them. "I understand," he said quietly. "Thank you." The doctor patted his shoulder and then disappeared back through the door he had come through. The lupine captain walked quietly back to the chapel, careful not to look at the nurse and guards as he passed them.

When he arrived back inside the chapel, Taro jumped up from her seat and rushed to him, followed by Samantha and Lorelei.

"Did you find out anything?" Taro asked him. Merlin nodded and then related everything the doctor had told him. Lorelei began crying openly when he mentioned the young cheetah woman that had died, even though her death might actually mean Renny's salvation. Taro drew the bunny to her side and let her cry on her shoulder. The vixen had brightened up with Merlin's news, but he had to caution her.

"I don't want to sound pessimistic," the captain said quietly, "but there's still the possibility that Renny won't make it, even *with* the transfusion."

Taro looked back at him and nodded. "I know," she said with a voice stronger than she had spoken with lately, "but I'm not going to give up on him so long as there's the slimmest chance he'll make it."

Rezo ambled around the curved corridor of the crew deck toward the bridge of his ship. His hands were clasped behind him as he walked and his head was down in deep thought. When he reached the door to the bridge, he reached up to activate the switch. Before his hand connected, however, the panel slid aside and Riki stepped out in front of him.

"Call for you, Captain," she said in a startled voice. The slender lemur had not expected to see him so suddenly and gestured into the room behind her. "Merlin's on the line."

"Thank you, Riki," the red panda said in a quiet voice. He moved past her and went straight to the Com station. "Captain Kegawa here," he said into the condenser microphone of the headset he put around his ears.

"Hi, Rezo. How's the Hidalgo Sun?" asked Merlin's voice, "May I have a progress report on the repairs?"

"Yes," the small panda replied. "Our final parts shipment arrived about an hour ago and the cargo bay door is currently undergoing assembly. The minor repairs have almost been completed - I've had most of the crew working around the clock on them, but I had to order both Porters to bed for rest early this morning or they would have dropped in exhaustion."

"I'm assuming that Patch and Pockets are already back into the middle of things?"

"You know them well, boss," Rezo replied with a little smile. "Both claim they got in four hours of sleep and that it was enough to recharge them, but as we're running on a tight schedule, I didn't argue. Pockets said he would catch up on his sleep later and they're both working on the assembly. So far, everything's going together properly, but that door's big and it's still going to take a while to get it finished."

"Your people have done a lot in the past couple of days," Merlin said in appreciation. "Let them know I'm proud of them."

"I'll do that. Thank you," Rezo replied. He looked toward the door when he heard movement and saw Tsarina standing there. He put the conversation on the overhead speaker so his navigator could listen in, but kept the headset on to use the microphone. "What's the word on Renny?" he asked.

There was a hesitation and then Merlin answered. *"It doesn't look good. They took him away a couple of hours ago to give him an emergency transfusion of blood from another cheetah who'd died in a traffic accident, but we've not heard anything else since then. I've talked to the doctor, and despite the transfusion, I don't think he expects Renny to pull through due to a slight mismatch in the blood type. Now it's just a matter of waiting until we get... the word."*

Rezo glanced over at the jaguar and saw that Tsarina was in distress by this news. She stood perfectly still, her eyes closed and fists clenched, with tears beginning to slip through her cheek fur. She didn't make a sound, but the red panda could see her whiskers trembling.

"I'll pass on the news," he said slowly, "and I'll let you know as soon as the repairs have been completed."

"How's Mark doing?"

"Littlefeather is impatient to get back to the ship. Carmen's had to force him back into bed to rest several times, and I would have to say that if she'd been a species other than a large polar bear, I don't think she would have been able to keep that guy at bay. He's determined, but she's threatened to use cargo straps to keep him in bed if he doesn't behave."

"Those humans are stubborn, alright," Merlin said. *"Has your armed guard encountered any resistance?"*

"There have been few rubbernecks that have come close to the barrier, but it hasn't taken much to shoo them away. Other than that, no trouble at all."

"Okay, maybe you can appease Mark a little and have Dr. Burgess transfer him to his own cabin on board the ship. He still needs healing time, but maybe he'll be satisfied to be back on board."

"Aye, Captain. That should quiet him down somewhat, but he'll still probably be difficult to keep him in his quarters. I'll make arrangements with Carmen to bring him back, though."

"Very good. I'm down in the lobby of the hospital and need to get back upstairs. I'll let you know when I know more."

"Aye, sir," Rezo replied. *"Hidalgo Sun out."*

Tanis looked up at the cloudy sky with a frown as he approached the front steps of the hospital. He'd gone back to his hotel room to rest several hours earlier, but discovered that he couldn't sleep very well. There was such a sense of gloom over him, and although he'd received no messages from the hospital, he couldn't help but feel that Renny had slipped away from them.

The desert fox thought about his friendly rivalry with the navigator as he walked into the lobby and headed for the elevators. He and Renny had originally vied for Taro's affections, but Tanis had always been aware that the vixen didn't play favorites with the guys she toyed with and knew that he would never get serious with her. Renny, on the other hand, had always seemed the jealous type and seemed to think his relationship with her *should* have been exclusive.

Tanis had used this underlying tension to needle the cheetah every chance he got, merely for the point of getting a rise out of the navigator for a laugh, but eventually he had started to slack off when he realized just how deeply Renny felt for Taro. Of his own volition, Tanis had slowly distanced himself away from the vixen, and although she still visited his bed on occasion, those times had become rarer for Renny's sake. Taro, herself, had made no conscious decision for an exclusive relationship, but it was clear to see that she loved Renny's presence.

Arktanis TeVann was not lonely because of this, however. Lorelei was a willing companion, and even though she appeared simple and easily distracted, Tanis did like her. The bunny was the first to go to him with needed hugs each time he'd received devastating news about Nalirra. It was still hard for him to believe that his homeworld was now under the control of another planet and that he could never go back - even if he had wanted to. In the weeks

following the last reports from the Roppa star system, Tanis had tried to put thoughts of Nalirra behind him and Lorelei had done her best to help him think of other things.

Now their roles were reversed. Despite the hobbies she might have that Tanis would never take part in himself, Lorelei had a tender and compassionate heart. Seeing Renny on his deathbed was tearing her apart and it was Tanis she went to for security. The desert fox knew that if he aspired to be a fully-licensed physician, he would have to keep his head during crises, and this included the present situation.

When the elevator doors opened and he stepped out into the hallway, he fully expected to see everybody crying over the cheetah's death. He knew he had to be strong in order to provide some measure of comfort to Lorelei and Taro.

"Tanis," Samantha's voice called to him from a side hallway. The fox looked over at her and saw her struggling with a vending machine that refused to give up the snack bar she'd purchased. "I thought you went to your room to sleep," she mused. Suddenly, she gave a swift kick to the side of the vending machine that sounded loud in the quiet hospital wing.

Tanis allowed himself a little smile when the action resulted in *two* snack bars falling to the tray below. Samantha retrieved them with a shrug and handed one to her friend.

"I lay there for a couple of hours," he replied to her as they walked back toward the ICU waiting room, "but was unable to fall asleep. All I could do was just to lay there thinking."

"I've been doing a lot of that myself lately," Samantha admitted. "It doesn't seem possible that we may lose Renny."

"Is he still with us?"

The Border collie nodded and took a bite of her snack bar. She brushed a few crumbs from her turquoise blouse, and smeared a bit of soft carob on the silky material. She groaned at the mess she made and looked up at Tanis with a look of resignation. She chewed her mouthful and then swallowed with the wish that she'd bought a soda as well.

"They took him away last night for an emergency blood transfusion from another cheetah they'd brought in DOA, but we've not heard anything new since then, one way or another. I suppose that in this case, no news could be counted as good news."

Merlin looked up at the pair when they walked into the waiting area and nodded his greeting silently. Lorelei lay on the couch beside him with her head in his lap. She was not asleep, but she stared off into infinity, unfocused on anyone around her. The wolf absently stroked the soft fur behind her left ear.

"You're back early," Merlin said quietly.

"Couldn't sleep," the fox replied. "Where's Taro?"

Samantha sat down in a worn vinyl chair and gestured toward the far hallway. "She's back in the chapel again, lighting more candles. I think she feels the more she lights, the better Renny's chances will be."

"I think she frightened that mouse family that went into the chapel to pray for their child," Merlin mused as Tanis took another seat. "She has so many candles burning in there that it looks like the interior of a furnace; she's refused to put out a single one of them."

"What's up with the mice?"

"A drunk driver smashed into the family car. The father's in ICU with some fairly bad injuries and his survival chances aren't good. Their eight year old son didn't make it."

Tanis grimaced. He'd lost a childhood friend to a drunk driver himself and he knew how devastating it was to lose a young one to that. He stood up and Samantha looked up at him.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"To see if I can give some consolation to the mouse family," he said. "I don't seem to be helping Renny, so perhaps I can help these other people."

"I wish you would help *me* through this..." Lorelei said in a quiet voice. She looked up at him with sad eyes and Tanis knelt down in front of her.

"Alright, come with me back to my hotel room," he said to her with a nod.

"I don't think I'm up to playing..." the bunny whispered.

Tanis shook his head. "That's not what I had in mind. Ya need a chance to get away from the hospital for a while, and we can talk or rest together there."

The white rabbit sat up slowly and brushed down the fur on the side of her face she had been laying on. "Okay," she said in a muted voice. She looked over at Samantha first, and then to Merlin before she took Tanis' offered hand to stand up.

"Let us know if ya hear *anything*," Tanis said to his captain.

The candles were burning all around her and the air was sweet with the scent of floral aroma. Taro was alone in the tiny chapel as she knelt on a small ornamental mat on the floor. She had prayed for what seemed hours and now merely stared into the candle flames. Her eyes were half closed as she let her mind drift though time.

She remembered the first night she and Renny had hooked up in his cabin on the *Blue Horizon*. She recalled the countless trips the two of them took together during their shore leaves, and she remembered the time when she thought he was going to propose to her during a mountain climbing vacation on Kantus. Her mind swirled over many more memories and her heart raced as each one vividly came back to her.

She had been unaware of it for a long while, but this situation had taught her the agony that Renny must have gone through after she had been whisked away following the fight with Sagan. He had not known if she had lived or had died and the worry that must have eaten at him had to be similar to what she now felt herself. Even after she finally returned home to the *Blue Horizon*, Taro had never really been aware of the turmoil that Renny had suffered. Until now. Now she understood.

For the first time since he had arrived at the hospital, Merlin turned on the waiting room vidscreen. The channel was set to the local weather station for Iverson and he picked up the remote to change the frequency. He sat down beside Samantha, who busied herself with a crossword puzzle book, and then flipped the channels until he got to INN.

A field reporter was decked out in a lavender pressure suit giving an account in a desolate-looking field of scorched and blackened rock with a glassy texture she had difficulty standing upon. The air around her was thick with toxic clouds and through them moved a large mechanical device of some sort behind her.

"...and to that conclusion, the Jerath Mining Corporation of Dennier has high hopes that the surface of Mainor in its present state might wield rich minerals. Jerath has already filed mineral rights to what was once the Dojes Plain, which is about thirty kilometers to the south of where the metropolitan city of Risen used to exist before the Siilo War. However, Mainoran organizations located off-world are up in arms over the Dennieran company laying claim to Mainor, no matter the state of the planet. Memories of the Dennier-Mainor conflicts of over a decade ago have resurfaced, but the spokesman for

Jerath has expressed no concerns for the now-dead world. For INN, this is field correspondent Jennifer Saxon."

"Speaking of war," said the voice of Holly Harken as the camera changed to show her at her normal post as the anchor of the Interstellar News Network. She was dressed in a powder blue blouse with a white tie and a pale yellow carnation attached to her dark hair above her left ear. "The Roppa star system continues to be off-limits to anyone entering its borders. Six hours ago, a starship for rival news network PANN was shot down just inside the Reytharsa asteroid belt by a Tanatan battleship. Our sources tell us that the SS Noio Bloom tried to sneak into Nalirra for a news story, but the Planetary Alignment Network News cruiser was detected by the Tanatan battleship just as it entered the asteroid belt for cover. A chase into the Reytharsa region lasted only twenty minutes before the Noio Bloom was destroyed with all hands aboard. Names of the passengers and crew of the vessel have not been released pending notification of their families."

Holly shuffled several papers in front of her without looking at them and then gave the camera a pretty smile. *"Before we sign off with this broadcast, I have another news story to brighten the day of those interested in the royal House of Aris of Tanthe. The long-awaited birth of new children in the royal line has just been confirmed only a few moments ago from our offices in Aris Grand. Princess Tinara has given birth to two healthy pups, one male and one female, as a result of a royal tradition to infuse new blood into the family line by an unrelated outside father. The identity of the children's father has been kept anonymous in Aris tradition, but it has been made known that the coyote infants are half wolf, a hybrid sometimes known as a coywolf. Names of the infants have not yet been publicly released, but we will be sure to let you know as soon as we have them."*

Samantha looked up from her crossword book at the screen and then glanced over at Merlin with narrowed eyes. *"Celebrations all over Tanthe have begun to honor the people's favored Princess Tinara,"* Holly continued. *"Whoever the father of the children may be, the Aris monarch, King Adion Aris, has assured his subjects that the anonymous male has been well-compensated for his contribution to the family line. Well folks, this wraps up tonight's edition of News Around The Planetary Alignment. I'm Holly Harken, bidding you a Good Day or Night, wherever you may be."*

A commercial for TranStar Shipping came on the screen and Merlin muted the sound. He felt Samantha's eyes on him and he turned quietly to look at her.

"Is there something you need to tell me?" she asked in a flat tone.

Samantha wrapped her arms around her middle as she stared out the window of the hospital lobby and watched it rain. The sky had been cloud heavy most of the day and the rain had begun at sundown. Rolling thunder sounded far off on the horizon and Samantha smiled thinly at the thought of Renny shaking in fear had he been able to see the distant lightning. For several moments, she watched the puddles grow on the garden walkway outside, but then she finally closed her eyes.

The rain shower outside the building was nothing compared to the storm within her mind. Had she not already been on edge from Renny's situation, she might have been able to think more clearly, but the newscast in the waiting room had dropped a load into her thoughts. Merlin had been hesitant at first, but then seemed relieved to have someone to talk to concerning the House of Aris.

He had given her a lengthy account on what had happened with him during his visit to see Prince Merlin, but there were parts of his tale that she found hard to believe. He had never

lied to her in the past, at least she didn't believe he had ever done so, but she had trouble swallowing everything he had told her.

Samantha told herself that he had been completely honest with her and she *wanted* to believe him, but it was so difficult. She was not as close to the Aris royalty as was her captain, but for the sake of the relationship she had with him, she was determined to contact Princess Tinara at the first opportunity that presented itself to her. Perhaps *then* she would be able to make up her mind about it all.

The Border collie opened her eyes with an audible sigh and shook her head in frustration. She took another look out into the rain showers that were strengthening into a storm, then turned and walked back to the elevator. She rode the lift back up to the floor where they had been camped out and then headed slowly back to the waiting area.

Merlin was nowhere to be seen, so she went up the hall toward the chapel. Perhaps she would find him in there, although she wasn't sure she really wanted to discuss anything more with him at that point.

She turned the corner in the corridor and saw Doctor Sado talking quietly with Taro ahead. She could not hear what was said at this distance, but Sado shook his head and Taro suddenly buried her face in her hands. The black bear put a hand on her shoulder and said something else before he turned and walked away.

The vixen looked up at Samantha when she approached, then jumped to her, holding her tight. She cried onto the Border collie's shoulder and Samantha swallowed hard, instinctively knowing what the doctor must have told her. Tears came to her own eyes as she listened to her friend's sobs, but she said nothing to give the fox time.

Taro calmed down after a moment and then pulled away from the canine. She wiped her eyes on the sleeve of her blouse and then looked into Samantha's widened, brown eyes.

"The doctor just told me," the vixen said in a hoarse voice, "that Renny isn't responding to the transfusion." She swallowed and then said, "He advised me to gather his friends around him... for his last few moments..."

"Taro..." Samantha whispered with moist eyes, "we knew this was coming..."

"I... I know, Sam... I just... I just..."

"I know, Taro. I know." The collie took the vixen in to a warm embrace once more and for several moments they cried upon one another's shoulders. Time, however, was on their minds, and if they were going to gather the others for Renny's last moments alive, they would need to hurry.

Tsarina exited the lift she had taken to the crew deck and she stepped out into the corridor with her eyes barely open. Her rest period could not have come at a better time. She was exhausted from the rigorous repair schedule and could barely stand up. She wasn't sleepy, so much as she was just *tired*.

The *Hidalgo Sun's* Mobile Sentry System floated past her and meowed its greeting, but Tsarina chose to ignore the Moss-unit. It had done nothing against her, but she didn't like the little thing primarily for what it represented - that they had been under attack and that a dangerous element was still out there gunning for them somewhere.

She found her way to her cabin and then tapped the control to open the panel. It slid aside with a gentle hum and she looked into the darkened room for a moment before she

stepped inside. She closed the door behind her and then leaned back against it with her arms wrapped around herself.

Tsarina Ahnya had served aboard various freighters over the years, and of those there were several which had been attacked by pirates wanting their cargo, but this was the first time she had been employed by a company stalked by *terrorists*. It unnerved her and frightened her. After the attack on the home office on Dennier, Tsarina had considered looking for a job with another ship, but the freightliner business still hadn't fully recovered from the economic disaster following the Siilv War, and jobs in the market were hard to come by. Horizon Freight had done well due to a good PR team and Captain Sinclair's good sense of business, but other freighters hadn't been so lucky. Despite the terrorist attacks, working for Sinclair had paid well and allowed her to work on board one of the newest *Okami*-class ships in the business.

Still... being stalked by an unknown enemy frightened her. She felt she could hold her own in a straightforward fight, but this situation scared her more than she realized. When she allowed herself to ponder the situation, Tsarina was filled with horror. What would happen next? Would *she* be shot down in a dark alleyway like Renny... or would it happen to her out in the open, even in the midst of a crowd? *When would it be her turn?*

She choked up when her thoughts turned to Renny. Captain Kegawa had informed them all that the health of the *Blue Horizon's* navigator had deteriorated further and now it was probably only a matter of time before they got word of his passing. Tsarina shook her head.

"No!" she hissed to the dark room. So long as he was still alive, there was hope that Renny could make it, no matter how pessimistic the doctors were.

The black jaguar reached out and found the light panel. She turned the light on to a low setting so she could see her way across the room and then moved through a Japanese *noren* curtain into her bedroom. She turned the light on to its lowest setting there as well before moving to her vanity table.

She sat down on a short stool covered with a large blue pillow and then reached for a framed photo on a corner of the tabletop. It was a picture of Renny Thornton in a pair of black swim trunks and a gray tank top with the *Blue Horizon's* logo across the chest. He smiled toward the camera and his large yellow eyes glinted in the flash.

Tsarina held the framed picture before her and she lightly caressed the cheetah's photo. She got up from her chair and took the picture back out into the front room. She set it on a low coffee table in front of her couch and then walked to a wall cabinet. She pulled out a lighter and a cardboard box, and then took them back to the coffee table.

The jaguar knelt down on the carpet and opened the box. Inside were a number of short, red candles that she saved for special occasions. She pulled out eight of them and arranged them on the tabletop in a circle around Renny's photo. When they were arranged, she closed her eyes in prayer for a moment then picked up the lighter. She lit each candle slowly, and with each one, she intoned the cheetah's name in a whisper.

Tears fell freely from Tsarina's cheeks as she lit the final candle. She lay her head down on her arms on the table and allowed herself to cry.

Merlin tried to swallow, but the lump in his throat was too big to get down. He looked around the small ICU room at the others gathered around their fallen friend. Taro stood next to him at the head of the bed, with Samantha holding hands with him on his other side at the navigator's feet. Tanis and Lorelei were on the opposite side of the bed. The rabbit was on the

verge of crying openly, but bravely held it in. With the exception of the EKG and blood pressure monitors, all the rest of the sensors and IV tubes had been removed from the cheetah.

Probably for the first time since she had picked him up from the filthy alleyway, Taro's eyes were dry. It had been a long time since she had been cried out and she now leaned over Renny's head to lovingly stroke the short fur on top of his head. She looked stronger than she had over the past couple of days and Merlin knew in his heart that she had finally given him up. Whatever it was that Renny now faced, the wolf hoped it would happen smoothly and without pain.

Samantha stared mutely at each of the faces around her and realized her own expression must mirror those she saw around her. Each one was already in some form of mourning, but held their ground until what would be the very last moment.

She glanced over at the monitors still running and let her eyes become unfocused after a moment. The amber numbers counted up slowly and the monotony of it helped her mind to wander.

There was something at the back of her mind that tried to penetrate the fog surrounding her brain and it took several heartbeats before it solidified in her understanding. Samantha refocused her eyes and studied the monitors.

The numbers were counting *up*.

"This *Hidalgo Sun*," a bobcat said into the headset microphone placed around his feathered head. "Sorry, but video not working at moment. What can do for you?"

"Danaher? Is that ya?"

"Aye, yes, is me. Who you?"

"Dan, this is Tanis of the *Blue Horizon*. Would ya please call Captain Kegawa to the Com?"

The feline narrowed his green eyes. "Name not Dan. Name is Danaher, mister Arktanis. Sorry, but captain asleep, is tired."

"Sorry about the name," the desert fox's voice said with levity. "Since Rezo is asleep, I need ya to relay a message to all on yer ship. Renny's blood pressure is rising steadily on its own and the doctor says he is looking better with each passing moment!"

"YES!" shouted a voice from the doorway of the bridge. Jonesy grinned in at the startled bobcat and practically jumped into the room. "Here, let me have that!" the orange cat exclaimed as he plucked the headset off the accountant's head.

"Tanis, this is Jonesy - I just heard what you told Dan... that's *great* news!"

"Danaher!" the bobcat complained at the shortened use of his name. Jonesy ignored him as Tanis replied.

"We were all gathered around Renny's deathbed a few hours ago when Sammy noticed the monitor numbers rising. Doctor Sado says it must have been the combination of the synthesized blood they'd put in him earlier along with the transfusion from a donor. Whatever it was, it worked. It looks like Renny's going to live!"

"I'll bet Taro's relieved," the feline first officer said with an ear to ear grin.

"We all are," Tanis replied. "Taro's been stationed beside his bed and won't let go of his hand as she watches the monitors. He regained consciousness about ten minutes ago and Taro made sure that her face was the first one he saw when he opened his eyes. He's not completely out of the woods yet, but Doctor Sado is taking this as a good sign and they're continuing to watch him closely."

"Thanks for calling, Tanis," Jonesy said, "but I'm itching to spread the news. I want to be the one to tell Tsarina – she's likely to kiss me just for making her day!"

Tanis chuckled. "That's a devious way to get a kiss, but I hope yer successful. That's all the news I had for ya anyway. I just wanted everyone over there to get the word."

"Thanks, Tanis. *Hidalgo Sun* signing off!" Jonesy cut the circuit and then set the headset on the counter in front of him.

"Danaher!" the bobcat said again with a shake of his head. "Have told you again! Name is Danaher!" Jonesy ignored him as he darted off the bridge. He trotted along the corridor and then stopped beside Tsarina's cabin door. He knocked on the door and waited with a smile. When he didn't get a response, Jonesy frowned. He knocked again and then heard a muted voice through the doorway.

"Not now..." he heard the jaguar's voice.

"Tsarina," he called through the door, "I have news about Renny!"

He heard nothing for moment, but just when he was about to try again, the door panel slid aside. Tsarina was dressed in a sheer teal nightgown and the tabby cat's eyes bulged at the sight of her. The scent of roses was strong in the air, too. "C'mon in," she told him, oblivious to the first officer's stares.

Jonesy followed her into her cabin and then stopped still when he saw the front room. The room was *full* of lit candles. Every available tabletop surface contained red candles. He could feel the heat they generated and for a brief moment wondered how they hadn't set off the fire alarm. In the middle of the room, on the low table in front of the couch was a framed photograph of Renny. Tsarina walked over to it and then picked it up.

"Did you come to tell me that Renny has...?" she asked quietly, unable to finish the sentence.

The tabby cat shook his head and then looked up at her with a grin. "No, Tsarina," he said quickly. "Renny is *responding* to the treatments – he's going to be okay!"

The jaguar looked at him with wide eyes. "R-really? This had better not be a joke..." she said dangerously.

"No jokes, Tsarina. I just took a call from Tanis saying that Renny's blood pressure is rising and that he regained consciousness just a little while ago!" He took a step toward her and opened his arms wide in invitation.

Instead of the expected response, however, Tsarina didn't run to him for a hug, but instead dropped to her knees on the carpet, clasping the photograph close to her chest. She began crying, but this time the tears were of relief and joy. Jonesy sighed, dropped his arms, and then walked over to her to lend his support.

Taro looked up at Merlin when the wolf entered the room. She had been keeping watch over Renny, but now he slept normally, no longer in a coma. Merlin set a tray of food from the cafeteria on a small table next to the vixen and smiled at her.

"You've been in here so long," he said to her. "I knew you wouldn't leave his side, so I brought you something to eat."

Taro stood up and pulled Merlin to her. She embraced him gently and then laid her head on his shoulder. "Merlin," she said quietly, "I....."

Without warning, her eyes rolled up and Taro collapsed in his arms. He struggled with her unexpected weight, but managed to get her back into the chair without dropping her. He

looked at her closely and realized that she was physically and emotionally exhausted. Now that Renny was out of the worst danger and on his way to recovery, Taro's mind had shut down to rest.

Merlin gave her a compassionate smile and brushed a few locks of red fur from her forehead gently. He picked up a blanket from a nearby chair, draped it around her shoulders and then made sure she would remain upright in her seat as she slept. He moved up to the head of the bed and put his hand lightly on the cheetah's shoulder.

"You can both rest now," he said in a whisper. "I'm glad to have you back with us."

"Repairs have been completed, the safety inspectors have signed off on it, and the Port Security has given us authorization to leave as soon as we file our departure time with the Alexandrius Defense Authority."

"What about your cargo?" Merlin asked of the red panda on the bridge screen.

"The SPF has examined everything closely and has found no other dangers. The material damaged by the blast has been replaced for immediate shipping to Tanthe, plus we have our mail quota that has also been scrutinized. Our delivery will be a week and a half late getting to Tanthe, since it took us nearly that long to get the ship space-worthy again, but I've informed our contact on Tanthe of the situation and the SPF has validated our story with them. Aris Grand assures us the delay will cause no consequence, so we'll be getting underway as soon as you give the word. Pockets and Max are already en route back to Iverson, so you should see them soon."

"What about Mark?"

"Although he's still in a cast and on crutches, Carmen has released him back to work – much to her personal relief. That man doesn't make a good patient and his complaining was really getting on her nerves. As for everyone else, we are more than ready to get back into a routine."

"Well, then," Merlin nodded, "you can launch as soon as you're given the green light from the ADA."

"Aye sir," Rezo replied. "I will call back with a report after we've cleared the system."

"Have a safe voyage, Captain."

Merlin stood at the seventh floor window of Renny's private hospital room, his hands behind his back and his eyes closed as the warmth of the sunlight washed over his face. The last five days since the cheetah had regained consciousness had been thankfully uneventful. Renny was still in sore shape from the gunshot wounds and broken bones, but he was now out of danger. All he had to do was relax and heal, but waiting was not one of Renny's finer attributes.

The navigator had been of such good cheer that the crew of the *Blue Horizon* joked with him and teased him constantly, but despite his sneers at their bad puns and snorts at their jokes, he enjoyed the attention he got from everyone.

Pockets and Max had returned to Iverson bearing several get-well-soon baskets and gifts from the crew of the *Hidalgo Sun*, as well as a personal letter from Tsarina. Renny would not divulge the contents of the letter, but he seemed quite embarrassed after reading it. Not even Taro could get him to talk and he would show it to no one.

Despite all that had happened, the *Blue Horizon* was being prepared for its next launch. They were scheduled to take standard relief supplies to Joplin, the headquarters of the Spatial

Police Force. It would be a four-week journey with an immediate turnaround back to Earth flying empty. Officers Sashay and Wagner were personally inspecting the supplies that would be taken to their headquarters, to make sure there were no more incidents like the one that had temporarily crippled the *Hidalgo Sun*. As Durant had not yet returned from his mountain excursion, Samantha was assigned as load master to supervise the weight distribution of the load placement.

In association with the Iverson hospital, Tanis arranged to have Renny transported to the *Blue Horizon*, where he would be monitored closely during the rest of his recovery. Taro and Lorelei had already appointed themselves as his nurses, and as soon as the cheetah healed well enough, a rehab exercise routine was already planned to get him back up on his feet.

Merlin opened his eyes at the sound of wheels behind him. He turned as Tanis and two male nurses approached the sleeping cheetah. "Renny," the desert fox said with a gentle shaking of his friend's shoulder.

The navigator yawned and opened his eyes. "Time to go?" he asked.

The nurses lined up beside his bed and one nodded to him. "We're going to move you onto this gurney," the cougar said, "and then you'll be taken downstairs to a transport that your captain has arranged for you."

"Okay," Renny said. The nurses picked him up gently and moved him to the gurney. Due to his ribs and abdomen wounds, he still could not sit up, so he had to take his trip to the spaceport on his back. Tanis patted his friend on the shoulder and then walked over to Merlin as the nurses rolled Renny out of the room.

"Dr. Sado is in surgery right now," Tanis said, "but he's already approved Renny's release. They need yer thumbprint down at the main desk on the first floor and then we can head to the *Horizon*."

"Okay," Merlin replied. "Let's do it and be rid of this place. I don't particularly like hospitals."

"They're not so bad," Tanis mused. "I hope to get a job working in one someday."

Merlin glanced at him with a smile. "I know you want to be a doctor, and I think you'll make a great one, Tanis," he said, "but for now, I'm glad to have you on my crew."

"Thanks, boss," the fox replied meekly.

Samantha looked up when a levitating green cab settled down to a stop near the rope perimeter surrounding the *Blue Horizon*. Durant stepped out of the vehicle, paid the driver, and then removed his luggage from the back seat. The aircar floated away and an armed guard approached the surprised grizzly with his weapon brandished.

Before a repeat of what had happened to Lorelei could take place, Samantha shouted toward the guard. "Let him through!" she said loudly. "He's one of ours!" The guard lowered his weapon and waved the puzzled bear through the ropes.

"Hi, Sammy," Durant said when she met him at the loading ramp. "What's with the guards?"

Samantha gave him a warm hug and then took one of his bags for him. "Just a safety precaution," she told him. "We've had a lot of excitement in your absence and the guards are there to prevent any more of that excitement before we launch in the morning."

"Oh? What kind of excitement?"

Samantha shrugged her shoulders, deciding to keep it simple for now. "Oh, nothing much. A bomb exploded in the *Hidalgo Sun* while they were loading cargo," she said almost nonchalantly, "and Renny was shot outside of a nightclub and almost died."

Durant stopped in his tracks and set down his suitcase. "What?" he exclaimed.

The Border collie took his arm and looked up at him. "You can get the details later, but everything's fine now. The *Sun* has been fully repaired and is already on its delivery run, and Renny is up in his cabin being tended by Lori and Taro. The hospital released him earlier today. He'll be out of commission for a while so he can heal, but for now the excitement is over."

Durant looked down at her incredulously. "All this in the eleven days that I was gone?" he asked.

"Yeah, and if ya had taken a DC with ya on yer mountain trip, we could have let ya know about it," Tanis said dryly.

The grizzly turned around to see the desert fox walking toward them. Tanis held a paper grocery sack in his arms full of printed books and crossword puzzle magazines for Renny's convalescence. Despite his words, the medic was pleased to see him.

"It was probably better I didn't know," Durant admitted. "It would have ruined my perfect vacation, and it doesn't sound as if there is anything I could have done had I been here anyway."

"What an attitude," Tanis said to Samantha. "It still would have been prudent had ya taken one with ya anyway, in case ya got into trouble yerself. How did things go?"

Durant smiled. "It was a perfect vacation - probably the best one I've had in years," he said. "I fished in a mountain lake and took it easy in the fresh air at the cabin. I relaxed in a peaceful environment and didn't do a thing that involved using my brain."

"Any... problems with yer heart?" Tanis ventured to ask. "Any trouble breathing... in the thin air?"

Samantha looked at him strangely, but Durant only shook his head with a grin. "No problems whatsoever, *Doctor* Tanis. I didn't so much as sneeze at the hummingbirds while I was up there, nor even got a splinter from a thorn. I feel refreshed and fully recharged, as Pockets might say."

"Well, as least you didn't come back with a hunter's ear-tag on you," Samantha quipped with a grin.

"Ya took an awful risk going up there by yerself," Tanis said, "but... I'm pleased to know yer feeling okay. I still intend to give ya a complete physical, objections or no."

Durant merely shook his head and then winked at Samantha. "He's persistent," he said. "I'll give him that."

It had been a week since the *Blue Horizon* left Alexandrius. The ship was cleared to leave by the Spatial Police Force and Merlin had paid the security guards well for their help with letters of appreciation going to their bosses. Company insurance had been filed for Renny and Mark for their injuries and Interstellar Insurance had come through for them again for the damage to the *Hidalgo Sun*. Long range sensors detected no other ships on their flight plan to Joplin, and for the time being, there appeared to be no further danger to ship or crew.

In the cabin of Renny Thornton, all the lights were out save two tall, red candles lit on a table beside the cheetah's bed. He had healed well enough that he could now partially sit up with some pillows and Taro had personally prepared a special meal for him.

The vixen was dressed in an elegant black dress with the right side split up to her hip, and a plunging neckline that left little to the imagination. Renny was in awe of her beauty and could not think of a time he had ever seen her so lovely. Although the setting was only his personal bedroom on board a freighter, Taro was dressed for him as if they had been invited by royalty for dinner.

The red fox uncovered a tray of food and spread it out on top of his dresser so she could feed it to him slowly and deliberately. This was a special night and she had chosen soft music from his cabin Com system.

Renny swallowed in anticipation after seeing the food spread out for him, but he couldn't keep from smiling up at her.

"What is so amusing?" Taro asked with a grin of her own.

"Your feather seems out of place with the rest of your clothes," he said hesitantly.

Taro instinctively reached up and stroked the feather clipped to the fur above her left ear. "I'm so used to seeing it in my reflection that I'd forgotten I was still wearing it," she replied. She narrowed her eyes and gave him a mischievous grin. "I can't wait until I can use it again," she added.

Renny's eyes widened. "Just because you've been designated a Grand Major by the Hestran Society of the Feather," he said, squirming in his bed, "don't think that you can go around tickling anyone who's available. I heard what you did to poor Durant a few weeks back."

Taro leaned forward over his bed. "There's no one on board who's more ticklish than *you*, my friend," she said, "although I can think of other activities I'm looking forward to more."

Renny swallowed once again. "Forget the feather... I'd rather have the other activities," he said with a smile. "Right now, however, I'm starving!"

"Before I feed you," Taro said quietly, "I have a special gift to give you." She turned her back on him and reached beneath a tented napkin on the dresser. When she turned around, she held a small package wrapped in red and white checked paper that was adorned by a red ribbon and a tiny bow. She held it out to him on one hand.

"What is this?" the cheetah asked.

"Open it," Taro said. Hesitant, Renny picked up the small package and then carefully pulled off the wrapping. Underneath was a simple white box, so he stuck a claw under the lid and slowly lifted the top.

Renny smiled and pulled out a ceramic figurine of a wild red fox that was identical to the one she had purchased for him so long ago. Next to it in the box was the ceramic cheetah that he had bought for her in exchange. A single red thread was tied with each end around each figurine, binding them together.

The navigator looked at them for a long moment and then hesitantly stretched out a finger to caress the head of the fox. "Thank you," he whispered.

Taro sat on the edge of the bed and looked into his eyes with moisture in her own. "The red string signifies the bond between us," she said to him. She closed her eyes for a moment and then looked back at him. "Don't ever do this to me again," she said in a quiet voice. "I don't think I could have survived had you died back there."

Renny set the figurines on the bed next to him and then reached out to take her hands. "Remember when you were hurt by Sagan and nearly died?" She nodded. "I didn't have the luxury of worrying beside *your* bed, sweetheart," he said in a whisper. "I was all alone."

Taro swallowed and nodded. They had each come near death and both had agonized over the other in different ways. She picked up the figurines and set them aside, and then she

leaned forward to give him a deep kiss. Afterward, she clung to him and held him tight, ever so thankful that each had survived for the other.

THE SECRET OF TANAGER CASTLE

By Ted R. Blasingame

Blue Horizon, PA1138

Captain's Journal

It has been three months since my last journal entry. Most of what's happened since the attacks on Renny and the Hidalgo Sun hasn't been much to note and I've been lax writing anything down.

After we left Alexandrius, we made deliveries of general supplies to the SPF Headquarters on Joplin, transported the equipment of a film crew and several members of its cast to Earth, and then picked up a load of metal pipelines for shipping to Ganis. After that, it was back to Joplin for some training, and then to Kantus to deliver an export of archaeological artifacts to a university for study.

We've had no further attacks on the company, but despite how good this sounds, it continues to make me nervous wondering when the next strike will happen. Granted, we have increased our security measures on the ship and cargo, and I have forbidden anyone to go out alone while on shore leave. It's been expensive, but I've hired guards to watch the ship every time we're down for a delivery or pick up.

In light of the multiple attacks on the company, the SPF granted my request for concealed weapon licenses that are recognized by the local authorities throughout the Planetary Alignment, and I made it compulsory for all my employees to have firearm training. During the Blue Horizon's most recent visit to Joplin, I arranged a week of training with the SPF officers in the use of firearms for my crew. I'll have to say that everyone was taken completely by surprise by Lori's marksmanship. She maintained higher scores than anyone, including the three of us who have had prior military training.

To her credit, Lori played down how well she could shoot a gun saying that she had plenty of training due to all of the military bases she lived on while growing up the daughter of a career-minded army officer of Kantus. She doesn't particularly like weapons, but she sure knows how to wield one... and I hate to admit that she was the one I had the lowest expectations for learning how to shoot. Anyway, I made it mandatory for the crew of the Blue Horizon to carry concealed Binfurr handguns while on shore leave. I don't like having to do this, but after what happened to Renny, I don't want to take any chances until our enemy is finally caught.

We've run across JW Chon twice in the last few months and our meetings have continued to be amiable. Neither of us has heard anything more of Armando, so we can hope he's behaving himself wherever he may be. Perhaps he's learned some responsibility and is working somewhere earning a real living.

Renny's road to recovery has been slow, much to everyone's displeasure. My navigator makes a terrible bed patient and has nearly driven everyone crazy. Tanis, Taro and Lori have been working with his physical therapy these past few weeks, and although he's now up and about the ship, he still has to take it slow. If he happens to make a sudden movement, his injuries will remind him sharply that he hasn't fully recovered. Samantha has tried to get him to use the antigrav pillow that Pockets made for her during her own convalescence, but he doesn't want to bother with it. It's a personal frustration for a cheetah that is used to being quick on his feet to have to rely on an external device to get around. It would

be easier for him to accept the offer and just use it, but on the other hand, it has given him incentive to work hard to get back into shape.

I have allowed him to help me on the bridge with navigation, but not with the actual flying of the ship. Before the attack, I'd fallen lax on having the other crewmembers perform the landing and launches, but with my primary backup pilot out of commission for three months, a few of the others are being reintroduced to the Blue Horizon's flight controls. Lucky for me, I have some decent pilots among my crew – although Max frightens everyone whenever he's in the center seat. Inevitably, he will forget some small process, but I make sure I am always on the bridge to watch him and compensate for his mistakes. He may have impressed everyone with his mechanical aptitude, and I'm glad to have him in the engine room with Pockets, but he has a lot of practice to go before he can be designated a trustworthy pilot.

At this time, we are currently approaching Tanthe, where we will be landing at Tanager Castle. I'm the only one on board who has actually been to this location before, but not long after we'd launched from Alexandrius, Samantha received an invitation to a wedding addressed to her and the crew of the Blue Horizon. It seems that her friend Alex Rogers issued a proposal to his Lady Ayana and she accepted.

We were able to shuffle around our delivery schedules with the home office and the Hidalgo Sun to allow us the opportunity to spend a little time to attend the ceremony. Since Lady Ayana Kojote is the cousin of Princess Tinara of the House of Aris, and Alex is the CEO of the largest pharmaceutical corporation in the Planetary Alignment, King Aris allowed that the wedding should take place at the ancient Tanager Castle.

As I understand it, Master Tristan, former Regent of Sillon, will be in attendance, which has been good news for Samantha. Alex worked for Tristan for a good many years and the Silloni master fully intended to be there for his wedding. It's a long way to come from Sillon, but I understand that Master Tristan is in possession of a ship equipped with a new generation of LightDrive engines. It's a little faster than what is currently on the market, and has enough of an edge that it could shave a week and half off the time it would normally take the Blue Horizon to go the same extreme distance. That may not sound like much, but when the journey normally takes three months going one direction, that week and a half could make a great deal of difference in food, air and water on board an interstellar ship.

I will have to talk to him about it when we meet. If it performs as well as I have heard, I may have to look into having the Horizon's engines upgraded.

I admit that I feel strange coming back to Tanthe, especially back to Tanager Castle. I've not been back since being approached to take part in the Aris family tradition, and I am hesitant to see the Princess again. Of course, for the sake of her son who bears my name, I don't intend to avoid her. I don't know if her four-month-old twins will be there, but I have an obligation to see Tamari and Dorian if they're also present. Needless to say, I am strongly curious to see how the little coywolves have developed.

I can't say that this brief journal entry will make up for three months' laziness, but I should wind this up and head to the bridge soon. We'll be arriving at Tanthe in about two hours and I should begin my checklist. Tanis is assisting in the landing today and I'll need to make sure he's on the bridge long before we approach planetary orbit.

Merlin Sinclair, Captain

The great hall of the ancient Tanager Castle was lit by hundreds of white candles from eight crystal chandeliers hanging from the vaulted ceiling, and garlands made of every color were draped around the walls of the room. Braziers of open flame with baskets of flowering shrubs hanging beneath them lined the walls to provide a modicum of warmth while lush draperies adorned the walls to keep it in. The bronze and iron statues of Tanthean heroes that occupied each corner of the room were also festooned with flowering garlands. The crystals of

the chandeliers above sparkled from the lights and movements below, and more flower arrangements were placed tastefully in every part of the room. Tables draped with white satin cloth with candelabras in the middle of each gave the place a stylish feel.

Royal dignitaries, media personalities and other invited guests were gathered in between the rows of tables, a hundred conversations filling the air with joviality and laughter. Near the forward end of the chamber were a pair of elegant thrones of velvet drapes of purple on an upraised dais, but at the moment they were empty. We were unable to attend the wedding of Tinara and Kal, but I am sure it probably looked something like this.

Near the back of the room, a small group of various species was huddled together as if the regality of the place was overwhelming and something dread would happen if they split up. Each held a drink glass and most of them fidgeted while waiting. They were dressed in various garments of medieval design in order to match the fitting of the locale and the occasion.

"That was such a beautiful ceremony," Lorelei said with bright eyes. "I just love weddings, don't you?"

Tanis looked at her with an amused expression as he tugged at the strap across the back of his breeches that was just a little too tight for his tail. "Yeah, it was nice," he replied in an unconvincing tone. Lori looked at him suspiciously and then *tsk'd* at him.

"You're lying," she said with her hands on her hips. "What do you have against weddings?"

"That was a lot of pomp and showcasing," the fennec fox said with a grin at her reaction. "In my hometown, all it took for a couple to become legally married was for them make an announcement at a local gathering that they had become mates. No certificates, no singing in foreign languages, no blessings by their parents or elders and no media coverage like those two just had."

"That sounds rather dull," Samantha said with the shake of her head.

Tanis grinned. "Oh, the couple would be given a grand party by family and friends," he said, "but the union itself was nothing more than a public announcement."

"Well," Samantha said, "as much as I hate to agree with Lori on anything, I thought Alex and Ayana's wedding was beautiful." Lorelei tilted her head at the comment, but nodded.

"Alex has a gorgeous bride," Durant said as he scratched the fur at his neck where the fancy medieval garment had been rubbing. "He certainly looks happy about it. All the fuss is probably worth it to him."

"Yeah, but I don't think I'd want all this attention either," Renny piped up from the side where he leaned on his crutches.

Taro leaned over to him with a mischievous look and said, "What if Tsarina wants a big wedding, dear?" she teased.

Renny looked embarrassed. "I should have never told you all what was in Tsarina's letter," he groaned. "I've gotten nothing but grief about it ever since I let you know she has a big crush on me."

"Ren-Ren, we've *all* known she's had a crush on you since our crews first met," Samantha said with a smirk.

"More than a crush," Tanis teased with a big grin. "If ya have not left out anything from the letter, it sounds as if she's quite in *love* with ya."

"I think she wants to have your kittens," Samantha said with a sly look. Renny gave her a momentary glare, but couldn't hold it. He grinned in return.

"Yeah, well..." Renny started, "she nice an' all, but I'd rather spend my time with Taro."

The vixen grinned and then whispered something into his ear that the others couldn't hear. Merlin laughed at the embarrassed expression on the cheetah's face and wondered what naughty comment the red fox had uttered.

"Is that Samantha Holden I see?" said a voice from an approaching figure. As one, the *Horizon* crew turned to see a shapely human woman with long dark hair in a golden dress adorned with silver leaves. Her eyes sparkled at the recognition by the others and her grin was a mile wide.

"Holly?" Pockets asked in amazement. "*Holly Harken!*"

The woman smiled down at the diminutive raccoon and nodded her head. Samantha had a canine grin that was ear to ear and she held out her hands. Holly took them and then pulled her into a hug. "I am so glad to see you here," she said. "This was a surprise I had not expected."

Samantha pulled away and beamed at her. "The groom is a childhood friend," she explained. "There was no way I would miss his wedding."

"Well, I didn't know either of them myself," Holly remarked, "but it was a media event that INN wanted me to cover personally." She leaned in close and added, "They don't let me out of the studio very much, so I jumped at the chance for some field work!" She looked up at the Hestran fox and gave her a warm smile. "You *must* be Taro Nichols," she said.

The vixen nodded quietly and seemed subdued in the famous anchorwoman's presence. "That's right," she said in a quiet voice. "I can't thank you enough for your help on Hestra."

Holly took a step toward her and touched Taro's cheek lightly. "I'm sorry I couldn't do more," she replied with sudden moisture in her eyes. She and Taro exchanged a brief hug and then the woman wiped her eyes with a handkerchief she pulled from a small bag she carried.

"Now," she said to Samantha in a voice that was a little stronger, "how about introducing me to your friends?"

The Border collie grinned and gestured toward Pockets, who was practically biting his lip to keep from blurting out his praise of the woman. "This is our chief engineer, Jerad Porter," she said. Holly knelt down so that she looked the raccoon better in the eyes and shook his hand. "I am delighted to meet you, Mr. Porter."

Pockets felt himself blush beneath his fur and his bright eyes practically shone. "The pleasure is mine, I assure you," he said in a shaky voice. He dug into a pocket of his suit and produced a worn notebook and a pen. "M-may I have your autograph, please?" he asked.

Holly's eyes sparkled as she took the book and pen with a smile. She was used to this, but she never turned down the opportunity to please a fan with her autograph. She flipped through pages of engineering notes to a clean page near the back, and then signed her name with two small hearts. She handed it back to him and then gently tickled his left ear. Pockets took the book with honor with a short bow, his joy barely contained.

Max elbowed Pockets gently with a laugh and Holly gave him a wink. Samantha introduced the German shepherd, and then went around their group one by one, ending with the wolf.

"This is our Captain, Merlin Sinclair," Samantha said. Merlin took her hand and gave a short bow.

"Pleased to meet you, Captain," Holly said in genuine admiration. "I have heard so many things about you that would fill up a program, were you to permit me to interview you."

Merlin grinned at her lopsidedly. "I'm not so sure the life of a mere freighter captain would be of much interest to your viewers, Miss Harken," he said in a smooth voice, "but I am pleased to meet you as well."

"Modest, isn't he?" Holly said with a laugh to the others. "I'm glad to have had the chance to meet the crew of the *Blue Horizon* in person," she added. "You have done the Planetary Alignment much service in your adventures, whether you are aware of them or not. A mere freighter captain, indeed!"

Another human came up to Holly's side and whispered something into her left ear. She nodded and then he disappeared back into the crowd. "I'm afraid I will have to cut our visit short," she said apologetically. "I've been granted an interview with the bride and groom and have been told I've only ten minutes to prepare. Nice meeting you folks!" she said. She exchanged another short hug with Samantha and then she was gone.

"Well, that certainly was a surprise," Tanis piped up after a moment of awkward silence. "For a human, she's a looker!"

Durant laughed and rested an elbow on the fennec's shoulder. "Fancy her, do you?" he teased.

Tanis grinned widely. "I don't think I'm alone in my admiration of the famous Holly Harken," he replied. "Pockets was practically drooling on himself when she was here."

"Aww, I wasn't *that* bad..." Pockets gushed. "Was I?"

"Yes, Pockets, ya were," Tanis laughed, "and she could see it, too!"

"All I wanted was her autograph," the raccoon said in embarrassment.

Renny put a hand on his shoulder. "Don't worry about it," he said. "I'm sure she has big fans all over the PA, and your request was probably commonplace."

"I feel like a goofus," the engineer muttered lowly.

"That should feel natural, Pockets," Tanis said with a grin, "because ya *are* a goofus."

"Gee, thanks too much!"

Merlin chuckled and then took a drink of his punch. He swallowed it hard when he noticed someone else walking over toward his small group.

He'd managed to evade Princess Tinara since landing the day before. Even back when Sam had received Alex's wedding invitation, he knew their eventual meeting was unavoidable.

Merlin approved the side trip and had the crew at HQ reroute their delivery schedules with the *Hidalgo Sun* so the *Horizon's* crew could attend. When they had at last arrived on Tanthe, they were directed to land in a wide plain a mile to the south of the castle, where other ships and landers had been parked as well. Shuttle services were provided from the plain to the castle, but no one was allowed to set down within the fortress walls themselves, nor were they allowed within the airspace over the nearby Tanager Village. Visits to the small village were permitted, but all items electronic in nature were forbidden within five miles of the place. No explanation had been given over that last directive, but everyone complied.

"Good afternoon, your Highness," Merlin said with a short bow. The other *Horizon* members turned to see the approach of Princess Tinara and each of them quickly gave a bow of their own, although Renny's bow was nothing more than a nod of his head, owing to his prior injuries.

"Good afternoon to you all," the coyote woman replied. Young Prince Merlin Aris trailed behind her, one finger resting on his lips at the crowds around him, and his other small hand resting comfortably in his mother's hand. Durant exchanged quick looks with Tanis and then the two of them closely watched the expressions on Samantha's face. They all knew well of the relationship between the captain and their supply officer, and of the recent events that tied them to Tinara. Max leaned over and whispered something to Pockets and the raccoon nodded silently.

Princess Tinara was dressed in an ice green gown with gold trim and white lace, with a plunging neckline decorated with an elaborate diamond necklace and matching gems in an understated tiara between her ears. Merlin thought she looked lovely, but felt a knot in his throat as he realized the attention from his crew that was focused on the two of them.

"Princess," he said a little awkwardly, "I would like to introduce you to my crew," he said. Tinara nodded quietly and then Merlin named each of his friends around them. When he came to Samantha, the princess' eyes lit up.

"I am so pleased to meet all of you," she said, "but I am *most* pleased to meet the woman who has the heart of my wolf friend."

Samantha swallowed and then gave a short curtsey. The group around them fell completely silent. "Likewise," the Border collie replied quietly. "I hope your Highness and her children are doing well?" Taro drew in a sudden breath at Sam's comment. While it was a simple pleasantry, it was a little bold for those who knew what they thought they knew.

Tinara gave her a warm smile. "Thank you for asking," she said. "I am doing well, and so are my children." Prince Merlin looked up at Captain Merlin in sudden recognition and released his mother's hand to jump up into the wolf's arms. The lupine captain picked up the boy with a smile and lifted him up onto his shoulders to the delight of the child.

"Yayyy!" exclaimed the royal youngster. Tinara's eyes crinkled in amusement.

"Where are your other children?" Lori ventured to ask.

Tinara's eyes shined when she looked at the rabbit. "Their nanny is caring for them in Aris Grand," she replied. "Miss Dayl is a wonderful woman, but I still found it hard to leave my pups behind. Despite their royal upbringing, they are already becoming mischievous in their own ways. I suspect it is the wolf blood in them." She turned and looked at Merlin with a look that silently suggested many things. Samantha moved closer to Merlin and threaded an arm through his, avoiding the child's leg that dangled from the captain's shoulder.

"That reminds me," Princess Tinara said as she raised a handbag that had been hidden in the folds of her gown. "I have something for you."

She pulled out an envelope of parchment and handed it to Merlin, who took it in curiosity. Across the back flap was a purple waxed seal with the Aris crest impressed into it. "What is this?" he asked. There was no writing on the package and he turned it over quietly, hesitant to open it.

"That is a letter from the wolf who fathered my youngest children," Tinara replied casually. "He asked me to deliver it to you personally while you were here today." There were looks of astonishment among the *Horizon* crew, and Samantha raised her eyebrows.

Merlin looked up at her, oblivious to the stunned looks of his friends. "What is it?" he asked.

"I do not know," the princess replied. "It was sealed before he gave it to me this morning and requested that no others were to handle it until it came into your possession. He asked that it was for your eyes only - to be read in private, but he did not divulge the contents to me."

"Excuse me, your Highness," Durant said meekly. "You said the *father of your children* wanted you to deliver that envelope to Merlin?"

"That is right, Mr. Durant," she replied. "Is there a problem?"

The grizzly swallowed his embarrassment. "No, milady," he answered. "It is just that I thought..."

Tanis put an elbow into the bear's side and Durant became instantly silent. Tinara noted the action and frowned. "There appears to be some confusion among you," she said. "Please tell me your thoughts on the matter of my children."

Merlin cleared his throat and all eyes from the small group went to him. "I must apologize for my crew, your Highness," he said with a growl in his voice. "They have been making assumptions based upon a misconception." Taro snickered at the wolf's choice of words, but fell silent at the glare she received from him.

"What assumptions?" Tinara asked. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"They thought Merlin was the mysterious father of your cubs," Samantha answered with a smirk. Tinara looked at her in sudden amusement. She glanced over at the wolf and noted the embarrassed expression on his face.

"Is this what you have been telling them?" she asked him with a sparkle in her eyes.

"No," Merlin replied. "They have assumed this on their own."

"He hasn't said a word, your Highness," Pockets said, "but the timing of his last visit to see you would have been about right. We thought..."

"You thought that Merlin Sinclair had been chosen to father my children in a family tradition to bring new blood into the royal line?" she asked. There were nods all around and Tinara suddenly moved to Merlin's side, opposite that of Samantha. She threaded an arm through his and then laughed.

"You aren't wrong, my friends," she told them to astonished expressions. "Merlin *was* chosen for our tradition, but he declined." She giggled at the apparent awkwardness the wolf felt at her side.

"Why?" Lorelei asked boldly. "You are so beautiful!"

Tinara sighed. "Thank you, my dear, but he is a proud *wolf* who values family, and would not take part in something that would produce children if he could not stay to raise them. He even refused the royal counsel of my father, the king of all Tanthe. Imagine that."

Samantha looked up at the fidgeting Merlin and felt a warm glow inside. He had told her of this before, but she'd been reluctant to believe he had actually turned down the advances of a princess whom Merlin was known to be fond of, as well as the offer of a nice fortune by the Aris monarch himself.

Tinara continued without interruption. "There was another reason he wouldn't let himself be seduced," she said as she looked over at Samantha. "His heart was already taken by another. He expressed strong feelings for someone already close to him."

It was Sam's turn to feel embarrassed and she clung to Merlin's arm tighter. Merlin himself was unmoving, his eyes focused somewhere far away so that he didn't have to meet the gaze of anyone in his crew. He absently fiddled with the envelope in his hands and met no one's eyes.

"If Merlin's not the father of yer kids," Tanis said quietly, "then who is?" He glanced at the parchment envelope. "I understand that wolves are not common on Tanthe."

Princess Tinara smiled. "It is customary in these matters for the father to remain anonymous, but apparently he is someone familiar with your captain," she replied with a gesture toward the envelope. "I have said little to him about Merlin, but he *is* aware that my *firstborn* was named after Merlin Sinclair, commander of the *Blue Horizon*."

"It has to be someone from Dennier, then," Taro said. "There are lots of wolves there who know Merlin."

For the first time since the explanations began, Merlin moved. He lifted the youngster from his shoulders, much to the displeasure of the child, and set him on the ground beside his mother. He smiled sheepishly. "Now you all know it wasn't me," he said in a low voice, finally relieved to have the secret truth finally voiced.

"But why'd you never deny it?" Renny asked. "We've been speculating in front of you about it for months!"

Merlin shrugged his shoulders. "Because you wouldn't have believed me anyway - especially since it was announced on INN that the cubs were half-wolf. It was safer just to let you speculate, than to have to endure your disbelief. Besides, I don't know *who* the real father is either - or how he could choose not to stay and raise the pups."

He removed Tinara's arm from his and turned to face her. "Congratulations on your successful mating," he said with a smile that was finally relaxed. "I know what it means to the House of Aris, and I am happy that you found someone willing to help you."

Princess Tinara looked up into his golden eyes and felt unashamed before him and his friends. "I admit that I still wish it had been you, my dear wolf," she said with a wink toward Samantha, "but I also admire your resolve, your sense of relationship and of family. These are commendable qualities."

"Thank you, your Highness," Merlin said with a short bow. Tinara chuckled and then tiptoed up to lick the tip of his nose.

"That's mushy stuff!" the young coyote prince said with a wrinkled nose. "Yuck!" The small group laughed at the child's words and Tinara could feel the tension had gone out of the air.

"Well," she said at last, "the Prince and I must mingle with the other guests now. I don't know if I will have the chance to speak with you for the remainder of your visit, so I bid you and your crew a fond *fare well*."

The *Blue Horizon* crew bowed to her in unison and then she left with her son in tow. She glanced back toward Merlin and winked at him before she turned her attention elsewhere.

"Wow..." said Pockets. "That was quite a revelation!"

"That sure explains a lot," Durant commented.

Tanis stepped forward and pointed to the envelope still in Merlin's hands. "Ya gonna open that?" he asked.

Merlin looked at the parchment package, held it up and looked again at the seal. "Yes," he replied, "but she said I was to read it in private. Why don't you clowns go eat some wedding cake while I hide out and see what this other wolf has to say to me?"

Samantha looked up at him with a smile, the feeling of warmth all through her. "You turned down a princess for someone closer?" she asked as the others dispersed, talking animatedly amongst themselves.

Merlin grinned and then gave her a quick peck on the cheek. "Yes, I did," he replied. "Now, go slap Alex on the back in congratulations while I go look at this."

"What?" the Border collie asked in mock surprise. "I thought you'd at least let *me* read it with you."

Merlin grinned. "Uh uh..." he said. "It's probably all the sordid details of his mating with Tinara and I don't want your delicate eyes ruined by what might be in here."

"My delicate eyes!" Samantha laughed. "Go and read your royal porn, then," she said. "I'm going to go tease Alex about his impending wedding night!"

Samantha left his side and started to make her way through the crowd. The few seconds she had delayed had already lost her to the others, but she didn't care. She walked idly among the people and nodded in greeting to those who met her in like manner. She'd not heard a fanfare of any kind, so she knew that Alex and Ayana had not yet come forth to greet the visitors in the throne room's reception hall, likely still tied up with Holly's interview with them.

She milled around here and there, until she heard a voice she had hoped to hear. She smiled widely and excused herself through several blocks of people until she stood before the one who had raised her as a pup.

"Master Tristan!" she exclaimed when a lull had come into the conversation with several other Silloni.

The tall, black equine looked down at her with gentle brown eyes and smiled. "My Samantha," he said in a deep voice. "I had hoped to see my adopted collie," he said.

Samantha moved forward and hugged him fiercely. She was *so* glad to see him, especially since he had suffered at the hands of a would-be assassin. There were very few off-worlders away from Sillon who was aware of the importance of the Silloni's spiraled horns, but Samantha knew and was overjoyed to see him looking as if he were in his prime.

"I have missed you, Master!" she said with wide, moist eyes.

"There, my little one, no tears please," he said gently. "Guinevere and Laura are around here somewhere, but until they return, I want to introduce you to the current Regent of Sillon."

When Merlin left the great hall, a coyote guard stepped up to him. "I am sorry, Sir, but there are no unescorted sojourns allowed into the castle during this time, please," he said.

Merlin nodded, but from a pocket pulled out a metallic badge that had been given to him upon his arrival, granting him full access to the estate. The coyote examined it and grunted. "My apologies, Milord. You may proceed."

"Thank you," Merlin told him with a smile. He looked around and searched for anything out of memory to show him where he was. He wanted to go to the library, and if he remembered correctly, it was to his left. The lupine captain moved down a shadowy corridor that was lit by torches placed just far enough apart to give the passage an air of gloom. His footsteps echoed off the rock flooring and he met no one else. He soon came upon what he was looking for – a flight of circular stone steps that led up to the next level. When he reached the top, he walked quietly along another torch-lit corridor, passing armed sentries along the way. Without preamble, he showed his badge as he passed each guard, and he received nods from each that allowed him to pass.

When he was certain he had crossed the length of the fortress itself, he soon found a pair of polished wooden doors. He moved through them into a large chamber that was well-lit and extravagantly furnished with chandeliers, sculptures, potted plants and ornate furniture that were all surrounded by floor-to-ceiling shelves of books – some of which looked to be centuries old. The overhead ceiling was painted in various shades of blues to represent a cloudless sky of a warm spring day and the columns that held it up were covered in climbing ivy that issued a minty aroma.

Save for himself, the room was unoccupied and he moved quickly to a high-backed chair of comfort. He held up the parchment envelope and was about to break its seal when he noticed something on the wall opposite him. Merlin frowned and almost groaned aloud. The portrait of himself that had once been in the room where he had last stayed was now on display in the castle library along with other royal heroes of the past. As the princess had indicated earlier, he *was* modest when it came to himself, and seeing the portrait unnerved him.

While there was no real reason to do so, Merlin got up and moved to another elegant chair that faced the other direction. He nodded to himself in satisfaction and then looked at the envelope. With the tip of a claw, he pulled up on the flap and broke the Aris seal. It made a

small *snap* in the quiet of the room and then he removed the contents. Inside was a letter on matching parchment, and the neat lines of the missive looked as if they had been written with a well-dipped quill.

Merlin's pulse skipped a beat and he felt his heart well up into his throat when he looked at the handwriting. He recognized it immediately. He closed his eyes momentarily and then swallowed hard before he allowed himself read the letter.

Merlin,

Please sit down, as this will undoubtedly be a shock to you. I have asked Princess Tinara to deliver this letter to you personally, for it to change hands with no one save between yourself and the Princess. If the seal to this letter is unbroken, then my secret may still be safe. As she has undoubtedly told you, I am the father of her newest children, due to a family tradition held in high esteem by the family Aris. By Tanthean law, they are bound not to reveal the identity of the surrogate father to the general populace so that he may live in peace and remain anonymous, albeit highly rewarded. However, it's in my right to reveal myself to whomever I please, so long as it is not brought to the attention of the public.

Tinara has told me of her infatuation with you, from the time you first met and through reports of the growth of your business in this time of trouble throughout the Planetary Alignment. As a schoolgirl sometimes does, Princess Tinara continues to hold a crush on you – one that will likely follow her for many years, even though you refused to grant her wish to take part in the Family Tradition.

The day after you left Tanager Castle, Tinara went horseback riding across the countryside, to clear her mind, she said. I don't believe you have been there, but six miles from the castle is the tiny Tanager Village, which exists solely to maintain and support the castle. Just before arriving in the village, her majesty's horse threw a shoe and she walked her animal the rest of the way to the stable to have it looked at. In the village, I was nothing more than a delivery boy to the castle, and it was while she awaited her horse to be reshod, I delivered some grain to the blacksmith.

Almost as soon as she realized that I was a wolf, she drew me outside under a shade tree and explained the Aris Family Tradition to me. I was offered wealth beyond my dreams and the granting of any wish I could ask for, so long as I remained anonymous. I have been down on my luck for many years, usually due to my own foolhardiness, and this was really the first time that something good had happened to me.

I told her what my "wishes" were, and although they took her aback to hear my odd request, she assured me that everything would be taken care of. She took me into her bedchamber that night and I satisfied my bargain with the Aris family bloodline.

Over time, she visited me often, and as promised my wishes were fulfilled. I was introduced to a lovely lass who has since become my wife and we reside still in the quaint village of Tanager. There are some in this place who suspect that I am the father of the twins, as there are no other wolves here, but I let their tongues waggle without comment, for no one ever leaves this place. Wolves such as ourselves are taught from childhood the importance of family, of children and belonging, but honor has long eluded me and I've made no demands to take a part in the lives of those I've sired.

One of my granted wishes was that Tanager Village be rid of all forms of electronic equipment within a five-mile radius of the outskirts. This was done and the Aris monarch set forth a law banning all technology from the village on the pretense of keeping the spirit of the origins of the castle on its surrounding countryside intact. Of course, Tanager Village was already devoid of having much technology, but now it's free of all such devices. The penalty for disobeying is rather stiff.

The reason for this particular wish is that I had been previously captured by an evil force and had numerous explosives implanted all through my body to ensure obedience. The Cold Fire virus that the Planetary Alignment fell under during the Siltv War was of my design, but please don't place blame for the deaths upon me. I was forced under duress to write the virus and was punished violently by these internal explosives when I wouldn't comply. I was also informed that any attempt at surgery to remove even one of them would set them all off at once, so I'd had no hope of ever escaping his influence. Due to this, I am now missing several fingers and toes. In spite of my malevolent captor's torture, I encoded the antidote within the code itself. Apparently, someone on the outside had the foresight to examine the virus code deeply, for it was broken and eradicated far too quickly. I praise whoever it was who was able to find it in time.

My Master was unkind to me, but in the confusion of the War and its unforeseen sudden end, I found the opportunity to escape. I made it as far as Tanthe as an extra hand on a slow-moving, low-tech ship. I was deposited near Tanager Village, and when I realized there was no real technology here, I felt that perhaps I might be safe from anything that might generate a signal to set off the explosives within me.

I decided to settle in this place, and with my pact with Princess Tinara, this place has been declared free of technology so that I may live the rest of my days without fear of my Master finding me. He has many eyes and ears throughout the Planetary Alignment, and so long as I am thought of as dead, the better off I can be. I would also ask that you destroy this letter after reading it to further my chances of safety.

In this place, I am known simply as Jorge Flanelle, the deliveryman. I now have wealth to cover the needs of my wife and our own expected pups, and I have my safety, but to you and our sister Shannon, I am your lost sibling. Live well, big brother. I know we have had differences in opinion in the past, but you can rest assured that I am happy here. We shall never see one another again, and I ask that you swear yourself to silence of your knowledge of me if you value my life and my new prosperity. However, I wanted you to know what had become of me so that you and Shannon may put me to rest in your thoughts.

*May you and your business grow in health and wealth,
Lucas*

Merlin sat back in the high-backed chair and was tense in the cushions. He read the letter slowly three times to make sure he missed nothing, before he folded it and returned it to its envelope. The wording of the letter was more formal than his brother was used to writing, but perhaps his time in the quiet village that served a royal castle had impressed itself upon him.

He put the envelope inside his tunic and then sat in the chair with his eyes closed for a long while.

Merlin opened his eyes at the sound of voices and realized with a start that he had fallen asleep in the library chair. His first thought was that the letter had been a dream, but when he put his hand inside his tunic, the parchment envelope was still there.

He looked up and noticed that several of the chairs in the library were now occupied by guests of the wedding ceremony. Many were still garbed in the period medieval garments that had been required, but no one seemed to notice him. He brushed a hand across the top of his head and fluffed up some of the fur that had been pressed down during his sleep. He sincerely hoped he had not been snoring.

With as much aplomb as he could muster, Merlin stood up as if he had only been sitting with a book and quickly left the library. The first thing he noticed was a large window to the outside and he was surprised to discover that night had fallen during his nap. A full moon shone in through the windows and he studied its pocked surface momentarily before he moved away.

The others must have wondered if I'd skipped out, he thought to himself. He made his way quickly to a staircase to find the third-floor rooms that had been assigned to him and the *Blue Horizon* crew. *Either that, he mused with a wry smile, or they may think I have slipped off with the Princess again.*

It took him nearly fifteen minutes to locate the area of the castle where his quarters were and another five to find the right door. He stepped up to the heavy wood door and hesitated. He looked across the hallway at a low brazier that lit the passage and then walked over to it. He pulled the parchment envelope from his tunic and held it out toward the flames. He hesitated a long moment before he let it fall into the middle of the fire and then stood transfixed until he had made sure the document was unrecoverable ash. He swallowed and heaved a sigh before he moved back toward the room.

He knocked lightly and Renny's voice came through the heavy wood panel. "It's open, come in."

Merlin opened the door and stepped inside the room he shared with the feline navigator. "It's about time you showed up," Renny said with concerned expression. A tray with a loaf of bread and a wedge of cheese lay beside him on his bed, as well as an amber bottle of drink. "We looked everywhere for you. Alex and Ayana wanted to meet with you before they left for their honeymoon, but if you haven't seen them yet, I'm afraid you missed them. They left a couple of hours ago."

"I was in the library," the wolf replied.

Renny scoffed. "I know you like to read, boss, but don't you think you could have waited until tomorrow to check out a library book?"

Merlin looked cross at the cheetah. He didn't feel he had to answer to his subordinate and suddenly wanted only to leave. He moved to the door that opened out into an upper courtyard and stepped out without another word to Renny.

"Did Faltane find you?" Renny called before he shut the door behind him.

Merlin stopped and looked back in at him. "Victor Faltane?" he asked. "He was here?"

"Yeah, it was strange. He asked about you, but he seemed more interested wanting to know the health of your brother, Lucas."

A cold feeling overcame the lupine captain. "Why would he ask about Lucas?" he wondered aloud. "I wasn't aware the two of them even knew one another. What did you tell him?"

Renny shrugged his shoulders. "I just told him the last time we saw the flea-bitten cretin was when we booted him off on *Quiet* a couple years ago," he replied.

"That's awfully strange..." Merlin muttered. "Did you say anything about what you found in the code of the Cold Virus?"

"No, it didn't occur to me to mention it."

He looked at Renny after a moment's thought and then asked, "Was there anyone else there I should know about?"

"Max introduced us to his long-distance girlfriend, Wendy Bengoro," the cheetah said with a grin. "The kid's got good taste - she was cute."

"Isn't that the tigress he met when we were down on *Pomen*?"

"Yeah, they've been exchanging letters ever since. They were holding hands and both of them looked quite the cute couple."

"If I remember right, her father is a surgeon," Merlin mused. "He must be pretty prominent to have been invited to this wedding."

"I think Dr. Bengoro was associated with Alex in some way, as both are in the medical field."

"Well, I hope Max got to spend some quality time with his girl," Merlin said. "He's a good kid. Anyone else?"

Renny chuckled. "By going to the library, you missed the melodious song of the artist who'd been hired to do the music during the reception, Pixly Dixly."

"Now you're pulling my leg," Merlin said in surprise.

"Nope, they got the wonder bunny, herself," Renny replied with a look of disgust. "I think everyone realized the mistake that had been made in hiring her after she and her performers started. You wouldn't believe how many different arrangements of her song, *'Cause I'm a Girl* she has – and she and her choreographed dancers have different routines to each version."

Merlin shook his head. "Max must have been in heaven with Wendy holding his hand and his favorite performer on the stage."

"Probably," Renny replied. "He was gone almost as long as you were."

Merlin's smile faded at that. "Anything else?" he asked.

Renny flattened his ears against his head at the wolf's tone. "Just the actual reception of Alex and Ayana," he said. "Alex really wanted to see you."

"Alright, I get the message," Merlin growled irritably. Without another word, he left the cheetah behind. When he stepped out into the moonlit night, he felt a gentle, warm breeze. There were many things on his mind and he felt like a little outside walk might refresh his brain. So much had happened in the past year and Merlin was tired - not just physically, but mentally as well. He walked over to a stone rail at the edge of the courtyard and leaned against it. Feeling warm, he opened the front of his tunic to his chest and looked around.

There were more flowering shrubs arranged all about the courtyard and potted trees at every available corner. Far away from metropolitan city lights, the stars above the castle were brilliant. Merlin gazed up at them and wondered if he really belonged out there among them. There were more changes ahead, he felt. Some would undoubtedly be of his own choosing, but he was afraid that others would come of their own accord. It was rare that Merlin Sinclair was a wolf of indecision, but on this night, he wondered which course he should take.

He heard a soft footfall to his right and he glanced over toward its source. Bathed in the full moonlight was a creature of beauty. The skirt of her blue and white dress wafted gently in the night breeze, and the moon light reflected gently from her bodice. Her hands were together in front of her and the white gloves up to her elbows added to her elegance. Delicate pink slippers put a dash of color to her raiment and Merlin stood entranced with his mouth opened in awe.

Samantha stepped toward him hesitantly, a look of concern on her face. "You look troubled," she said in a quiet voice. "I suppose the contents of the letter the Princess gave you contained bad news?"

Merlin shook his head and swallowed as she stopped close before him. "No," he said in an equally quiet voice, "It was merely a *thank-you* for allowing him to have the honor of the Aris family tradition," he told her. It wasn't exactly a lie, but he would honor his brother's request to

keep his existence a secret. He took a step back and looked at her. It was the same outfit she'd worn earlier, but he seemed to see her in it for the first time.

"You look absolutely stunning, milady" he said in a quiet voice.

The Border collie smiled warmly. "Why, thank you, milord" she said. She spun around slowly, flaring out the skirt so he could see her from all sides, and then stopped to face him again. She lowered her nose, but looked up at him with half-lidded eyes.

Merlin caught his breath and moved closer to her. He put his arms around her and then she tilted her head up to him. They shared an extended kiss and then held each other for a long moment. "Merlin," Samantha said in a voice so quiet that even his sensitive ears almost missed, "I love you."

Merlin looked at her and smiled. "I love you, Samantha," he replied. Then he kissed her again, this time more passionately. Neither of them knew if it was the atmosphere of the ancient castle, the medieval garments or merely the night air under a full moon, but at that point in time, all either of them could see was the other.

Merlin Sinclair pulled away and took her hands gently in his own. She looked at him in wonder. He was handsome in his brown tunic that was open to expose his chest and dark blue pants that were bloused over black boots. She had seen the portrait of him in the castle library and felt that *this* is how the painter should have captured the King's Hero on canvas.

Then, without warning, Merlin dropped to one knee and looked up at her, his hands still holding hers. "Will you marry me, Samantha Holden?"

Sam's eyes misted over and a lump formed in her throat. For what seemed an eternity, she felt frozen in time and could do nothing more than gaze down into his bright, amber eyes. Then, finally, she could only nod her head and whisper, "Y-yes."

Merlin swallowed the lump that had been in *his* throat and then stood up again. Without another word, he reached down and then picked her up in his arms. She slipped her arms around his shoulder as one of her slippers fell from a delicate foot, but neither of them noticed as he walked across the courtyard toward her room.

Merlin looked over his shoulder at Tanager Castle. It was beautiful in the morning sunlight. The first time he had been here, he had left with his emotions in turmoil. This time he would be leaving with a lighter heart. He and Samantha would discuss their own wedding at a later time, but for now, the atmosphere of the ancient castle had been good for them both. The *Blue Horizon* would be departing in a few hours, but there was something he felt he had to do before leaving this place. He gave the reins in his hand a light flick and the palomino horse beneath him trotted down the road toward the community that supported the castle.

In the time it took for Merlin to reach Tanager Village, he had enjoyed the quiet countryside. Fields of wheat bordered each side of the one-lane road of gravel and he waved back at the friendly field workers who greeted him as he rode by. He was no longer dressed in the medieval garb of the castle ceremony, but back in his familiar captain's trousers and boots. He wore a light blue, short-sleeved shirt that was open to his chest and his comfortable captain's hat was perched between his ears, right where it belonged.

He had been searched before he left the castle to ensure he carried no electronic devices on him before he was issued the non-sentient horse, and now that he approached the village, he wondered if he was doing the right thing by coming here.

The local folk were friendly as he rode in and he felt touched by the quaintness of the area. The houses and buildings were made of stone and in one place, he could see that the sod covering on the roofs were just a decoration over a more modern, and likely more weather-worthy, roof beneath. He smiled and wondered just how “country” the village really was beneath its rustic exterior.

He dismounted his horse and held onto the reins as he walked through the town. His brother’s letter had mentioned a visit to the livery stable, so he asked an elderly coyote who idled his time in a chair outside a local store for directions. He thanked the gentleman and led his horse to the stables. Beside the hitching post was a watering trough, so he let his mount have a drink before he tied off the reins. A moment later, he stepped inside the hay-strewn floor of the stable.

He heard the ringing of a hammer on metal and let his eyes adjust to the darker interior. “May I help you, sir?” a voice called out when the ringing stopped.

“Yes,” he replied. “I’m looking for a wolf that makes deliveries to the castle. I believe his name is Jorge Flanelle.”

A burly coyote came up to him and wiped his hands on a dirty apron. “Jorge? Yes, I think I saw him heading over to the market a bit ago,” he said. He motioned Merlin to follow him outside and then pointed down the street. “It’s that building down there with the green banner out front.”

Merlin nodded his appreciation. “Thank you, sir.”

“Have a good day, milord,” the man replied and then went back to his work.

Merlin left his horse tethered to the hitching post and walked down the street to the market. He looked over the folk who moved up and down the aisles, but saw no wolves in the lot. He stopped next to a pretty young woman in an apron who was arranging apples on a table, and pulled out a gold coin from his pocket. He had exchanged PA Credits for local currency before taking his leave of the castle.

“Excuse me, miss,” he said quietly. “I am new to this area. Will this cover two apples?”

The coyote lass smiled at him with warm eyes. “More than enough, milord,” she replied in a country accent. She picked out two of the best-looking apples from her table, wiped dust from them with her apron, and then handed them to him. Then she led him to a counter and opened a drawer. She pulled out five bronze coins and one copper, placing them in his hand after taking the gold.

“Thank you,” he said to her with a short bow. The woman giggled and curtsied in return. Merlin put both apples in the pockets of his pants and then asked, “Pardon me, but do you know Jorge?” he asked

“Of course, milord,” she said with a nod. “He delivers things to the castle for me all the time. He was just in here a few moments ago, but I believe he had business with the groomer on the other end of the village.”

Merlin nodded, thanked her and then walked back out into the street. He pulled one of the apples from his pocket and bit into it. He smiled, for it was juicy and probably one of the best-tasting apples he had had in a long time. He continued munching on the apple as he walked through town with one hand in his pocket.

Half an hour later, Merlin returned to his horse. The day had grown warm and he was disappointed. The people in Tanager Village had been friendly and helpful, but he had been all over the village and still had not seen his brother. It seemed he kept missing him every step of the way. Lucas was apparently a busy guy. He glanced at his watch and frowned. He would

have to start toward the castle soon if he were to get back in time to start preflight preparations for their designated launch time.

He pulled out the second apple from his pocket and gave it to his horse, idly thinking that the animal's coloring greatly resembled Roger Paxton of the *Hidalgo Sun*. He waited patiently until the apple was eaten completely and he allowed the horse to drink from the trough. Then he stepped up into the saddle and took a last glance at the village before he urged his palomino back toward the distant castle.

As he rode past the last of the village buildings, Merlin didn't see a pair of amber eyes watching his departure from the loft of a barn. They watched until the horse and rider disappeared around a bend, and then they closed momentarily.

"Fare well, brother," the wolf whispered to himself.

PERIL IN EBONY

By Ted R. Blasingame

Blue Horizon, PA1138

Captain's Journal

The Blue Horizon is approaching the world of Fyn. Almost as soon as we got back on board the ship following Alex's wedding on Tanthe, Cindy had a message waiting for us explaining that we had received an urgent request for the delivery of standard supplies to an out-of-the-way colony in the backcountry of Fyn that's suffered a major loss due to flooding. The supplies had already been ordered from Silvest, a large Tanthean city about fifty miles from Tanager Castle. I'm not sure how a backwater colony would know we were in the vicinity of the very place where their supplies had been ordered from, but a job is a job.

Fyn is probably the least industrialized world of the Planetary Alignment, so it's not surprising that one of the colonies in the unexplored territories would call to another planet to replenish their supplies. Tanthe is a long way from Fyn, however. I would have thought Alexandrius would be a likelier place to get their supplies since the two worlds are in the same system and typically only a day away from one another by star freighter. Durant showed me the manifest for the supplies we picked up in Silvest and there's nothing particularly special about them. Alexandrius could have provided them easily, but it's not my job to worry where a customer orders their goods.

The Chimera Colony is located just about as far from local civilization as it could be. Fyn does not yet have a global positioning satellite system, so Renny used the directions the customer provided and found the site on the topography maps in the southern hemisphere. This place is located in the middle of the Kaisudon Mountain range, down in a deep canyon rift named the Valley of Bones. The map details show the region to be difficult to access. I would wager to guess the colonists got there by foot or pack animal, as a motorized vehicle would be unlikely to traverse the steep sides of the valley and colonists usually are not wealthy enough to afford to be airlifted. The planet of Fyn does not have many tall mountains on its surface to begin with, so it is my guess that the colonists chose the location specifically for its remoteness away from civilization. However, it doesn't look as if they planned well enough to be self-sufficient if they have to order supplies from a world in another solar system altogether.

Still, they paid our standard delivery fee in advance for the supplies, so I shouldn't complain. We will arrive during the local evening hours, so navigating the narrow canyon pass going instruments-only in the dark may prove to be a challenge.

Speaking of challenges, Samantha has been busy working up a guest list for the invitations for our upcoming wedding. We haven't done much more than announce our engagement to everyone since we left Tanthe, and we haven't even set a date yet, but Sam is acting the part of a bride preparing for her wedding. She and Taro have been researching bridal companies on the StellarNet for dresses. Shannon has even been helping out by touring the local shops for her.

Lori wants to help out in any way she can, but Samantha is reluctant to trust her with any specific duties. To be expected, all the guys on board have given me good-natured ribbing about finally giving in to Samantha's charms, though Durant keeps muttering "It's about time," with a grin whenever

I'm near. I've tried to remind everyone not to get too gung-ho until an actual date is set for the ceremony on Dennier. I may as well have saved my breath, as everyone, especially the ladies, are acting like it's next month.

As for me, I haven't tried to think about it too much beyond my proposal. I am sure I will have my hand in on the preparations once we have a date to work towards, but for the time being, I have to keep the business in mind, and that is one of the factors to figure in on potential wedding dates.

The company's been doing better than I anticipated. The girls at the home office have done an admirable job promoting the company, and there are calls almost daily requesting our services. I never thought it would come to this, but after talking it over with Durant, I've begun to think along the lines of buying a third freighter for Blue Horizon Freight Transfer. This would mean hiring another eight or ten people. The company account does have the capital to invest in another ship and crew, and I find it difficult to turn away customers who have been specifically requesting our services. With an expansion of the company like this, it could be harder to run my business out here in space. My brother-in-law has suggested turning the captaincy of the Blue Horizon over to someone else and settling down on Dennier to run things from the home office. While the thought has merit, I'm not sure I am quite ready to give up my ship just yet. Personally, I think he's just trying to get me closer to Shannon and the kids.

The flight to Fyn has been quiet, without incident and rather pleasant. Renny is now getting around without his crutches, but he's still walking rather slowly. With the type of wounds he had, it may be a while yet before he is back to his old self again. I overheard him make a comment to Durant that he's never had as many injuries, nor seen the inside of hospitals as much as he has since joining the crew of the Blue Horizon. I suppose that is true, since life aboard a stellar freighter should be mundane, but it does seem as if we have seen our share of excitement in the past few years. I just hope he doesn't decide to tender his resignation with us. He is one of the best navigators I have ever worked with, and he's also a good friend. The rest of my crew gets along with him well, and even though he and Tanis often argue with one another, they're actually good friends – at least I think they are. Since Renny's gotten past the danger of his hospital stay, the two of them have resumed some of their earlier arguments.

Max has been in contact with Clarence Duffy while on the way to Fyn, but we'll be in a completely different part of the world from him to make any stops to visit. They seem to have become good friends in a short time, although a father-son relationship hasn't developed. Max has a good head on his shoulders and seems to have handled the situation in a mature manner. I am really proud of him.

Taro is currently in the Blue Horizon's center seat with Renny on the bridge at navigation. We entered the Fynian atmosphere fifteen minutes ago and we are already en route toward the landing coordinates. The Chimera colony is transmitting a locator signal and we should be landing shortly. It is normally my duty to take over the landing procedures when there are dangerous conditions to fly into, but my first officer assured me that she could handle it, even in the air currents of this harsh mountain range.

Pockets has reported that the filters in the atmosphere recycling unit located between the double-hulls of the ship are getting dangerously clogged and will need to be cleaned out while we're down inside an atmosphere. It's a relatively simple job and we should be on the ground for little more than an hour, so I will excuse him and Max from cargo detail to take care of it while we are down.

Once we are finished here, we'll be launching immediately to Pomen for our next pickup assignment. I hate to leave without allowing the crew our standard three days of shore leave, but since this was an unscheduled diversion, Cindy had to make excuses with the Torres Corporation for the six week delay in picking up their automobile parts for delivery to Earth. She gave them the option to cancel out of the contract legally, but Torres assured us their people could handle the delay.

Merlin Sinclair, Captain

Merlin capped his pen and set his journal on the desk in front of him. Its cover of dyed Terran cowhide showed wear from excessive handling. It was the fifth such journal he had kept over the years and he knew he should order one with more pages in the future or learn to write smaller. Keeping a journal of his travels was a common tradition long held by ships' captains of all the worlds he had ever visited, whether they commanded ships that sailed the seas or the void between the stars. He was proud to uphold the custom, whether or not he planned to ever show them to anyone. He had long intended to transcribe them into electronic form for safer keeping, but despite all the free time he usually had during the voyages between worlds, he had never taken the time to do it. For the time being, he continued to put ink to paper just as it had been done in the days of the earliest explorers.

"Attention all hands," Taro's voice sounded from the ship-wide speakers, "We're approaching the Kaisudon Mountain Range, where we will experience wind-shear turbulences as we pass over them. The Valley of Bones is in the middle of this range, so I would advise everyone to buckle up until we have landed. You have about three minutes of stability."

Merlin left his den quickly and made for the bridge next door. Thumbing a pad set in the wall beside it, the navy blue panel with the golden image of a sailing ship's wheel moved aside for him quietly. He walked to the Com station, sat down, buckled himself in and then looked up at the amused faces of his bridge team.

"Even when you aren't driving the boat," Renny said with a chuckle, "you can't stay off the bridge!"

"You want to drive?" Taro teased, knowing there would be no change in pilots once they had dropped inside an atmosphere. "You can have it now!"

"I just want to see," the wolf retorted. "You keep your seat, lady."

"Aye-Aye, Captain, sir!"

"Let's hope everybody's strapped in," Renny said after a quick glance at his navigational readings.

Merlin looked out the forward windows. The sun was at their backs as they flew eastward and the sky before them was already growing dim from the approaching dusk. The ground below was a mixture of green and brown, darkening with the approaching nightfall. Their course had taken them over low hills and sporadic forests, but directly ahead and below them were the jagged peaks of the Kaisudon Mountains, commonly called the *Dragon's Teeth* by local folk.

"What the devil is *that*?" Renny asked suddenly. Merlin's gaze moved from the mountain peaks to another ship approaching from the starboard at a lower altitude. It was long, cylindrical and seemed out of place flying above the ground. "Almost looks like a submarine," the navigator said with a smirk.

"Hey, that's an old *Altus*-class cruiser," Merlin replied after studying its design. "I've only seen them in museums and ship catalogs, but it looks like someone got one flying. It's a dual-pressure vessel, designed for the vacuum of space as well as the pressures of a deep ocean - pretty solidly built, but I seem to remember their engines were rather unreliable."

"Wow, you're *full* of information," Renny teased. "Where's it from?"

Merlin turned to give him a smirk as the vessel slipped beneath them and continued on its journey. "Well, I can't vouch for this one specifically," he said, "but the *Altus* cruisers were built for Fyn's first forays into deep space after they developed their own form of LightDrive

technology using Falstar engines. They were only in use for a couple decades, but I don't think they've been widely flown for the past thirty years."

"Imagine seeing one out here in the middle of nowhere," Renny remarked.

"Renny, we're nearing the mountains," Taro said in a quiet voice. "I need a navigator."

"Right," the cheetah said, instantly forgetting the submarine starship. He set to work on getting a good fix on the landing beacon and sent the coordinates to the center seat's console a moment later.

The *Dragon's Teeth* rose to seemingly impossible heights and resembled the bottom of a spike-filled pit trap from the sheer numbers of their pointed crests. The tree line was far below, and while there was not much snow in this region at this time of year, Merlin could see patches of white in areas of perpetual shadow.

The canyons between the crags seemed bottomless and forbidding, and the mountain range stretched on for unseen miles in both directions. Merlin wondered again how the colonists had originally traversed them to set up shop deep in their midst. He forgot his musing when the *Blue Horizon* banked to the starboard and then suddenly bucked upward. Taro compensated with the guidance shifts without a word, but he could see the concern in her eyes.

The ship slipped sideways and abruptly dropped altitude in an unexpected pocket of dead air. Renny's eyes widened considerably at the suddenly nearer peaks, and he gripped the armrests of his seat with a strength that would undoubtedly leave imprints in the material.

Merlin swallowed in apprehension as he eyed one dark peak that jutted up at them almost as if it was growing on the spot. The *Blue Horizon* sped past it without a meeting and Taro calmly increased their altitude, much to the relief of her companions.

The vixen had not handled a flight such as this in a long while and the bucking ship tested her experience. Fortunately for them all, she was a competent pilot and weathered the atmospheric roller coaster admirably, although with clenched teeth. The darkness made unexpected rock outcroppings near impossible to see, but Taro spent more of her time watching the instrument monitor on the console before her than she did looking out the forward windows.

The *Horizon* smoothed out suddenly and Merlin's face lit up in appreciation. They had cleared the tallest peaks and were now descending toward a dark chasm that was wider than it seemed it should be in this place. Even so, he doubted that the bottom saw more than just a handful of hours of direct sunlight due to the height of the surrounding mountains. Although the area was now shrouded in deep shadow, the wolf thought he could see a mixture of forest, plains, and a meandering river that gently reflected the weakening sunlight in soft shimmers. Encircling both sides of the valley were huge fingers of wind-carved rocks that were bone-white and shaped like some titanic ribcage.

"The Valley of Bones," Renny announced. "Alter our course two degrees starboard and we'll be heading directly for it."

"Changing course, two degrees starboard," Taro repeated in a quiet voice. Merlin looked over and saw her rapidly blink several times, panting lightly as the ship passed beneath the stone rib formations. She caught him looking at her and swallowed in embarrassment. She managed a weak smile, but Merlin gave her a small nod of encouragement.

"The beacon is five miles directly ahead," Renny reported. "It's near the starboard wall of the valley." He stretched his arms to ease the tension he had built in them and felt a small twinge in his side. He lowered them with a frown and glanced back at the wolf. "We should probably give our contact a call to let him know we're on final approach," he suggested.

"Right," Merlin said as he turned to the Com console beside him. He picked up a headset microphone and put it around the back of his head so that one small flexible boom was near his ear and another near his lips. Once he had it in place, Merlin called up the contact information for their customer from the main computer and then keyed in the calling code and frequency. A green light came on to indicate the Com unit was ready and he touched it briefly.

"This is Captain Sinclair of the *SS Blue Horizon*, PA1138, calling the Chimera Colony, ID 50129," he broadcast. There was no immediate reply, but Merlin waited patiently for a response. He was about to try again when a voice sounded in the earpiece of his Com headset.

"Blue Horizon, this is Pamiu Nechet of the Chimera Colony. Good evening to you, Captain. How was your flight?"

Merlin smiled at the aged voice and routed the signal to the overhead bridge speakers. "Good evening to you, too. Our flight went well, Mr. Nechet. We have just cleared the *Dragon's Teeth* and are descending into the Valley of Bones. We are on final approach to your position and the landing beacon is coming in clearly. We should be landing shortly."

"Blue Horizon, I'm afraid you won't be able land on the exact location of the beacon, which is here in our communication hut. We're surrounded by forest and have limited free space around our homes, which is taken up by freshly plowed fields in the only area that gets sunlight that we would prefer you didn't land on."

"I understand, sir," Merlin replied. He glanced out the forward windows and frowned at the darkness. He made a motion to Renny to pull out local navigation charts. "If you will tell us where to set down, we'll gladly land there."

"As you home in on the beacon, you will find a large clearing a half-mile beyond our colony that should be large enough for your ship. You may set down there. We will meet you shortly with lamps and carts for our supplies."

"Aye, sir," Merlin replied. "We will see you there. *Blue Horizon* out."

"We'll be over their position in about a minute," Taro announced quietly.

Merlin activated the ship-wide intercom. "We'll be landing in two minutes," he announced, "but we have to set down a half-mile away from the Colony facilities. They will meet us there with carts and lights for their supplies and I want everyone except Engineering to help get everything off-loaded. Pockets and Max are to get started with air filter cleaning as soon as we are powered down. Assuming all goes well, we should be back in the air within two hours."

The wolf unbuckled his harness and moved to the Engineering console. Before he could sit down, Taro wrenched the ship to the starboard to avoid a tree taller than the rest. The inertial dampers were active, but were set low inside the atmosphere. Merlin stumbled and lurched into the chair.

"Sorry about that," Taro murmured.

Merlin waved it off, buckled himself to the seat and then tapped out a few commands on the terminal before him. He nodded to himself at the outside readings and then toggled a covered switch. Almost at once, the smell of plant life issued from the room ducts as fresh air from the outside began to vent throughout ship. By the time the cargo bay was unloaded and the hatches resealed for launch, the ship's environmental reserves would be replenished with fresh air.

"Mmm, smell that?" Renny said with his eyes closed. "It must have rained recently. I love the smell of fresh florence."

Taro and Merlin looked at one another with impish grins. "Florence?" the vixen asked in an amused tone. "You know someone here?"

"And you can smell her already?" Merlin added as he sniffed the air.

Renny opened his eyes and looked at them with a smirk. "Florence is a Fynian shrub that my captain used to grow in her quarters on the *Argentina*," he explained. "They give off a minty scent when they've been watered."

"Yeah, I can smell that," Merlin replied. "It's nice."

Renny tapped in a set of figures into the navigational computer and transmitted the coordinates to Taro's terminal. The vixen nodded without looking up and adjusted their course slightly. A heartbeat later, she moved the guidance shifts and then depressed a foot pedal gently. The ship slowed considerably and dropped to an altitude just above the tops of the trees below. There was a glow of torchlight ahead in the trees. A moment later, they could see nine wooden huts arranged in a loose circle around a larger one, all near a meandering stream. Several figures emerged from the buildings and waved as they passed overhead, and then were left behind as the *Blue Horizon* moved toward the desired landing site.

They flew over freshly plowed fields, although in the darkness it was impossible to tell exactly how much of it had been newly planted. The fields and the lights of the colony were left behind as they passed over trees once again. There were no moons shining down into the deep recesses of the valley and Renny had an eerie feeling. It was near pitch-black in this place. At least out in space the void was far from empty with starlight in every direction,

Then they were over a clearing that only the instruments could see and Taro toggled a switch beside her. The familiar *clunk* of the landing gear locking into place could be felt in the ship's deck plates and the vixen lowered the vessel gently to the ground. Once down, Renny and Taro began shutting down the flight systems. Merlin stood up with a stretch.

"Well done, Taro," he said with a smile. "You've earned your pay for the day."

"How about a raise?" asked the vixen.

The wolf grinned. "It wasn't *that* good," he replied. Taro protruded her bottom lip and then giggled when Merlin added, "Careful dragging that lower lip. You could get a sticker in it!"

"A sticker?" Taro asked with a laugh. "What's that?"

Merlin looked at her strangely. "A sticker is a small seed with spiny barbs that *stick* to anything that passes. My grandmother used to tell me I'd get a sticker in my lip if I pouted."

Renny snickered. "You're sure in a mood today, boss," he said lightly. "What's up?"

Merlin shrugged his shoulders. "I'm not sure," he admitted, "I woke up in a good frame of mind. I haven't had many of them lately, so I'm hoping nothing goes wrong to ruin the mood."

Durant filled his lungs with fresh air as soon as the bay doors began to open. He loved the smell of plants after a rain shower and preferred it to the stale air of the hold after a twenty-one day flight. He looked out into the darkness, but could see nothing beyond the glow of the internal lights. He looked back at the console beside the main airlock and flipped a large switch. Brilliant external lamps on each side of the bay door illuminated the area beyond the ship and made wet grasses glisten. The cinnamon grizzly thumbed another control and the loading ramp began to extend toward the ground.

He turned back toward the supply crates cabled to the floor of the hold, but stopped when he suddenly felt light-headed. His neck and jaw began aching and he felt short of breath,

despite the huge drafts of fresh air he'd just taken into his lungs. He shuffled to the nearest crate and decided to wait there until the others arrived for cargo duty.

It was not the first time he'd felt this way, but it had been a couple weeks since the last time he had felt discomfort in his chest. He looked up toward the ceiling of the cargo bay and his eyes watered from an increasing pain in his left arm. He massaged it mechanically and swallowed as he tried to relax. The feeling passed a moment later and he felt his breathing return to normal. He *knew* he should have Tanis take a look at him, but he was frightened of what he suspected the desert fox might find.

He heard the lift door open somewhere behind him and he composed himself for the task at hand. Samantha approached him a moment later and gave him a smile. "Smells good out there, doesn't it?" she asked.

"Aye to that," Durant answered in a hoarse voice. The Border collie looked at him strangely and he cleared his throat. "I'd like to bottle up the aroma and take it with us," he added in a regular voice.

"Are the colonists here yet?" another voice asked. Samantha turned to see Lorelei settle down on the crate next to Durant.

"Not yet," the bear answered. He stood up slowly and grunted from the effort.

"You okay?" Samantha asked in concern when she saw the look in his eyes.

Durant grinned lopsidedly and kneaded a muscle in his side with a hand. "I'm getting old, girl," he said, "but I'll get over it."

"I have an herbal tea that does wonderful things for tired muscles," Lorelei offered with a smile.

"I may have to give it a try," Durant said, "but first we need to get these crates unshackled. Sam, if you'd grab the lock codes from the slateboard on my desk, I'd be grateful."

"I'll get them," the canine replied.

He looked at Lorelei and asked, "Would you get out the work gloves for everyone?" The bunny nodded without a word and darted across the cargo deck to a storage locker. Normally, Durant would have already prepared these things by the time the crew reported for cargo duty, but he was moving slow today.

Tanis and Taro showed up together by the time all the cable locks were open and Lorelei handed out the gloves, each pair labeled with their names by a marker. Renny made his way out of the lift and then to Durant's side, his limp barely noticeable. The bear was stowing the cables in a locker near the starboard side of the cargo arena.

"What can I do?" he asked with a pair of glove already on his hands.

Durant gnawed on his bottom lip in thought. "Since you're still not fit for heavy-lifting," he said, "you can man the overhead crane. There are a few crates too bulky to be moved by hand. It's probably plowing equipment."

"I'll take care of them," the cheetah said with a nod. It would take a few minutes to uncouple the crane arm from its stowed position, but it would take some time to unload the rest of the cargo around the larger crates before he could get to them anyway.

Merlin was the last to appear. He had changed into a loose-fitting blue work shirt with long sleeves; His captain's hat was perched on its usual place between his ears. He took the gloves offered to him by Lorelei and then walked over to the load master.

"Any sign of our customer?" he asked. Durant looked up from the delivery paperwork and shook his head.

"Not as yet," the bear replied.

"Well, we're a half-mile from their homes, so —"

"Ahoy, the ship!"

Merlin looked up with a smile and he and Durant automatically walked to the edge of the cargo ramp. "Hello!" he called back.

A group of various feline males emerged from the darkness, some leading non-sentient workhorses pulling wooden carts. An aged jaguar walked forward with a smile. "Captain Sinclair?" he asked.

Merlin walked down the cargo ramp and extended a hand. The cat took it warmly. "I'm Sinclair," the wolf replied. "Merlin Sinclair and the *Blue Horizon* at your service, sir." More cats came into the light, and a quick count by Durant numbered them at twenty-five.

"I'm Pamiu Nechet," the dark-furred jaguar replied. "Thank you for coming, Captain. I know it was such short notice, but our winter will be here in a few months and we need to start preparing even now in our planting season."

Merlin glanced at the gray cat standing just behind Nechet and the younger male looked up at him with nervous eyes. His tail twitched in agitation and he tried to mouth something to the wolf, but shut his lips when the jaguar turned to look at him.

"Ah yes, this is Nicholas Moran," Pamiu said, "my colony deputy."

The jaguar looked around at the *Horizon's* crew and motioned them forward. "I would like to meet each of your people," Pamiu said. "Because of our seclusion, we rarely get any visitors from the outside, and never from off-world. It would be an honor to meet you all before we start working."

"Of course." Merlin gave a slight nod to his people and each of them walked down the ramp to assemble at his side. He chanced another glance at the gray cat, but the fellow was looking at his feet in apparent frustration. Merlin frowned and stepped toward him, but Pamiu grabbed his elbow lightly and steered him toward another cat.

The feline colonists gathered around them and introductions began. Renny was slow getting down the ramp, but as he neared the group with a friendly smile, others came close to meet with him. Another jaguar approached him through the crowd and the fur on the back of Renny's neck suddenly began to bristle. Lorelei saw his hesitation and gave him a gentle nudge in his side.

"Not all jaguars are out to hurt you," she reminded him in a whisper. Renny swallowed and nodded quietly to her. Only a portion of the felines in the colony was jaguar, while the rest were made up of other feline races. He cleared his throat as the dark-furred feline stepped up to him.

"Hi there," the male said in a deep voice. "We're so glad to see you. My name is Bomani Aleson."

"I'm Lorelei," the rabbit replied with a cheerful smile, "and my friend is Renny."

Bomani looked at the cheetah and tilted his head. "I think my brother would like to meet you, Mr. Renny," he said.

"Oh?" the navigator asked hesitantly. "Why is that?"

"You two have met before, but he never got to finish his business with you."

"W-what business is that?" Renny asked hoarsely. Another jaguar moved toward him out of the crowd and Renny felt the blood drain from his face.

"Let me introduce you to Zuberi Aleson, my brother..." The new arrival gave Renny a wide, toothy grin, but it was anything but friendly. The cheetah's eyes grew wide in recognition.

"You!" Renny exclaimed, lifting an arm up as if to protect himself. The jaguar reached out and grabbed his wrist in a vise-like grip.

"Going somewhere, Mr. Thornton?" Zuberi growled at him, still maintaining his malicious grin. His yellow eyes were narrowed to slits.

Renny gasped as the jaguar squeezed his wrist with enough strength to make the cheetah's eyes water from the pain. Lorelei's puzzlement at the exchange turned to shock as Zuberi punched Renny in the gut, precisely where he had shot him months before. Renny's air expelled forcefully from his lungs and he dropped to his knees.

Lori threw her hands up to her face in disbelief at what was happening. Shouts shattered the night from behind her and she whirled around to see Merlin throw a punch at Pamiu. Another, smaller jaguar jumped onto the wolf's back before his fist could connect, eliciting a cry of surprise. Merlin stumbled and his shirt ripped from his assailant's claws as he tried to throw the cat from his back. Unable to struggle away from the assault, Merlin was knocked to the ground by the older feline.

The chaos amplified around Lori. She saw Taro lift another jaguar over her head before throwing him over the crowd, even as another tried to tackle her. She heard more shouts and recognized the voice of Tanis, cut short by a silencing blow to the back of the head with a sock filled with sand. Somewhere in the back of her mind, Lori seemed to realize that of all the felines in the group, only the dark-furred jaguars were attacking her friends.

The fright of action paralyzed her, even as Bomani grabbed her ears and pulled the bunny around to face him. She only managed a muffled squeak as he roughly shoved a handkerchief up to her nose. Her eyes went wide and she finally found strength to struggle, but it was too late. The chloroform-soaked rag made her eyes roll back as it took her consciousness. She collapsed into his arms without a sound.

With the exception of Taro, who continued to fight everyone around her, the rest of the *Horizon's* crew went down to similar blows or doped rags. The Hestran fox made a valiant effort even as the horrible reality set in that the delivery had been a ruse to ambush them. Even tired, her instincts were vicious, gifting out broken limbs to anyone who tried to lay hands on her. It was a while before the attackers realized that individual strength would not topple the fox. They bore her to the ground from sheer numbers, piling on until they reached the threshold of her strength. A blackjack found a spot behind her left ear and the vixen dropped heavily onto the wet grass.

Merlin opened his eyes but he was unable to see anything but a dirty white blur. His head throbbed and he ached in numerous other places. He was blindfolded and bound with chains in a standing position with his arms outstretched between two poles, though he had slumped against his bonds. Some part of his brain noted that his hat was missing and his shirt felt as though it was hanging on him in shreds. Stinging cuts on his back reminded him why his shirt was in tatters. He tried to stand up, but his legs had trouble supporting him. He dropped back against his bonds with a grunt and then he heard someone get up from a creaking chair to his left.

"Merlin Sinclair..." an unfamiliar voice said near his left ear. "It's about time you woke up. I'm tired of listening to you snore."

"Who... who are you?" the wolf said through swollen lips.

"I'm your mailman."

"My...."

There was a soft chuckle and Merlin could feel the speaker's hot breath against his ear. "I have sent you several letters over the past year and a half," the voice explained, "but you chose to ignore them."

"The threats!" Merlin said in sudden understanding.

"Threats? No, they were... *promises!*" Another chuckle. "Some as yet unfulfilled."

"Do I know you?" the wolf said with a swallow. "How have I wronged you?" Merlin could see a portion of the floor in front of him beneath the bottom of the blindfold. He saw a pair of jack-booted feet move into view and then his companion spoke again from the front.

"You and I have never met before now," his faceless enemy said, "but you have caused no limit of frustration to those I've served."

"Who do you serve?"

"No, I won't provide you with an answer, Sinclair, but you *have* met them. They know you very well and have followed your movements for some time."

"Do I get to see the face of my enemy?" Merlin asked uneasily.

"Careful, Sinclair," the voice said in a menacing tone, "to look upon the face of the basilisk is death!"

Merlin's mind raced. He'd been in tough predicaments before, but never one such as this. From the sound of the menacing voice, he knew his life was likely in jeopardy, but although he didn't have a name, he now knew his enemy. "How should I address you," he pressed again, "if not by one of the names that immediately come to mind?"

A strong hand suddenly grabbed his throat and squeezed, but only as a brief warning. The hand relaxed, but the clawed fingers lingered on his neck for a heartbeat. Merlin swallowed involuntarily. There was another chuckle, very low. "Yes," his enemy said, "I will kill you, Sinclair. Of that, you can be certain. Soon, but not right away."

The individual stepped back from him and Merlin was glad to have the foul breath out of his face. "What about my crew?" Merlin asked in a low voice. It was difficult to talk with swollen lips. "What have you done with—?"

"No more questions from you!" his captor snapped. "You will give only answers." He paced around the wolf and growled lowly. "Now..." he said in a calmer voice, "you can begin by telling me where I can find your brother, Lucas Sinclair."

"That deadbeat?" Merlin growled. "You can probably find him on Quet. I kicked him off my ship in the town of Lormun nearly two years ago. He's either a miner or a slave by now."

"Yes, we are aware of this," his captor said with a snort.

"If you've been following me as closely as you say you have," Merlin said thickly, "then you know that my brother and I have never been friends. I've not talked to him since Quet."

"We have reason to believe you *have* been in contact with the younger Sinclair. Where is he *now*?"

"Why are you so interested in him?" the wolf asked. "Does he owe you money like he does to most people in the PA? Go stand in line."

A fist slammed into his stomach and all the air went out of him. He coughed and tried to double over, but his arms were still bound to the poles; he could do nothing more than hang against his chains. A hand grabbed the fur between his ears and pulled his head up sharply. Beneath the lower edge of his blindfold, he could see a black-furred chin. It was feline. Considering the group that attacked them at the ship, however, this was not really a revelation.

"Where is your brother?" the voice growled again. When Merlin didn't answer, he kicked the wolf in the shin out of frustration. Merlin grunted from the pain, but otherwise didn't cry out. "You are too stubborn for your well-being," he said. "That's your choice, Sinclair."

The man walked away and it was then that Merlin realized someone else was in the room. "Mr. Moran, tell the captain what happens next."

"No, p-please..." said a small voice.

"Tell him," growled the captor. Merlin heard a shuffle of feet as Mr. Moran was shoved over to stand in front of him. Beneath his blindfold, Merlin could make out a bare feline foot with gray fur.

"C-captain..." Moran said in a frightened voice, "They will t-torture someone in front of you... It - it's horrible! P-please... tell him what he w-wants to know..."

Merlin bit his bottom lip. This was the nervous gray cat that had tried to warn him just before the ambush, and the strain in his voice spoke volumes. Their captor had done something ghastly to the feline's people before the *Blue Horizon* had arrived. Merlin could think of no reply to give the cat. Despite the frustration that Lucas had caused he and their sister over the years, the younger Sinclair had already redeemed himself. Merlin had no intention of revealing the location of him and his new wife, nor did he intend to send hostiles anywhere near King Aris' ancient castle.

"Briggs, he's not going to talk," another voice said. Merlin tilted his head, but the name of his mysterious captor was not familiar to him.

"I think he will, Pamiu. Tell Bomani and Zuberi to bring in the cheetah."

"Yes, sir," the other replied

Merlin swallowed hard, his mind wrenched with the gravity of the situation. Renny had not yet fully recovered from his last encounter with assailants, and he had no doubts these were the ones responsible for nearly killing his friend. The thought of them doing anything to Renny gnawed at his stomach like the lingering punch. It was unlikely the navigator would survive this time.

Durant opened his eyes, but he saw nothing. He ached all over and discovered he couldn't move. *Oh Lord...* he thought to himself, *it's hit me really hard this time - I'm blind and paralyzed!* The grizzly bear started to panic, but then he heard Renny groan from a place near his right ear. It was then the ursine accountant realized he was lying on his back on a wooden floor; his arms and legs cramping. He could also hear the sound of thunder rumbling overhead.

"Ohhh..." the cheetah groaned again. "Just for once, I'd like to meet a black cat who doesn't want to beat the tar out of me."

"Tsarina doesn't want to hurt ya," said the voice of Tanis from the darkness. "She only wants to have yer kittens." Durant smiled to himself, but even that hurt.

"Tanis?" the bear said in a raspy voice. "I can't move and I can't see."

"We're all tied up," replied the medic, "and it's just pitch dark here, wherever it is they put us. I don't think the colonists liked Renny's cologne."

"Always the comedian," the cheetah retorted. Tanis chuckled and then heard Renny grumble under his breath. "They took my concealed pistol," the navigator complained.

"Is everybody else alright?" Durant asked.

"It's just the three of us, from what I can tell," the medic replied. "I don't know where the others are."

Durant sniffed the air. "I smell fertilizer," he said quietly, "and fresh dirt."

"I think we're in a storage shed," Tanis remarked. "I knocked over something a bit ago that almost hit me in the mouth. I think it was a rake."

"See if you can knock over another one and let it hit its target this time," Renny said sourly.

"Who put a thorn into *yer* tail?" Tanis replied. "I'm *not* the one who whooped up on ya!"

"I'm in a foul mood and you're handy."

"Quiet, you two," Durant whispered sharply. "Someone's coming."

A moment later, they heard the sound of a key in a mechanical padlock and then a *click*. Two flashlights blazed in their eyes and Durant could only see the silhouettes of two feline shapes as he blinked rapidly in the sudden brilliance. Lightning illuminated the sky behind them briefly and both flashlights centered upon the cheetah. One of the figures stepped inside, moving to Renny. He picked him up with a grunt and draped him over his shoulder in a fireman's hold. In the lamplight, Durant and Tanis could see just how much rope had been wrapped around their friend; Tanis took a quick glance at Durant to confirm the realization. The colonists must have used every bit of rope they owned to bind the three of them.

The feline shadow turned and carried Renny out in the night.

Merlin felt fingers on the knot at the back of his blindfold and then the dirty white cloth was removed from his eyes. He blinked a few times and then looked around. The room took up the bulk of the hut he was in, likely the gathering place for the colonists during inclement weather, such as the rain that had begun to fall outside. He stood between two wooden supports of the room, his arms in manacles attached to the poles with light chains. His blue work shirt was in tatters, the remnants of sleeves still attached to cuffs beneath his manacles, but the rest of it barely hung upon his body. The white fur of his chest and belly was matted and dirty, and although his trousers were in better shape than his shirt, there were tears along the outer seams and both of his knees were exposed.

The floor and walls were made of wooden planks and the rafters in the ceiling were exposed. Light was provided by oil lamps attached to the building's supports, rather than by electrical means, and he could see cloth curtains blowing in the cold breeze that came in through open-air windows. Several folding chairs were scattered about the room, but there were brown stains on the floor beneath a solitary chair positioned directly in front of him - dried blood, Merlin's brain told him numbly.

From what he could see of the room, a box sat next to a wooden door, and a small folding table was near him with what appeared to be a rolled-up tool pouch. He saw crayon-drawn artwork on papers tacked up on one wall, likely from the colony children, and a few commercial scenic pictures adorning other walls. The cat with gray fur sat dejectedly in a chair against a far wall, his leg manacled to another support post. The two of them exchanged looks and Merlin could see the terror in the cat's eyes as he waited what was next to come.

"Yes, Mr. Moran knows what's about to happen," said a voice from behind the wolf. Merlin tried to turn his head to look at the one called Briggs, but the jaguar was out of his range of vision. "I would listen to him, Sinclair. You could save you and your friends a lot of grief if you just tell me what I want to know." Merlin thought he should probably say something witty in return, but the knot in his stomach prevented him from giving a reply. Instead, he just looked at the floor, unable to meet Moran's forlorn expression again.

The door opened and Merlin looked over to see two jaguars escort a bound cheetah into the room. Moran gasped and his ears flattened in disbelief. The spotted feline looked up, and it

was then Merlin realized that the cheetah was not Renny Thornton, although he was about the same build. He was taken to the chair in front of Merlin and forced to sit down.

"Jerome!" Moran exclaimed. One of the jaguars tied the cheetah's ankles to the front legs of the chair while the other tied his wrists behind him. Moran looked frantically to Briggs. "No, please! Have mercy!"

Briggs chuckled. "Mercy, Mr. Moran? Only the captain can grant that now."

"Nick, what's going on?" the cheetah asked. Nicholas Moran swallowed deeply and tried to speak, but no words came out of his mouth. The gray cat bent over so that his face was in his hands, resting on his knees. The cheetah looked at Merlin and swallowed. "Who are you?" he asked.

"He is Death," said the voice of Briggs. "*Your* death, as a matter of fact, Mr. Tippet."

"I don't understand."

"Tell him," Briggs said to the wolf. Merlin didn't answer, so Briggs smacked the back of his head just hard enough for his head to rock. "Tell him," he repeated.

Merlin cleared his throat. "He is going to torture you... unless I give him information he thinks I have," he said quietly. One of the jaguars that had brought in the cheetah moved to the man's side, brandishing a large serrated knife that glinted in the lamplights.

The cheetah gasped and tried to back away in his chair. "Tell him what he wants to know!" he exclaimed.

"I can't tell him what *I don't know*," Merlin lied, feeling sickened by his own words. A fist slammed the back of the wolf's head. Merlin saw stars for a moment and it took an effort to refocus his eyes.

"Zuberi," said Briggs, "put away the knife for now. I want you to start simple."

The jaguar beside Tippet grumbled in disappointment. "Simple, huh?" Zuberi used his knife to cut the cord binding the captive's wrists behind him. He then grabbed the cheetah's left arm roughly with both hands and unceremoniously broke it over his knee.

Moran's head jerked up at Jerome Tippet's shriek and Merlin jumped with an icy cold feeling along his spine. Zuberi had done his deed with such a quiet calmness that announced just how experienced he was at this. He dropped the broken arm into the cheetah's lap and smiled as the action reduced the spotted feline to agonizing sobs. The lupine captain felt the blood drain from his face and he struggled vainly against the chains that held his arms. Tippet cradled his broken arm and rocked back and forth in his chair in whimpers.

Briggs' hot breath whispered near Merlin's right ear, "Where is Lucas Sinclair?" Merlin didn't answer. He couldn't answer. He felt as if his heart were in his throat. Briggs took his silence as further defiance and he motioned toward the other jaguar that had brought in Tippet. "Bomani," he said.

The other cat cracked his knuckles with a feral grin and then slugged the right side of the cheetah's jaw. Merlin's own jaw muscles clenched when Tippet nearly fell over with his chair, his cries of agony now lower in his throat. Zuberi caught the chair and put it upright again. Tippet's cries of pain gurgled and he coughed up a tooth. Bomani then brought his boot down on the cheetah's bare left foot. There was an audible *crunch* followed by a hoarse sob of pain.

Moran cried out for his friend and looked over to Merlin with pleading eyes. Merlin couldn't help it. He closed his eyes and held them tight. He muttered a curse beneath his breath, which only elicited a chuckle from the unseen Briggs. He grabbed Merlin's head and forced him to look at the cheetah. "*Where* is Lucas?" he asked again, calmly.

Merlin knew it would do more harm than good, but he kicked backward with one leg and caught Briggs in the knee. The master jaguar fell backward off-balanced and crashed into a

chair amid curses in another language. Bomani rushed forward and hit Merlin hard in the stomach. He was about to belt him again in the face when Briggs stopped him with a hiss. Merlin gasped for air, but found it hard to draw in a breath.

Bomani returned to Tippet's side and Merlin heard Briggs struggle to stand up. He heard a limping footstep and then Briggs hit him hard in his right side. The wolf yelped and fell into his bonds, the chains tugging at his sore shoulders. Once again, he felt Briggs' hands on his head, which forced him to look at the cheetah.

"Again," he said. Bomani reached out, grabbed Tippet's right ear, and yanked hard. The cheetah growled loudly and the jaguar then hit him in the jaw once more for his noise.

"This will continue," Briggs said quietly. "Tell me what I want to know."

The door opened and two more jaguars entered the room. One had several weapons strapped to his arms and legs, and the other looked older than any other in the ebony group with bits of gray around his muzzle. While attentions were momentarily distracted by their arrival, Merlin caught Briggs off guard again and reared his head backward. The back of his skull struck the jaguar's nose hard. Briggs stumbled backward with another string of curses and then hit the wolf between the shoulder blades with a rock-hard fist. Merlin lost his footing and fell. Had he not been tethered to the poles by chains, he would have collapsed in a heap to the floor.

Briggs spat out some blood and then grabbed Merlin by the belt. He hauled him back into a standing position. "Zuberi," he said in a strained voice. "Mr. Tippet is yours. Do whatever you want to him."

"S-stop..." Merlin gasped hoarsely. "Don't do any more..." Moran looked up in disbelief, but realized that Briggs would finally get the information he wanted and that Jerome Tippet would live. He could not have been more wrong.

"It's too late to stop now," Briggs spat in Merlin's ear as Zuberi drew out his cruel blade. "You *had* your chance to stop this, but now you will know that protecting your worthless brother's hide resulted in someone else's *death!*"

"Captain Sinclair," the one called Zuberi said to the wolf in an icy voice, "have you ever seen an animal when it's been skinned *alive?*"

Mr. Moran fainted away at those words and fell to the floor with a *thunk*. Briggs gave a nervous chuckle and then said, "I'll leave you to it." Merlin heard him limp away and then exit through a door to another room.

The wolf coughed twice, still having trouble breathing after the hard punches to his middle. Zuberi laughed cruelly, unrolled a pouch of devilish cutting utensils on the table, and then looked to his brother. "Hold him," he said. Bomani grabbed the cheetah's undamaged arm and pulled it out straight as Zuberi put down his large blade and reached for the pouch.

Briggs sat back in a chair and gently rubbed his sore nose. He listened to the cheetah's pleading from an adjoining room for a moment and then leaned back against the wall with his eyes closed. He remembered stepping into a private alcove a fortnight earlier, a blue-white light flashing from the ceiling. On a tall and narrow vidscreen before him, an image was projected, that of his Master cloaked in a draping pale cowl. "Captain Briggs, at your command, sir," he said with a short bow.

The figure peered out at him with bright blue eyes, and through an artificially resonant frequency meant to alter his voice, he replied, "Take your ship to Fyn and wait there. Your long-

awaited vengeance will come to you in the Valley of Bones. I believe you are familiar with the place."

"We will destroy the *Blue Horizon*, sir?"

"No... I believe that Captain Sinclair may know the location of his brother. Finding the traitor is of utmost importance to me now. The younger Lucas possesses much more than he ever knew he did, and it was my own oversight that allowed him to escape. As you are aware, my contacts throughout the PA have all failed at finding him, which I largely credit to his previous life as a drifter and his ability to make himself disappear. It will be your duty to extract, by whatever means necessary, his whereabouts from Sinclair... or from whomever among his crew you deem worthy of attention."

"That," Briggs hissed, "is no duty. It's my pleasure, sir."

"A word of caution, Captain," his master added in a dangerous tone. "Do *NOT* kill Sinclair until he has divulged the information I need, and then only after you have reported it to me. I have others who will check the validity of his words *before* you dispose of him."

Briggs swallowed his anger, but managed to nod his acceptance of the warning. He knew just how short his lifespan would be if he disobeyed a direct order from this human. "I will see to it," he said with a short bow.

The communications channel darkened and the Master's image faded to black.

A sudden long shriek from the next room startled Briggs and he opened his eyes wildly. He swallowed and exhaled quietly. Even by his own piratical standards, Var Briggs felt that Zuberi took a little *too* much pleasure administering grisly torture with as much pain as possible.

Renny was dumped unceremoniously to the wooden floor of another hut. A moment later, Tanis fell to his side, followed by Durant. The three of them looked up into the faces of the jaguars that had moved them from the storage shed; they had all been with the landing party. Renny clenched his teeth together and set his jaw tight as one of the jaguars grinned at him. The captors left them where they had been dropped, and then locked the door behind them. The cheetah was getting awfully tired of jaguars. He wanted nothing more than to get his claws into the one called Zuberi and rip him into shreds. He may not be fully recovered from getting shot, but the navigator resolved to have his revenge, even if it was his last act in life.

"Are you guys okay?" said a new voice. A short bobcat bent down next to Durant and began to untie the ropes that bound him. A longhaired black and white cat knelt down next to Renny; a young cougar went to Tanis.

"We've all had a beating," Tanis replied, "but I don't think anything is broken."

The bobcat and a white cat helped set Durant into a sitting position so they could remove the coils of rope. "You guys should not have come here," the bobcat said somberly. "I don't think any of you will be leaving."

"What's going on?" Durant asked. "We were hired to bring your colony a shipment of supplies from Tanthe."

"Tanthe?" the black and white longhair repeated. "We didn't make that order. We get our supplies from Ramah, right here on Fyn."

"Then, who...?"

The cougar helping Renny snorted. "That was your jaguar friends," he said. "They must have ordered the supplies to bait a trap for you."

Samantha paced the floor of the hut that she shared with the colony females. She awoke an hour earlier to find Lorelei drugged and still asleep in a corner; Taro was bound up with iron chains wrapped around her so tight that even the Hestran fox couldn't get out of them. None of the feline women had been able to help get her free, and Samantha didn't have anything available to her to pick the lock. She didn't have Pockets' skills as a locksmith, but she'd learned well enough that she could do it if she had the proper tools. Even a hairpin would work, but no one in the room possessed one.

As she paced, she glanced around at the women, remembering what they had told her upon awakening. A dark ship had arrived a week ago with a crew made up entirely of black-furred jaguars. The colonists had gone out to greet them, having had no visitors in a long while, but the jaguars attacked them with neither warning nor provocation. Several of the colonists were killed and the rest were rounded up and then separated. The children were taken away from the families by a female and locked up in one of the huts on the perimeter of their encampment. The remaining adults were split up. The females were locked up in this hut without further distress, but the men were all beaten one by one until they submitted. Several resisted and tried to fight back, but those were summarily tortured for their trouble. The women had seen nothing more of the men or the children after that, and they were only given meager amounts of food and water once a day. When Samantha inquired into the reasons the dark ship had come, none of the women could give her an answer.

"Samantha?"

The Border collie turned to look at the cheetah named Christine standing beside her. "I found this piece of wire," she said. "Will it help get your friend's lock off?"

Samantha gave her a smile and took the offered bit of wire. It was about four inches long, but its metal was soft. "I don't know if this thing will hold a shape, but it's worth a try," she told the woman. She walked over to Taro and knelt down on the hard wooden floor beside the fox. Taro looked at her hopefully.

"My legs are going numb," the vixen muttered. "They made sure I couldn't wriggle out of these things."

Christine sat down on the floor next to them. "I'm sorry we got you into this mess," she said with lowered eyes. The dark cry-lines of her facial stripes made her look forlorn. Samantha put a hand on the cheetah's shoulder briefly before turning back to the lock.

"I think it's we who should apologize to you," she said. "These people are known to us and have caused us grief. It's unthinkable that they would use innocents as bait to draw us here."

"Why are they so cruel?" Christine asked. "They've taken our kits and our mates - we don't even know if any of them are still alive." She looked over at Taro with sad eyes. "We only know that some were killed and others were tortured horribly. Our captors tell us *that* much..."

"Yeah," added a Siamese cat named Jennifer who sat down next to Christine, "it's their own form of torture for *us*. They like to see how much misery they can cause us."

"Do you know how many of them there are?" Taro asked.

"Just ten," Jennifer replied, "but they were more than a match for the lot of us."

Samantha gritted her teeth and heaved a sigh. The wire was too soft to be of use on the lock. "We'll find a way out of here," she said, "and the *Basilisk* will pay for all they've done. I'm

sorry your people have been drawn into this, but however long our conflict has lasted, I believe that it will end here, one way or another."

On board the *Blue Horizon*, a thick panel opened at the aft end of the cargo arena, near the open bay doors. Pockets emerged from the space between the double-hulls of the ship and took in a lungful of clean air. He moved out of the way to let Max through and set a large burlap sack on the floor beside him. Max shook his head as soon as he was out into the open room and then coughed several times. He set another bag next to the chief engineer's sack. They were both dusty and dirty all over; Max even had bits of stray fur clinging to his whiskers.

"Ugh," said the German shepherd. "It's cramped and dirty back in there."

"Don't tell Merlin how dirty it is," Pockets said with a smirk, "or he'll have us back in there cleaning it!"

"Uh uh... I'm not saying a word. Cleaning out all this old fur from the reclamation filters was bad enough!"

The diminutive raccoon stretched his arms and arched his back with a yawn. "I wonder if I can get in a quick nap before we launch again," he mused aloud. He rubbed his face with one hand and then looked at the rainy night outside the ship with drowsy eyes.

"Pockets..." Max said in a hushed voice.

"Hmm?"

"None of the cargo has been unloaded."

Pockets stifled another yawn and noticed the octagonal crates as if seeing them for the first time. The netting and cables to secure them in flight had been removed and stowed, but nothing else had been touched. He looked around the cargo bay, puzzled. "Durant?" he called. There was no reply. After a moment, he called again. "Anyone in here?"

Max frowned and walked to the nearest intercom terminal. He thumbed the pad for the bridge. "Hello?" he asked. As before, there was no reply. He exchanged puzzled looks with the chief engineer and then toggled the pad for ship-wide broadcast. "*Pockets and Max are ready for cargo detail. We could use some assistance, folks.*"

The two of them waited a minute before they surmised there was no one on board the ship. "I'll try one of the DCs," Pockets suggested. "Maybe the colonists refused to pay for their cargo and they all went to the colony to hash it out."

"I thought Uncle Merlin said the cargo was paid for in advance, before we even left Tanthe," Max replied.

"I dunno," Pockets replied with a shrug. He walked around the cargo back to the engine room to get one of the hand-held DataCom units. While he was gone, Max shut the airlock to the inner-hull passage and secured the mechanism. He grabbed the ends of both sacks of fur and other debris they had removed from the air reclamation units and dragged them to a waste bin on the other end of the hold. Once they were stowed, he walked to the cargo ramp and peered out into the night. He doubted that the rain would have left any footprints behind in the soil, but he noticed some muddy prints tracked up the ramp and into the cargo bay. From the distance each print was apart, it appeared their owner had been in a hurry. He followed them as best he could around the hold and saw them rove back and forth, as if searching for something.

The fading tracks led around the hold and then back out into the rain. He peered out into the lights left shining and saw a bit of color in the trodden grass. He darted out into the rain and

splashed through puddles to retrieve the items he had seen. He picked them up quickly and then scrambled back to the rain-free safety of the cargo arena.

"I can't get anyone to answer on any of the frequencies," Pockets said. He held up a DC and shook his head. Then he noticed the wet canine. "What have you got there?" he asked.

Max wiped water from his face and then held up the two articles he had recovered. One was a torn shred of blue cloth. "It looks like part of Uncle Merlin's work shirt," he said, "but there's no mistaking this." He held up a muddy naval captain's hat, its brim creased in half and a boot print across the top.

Nicholas Moran stared at the wall beside him, but didn't actually see it. He lay on the floor, curled up in a fetal position, unwilling to accept what he had been forced to watch. Not long after the start of his best friend's torture, Moran had mercifully fainted, but one of the wretched jaguars had pushed a foul smelling chemical beneath his nose that brought back alertness. The weapon-heavy jaguar he knew as Runihura had held his head so that he couldn't look away from the scene, while Bomani and Zuberi, the ones who enjoyed giving pain, had done horrible things to Jerome, his lifelong friend and the colony's doctor. The cheetah's screams of agony were burned into his mind and Moran was near comatose from shock.

Likewise, the aged Pamiu had forced Merlin to watch the horror that Bomani and Zuberi had presented for him, with no reprieve for *any* of the captives present in the room. He was queasy and panted steadily from the emotional exhaustion of what he had just witnessed. The jaguars had taken their time with Tippet and had worked their particular brand of torture slowly, but finally - mercifully - they had put an end to the cheetah. Merlin's brain was numb and he was afraid to think beyond the moment of who might be next.

After Tippet's voice had been silenced, Pamiu and Runihura grabbed the remnants of the lifeless body and dragged it out of the room into the rainy night. A moment later, the door at the back of the room opened and Briggs stepped inside. He scowled at Zuberi and the amount of blood decorating the floor in front of the wolf, and then roughly grabbed the back of the lupine captain's head.

Briggs stuck his nose right up to Merlin's left ear. "*Where is Lucas Sinclair?*" he growled.

Merlin swallowed hard and tried to focus on the far wall through the moisture in his eyes. "I ... don't know..." he whispered.

"Up until now, my Master has been merciful with your..."

"Merciful!" gasped the wolf. "How is anything you've done merciful?"

Briggs tightened his grip on Merlin's head and shook him violently to silence his captive. "We have been merciful with your company," he continued with a hiss. "You don't know how badly I wanted to release the Taquit Fever Virus *inside your vessel*, Sinclair. I almost did - twice! I have it on my ship with me even now... However, my Master has continued to stay my hand."

Merlin was unable to suppress the shudder that went through him. The *Taquit Fever Virus* was the lethal agent Sagan had claimed developing after releasing it upon Taro's hometown on Hestra. Had it been let free inside his ship, the *Blue Horizon* would have arrived at its destination with everyone dead from a horrible, fast-acting disease. They had since hoped the pirate had not retained a stock of the killer virus, but the wolf now knew they could not have been that fortunate. He remembered the images on INN of the devastation in Taquit and his queasiness returned.

"It would have been so much easier to deal you that blow," Briggs continued in a malevolent voice, "than to track you all over the Planetary Alignment on your insignificant little deliveries." The jaguar changed position so that his nose now rested next to Merlin's other ear. "I am forbidden to kill *you*, Sinclair," he growled, "but you are the only one exempt from your crew."

Briggs pulled back away from Merlin in caution, lest the wolf kick back at him again, and then looked over at his bloodthirsty men. "Time to begin again," he said. "Get one of the captain's friends."

The night was black save for the occasional lightning flashes high in the *Dragon's Teeth* above the valley. Muted thunder rolled with each burst of light, and two figures approached the perimeter of the colony dressed in dark cloaks that shed rainwater much like the feathers of a duck.

"That's the Chimera Colony?" Max whispered to his companion. He shifted the heavy bundle in his hands to get a better grip on it and he almost dropped it into the mud. Rain spattering on his hood made it hard to hear Pockets' reply.

"Looks like it," the raccoon answered. "Let's see what we can see." He shielded a small hand-held remote from the rain and moved a tiny joystick forward. There was a quiet whirring noise that was barely discernable against the rain and then Moss floated out of Max's arms, its sensor eyes glowing in the darkness.

"I thought Moss would only work within the confines of the ship," the German shepherd stated.

Pockets leaned closer to him as he adjusted the mobile sentry system's course toward the nearest of the wooden huts. "After our encounter with the *Walkabout*," he explained, "I modified Moss' functional range to five thousand feet of our ship's operating system. This is the first chance I've had to use it. However, it will only operate inside a pressurized atmosphere, not out in space. I've not yet sealed it against a vacuum. I haven't had time."

"If it gives out a *meow*, we'll announce ourselves," Max cautioned.

"I've already muted its speaker with a security protocol," Pockets assured him.

Max peered over the raccoon's shoulder at the remote's tiny video display and watched the greenish infrared image that was broadcast back to them. Pockets played with the controls and sent Moss to the edge of a window. A thin curtain wafted gently on the night breeze and Moss' primary eye focused into the room beyond the window covering's edge.

In the small viewer, Pockets and Max saw a room of feline children. Some were asleep on mats, but the majority of them were gathered around an adult female jaguar seated on a large pillow in their midst. There were nearly twenty children.

"Pockets..." Max said uneasily. "I've seen that woman before."

"Where?"

"On Alexandrius. I saw her watching the reconstruction of the *Hidalgo Sun* when you and I were there to help Captain Rezo's crew."

"There were a lot of gawkers there watching us. Are you sure she was one of them?"

"Positive. See the notch in her right ear? I noticed it then too."

Pockets studied the image. "What is she doing?" he asked.

"Reading them a bedtime story?" Max ventured to guess. As they watched, a small lynx cub tripped over his own feet and fell down. He started to howl and the ebony woman reached

forward and picked him up in her arms. She spoke to him with a smile and then cradled the child to her bosom. The cub calmed down, clinging to her as she settled back onto her pillow, and answered some question by another child.

"Let's try another hut," Max suggested. Almost as soon as he spoke, a red light flickered on the remote. Pockets rotated Moss on its axis and pointed its lens at the door to a nearby building. Another of the jaguars stepped out into the rain, holding a flimsy square of plastic over his head to ward off the light raindrops. They watched him trot across the compound and then out toward the trees surrounding the colony.

"Max, you scout around to see if you can find the captain or the others. I'm going to take Moss and see what our dark friend is up to."

"Right," replied the young canine. "Be careful." Max moved stealthily toward the huts and Pockets recalled Moss back to him. He watched the jaguar disappear into the trees and then Pockets sent the sentry unit a few paces before him as he followed.

If it was difficult to see anything in the darkness of the compound, it was impossible in the forest. Pockets stumbled over tree roots and he slogged through wet leaves and overhanging branches. If it weren't for Moss' seeker routine, Pockets would have never been able to track his quarry. He berated himself silently for losing his set of infrared goggles on their trek to the colony, but at least the rain felt like it was letting up.

He felt the ground rise slightly and the raccoon slipped getting to the top of the small hill. When he reached the top, he saw a dim light ahead. He dropped back behind a tree and then sent Moss forward to have a look.

As the sentry unit drew closer to the light from a higher vantage point in the branches above, Pockets recognized a large shape in the infrared image. It was a sleek vessel hidden in a large clearing, and the light came from its open airlock. The jaguar walked up a short ramp and then disappeared into the ship's interior. Pockets took a moment and sent Moss around the ship to look for others who might be guarding the vessel, but while doing so, a sudden chill coursed down his spine. He recognized the *Manta*-class Brandtian cruiser even before Moss found its nameplate near the hatch. It was the *Basilisk*.

Max set a wooden box he'd found next to the wall of a hut just under its solitary window. He thought he'd heard sounds inside and he wanted to check them out. He wished that Pockets had left Moss with him to look over the colony, and didn't know why the chief engineer felt he needed to take the floating sentry unit into the forest. Max could have made better use of it in amongst the buildings. It would have been safer than standing on a wet box to look into a window almost higher than he could reach.

He heard a sound to his right and quietly got off the box. He eased his nose around the corner of the building and saw two jaguars step inside the hut from where the other one had emerged. There were sounds of a commotion and then the felines emerged from the doorway dragging Tanis between them. They dropped him onto the wet grass and one of the cats kicked the tan fox in the side. Tanis clutched at his middle and the other jaguar kicked him from the opposite side.

It was all Max could do to remain out of sight, but if he gave his position away now, it would ruin any chances he and Pockets might have to help their friends. He found himself growling deeply in his throat, but forced himself to stop when one of the cats looked his direction.

They picked up Tanis again and then dragged him toward the largest hut in the compound. Max watched them go inside, resisting the urge to see where they had taken him. Instead, the young canine decided to reconnoiter the area to locate the rest of their friends. The hut where Tanis had been removed from would be a good place to start.

He didn't see an ebony feline step outside of another hut and light up a cigarette.

Tanis looked up and the scent of fresh blood hit him when the door to the large hut opened. Bomani jerked on his arm and half-dragged him up the three wooden steps into the structure. The medic saw a box of weapons just inside the door and he recognized them as the *Blue Horizon's* Binfurr handguns. Despite this, he had no chance to grab one. Zuberi scowled at him and pushed him up the last step.

He was taken to the middle of the room, and in the dim lights, his jaw dropped in surprise. Merlin Sinclair stood wearily between two vertical poles, his arms suspended from chains attached to metal eyelets driven into the wooden supports. His shirt and breeches were in tatters and Merlin was filthy from dirt, mud and splatters of blood. His left eye was swollen nearly shut, but his right eye was open wide in apparent terror at the sight of Tanis.

The fennec fox was roughly seated on a wooden chair in the middle of the room and his ankles were shackled to its legs. His wrists were tied loosely behind his back and then the two jaguars took up stations on either side of him. He glanced down at his boots and saw fresh pools of blood around them that had not yet seeped between the floorboards. He looked up at Merlin in a panic and then noticed the yellow eyes of Briggs watching him from behind the lupine captain.

Merlin swallowed hard and felt Briggs' familiar hot breath on his left ear. "Now we shall start over," the feline said calmly. "Where is Lucas Sinclair?"

Merlin wet his lips and then replied in a hoarse voice, "He... Lucas was on Mainor..."

Briggs laughed and cuffed the wolf on the back of the head, almost playfully. "Good try, Sinclair," he said, "but you'll have to lie better than that. Your brother was in the care of my Master at the time the Kastans reduced Mainor to slag."

"I - don't know what to tell you," Merlin tried again. "I've not seen him since Quet."

Briggs exhaled loudly. "Take a look at your friend there," he said in a darker tone. "Picture what happened to poor Mr. Tippet being done to this fox. Imagine it well, because if you don't tell me what my Master wishes to know, your friend's *carcass* will decorate the ground next to Tippet's with his hide displayed on Zuberi's wall!"

"I don't know where my brother is," Merlin replied again. It wasn't exactly a lie, since he'd not actually been able to find Lucas, but he had no intention of setting pirates loose onto the countryside of Tanthe to look for him. The royal house of Aris would not react kindly to having their heirs' seclusion threatened by murderers, whether or not the pirates were actually after the children.

Briggs was right, however. Protecting a brother that had done nothing but shame the family *had* resulted in the death of one of the colonists, but Lucas had also risked his own death to save countless others in the Siilv War.

"Alright," Briggs growled into his ear, "your silence will take *another* life. Zuberi, you may begin."

Merlin winched at the sound of the big jaguar's open hand slapping the fox's nose with enough force that Tanis' head rocked. Already weakened from an earlier beating, the medic's

eyes rolled up in his head and he slumped down in the chair. That didn't deter Zuberi from his job, however. He grabbed a small vial from the table full of sharp instruments and uncapped it. He waved it under Tanis' nose and the fox came to immediately with a jerk.

Merlin's mind raced frantically. He had to do something, to act quickly in order to save Tanis, but he was helpless. *He didn't know what to do!*

Bomani grabbed both of Tanis' large ears and pulled his head back so that his throat was exposed. The fox found he couldn't easily swallow and his eyes went wide when Zuberi held up a wicked looking instrument with a curved, razor-sharp blade. "I'm going to carve pretty red pictures around your neck," the feline snarled with a sadistic grin.

There was a loud *crash* outside the window to the room and Briggs looked up in alarm. It sounded like a fistfight out in the compound amidst shouts and curses. He rushed to the window and whipped the curtain aside. It was dark, so he grabbed a flashlight torch from the floor and shined it out into the night. He saw two figures dancing around one another, one feline and one canine.

The canine, a German shepherd, used some kind of martial arts tactics against his aggressor and planted a kick into the jaguar's stomach. Briggs growled over his shoulder, "One of Sinclair's men has gotten free. All of you get out there and help Sennedjem take him down!"

"But... the fox—" Zuberi complained.

"He's tied to the chair, you idiot! He'll be here when you get back!"

"Right, boss!" Bomani scrambled across the room and burst out the door, but Zuberi hesitated just long enough to kick over Tanis' chair. The fox fell hard to the floor. Briggs looked back out the window and saw the runt land a fist against the canine's shoulder, but the cur twisted just in time so that the punch was robbed of its power. Sennedjem didn't waste time and kicked out with a leg that caught the young German shepherd off balance.

Briggs whirled on his lupine captive and grabbed the fur at the back of his neck. "I don't recognize that dog. How many more of your men are loose?" he demanded. Merlin's good eye went wide. He had never been told just who had been captured in his crew, but he now knew that at least Max was free. He sincerely hoped the kid got away as quickly as he could. "*How many more?*" Briggs shouted angrily in his ear.

Outside in the wet grass, Max managed to get back to his feet before the jaguar could jump him and he took a roundhouse swipe at the cat. He heard a door slam and took a heartbeat's hesitation to glance toward the main hut. Sennedjem did likewise and both of them saw Zuberi and Bomani barreling down at them with Pamiu and Runihura close on their heels.

Max took advantage of his opponent's brief distraction, kicking him in the kneecap. Sennedjem yowled in pain as Max took off running across the compound. Zuberi slipped on a patch of mud and fell headfirst into Sennedjem, but the other three kept their footing and raced after the canine. The dog was fast, but the jaguar gained on him quickly. Max splashed across the colony's flooded stream and lit out as fast as he could for the forest. His only chance was of losing the felines among the trees and brush.

"Why didn't you tell me you had a hair pin?" Samantha asked Lorelei in exasperation. There was a satisfying *click* as the padlock released its mechanism and the Border collie smiled despite her mood.

"You didn't ask," the bunny replied in a quiet voice. "Besides, I'm still sleepy..."

Christine and Samantha helped Taro into a semi-sitting position so they could remove the chains from around the vixen. It took a couple minutes before the last length of chain was on the floor, but Taro found that she had been bound up tight for so long that she was unable to stand up on her own.

The Siamese cat began massaging one of Taro's legs and Christine followed her example with the other. Samantha knelt down next to her friend and brushed dust from her fur. "Despite Lori's hairpin," she said, "I can't open the door."

"Why?" Taro asked as she flexed her arms to get the feeling back in them. "Too difficult?"

"The padlock's on the *outside*," Sam replied. "I can't get to it."

"Well, as soon as I get control of my arms and legs back, I'll see what I can do about that door."

"How?" asked one of the other women.

Taro held up a fist. "I'm Hestran," she said with a touch of pride.

"That would draw too much attention," the Siamese said quietly.

"Jenny, do you expect me to just do nothing now that I'm out of these chains?" Taro asked with a frown.

"No, but I might have an alternative if you don't mind getting dirty." She gave the vixen a nod and twitched her whiskers. Taro fixed her with a puzzled look. "There's a loose floorboard in the back corner beneath my bunk that can be pulled up," Jenny explained. "It's been on our list of things to repair, but for our purpose there's a crawlspace underneath that leads to the outside."

"If you've had that way out, why haven't you escaped before now?" Samantha asked.

"If any of us are discovered missing," a lioness named Melissa answered from behind them, "our cubs might be harmed."

"Sounds like a good reason to stay put," Lorelei said with a yawn. "Keeping the kids safe is the right thing to do."

Taro got to her knees and then stood up shakily. She took a few steps away from the others and then began doing a few exercises to loosen up cramped muscles. "I'll be ready to try the crawlspace in a few minutes," she said in a flat tone. No one challenged her statement, not even Melissa.

"Christine," Samantha said in the awkward silence, "can you tell us which buildings the others are being kept in?"

"I can show you myself," the cheetah replied, "if we look in on the cubs first."

"We need to find the guys," Taro said. "The kids can't help us subdue grown jaguars."

"I want to see my cubs," Christine said crossly. "Once I know they're okay, I'll take you to the others."

"Okay," Taro said in resignation. There was no arguing with a mother. She stretched her legs against a wall and then dropped to the floor for several pushups. As there was nothing else to do, practically everyone in the small hut watched the vixen go through a short regiment of exercises. It had grown quiet outside, but suddenly there was a hard pattering on the roof.

"Sounds like it's raining again," Lorelei said unnecessarily. "You're going to get wet."

"I'm ready," Taro announced with her hands on her hips and her feet planted defiantly apart, "rain or no rain."

Jennifer got up with a nod and led Taro and Samantha to the back of the room. She grabbed the end of a bed, pushed it to the side, and then pointed to the edge of a warped floorboard. Taro knelt down, grabbed the end of the board with her fingertips and then pulled.

The plank emitted a squeak as its nails pulled free of the wooden foundation frame. Several of the women started from the unexpected noise, but with the hard rain outside, it was unlikely anyone beyond the room would have heard it.

Taro pulled the board upright and let the nails in its other end hold it in place. The opening was just large enough to pass through, and the red fox eased herself down to the soggy ground beneath. Christine went through the hole next, followed by Samantha. The Border collie looked back up at the women gathered around the opening.

"Push the board closed behind us and put the cot back over it again," she said. "If we're successful, we'll be back to open the front door."

"What if you aren't successful?" asked Jenny.

Samantha raised an eyebrow. "Then you won't have to worry about us anymore," she said grimly. "Our first concern is the welfare of your children. We'll send Christine back to you with a report on them after we've taken a look."

"Be careful," said a young orange cat, "and good luck."

"Thanks," replied the Border collie. She turned and crawled away. Jennifer pushed the board back into place and then slid the bed to its original position.

Underneath the wooden hut, Taro crawled on her belly toward a vent of slats that she could see in the flash of lightning outside. The ground was muddy from rain seepage and the mold and fungus growth made their way slick and slimy. Samantha stuck her tongue out at the filthy feeling, but when Christine accidentally kicked a bit of mud into her face, she sputtered irritably. Lightning struck one of the peaks overhead and thunder vibrated throughout the colony.

Taro reached the slats and pushed on it gently. The wooden vent fell off easily; it had never been nailed in, just pushed into the hole. Like the floorboard opening, Taro was able to squeeze out of the aperture, but not without some discomfort to her bosom. She got up on her hands and knees once she was out in the pouring rain, and turned to give Christine a hand.

A moment later, Samantha stood up beside them and suddenly froze. "Hsst! Taro!" she said through clenched teeth. In the flash of lightning, the shadow of an approaching figure was visible beyond the edge of the hut.

Christine moved fearfully back behind Samantha, but Taro darted forward quickly. She reached out, snatched the individual and slammed him hard against the side of the building.

"Ow! Don't be so rough!"

"Pockets!" Samantha nearly shouted in surprise. Taro clamped a hand over the Border collie's mouth and held up a finger for silence as she released the engineer. She dropped her hand from Samantha's face and bent down to look eye to eye with the diminutive raccoon.

"We're sure glad to see you," Taro whispered. "What are you doing out here?"

"Looking for you," Pockets answered as he brushed her muddy handprints from his rain cloak. "Have you seen Max?"

Five minutes passed with Briggs growing angrier by the minute. He stared out the window at the woods where four of his crew had gone in after the young canine, but none had yet returned. He was furious for sending all of them out into the rain and his fingers clenched the windowsill. He had no way to call them back, so all he could do was wait for them to return.

Unnoticed behind him, Tanis had his eyes closed. He had been given a respite due to the distraction, but he knew that his eventual fate would return. He had never really feared dying

before, but what he did fear was dying *horribly*. From the strong stench of blood, the look of terror on his captain's face when he had been brought into the room, and the sadistic grin on the one jaguar's face, Tanis had no doubt he would die very shortly *and* in a lot of pain. He had not been able to hear the words that Briggs had spoken into Merlin's ear, so he had no idea what this was all about.

Like his medic, Merlin was grateful for the respite, no matter how short a time it might be. An idea had come to him and he was going to take advantage of the distraction Max had unknowingly provided. He let his weight rest on the chains, and although his wrists were sore where the manacles had chafed him, he thought he felt the chains give ever so slightly. He set his jaw and then eased off the chains slowly so not to make them jingle, and then reapplied his weight. Each time he did this, he put more weight on one side than he did the other, but the next time he would switch for the other arm. He had no way of knowing if Briggs was watching him, but Merlin chanced tilting his head back and looked toward the ceiling. The jaguar didn't do anything more than fling more curses at his men out the window. Good, he hadn't been noticed.

As he expected, the metal eyelets that his chains were attached to were slowly working loose from the wooden poles. The movement was subtle, but it was there nonetheless. He worked the chains for several minutes, keeping his ears perked to listen for Briggs and an eye on his friend on the floor below. Tanis' clothing and fur had soaked up some of the blood from the floor, and although Zuberi had not done anything more than slap him, his appearance suggested something more ghastly.

Briggs slammed his fist down on the windowsill and then turned back toward the wolf. He no longer cared if Merlin saw his face. He would continue the torture of the fox on his own. The quicker he frightened a confession out of the lupine captain, the sooner he could be through with this task and do away with Sinclair altogether.

He stomped his frustration as he walked over to where the wolf hung heavily against his chains and then walked around in front of him. Merlin looked at him with his good eye, surprised that Briggs had come into view. He studied the man and thought he recognized him. Then it came to him. Briggs had been a member of Sagan's boarding party that night when the *Basilisk* ambushed them in the nebula where Jiro had been murdered. Merlin had fought with him briefly before the pirates were driven back through the airlock tunnel. That was two years ago, but the face came back to him.

Var Briggs stared at him for a long time, his yellow eyes unblinking and filled with hatred. Merlin tried to look as unemotional as he could out of a beaten face, even as he continued to apply pressure to the chain eyelets above. Briggs snorted and finally turned away. He walked over to Tanis and then kicked the fox's chair hard. Tanis grunted, but otherwise didn't cry out.

Merlin growled low in his throat and the jaguar turned to look at him with a feral smile. "Got your blood up, haven't I, Captain?" he asked. "Get used to the feeling, because you're going to see more." He took another step toward Tanis and then bent down to pick up the chair, occupant and all. Merlin lunged hard against the chains while Briggs had his back turned and the jaguar only laughed without looking.

Briggs set Tanis upright where he had previously sat and then slugged him in the jaw. He was miffed that the fox had not already started begging for his life, so he thought he would try some intimidation tactics. He was not as experienced with bloody torture as Zuberi and Bomani were, but he was angry enough to inflict some serious pain.

He put his face next to Tanis' nose and said in a menacing voice, "Scream all you want. Feel free to cry out for mercy, but you will get none from me." He pulled back and then picked up the curved scalpel from the pouch on the small table.

There was a grunt behind him and then the loud sound of a chain hitting the floor. Briggs whirled around and saw that the wolf had pulled one of his chains loose from its support pole and he was struggling frantically to free the other too. The jaguar shrieked in rage and lunged for the captain.

Merlin was ready for him and quickly swung the freed length of chain in a wide arc. It smacked the jaguar across the face with such force combined with the cat's forward momentum that the loose eyelet gouged a deep gash across his left cheek, over his nose and across his forehead. It was sheer luck that an eye wasn't taken out, but blood sprayed into the air as Briggs' head rocked back from the blow. The jaguar crashed to the floor and Merlin used the intervening seconds to tug hard at his remaining chain before the mad cat could recover.

Renny rubbed the sore spot on his side where he had been waylaid back at the ship and winced. He was sick and tired of being a victim and wanted nothing more than to be on the offensive for once. He had stewed long enough that he had made up his mind that he would never again be afraid of dark-furred jaguars.

He looked over at Durant in the dimly lit room and frowned. The old bear seemed tired and worn out, but somehow he didn't think it had anything to do with their attackers. Tanis had mentioned the load master's reluctance to a physical examination and his growing concerns, but Renny had not thought much about it until now since the fox was inclined to be a worry wart when it came to their health. The grizzled bear tended to move slowly when he had seen him in the ship's corridors and the look in Durant's eyes this evening was far from alert. He'd not said much since their capture, but had patiently listened to Renny's rants.

He looked around the room lit by a single candle at the downtrodden faces of the other felines, but the one he missed was Tanis. Why had he been taken away? Was it for questioning or was it for the medic to tend to someone else's wounds? Although some would say they were rivals, he was worried about his friend. Sure, they verbally sparred with one another, but in the end, they were friends.

He looked up at a sound near the door and wondered if their captors had brought back Tanis. He touched Durant, who had drifted off to sleep, and the two of them looked up as something smashed at the solid wooden panel. They raised their arms as splinters flew out into the room with repeated poundings. Suddenly the object of force burst through the panel. It was a black-furred fist that retreated and reappeared as the door swiftly fell apart before their eyes.

A moment later, a silhouette filled the doorway, but Renny recognized her immediately. "Taro!" he gasped. The wet and muddy vixen rushed to him, hugging him close as Samantha came inside and did likewise to Durant. The bear grinned up at them, but didn't get to his feet.

"I'm so glad to see you two safe," he said, "but you're filthy!"

Samantha chuckled and purposely wiped some of her mud across the bear's own dirty green shirt. He made a face of disgust, which only made Sam chuckle again.

Christine stepped inside a moment later and went straight to Renny, but then stopped when she realized he was not the one she was looking for. She glanced around at the other men gathered and then moved to a cougar. She looked up at him with fear in her eyes. "Thomas," she asked quietly, "where's Jerome?"

The cougar averted his eyes and shook his head slowly. "They came and took him away an hour ago," he said in a strained voice. "We heard his screams... We fear the worst..."

"No... God, no..." The woman buried her face in the cougar's arms and began to sob. He held her close with his own moist eyes.

"Was Jerome your leader?" Samantha asked solemnly.

"No," Thomas replied as he laid his cheek against the cheetah's head, "but he was Christine's mate."

Taro helped Renny to his feet and then moved to Durant's side. "I know this is a rough moment," she said to the full group of men, "but if you want to help us stop those murderers, we need to start moving before they come to investigate the noise I just made."

A bobcat stepped forward, looking embarrassed. "We may not be of much use to you," he said. "We've been beaten and starved, and most of us are too weak to do more than stand up."

Taro looked around the weary faces in the hut and nodded with understanding. "If there are any of you who feel up to helping, we're going to take them out, one by one. There are only ten of them, so—"

"I don't care if I'm not in the best shape," Renny interrupted with darkened eyes, "but I want my claws in them!"

Thomas looked up with his own furrowed brow and replied, "You can count on me." Christine looked up at him, her cry-lines wet with real tears. Thomas nodded to her and added, "I'll be careful, Chris, but I've got to do something."

The cheetah nodded and then glanced back at Renny. "Watch each other's backs," she said to him in a shaky voice.

"We will," he acknowledged.

"I'm going too," added a young lion that stepped forward from the back of the room. "I'm ready for a pay-back."

"Yes, but be careful about it," Christine said to him. "Your mate is worried about you, Reid."

Renny looked out into the lightning-illuminated rain. "Someone's coming!" he said suddenly. Thomas moved to stand behind him and looked over his shoulder. Lightning flashed again as the sky rumbled and the cougar saw two jaguars running across the compound from the direction of the forest. Without warning, Renny rushed out into the rain, driving a course directly for the ebony cats. Thomas took that as a signal and took off after him, leaving the others behind.

Samantha and Taro exchanged glances. "I guess that's our cue," the vixen said with a frown. With a quick glance back at the others gathered behind her, Taro jumped out of the hut and followed the two men through the rain. A second later, Samantha, Reid and Durant gave pursuit.

The jaguars noticed Renny barreling down upon them and changed direction for a direct attack. Thomas leaped forward and tackled Bomani into the mud just as Renny and Zuberi clashed. The two cats began to pummel one another fiercely. Zuberi landed a fist aside of Renny's jaw, but the navigator twisted under the punch and brought his knee up into the jaguar's stomach. Both of them fell to the ground, but Zuberi took the advantage to jump up on top of Renny and grind a knee into the cheetah's previously injured side.

Thomas wasted no time to let Bomani recover from his assault and slashed at the jaguar's face repeatedly with his claws. Thomas Rowley may have been previously beaten into submission and given little to eat for a week, but his pent-up anger and frustration against the

crew of the *Basilisk* gave him desperate strength and the willpower for his attack. He didn't know how long he would be able to hold out, so he was intent on getting the best of his opponent as quickly as possible.

Taro reached Renny and Zuberi and leaned in to pop the jaguar in the head. The black cat stumbled backward and fell to the ground, but Renny whirled on Taro with a battle-raged snarl. "He's mine!" he screamed at her and then jumped Zuberi before he could recover. Taro stood in shock and mutely watched her lover slash out at the jaguar with his claws and teeth. The cheetah had been trained by a Kastani assassin, but this attack used none of those techniques; this fight was fully *feral*.

Probably for the first time in many years, Zuberi was suddenly *afraid* and he began to panic at the hacking claws across his face. He flailed his arms, kicked with his feet, and tried to scramble away, but Renny was so enraged he would not give him a second to breathe.

There was no thought in the cheetah's mind but murderous intent, and seeing this in his eyes frightened Taro. She had never seen this side of the navigator, but knew instantly that his fear and anger had been bottled up for so long that its release had been explosive. His attack was so fierce, so primal, that Taro felt momentary paralysis in the power of its expression.

Samantha let out a shout when three more jaguars emerged from the woods and raced toward them. Taro went on alert immediately and rushed the new arrivals along with Reid and Samantha. Durant turned to follow them, but abruptly clutched at his shirt. His chest was tight and he became nauseated so suddenly that he dropped to his knees and doubled over. Despite feeling cold from the continuing rain, he began to pant heavily from an icy feeling throughout his left arm. It felt like someone was squeezing him in a death grip and it became hard to breathe.

Then, just as quickly as it had begun, the tightness released him. His chest muscles ached and he continued to pant, though no longer with a shortness of breath. He glanced over to see Renny's fingers clamping down on Zuberi's neck, but he was in a daze and was disoriented. He closed his eyes as the rain fell across his face, and he felt like he wanted to do nothing more than lie down and sleep, but something in the back of his mind told him to stay awake. The grizzly shook his head and then forced himself back to his feet. He wavered a moment, but retained his balance.

There was a sudden sharp *snap* and he turned to see Thomas holding up a limp Bomani, the jaguar's head hanging just a little too loose. The cougar dropped the lifeless pirate and then rested his hands on his knees as he panted heavily.

"Are you alright?" Durant heard Thomas say. He nodded slowly, but when he looked up, the cougar wasn't looking at him, but at the *Horizon's* navigator. Renny knelt atop Zuberi's chest, shoulders heaving with expended effort. His bloody fingers, wrapped tightly around the jaguar's throat, pulsed with residual energy, but in spite of the strong desires within, his enemy still lived.

The cheetah still had a wild look in his eyes, but the better part of his nature stopped him short of finishing the job he had begun. His eyes slowly cleared and he released the jaguar's neck, letting the dark gasping head fall back into the mud. Renny's shoulders slumped and he hung his head. The steam from his body heat rose against the rain as the anger evaporated from his form.

"I'm..." he said slowly, "I'm... finished."

"I'm not." Thomas pushed Renny aside, and without warning, the cougar calmly stomped his heel down upon the jaguar's throat, ending the pirate instantly. "That's for Jerome," he spat.

Renny looked at the scene in horror, knowing just how close he had come to murder. A cold, icy feeling spilled down his spine as the cougar left the body where it lay and moved off into the night.

Some distance away, and not having witnessed Zuberi's demise at the last, a movement of white caught Durant's eye; he looked up to see Lorelei on the far side of the compound moving toward the main hut. She had a soaked blanket over her head and seemed to be blindly walking through the rain. The grizzly knew he would be of no use to the others who had converged on the other three jaguars, so he started to make his way through the rain toward the bunny.

Durant glanced back toward the others, saw one of the jaguars break away from the brawl and run toward the main structure, leaving his two companions behind. At first, Durant thought the cat was after Lorelei, but it didn't appear as if he had seen her. His intention was on the building itself.

Pamiu was the eldest of the *Basilisk* jaguars and second-in-command on the pirate ship. He had been Sagan's advisor and afterward enjoyed the same position serving under the First Mate that had been promoted to Captain, Var Briggs. The campaigns he had followed them into had been profitable, but this time nothing had gone right. Their plan had seemed foolproof at first, but now it was falling apart. They had held the advantage of surprise when they took over the Chimera Colony, and the same with the landing of the *Blue Horizon*, but now some of the prisoners had gotten free and were quickly outnumbering the jaguars. If he could just get to Briggs, they could get out the weapons and regain control before it got too far out of hand.

He reached the door of the hut, flung it open with a *bang*, and then hopped up the steps into the main room. He stopped abruptly when he saw his commander and the wolf locked together on the floor in combat. Merlin favored his left foot and pain was on his beaten face, but he had a chain wrapped partially around the jaguar's neck and one arm in an attempt to strangle him. Briggs was far from subdued, however. The one hand he had managed to raise before the length of chain had been thrown around his neck was the only thing that had kept him from a strangling death. He wrapped his legs around the wolf's feet in a quick scissor-lock and put his weight into it, but he was unable to unbalance Sinclair as he had hoped. Briggs reached out and grabbed the wolf by the throat with his free hand, but Merlin only squeezed tighter with his chain.

"Look out!" Tanis yelled. He was still bound to his chair, but had been upended and shoved up against a wall next to the cowering Moran. "There's another one!"

Pamiu reacted quickly. He circled the fighting and snatched up Zuberi's favorite knife from the floor. Then he grabbed Tanis by one of his large ears and hefted him up enough that it stretched out the fox's throat. He put the serrated blade up to the taut neck, backed up against a wall, and then shouted, "*Sinclair!* Stop or your man dies right now!"

His threat had its desired effect. Merlin released Briggs and backed away from the pirate captain, dragging his chains beside him and panting for breath. He glared hard at Pamiu, calculating his chances of reaching him with the end of the chains that were still manacled to his bloody wrists, but it didn't look good. He could hit Tanis too. Briggs gasped and struggled for air a moment before he could get to his hands and knees, but he finally gave his first officer a nod to let him know he would survive.

Briggs turned to face Sinclair and then walked boldly to him. He backhanded the wolf hard enough that Merlin's weary knees buckled and he dropped to the floor, but the jaguar almost followed him down. He somehow managed to keep his feet and towered over Sinclair.

The door opened at that moment and everyone in the room turned to see who had entered. It was Lorelei and she stopped and stared at the scene before her. Immediately, her eyes fell upon the bruised and bloody wolf, his wrists still in manacles, blood all over the floor, and Briggs standing over him menacingly. Then she noticed Pamiu holding Tanis' head back with a nasty looking knife at his throat.

In a desperate move that surprised everyone, the white rabbit grabbed one of the guns from the box next to the door. She whipped it up and pointed it at Pamiu, her thumb automatically releasing the safety. "G-get *away* from him!" she shouted. Her mouth quivered, but she held the firearm steady, aimed at the elder jaguar's head.

The aged cat suddenly laughed and drew the blade across Tanis' neck. It wasn't deep, but the cut was just enough that a small trickle of blood stained the fox's white ruff. "Your friend is as good as dead, missy," he said with a feral grin to show his indifference to her threat. "There's not a thing you can d—"

Bang!

Pamiu's eyes rolled up fast, almost as if they were trying hard to look at the purple hole that had suddenly appeared in the space of forehead above them. The knife dropped from his hands and clattered to the floor only a second before the jaguar collapsed to the floor, smearing blood down the wall behind him.

Briggs yelled out in rage and tensed his muscles to leap at the bunny that had swept her firearm toward him, but Merlin swung his right arm around and whipped the chain hard against the cat's stomach. The jaguar collapsed to the floor and Merlin jumped him with the intent to beat him senseless.

Durant came in the door behind Lorelei and suddenly men from the colony swarmed in the door behind him. Briggs kicked Merlin aside with a lucky blow from his boot and he scrambled to his feet, slipping uncertainly on the slick floor. He took one look at the enraged colonists and then dove for the open window. His knee hit the sill and he tumbled messily out into the rain, but before anyone could get to him, the jaguar was on his feet and quickly limping for his life. Colonists rushed out the door after him and followed him across the compound toward the trees of the forest.

Lorelei suddenly dropped to her knees, letting the pistol slide out of her hands to the floor in front of her. She buried her face in her hands and started bawling. Durant eased down on the floor beside her and put his arms around her shoulders with understanding. Her marksmanship had been perfect, but it was the first time she had ever killed anyone, even in defense. She turned, clung tightly to him, and cried into his chest in racking sobs.

Merlin got to his feet shakily and moved across the room to check on Tanis, his chains dragging the floor behind him. The fennec fox looked up at him as the wolf picked up Zuberi's knife and cut the ropes that still bound him to the chair. "Are... ya alright?" he asked his captain. Tanis ached from his beating, but knew he was in far better shape than Merlin was.

The wolf started to nod, but then changed his mind and shook his head instead. "No... but maybe I'll live anyway." He took a look at Moran with his one good eye and then put an aching hand on the gray cat's shoulder. "It's over," he said hoarsely. "It's over..."

Moran nodded and swallowed hard. "I'm sorry any of this happened, sir," he said as he glanced over at Pamiu's still form.

"Captain!"

Merlin looked up as Pockets rushed across the room to them. The wolf managed part of a smile through swollen lips and then held up one manacled wrist. "I need a locksmith," he said. "So does Mr. Moran."

The raccoon nodded and dug into one of his pockets. He pulled out a small pouch and unrolled it to reveal a set of gleaming metal instruments. Moran suddenly backed away. Merlin put out a hand to calm the cat. "Those are tools to pick locks," he explained gently.

Moran watched Pockets dubiously, but only relaxed when the raccoon took one of the tiny instruments and put it inside the lock of Merlin's bracelet. The manacle parted seconds later and then the wolf held out his other wrist to his engineer. "See?" he said.

The gray cat closed his eyes when Pockets went to work on the manacle that bound him to the chair and jumped when it *clicked* apart.

Runihura was panting and out of breath when he reached the ramp into the *Basilisk* and almost collapsed to the floor once he was inside. He hit the intercom button on the wall beside the open airlock with his good hand, and then cradled the other arm the vixen had broken for him back at the colony. He had managed to escape in the darkness and confusion of the fighting, but he didn't think Sennedjem had survived the mob attack.

"This is Nakhti," a bored voice reported from the small intercom speaker.

"Secure the ship," Runihura gasped through his pain. "The prisoners have broken out!"

"Right." The ramp began to slide back inside the side of the vessel and the airlock door automatically swung shut. Other apertures for ventilation around the ship closed up tight and all exterior lights extinguished. Lights inside the *Basilisk* dimmed to a low setting and then everything went quiet.

"Who's on board?" Runihura asked. He remained where he sat on the floor, hoping the doctor was available.

"Just me and Runi."

Runihura cursed aloud. Their doctor had been assigned to guard the children of the colonists and was probably still there at her post. Khepri filled several jobs on board the *Basilisk*. She was their doctor, their cook and their pleasure provider. She'd been happy in her work when Sagan had led them, but lately had shown signs of discontent in the things she did for all of them. The svelte and curvaceous female didn't have the heart of a pirate, but had served her purpose and was paid well from their plunder. More than anything, however, Runihura needed her medical skills.

Suddenly there was a pounding on the hatch beside him. He could barely hear muffled shouts through the seals.

"Someone's outside the main airlock," Runihura whispered to the intercom.

"It's just Briggs," reported the bored jaguar on the bridge. "You want I should let him in?"

"Open it," growled Runihura, "unless you want to face his wrath later."

There was a soft hiss and the mechanism to the door released its lock. Briggs didn't wait for the hydraulic arm to finish opening the door all the way and he scrambled inside. His eyes were crazed and his fur was matted with leaves, mud, grass and blood. He leaned into the intercom and shouted, "Secure the ship and prepare for immediate liftoff!"

"Aye," replied Nakhti in a voice just as dull as it had been earlier; even in the midst of an emergency, nothing seemed to excite him. The airlock resealed itself and Briggs turned to go.

"Khepri's still out there, sir," Runihura said in a voice laced in pain. "We need the doctor..."

"We're leaving!" Briggs growled.

Runihura held up his broken arm. "But, sir—"

Briggs roared in fury and brought his fist down hard on the proffered limb. Runihura bellowed in pain and fell to the floor in agony. Without a backward glance, Briggs left him and stormed toward the bridge.

There was a sound at the door of the hut and Khepri Mandisa looked up from her task as the outside lock clicked. The panel opened and a crowd of adults filed inside. They found the female jaguar surrounded by the colony children where she had been telling them an exciting tale of love and adventure, but as soon as the children recognized their parents, the air was filled with tears and the sounds of happiness.

Thomas and another male rushed forward and roughly picked her up by the arms, scattering pillows across a floor covered in crayon drawings. Khepri offered no resistance and allowed herself to be taken outside into the cool night air. The rain had finally stopped, though thunder could still be heard farther up the valley.

Christine cried openly when she knelt on the wooden floor and her two male kits bounded into her arms. She held them close and licked their muzzles over and over. Similar scenes were all over the room as mothers and fathers were reunited with their children.

As the leonine family rejoiced in their reunion, Reid looked down at the drawings on the floor. He picked up one of them near his knee and studied it. He was puzzled at the likeness of a black cat playing with several kittens and looked down at his daughter. "Shanna," he asked, "what is this?"

The young lioness grinned up at her father and pointed to the black cat image. "That's miss Khepri, daddy," she explained. "She's a nice lady, plays wit' us and tells us stories an' stuff!"

"She treated you well?" Melissa asked her daughter. "She didn't hurt you?"

"No mamma," the child replied shaking her head. "Kevi fell down, but she picked him up and kissed his boo. She funs, even gave tickles."

Reid and Melissa exchanged quick looks and then the lion got up quickly. He pushed his way past the other families and dashed outside. He found Thomas standing over the jaguar female, who had been shoved to her knees in the soggy grass and mud. The cougar had one of the Binfurr pistols in his hand and put its barrel to the back of her neck.

"No!" Reid shouted in alarm. Thomas looked up in surprise, but didn't move the gun. "You mustn't kill her!" the lion said in a rush.

"Why not?" growled the cougar. "She's the last of the murderers!"

"She's not a murderer, Thomas. She did no harm to the cubs, but she did care for them." Reid held up the crayon drawing so that light from the hut fell upon the images. "My daughter said she was nothing but nice to them."

"But she's one of *them*!"

"She has done nothing against us," Reid reminded him. "The kids look healthy and they're all happy. They haven't been starved or beaten as we were. Shanna *likes* her."

Thomas looked uncertain, but Reid had never lied to him before. When the men had been locked up together in the hut, Reid had vowed serious revenge upon their captors, and it had

been he who had dealt the deathblow to Sennedjem when they had fought him in the compound. It shocked Thomas to hear Reid sticking up for the jaguar who remained on her knees, but the woman had said nothing in her own defense.

"She's okay," Reid insisted again. "I trust my daughter."

Finally, after a long, tense moment, Thomas locked the safety on the pistol and quietly shoved it into his belt. He reached down, took Khepri's arm gently, and then helped her to her feet. She kept her head bowed until the cougar put a finger under her chin and tilted her head up to meet his gaze.

"Why didn't you harm our children," Reid asked, "while the rest of your band did terrible things to us?"

The woman looked at him with sorrow-filled eyes. "I've never agreed with their horrors," she said in a voice barely above a whisper. "They disgust me, but I've never been allowed to leave them. I have always loved children - have always wanted some of my own, and when they put me in charge of guarding your young ones, I knew I could do them no harm."

Reid put a hand on her shoulder and looked at her with compassion. "Thank you, miss," the lion said sincerely. "With all the horrors we've faced, thank you."

Var Briggs angrily punched controls on the pilot's station before him and the thrusters of the *Basilisk* came alive. The black ship lifted above the trees and he rotated the vessel on its axis. The infrared scanners and night-vision instrumentation were active and he easily located the colony on his screen.

Runihura limped onto the bridge, still cradling his decimated arm, but he said nothing to the madman who was his captain. He sat down in an empty seat and saw the ship's lackey at the weapons console. Nakhti was disrespectful to everyone he met, but he was a pirate who never refused an order given him by a superior. Runihura recognized the ordnance controls the lackey was setting and knew that Briggs intended to bomb the Chimera Colony out of existence, and likely the freighter as well. The action would put Briggs at odds with their Master's direct orders, but it appeared that Briggs no longer cared. Runihura sat back to watch, calculating a rise in status for himself when he reported Briggs' actions to the human. Since he and Nakhti were the only ones left of the crew, Runihura saw himself being awarded the captaincy of the *Basilisk*. As far as he was concerned, Briggs had sealed his own fate.

The *Manta*-class vessel moved forward, the tops of trees caressing its underside as its captain piloted it for a bombing run.

The survivors of the Chimera Colony and the *Blue Horizon* were gathered outside in the clearing between the buildings. Now that the rain had ended, it was the only place available that was large enough for them all to assemble. The main hut could have contained them all, but no one wanted to go back inside its bloodstained room of death. Several torches had been lit and a few bugs had already been drawn into erratic orbits around the flames despite the hours of rain.

"Now that we have firearms," Thomas said loudly, "we should storm that devil's ship!"

Samantha stood in front of him with her hands on her hips. "Our handguns will be of no use," she told him. "They won't do anything against the ship's hull, and all he would have to do is open fire on you with their main guns to be rid of you."

Thomas raised his arms in exasperation. "Are we *supposed* to let him get away just so he can come back at a later time with more murderers to finish us off?"

"Listen, we *don* —"

A loud roar from the forest drowned out Samantha's words. They could see nothing at all, but everyone instantly knew it must be the *Basilisk*, probably flying without lights. Briggs was coming for them. People in the crowd started to panic and parents began to swoop up their children in fear and run.

Suddenly the sky lit up from a terrific explosion! A huge fireball expanded above the nearby treetops and engulfed the timbers in a searing heat. *The bombing had begun...* or so they thought. Burning debris began to rain down upon the colony, but a huge object over the decimated trees dropped to the ground with a thunderous crash. Had the area not been thoroughly soaked from the recent thunderstorms, a forest fire surely would have spread right away.

People scattered and ran into the buildings; most of the *Blue Horizon* crew bolted for the large central hut despite the carnage inside, but Merlin had to be carried. Taro picked him up and ran as burning debris continued to fall. A large, flaming chunk of twisted metal crashed through the roof at the far end of the main room, making everyone jump. Renny and Pockets grabbed extinguishers from wall brackets and managed to get the resulting fire put out before it was able to spread.

"What... what happened?" Lorelei asked as she stared out the open window in awe. A few small pieces of charred material continued to fall from the early morning sky, and the burning wreckage cast off a flickering orange glow in the woods, but the worst of it was over.

"The ship... just exploded," Tanis said in a quiet voice. "Why... how?"

"The *why* is because the pirates had it coming," Pockets said in a matter-of-fact tone. All eyes shifted to the short engineer. "How — is *this!*" The raccoon set down his extinguisher and fished a small remote from the pocket of his coveralls.

"What's that?" Merlin asked hoarsely.

Pockets pressed his lips together tightly when everyone in the room looked to him for an explanation. "I followed one of the pirates out into the woods about an hour ago," he said. "He led me straight to the *Basilisk* and I used Moss to do a little reconnoitering for me."

"I thought Moss couldn't leave the ship," Durant replied.

"After our encounter at the *Walkabout*, I modified Moss so it could operate a distance outside the ship."

"That's great, Pockets," Samantha said as she gestured out the window, "but it still doesn't explain *that*."

The raccoon walked over to the window and stood beside Lorelei. He stared out at the burning wreckage and put a hand up on the sill. "Their main hatch was open," he said, "and I flew Moss inside to look around. I watched its progress on my remote and had all its sensors on full alert in case one of the crew happened along. There was only one person on board on the bridge, so I guided Moss into the *Basilisk's* engine room. Unlike the *Okami* freighters that we're familiar with, there are no doors on the access panels in *Manta*-class cruisers. The engine rooms are cramped, so access ways are open for maintenance."

He turned and looked back at Merlin with a frown. "I didn't know they were torturing you guys in here, but I remembered when those from the *Basilisk* killed Jiro and got away with

it. He was my friend," he said in a low voice. "When I saw easy access in the engine room through my viewer, I sent Moss into the one that would take it next to the core of their LightDrive engine for its final task."

"What did Moss do in there?" Tanis asked.

"I programmed its internal altimeter to set the unit into overload if the ship got more than ten meters off the ground, the approximate height of the trees around here. I figured it would take the overload about two minutes before its instability exploded into the engine core."

Pockets turned and looked back out the window. Several of the colonists had ventured back outside and a few had gone to investigate the crash site. "I'm a murderer," he said solemnly, "just like they were. I didn't kill in self-defense. I did it for revenge."

Samantha moved to his side and then put her arms around him. She held him close to her and then said, "It may not have been in a court, Pockets, but justice was dealt. The *Basilisk* was a band of murderers who had killed long before this incident, and some of us had a hand in fighting back, too. You aren't alone."

The room fell silent for a moment, but then Durant spoke up with a small smile. "Well, one thing's for sure," he said in a lighter tone. "Moss was finally useful for *something*." Despite the sobering events of the night, the bear's comment brought out a few chuckles.

The raccoon grinned for a moment, but suddenly his eyes went wide. "Has anyone seen Max?" he asked. "I sent him to scout out the area just before I followed that guy to the *Basilisk* and I haven't seen him since."

"He's over there," Lorelei said in a casual voice, "talking to one of the colonists."

Pockets looked to where the rabbit pointed and shook his head in relief. Max looked as bedraggled as the rest of them, but he didn't appear to be injured. The engineer left the hut a moment later, followed by most of the *Blue Horizon's* crew. Max glanced up as the group approached him and gave them a worried look. "Where's uncle Merlin?" he asked in concern. "Thomas just told me what happened."

"Tanis is giving him medical treatment in the main hut," Taro replied. "He's a wreck, but we think he'll be okay... now."

"What happened with you?" Pockets asked.

Max shrugged his shoulders. "One of the jaguars discovered me and then *five* of them chased me into the woods," he explained. "I had a hard time running through the trees and underbrush, but so did they. They chased me over by the canyon wall and I discovered a small cave behind a large rock to hide in. They didn't see me crawl into it, so I decided to wait there until I was sure they were gone." He made a comical face and spread his hands out wide. "The cave wasn't empty, though," he said. "A wild boar didn't like me blocking his exit and chased me back out into the woods. He almost got me, but I climbed a tree to get away from him."

"You were treed?" Samantha asked with a grin.

"Yeah, and it wouldn't let me alone, either. It stayed underneath my tree and even butted the trunk like it was trying to shake me out." He gestured toward the crash site out in the woods. "I was stuck up in the tree until that explosion frightened away the boar. It scared me too. I thought it might have been the *Horizon*."

Merlin looked up when Thomas and Reid entered the hut, followed by Moran and a female jaguar. Faint spot patterns in her dark fur shimmered in the lights of the room as she walked. Tanis had found some blankets and had made a bed for his captain in a far corner away

from the bloodstained floor. He didn't have any first aid supplies, but had done the best he could with clean water and strips of cloth.

Mr. Moran stepped forward and then knelt down next to the wolf. "Captain," he said, "I want to introduce you to the only survivor of the late pirate ship, *Basilisk*. Doctor Khepri Mandisa is here to help you." Tanis looked at the ebony feline dubiously, but she *did* hold a black medical bag in her hands.

Merlin stared at her through his good eye, but his swollen lips were drawn tight against his teeth in a snarl. He started to growl, but Moran set a hand on the captain's shoulder and shook his head. "I will vouch for her intentions," the gray cat told him. "Please listen to her story. I think you will find it... enlightening."

Merlin became quiet, though he didn't relax, but he shot Tanis a dark glance as if to say, "Watch her." The desert fox nodded in understanding.

"If you will allow me to treat your injuries, sir," she said in a smooth voice, "I can talk while I work." Merlin stared at her for a moment before she added, "We are surrounded by your allies, Captain. They will make sure you are not left alone with me." Finally, reluctantly, the wolf nodded and she gave him a sad smile in return.

She looked into her medical bog, took out some cotton swabs and a bottle of antiseptic, and then began cleaning his raw wrists where the manacles had cut into him. She began speaking in a quiet voice and held his hand firmly when she applied the stinging liquid to his wounds.

"Four years ago," she started, "I became infatuated with the one you knew as Sagan." Merlin scowled, but she ignored his expression. "Unfortunately, he only saw my skills as a doctor, cook and a provider of pleasure for he and his crew. I was lonely and unemployed on Brandt, and he promised me a better life. I agreed, but to my dismay, I discovered the ship I had been brought onto was a pirate ship. By then, it was too late and he wouldn't free me from his service." She glanced at her patient with a look of remembered frustration and then gently bandaged his wrist. She started on the other wrist and continued.

"I saw plenty of raids against freighters such as yours, but they never killed anyone – until Sagan brought in the Aleson brothers, a sadistic pair I know you were well acquainted with. After Bomani and Zuberi joined us, someone died with each campaign. I pleaded with Sagan for him to make them stop, but he never listened to me. He was only interested in the loot they stole, and if someone was killed, *Oh well...*"

She finished with his wrist and then began cleaning other lacerations about his head and neck. "After Sagan died," she said, "I thought I might have a chance to escape my enslavement, but Sagan's master put Var Briggs in charge instead. Briggs was used to having me around and wouldn't let me leave."

"Sagan's master?" Tanis repeated. "Ya mean he worked for someone else?"

Khepri nodded. "Sagan was captured and imprisoned in his youth by a human named Faltane, who –"

"Faltane!" Merlin exclaimed. "*Victor Faltane?*"

"Yeah, that's him. He's not as innocent as he appears when he's doing charitable work on the news, and he's much older than he looks," she said. Merlin and Tanis exchanged expressions of astonishment. "This Faltane imprisoned Sagan when he was young. He tortured him into submission, and then later trained him to do his dirty work. When Sagan was given the *Basilisk*, he was pretty much left to his own whims, but Faltane – or Master as he was often referred to – would occasionally call on him to do jobs that he would assign to no one else."

"Was Faltane responsible for unleashing that virus on Hestra?" Taro asked.

Khepri shook her head. "No, that was Sagan's own doing, and the Master punished him severely for going public. Apparently the Master had another intended purpose for the viral agent, but after Sagan broadcast the virus data to the whole PA, it ruined his plans and he was *not* happy about it."

"What *did* he have planned for a fifth-level hot virus?" Tanis asked hoarsely.

"I'm sorry, but I don't know."

Merlin winced when she put more of the antiseptic on the tender flesh near his swollen eye. "What more can you tell us about Faltane?" he asked. "We've come in contact with him on an occasion or two in the past."

"Faltane's a man with many contacts all over the Planetary Alignment," she said. "I believe he appeals to people due to his innocent appearance and helps them under the table when they need it. He would later call in favors with those people for his own purposes, and then help them in other ways to make them continually indebted to him. Sometimes he would pose as a simple businessman or even an arms dealer. He's grown stronger in recent years and his influence is quite impressive."

She looked up at the wolf with a dark expression. "Undoubtedly, I was not supposed to know this, but he even had Kastan assassins working for him who wiped out the officers of Intergalactic Aid."

"Why would he do that?" Tanis asked. "Intergalactic Aid was *helping* people."

"Intergalactic Aid was not as on the up-and-up as you think," the jaguar replied. "With the organization's other officers out of the way, that left Faltane in *de facto* charge of the group. He found himself suddenly sitting on trillions in tax-free credits that had been hidden by various special interest groups. Would you believe that he orchestrated an attempt to kidnap the Kastans' Heir Apparent away from Argeia?" she asked to looks of astonishment. "His intention was to extort cooperation from the Kastans for some grand scheme, but Argeia found a way to thwart his plan. Despite this, he has enough fiscal leverage with various guilds across the PA so that he has a little mafia of his own."

"Wow..." Moran said. He'd never heard of Victor Faltane and was oblivious to the politics of the Planetary Alignment, but he was riveted to Khepri's words. From the expression on Sinclair's face, however swollen, he was confident the wolf knew exactly what she was talking about.

"Intergalactic Aid's headquarters were on Mainor," the doctor continued, "so all the financial records are gone and the IA was too smart to let their assets rot in certificates - they bought resources... probably gold or Siilv. This put the Master sitting on top of a huge cache of liquid assets, and he's been our primary source of funding for the *Basilisk*."

Merlin winced again when she took a small tube of salve and began to apply it on his other abrasions. "You have certainly given me a lot to think about," he said in a strained voice. He was thinking about all the times he had had dealings with Faltane and applied what she had told him to those occasions. As implausible as some of it sounded, the puzzle pieces fit together enough that Merlin felt she told him the truth.

As if reading his mind, Moran looked at him and asked, "Now do you believe her, captain?" The gray cat stood up to let the blood flow back to his legs. "When Briggs and his men were torturing us," he said, "this woman cared for our children and kept them safe and happy without causing them any distress."

Merlin caught her eyes with his and then he nodded. "What you say may all be true," he said, "but I'm not quite certain I trust you completely. When all your crewmates are dead and you are facing your own execution, it's easy to spill some knowledge to save your skin."

"It's possible," Moran replied before Khepri might comment, "but I can't deny that she cared for our children while knowing the rest of us might be killed. I *choose* to believe she is not evil as her companions were, Captain."

Merlin held the jaguar's gaze for a moment longer, but then looked over at the gray cat. It seemed strange to see this small feline acting like a leader of a colony. Merlin knew the horrors Moran had been forced to watch and didn't blame him for his earlier terror. No doubt he would have sunk to the same level of despair had the Aleson brothers been able to do their work on Tanis. He looked back at the doctor and finally gave her a nod.

"What will you do now?" he asked. He expected her to request passage on his ship back to a Fynian city, but it was Moran who answered.

"She will stay with us," he said to Merlin's astonishment. "Jerome Tippet was our doctor, but you saw him tortured and murdered. I've talked it over with Dr. Mandisa and the remaining elders of our colony and most of us are in agreement that we can use her medical experience in Jerome's absence."

"Mr. Tippet's mate was opposed to my staying," Khepri said in a quiet voice, "but the majority overruled her. She may never come to like me, despite that I was not responsible for any wrongdoing, but I will do my best to be a friend."

"How do ya feel about the deaths of yer pirate associates?" Tanis asked.

Khepri looked over at him and fixed him with a steady gaze. "Good riddance," she said without hesitation. "I hold no grudge against the colony or your crew, if that's what you mean."

Tanis nodded. "That's partially what I meant," he said, "but I was also curious as to yer thoughts on staying here. Ya said ya felt like a prisoner on board the *Basilisk*, but by staying with these people, ya will, in effect, be imprisoned here as well."

Khepri nodded. "If I chose to think of it that way, you would be right, mister fox, but staying was also *my* decision, as well as their vote. I love children and I enjoy helping people. That's why I became a doctor. If serving this colony in that capacity equates to a sentence to make up for what my former associates did, then I will gladly fulfill my obligations to them."

Tanis nodded in understanding. There was no way she could be aware of his personal desire to become a doctor to help others, but it was her last statements that convinced him of her intentions.

Merlin opened his eyes and yawned, but the ache in the side of his face reminded him of the previous night's activities. His left eye opened further than it had before, and as he gently probed his cheek with a finger, he felt that some of the swelling had gone down once he had finally been allowed to sleep. The swelling in his lips had also subsided and it didn't hurt to touch them. There were still places like his wrists that were tender, but they were bandaged and cared for. He reached to the side of his bed and touched a familiar control stud that turned on the light in his bedroom. He was back aboard the *Blue Horizon* where he had been taken to sleep, and although he was still stiff and sore, he felt somewhat rested.

He glanced over at the clock on his bedside table and noted it was the late afternoon in local time. He didn't remember just exactly when he had drifted off to sleep, but his slumber had been free of dreams. He was immediately thankful he had experienced no nightmares of the tortures he had been forced to witness.

He managed to lift himself into a sitting position and then swung his legs off the bed. He dressed himself stiffly, but managed it without too much trouble, though his captain's hat was nowhere to be found.

He left his quarters and peeked into the bridge of his ship, but it was vacant. Only the essential systems were in operation and they made no noise in the small control room. He moved to the environmental station and looked at the weather readings outside the ship. The sun was shining in a sky that was clear of all clouds and the temperature rated comfortable.

He left the bridge after shutting down the systems he had operated and made his way to the lift. Just as he arrived, the door slid aside and Samantha smiled out at him. "Hello, darling," she said with a gentle kiss to the side of his muzzle. "I was just coming to get you out of bed."

"Is anyone else awake?" he asked as he stepped inside the lift beside her and pushed the pad for the cargo deck. "Everyone was fairly bushed after last night's events."

Samantha laughed. "Last night? Merlin, you weren't awake *last night*," she informed him. "You've been asleep for a day and half!"

The wolf looked at her sideways and then shrugged his shoulders. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised," he said. "How is everyone?"

"Considering what we all went through, pretty good." The door to the lift opened and the pair of them stepped out into the cargo bay. "Aside of those who didn't survive, you were the one in the worst shape."

Merlin was quiet for a moment. "Where's our cargo?" he asked as he looked across the hold. The place was empty and the bay doors were closed.

"Well," Sam answered, "in your absence, Taro told the colonists that since the pirates had paid in advance for the supplies in their ruse to get us here, the colony should have them. Was that alright?"

Merlin nodded and they began walking hand in hand toward the open airlock. "It's what I would have done," he said with a lazy smile. "So, what have you all been doing while I've been out of commission? Slacking off?"

"Hardly," the Border collie replied. "After everyone cleaned up and got their rest, we held a memorial service for those who didn't survive, and then we all assisted in moving the supplies from the ship to the colony. Since then, we've been helping them pick up debris of the explosion from the compound and hauling it to the crash site. Nick said they would probably pick over the junk at a later time to see if there was anything salvageable they could use, but for now they just wanted it out of the colony proper."

Samantha led him down the airlock ramp to the ground and Merlin looked up at the sun that was just caressing the western peaks of the *Dragon's Teeth*. He took in a lungful of fresh air and then smiled. The air was strong with the aroma of the minty Florence shrubs that Renny had told him about when they had landed.

Something snorted from the right and Merlin looked over to see a non-sapient workhorse harnessed to a wooden cart. Samantha grinned and gestured toward it. "I didn't think you'd feel up to walking a half-mile, so I got you a limousine."

"Very thoughtful of you," Merlin replied with a smile. He had to have her help to get up in the wagon cart and he sat back on a soft cushion to let her take the reins. Sam clicked her tongue, flipped the reins and then they were moving back toward the colony.

"Are you hungry?" she asked him.

"Famished," he replied. "Do you think Moran will let us dip into their new supplies for a bite to eat?"

"Oh, I think so," Samantha replied with a smile. "The feast they've been preparing all day long is almost ready."

"A feast?"

"Lori's been helping out, naturally. Nick thought everybody needed it to boost morale after all we've gone through and Lori agreed. She's still upset with herself for shooting that guy, but everyone's told her she did the right thing. It may take her a while to get over it."

"It may take a while for *me* to get over it," Merlin mused.

"Pocket has also been making comments about turning himself over to the authorities for destroying the *Basilisk* and killing those inside it. Moran and his people have been trying to talk him out of it, to just accept what he'd done with thanks for saving their lives. Fynian law allows local communities to settle their own affairs and the Chimera Colony wants to keep all of this to themselves. Taro researched it and discovered that what they said is true. If Pockets turns himself in to local authorities, that's the colony elders here."

Merlin remained in silent thought for several long moments before he finally looked over at her. "I want you to promise me something, Sam."

"What is that?"

"Never ask me to describe what I saw last night... uh, the other night."

Samantha shook her head. "Don't you think it's dangerous to keep it bottled up inside?"

"I don't think I could stand reliving it."

The Border collie was quiet for a moment, but when she looked over and saw his pleading expression, she finally nodded.

"Okay, I promise. I want you to think only of good times, but if the memories ever get too heavy for you to bear, please talk to me."

"Are ya sure?" Tanis asked the cinnamon grizzly at his side. "Ya have been avoiding me for a long time."

Durant looked down at the diminutive medic as the lift doors opened and nodded his head. "Yes, I'm sure," he said wearily. "It took a long time for me to admit to myself that I haven't been feeling all that good. I felt great and refreshed after my vacation on Alexandrius, so I didn't think I had anything to worry about."

"Well, now that we've made it through that business on Fyn and are on our way to Pomen, I can give ya a complete physical. It will tell us both what's wrong with ya and what we can do about it."

"Just in time, too," the load master mumbled. "I'm feeling a little lightheaded." He followed the desert fox out of the lift and along the corridor toward Sickbay. Tanis absently rubbed the side of his face where he had been struck hard.

Tanis stopped when they came alongside the door to his quarters. "Go on ahead and wait for me," he said. "I'm going to grab my smock and slateboard, and then I'll be there in a moment."

"Sure. Uh, Tanis?"

"Yah?" the fox replied, looking up.

"Thanks," Durant said sincerely. "For everything."

"Sure, yer welcome," Tanis replied with a nod. Durant gave him a tired smile and then turned to continue up the corridor.

The fennec opened his door and switched on the light. He made his way slowly around the furniture toward the back room, but stopped and turned when he noticed a blinking green indicator on his cabin Com terminal. He proceeded to the back room and then pulled a clean smock from a closet hanger. He needed a chance to clean and groom his fur better, but he wanted to examine Durant before the bear changed his mind.

He put on the garment stiffly and walked back out to the front room. He moved to the Com terminal and thumbed a control to check messages. There was a missive for him from Alexandrius. He opened the file and read it quickly. The expression on his face was first one of disbelief, but then it spread into a smile across his features.

Mr. Arktanis TeVann,

In review of your past academic achievements and personal experiences, your application to the University of Alexandrius Medical Division has been accepted in order that you may complete your medical studies. The file attachments will give you all the information you will need to tender your tuition, sign up for your needed courses and obtain lodging, as well as other important facts concerning your membership with our facilities. The next semester begins on the fifteenth of Goldsun. You will need to be in place no later than one week before the start of semester.

Congratulations, Mr. TeVann, and welcome aboard.

Sincerely,

Vaughn Abrams, Director of Medical Studies

University of Alexandrius, Medical Division

4001 Tames Lamar, Alucara

Tanis reread the message twice more and decided to print out a hardcopy of the cover letter so that he could display it on Sickbay wall. He picked up the fresh page, grabbed his slateboard and then whistled a tune as he left his cabin. If he remembered the Alexandrian calendar correctly, Goldsun was two months away. Merlin would need to hire a new medic for the ship during their next landfall and Tanis would have to try to make all arrangements by Com system for his transfer to Alexandrius in time to make the new semester. He would also need to secure transportation from Pomen *back* to the Centaurus solar system they were currently leaving.

Had he known about the letter before the *Blue Horizon* had launched from the Chimera Colony, he could have asked Merlin to divert to a Fynian city where he could catch a transport to Alexandrius. It would have meant only a delay of an hour or two at the most. Still, there was plenty of time to get back to Alexandrius before his deadline, and that would allow the desert fox to say goodbye to everyone properly and make sure his replacement was settled in before he left.

Although he had enjoyed being a part of this crew, Tanis doubted he would ever serve on board the *Blue Horizon* again. Once he had graduated from UA and was licensed, he would finally get to serve at a real medical facility and do what he wanted more than anything else in life – to help people. His homeworld was off-limits to the rest of the Planetary Alignment, and he had finally accepted the fact he would likely never set foot on his home soil again, so all he had now was to press onward and fulfill his calling.

It was with a light heart that Tanis entered Sickbay and set the letter and his slateboard on the table near the door. “Now, my friend,” he said cheerily, “let’s see what –”

The desert fox hesitated a moment when he saw Durant lying in a heap on the floor next to the roller stool. He rushed to the bear's side with a lump rising in his throat and pushed the stool away before dropping to his knees beside the load master's still form. With effort, he pushed the grizzly onto his back and then dug his fingers into the thick fur of Durant's neck to find the carotid artery. He located it with some difficulty, but Tanis felt the blood drain from his face when he realized there was no pulse.

"No, Durant!" Tanis shouted, giving the bear's chest a quick thump over the heart with a fist. He tilted Durant's head back and tried to force air into his lungs. The bear's chest rose and fell but there was otherwise no response. The fox quickly knelt at his side and started to pump firmly on his chest. "*C'mon...C'mon!*"

A moment later with no pulse, Tanis raced for the defibrillator on the nearby wall and primed it. It was a simple machine, built for a simple purpose. The shock was designed to jump start a heart into beating again, though at any other time it would feel like being kicked in the chest by a horse. Tanis pressed the ready paddles to the bear's chest and activated it, causing both of them to lurch at the shock. There was no response.

As Tanis pushed through another cycle to resuscitate the bear, he could feel the warmth of tears growing behind his eyes. It had taken so long for Durant to come to him. *Why had he waited for so long?* Found earlier there may have been a chance to help, but as the time stretched on, the crushing weight of the inevitable lay before him. Fifteen minutes of valiant effort left the exhausted fox crumpled on his knees next to the bear with the charged defibrillator paddles still held in his limp hands, tears running in dark lines down the side of his bruised muzzle. That was how Samantha discovered him when she came in to see him a little later.

NEVER SAY LONG GOODBYES

By Ted R. Blasingame

The blue-green sky of Pomen was partly cloudy, and although the afternoon sun tried to warm the proceedings below, it was a cold day that chilled to the bone. Tiny white flowers, the last remnants of a fading autumn season, dotted the hillside that overlooked a small lake in the foothills of a weathered mountain range. A gentle breeze came in off the water and dried tears in the cheek fur of those gathered around a bronze marker and an alabaster urn beside it in the grass.

"...To this we release you. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust," intoned an ursine minister as he lightly tossed a pinch of dirt over the marker. "From the dust we came, and to the dust we return. Leonardo Allen Durant, we bid you farewell." He raised his hands, laid them both palms outward on his forehead, and then put them palms-down against his chest with his eyes closed. He recited something in a local language and then raised his head to look at those gathered around.

"The family of Leonardo Durant thanks you for coming to pay your respects," he said to them. He gave a short bow and then gathered his black robes around him to leave. An aged grizzly ambled toward him and then placed a huge paw on the minister's shoulder.

"Thank you, Sire," he said in a gravelly voice. "My son would have appreciated your words over him. Nicely done."

The black bear looked up and nodded. "I'd known Leo since he was a cub, Allen. I remember him as a bright student and an attentive listener in the church, and although I hadn't seen him in recent years, I have fond memories of his kindness. However, I must leave you now, Mr. Durant. I have another service to perform across town."

"Anyone I know?"

"Altaira Adams."

"Ah yes, I'd heard about her accident a couple days ago. Poor girl. That was an awful way to go."

"If you will excuse me, Allen."

"Of course, Sire. Thank you again."

The aged bear watched the minister depart and then he turned back toward the mourners who had already begun to mill around loosely. Low voices comforted those who still cried, but there were others who chuckled softly, recounting some humorous moment in their relationship with his son. Allen Durant inhaled deeply, taking in the scents of the small cemetery. There were no tears in his eyes. Those had been shed three weeks earlier when he had received the news from the captain of the *Blue Horizon*.

Even when they landed two days ago and presented the local medical authorities with the body of his son they had kept in cold storage, he had not cried. It was difficult, however, to remain so with a host of friends and family who were open with their emotions, especially since Leo's marker had been set into the earth next to that of his mother, Joan. He swallowed hard

and then turned to his remaining son, James, who clung to his fiancée in remorse. Allen placed a hand on James' shoulder and then drew the man to himself. It was then he allowed a few tears to fall.

A group of friends who had known Leonardo huddled together near the headstone marker, none of them saying much. Captain Merlin Sinclair stood behind Samantha, his arms around her gently as they stared mutely at the alabaster urn. Both were dressed in their best garments, and if they had not been standing in a cemetery, onlookers might have thought their sartorial perfection the result of a high-class family. Taro stood nearby between Renny and Tanis, their heads together in quiet conversation, accompanied by Jerry Somner, a local male red fox of the cheetah's acquaintance. A few steps away, Lorelei was on her knees in the grass so she could weep openly on Pockets' shoulders for support.

Max stood a short distance away from his crewmates, his hand holding tight to the hand of a shapely Bengal tigress at his side. Wendy Bengoro's parents had not been able to attend the funeral, but the young tigress had driven two hundred miles from their home on Pomen to meet her friend of the *Blue Horizon*. They had been near inseparable since they had been reunited. She knew that Max was trying to be strong, but she had felt his shoulders shudder during the eulogy.

Standing in a group to themselves was the crew of the *Hidalgo Sun*. They had arrived several days earlier than the *Blue Horizon* due to their scheduled delivery, but Merlin had granted them leave to stand by for the funeral. Of the *Hidalgo*, only two of its crew was personally familiar with Leo Durant. Jasper Porter stood downwind of the gathering, puffing on a cigar in silence. He had largely ignored his former crewmates from the *Blue Horizon*, with the exception of a muted reunion with his brother. He didn't look as if he mourned the grizzly bear's death at all, but in reality he was nauseated by it. Of those he had served with on board the *Horizon*, the ill-tempered raccoon had always respected Durant.

He watched Renny step away from a male fox he didn't know and approach the *Hidalgo's* crew. The cheetah said a few quiet words to Sheila and Riki and then moved between them to the back of the group. Patch watched him take Tsarina's hand and lead her down the hill to the edge of the lake. They talked for several moments, and then the jaguar flung herself into the cheetah's arms to bawl onto his shoulder. Renny stroked the fur of her cheeks and spoke words of comfort. Patch grunted to himself with a nod. He had wondered how long it would take those two to get together.

The stoic raccoon had not been the only one to observe the felines' behavior. Carmen Burgess watched them with sad eyes, but when she saw Tsarina start to cry, she felt a sudden lump in her throat. She turned and spoke to Mark Littlefeather, and the human immediately produced a handkerchief from the pocket of his suit coat. The polar bear thanked him, wiped her eyes with it, and then stepped away from the group. She walked across the lawn toward the alabaster urn and then knelt down in the grass beside it.

Samantha knew that she and Durant had maintained a long distance relationship, so she led Merlin away to give the woman a few moments alone. Carmen looked up gratefully as the couple walked toward their friend's father and then she folded her hands together in her lap. She glanced back down at the receptacle that housed the load master's ashes and felt tears escape down her cheek fur. She reached out quietly and stroked the edge of the container as if touching him one last time.

"You were to be my future," she whispered, "but our plans were not meant to be." She swallowed back a sob and closed her eyes briefly, but more tears escaped anyway. "Why did this have to happen?" she asked as she wiped her cheeks with Littlefeather's handkerchief.

Although they had not yet announced their plans to anyone, Carmen had intended to tender her resignation with the company in a month's time to coincide with Leo's planned retirement. They'd discussed setting up a medical office together in his hometown and then get married in the spring.

Carmen covered her face with both hands and cried into them. Her shoulders racked with sobs until she felt a pair of strong arms pull her into an embrace. She didn't look to see who it was, but blindly accepted the comfort as she allowed herself to shed her tears.

"Let it all out, dear," Taro whispered into her ear. "Take all the time you need. He will understand."

Blue Horizon, PA1138

Captain's Journal

My ship feels empty without Durant. I'd known him for many years and losing him was like having lost a brother. It hurts. More than I would have imagined. As I write this, I am sitting in the dark in my cabin on board the Blue Horizon, with only the light of a single candle burning for him on the desk before me. I have released the crew for now, as this is difficult for all of us, and everyone will need time to deal with this on their own.

With Taro, we had no finality if she had actually died. With Renny, it was a slow time of waiting for the inevitable. With Durant, his death is past tense. It's happened. It's done. It was a complete shock to us all. Tanis told me that he had suspected something was wrong for months, but Durant wouldn't allow him to examine him... until it was too late. Why did he wait? That seems to be the question on everyone's mind. He never procrastinated about anything else.

Tanis feels guilty that he went into his quarters and read his mail that day. He feels that if he had gone on to Sickbay with Durant instead of stopping in his quarters for his smock and slateboard, he might have been able to save him. No one has blamed him but himself. There is no way he could have known those few moments were crucial, but all Tanis can seem to remember is the final look that Durant gave him, and his 'thanks for everything'. It was almost as if Durant knew his time was near.

If nothing else, this has served to strengthen Tanis' resolve to finish his medical training, and he's moved forward in his plans to leave us for the University of Alexandria. This was a difficult time to concentrate on hiring a replacement medic for the Blue Horizon, but Renny came to our rescue. He told me that he had a friend right on Pomen who was a local doctor that had been looking for a change of scenery. He prompted me to contact him, but even with the increase in business for my company, I doubted I could match the salary of a fully-licensed doctor; Renny assured me that what I was paying Tanis more than surpassed what his friend was getting in the backwater town clinic he was serving in, but I was dubious.

Upon his recommendation, I contacted Jerry Somner and tentatively presented him with an offer. It turns out Renny was right. The man accepted the salary and position without hesitation following a quick Com-link interview, and thanked me for the opportunity. By the time we traveled from Fyn to Pomen, Jerry had settled his affairs and met us at the home of Durant's brother, James. I would have wished for better circumstances to introduce our new doctor to the crew, but he handled our free emotions in stride and was respectful at the funeral. I assured him that he would see us under better times.

Dr. Somner is a red fox, but unlike Taro, he is not Hestran. Renny has told me a little bit about him, but confessed that it's been a number of years since they last ran around together in flight school. He's an excellent pilot and showed enthusiasm when I told him of my requirement that my crew be able to fly the ship in an emergency; he has a passion for flying and even offered to take over the primary pilot's

duties. Renny told me that Jerry was quite a womanizer, but to his credit, I've seen no signs of this during our time of mourning; such people are known to prey on the distraught when emotions are raw.

Perhaps Jerry has settled down since he and Renny knew one another in school. I just hope this doesn't cause a conflict between he and Renny about Taro – the same valid concern I had when Tanis came back to us. He seems introspective, but is experienced and knowledgeable with current medical technologies. I don't know all that much about his personal background, but there will be plenty of time to get better acquainted once we've launched again.

Just when we'll be space-borne again is still undecided. I've had the home office juggle our schedules around and try to explain our situation to our ever-growing list of customers. I'm almost afraid we'll lose a few to our competitors if I don't get my ships back in operation soon, but I want to give everyone a chance to mourn first... There are few aboard the *Hidalgo Sun* who were close to Durant, knowing him only as an associate on their sister ship, but Carmen is the one I've been worried about the most.

I suppose I could have brought her onto the *Horizon* and assign Jerry to the *Hidalgo*, but in one brief visit onto our ship to let her see if there was anything from Durant's quarters she wanted, she burst into tears just from his lingering scent. I realized then that making her a part of the *Horizon's* crew would not necessarily be beneficial. She told me of their personal plans, which was not entirely surprising to me, but she said that since such plans were now gone, she would remain with the *Hidalgo Sun* and abandon her thoughts on resigning.

Captain Rezo will be launching his vessel tomorrow to pick up his mail-quota and our overdue delivery of automobile parts from Pomen to Earth, and Carmen has promised me that she'll be okay to go. She has had a long visit with the Durant family, and despite her loss, she's ready to be on her way.

As for the *Blue Horizon*, I've authorized another three days of downtime for the crew. It feels like it's still too soon to be thinking about hiring a replacement for Durant, but eventually I need my ship back in operation; I'm currently without a load master and the senior accountant for my whole business. I'm still in mourning, but it's time to move on. The funeral was only yesterday afternoon, but Durant died nearly a month ago. He had a great mind for business and I am sure he would agree with me. I need to get my business back on track.

Leo Durant was my friend, and although he was of a different species, I gladly considered him part of my family. I will miss him.

Merlin Sinclair, Captain

Merlin closed his journal and looked at it with a sigh. He stood up after a moment and blew out his candle, dropping the room into darkness. *Time to get to work*, he thought to himself. He had to do a little research and then he would need to contact the home office after he talked to Taro.

Rather than stay free in their cabins on the *Horizon*, the collective crew had rented rooms at a local hotel during their stay on Pomen in Arctos, the Durant family's hometown. As with their usual planetary downtime, the lupine captain liked to spend time away from the ship. Although the vessel had better Com equipment than most hotels might afford, they were equipped with decent enough systems. Merlin felt he would make extensive use of it today.

He left his den quickly and then rode the lift down to the cargo deck. When he stepped out into the empty hold, something caught his eye. He glanced over at the load master's office and noted that the light was on over Durant's desk; he was sure it had been off when he had

come on board earlier. He frowned and made his way to the room. When he stepped inside, he didn't see anyone and wondered how the light came to be on.

He reached for the pad, but hesitated when he heard a snuffle. Merlin walked slowly around to the other side of the desk and then leaned over between the desk and Durant's large chair. There on the floor beneath the oak desk was Pockets. He had his arms wrapped around his knees and his eyes glistened from recent tears as he looked up at his captain.

"I can't seem to stop crying..." the raccoon whispered apologetically.

Merlin pushed the chair back against the wall and then knelt down on the carpet beside him. He put a hand on his shoulder and gave him a tired smile. "It's okay, Jerad," he said compassionately. "Durant was with us a long time. It will be hard for a while."

"I know, but... I was fine until the funeral."

"Come on out of there," Merlin said gently. "I'm heading back to the hotel. Let's leave this place for a while."

The raccoon nodded somberly and crawled out beside his captain. He pulled a handkerchief from one of the pockets of his familiar coveralls and blew his nose on it noisily. Merlin stood up, helped his chief engineer to his feet, and then led him around the desk. He looked back at Durant's chair briefly and then shut off the light.

The ride back to their hotel was uneventful. Merlin drove the rented passenger van through the streets of the small town without a word and Pockets stared out the window at the passing trees. The quaint houses in Arctos had been built over a hundred years earlier, but had been taken care of exceptionally well. Durant had been reared in this community, and it was easy to see where he had gotten his easygoing personality. Here, life was quiet without being backward. Many of those old homes had the latest satellite multicom systems within their walls and there were recent vintage automobiles all around.

Children played happily in their yards and Pockets noticed that the majority of the population was ursine. If Carmen had gone through with her plan to settle here without Durant, she would have fit in well. She was not xenophobic, but in a medical career it was always simpler if you only had to concentrate upon the anatomy of one species.

Merlin pulled up to their hotel, a recently constructed lodge next to a large, tree-filled park. There was a small stone amphitheater at the far end of the recreational area and a cluster of children was gathered at its center stage. The wolf smiled when he saw them, thinking of his sister's cubs. He missed seeing them and wished there was a way he could spend more time around them during their formative years, but as a star captain, he didn't see that as possible. He would have to remember to call Shannon soon. It had been a while since their last communication.

He parked the van and Pockets hopped out of the other side. They walked into the plain lobby of the one-story building and saw Max and Wendy sitting on the couch in the common room. Pockets waved and headed off to his room, but Merlin stopped to visit with the young couple.

"But where did it come from?"

"I pulled it out of yer sister's ear," Tanis answered with a smile as he handed a small copper coin to a child in front of him.

"You didn't!" exclaimed the unconvinced bear cub. "I was diggin' in her ear a minit ago and didn't see nuthin' in there before!"

Jerry laughed and his eyes crinkled merrily. "Why were *you* digging in your sister's ear?"

The young boy stuck his hands in the pockets of his overalls and shrugged. "I dunno," he mumbled.

Tanis and Jerry sat on the edge of the amphitheater's stage in the park next to their hotel, surrounded by children. They had been casually discussing the various members of the *Blue Horizon* earlier. Since Jerry would soon be looking after the physical well-being of his new crewmates, he'd wanted to know as much about them from their current physician as he could. Children playing nearby had come over to them one by one, curious to see two different kinds of foxes in their park. For the majority of the kids, it was the first time any of them had ever seen a Fur from another world before.

Before long, Tanis was entertaining them with sleight-of-hand illusions, wowing the children with *magic!* As with every group, however, there were always skeptics.

"You put that coin in her ear!" the cub complained.

Tanis only shook his head and laughed. "No," he said with the first real grin he'd had in weeks, "I pulled the coin *out* of her ear."

The little girl cub with the financial ear canal looked up at him with wide eyes and promptly stuck a finger in her ear, obviously feeling for more coins. There was a sharp whistle and all the children looked up in unison.

A short brown bear near a school bus at the street waved them toward her and one of the other kids said, "Miss Collins wants us!"

The little skeptic looked up at Tanis and grinned. "Bye-bye, mister foxes," he said and then ran away with the other cubs.

"You really like kids, don't you?" Jerry asked as he stretched and yawned. Tanis turned back to the doctor and nodded.

"Yes, I do," he replied. "They're such a joy to be around and it's easy to make them laugh."

The red fox looked at him with a tilt to his head. "Is pediatrics the field of study you intend to focus on?" he asked.

Tanis shook his head. "I once considered it, but after recent events, I'm thinking more along the lines of cardiology."

"I can see where that would become important to you," Jerry mused, "but you have a nice gift dealing with children. I wouldn't discard that possibility if I had your talent with kids. The little carpet-commandoes are a mystery to me, and I've been a general practitioner for years."

Tanis laughed. "Well, Doc, ya won't have any of them to worry about on board the *Horizon*. Max is the youngest ya'll have to deal with, and he won't give ya any trouble at all."

"What's the story with that tigress he's been orbiting? She isn't another new member of the crew, is she?"

"Wendy? No, she's a cute lass he hooked up with while we were recuperating over in Adasa. They've maintained a long-distance relationship ever since."

"Adasa? Oh yeah, the crash Renny told me about," Jerry replied. "I was off to Kantus when you guys were here on Pomen. I didn't get back until you had left."

"We were there three months," Tanis said. "What were ya doing on Kantus for so long?"

Jerry smiled. "One of my kid sisters got married and the whole family helped her and her mate build their new home. My brothers and I did most of the construction on the place."

"Sounds like ya come from a big family."

"My folks had eight kits - four boys and four girls. I was the youngest male and I have two sisters younger than I am."

"Everybody on Kantus?"

"No, we're scattered across the Planetary Alignment, but we all try to get back to see Mom and Dad whenever we can."

"Well, if ya come from such a large group, ya should have no trouble with a crew of eight - so long as ya can stand being cooped up with them inside the ship for weeks at a time with no way to get away from anyone."

Jerry rubbed his chin and nodded. "I'm looking forward to serving on the *Blue Horizon*."

"It's *only* a freighter, ya know..."

Jerry grinned. "I know that doesn't sound very glamorous to you, but after spending several years in a tiny clinic in a backwater town, I'm ready to see new sights. The *Horizon* may only be a freighter, but to me she's a cruiser and I am anxious to fly her."

"It sounds like ya and I will be trading places," Tanis quipped. "Yer a doctor wanting a job that requires the skills of no more than a medic, and I'm a medic who wants to be a fully-licensed physician."

"That about sums it up."

"Then I wish ya luck," Tanis said. "As for me, I'm looking forward to getting back to medical studies again. I've tried to keep up with new advancements online, but there's only so much ya can learn outside a classroom or a real application." He glanced up and the red fox followed his gaze. A large crowd was moving toward them from the hotel, consisting of the entire crews of both the *Blue Horizon* and the *Hidalgo Sun*. He hopped down from the short stage and Jerry followed him to the outer wall.

"I wonder what's up," Tanis mused.

Jerry leaned toward him. "Thanks for taking the time out to talk with me, Tanis," he said in a quiet voice. "I think I have a fair idea what everyone is like from what you've told me, as well as my brief exposure to them over the last couple days."

"I think ya will do fine. Anything else?"

"I tried talking with Dr. Burgess about the crew she oversees with your other ship, but she doesn't seem to want to talk to me."

Tanis shook his head. "Don't mind her," he said. "Merlin told me that she and Durant were planning a future together. This has hit her rather hard, so it's not just yerself that she's being quiet with."

"Ah, okay. However, I do have a question concerning your bunny, Miss Lorelei."

Tanis smirked at his formal use of Lori's name. "Yes?"

"Does she always move in on the new guys so quickly?"

The fennec fox laughed. "Yes, actually. She does. She *is* a rabbit, after all. What'd she do, crawl into bed with ya?"

"Uh, nothing so bold," Jerry said with a frown, "but I did feel as if I were being propositioned."

"Knowing her, ya *were*..." Tanis said in a whisper. "However, from what I heard of yer reputation, ya should not mind her free spirit."

Jerry narrowed his eyes at him. "What's Renny been telling you?"

Tanis hesitated for a brief instant. That was not the reaction he had expected. "He said ya were quite the womanizing playboy."

Jerry shook his head with a frown. "He should talk, from the way he's been all over Taro and that jaguar lady, Tsarina."

Tanis laughed. "Renny's been serious about Taro for a long time, but Tsarina has been after *him* for a while now, not the other way around."

"Ah... well, Renny has a selective memory. Yes, I've enjoyed the company of ladies in my time, but I've settled down in recent years. He *knows* that." He grinned at the tan fox and added, "Spend time in a backwater town where the selection is limited, and you'd settle down too."

"Do ya still like the ladies?" Tanis asked cautiously.

Jerry laughed out loud. "Very much," he replied. "My tastes have not changed, but I don't chase every tail I see anymore. However, I may have to investigate this Miss Lorelei a little closer, if it won't upset any of the guys on board."

Tanis put a hand on his new friend's shoulder. "As I said, she's a free spirit. Yer welcome to give her any attention she will have."

There was laughing and joking from the voices of the mingled crews when the entourage approached the small amphitheater, filed in through the opening in the wall and began to sit down among the stone seats. Merlin didn't feel like looming over everyone, so he moved to a position below the stage. He stood in the middle so that everyone could see him and Rezo took a seat on the front row. Jerry and Tanis sat down three rows up, next to the bobcat, Danaher. He nodded to them and Tanis leaned toward him.

"What's going on?" he asked.

The feline gestured around at the gathered personnel. "Is a meeting of staffs," he replied. "Merlin-captain says must talk, be short."

"Oh, okay. Thanks."

"Is welcome."

"Hello, Mr. Tanis," said a voice below him.

The medic smiled down into the amber eyes of the tigress that sat beside Max. He put a hand on her shoulder and said, "Hello, Wendy. Is Merlin about to announce that ya have signed onto our ship?"

Wendy giggled and shook her head. "No, silly. I'm just being nosey and decided to sit in on the meeting."

"It would have been rude to leave her back at the hotel," Max added when Tanis leaned forward, resting his elbows on the mechanic's head.

"This will be a short meeting," Merlin said in a loud voice, drawing everyone's attention. The rock walls, seats and stage of the amphitheater carried the sound easily and he flinched at just how well his voice traveled. He smiled and continued in a quieter tone, "Due to recent events, I'm about to make a few changes to the company and thought everyone should be in on it. This is the largest spot I could think of to hold our meeting. Naturally, we don't have a large vidscreen to stage a teleconference with the ladies at the home office, but Samantha has them online on her DataCom and will relay any comments they may have."

He cleared his throat as he looked over the slateboard datapak in his hand and his voice took on a more somber tone. "This is not an easy subject, but one that has to be covered. Due to the loss of Durant..." —the amphitheater went silent instantly— "there are some gaps left in our personnel, and not just in the crew of my ship. Not only was he the load master for the *Horizon*, Durant was also the senior accountant for the company. All financial transactions for

the home office, the *Hidalgo Sun* and the *Blue Horizon* were given to him for tracking in the company books. This included your salaries and pay transfers, as well as expenses for parts, groceries, supplies, all insurance claims and processes."

He cleared his throat again and looked around the solemn faces that stared back at him. "In a regular freighting business such as ours, all the accounting work would be handled from a central office, rather than a small desk on one of the ships. I *should* have offered Durant a desk job at the home office as soon as we'd established it, but it never occurred to me. Leo Durant was my friend and accountant, and had been with me for nearly ten years, and although the home office was originally his suggestion, nothing was ever said about setting up the accounting department there."

He cleared his throat and fidgeted with the slateboard in his hands. "As everyone's expected, I will soon be interviewing applicants for a load master for the *Blue Horizon*. Taro and I will take care of that, but for the role of senior accountant, I want that position based at the home office as it should be. I've already been in contact with the SPF, who will help screen the security credentials of the applicants for such a sensitive job, as well as coordinating with the ladies of the home office. Until such time as this position can be filled, Samantha and Danaher will be responsible for the accounts on their respective ships, and I will handle everyone's pay myself. Captain Kegawa will relay the pay vouchers I set up for the crew of the *Hidalgo*, so that no one will be overlooked in getting their pay. Likewise, Rezo and I will handle any insurance issues that come up, but hopefully that's something we won't have to deal with for a while."

He put one hand in a pocket of his trousers and then looked straight at Taro. "I've also been thinking of implementing another of Durant's suggestions, one that could help our delivery schedules, but there is someone I need to talk to first before I announce what it is. Any questions?" No one said anything for several long moments, but Samantha quietly answered something the ladies at the home office wanted clarified. Merlin pulled the hand from his pocket and then gestured toward the fennec fox seated next to Danaher.

"In other news, I'm sure everyone knows about the opportunity that Tanis received concerning his career, but in case anyone from either ship has somehow missed out, Arktanis TeVann has been accepted by the University of Alexandrius to continue his medical studies." Half-hearted clapping echoed around the amphitheater, but Merlin noted some of the faces brightened to have the subject moved away from Durant.

"He will be leaving us tomorrow afternoon, so you'll want to say your good-byes to him tonight. Also, for those who haven't met him yet, Dr. Jerry Somner has graciously accepted our invitation to serve as Medical Officer." There was more clapping, a little livelier. "Tanis has been filling him in on all your dirty little secrets..." The crew of the *Horizon* groaned collectively, but Merlin continued with a grin. "...so you'll want to get in on his good side."

"Please replace the needle syringes with a new air-hypo!" Pockets said plaintively over his shoulder at the male fox. "The last time we all got sick, Tanis took too much pleasure giving us shots!"

Jerry knew he'd have to have a sense of humor working with this crew, so he looked down at the raccoon with a sly grin. "Treat me well," he said to him, "and I'll consider it."

"Chocolate or whisky?" Pockets asked with a mock expression of wide-eyed innocence.

"Either or both... among other things," the physician said with amusement. There were chuckles in the crowd at the exchange, and Merlin knew some of the ice had been broken. They still mourned the loss of Durant, but for the moment they had something else to think about.

"Do we get to initiate the new guy?" Renny asked with a grin.

"What do you mean by *initiate*?" Jerry wanted to know.

"We could all line up with wooden paddles and have you run past us!"

"Hey, that sounds like a good idea!" Max quipped. "I'm all for it!"

Jerry looked down at the German shepherd seated in the row before him and said in a voice loud enough for all to hear, "Pockets, your helper mechanic had better stay healthy. *He* gets a needle the next time he gets sick – him and Renny, both!"

"Hey!" the cheetah exclaimed.

Wendy punched Max in the arm. "You deserved that," she teased.

"Captain Sinclair?" another voice called out. Everyone looked down at the first row to the red panda that had sat quietly during the recent exchange.

"Yes, Rezo?" Merlin asked.

"You said you had something you were going to implement in the business to help our schedules," the short captain replied. "Can you tell us anything more than that? My ship leaves to pick up our shipment to Earth tomorrow morning and I'd like to have an idea of your plan before we leave."

"I'll let you know as soon as I can," Merlin said with a sideways glance at Taro, "but I need to talk to someone first."

"How long will that take?"

"As long as necessary, Captain."

"Can't you make it quick?"

Merlin gave the panda a dark look. "I will *let you know* when I have—"

"Listen, we don't *have* much time, so if you think you have someth—"

Merlin took three long strides and stopped abruptly in front of the diminutive red panda. He towered over Rezo, his lips curled back in a snarl with a low growl in his throat. "Mind your place, *Captain*," he said in a menacing tone. "I will tell you *when I am ready* to tell you, and not before! Got that?"

Rezo cowered. "Y-yes, sir..." he squeaked.

Merlin stared down at him with piercing amber eyes, daring his subordinate to argue with him further. The back-talk was uncharacteristic of the red panda, but the wolf had always been intolerant of such disrespect.

Taro stood up from her seat next to Renny and Tsarina and made her way down to the front. She walked directly to the wolf and whispered something in his ear. He growled lowly, but then nodded toward her and gestured briskly toward the stage. Without a word to the gathered crowd or another glance at Rezo, Merlin led the vixen to a large evergreen tree that grew at the side of the stage and then bent his head low toward her.

"What did you need to ask me?" Taro whispered, her orange eyes smiling warmly at him. She clasped her hands behind her and leaned in toward him.

Merlin sighed and gave her an embarrassed smile as his anger melted away. "I wanted to wait until this evening and take you out for dinner to talk to you about this."

"That sounds serious. Were you going to propose to me?" she asked with a grin.

Merlin chuckled softly. She sometimes knew ways to diffuse his anger. "You can't have me. I've already proposed to Samantha! However, what I need to ask *is* a proposition of sorts," he replied to her teasing smile. "On at least a couple recent occasions, Durant suggested that I purchase another ship for the business to help out with the workload."

"We *have* been getting more requests for our services than we've had time to do, even with both ships," Taro agreed with a nod of her head, "but you don't need my input for that, Merlin."

“Not for that,” he agreed, “but a new ship will need a captain and I would like it to be you.” Her eyes grew wide and he added, “It’s a big responsibility, but it comes with a significant raise in salary. I think you’re perfect for the job.”

Taro swallowed and hesitated. “Thank you, Merlin,” she said after a long moment of thought. “I’m flattered that you thought of me, but if it’s all the same to you, I’d rather stay on board the *Blue Horizon*.”

Merlin tilted his head to the side, as if unsure he had heard her correctly. “You don’t want your own command?” he asked in a near whisper.

Taro chuckled. “Of course I do,” she admitted, “but I have higher aspirations, Merlin. I’m aiming for the *flagship* of your fleet! If you and Sammy ever decide to settle down somewhere and raise some pups, or you decide to retire from command of the *Blue Horizon*, I’ll gladly accept promotion at that time.”

“You’re the third person who has suggested that I step down to raise a family,” the wolf said with narrowed eyes. “You all just can’t wait for me to leave, can you?”

Taro stared back at him in surprise, but then recognized the twinkle in his eyes despite his scowl. She laughed and gave him a hug in front of everyone. “Don’t let it bother you, boss,” she said. “If you don’t step down for another lifetime, I’ll still be there beside you. Thanks for the offer, but I’m afraid you’ll have to find another captain.”

Merlin smiled at her and then turned back toward the crowd that had begun to murmur amongst themselves. The two of them walked back to the center of attention and then Taro made her way back to her seat. The wolf glanced at Rezo briefly, making the red panda cringe, but then he looked back out over the expectant faces.

“Due to our increasing workload,” he said in a voice to carry, “I am going to add *another* ship to our company.” He held up a hand to silence the sudden conversations and regain their attention. “Since Captain Kegawa was too *impatient* to give me the chance to ask her *formally* over dinner tonight, I just offered the captaincy of the new ship to Taro,” he said with a smile. A few claps started up, but the wolf held up his hand for quiet again. “She turned it down, however. It seems she intends to eventually challenge me for control of the *Blue Horizon*.” There were a few chuckles at his choice of words.

“That decision having just been made, I will be conducting a series of interviews for another captain and a whole new crew over the next week.” He looked at Rezo. “Go ahead and make preparations to launch as planned. I will inform you of the details once the new sister ship has been purchased, staffed and put into operation.” He turned toward Samantha and gestured toward the DC in her lap.

“Taro and I will be coordinating things for the new personnel with the home office every step of the way, so there’s likely to be some overtime in your near future, ladies.” Samantha listened to the unit for Cindy’s response and then gave Merlin a thumbs-up gesture.

Merlin set his slateboard up on the stage and then put both hands into his pockets, looking over the faces of both crews. “We’ve had a rough time in the past few months, from the situation at Nalirra, the terrorist attacks on the *Hidalgo Sun*, the home office, injuries to Mark and Renny, the business on Fyn with the *Basilisk*, the passing of a friend, to changes in the business and its personnel. However, as always, it is time to move on and get back into a routine. The *Hidalgo Sun* will be leaving tomorrow morning and Tanis will be departing the same afternoon, but the crew of the *Blue Horizon* will be here on Pomen just a little while longer.”

“Vacation time?”

The wolf shook his head. "No, not this time, Pockets. While Taro and I are conducting interviews here and through the home office, I'm placing you in charge of shopping for a new freighter to add to our inventory, which you will then get the others to help you get it stocked with standard supplies and tools for routine flight. We need to do this quickly. I want the ship ready to fly by the time I've hired the last person, so they can launch shortly thereafter. We're nearly a month behind schedule on our entire timetable due to recent events and the new ship is going to help us make it up."

"What are you going to call the new ship?" Riki asked.

Merlin shrugged his shoulders. "I haven't really given it much thought yet, but there's still time. I might have a name that would work, but I would need specific permission from someone else before I can use it. You'll all be informed when it's all done, unless Captain Kegawa is in need of *that* information right now as well." He glanced at Rezo, who crossed his arms and averted his eyes. "I'll have a conference call between the home office and all three ships to introduce everyone when it's time."

The lupine captain stood there and looked at his employees for a moment, and when there were no more questions, he raised his hands and said, "Okay, that's all I have. You're free to do what you need to do for today, but we'll need to get right on this first thing tomorrow. Captain Kegawa, I want to speak to you before you go."

Rezo got up and stepped forward as everyone else dispersed. Many from both crews cast sidelong glances at the two captains as Merlin led the red panda toward the stage. When they stopped beside the rock wall of the platform, Rezo turned and looked up at his boss.

Merlin remained silent and didn't do anything but watch the rest of the people leave, but when a couple from Rezo's crew tried to linger to listen in, he cleared his throat and gave them a stern stare that told them to leave. Once the final body was out of the area and heading back toward the hotel, the wolf turned to face the red panda.

"As someone with authority over others," he began in a low, throaty voice, "you should realize that you placed yourself in a precarious position by challenging me openly." He snarled, bared his teeth at the cowering panda, and stuck his nose into Rezo's face. "Want to challenge me *now*?" he growled.

"N-no, s-sir!" the short captain stuttered. "I-I didn't m-mean..."

"Then tell me what you *did* mean, Mr. Kegawa." Merlin asked harshly, his words echoed around the amphitheater. "Insubordination will *not* be tolerated, especially by a captain who thinks he's above *his employer!*" He growled deeply in his throat and opened his mouth to say more, but then he noticed just how large Rezo's pupils had grown in fear. He swallowed his tirade and straightened up, but never broke eye contact.

"Due to the amount of work we've had, sometimes doubling up multiple customers having their material shipped to the same places, you've almost paid off your loan on the *Hidalgo Sun*," he said in a quieter voice. "If you wish to terminate your employment with me, Captain, you can take the ship so you can start up your own business. I will sign off on the loan and we can forget the rest of what you owe me, but since your personnel are contracted with *me*, I should have another ship soon they can serve on. You can hand-pick a new crew as you see fit."

Rezo swallowed twice and then finally blinked his eyes, which had gone dry. He dropped his gaze and stared at his feet. "N-no..." he said meekly. "We've d-done much better working for you that we did on our own. Please let me stay with the company. I... I apologize for my public outburst. Please forgive my arrogance and my impatience."

Merlin stared unblinking at him a moment, and then he nodded. "Apology accepted, Captain." He motioned the panda to follow him to the stone seats and then the two of them sat down. "This has been a trying time for all of us," he said in normal conversational tones. "Even though it's been nearly a month since I was beaten, I'm still sore in places - and then I've been wrought with emotional pain over my friend's death." He looked over at Rezo and sighed. "I admit that I've always been testy when my authority is challenged, but this was not a good time to try it with me."

"I'm sorry," the red panda said again. "As you said, we're behind schedule and since coming to work for you, I've been afraid of losing any of our customers to a bad schedule as I did all too often before you came along and rescued me twice. I don't deal with down-time very well and I'm more than ready to get back to work, sir, but I didn't mean to usurp your authority. I was flustered and spoke out of turn, but I won't let it happen again."

Merlin gave him a nod. "I accept that," he said, "and I believe you're right. Get your ship ready for an early launch tomorrow, Captain. Pomen Air Command should have no trouble granting you launch privileges from the local airfield. We're far enough from standard air traffic that you should be able to take off as soon as you're ready."

"Thank you," Rezo said in relief. "We'll leave at dawn."

Wendy leaned in and gently pressed her lips against Max's as she wrapped her arms around his neck. The canine pulled her close and returned the kiss with closed eyes. They stood like that for a long moment outside the entrance to the hotel. The Bengal tigress had spent several days in a hotel room next to one Max shared with Pockets, but now it was time for her to return home. She had just begun pre-medical school and couldn't afford any more time away, but she'd become fond of him and she was reluctant to leave the star-stranger.

"I wish you could come with us on the ship," Max said quietly when they finally parted.

"I wish you could come with me back home," Wendy replied. The young couple smiled at one another at their exchange and then the canine pulled her close in a warm hug.

"Be sure to write to me and let me know how your studies are going," Max said. "I want to hear about *everything*."

"Likewise," the tigress replied as she stared into his ice blue eyes. "I know you'll be starting your online college courses soon. It won't be the same as actually attending a campus, but you'll get a better education than what you have now." She held up his left hand and then tapped his stubby middle finger with one of hers. "I'll let Dad know you're interested in a prosthetic finger. He should get back with you with some information soon."

Max nodded and then gently put a hand on either side of her head. He peered back into her yellow eyes and said, "I'm going to miss you, Wendy," he said. "A lot."

"I'm going to miss you too, Max," she said. The tigress gently licked the side of his muzzle and then turned away.

Max put her suitcase into the back seat of her convertible aircar as she climbed into the front seat. She activated the repulsors and then looked back at him. "Take care, sweetheart," she told him. All he could do was give her a sad smile when she raised the suspension landing gear and put the vehicle in motion.

Max watched his feline girlfriend float away and didn't take his eyes off of her until she turned a corner far up the street.

Merlin rubbed his eyes as Taro entered the last of their notes into the slateboard on the desk before her. They had rented office space in the small metropolitan city of Fyerton for a few days to conduct interviews and the last applicant had just left to await their decision in the reception room where Jerry and Samantha kept an eye on things.

"Well, what do you think?" Taro asked with a yawn.

Merlin looked over at her and shook his head. "I wouldn't have believed there were so many out-of-work, ex-freighting personnel in this area. How many have we interviewed this morning?"

"Twenty-three," the vixen replied after consulting the slateboard. "Unfortunately, *all* of them fit the qualifications you have for the position."

"I guess it comes down to their personalities, then," Merlin muttered. "Which one do we want sealed up in the ship with us for weeks at a time?"

"Are you asking me, or thinking aloud?"

Merlin rubbed his eyes again. "Thinking aloud," he answered, "but I want your opinion, too."

"Okay, in that case, I would say it's a toss-up between these three: Conroy, Legrand or Kodai." Merlin looked at the notes she pointed out and reread them.

"Hmmm... the mastiff... is he one of those?"

"Yes, that was Damien Legrand. He's the one who used to work for the Leaway Moving Company of Tanthe. You were thinking about him?"

The wolf nodded. "He seemed to be the most relaxed when he came in here, and probably the most experienced as well. He certainly knew how to make quick mental calculations for weight distribution in the cargo bay of an *Okami* freighter."

"Do you want to speak with these three once more before making your decision?"

Merlin studied Taro's notes and then glanced at the clock. "No, I don't think that'll be necessary," he replied. "It's almost time to take Tanis to the airfield to catch his shuttle, so we won't have time right now. Besides... I think Mr. Legrand is probably the best of the lot." He stood up, stretched and then fluffed the fur on his tail where it had been pressed into the back of the chair for so long. "Go ahead and thank all the applicants for their time and send them all away - except Legrand. I'll need Samantha to do a local background check on him, and I want Jerry to give him a complete physical this afternoon. If our new doctor gives him a clean bill of health, he's got the job."

"Okay, I'll thank the other applicants while you speak with Sam and Jerry."

Merlin touched the vixen lightly on the arm when she stood up; Taro looked at him curiously. "Are you okay?" she asked.

The lupine captain sighed and then gave her a weary look. "Durant was the one who always sat in on interviews with me," he answered. "It felt strange not having him in here today... and stranger yet to be interviewing applicants for *his* job. Thanks for helping me with this. I don't think I could have done it alone this time."

Taro gave him a warm smile. "I understand what you're feeling, Merlin," she whispered. "You're welcome."

Tanis turned to look at his former crewmates and he gave them a friendly smile. With all the events of the past weeks, there hadn't been much time to get with each person as he had originally intended, but now time had run out. He'd just checked in the luggage containing all his possessions and the lot of them had followed him to the departure terminal, talking animatedly amongst themselves. Everyone fell silent as he met each pair of eyes. Some smiled back at him, while others looked remorse at his leaving.

He started to say something to his extended family, but he couldn't seem to get the words across his tongue. He set his carry-on bag on the floor at his feet and struggled with the words. Taro took the initiative with a smile and kissed him on the lips. Then she pulled him to her in a warm embrace. He closed his eyes briefly and took in her scent for the last time.

"The shuttle for Merriam Flight 1621 to Alexandrius is now boarding," an electronic voice said from the facility's overhead speakers. *"Ticket holders may now begin boarding flight number sixteen-twenty-one, bound for Alexandrius."*

Tanis forced himself to pull away from the vixen and then he looked at the other faces around him. "Never say long goodbyes," he said hoarsely. "That's what my Gram always used to tell me, but now it looks like I have no choice. I have to go now."

Samantha stepped forward and licked him lightly on the cheek and then Lorelei pushed her way forward to do the same. Pockets and Max moved in simultaneously to shake his hand and he wound up taking them together with a grin, one on each hand.

Jerry eased up beside him and offered his hand as well. "Good luck, Tanis," he said. "Study hard and the rewards will be worth it."

The desert fox nodded as he shook his hand and then turned to Merlin who had appeared at his other side. "Tanis," the wolf said quickly, "all the work you've done with us is well appreciated. Thanks for everything."

"Thanks, boss," the fox replied with a smile. "It's sure been interesting working for ya."

"Yeah, but I'll be the one to miss you the most," Renny said. Tanis looked up into the eyes of his friendly rival and suddenly felt moisture rimming his own. He had enjoyed sparring with the cheetah, but regretted their recent arguments.

"Thanks for putting up with me," he said in a choked voice. "I know I've been a pain in the tail lately, but..."

"Forget it, Tanis," Renny said with a grin as he embraced him. "I'll probably get bored without you ruffling my fur. You take care of yourself."

"This is the final boarding call for Merriam Flight 1621 to Alexandrius. Ticket holders must board the shuttle now."

Tanis looked apologetically to his friends. "I have to go..." he said. Before anyone could give him any further well wishes, he picked up his carry-on bag and sprinted toward the ticket clerk. He pulled his slateboard from the bag's side pocket and showed his ticket to a young canine by the door; the desert fox then disappeared without a look back.

Merlin's crew gathered by the large tinted windows and lingered a while until the shuttle launched toward the primary transport vessel in orbit. Nobody said anything as the crewmembers of the *Blue Horizon* turned and walked out of the terminal, several of them with eyes that were not dry.

Tina Winters lowered her head and tail submissively, but looked at the vidscreen with steady yellow eyes. "Thank you, Mr. Sinclair," the white wolf said with genuine appreciation. "I

know you have done a thorough security check on me, and I want you to know your finances will be safe with me."

Merlin's face stared back at her with a warm smile. *"Welcome aboard, Ms. Winters,"* he said as he reached up to adjust a new nautical hat between his ears. *"Once Cindy's set you up with a desk at the home office and has activated your account on the company system, contact me and we'll arrange to transfer the company books and records to you for immediate processing. You will have the home office accounts, as well as those of the Blue Horizon and the Hidalgo Sun. My chief engineer has located another Okami-class freighter for the company, but I don't think you'll be in place before we process the financial paperwork on it. I'm afraid you've got your work cut out for you – likely some long hours of overtime until the transfer has been completed."*

Tina nodded and looked at him with a confident gaze. "I understand the situation you are currently in, sir, and I will try to get settled in as quickly as possible. I'm used to working long hours, and I'm sure I can help you get everything in order in short time."

"Very good, Tina. You were highly recommended and I'm glad to have you on the team. My company is informal, so you don't have to call me Mister Sinclair now that you're a part of us."

"How do you prefer to be addressed, sir?"

"First off, you can drop the 'sir' when you talk to me. You can call me Merlin, captain, boss, or anything similar. I'm sure you'll find other creative names for me after you've worked with us for a while, but I'll treat you as fair as I do the others."

Tina smiled. "I think I can handle that, boss," she said.

"Excellent. Please put Cindy on the line. I'll have her process your employment and then get you set up for your work."

"Right away." Tina got up from Cindy's desk and walked to the door. She stepped out, saw the mouse, and gave her a pleasant smile. "Captain Sinclair has accepted my application," she said. "He wants to talk to you about getting me set up."

The gray mouse brushed a stray lock of hair over one ear and then smiled widely. "Yay!" she said merrily. Cindy gave her a quick hug and then moved past her into the room. Tina chuckled, straightened the hem of her dark blue dress, and then walked down the short hall of the office to the front room. A smaller mouse with an extraordinarily large coffee cup sat on the edge of the receptionist's desk, swinging her feet and idly chatting with a lithe ferret.

Keri looked up at the white wolf and said, "You look pleased. You must have gotten the job!"

"Yes, Miss Petrie, I did," she replied. "I'm to start as soon as Ms. Allport can get me set up with an office."

"That's great news!" the ferret said in a rushed voice. "You're going to like it here."

"I'm sure I will, Miss Pon," Tina replied, "but it looks like I'll be quite busy at first jump."

The receptionist snickered and waved a casual handpaw at the wolf. "You can stop already with the formal names, dearie! I'm Penny, this is Keri and that's Cindy in the other room."

Tina gave her words a nod. The informal atmosphere of this small company would take some getting used to. It was nothing like the offices of Merrick Enterprises where strict business protocols were observed, but she was well aware that the increasing business of this little freight transfer company would keep her busy for a while. She also knew that a background check on her normally would have found little-to-no information on her time working for Harrison Merrick, but the SPF was thorough and obviously found some sort of records that had not been destroyed along with the rest of Mainor. Harrison had employed numerous

accountants, but despite being one of many, she had distinguished herself professionally and she had been recognized for her skill with numbers and data.

She had been away on a visit to her family on Dennier when the Kastan super-weapon destroyed her employer's headquarters and homeworld. She had been working small, unrelated jobs ever since. She was glad to have the opportunity to do accounting again, even if for a shipping business with only three ships and two dozen employees. Sinclair had told her that his late accountant was a stickler in maintaining the books, so perhaps there would be no discrepancies to deal with.

"You may call me Tina," she replied with a smile.

Cindy walked out of the back room and pulled on a light jacket. "Okay, Tina, let's go pick out your office furniture!"

Merlin looked up at the emerald green paint job of the *SS Rambler* and nodded appreciatively. Damien Legrand stood beside him and whistled his own approval. The mastiff was now a member of the *Blue Horizon's* crew, but the load master appreciated being included checking out their newest sister ship all the same.

Renny, Pockets and Max had found the *Okami* freighter in a metropolitan city on the other side of the mountain range, and it was in perfect condition. The raccoon had been thorough in his inspection of the vessel, including a lengthy crawl through the access passages beneath the hold and in between the ship's double hulls. Although just a year old, it hadn't seen many flights. Its owner had purchased the freighter to start up his own little business, but had fallen into ill health before he could establish himself in the market. It had been up for sale for three months, but Pockets had been the first to contact him about it.

"We got it for ten thousand credits less than what we paid for the *Hidalgo Sun*," Pockets told him cheerily, "and it's in better condition. Mr. Rambles was fond of his ship and took care of it."

"How much flight time is on its engines?" Damien asked with a quick glance at the *Blue Horizon* parked next to it on the small tarmac.

"One trip to Ganis and back, and two hops across Pomen," the engineer replied. "It's been in a flight hangar the past few months, so it's even been out of the weather."

"What was in the large package you brought with us?" Damien asked.

The raccoon smiled. "A mobile sentry system for the new ship. We have them on all our vessels, so I thought it might be good to go ahead and integrate it into the system."

"We call it Moss," Max supplied. "It kinda just floats around in the background keeping a watch on systems and personnel. Everyone gets used to ignoring it after a while."

"We'll have you added to the *Horizon's* security protocols when we get back," Pockets added, "so our own Moss unit will see you as part of the crew."

"Want to take a tour, Uncle Merlin? Mr. Legrand?" Max asked with a gentle wag of his tail.

"You can call me Damien, son," the mastiff offered with a smile.

Merlin chuckled. "It has the same floor-plan as ours, doesn't it? I wouldn't imagine it looking any different."

"Well," the young canine answered with a shrug, "the carpet and the walls are different colors than ours, but yeah, it's the same layout. There's more stuff on the recreation deck, though."

Merlin put an arm around Max's shoulders and nodded with a smile. "All right, take us on a tour. Before we put a crew on her, I suppose I should take a look around at least once." Pockets and Legrand fell in step behind them as they headed for the ship, and were met at the airlock by Renny.

"Sorry about that," the cheetah said with a grin. "I had to test out the ship's facilities."

"Everything in working order?" Merlin quipped.

"The plumbing's in good shape," he replied with a smirk.

"Yours or the ship's?" Damien asked.

Renny looked at him with wide eyes and then grinned. "Both!" he answered. Max laughed aloud at the joke and Merlin chuckled with a shake of his head.

"Do we have a name for her yet?" Renny asked as he brought up the cargo bay lights from a control by the airlock. Aside from bright yellow reflective alignment lines painted on the floor, it looked identical to the *Horizon*.

"Since buying it was originally his idea," Merlin replied, "I wanted to call it the *Leo Durant* in his honor, but I wanted his family's permission first. However, Allen Durant asked me not to do it. He just wants to let his son's name rest, so I agreed to honor his request."

"That's understandable," the navigator said. "So what name *did* you come up with?"

"The *Mooncrest*," the lupine captain answered. "It's what Jiro and I almost called the *Blue Horizon* when we first started this business."

"That name sounds familiar," Pockets muttered as they arrived at the forward lift. He thumbed the pad and then looked up at his captain. "Wasn't she a legend somewhere?"

"That's right. *Noiré Mooncrest* was instrumental in bringing the rediscovered colonies of Earth back together by forming the Planetary Alignment. I'm hoping this additional ship will help keep the business together as well."

"Okay, she has a name. Now all she needs is a captain and a crew," Renny mused.

The door to the lift opened and they stepped out into a corridor of green carpet and light gray walls. The lights came up immediately and Merlin looked up at the recessed light panels with a nod. "I hired the *Mooncrest's* captain this morning," he said casually, "but Taro and Samantha are conducting interviews for the rest of the crew until I get back."

"Who's the new captain?" Max asked.

"A buffalo by the name of Abner Corwin," the wolf replied as he headed for the bridge. "He's a retired..."

"...a retired freighter captain who prefers life in space," Renny finished for him.

Merlin stopped in his tracks and looked back at his navigator. "How did you know that?" he asked in amazement.

"That's how Corwin describes himself," Pockets replied.

Renny, Max and Pockets all grinned at the wolf. "Did Taro tell you what happened on Nalirra while you were off on Tanthe getting seduced by the princess?" the cheetah asked.

"You were seduced by a princess?" Damien asked with wide eyes.

Merlin twitched an ear and narrowed his eyes. "Let's just try to forget the incident on Tanthe," he muttered. "If you're talking about the covert operation concerning Tanis' records prior to the Roppa War, yes, she told me about it. What does that have to do with Corwin?"

"He was the captain of a *Prairie-dog* freighter called the *Sandburr* that was stuck waiting to unload just like we were with the *Blue Horizon*. His ship was destroyed when the Tanatans attacked the warehouse."

"I played cards with his crew on his ship while we waited," Pockets added. "They weren't very good either."

Merlin nodded. "Corwin mentioned losing his ship on Nalirra, but never said anything about meeting up with the *Horizon*. Good, at least a few of you know him already." They stopped in front of a familiar blue door painted with a golden sailing ship's wheel. It was a trademark on all *Okami* freighters, harking back to the days of water vessels.

The door opened before him and the bridge lights came on automatically as the small group moved inside. "Navigator," Merlin said to the cheetah as he moved to the center seat, "get on the Com and contact the Pomen Air Command. See if you can secure permission to launch into an orbital altitude of one hundred fifty miles, duration two revolutions, and then a return to our present position."

"Sure, boss. What reason do I give them for this flight plan?"

"Tell them it's just a test run of a new ship. I want to make sure it's really flight-ready before we put Captain Corwin's people on board and a three-hour flight should give us plenty of time to determine everything we need to know."

Renny grinned at him and then gave him a crisp salute. "Aye, aye, Cap'n!"

Later that afternoon, Merlin returned to the office they had rented for their interviews. The test flight of the *Mooncrest* had gone without a hitch and all systems seemed to be in perfect working order. Pockets confirmed that the ship had not been in service long enough to develop any bad quirks and seemed impressed with the condition of the engines. They had spent the past hour of their flight time in low orbit over Pomen, taking the ship through several scenarios and then finishing out the ride just marveling at the beauty of the world below them.

He had left Max and Pockets with the ship to change the security codes throughout the vessel and get the new Moss integrated into the system while he and Renny returned to the office. Damien left them at the entrance to seek out a bite to eat. The wolf and the cheetah stepped inside the front door and removed their flight jackets in unison. The front room was filled with more people than there were seats, and all of them looked up when they came in. Lorelei was half asleep in a chair by the door, the slateboard in her hands leaning heavily toward the floor.

"Good evening," Merlin said to the assembled crowd as he slid Lori's slateboard back into her hands. Several smiled courteously back at him, but it was apparent most of them had been there all day and were getting tired. He passed through the crowd and then moved toward the back room.

"Hey!" exclaimed a short bulldog, "Yer gonna hafta get signed in by the door and wait like the rest of us!" Merlin stopped and turned to look at the canine. Renny rolled his eyes with a sigh and watched the wolf walk over to the dog.

"I don't have to sign in, sir. What's your name?" Merlin asked.

"Walter Maverick, what's it to ya?" the dog said haughtily. "I've been here all day an' yer not takin' cuts! Ain't no one da likes of ya going to jest walk right in!"

Merlin stared at him for a moment and then looked up at Renny with a twinkle in his eye. "Mr. Thornton?"

"Yes, Mr. Sinclair?" Renny replied with a smirk.

"Please escort Mr. Maverick off the premises. He *won't* be selected for the job he is applying for."

"*What?*" bellowed the bulldog. "Who do'ya think ya are?"

"Whoever is hired today will be working for *me*." Merlin smiled with brandished teeth. "I'll be making the final decisions on who signs a contract and I've just decided you won't be among them," he replied in a firm tone.

The bulldog's eyes went wide and he sputtered as he tried to issue an apology, but Merlin tilted his head toward Renny. The cheetah stepped up beside the man and gestured toward the door.

"Please leave," the navigator said in a clear voice. "It'll be easier if you walk out on your own."

Maverick looked mad at first, and then hung his head in embarrassment. He turned and walked out the door without another word. When Merlin looked up at the faces around him, he was greeted by smiles all around, as if letting him know that *they* were worthy of employment. A large wolf near the fireplace gave him an abbreviated salute and Merlin nodded in return.

"Excuse me, folks," he said with a cordial smile. He turned and walked toward the back room. Samantha sat behind a small oak desk on her red floating pillow and grinned up at him when he stopped beside her near the hallway. He leaned over, gave her cheek a quick lick, and then looked at the slateboard in front of her.

"Thanks for getting rid of him," she whispered in his ear. "He's been on everyone's nerves all day."

"Only too glad to help. After the last time he contacted us, I knew I didn't want him anyway."

"You knew him?"

Merlin nodded. "Remember the last time we were on Pomen conducting interviews for Taro's job? Walter Maverick was the name of the guy who got rather upset when I told him I wouldn't hold off all other interviews for the four weeks it would take him to travel here from Kantus."

"Good memory," Samantha replied. "I hadn't remembered him."

"His name stuck in my brain," the wolf replied. "What else is going on?"

"Corwin came in a little bit ago. He's back there with Taro now."

"How far along are you?"

The Border collie looked up at him wearily. "Just about everyone in this crowd has been in to see Taro and Abner, but there are still a few left. These people have been here for a long time, waiting to find out if they'll be chosen." She glanced back at the crowd and added, "The funny thing is that *most* of them already know one another. I hadn't thought Pomen would have yielded so many local applicants for nine jobs, especially in this part of the world."

"Times are hard," Merlin admitted with a nod of his head. "Our company has been doing well, but there are still a lot of folks out of work following the Siilv War, even this long afterward. Losing Mainor put a lot of people on the streets, whether they were from there or not." Samantha looked up at him with a strange expression on her face. "What is it?" he asked.

"You *won't* believe who's back there with Taro right now..." she said quietly.

"Oh?" he replied. "I take it that we know her?"

"Him," Sam corrected. She opened her mouth to continue, but then looked up quickly at someone coming up the hallway behind the wolf. Merlin saw her diverted attention and turned. He narrowed his eyes and snorted.

"Armando Jensen..." he said in a low voice. He stood up to his full height, but only came up to the Mainoran lion's shoulders.

"Hiya!" Armando looked pleased to see the wolf, but Merlin only sighed. The room was full of potential employees and the last thing the wolf wanted was a public confrontation with

an old competitor. Before the lion had a chance to say more, Merlin took him by the arm and led him back down the hallway. Taro and Abner looked up from the notes they were comparing when the two of them entered the room. Merlin cast them a brief glance, but then turned his attention back to the large feline.

“Armando,” he said quietly, “*what* are you doing here?”

The lion looked embarrassed and stuck his hands in the pockets of his slacks. He was dressed in nice clothes and his mane had been well groomed. “I came in for the interview,” he said meekly. “I need a job and freighting is the only thing I really know. Listen, Captain, I know we’ve been at odds in the past, but I promise to be a hard worker if you hire me.”

Merlin studied him a moment. “We treated you rather badly the last time you hooked up with us,” he stated in a neutral tone, “and you still came back looking for a job?”

Armando nodded. “You’n me had some bad blood between us and I figure you were getting it out of your system by taking it out on me. I don’t blame you,” he said. “I might have done the same if you’d been on my ship. I’m willing to forget all that.”

Merlin nodded and found that his old hatred of the feline just was not what it used to be. Perhaps seeing him humiliated had been compensation for their past conflicts. He still wasn’t sure he trusted Armando, but at least he didn’t *hate* him anymore. He glanced over at Taro and Corwin.

“You do the standard background check on him?” he asked. Armando brightened up. That question alone told him that his application might actually be considered.

Taro nodded, but it was the buffalo that answered. “I just got a response and what he told us checks out,” Corwin said in a gravelly voice. He absently scratched his chest beneath the blue robe-like garment he wore. “After he was released from Nalirra—”

“Nalirra!” Merlin exclaimed. He turned back to Armando and the lion nodded in confirmation. Merlin gestured to the chairs in front of Taro’s desk; he and the lion sat down. “How did you wind up *there*?” he asked. “How did you get back out?”

Armando shrugged his shoulders and then put an elbow on the desk. “Something got mixed up somewhere,” he began, giving the explanation he had given to Taro and Corwin earlier. “MPs from Nalirra came for me, claiming I had tried to infiltrate their military and put me under arrest.”

“You infiltrated their non-feline military?” Merlin asked incredulously.

“No,” Armando replied. “I had no part in their conflict with the Tanatans, but somehow they thought I had given it a try. I’m not sure who turned in my name, probably someone from my old crew making trouble for me, but I wound up being taken to their planet in chains and manacles. They tossed me into a stinking prison somewhere in a tropical jungle and I stayed there until the Tanatans beat them down in their war and found me in my cell.” He glanced over at Taro, but she didn’t look sympathetic.

“At first they thought I was one of them that had been captured,” he continued, “but after their doctors checked me over, they decided I wasn’t from Oe’Tanata, but wasn’t from Nalirra either. They found nineteen others like me imprisoned, and after they set up their own government in place over the occupied planet, they put us on a transport out of their system and sent us here to Pomen; we were processed as ex-POWs and released. I’ve been here about three weeks, looking for work.”

Merlin leaned forward in his chair and rested his elbows on his knees. “What are the conditions on Nalirra?” he asked.

“Pretty bad,” Armando answered with a frown. “Oe’Tanata is punishing the people of Nalirra for kidnapping their emperor’s little daughter and they’ve hit them hard. Every warship

and private craft capable of getting to orbit has been destroyed, and even low-altitude aircraft were blown up so no one could escape. Major industries were eliminated and now the Nalirran population *has* to depend upon the Tanatans even for food and medicine. It's not likely Nalirra will be a part of the PA again for a long, long time, if ever again. I'm not siding with Oe'Tanata," he added quickly, "even if they did save me from rotting in that prison, but they're in the right in this war. Nalirra's leader is the one who initiated the whole mess, but the Tanatans sure put an end to it. Unfortunately, it's the Nalirran population who are still paying for it."

"Has anyone from the media talked to you yet?" Taro asked.

"The media? No, why would they?"

"There's been no word from Nalirra since the Tanatans conquered it," the vixen said. "INN would probably pay a lot to interview you. They've been trying for months to get *any* information out of the Roppa system on what's going on there."

Armando shook his head. "I don't wanna talk to them," he said. "Maybe some of the others who got released with me might talk, but I'm just glad to be back in the PA. All I want is a job to do some honest work." He looked at Merlin's steady gaze and dropped his eyes. "I told you how I lost my ship," he said in a quiet voice. "I blew it with my own business, but I've learned my lesson. I'm lousy with a company of my own, but I promise I'll work hard if you hire me."

Merlin looked over at Corwin, who nodded to him, and then to Taro, who pursed her lips. He stood up and then said, "I'll take your application under consideration. If you'll wait outside with the rest of the applicants until we can finish up the last few, we'll let you know what we decide."

The lion stood up and extended his hand to Merlin. "Thanks, Captain," he said. "All I ask is for a fair chance." Merlin hesitated a moment and then took the proffered hand. He shook it briefly and then Armando left the room.

After he had gone, Taro set her stylus on the desk beside her slateboard and then stretched. "That sure was unexpected..." she commented.

"What position did he apply for?" Merlin asked.

"Anything available," Corwin answered, "but he seems best suited for load master, having had a little experience in that field."

Taro looked up at the wolf in surprise. "You aren't actually going to consider him, are you?"

In answer, Merlin looked over at the buffalo. "What's your personal impression of him?" he asked. "It's *your* ship he would be on."

Corwin moved his massive neck around until it cracked and then he raised his eyebrows. "Well, he looks like a strong back," he said. "That'll be handy in moving cargo, with or without equipment. Despite a deficiency in business sense, he worked as an assistant to another load master before he got his own ship and he answered all my questions about it correctly, so he *is* qualified. Plus, he seems genuinely sorry for whatever trouble he has caused you in the past and wants to make up for it. I think he should be okay."

Taro crossed her arms. "We've had other applicants for load master that are more qualified," she said with a frown. "We already know what Armando is like."

Merlin nodded. "True," he admitted, "but it might be better to have him where he can be watched." He chewed on his bottom lip for a moment and then looked up at the buffalo.

"Okay, I'm putting him into your hands, Abner," he replied after a moment of thought. "I'm willing to give him a chance, but I want him on six-month probation. Should he prove to

be untrustworthy, I won't hesitate to terminate his employment. He's been irresponsible in the past, but if he can keep his nose clean and do a good job, you can decide whether or not to make him permanent on your crew. Armando has promised his good behavior, Abner. Keep an eye on him to make sure he lives up to that promise."

"Aye, sir, I will."

Merlin nodded to Taro. "Okay, let's see the last ones on your list so we can send those tired people out there home. I'll look over your notes tomorrow and then call back the ones we decide to employ." He looked over at the buffalo and added, "It will then be your job to call the ones who *aren't* hired and thank them for coming in."

Corwin crossed his thick arms and gave the wolf a lopsided smile. "Oh, joy."

It had taken nearly a week to get the *Mooncrest* fully stocked and prepped while Merlin and Abner finalized the crew positions. In all, Corwin was pleased with his new team and he had spent a good deal of time with each of them prior to their first assignment together. Their new ship's medic had already given everyone their mandated inoculations and despite a few grumblings, everyone had checked out healthy. For his crew, Corwin had only made one specific request. He wanted his twenty-five year old nephew as the ship's cook. The young buffalo was something of a specialist when it came to feeding different species and with a crew of various races on board, Abner could think of no one better for the job. Merlin allowed him that decision, citing *captain's prerogative*.

When the trucks from Holden Pharmaceutical arrived that morning with their cargo, Armando took the initiative and gave instructions to his new crewmates on where to set the heavier crates for proper load placement based upon floor sensor information fed to his slateboard. The process for filling the hold went smoothly. Everyone seemed to be in good spirits and ready to be on their way. Bored with waiting, the crew of the *Blue Horizon* had joined in the loading, although some of them cast furtive glances at the Mainoran lion dressed in a bright, flowered shirt. Merlin stood next to Captain Corwin out of the way of the activity and chatted idly while they waited.

"Your mail quota should arrive any moment," Merlin told the large buffalo. "They always seem to know when a ship's cargo loading operation has completed. It's almost as if they time it that way."

Corwin stretched in the bright sunlight and then looked over at the wolf. He smiled at the lupine's nautical cap and chuckled. "Does Captain Kegawa wear one of those too?" he asked.

Merlin looked at his teasing smile and shook his head. "No, it's just my personal preference, Abner. I don't have one your size, but if you want one too, there's a shop just inside the spaceport terminal that sells them in all sizes."

Corwin laughed aloud. "No, thanks," he said in his gravelly voice. "I like my head uncovered. It's hard enough having the edges of my horns in the periphery of my vision when I'm trying to navigate through a doorway, and I've been doing that all my adult life. A hat would only complicate matters."

Both looked up at the same time when Armando approached them with a slateboard. He gave the buffalo a smart salute and then said, "Here's the manifest, Cap'n. Who's supposed to sign for it, you or me?"

"Either of us can, but in most cases it will be your job to make sure the manifest matches what you load into the ship. We have to keep a record of everything that goes on and off the *Mooncrest*."

Armando nodded, remembering similar words from JW Chon. He pressed his thumb against a box on the screen and signed it with his print. He gave Merlin a quick nod of acknowledgement and then walked back toward the awaiting delivery driver to transfer the electronic document to her. Merlin noticed something with bright colors rolled up in the lion's back pocket.

"What's that he's got there?" he asked.

Corwin glanced to where the wolf was looking and chuckled. "It's a comic book," he answered. "I saw him move a large box of them into his cabin this morning."

"Sounds harmless enough."

"You should have seen the size of the case of *Adirondack's Exotic Honey Mustard* he had my nephew order for the galley. It seems he likes a dab of it on *all* his food."

The delivery truck started its engine and a moment later pulled away. Right on cue, a mail truck emerged around the corner of the terminal building and rumbled toward them. "See? Here they come," Merlin said.

"Once the mail is loaded on board, I suppose we'll need to be leaving," Corwin said as he turned toward the wolf. "Mr. Silverthorne is making final preparations in the engine room, and Michaleen is on the bridge going over the pre-flight checklist. Everyone else has been running cargo duty."

"Thanks for all your help, Abner," Merlin said with an outstretched hand. "I think you and the *Mooncrest* will be a good asset to the company. Take good care of your people."

Corwin returned the handshake warmly. "Glad to be a part of the team," he said. "How much longer are you going to be here on Pomen?"

Merlin scratched his left ear and glanced back at the blue freighter behind him. "We'll be loading up the *Horizon* with cargo bound for Dennier tomorrow morning," he answered. He looked pensive for a moment, but it passed quickly. "Everything is done here. We've brought our friend back home, made changes at the home office, and added a new ship with a batch of new friends to the company. It seems like every time we're on Pomen, it's an extended stay. I have nothing against the place, but we're all ready to be on our way."

"I know what you mean. It can get monotonous out in space on those long journeys, but sometimes I get antsy if I'm on the ground for too long." Corwin noticed various members of the crews of both the *Blue Horizon* and the *Mooncrest* giving one another farewell hugs and handshakes while the cargo bay door closed. "Time to go," he said.

"May the wind be at your back, captain," Merlin said, quoting an old seafarers' saying.

"Thank you, sir. I'll report in once we're underway to let you know our operational status." With that, he turned and headed toward the main airlock of his ship. Merlin watched him go and sighed quietly to himself. He was now the master of three ships and employed over two dozen individuals. It would be hard to coordinate them all from the bridge of a ship, but he knew expanding his business was a smart move. *How had Taro said it?* Yes, he now had a small *fleet* of freighters and a thought was growing in his mind.

Later that afternoon, Merlin lay stretched out on his hotel room bed, his hat on the table next to him and his boots on the floor. It had been a full morning and the *Mooncrest* had

launched on her maiden voyage with her captain and crew. Corwin had reported in two hours later to say that everything had gone smoothly to orbit and that they were fast on their way to cruising speed out of the Lia-Noa star system.

The door to the room opened and Samantha walked in. She set a satchel on the room's small table and then kicked off her shoes.

"I've turned in the keys to our rental office and got our deposit back after Jerry and Lorelei gave it a good cleaning," she said, looking pleased. She crawled onto the king-size bed next to him and looked into his smiling amber eyes. She gave him a little nuzzle and then cuddled up next to his side, her tail wagging gently on the mattress beside her.

"Do you want to discuss our wedding plans before or after we take off?" she asked him quietly. "We really haven't had a lot of opportunities to talk about it since Tanthe."

Merlin gave her a gentle smile. "I'm sorry we haven't made the time for it," he said. "We could have discussed it on the flight from Fyn, but I don't think either of us felt up to it, with my injuries and Durant's..."

"I know, love," the Border collie said, "I know."

"If you want to discuss it now, I'm open," he said.

Samantha smiled and nodded. "Shannon and I have been on the Com quite a bit lately," she admitted. "She's told me all about the various wedding customs on Dennier, specifically from the region you are from. Everything sounds simple enough, but there's a lot of extra room for fluff in your traditions. I want a lot of fluff in my wedding."

"You want fluff?"

"Yeah, I want fluff!"

Merlin chuckled and touched noses with her. "Okay, you can have your fluff. All I want is *you*, with or without the fluff."

"Yay!" she exclaimed with a grin. "Okay, now let me tell you what fluff I want." Samantha went on to tell him all the ideas that she, Shannon and Taro had come up with for their wedding. Merlin listened in patience and made a few suggestions, but was ultimately impressed by the amount of planning she had already done. Shannon had found a local wedding dress that went well with Samantha's projected image and the price was reasonable. Merlin's sister had been ecstatic when Sam contacted her for ideas and had been instrumental finding prices with the Grandstorm businesses.

"We *are* going to have the wedding in Grandstorm, aren't we?" Samantha asked. "I just assumed..."

"Where *else* would it be?" Merlin asked with a smile. "I grew up in Grandstorm, that's where Bill and Shannon and the kids live, and that's where the home office is. I know your family was from Alexandrius and you grew up on Sillon, but Dennier is better suited for the business if we settle down there."

Samantha looked at him quizzically. "Settle down?" she repeated.

"I've been doing a lot of thinking lately," the wolf explained. "Something that Bill said not too long ago."

"About having cubs of our own?" she asked. It was no secret that Bill had often teased Merlin with complaints that his children didn't have any cousins. Bill had no siblings of his own, so it would be up to Merlin and Samantha to produce more relatives.

"Well, there is that," the lupine captain replied, "but that's not the idea foremost in my mind."

"What then?"

"I just bought another freighter for my business and staffed it with ten people who are contracted to receive salaries and benefits. I moved the company accountant to Dennier to make it more accessible to everyone through the home office, but yet here I am still commanding my fleet from a mobile location."

Samantha nodded, understanding his train of thought. "Bill suggested that you give up your ship and run the business from the home office, didn't he?"

Merlin nodded. "Having my own ship and business was something I'd wanted to do," he said, "and I got to have it for nearly ten years. However, now that I have more than just a single crew to look after, it makes better sense to run the company from a centralized location."

"Bill has a good mind for business," the Border collie agreed.

Merlin gazed into her deep brown eyes. "We'd have a *real* home together, Sam," he said quietly. "It wouldn't just be a shared stateroom on a freighter, but an actual house."

Samantha's eyes widened and she grinned. "I was already thinking Bill's idea had merit, but you just added icing. I think it's a wonderful idea... I like it."

"We'd be leaving our friends behind," Merlin reminded her in a quieter voice. "We've been with them a long time."

"True," the collie replied, "but we'll still be in contact. If you think it's time to let someone else command the *Blue Horizon*, Merlin, I'm behind you. You'll still have a crew to command at the home office - it just won't be out in space where pirates are always a threat. Besides, I would like to give Bill and Shannon's cubs those cousins."

Merlin looked at her with renewed interest. "Oh, you would, would you?" He started to move closer to her with a certain glint in his eye, but Samantha laughed and pushed him away with a hand on his nose.

"Hold on, handsome! I didn't mean *right now!*" Merlin gave her a playful pout and then settled back down against his pillow. Samantha giggled at his expression. "Do you remember what you said when Sparky and Roland were married? '*A cargo ship with limited room is not the place to raise a family*'. If we have pups, a house on Dennier is a better setting. Children need fresh air in the open sun and a lot of room to run."

Merlin chuckled and looked at her lovingly. "I was worried you wouldn't want to leave the *Blue Horizon*, but it looks like you're already packing for us. I'm sure it will make Shannon happy."

He thought for a moment and then added "It's decided, then, but don't tell anyone just yet. Taro already expressed an interest in taking command of the ship if I ever decided to leave, so let's take her out tonight to discuss it with her before we tell the others."

Samantha leaned forward and ran a finger through the soft fur behind his left ear. "You're a good man, Merlin Sinclair. It's no wonder I love you."

"Okay, Merlin, out with it."

The lupine captain looked up at his first officer in mock surprise, but he couldn't keep a smile from creeping across his lips. He set his fork down on the table beside his plate then picked up his glass. He didn't drink, but held it in his hands without breaking eye contact with the vixen. He peered at her between two candles that occupied the center of their table and then set his glass back on the table.

"Out with what?" he teased with a side-glance at Renny and Samantha, who occupied the other two seats at their table.

Taro snorted and leaned on the table with her chin rested on steepled fingers. The four of them were in a classy restaurant and the large room was dark to provide the candle-lit ambiance. A quartet of black bears was in a corner playing soft music and the tinkle of silverware and low voices of quiet conversations were in the air. Renny sat uncomfortable in a suit and tie, but he had refused none of the food. He was used to more of a casual atmosphere, but Taro and Samantha looked at home in their elegant evening gowns. Merlin wore a dark blue suit with an amber tie to match his eyes, but had abandoned his hat for the night.

"It's rare that you will take any of your royal subjects out to eat at an expensive restaurant," the vixen said with a suspicious smile. "What's on the king's mind?"

"We're practically done with our meals," Samantha as Renny took another bite and looked up at her. "Go ahead and tell her."

Merlin smiled mischievously. "I'm sure you already know what's on my mind," he said to Taro. "After all, it was partially your idea."

Taro sat back in her chair, a sudden look of uncertainty on her face. "You aren't... retiring... are you?" she asked.

Merlin chuckled. "No, I'm not retiring. However, what I *am* doing is offering you the captaincy of the *Blue Horizon*."

Renny choked on his food and took a quick drink from his glass. "What?" he said after he regained his breath.

Merlin looked over at him in amusement and then grasped Samantha's hand on top of the table. "Once we get to Dennier, Sam and I are going to start shopping for a house of our own, and then I am going to run the company from the home office instead of from a mobile location."

Taro nodded and smiled. "I wondered how long it would be until you decided the business was getting too big to operate from the *Horizon*," she said.

"You're leaving?" Renny asked. He seemed surprised that Merlin would even think of giving up his vessel.

Samantha giggled. "That's right, Ren-Ren. We're going to settle down and raise a family."

"Well, that's great, I guess," he grumbled with downcast eyes. Renny had enjoyed working for Merlin and considered him a close friend.

"Taro Nichols," the wolf said formally, "the position of Captain of the *SS Blue Horizon*, with all its benefits and responsibilities, is hereby offered to you. Do you accept?"

The vixen nodded her head elegantly and responded, "Yes, Milord. I accept your kind offer and am humbled by it." Samantha burst out laughing and had to cover her mouth. Taro snickered and Merlin chuckled along with her, but Renny just heaved a heavy sigh.

"May I make a request?" Taro asked when the mirth subsided.

"Anything," Merlin replied.

"May I assign Mr. Gloom, here, as my first officer?"

Merlin nodded with a smile and replied, "That's your prerogative as the captain," he said. "Once you've formally assumed command, your responsibilities will include whatever crew assignments you wish to make."

"When does this go into effect?" Renny asked quietly. He'd lost his appetite, a feat in of itself, and pushed his plate away from him.

"Once we land on Dennier, we'll have an informal Change of Command ceremony," Merlin explained after taking a lap of his drink. "This will be my final voyage as captain of the *Blue Horizon*."

"I never thought I'd see the day when *you* would leave the ship," Taro said, "but I think you're doing the right thing."

"Thanks," Merlin said. "That means a lot to me."

The conversation came to a lull and all four of them sat for a moment, lost in their own thoughts. Then Taro stood up and picked up her small handbag. "Excuse me," she said, "I need to visit the powder room."

"Me too," Samantha said. "I'll go with you." She licked Merlin on the nose and then followed the vixen across the room.

Merlin and Renny sat quietly for a moment and then the cheetah looked over at him. "I don't want you to go," he said seriously.

"Times change, my friend," the wolf replied. "If it was still just me and a crew on the *Blue Horizon*, I wouldn't even consider it, but I have a whole fleet of employees now."

"You've been running everything from the *Horizon* this long, even after we took on the *Hidalgo Sun*," Renny countered. "What difference does it make if you're behind a desk on the ship instead of a desk on *Dennier*?"

"The biggest difference is Samantha," Merlin told him. "We're about to be married and we both want a family. Considering the amount of danger we've run into over the past few years, I wouldn't want to raise my cubs in that kind of environment. Children need fresh air in the open sun and a lot of room to run."

"Yeah, I suppose so." The cheetah picked up a meal bone and began to gnaw on it idly.

"Are you going to stay with the *Blue Horizon* if I leave?" Merlin asked after a moment of thought.

Renny looked up at him in surprise. "Why would I leave?" he asked.

"You've had more injuries than anyone else since you came on board," Merlin answered. "Frankly, I'm surprised you haven't resigned after all that."

Renny's eyes flashed and he pointed his bone at the wolf. "I'm no quitter," he said in a strained voice. "No one will ever accuse me of *that*!" He dropped his bone to the plate with a clatter and leaned back in his seat. "I admit this job's been more hazardous than I would have thought for a freighter navigator, but I like working for you and the *Horizon* has become my home. I get along with my coworkers and the pay is decent. You may have to increase my medical insurance benefits, though." He said the last with a bit of a smile.

Merlin nodded with a smile of his own. "Well, you'll be getting a raise just having the First Officer tag on you," he said. "I think I can arrange a bit of hazard pay as well."

"Fortunately for us, the *Basilisk* won't be stalking us anymore."

Merlin's eyes grew dark at that comment. "I wouldn't count on smooth sailing," he cautioned in a low voice. "The *Basilisk* was just one pawn controlled by Victor Faltane. We got in the way of his plans for Argeia and he's apparently trying to hunt down Lucas for the same reason. If he sent the *Basilisk* after us, I have no doubt he has other ships to take its place. From what we learned on Fyn, Faltane is more powerful than we knew and he probably hasn't enjoyed our interference. I doubt we've seen the last of terrorists. Are you sure you want to remain on board?"

Renny snorted. "You sound like you're trying to scare me away," he said with a smirk. "Don't worry, boss. I'm not going anywhere. Besides... I'm now second in command for the flagship of your fleet! I doubt I'd do as well anywhere else." Merlin nodded and gave him a smile of appreciation. He had never regretted hiring Renny Thornton.

Both of them looked up as the ladies approached the table. Samantha sat down next to Merlin and gave him an impish smile. "Miss me?" she asked.

There was a knock on the door, but Lorelei didn't hear it at first. She sat naked in the middle of the front room of her cabin on board the *Blue Horizon*. All the lights were out save for a single red candle on a small table before her, with a stick of incense burning from a stylized holder. She had her eyes closed, her legs crossed and her hands together in her lap holding a common wildflower she had picked just prior to the ship's launch from Pomen.

The knock on the door repeated and a soft voice called out to her through the panel. "Lorelei? Are you in there?"

The white rabbit opened one eye and smiled gently when she recognized the voice of the ship's new doctor. She closed her eye again and replied, "You may come in, Jerry."

The door opened and the red fox took one step into the room before he realized what he was seeing. "Oops," he said in an embarrassed tone. "Sorry to bother your contemplation, Miss, but the captain's called a staff meeting on the recreation deck."

Lori opened her eyes slowly and then looked up at him with amusement as he unsuccessfully attempted to avert his gaze. She set her flower on the small table and then tapped out the incense stick before she stood up.

"Would you like to help me get dressed?" she asked with half-lidded eyes.

Jerry swallowed and put his hands into the pockets of his medical smock. "I think I'll just wait for you, Miss," he said. The rabbit laughed and then disappeared into the bedroom. She reappeared a moment later wearing an ice-green *hapi* coat tied over a pair of yellow shorts and then walked to her candle. She blew it out with a gentle breath and then moved to Jerry's side.

She threaded an arm through his with a smile and chuckled at his discomfort. For someone who was supposed to have a reputation with the ladies, the doctor was acting awfully shy. "You can escort me, foxy," she said. Jerry raised an eyebrow and then led her out into the corridor without a word. The door shut behind them automatically.

A few moments later, they walked out of the lift together and all eyes from the rest of the crew watched them enter the room. Merlin stood at the forward end of the recreation deck in front of the large window. Several sensor readings were displayed by the near-invisible circuitry in the upper right corner of the glass in red letters, but otherwise the view was of the stars before them.

Taro and Renny sat together on a short couch and Damien occupied a recliner next to them. Pockets sat in the other recliner and Max was stretched out on the carpet at his feet. Samantha was absent, having the current bridge watch duty, but she had tied in the intercom system to listen in on the conversation. Jerry led his charge to another couch and sat down with her.

Merlin nodded to them and then all eyes returned to the captain when he cleared his throat. "I wanted everyone here together to let you know that although there have been a lot of changes to the company lately, there are a few more yet to take place."

"What kind of changes?" Pockets asked suspiciously. "Are you buying *another* ship?"

Merlin chuckled, but shook his head. "No, I have enough ships for now," he replied, "but there will be a few more personnel changes."

"More?" Lorelei asked in a lazy voice.

"I know it will come as a shock to some of you..." Merlin hesitated, "...but Samantha and I will be leaving the *Blue Horizon* when we get to Dennier."

"Leaving?" Max asked. He sat up and crossed his legs, his blue eyes imploring. There was a long and uncomfortable silence, and then Lorelei's previous calm demeanor evaporated as the implications set in.

"What do you mean by that?" she asked with one ear drooping. "You aren't leaving for good?"

"Are you selling the company?" Pockets asked in a near whisper.

"I am not selling my company," Merlin explained calmly. "Now that there are more ships than just this one in the business, it has become apparent that I will need to move my desk to the home office to run things from a central location."

"Aww, no..." Max replied with a downcast expression.

Pockets sat very still in his seat, his lips partially open and his eyes wide. He had been with the *Blue Horizon* since Merlin had first put it into operation and had undoubtedly never entertained the thought that the wolf would ever leave. Neither Jerry nor Damien expressed distress at the announcement, both of them still a little new to the company.

"Sam and I will be finalizing the plans for our wedding and begin house-shopping shortly after we depart," Merlin continued.

"No!" Lorelei exclaimed with tears in her eyes. "That's not fair! There've been *too many good-byes* lately!"

"Lori..." Jerry said with a hand on her shoulder. "The boss is right. It makes better sense to run things from the office." The rabbit gave him a cold look and then turned her back on him.

Merlin shook his head and then said, "Taro has accepted promotion to captain of the *Blue Horizon*. There will be a short change of command ceremony after we've landed on Dennier, and then your captain will be conducting interviews for a new business coordinator, supply officer and computer technician."

"Merlin..." Pockets said in a quiet voice, "are you *sure* you want to do this? I mean... the *Horizon* has been your child..."

The wolf looked at his longtime friend with an uncertain expression. "All children grow up and eventually need to be on their own," he said quietly. "Using your analogy, I am a father... one who now has three children. I can't play favorites, Pockets. The home office will be my home for the children to come back to for advice and direction." He gazed around at the faces gathered before him and added, "Samantha and I plan to have cubs of our own and we don't want to raise them within the confines of a ship. Perhaps in the future when they've grown up, Sam and I will return to a life in space, but for now, we need our feet on the ground."

Max got up and then walked to the wolf. He stopped in front of him, and for a moment, they searched one another's eyes.

"Uncle," the canine said in a steady voice, "even when you were reluctant to bend the laws of Quet, you helped me escape my previous fate. You gave me a better life, you gave me confidence, and you gave me a real family. I don't want you to go," he swallowed briefly, "but I understand *family*. You'll still be there for us, just not on board our ship. Thank you for everything you've given me." He held out his hand to the wolf, but Merlin gave him a soft smile and then drew him into a warm embrace.

Lorelei jumped up, ran to them, wrapped her arms around them both, and began to cry. Pockets got up and joined them. He moved behind Merlin and then wrapped his arms around the captain's middle. He closed his eyes, buried his nose in the wolf's shirt, and tried very hard not to start crying too. Renny and Taro exchanged smiles and then stood up. They moved in and both of them joined the group hug.

Renny grinned widely at Merlin as he grabbed the back of his neck. He had finally accepted the reasons Merlin had given him the previous night, and although he would miss his friend, he was no longer upset by it. Taro leaned in to give Merlin a lick on the cheek and then winked.

Jerry and Damien looked at one another and stood up, but otherwise didn't approach the others. Although they were now a part of the crew, they were still relative outsiders to the "family" of friends. Jerry stuck a hand into a pocket of his smock and then motioned for the load master to follow him to the galley for coffee.

Lorelei continued to cry, and even Max and Pockets began to grin, but the rabbit continued to hold onto Merlin as if afraid to let him go.

"Hey!" Samantha's voice cried out suddenly from the intercom speaker, "I think I'm missing out on all the hugs!"

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

The door panel opened and Samantha stood there in a short silk robe with a tray of food. Her fur was well groomed and the scent of flowers followed her in. She smiled widely and stepped inside. The Border collie touched the pad to close the door before turning back toward the bed. She moved to where the wolf sat on the couch with his slateboard on the short coffee table in front of him. She set the tray on his lap as so not to cover up his slateboard.

"What's this?" Merlin asked with a friendly smile. The tray held all his favorite breakfast foods with a nice, steaming cup of coffee. He picked up the cup and lapped from it first.

Samantha wagged her tail gently and shrugged her shoulders. "Today's going to be a full day for us all, so I thought I would help the captain get a good start."

"At three in the morning?" he asked as he picked up a slice of buttered toast.

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

Merlin mocked a deep sigh. "Yeah, I've been told that I'm predictable." Both snickered and Sam sat on the couch beside him. She watched him eat, and after a few moments, the wolf arched an eyebrow at her. "Something on your mind?"

"Not really," she admitted, "but I wondered if you wouldn't mind a bit of snuggling when you are finished eating."

"You wake up in the mood?" he teased.

Samantha shook her head with a smile. "No, I just need your arms around me."

Merlin set his cup down and lightly brushed the fur on her left cheek. "You're always welcome in my arms, Sam," he said with a gentle smile. "Always and forever."

Merlin quickly finished the last of his breakfast and then took another lap of his coffee. He set the tray on the table, stood up, took her by the hand, and then led her to the back room. They slid under the covers of the bed and then settled in.

"I love you, Merlin," she said quietly. "Forever and always."

"I love you too, Sam."

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

The northern shore of land appeared in the vidscreen and Samantha pointed with a smile. "There's Grandstorm!" she said. The *Blue Horizon* had left orbit and descended upon Dennier over the Arvallian Sea. The blue flying saucer zoomed over green water toward the shore and Merlin raised their altitude back up to standard air traffic while Taro exchanged information with the spaceport control tower. Since the *Blue Horizon* would be loaded up there for its next assignment, they couldn't land at Bill and Shannon's place as they had on previous visits.

The evening sun was just touching the western horizon and the traffic near the seaside spaceport facility was heavy. The five main skyscraper spires of the city were already lit up from internal offices and glittered in the evening as the ship approached Grandstorm. Commercial and private sea craft were plentiful nearer the coast and the boardwalk at the beaches was lit up for nighttime visitors.

"There's the spaceport," Taro said. "Control tower is directing us to pad sixty-one, Captain. Bill had it reserved for us; he and Shannon are there already with the kids."

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

"Aye, Captain," the Border collie answered with a grin.

Taro touched a few pads and then spoke over the ship-wide intercom, "Artificial gravity will be disabled in fifteen seconds. In another five minutes we'll be on the ground with full engine shutdown."

The ship slowed even more and Renny glanced out the windows. They were now moving beneath the spaceport traffic and on approach to a landing spot ringed with flashing green lights. The *Blue Horizon* stopped and hovered above the pad, and then began dropping slowly. Merlin flipped the toggle to lower the landing gear, and then a moment later, they were on the ground.

Merlin and Renny began shutting down the onboard systems and Samantha looked over at Taro. She grinned at the vixen, but her smile froze when she saw Taro's sad expression.

"What's the matter?" she asked her quietly. Renny and Merlin both looked up at the question.

"This is it..." the red fox replied. "The end of our last voyage together..."

Sam moved forward and put a hand on her friend's shoulder. "Don't look at it like that," she said after a moment. She sat down in the chair nearest Taro and regarded her. "Think of this as the beginning of *The Adventures of Captain Nichols and the Blue Horizon*."

Taro nodded with a chuckle. "I suppose you're right," she replied.

Renny stood up and then turned to Merlin, who still sat in the center seat, possibly for the last time. The others turned to look at him too, but the wolf didn't meet anyone's gaze. "Please assemble the crew outside the main airlock," he muttered quietly.

"Merlin...?" Samantha asked. He didn't look up at her, but continued to stare at the guidance shifts in front of him.

"I will be down in just a moment," he said. "Wait for me there."

Sam nodded and then followed Renny and Taro off the bridge. She turned back to look when she reached the door and saw Merlin unbuckle his harness quietly and then get up out of his seat. He retrieved his flight jacket from the back of the chair and slowly put it on over his blue shirt.

"I think the realization of your words just hit him," Renny whispered to Taro as they headed toward the lift. "Until now, his leaving has been something in the *near future*. Now that it's here..."

"Shhh..." Taro shushed him as Samantha caught up to them at the lift. The three of them climbed into the small elevator and took it down to the cargo deck. Damien came out of the nearby load master's office and walked over to join them. Everyone else was waiting outside the main hatch, and Lorelei was cooing over the four children standing with Bill and Shannon. Max introduced Jerry to them and then Damien.

Two of the cubs, Marissa and Shane, looked up at the large mastiff with wide eyes when he gazed down at them with an unreadable expression. After a moment, his countenance softened and then he squatted down to look them at their level. "These are fine looking pups, ma'am," he said to Shannon. Another black cub walked up to him and stuck out his little hand to the canine.

"Ah'm Jacob," he said to Damien. Legrand shook his hand with a nod and then looked over at a chubby cub peering out at him from between his parents. Damien let out a soft sigh when Jaran suddenly smiled at him.

"Unca Merlin!" Shane exclaimed. He ran through the small group and jumped into the lupine captain's waiting arms. The other three followed, yelling his name, and he gave them each a hug and a nuzzle on the cheek.

"Hello, cubs," he said happily. Shannon walked over to them and then Merlin put down the youngster to stand up. He gave her a warm hug. "Hello, sister of mine," he said with a grin. "Is that husband of yours still treating you well?"

He shook hands with Bill and Shannon chuckled. "Very well," she replied. "It's good to see you again."

Merlin looked down at a tugging on his tail and saw Shane gazing up at him. "Are you gonna stay with us again, Unca Merlin?" he asked.

Merlin nodded with a smile. "For a little while," he said. "Samantha, too."

"Samma?" Marissa jumped up and down and exclaimed. "Yaaaay!"

"Bill, can you and Shannon take the kids over there a few paces?" Merlin asked Bill. "I have a small ceremony to perform."

"Sure," the black wolf replied curiously.

While the family moved away, Merlin turned and looked at his people. "Taro Nichols, front and center!" he said aloud. The rest of the crew gathered to one side and then Taro stepped forward. She stood in front of the wolf at rigid attention amidst chuckles.

Merlin looked at her with a grin and said in a semi-serious tone, "To be recorded for this date and time, I hereby transfer command of the *SS Blue Horizon*, PA Registry 1138, to Captain Taro Nichols, with all the benefits and responsibilities that are associated with the position."

With her arms straight at her sides, the vixen tried hard to keep a straight face and then replied, "I accept transfer of command, sir." She gave him a crisp salute worthy of a military veteran and then said, "You are now relieved of command, sir."

Merlin extended his hand, but Taro shook her head and then drew him into a tight hug instead. The wolf squeaked and she quickly released him with an apologetic smile.

Merlin pulled his hat from off his ears and then placed it on Taro's head. "You *don't* have to wear this," he told her amongst the laughter of the assembled group, "but it's symbolic of the position... and I won't be wearing it anymore."

"Thank you, Merlin," Taro replied with a grin.

"However.... I do have something you might like instead," the wolf added in a more serious tone. He stuck his hand into a pocket of his flight jacket and withdrew a small gray box. He handed it to her and she took it in curiosity. The members of her crew gathered around to see what it might be, and when she opened it, Taro's eyes grew moist.

Inside was a small gold pendant in the shape of a sailing ship's wheel, much like the image painted on the door of the bridge. Set into its center was a deep blue gem. Merlin pulled it out of the box for her, raised its strong, yet lightweight chain over her head, and then set it gently upon the bosom of her white blouse.

"It's lovely," she said in a choked voice. Lorelei *oooh'd* at the sparkly gem.

"It was a gift from Shannon when I bought the first *Blue Horizon*," he said at his sister's look of recognition. "I rarely wear jewelry myself, but have kept it with me ever since. I'm now passing it on to you to keep safe."

"Thank you, Merlin." Taro put her arms around the wolf and then kissed him full on the lips. When the kiss lingered just a moment too long, Samantha and Renny exchanged glances. In unison, each grabbed one of the vixen's arms and pulled her away from Merlin.

"That's enough," Samantha teased the vixen with a grin.

"Yeah," agreed Renny. Once again, laughter echoed across the landing pad.

"Well folks," Merlin said to the assembled crowd, "you now have a new captain. I've already made all the legal arrangements, so this is legit. She's your boss, so be sure to give her plenty of grief!"

"Hey!" Taro said with a laugh.

Bill stepped in and shook hands with Taro. "Congratulations, dear. You managed quite a feat to make *him* give up the ship!"

"That was *my* doing, thankyouverymuch!" Samantha exclaimed. "It took me *years* to make him fall in love with me and propose!"

"Well, whosever fault it was, *thanks!*" Bill replied with a grin. "Now, if everyone will follow us, we have transportation lined up for the lot of you, with reservations for dinner." He looked at Merlin and Samantha and added, "You can retrieve your personal effects from the ship later."

Renny licked his lips. "All right, I'm starving!"

"Better hope the restaurant is stocked..." Pockets quipped. "If Renny's *starving*, watch your fingers and don't get too close to his mouth!"

A blue and gold taxi stopped at the edge of landing pad sixty-one of the Grandstorm Spaceport. A tall coyote slid out of the back and the cabbie retrieved two large suitcases from the trunk after she paid her fare. She tapped a control on the handle of each bag and gravity repulsors discs activated to levitate them a few inches above the tarmac. The cab drove away and the woman straightened her burgundy dress as she looked up at the two-tone, oval bulk of the *Blue Horizon*.

She was about to grab the straps of her wheeled luggage and pull them toward the ship when another taxi pulled up behind her. A koala in a pair of sunglass goggles opened the door and dragged a large gray duffel bag out of the back seat with him. He handed the cabbie a few credits and then had to jump out of the way when the car took off in a hurry.

The koala looked up at the coyote and smiled. "Hello," he said. "Are you here to welcome me?" he asked in a thick voice.

The woman looked amused. "No, sorry," she replied. "I just arrived myself."

"New recruit?"

"Uh, something like that," she said. "You?"

"Yeah, me too. Hello, my name is Justin Mandolin. Most folks call me *Justy*," the koala said with a smile as he looked over the top of his sunglasses at her. "And no, I don't play the musical instrument."

"Pleased to meet you, Justy," the woman said. "I'm Amanda Black, the new business coordinator for the *Blue Horizon*." They shook hands and then Justy turned to look at the parked vessel.

"I'm her new supply officer and computer tech," he explained, "starting today."

"I don't know if anyone else knows we're here," Amanda said. "Do you think we should go up to the front door and knock?"

"Sure, sounds like a good idea." Justy picked up his duffel bag and hefted it up onto his shoulder. It was nearly as large as he was and looked to be just as heavy. Amanda grabbed the straps of her bags and pulled them behind her as they walked toward the ship.

When they reached the main airlock, they found it open. Justy looked at Amanda, shrugged, and then walked up the ramp into its interior. The coyote followed him inside, but the only lights on in the cargo bay were the emergency glow panels.

"Hello?" Justy called out as he removed his sunglasses by its strap. His voice echoed in the semi-empty hold, but there was no reply. It seemed the only cargo on board consisted of six large crates anchored to the floor with the initials 'DWT' emblazoned in large letters upon their sides, and one tremendous red container marked 'Mail: *Dennier-Kantus*'.

"There's a lift over there," he suggested.

"Do you think it's advisable if we just walk in?" Amanda asked hesitantly.

"Why not?" said the koala. "Captain Nichols has our contracts and this is our ship. C'mon, let's go see if we can find someone upstairs." Amanda followed him across the cargo deck. Justy tapped a pad beside the lift and they heard a light hum as the carriage descended to their level.

When the panel opened, they found themselves face-to-lens with a small flying saucer hovering in the air before them. Its metal surface was light blue, and printed in tiny letters below a pair of offset sensor lenses was *Moss*³.

Amanda started when it peered at them and said, "*Meow!*"

The small unit's lights began to alternate between several colors as it tried to identify the intruders, and within a microsecond, it had made a match in its database for both individuals. It rotated a few of its whisker antennae and then floated past the pair toward the engine room.

"What was *that*?" Amanda asked. Justy stepped into the lift and shrugged his shoulders, setting his duffel on the floor at his feet.

"It might be a *flobot*," the koala suggested. "I heard they use something like that on the ships of the Firebird Fleet, but I've never seen one in my trade magazines that looked like that."

Amanda pulled her luggage into the carriage beside the koala and then the door slid shut. It opened again on the crew deck a moment later. There were no lights in the corridor, but as soon as Justy stuck his nose out into the hallway, the recessed lights came up full.

"The place looks deserted," the coyote said nervously.

"If you want to wait here," Justy said, setting his duffel on the floor next to the wall, "I'll take a quick look around."

"Uh-uh," Amanda shook her head. "You're *not* leaving me alone!" She left her suitcases beside his duffel and then followed him around the curved corridor. There were nameplates on

seven crew cabins and Justy knocked on each one, but there was never a reply. When they reached Sickbay, the koala put his nose inside and sniffed at the scents. There was no one in there either.

"This is spooky. Let's try the bridge," he suggested. They found the blue door with the ship's wheel and went inside. As with the other rooms, the bridge was deserted, though several systems were active on the boards. Justy studied them a moment while Amanda went through a side door and found a small water closet that contained an all-species squat toilet with a small sink. A fresh hand towel hung on a rack with the words *SS Blue Horizon* in fading blue-to-black letters.

Justy looked up at her from the computer terminal. "There's another deck above us," he said. "If they're not there, then everyone must be out on the town."

"That's odd," Amanda said as she checked her small wristwatch. "I was supposed to report to the ship at 0900 hours. We were standing at the main hatch right at that time and it was wide open." She followed the koala back to the lift and they got in once again. They didn't bother with their belongings and left them in the corridor.

A second before the door opened, they heard the sound of laughter. The scene that greeted them was one of pandemonium. On a large exercise mat spread out on the floor was nearly every member of the *Blue Horizon's* crew. The red fox that Justy and Amanda knew to be Captain Nichols was pinned to the mat with two people holding *each* limb. A rabbit and a mastiff were on Taro's right arm and a German shepherd and another red fox were holding down her left arm. A Border collie and a wolf were on her right leg, and a cheetah and a raccoon were on her left. The wolf and the cheetah were voraciously tickling the bare soles of Taro's feet while the others tried to keep the Hestran fox immobile as she laughed, cried, begged and pleaded.

The wolf wriggled the fingers of one hand between each of the vixen's black toes and her foot jerked with each touch; his other hand continuously tickled the sole of her foot. On the other leg, the cheetah had grasped her toes with one hand and was tickling the underside of her toes with the claws of his other.

Taro screamed out with laughter and tried to jerk her legs free, but even with her strength, the combined weight of four people held them down. Then, as if the foot attack wasn't enough, the rabbit began tickling underneath Taro's right arm. The vixen's eyes flew open wide and then shut again, but she was unable to contain her laughter.

The young German shepherd practically sat on top of her left arm; he reached out with his fingers and found her ribs. He tickled them enthusiastically and grinned in satisfaction at her renewed efforts to free herself with shrieks of laughter.

Amanda put her hands to her mouth to cover up her smile, but Justy grinned openly and laughed at the commotion. He wondered if it would be rude to join in the fun without having been introduced to anyone but the captain herself, and had to restrain himself from moving from his spot.

As the assault on the vixen continued, Amanda took a moment to look around the recreation deck. Streamers and balloons were attached to the walls, and a galley table was spread out with a half-eaten cake, punch and assorted meat and vegetable snack trays. The large vidscreen on the forward end of the room displayed *Congratulations and Fare Well, Merlin and Samantha!* in large blue letters.

Her attention returned to the mob on the floor when the German shepherd and the male fox tumbled backward. The vulpine captain's left arm had gotten free. Still grinning, Taro reached over, pulled the bunny off her arm, and then managed to extricate her right arm from

beneath the large mastiff. Before the four of them could regain their hold on her, Taro sat up quickly and grabbed the first person she could reach.

The Border collie squealed out in surprise when Taro grabbed her around the middle and began tickling her in return. Samantha was as ticklish as they came and she shrieked out in laughter at the vixen's attack on her ribs from behind. The raccoon's eyes went wide at the screams in his ears and he turned to see what had happened. With a wide grin, the diminutive raccoon launched himself at Taro and tried to tackle her middle. Big mistake. Taro abandoned Samantha and wrapped her arms around Pockets, still laughing from the assault on her own feet, and grinning ear to ear at the raccoon's own squeals of laughter from her fingers under his arms. Fortunately for all involved, Pocket was not wearing his heavy, tool-laden coveralls, but was in a red shirt and trousers today.

Merlin was still oblivious to the fight behind him and continued to work on Taro's feet, although it was getting harder to hold her without Samantha's help. Renny had felt Pockets disappear from behind him and chanced a look back... just as Pockets rolled off onto the mat and Taro reached out to grab *him!*

It was Renny's turn to shriek out in laughter. He was kneeling on the mat next to her leg and she had found his foot. The cheetah was extremely ticklish, himself, and yowled in distress. Instead of fighting back, he began to claw at the mat to get away. Taro tickled his toes with relish, knowing that Renny had made the mistake of taking off his own boots.

When Max knelt down behind her and went for her ribs again, she yelled out in surprise. After a moment, Taro finally released Renny's foot and then held up her hands in submission. "Enough!" she managed to say between giggles and deep breaths. "Th-that's enough..."

Merlin released her foot and sat down on the mat beside Samantha. Everyone who'd been a part of the action breathed hard and continued to giggle or chuckle. One by one, almost all of them lay back on the mats to catch their breath.

Taro giggled and managed to sit up again, and it was then she finally saw the newcomers standing by the lift door. Amanda's eyes crinkled in contained amusement, but Justy laughed openly.

"H-hi...!" Taro managed with a wide grin.

Justy gave her a wave and Amanda smiled with nod.

"Hello," she said.

It was only then that the rest of the crew noticed the two new people. Merlin got to his feet and wiped his sweaty palms on a handkerchief he pulled from a pocket. He walked to them as the others slowly stood up, and he offered his hand first to the coyote.

"Welcome aboard," he said with a smile. "I'm Merlin Sinclair, president of *Blue Horizon Freight Transfer*."

The woman shook his hand and replied, "Thank you, sir. I am Amanda Black."

Merlin shook hands with the male koala. "Good to be here, sir. I'm Justin Mandolin," the marsupial said with a grin. "Quite a lively bunch you have here."

Taro found a glass of ice water at the galley table, drained it dry and then wiped her hands on a napkin. Other members of her crew began introducing themselves to the newcomers until she rejoined them. "Sorry I didn't meet you at the hatch," she told them. "As you can see, I got sidetracked!"

Merlin looked up at the digital display on the vidscreen. "You've arrived just in time," he said to Justy. "You've got about an hour to get acquainted with your crewmates, but Sam and I need to be going. We have an appointment to meet a realtor in a half hour so we can start shopping for a house."

Lorelei moved to Merlin's side and put her arms around him. They had already made their going away speeches and already said their emotional goodbyes, but the rabbit was still reluctant to let them go.

"I'll miss you," the rabbit said to him with moist eyes and a smile. Merlin gave her a warm hug and then the rabbit moved to Samantha, who had joined her wolf's side. Samantha had always had a difficult time dealing with Lorelei, but as this was good-bye, she returned the bunny's embrace without reservation.

"It won't be the same without you," Pockets said as he moved in, "but Max and I will take good care of your ship."

"That's right, Uncle Merlin," Max agreed. The wolf shook hands with the engineer and then with Max.

"I know the *Horizon* is in good hands," he told them. He put a hand on Max's shoulder and repeated a sentiment he had voiced recently. "I'm proud of you, Max," he said. "Keep up the good work."

Renny came up behind Samantha and put an arm around her shoulders. "Think you're leaving without giving me a goodbye kiss?"

Merlin, who had his back to the cheetah while talking to Max, said over his shoulder to him, "If you think you're going to kiss *me*, you're mistaken, mister..." Samantha and Renny exchanged amused looks and then burst out laughing. Merlin turned and then saw the cheetah's arm around Sam, immediately feeling foolish.

"Don't worry, boss," Renny said. "I only have lips for your sweetheart!" Sam looked at him with an upraised eyebrow, but didn't resist when the cheetah leaned in to give her a kiss on the lips. He didn't linger as Taro had with Merlin.

Samantha pulled away and then grinned at him. "So long, Ren-Ren," she said. "I'll miss sparring with you."

Renny smiled widely and then clasped hands with Merlin. "You take good care of this woman," he told the wolf. "I think you have a *keeper* there."

"I will, Renny," Merlin replied, "and she *is* a keeper."

Samantha turned to Pockets and Max. She gave a Max a warm hug, then a lick on the cheek, and then did the same with Pockets. She had never been aware that each of them harbored a crush on her for some time, but even at their parting, neither felt strong enough to say anything about it. She put a finger on Max's nose and smiled.

"You've done very well with your studies," she told him. "It was a pleasure tutoring you, Max. I know you'll go far in life if you apply yourself to everything you set yourself to do."

"Thanks to you," the mechanic said with a grin.

She turned to Pockets and then gave him a wink. "You'll always be my co-conspirator, Jerad," she whispered to the raccoon, using his first name as she'd done in their earlier years serving together.

Merlin walked across the room to Damien and Jerry. "I know we didn't have a lot of time to get to know one another," he said as he shook hands with each, "but you'll still be working for me and I dare say we'll have a lot of contact in the future."

"Glad to be working for you, Captain," the mastiff said.

Merlin grinned. "I'm not a captain anymore," he corrected, "but I'm still glad to have you on board the company."

"Take care," Jerry said with a smile. "If you have an appointment, you'd better get a move on."

The wolf looked at the clock display and grimaced. "You're right. It's not far, but we've got to go." He walked back over to where Samantha was trading hugs with Taro. "Sorry, but it's time we were on our way," he said.

"We need to prepare for our launch to Kantus, too," Taro replied. "Good luck, you two."

Samantha took the wolf's hand in hers and then they turned toward the assembled crewmembers. "See you all later," she said to them.

"Bye," said the group in unison.

Merlin and Samantha moved to the lift and then moved inside. They took a last look at their friends and then the doors closed.

It had been a week since the *Blue Horizon* had taken off from Dennier, its cargo consisting of nothing more than a half dozen containers of recording equipment for new studios on Kantus owned by *Dragon, Wolf & Tiger*. The progressive rock band had branched out to produce the music of others in addition to their own albums, and had chosen their friends with *Blue Horizon* to deliver the equipment for them.

The voyage was quiet, and with everything in working order, Pockets was using the free time in his cabin to study a set of data crystals he had held locked up in his personal safe. The crystals were unremarkable and a common configuration, but the data contained on them had the potential of being something of great value. They had been secreted in the battery pack of a young mouse that had once been the cabin boy for the infamous Captain Natasha Khasho, otherwise known as the Pirate Queen.

Pockets knew from firsthand experience that the vixen had not been a bloodthirsty pirate as the vids made her out to be, but was rather an opportunist whose personal goals were admirable. She'd possessed a keen mind, and just from his brief visit to her vessel, the *Lady of Dreams*, Pockets knew that she had developed technologies only fictionalized by others. After she had died in the Siilv War protecting a defenseless vessel with her own, governments all over the PA had begun treasure hunts to track down her base of operations in the hopes of finding the secrets of her Particle Vault technology. None had yet to be found, however, and it became a common belief that all information on her sciences was contained on her ship that was destroyed by the Kastani.

Since he had obtained the data crystals, Pockets had spent innumerable hours trying to crack the code that Natasha had used to encrypt them, but he had been unsuccessful. Even Samantha had tried her expertise on them a few times, but as with Pockets, she had not been able to get into them. It was a task that intrigued him, and the more he worked with it, the more convinced he was at her genius. As difficult as the encryption was, the engineer somehow felt that the Rosetta stone of the code would be something simple, if he could just determine what it was.

He leaned back in his chair with his hands behind his head and closed his eyes. He calmed his mind with one of the relaxing techniques Lori had taught him, and then tried to remember his visit to her vessel. Surprisingly, he found that he could remember most of her conversation with him and he concentrated on it for a long time.

A half hour later, Pockets opened his eyes. He leaned forward and thumbed the intercom pad on the computer terminal. "*This is Taro,*" he heard a moment later.

"This is Pockets, Captain. I need to ask you a couple questions," he said. "Didn't you tell us at one time that you had grown up with Natasha Khasho?"

There was a hesitation. "Yes, that's right. We knew one another as kits in Taquit."

"I thought so," Pockets replied. "What's the Hestran word for *tickle* from the region you're from?"

There was a chuckle from the intercom speaker. "The word is pronounced 'anejmil' - what does this have to do with Natasha?"

"Just doing some research," Pockets said vaguely. "Thanks, Taro."

"Uh, you're welcome."

Pockets disconnected the circuit and then went to work on his computer. He inserted the first data crystal into the reader and then used the word Taro had given him as a key. He had tried this process so many times, but he always got an instant error message. It was no different this time.

The raccoon grumbled beneath his breath, but then had a wild idea. He opened another application and called up a language translator from Standard to the Hestran region of Taquit. He entered the word and directed it to display it in that locale's alphabet. Then he copied the new configuration to system memory, went back to the screen for the data crystal, and then input it that way.

He expected the typical error, but this time, however, the monitor sat there without a message of any kind. He saw no activity that he could determine and was about to start a diagnostic when the screen suddenly came alive. Random characters filled the display, but instantly began to translate automatically into words of the common Standard language.

It had worked! That simple, yet obscure word had been Natasha's key to her encryption. Decompressed data began to wash across the monitor at an astonishing rate, but Pockets had had the presence of mind to set his terminal to capture all keystrokes and displays.

The raccoon whistled to himself as the information flashed by too fast for him to read, and he felt giddy at his discovery. A random thought that crossed his mind was that although encrypted, the crystals might contain information no more useful than the tickling thresholds or underwear sizes of her crew. He knew he shouldn't get his hopes up, but he couldn't help it. One just didn't put an encryption that strong onto something that wasn't important.

After nearly an hour of downloading just the first crystal, the scrolling data ended. Pockets jumped at the terminal and began to play back the data at a slower rate. As he expected, the information was *not* unimportant. He was a starship engineer and always thought of himself to be one of great talent, but most of what he read was beyond even his knowledge. He knew he'd hit the jackpot, but it would take *years* to analyze the data on his own, and this was just from *one* of the crystals.

He studied the information for hours, but he finally sat back and rubbed his eyes. He stretched and got up from his chair. He closed the translated file with a password of his own and then left his cabin. He walked around the curved corridor to the bridge and went inside. Jerry looked up from the book he was reading during his bridge watch and gave him a smile.

"What's up?" he asked.

"Would you please step outside," the engineer requested. "I need to make a call that's sensitive in nature."

Jerry shrugged his shoulders. "Sure," he said as he got up. He left the bridge with book in hand, and when the door had closed behind him, Pockets sat down at the Com terminal. He dialed up the access code for the home of Bill and Shannon, but it was several minutes before the connection was made.

"Wallace Residence," said a sleepy voice.

"Bill, this is Pockets on the *Blue Horizon*. Sorry to wake you, but it's important that I speak to Merlin."

"It's two in the morning, Pockets."

"Sorry about the time differential, but this is really urgent."

"Okay, I'll get him."

A few long moments later, his former captain got on the line. *"This is Merlin. What's the emergency?"*

Pockets hesitated. He didn't want to blurt out what he had found on an unsecured channel, so he had to think fast. "Uh, hi," he said. "There's something I wanted you to know..."

"Pockets..."

"Right... Do you remember the young mouse we met after our last visit to the *white planet*?"

There was a hesitation and then, *"What? Pockets, what are you talking about?"*

"Do you remember him – Tim?"

"Okay, yes, I remember him. Little guy, big ears."

"Do you also remember what I found on him?"

Another hesitation. *"Yes."*

Pockets nodded in satisfaction. The tone in the wolf's voice had changed to one of recognition. Good... they were thinking along the same lines now. "My studies have opened my eyes."

Another pause, much longer as the wolf apparently went over the implications in his mind. *"And?"*

"Most of it is beyond me," he admitted. "It's going to take someone with better resources than what I have here."

"Are you sure it's what we think it is?"

"Oh yes, that much I'm positive about. I've seen enough to recognize some of what I've studied."

"Alex Rogers is currently back on Tanthe in Aris Grand," Merlin said with sudden life. *"Tell Taro that after you've made your current delivery, you are to take what you've found to him, with instructions to get it to Master Tristan as quickly as possible. He will have the resources for further study. Don't tell Alex what this is about – only that it's very important that it get to Sillon."*

"Understood, sir," the raccoon replied.

"Good work, Pockets. I knew you'd find a way."

"Thank you. I'll let you get back to bed now."

The raccoon shut down the Com system and then padded lightly from the bridge. Jerry leaned against the opposite wall and looked up from his book curiously. "All done?" he asked.

"All done," the engineer replied with a smile. He moved around the curved corridor to Taro's quarters and knocked on the door. Ten minutes later, he left for his own cabin after having given her Merlin's message. As soon as he was back inside, he went to the closet of his bedroom and reached into the back corner. He pulled out a large, rolled up tube of coated paper and then spread it out on the bed after smoothing down the sheets. He pinned down the curled edges with books and magazines from the floor and then stood back to study it.

The blueprints were somewhat crumpled, a survivor of the wreck of the original *Blue Horizon*, but they were still readable. A smile crossed the engineer's face as he remembered a long-ago conversation with Captain Natasha. The instructions on the plans were written in scrambled hieroglyphs that he had never been able to decipher, but the Pirate Queen had promised to meet with him again at a later date to release the cryptography to him. That

meeting had never taken place, but now that he had unlocked the encryption of her data crystals, he may now be able to make use of her blueprints for upgrading the *Blue Horizon's* engines with her technology.

On the faraway world of Sillon, a small white transport craft approached a small community built around the base of a massive overhanging rock cliff of a huge mountain. A large blue lake completely circular in shape was nestled up against the cliff, almost as if an ancient meteorite had created the watery crater. Sitting on the edge of the lake was a large, extravagant-looking lodge built in soft curves and iridescent colors that appeared to be made of fluid metal poured into place.

The slender ship set down gently upon a landing platform a short distance from the lodge as a fat silver tube approached soundlessly a meter above the surface of the grass. The shuttle seemed to be molded as a solid structure without seams and, to an outside observer, it had no doors, nor even a window to see through. The tube slowed, stopped beside the transport, and an opening suddenly appeared in the side closest to it.

The side of the transport ship parted and a short female lynx in a yellow sundress stepped out into the spring air. She squinted in the sunlight and brought a hand up to shield her amber eyes.

As she walked up to the silver tube, an aperture appeared without actually seeming to open and then she smiled as she stepped inside. She exchanged pleasantries with the operator of the craft and then sat down in a soft seat of burgundy velvet. The aperture closed, but the interior was well lit from the sunlight streaming in through the transparent metal of the tube. The operator played the control panel as if it were a musical instrument and there was only the faintest *hum* as the shuttle slipped quietly away from white transport to move quickly back the way it had come.

The tube approached the magnificent lodge and stopped near an outcropping that served as a covered walkway. Once again the door of the craft just appeared. The single passenger said a few words of appreciation to the operator and then stepped back out into the morning air.

The lynx walked quietly through the front doors of *The Dragon Loft*, which were open to the outside air, and the metallic technology gave away to a different world of rich wood. She glanced around at the familiar interior of the finest timber that was polished to gleam, and was glad to be back after a trip to Wathradrim, a metropolitan city a hundred miles to the north. Crystalline chandeliers hung from high rafters and soft music could be heard from somewhere down a long carpeted hallway. The receptionist at the registration counter waved her over to the desk and handed her a handwritten note.

"A message was flagged for you while you were gone, Mrs. Carlton," a lithe gray Silloni told her.

The lynx took the note with a smile. "Thank you, Khari." She had long ago realized that no matter how often she chided the lass about addressing her formally, she knew the girl would never call her Sparky, the feline's preferred nickname.

She moved across the receiving area to one of the public terminals in the sitting room and sat down in a plush seat. She tapped out several commands and then entered her personal pass code to retrieve her personal mail on the active terminal. At once, her mail center came up

on the screen with a dozen messages awaiting her attention. She quickly scanned through the list of originators for the one that matched the name on Khari's note.

When she opened the message, it was all she could do to contain her delight.

*You are cordially invited
to the joyous union of*

*Miss Samantha Holden
to
Mr. Merlin Sinclair*

*On Saturday, the twentieth of June
at eleven o'clock in the morning
at the Wildwood Cathedral
9300 South Anderson Road
Grandstorm
Capemay County
Dennier*

Reception immediately following the ceremony.