

THE LION'S DEN ON THE PLANET JEAN

A "Freefall" fan fiction
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The normally placid bridge of the *Lion's Den* looked like it had been through a major battle. People were out of their chairs and on the deck. Panels glowed red from damage reports and there were wisps of smoke here and there.

As Capt. LionkingCMSL picked himself from off the deck he wondered, "What in the blip hit us? Hyperspace looked clear." He got back into his chair and looked around. His normally stoic weapons officer was looking harried. "Report, Altaica. What hit us?"

The tigress looked up from her weapons console and said, wearily, "I don't know, LK. There is and was no ship near us. My sensors are showing no indication of a weapons hit."

"Roger that. Okay, everybody, status."

While LK was getting his report his first officer, Painless Black Wolf, started to check with the various bridge stations.

Sam, from the helm, reported, "I'm here in one piece, barely. Ship is maneuverable, but is sluggish."

"George here, LK. Comms has lost most of its HASS channels. We're operating on light speed signals for the most part."

"Got that George and Sam. Lee P, what about engineering?"

A muskrat, in a bright green jumpsuit, looked up from a board that showed more red than green. His overhead monitors showed different engineering subsections with the damaged areas showing very clearly. "LK, I've got half the ship running on emergency power." Just then the bridge crew felt an odd vibration through the deck plates. "Ahh, good. Looks like they were able to get the gensets up and running. Okay! Emergency battery power is being replaced with the power from the gensets. We're battered, LK, but far from being D I S."

"Right. Thanks for the report."

"LK, I think I know what hit us," a voice called from the science station.

"Report, Mr. Bibbers."

"From what I can gather, a star went super nova as we were passing through its neighborhood. It had been theorized that super

novae could have effects in hyperspace, but there was no way to test the theory, until now.”

“Great, just great. Sam, set course for *Outpost One*, best possible speed.

“LK, I don’t think that will be possible.”

The captain, with mouth agape, just looked at the river otter seated at the helm station. “Why not?”

“I don’t know where we are. That hit sent us light years off course.”

“LK, we need to drop out of hyperspace. Now!” Lee Philips called.

“Do it, Sam!”

Sam’s paws were a black blur as he did what he needed to do.

As Sam was getting the ship out of hyperspace the lion captain looked to his engineering officer. “What’s up, Lee?”

“Miffilin just noticed a choke point on one of the anti-matter feeds. The magnetic fields were starting to fail.” Lee looked back at his console. “That got it. Bill was able to shut off the flow up stream of the choke point. We can move, but not too fast.”

“What do we need to repair that problem?”

“A fully equipped base would be nice. I would like to have micro-gravity and a breathable atmosphere outside the ship. If I had to choose, though, I’ll take the breathable atmosphere. Working in EVA suits is tiring and can be frustrating.”

LK looked at the muskrat and quipped, “I’ll see what I can do, but no promises.”

LK then looked at the helmsfur. “Any idea on where we are?”

“No. Though I did get a bearing on where I think Homestead is located.”

“Well, that’s a start. George, do we have enough power and an open channel to punch a message home to say that we will be delayed a bit?”

The lynx worked his boards and said, “We have the power, and one open channel to do it.”

“Do it. Put in what we know and that we will be in contact when we are on our way back.”

After a few seconds George looked up and said, “Done, but it will take a while to get there.”

“Nothing we can do about that. Sam, what is our position?”

“We’re about 40 AUs From the nearest star, though high above

its elliptic.”

“What type of star?”

“A yellow dwarf. Spectral type G2V, like Sol.”

“Okay, get us headed towards the star. How long before we reach the one A.U. mark?”

“About 12 hours at .5C. That the most I want to push her.” Behind LK Lee Philips was nodding yes. “But why there?”

“C’mon, Sam, you should know. That’s the most likely place for a habitable world.”

“True. It would be.”

“Lee Bibbers, I want you to start scans of any possible habitable planets. Lee Philips, I want your section to get as much work done as possible, so we don’t look like wounded prey for any hostiles.”

Both men signaled their acknowledgement, and the wounded ship limped in system. As it was doing so LK started getting queries from the rest of the ship wondering what happened.

"Dr. Forbes to the Bridge," LK's intercom called.

LK thumbed a button and said, "LK here, Cyntia. What can I do for you?"

"What happened? We're getting calls from all over the ship with medical emergencies."

"Shock wave from super nova. Anything serious?"

"No," the ocelot doctor said, both grateful and tired, "But if you could spare someone, from up there, it would be greatly appreciated."

LK looked at his first officer, who nodded and headed to the bridge's 'lift station. LK then turned his attention back towards the feline medico. "Painless is on his way right now."

"Thanks, LK. I'll let you know if we need anything else. Dr. Forbes out."

"Roger that, Cyntia. LK out."

-Twelve hours later-

“George, have you been monitoring all the channels? It seems to be pretty busy out here.”

“Yes, LK. I got their spaceport channel pulled up. Whenever you’re ready.”

“Thanks.” The leonine captain then thumbed a switch and said, “This is Captain LionkingCMSL, of the *Lion’s Den*, to the local spaceport. We are declaring an in-flight emergency and would like priority landing instructions.” There was no response and he repeated

his call.

At the planet Jean Spaceport Control Center confusion was rampant with the new ship's arrival.

"Hey, Tony. You know that contact I saw earlier?"

"Yeah."

"It's calling us!"

"The aliens are calling us?!"

"Call the mayor!" another voice chimed in. "We're being attacked! Notify the defense system!"

A fourth voice, a sound of reason, "Wait. What are they saying?"

The first person put the message on the speakers and they heard: "This is Captain LionkingCMSL, of the *Lion's Den*, to the local spaceport. We are declaring an in-flight emergency and would like priority landing instructions. Do you copy spaceport?"

"They're declaring an in-flight emergency? That ship is as big as one of our manufacturing satellites."

The fourth man thumbed his PTT and said, "We hear you captain. What is your registry number and home planet?"

LK grumbled something, under his breath, about stupid paper work, but said aloud, "This is the *Lion's Den*, registry number LDIX-five four six six. Our home planet is Homestead."

"What is the nature of your emergency?"

"We experienced a shock wave from a star going super nova, while in hyperspace. We have many systems that need to be repaired, before we can regain our FTL capability."

"Affirmative, *Lion's Den*. Do you have video transmission capability?" To his co-workers he said, "I want to see what they look like."

"Yes, we do control. Switching to video now."

At spaceport control four mouths hung open as a monitor showed a lion in a dark green robe looking at them.

"You're animals?" the third controller gaped.

"Yes, we are. Anthropomorphics actually." LK came back. "And you're human?"

"Yes."

"Spaceport control, we really need those landing instructions."

"Ahh, yeah, sure. How big is your ship?"

"The *LD* is 310 meters long, 145 meters wide and 100 meters

high. She weighs in at 227 thousand tonnes.”

“Cripes! She’ll never fit in the spaceport! We are sending landing instructions for one of the paved areas outside the spaceport itself.”

LK looked down and saw Sam nod. “Right, got it. LK out.”

At that point the screen went dark. The four in the control center started talking excitedly.

“Did you see that bridge!”

“Forget that, they are animals.”

“A ship almost as big as the spaceport, with FTL drive, and they can land it? There must be some fantastic things aboard her.”

“We gotta keep Starfall away from it. Who knows what damage he could cause.”

“Maybe we can order them to turn the ship over to us!”

On board the *Lion’s Den*, things were being handled as professionally as possible. The ship was pretty battered, but the crew knew what had to be done.

“LK!” Altaica called.

“What’s up?”

“We have three weapons’ radars lighting us up. They have a lock.”

“Not good.” LK then thumbed a switch to put him back in touch with the spaceport. “Spaceport control, this is the *Lion’s Den*. I don’t know what is going on down there, but I suggest, moderately strongly, that you tell your weapons boys to back off. We are here peacefully, but we can, and will, defend ourselves if attacked. LK out.” He then turned his attention back to Altaica’s station. “Ok, Altaica, do we still have ECM ability?”

“Yes, LK.”

“Good. Use it. Let’s see if it does any good.”

“Switching ECM on now. It seems that their radars are losing the lock they had. Hmmm. Your message seems to have gotten through. They are shutting down the radars one by one. There we go. No more radars.”

“That’s good. When we land I want a perimeter set up. Nothing overt in weapons, but nobody gets through without clearance.”

“Got it.” Altaica then turned to her intercom. “Altaica to Chuck Roberts.”

“Chuck here. What’s up?”

“Chuck, when we land LK wants a perimeter set up. Weapons, but not displayed openly. Use squads one, three, four and five.”

“Roger. On whose authority are people allowed to breach the perimeter?”

“Hold on.” Altaica then looked at LK.

LK hit the intercom button himself. “Chuck, they are allowed to enter on Altaica’s, Lee Philip’s or my authority. Anyone else can wait until one of us decides.”

“Got it, LK. Four squads will be ready when we land.”

“Thanks.”

The *Lion’s Den* flew through the atmosphere leaving the barest of a vapor trail. Even though the ship was sluggish in response to the controls, Sam’s piloting made it look like it had just got done a refit.

They were approaching the spaceport when Lee Bibbers stated, “It looks like we’re drawing a crowd.”

“Near where we want to land?”

“Close, LK, but not inside the clearance lines.”

Sam broke in with, “Ok, LK, starting landing procedure now. One hundred meters AGL. 10 meters per second forward and slowing. Descent at 5 meters per second and holding.”

Everyone, save Sam, was looking at the forward view screen at the crowd that had gathered.

“Forward speed is zero. 10 meters to touch down. 1 meter per second vertical speed. 5 meters. 4 meters. 3 meters. 2 meters. 1 meter. I have contact indicators on both nacelles. Ship is settling. That’s it, we’re down. Shutting down all thrusters.”

“Very good, as usual, Sam. Everyone secure stations. Altaica, squads are cleared for deployment.”

“Already on their way.”

LK then hit the ship wide all-call. “Attention, all hands. We are on a strange planet. The people seem friendly, but keep on your toes. Be advised they are humans. We want to give them a good impression of Homestead and ourselves. We also want to get the ship fixed as soon as possible. As soon as I am able to determine if it is possible I may authorize limited shore leave. All section chiefs, I want reports on what needs to be done to get this ship home. That is all. LK out.”

Out on the spaceport tarmac the crowd was watching with

amazement, as a building sized ship was moving very carefully, like it was afraid of its own size. When the ship was nearing touchdown they had to look away and cover their ears because of the windblast and noise from the thrusters that were slowing the decent of the ship. When they could watch again they were surprised on how gently the ship landed. Most of them were expecting a big boom as the nacelles touched down. Instead there was a gentle bump and the creaking of the ship as it settled down. Then the thrusters whined down.

Just when the police department was about to be over powered, by the curious crowd, four planet fall staircases lowered from the ship; two in the front and two in the rear. No sooner than these staircases hit the ground when 21 furs swarmed down them. It was clear that these people meant business.

Orders were called and carried out with no wasted time. There were no obvious weapons, but the guards' attitude and posture gave an indication that they were not to be messed with.

When the crowd saw this they relaxed their pressure on the police line.

The mayor pulled up in her car and got out. She looked at the crowd, police line and the line of guards encircling the strange craft. She puffed herself up and headed to the nearest guard. "Who are you?" she demanded.

"Ensign Gaines. Squad five, *Lion's Den*, ma'am."

"I'm the mayor and I want to talk to whoever is in charge."

"Yes, ma'am." Gaines lifted his right wrist and spoke into a bracelet. "Ensign Gaines to Commander Roberts."

"Roberts here. What is it, Fred?"

"I have a woman, who claims to be the mayor, here. She wants to see who is in charge."

"I copy. I'll be right there."

Commander Roberts was where the mayor was in a minute. "What can I do for you, your honor?"

"Who are you?" the mayor demanded.

"I am Lieutenant Commander Charles Roberts. Head of security of the *Lion's Den*."

"You in charge of this ship?" the mayor screamed, while waving her hand.

"No, ma'am. That would be Captain LionkingCMSL."

"I want to seem him. Now!"

"Ma'am, I will tell him that you want to see him, but he is busy at

the present time.”

“I’ll go to him, then,” the mayor stated as she started to push pass the two crew people. Her bodyguards were also starting to move forward. Before the mayor and her bodyguards knew what happened they had five more guards in front of them, all with blasters drawn.

The bald eagle morph said, “I’m sorry, ma’am. LK has set up a perimeter around the ship and without the proper permission no one, and that includes you, is allowed to pass.”

“How dare you! I’m the mayor! What gives you the authority?”

Gaines just pointed up.

When the mayor and her group looked up they saw one of the secondary laser turrets swing around, silently, to face them.

“I think that does, along with the one that is now pointed at you from the bottom of the ship,” the roe deer said, barely suppressing a chuckle.

“What are they?” one of the bodyguards asked, white with fright.

One of the other guards casually said, “Our secondary weapons. One hundred gigawatt Argon lasers.”

Another bodyguard exclaimed, “They’re your secondary system? That’s more powerful than the spaceport’s defenses.”

Commander Roberts nodded and said, “Your Honor, as I said, I will pass along to the captain your wish to meet with him.”

“I’m giving you a direct order: Take me to meet with your captain, at once!”

The bald eagle’s left eye ridge went up a notch. “Ma’am, with all due respect, you are not on the short list of people that can give me a ‘direct order’.”

The mayor was taken aback, “I’m not?”

“No, you’re not. I will still pass along your request to the captain.”

“Fine!” the mayor huffed and stormed back to her car.

Chuck let out a breath. “Okay, back to your posts. I hope I never have to do that again.” He then spoke into his wristlet, “Chuck Roberts to LK.”

“LK here. What is it.”

“Well, we had a near incident with a woman, who calls herself the mayor.”

“What?”

“Yes, she demanded to speak to you. When I said that you were busy she tried to break perimeter. She didn’t get far. She then tried to give me a direct order. She would like to meet with you.”

“Got it and good work.”

“Roger. Roberts out.”

“LK out.”

In the bridge briefing room LK let out a whistle. “That was unexpected. Well, back to business. Lee what is the problem?”

Lee Philips leaned back in his chair and said, “We can fix the problems, but we have a lack of man power.”

“What do you mean?”

Lee looked at the chief medical officer and said, “Tell him, Alex.”

“LK, it seems that some of the crew, unfortunately most of engineering, picked up some sort of bug at that last planet.”

“Is it serious, Doc.”

“No, LK,” the wolf said. “The problem is that the furs that were infected are going to be out of action for a few weeks. I have it contained, but they need bed rest to regain their strength.”

“So what does that mean, Lee?”

“We have to find someone local that knows engineering systems. One good engineer should do it.”

“And that means we’ll have to pay them. I don’t think HASS credits will fly here. We’ll need local money. George.”

“Yes?”

“Find out what goods we can sell or what services, in the shuttle field, that we can provide.”

“Will do”, the lynx as he left the room.

“Lee P., I want two freight shuttles, the Pennsylvania and Erie, to be readied for in system use.”

“Got it.”

“Altaica, I want you to see if you can pry their IFF codes from them. If so then program the shuttles with them. I don’t want any incidents.”

“Way ahead of you, LK. Pete is already looking in to it.”

“Why does that not surprise me. You and that badger seem to be one step ahead of me”

Altaica just smiled at him.

“Lee, I’ll see about trying to find a competent engineer here, but I’m not holding my breath. By the looks of things they’ve never seen anything like us.”

“Understood.”

The mayor returned to her office. “How dare they! Who do they think they are? Treating me like that! And why won’t they accept direct orders from me?” she stormed. After she sat down, and reflected on what happened, she realized that she was lucky to be alive. She had barged onto the scene with no notice, and no documentation. She then tried to push pass a clearly defined “Do Not Cross” line, that had highly trained troops. They gave her a stern warning on not to try that again. Even though their weapons were drawn, they were not aimed at them, just in an “at the ready” position. Even without those weapons turrets she didn’t think that she, or her guards, could’ve taken another step. As for the last question they may be programmed to only take orders from the captain. Maybe he could be ordered. He would have to be, no one would want AI’s running around without control.

She didn’t want to admit it, even to herself, but she was out of her depth. If what that one crew person, the skunk, had said was true, and she had no reason to doubt her, one of those secondary lasers could take out half the city. She suppressed a shudder as she thought of what their primary weapons might be and what they could do.

If they had that kind of armament they didn’t need permission to land. “Hell,” she thought to herself, “they could have radioed in and said, ‘We’re landing. Try to stop us.’ But, no, they kindly asked permission and were open in their intentions.” It was only when the defense system locked onto them, with radar, did things start getting hairy. They did something that made the radars lose their lock and the captain radioed in they were very capable of defending themselves.

She had to find a way to get one of her people on board that ship. The technology alone would be worth the cost. A faster than light ship that could land could be a bargaining chip when dealing with the higher ups. But how could she get someone on that ship.

She snapped her fingers when she got an idea. “I know. I’ll send a ship inspector. Any ship that wants to go off planet has to pass inspection. Without his okay they don’t fly.” Then she added to herself, “Not that that would stop them. They could take off and we couldn’t do anything to stop it. But they do seem to follow the rules. Point in our favor.”

“Good evening. This is Rants Freely of Overhype News”, the television blared from a cabin of a ship in the spaceport. “That alien vessel we told you about earlier has landed. We have exclusive shots of the interior of the ship.” The television then showed various shots of different interior compartments taken through the view ports of the ship. Most notable was what looked like a park area in the top section. “Also the mayor was rebuffed when she tried to make contact. We have our science editor, Dr. Hugh Noes, to tell us more.”

“Well, Rants, with that garden section they may be here to introduce alien plant life to our world. I also have word that they were able to scramble our defense systems’ radars. This is not good.”

“So they could attack and we couldn’t do anything about it?”

“We could try to defend ourselves, but against a ship that size...” at that point the doctor trailed off, hands and arms spread, his meaning plain.

“What about them being animal people?”

“Well, if they are AIs then we could possibly order them around. If they aren’t AIs then it could be very tricky.”

“Thank you Dr. Noes.”

Sam Starfall had been watching the news broadcast with interest. He noticed that the “aliens” were animals like Florence, so scamming them might be harder than with humans. He also wanted to get on that ship. Here was an opportunity that he couldn’t pass up. They probably had more valuables on that ship than that half of the city and, if he was lucky, some of them would be unsecured.

Florence had been watching the same broadcast and she looked into Sam’s cabin while he was rubbing his hands together. “Thinking of trying to get on that ship?”

“Who, me? Of course not”, Sam lied.

“Sam, don’t even go there. You saw what happened to the mayor when she tried to board. These people are highly trained and are probably in no mood for any of your adventures. Anyway, it is proper protocol for a visiting captain to invite other captains to visit, if they wish.”

“Ahhh. You’re no fun.”

“Sam, I’m warning you. Don’t try anything funny around that ship. You’ll probably regret it. And you won’t get that invite.” What Florence didn’t tell Sam is that she also wanted to get onboard that ship. Their engineering section would probably be one that engineers here had dreams about. Those ten engines out the back and the

thruster engines would be worth knowing about. She saw how the thrusters handled the ship's landing like it was a toy being gently put down. Yes, she would love to get onboard that ship, but it was very unlikely. Maybe if she was able to talk to an engineer.

The ship inspector hung up from talking to the mayor. "Great. An unknown ship she wants me to inspect. Well, as long as I don't have to inspect Starfall's ship again. That squid is always up to something. Still, I better take the same precautions I take with Starfall. This time I'll take off my watch. Last time it got expensive." As he made his preparations he realized that the mayor didn't give him a ship's name or number. She just said it was parked outside the spaceport and "You will know it when you see it."

"How will I know something when I never saw it before", he wondered as he left the building. He turned a corner and looked down the street, towards the spaceport. He knew right then what ship it was. He was looking at a ship that towered over everything around it. It was a good thirty stories tall. "Hell", he thought, "she doesn't need a ship inspector, she needs a building inspector."

As the inspector walked closer he began to realize how big this ship really was. The nacelles alone were about five stories tall. "It'll take me about a month to do a full and complete inspection of this thing. I'll do a baseline check."

He was waved through the police line and approached the ship. As he approached he noticed a knot of beings standing and talking, so he decided to head towards them.

Painless was saying, "Okay, Chuck, LK said you can pull the perimeter back to two guards at the staircases. If any of the elevators are used then I want two guards posted at each."

"What about over all perimeter?"

"Two guards making rounds should do it," Altaica mused.

"I concur," Painless said. "Make sure the rounds are done randomly. Lee, what is the status on repairs?"

"We have got a good start, but I still need a qualified engineer to help."

"LK is working on it. It seems that most of the engineers that are based here are helping with a moon move. Still, I think he has a good lead."

"Great."

"Alex, what is the situation here? Can LK allow the crew limited

shore leave?”

The wolf looked at the first officer and said, “Lee Bibbers and I did a study of the planet. It’s still being terraformed, but there is no hazard to the crew. I would suggest that you would limit shore leave to the local environs of the spaceport. I would also suggest a limit of a kilometer or two, tops.”

“Noted.”

As Painless said that a bald headed man approached and said, “Hello. I would like to see the commander of this vessel.”

Altaica asked, “And who are you, sir?”

“I am the local spaceship inspector. I need to do a base line inspection, before repairs get too far along. No ship leaves without an inspection.”

Lee Bibbers snorted, “Sir, I don’t think you would understand half of our systems.”

“Be that as it may, I still need to do the inspection.”

Painless looked over at the lapine science officer and said, “Be nice, Lee. He has a job to do, as we all do.” To the inspector he said, “I am First Officer Painless Wolf, pleased to meet you, the captain is busy at the moment and I’m acting in his stead. You can certainly inspect the ship to your satisfaction. Commander Lee Philips will be your guide.” With that Painless introduced the Chief Engineer. “Lee is our Chief Engineer and will be glad to explain as much as he can in answer to any questions you may have.”

Lee stepped forward and said, “Nice to meet you, Inspector. If you want to get started, follow me.” Lee started towards one of the forward planet fall staircases.

The inspector looked at the staircase and said, “Uh, Commander?”

“Please call me Lee. We’re not that strict on military procedure. What is it?”

“Do you have another way into the ship? I don’t think I could climb all those steps.”

“Sure, no problem.” Lee then spoke into his wristlet. “Lee Philips to Transport 4.”

“MacCree here, Lee. What can I do for you?”

“Two to transport up. Ready whenever you are.”

“Got it. Starting now.”

Lee turned to the inspector and said, “Be in the ship in a flash.”

With that the inspector’s vision got blurry and he got a sense of

dizziness. In about five seconds everything was back to normal, but he was now standing in a large room instead of outside. "Where are we? What happened?"

The tiger transport tech said, "You are aboard the *Lion's Den*, in Transport Room number 4. You have been transported aboard by using a matter transporter."

The inspector's face went white and he almost dropped the data pad he had. "Matter transporter? That's still in the wild dream stage here!"

Lee took pity on the inspector and said, "Sir, you will probably see things on this ship that are probably only theories on your planet. Now, if you will follow me."

The inspector gathered himself and said, "Yes." and followed the engineer out the door. What he saw floored him. He was used to ships that looked like ships. Now he was standing in a corridor that looked like it belonged in an office building. This was nothing like he had seen on any other inspections. Instead of a cramped, dimly lit, passageway here was a large open hallway in which one could easily read a newspaper. As he was taking this in Lee directed him into a doorway, into another room. As the inspector passed the doorframe he read, on a plaque, the room's function: Briefing Room 4.

Lee instructed the inspector to sit at table that looked like mahogany. The inspector got out a stylus and remarked, "This is not good. Flammable construction."

Lee suppressed a small chuckle. "Everyone thinks that. Everything in the ship meets or exceeds HASS standards on flammability of materials. This table and chairs are made of a composite that is fire restive, but is made to look like wood. You could hold a plasma cutter to this surface and it would not burn."

"I'll have to take you word on it."

"Okay, if you direct your attention to the large screen at the end of the room, I'll show you what we have done and what still needs to be done."

The inspector turned his head to face the large screen and Lee hit a series of controls and started to give the inspector the idea of damage the ship took and what was being done.

At one point LK's voice came over the All-Call. "Attention all department heads. Meeting in Briefing Room 3 in five minutes. All must attend. LK out."

“Excuse me,” Lee said. He touched another control and said, “Lee Philips to Bill Mifilin.”

“Bill here. What’s up, Lee.”

“I need you to cover that meeting. I’m giving a VIP tour. LK knows.”

“Got it. Any idea on what the meeting is about?”

“My guess would be possible shore leave. We were discussing it earlier. But keep an open mind.”

“Roger that. Bill out.”

“Lee out.” Lee turned his attention back towards the inspector and said, “Let’s continue.”

For the next hour Lee explained some of the various systems on the ship and the inspector took copious notes on his data pad.

When they got done the inspector said, “All very well and good. Your documentation is better than any I have ever seen.”

“You don’t know LK. He owns this ship and he wants it top notch. Also this crew is like a pride to him. He doesn’t want anything to happen to them.”

“That may be so, but I would like to do a physical inspection of the ship.”

“No problem. We’ll start at deck one and work our way down. By the way, do you know of any engineers, on planet, that could be of assistance to us.”

The inspector frowned as he wracked his brain for one, “No, I don’t think so.” Then he brightened. “Wait, there may be one. She restored a ship to orbital status faster than anyone thought. The ship was basically a scrap heap before she got there.”

“Sounds like the one we want. Her name?”

“Florence Ambrose, on ship 1071-CCN. Watch out for her captain though. He is a scam artist.”

“Got it. Now please follow me.” What the muskrat engineer was thinking was, “I don’t know how the crew will react to a human engineer.”

“Two questions, before we start?”

“Sure, what are they?”

“Are all the crew animals? Are there any humans on board.”

“Anthros, yes; quads, no. To answer your second question, you are the only human on board.”

Lee led the inspector to an elevator and told him to hold on. The inspector was taken by surprise as the car went backward before it

started its ascent.

During the three hour tour Lee relayed the information about the engineer and LK admitted his diggings came up with the same name.

During this time George had secured some lifts for the shuttles and had arranged to sell some goods that the *LD* had on hand. George was good that way. Being a comm lynx one heard what one needed to hear, and sometimes more. Comm people were always a bit loose when talking to other comm people. He was also able to, with LK's permission, to set up a bank account for the ship so bills could be paid.

LionkingCMSL contacted the captain, one Sam Starfall, of the ship that Florence was engineer on. "Greetings, Captain Starfall. I am Captain LionkingCMSL of the *Lion's Den*."

"Hello, Captain. What can I do for you?" Sam was excited. Here he was being addressed as "Captain" by another captain. Something he always wanted.

"Well, I would like to hire your engineer away from you, for a short amount of time."

"How long?"

"For about a week, maybe two."

The discussion went on and Sam tried to weasel a large amount of credits out of the other captain. LK showed him a figure that Starfall goggled at. It wasn't what he proposed, but it was still substantial.

"Hold on, Captain. Before I can accept I need to check with Florence to see if she will accept."

"I understand. I'll wait."

Starfall left the cockpit and marveled. Here was a sum that for which he had to do nothing, just let Florence go to that other ship. He still needed to check with her. He found her in the galley. "Florence would five thousand credits be fair enough for you to work on another ship for a week or so? And would you do it?"

"More than enough. What ship?"

"The one that just landed: the *Lion's Den*. The captain needs an engineer."

Florence's tail starting wagging like a flag in a hurricane. "Let me get my gear."

Sam returned to the cockpit and told LK that Florence would be right over.

LK signaled his agreement and signed off.

Before Florence left she met with Sam. "Sam, I want you to promise me no monkey business while I'm gone."

"I promise," Sam said while crossing his fingers behind his back.

Florence then turned her attention to the ship's computer. "Ship, you are not allowed to take off without me onboard. Understand?"

"Perfectly, Florence. No lift off will occur if you are not onboard."

"Ahh, that's no fun," Sam countered.

"Sam, you need a qualified engineer on board when you lift off."

"But Helix can ..."

"Helix doesn't know the ship's systems like I do. No lift offs."

"Yes, Florence." Sam was really thinking, "As captain I should really, really, should be the one who decides how the ship is run."

Florence left the ship, her tail wagging furiously. Her wish had come true. She was actually going to board that ship. Not only that, she would be working on it.

As she approached it she saw the ship inspector that inspected the *Savage Chicken*. He was just coming down a staircase talking to a being in a bright green jumpsuit.

"Thank you, Lee, for the tour. Let me know when your repairs are completed and I'll be back."

"Right and you're welcome."

The inspector turned to leave and saw Florence walking towards him.

"Hello, Ms. Ambrose. Is everything still shipshape on your ship?"

"Hello, Inspector. Yes, I'm keeping Sam and Helix under control."

"That is good to hear. Hope you can help this ship."

"You know about this? How?"

"I recommended you. After the progress I saw you make with Starfall's ship I thought you'd be a natural."

"Thank you, Inspector."

"You're welcome. I'll talk to you later. Good bye."

"Good bye, Inspector."

As the inspector walked away he thought to himself, "That rabbit was wrong. I didn't understand two thirds of their systems, not

one half. I sure hope Ms. Ambrose can handle what she is in for.”

Florence walked towards the staircase and approached the three furs standing there.

“May I help you?” a skunk in a red shirt asked, a little surprised to see a bipedal wolf.

“Yes, I am Florence Ambrose. Your captain hired me to help with your repairs.”

The muskrat in the green jumpsuit responded, “Oh, yes. We’ve been expecting you. My name is Lee Philips. I’ll escort you to the captain.” He then spoke into his wristlet. “Lee to LK.”

“LK here.”

“Our new engineer is here. She is a little different than we were expecting.”

“How so?”

“It’s hard to describe. Be easier for you to see in person.”

“Okay. Meet us in Briefing Room 2.”

“Got it. We should be there in about five minutes.”

“Roger, LK out.”

“Lee out.” He then turned back to Florence and said, “Please follow me.”

Florence followed him up the steps, down a corridor and into an elevator car. She was startled as the car moved backwards before it began its ascent. After a few more sideways moves and a spin on its axis the door opened and Lee said, “Just a little bit more.” She was agog. She was in a corridor that did not look like it belonged on a space ship.

“Mr. Philips?”

“Please call me Lee. What can I do for you?”

“Are all your corridors like this? I mean this is so wide and tall.”

“Most of them, yes. There are a couple of narrower ones, as you saw.”

“Why so big?”

“There was the room during the re-fit and LK thinks the crew is better off if they forget they are aboard a starship for periods of time. Not quite as stressful. They are so high because LK needs the headroom.”

“How about when you are in micro gravity conditions. I mean you would be floating around.”

Lee chuckled and said, “Not normally on board this ship. We have artificial gravity here. Even in the deepest space it’s like walking

on a planet.”

Florence’s eyes went wide and her ears laid back. Artificial gravity? That was only a dream. She was about to ask a couple of more questions when Lee directed her into a room. She marveled at the size and the briefing table. It looked like solid mahogany, but she doubted that it was. She was also surprised to see furs seated at the table. She was expecting humans.

Lee looked towards the head of the table and said, “Florence Ambrose, please meet Captain LionkingCMSL, at the head of the table, Commander Altaica Powell seated next to him and Lieutenant Commander Lee Bibbers seated next to her. Altaica is head of weapons, defense and security and Lee is head of sciences.” As Lee introduced each of the people seated they nodded their head.

“Captain and Commanders, I introduce Florence Ambrose.”

“Captain, Commanders, it is a pleasure to meet you. I hope I will fulfill the expectations you may have of me.”

LK spoke up, “Ms. Ambrose. May I call you Florence?” She nodded. “Okay, Florence, please come here. First you have to learn that we are not big on formality here. First names will do, but everyone normally calls me LK.”

“Yes, sir, ... er ... LK.”

“A question, if I may.”

“I will do my best to answer it, LK.”

“What are you? No offense meant.”

“I am a Bowman’s Wolf. Genetically engineered.”

“Ahh, I see. Now let’s get down to business discussing what is expected of you and what you can expect.”

For the next hour the five of them discussed what needed to be done and any special needs that Florence would have. It was decided that she would have the equivalent rank of lieutenant, in deference of her abilities and experience. It was also decided that he would go back to her ship at the end of each day.

After the meeting Lee Philips took her on a tour of the ship. One thing she noticed was the lack of robots. She saw maintenance bots, but nothing like on the planet.

“Lee?”

“Yes?”

“Where are your robots? I’ve seen maintenance bots, but no robots.”

“We don’t use them.”

“You don’t? Why not?”

“A couple of reasons. Mostly because we like to have furs to think outside the box and robots tend to think logically. New situations tend to throw them for a loop. Also some people are not really comfortable with anthro robots.”

“Oh. Then your crew is in for a shock. There are probably more robots on Jean than people. A lot of different shapes too.”

“That figures. A planet that is still being terraformed would have more robots than people.”

“What about your ship. Does it have an AI?”

“Yes, in a limited sense. It can learn someone’s preferences and provide the best possible choices when required.”

“Ah.”

They continued the tour and Florence noticed that the first of the crew were furs.

“Lee, I noticed that the crew seems to be all animals. Aren’t there any humans on board?”

“We all are anthros, no humans.”

Florence nodded her understanding and felt somewhat relieved that people would not be coming up to her and seeing if she was real. She still expected some questions, but having the crew being anthros would make it easier on her.

She saw a lot of systems that she only had a basic grasp of the theories involved. And what was she to make of those ten huge Tokamak based fusion reactors? She did have to admit that having the Ion engines built into the rear of them made sense. Just eject the by-products of the reaction for thrust. She was startled to see four diesel gensets on board.

“Lee, why the diesel generators? Aren’t they a bit backward and wasteful of supplies?”

“Yes, but with an explanation. They have very thorough exhaust scrubbers so very little air is consumed. As for the reason they are here, they are dependable. They give us more power than the batteries and may make the difference between surviving or not. I would not want to rely on them alone, but if we lose some of our fusion reactors, they could be the difference.”

“Ahh, I see. I never thought about it in those terms.”

After another hour they ended up at the planet fall staircase they had climbed to board the ship.

“So what do you think, Florence? Do you think you will be able

to handle what is expected of you?”

“To be frank, Lee, I’ve never even imagined such a ship. Some of the things on board her are the stuff of stories. To answer your second question, yes, I think I will be able to handle most everything, though I might need help with some of your systems.”

“No problem. We don’t expect you to go it alone. Shall I expect you tomorrow morning, 8am local time?”

“Yes, of course. Where should I meet you?”

“Briefing room four. We need to go over a plan of action.”

“Okay, 8am briefing room four. Thank you.”

“Your welcome, Lieutenant,” Lee said with a small chuckle.

Florence walked back to the *Savage Chicken*, her mind in a whirl. Being an engineer on the *Lion’s Den* was light years above any other ship she had seen or heard about.

Sam Starfall saw her re-enter his ship and was worried. “Things not go as you expected? You didn’t take the job?”

“I took the job. It’s just that I’ll be coming back here after the day’s work is done.”

“What about that ship?”

Florence looked at Sam and said, “Don’t get any ideas. It takes a minimum of 20 people to run her. Not only that you could put this ship in a couple of her cargo bays and her hangar bay.”

“What about the ship’s AI?”

“There is no AI, like in here. You wouldn’t have to worry about it. You should be more worried about their security personnel. They take their job very seriously and would not like any of your antics.”

A robot with a ball shaped body on four legs came into the cockpit and asked, “What about their robots? What are they like?”

“Sorry, Helix, but there are no robots, like here on Jean. They have maintenance bots, but they have limited intelligence. They do what they are told no matter who gives them an order.”

“What about if you give one an order and then a human gives another order?” Sam asked.

“If it was a contradictory order, then the person who was higher ranking would be the person’s whose order would be followed, or if the new order was of an emergency nature. It doesn’t matter between human and non-human, because there are no humans on that ship.”

“I bet they all move like you do in micro-gravity,” Sam mused, though he was a bit startled when e found out about no humans.

“They might, but not on that ship. They have your wish; artificial

gravity.”

“I have to get on that ship!”

“Sam, I will see what I can set up, but, remember, no funny business.”

The next day Florence showed up promptly at 8am at briefing room number four. Lee Philips was waiting for her.

“Good morning, Florence. Ready to start?”

“Good morning Lee, and yes I am.”

“Okay, before we get you started you have to follow me to comms, so we can get you a wristlet.”

As they were heading towards the ‘lift station Florence asked, “A wristlet?”

Lee lifted his right arm, to show the wristlet on his right wrist, and said, “It’s a communications device. It will be keyed to our frequencies. Comms has to get your voice print on file and show you how to use it.”

“Oh, I see.”

The next half hour was taken up with getting her voiceprint down and explaining the functions of the wristlet.

“Now remember,” the comm tech was saying, “the wristlet won’t come off unless you order it to release. This way it can’t be stolen off your furson. Also, it is keyed only to your voiceprint. Only you can use it, unless it detects that you are unconscious and are in need of help. In other words, no one can take it and then use it to gain access to the ship. The only exception is when the comm computer recognizes a superior officer’s voice print.”

“So LK can use my wristlet.”

“Yes, and anyone down to lieutenant commander.”

“Understood.”

Lee then spoke up, “Okay, now that you have a means of contact, let’s get going. We need to start on some of the sub systems.”

“Yes, it would not make sense to get the major systems up and running if the sub systems are not ready. After you, Lee.”

Lee led the two of them towards Engineering.

After about two hours, after Florence had left, Sam Starfall was getting antsy. He wanted to do something. Then he decided what to do. “Helix, come here,” he called.

Helix came running into the galley, like an excited puppy.

“What’s up?”

“Let’s do some exploring.”

“Yay! Exploring! Where?”

“Good question,” Sam demurred.

After the two of them had left their ship Sam turned to Helix and said, “I want to look at the *Lion’s Den*, but I didn’t want that computer to know that.”

“But Florence said ...”

“Helix, we are just going to look around. You saw how they pulled their guards back. Anyway we can always say that we’re looking for Florence.”

Helix looked at Sam, confused a bit, and followed him.

When they got to the door of the spaceport and got their first good, in person, look at the *Lion’s Den*, Sam was starting to have doubts about his half conceived idea of how to get on that ship. This ship was larger than some of the interstellar ships he had seen. The news broadcasts gave no idea on how big this ship really was. Even if the *Savage Chicken* had plasma cannons this ship could plow right through it and never know it hit anything. Sam figured that this ship’s shielding and armor would easily handle any plasma cannon blast.

He still walked up to the nearest nacelle and marveled. Even this engine nacelle dwarfed his ship. He also noted, as he walked along it, the semi-gloss surface that reflected his blue environmental suit.

It was while he was watching his semi-reflection that he was surprised by the roving patrol that LK had set up.

“Hello. Can we help you?”

“Uh, my name is Captain Sam Starfall. I was just admiring your fine ship. And, uh, my engineer is helping you fine folks out.”

“Sure he is,” one of the security guards said, skeptical.

“Not a he, but doggy,” Helix blurted out.

“Right a dog is helping our engineering staff. You expect us to believe that?”

“Not really a dog,” Sam explained, “But a Bowman’s Wolf. Her name is Florence Ambrose.”

“Now it’s a wolf. You two are really looking to ...”

“Wait a minute, Fred,” the other guard said. “Remember the briefing? There is an anthro wolf helping out and her name is Florence Ambrose.”

The roe deer furrowed his brow then said, “Ahh, yes. I

remember now. Let's take these two in to see if Lieutenant Ambrose knows them."

Sam Starfall gave a start. "Lieutenant" Ambrose? She said nothing of this.

"Okay, follow me," Fred said as he started walking. The other guard fell in behind Sam and Helix.

Secretly Sam was elated. This, getting on board the ship, was easier than he expected.

After a few moments they were in Briefing Room 3 where Fred pressed a control and said aloud, "Ensign Gaines to Lieutenant Ambrose."

A brief pause went by, and then Florence's voice was heard in the room. "Florence here. What is it, ensign?"

"I have a pair of 'people' here; one of which claims to be your captain. The other one calls you 'Doggy'."

"Sam and Helix." You could hear the aggravation in her voice. "I'll be right there. Where are you?"

"Briefing Room 3, ma'am."

"Got it. Do not let those two out of your sight. Not even for a second.

Florence out."

"Roger on that. Fred Gaines out."

Florence's ears were laid back in annoyance. She had told Starfall not to try anything around this ship, and yet he had. As she made her way to the briefing room she reflected, how could she expect anything else; Sam was Sam, and if he saw an opportunity he was going to risk anything to get something.

She finally made her way to the briefing room and entered. Sam said, "Hi, Florence. Or should I say 'Lieutenant Ambrose'?"

Florence just gave Sam a glare and said to Fred, "Okay, I'll handle it from here."

"Okay, Florence. Let us know if you need help."

"Will do."

With that the two security officers left the three from the *Savage Chicken* alone.

"Sam, what are you doing here? I thought I told you not to try any funny business."

"I just wanted to see this ship from the outside. How was I supposed to know they would have patrols."

"So you didn't try to sneak on board?"

“No! I was just walking along one of those landing struts and they came up to me.”

“They’re not landing struts, but engine nacelles. Helix, is he telling the truth?”

“Yes, he is. He, we, weren’t doing anything. Just looking.”

“Okay, okay. I believe you.”

“What’s that on your wrist?” Sam asked.

“It’s a communications device, so I can talk to anyone that is assigned to the ship. Before you get any ideas, the communicator is keyed to each user’s voice and only can be removed by explicit command by the user. No slipping it off someone’s wrist, like the Inspector’s watch.”

“Humph,” is all Sam grunted. “Maybe it won’t be so easy pickings after all,” he thought.

He then perked up with a thought. “Do you think I can get a tour of the ship? Since we’re here anyway.”

“Let me check with the captain,” Florence responded. She then called into the air, after hitting a control, “Florence Ambrose to LK.”

“LK here. What is it, Florence?”

“Would it be permissible to give my captain a brief tour of the ship? It seems he was looking at the exterior of the ship when he was encountered by one of your security teams.”

A slight chuckle came over the channel. “Not even a full day on the job and you want to give tours.”

“If it is a problem it can be done at some other time,” Florence said hastily and fearful for her contract.

This time there was open laughter from LK. “No. No. You misunderstand. I’m joking. It always seems to happen with new crewmembers. Sure, you can give him a brief tour of non-sensitive areas.”

“How about the bridge?” Sam queried.

“I guess it is only fitting that a fellow captain be allowed to see the bridge. So, yes, that would be permissible.”

“Thank you, LK.”

“No problem. And Florence, remember, just as with any crewmember, I hold you responsible for your guests’ actions.”

“Understood. Florence out.”

“LK out.”

Florence then looked at her two shipmates and said, “You heard LK. He holds me responsible for your actions, so no tricks or

'adventures'. I don't know what LK might do, but I do know there is a brig on board and I'm not anxious to experience the creature comforts it may offer." She then turned to Sam and addressed him directly. "You heard LK refer to you as a captain. If you want him to continue to refer to you in that manner you had better behave yourself."

"Do I have to?"

"You want to be known as a heroic captain. Right?"

"Yes! Of course!"

"Then that means behaving yourself when visiting other ships."

"Drat."

"Well, let's get going."

Florence led her crewmates on a brief tour of the *Lion's Den*, stopping in the places where she thought Starfall would be interested. She also made sure to stop by the brig, to show him she wasn't kidding.

While they were visiting the bridge Sam met with the bridge crew, which led to some funny moments and confusion when he met the otter navigator, Sam Twain. The only one he did not meet was LK. It seemed they were always a step behind him. Florence knew, even with her brief time aboard, the LK wouldn't be avoiding another captain, but his duties took precedence and there was a lot to do.

After an hour Florence walked Sam Starfall and Helix down a planet fall staircase.

"I hope this satisfies your curiosity and quest for adventure," she said as they reached the bottom.

"Yes, it does. That bridge is huge compared to my cockpit. And you were right, the *Savage Chicken* could be a shuttle for them."

"So do you still want this ship?"

"Yes and no. While it would be neat, it is way too big. Although I wouldn't have to worry about the ship's AI being out to kill or maim me."

"I don't like it," Helix almost cried.

"Why not?" Florence asked.

"There are no other robots on board. I'd be lonely."

"But there are no other robots on our ship," Sam reminded him.

"True, but our ship is smaller and we're not gone for long."

"True, true," Sam mused. "Anyway I found out something. None of their crew carries wallets. At least on board."

"Sam! You didn't!" Florence cried. "Not after what you heard and I told you!"

Sam cast his eyes downward and said, "Well once or twice. One time I think someone suspected something. Anyway you could tell by looking at them they don't carry anything. Their pockets don't bulge. I also found out, by looking, that they normally don't wear any jewelry or watches."

"You don't know how relieved I am to hear that."

"Yes," Sam said dejectedly, "that ship is locked up tighter than the spaceport's safe."

"So you didn't get anything," Helix asked.

"I hate to admit it, but that is the case. A pro like me walking away empty handed."

While Florence felt bad for Sam, she was relieved. She didn't know how she would explain a theft that Sam committed. What she said was, "Okay, both of you back to our ship. I still have work to do here. I will see you later."

"Okay, okay," Sam said sullenly as he walked towards the spaceport with Helix trailing behind.

When Florence was sure they were headed back to the spaceport she headed back up the stairs. She was bit miffed at Sam, but she also felt sad for him. She had just stepped inside the door when she bumped into LK.

"Oh, sorry, LK."

"No problem. I hear that you just kept missing me on your tour."

Florence put on what she thought was a wry smile and said, "If I didn't know better I'd say you were trying to avoid us. But how were you to know where we would be headed next?"

LK let out a small chuckle and said, "I have my ways. But, seriously, it was just bad timing."

"Well, if you do want to meet Sam, he's headed for our ship in the spaceport."

"Noted. I have to go meet the mayor. She's been calling the ship almost constantly."

"I've met her and I know she can be quite persistent," Florence said as a matter of understatement. "If you will forgive me I do have to get back to work."

"Yes, you better. I hear the captain is a real slave driver," LK said with a laugh and he turned to go down the stairs.

Florence let out a little laugh, and headed towards the 'lift station. It was then she realized why this ship's crew stayed here. LK made working here fun. He made sure everyone knew their job and

took it seriously, but he also let it be known you could laugh too. She had also found out that he was a consummate punster and would pun at a drop of a hat. While walking around with him she could not believe how many puns one person could do in the course of a five minute conversation. During her first day she was amazed on how readily the ship's systems and equipment were easily adaptable for her use. She was used to constantly trying to get human designed equipment, like retinal scanners, to work for her. Here it was a different story. The chairs, with tail holes, were a big improvement. She didn't have to constantly sit on her tail. She figured it was because the crew was of all differing species that the equipment was so easily adaptable to her.

LionkingCMSL, for his part, headed down the stairs and headed towards the city hall. He was somewhat annoyed by the mayor's constant harassment. He had told her, more than once, that he would see her as soon as the ship's condition would allow it.

When he arrived at the city hall he headed towards the receptionist. The receptionist looked up in surprise. He had never met anyone like LK before. "H-h-how can I help you, sir?"

"I'm here to see the mayor."

"I'm sorry, sir, but she is quite busy right now."

LK frowned and said, "Tell her Captain LionkingCMSL, of the *Lion's Den* is here to meet with her, as she has requested. Numerous times."

The receptionist brightened and said, "Oh! Captain! I was told to let you right through when you arrived. Let me get you an escort."

The receptionist pushed a button and not five seconds later a robot appeared. "Megahertz," the receptionist said, "please escort the Captain to the mayor."

"Yes, sir," the robot said. To LK the robot said, "If you will please follow me, Captain."

"Lead on, MacDuff," LK quipped.

"Sir, my name is Megahertz."

LK shook his massive head and said, "I know, I heard. It is an old saying."

"Ohhh." The robot got a somewhat blank look then after a beat said, "I got the reference now. The play *Macbeth*, Act Five, Scene 8, Line 38. They are some of Macbeth's last words before he battles Macduff and he is killed. Though it seems Shakespeare actually

wrote it as 'Lay on, Macduff.' "

LK was taken aback. "That I didn't know. I guess it got changed through the ages. You pulled that up from your memory banks?"

"No, I threw it to the net to see if anyone knew the reference."

"Ahh," is all LK said. He thought to himself, "And this is why we don't like robots with too much AI. Can make things complicated."

After a few seconds more Megahertz halted in front of a door and said, "Please wait here, Captain. I will see if the Mayor is busy." The robot just stood silently for a second or two then announced, "You may go in. She is expecting you."

"Thank you, Megahertz," LK said, slightly unnerved that the robot did not move as it apparently communicated with the mayor through radio or some other means.

He opened the door a little bit, on the hesitatingly side, as he did not know what to expect. When the door was open one quarter of the way he heard, "Come in, Captain. I've been waiting for you."

LK opened the door fully and said, "Yes, I know. I'm just not used to your type of robots. What can I do for you?"

The mayor leaned back in her chair, slightly taken aback that LK was a lion, steepled her fingers and said, "I just have a few questions, Captain LionkingCMSL."

"Such as?"

"Who are you and what are you doing here?"

"We are who we seem to be. We are furs from the planet Homestead. We are here for the reasons we stated in our conversation with the spaceport. A super nova effects intruded into hyperspace as we were in its local neighborhood. That caused us to be thrown light years off course and damage to our ship."

"Yes, I know that. That is the 'official story'. Why are you here? The truth, Captain."

LionkingCMSL had to struggle to keep his temper under control. He suppressed a snarl, however his ears were flat against his head and his tail was lashing. How dare this woman accuse him of lying! "Your honor! I find your accusation that my story is a fabrication totally repugnant. I have told you the truth. If you doubt the veracity of my claims check with the local ship inspector. He saw the damage we incurred. You may also check our logs."

"I saw the inspector's report, but the damage could've been staged. As for logs, they can be forged."

"Madam! How dare you! We almost lost the ship due to an anti-

matter handling defect and you accuse us of staging it?”

“Yes. I’m now giving you a direct order: Turn over your ship to my people.”

LK’s eyes went wide with disbelief. Was she really giving him that direct order? A slight snarl started to curl his upper lip as he said, “Ma’am, I don’t know who you think you are, but you are not HASS brass, nor anyone else that can give me a ‘direct order’. Especially that particular one. The *Lion’s Den* is my ship, free and clear. To put it in its lowest vernacular, ‘Like hell, Lady.’” LK was really starting to lose his temper and his “wild” side was starting to show.

The mayor was taken aback and offense at the last comment, but only said, “What is clear is that I am a human and you are an AI; so you have to obey my orders.”

“Ma’am, I respectfully suggest that you get your eyes checked. I am not any type of AI. I am a free fur. I do not have to obey your orders, other than out of respect for your office.”

The mayor then realized that she was getting nowhere, other than making the big cat angry. She decided to try another tack. “Where is this super nova of which you spoke? There has been nothing reported about it.”



“Because,” LK said, in a low and rock hard tone, as he put his hands on her desk and leaned his eight foot six inch frame towards her, “it happened fifty thousand light years from here. You won’t know about it for fifty thousand years.”

“That could be true,” the mayor mused, realizing that the lion’s muzzle was now about a foot from her face.

LK continued in the same tone, “Your honor I must remind you of how we entered system. If we were here for some nefarious purpose do you think we would’ve asked nicely and offered our services?” The mayor shook her head. “I’ve been told that somefur told you about our secondary lasers.” The mayor nodded her head. “Well, I’ll tell you about our main weapon system. It is two banks of two pulsed two hundred fifty terawatt Masers in retractable turrets. I’ll save you from doing the math. That equals five hundred terawatts per turret or one thousand terawatts total. Do you have anything that could stand up to them?” The mayor shook her head no slowly and started to pale.

“I didn’t think so. I’ll also let you in on something else. From what we have been able to determine, your defense system would pose no problems for our defensive systems.” The mayor turned white. “I’ll be blunt, Ms. Mayor. If we had come in shooting, there would have been nothing you could have done about it and we would have had this planet for ourselves. Just be glad we are the friendly folk, for there are pirates out there, with more superior firepower, which would think nothing of taking over this planet and the inhabitants as slaves. So I would suggest, moderately strongly, that when a superiorly armed ship comes on a friendly call you do not question their motives. They may not like it. And, to tell you the truth, I do not, but I’m a peaceful lion, and only fight when all other options have been ruled out.” LK’s ears had risen to half mast, but his tail still lashed angrily.

The mayor realized that she had angered the captain of a ship that was capable of laying waste to the planet, and her personally right here in her office. He could’ve very easily stormed out of her office, took off and fired a parting shot at the spaceport to prove his point. “I’m sorry, Captain. I didn’t realize. It’s just your appearance took everyone by surprise, including me. Some people thought you were aliens that were going to attack us or take over our world.”

“I can see where that might occur. I will grant you one nicety, though.”

“What is that, Captain?”

“Come to the ship in a day’s time, after I have cooled down, and I will give you a personal tour of the ship. I will even include the sensitive portions that are not normally shown to visitors.”

“And my bodyguards?”

“Yes, they are invited.”

“Very good, Captain.”

“Is there anything else, ma’am?”

“No, that will be all. I will say I will take what you said to heart. I will see you in a day’s time.”

“Very well. Good bye, Ms. Mayor.”

“Good bye, Captain.”

What happened next took the mayor by surprise. Instead of walking out the door LK lifted his left arm and spoke into his wristlet. “LK to the *LD*.”

“Sam here, LK. What’s up?”

“Lock on to me and transport me to the ship. I think I need to give a demonstration.”

“Roger. Starting the process now.”

In a blink and a sparkle the captain was gone from the mayor’s office.

The mayor had barely recovered from the shock of it when her telephone rang.

“Hello?”

“Ms. Mayor, this is Captain LionkingCMSL.”

“Where are you?”

“On board my ship.”

“But how?”

“Simple; a matter transporter system. Like I told Sam, I thought you needed a demonstration. Something that couldn’t be faked.”

“A very good demonstration, which drives your point home with clarity.”

“Very good. Goodbye, Ms. Mayor.”

“Goodbye, Captain.”

After she closed the link she checked with her people and no one saw the captain leave and they were positive that he had walked in. Even the security tapes showed him walking about.

She sat down in shock. She was just given a very dramatic demonstration of that ship’s capability. It was definitely way ahead of the technology of her world. She knew it now; she was definitely way

out of her depth in dealing with this ship.

LK walked to his office on the ship. He was angrier than he had been in a long while. How dare that woman suggest that everything was a fabrication. He was not one to anger easily, but she had pushed his buttons. Even the HASS brass accepted his reports with very little doubt. He had shown them that he was an honest fur. He was accused of being too honest at times. If that was a fault, he mused, it was a fault he could live with. He went over the reports that had been coming in. He noted the Florence Ambrose was doing the work of two furs at once. What surprised him was that her repairs were above the minimum required and were done in record time. He wondered if she was trying to make up for the time she was away from her duties, giving the tour. He also saw that she was learning systems that she never saw before in record time. He wondered if that had to do with her being part genetically engineered. He thought it was too bad that she could not stay with the ship when it left the planet. Florence would be a great addition to the engineering team. He considered offering her a position, but he decided against it. It would not be fair to her or her captain. She belonged here, not in a ship crewed with furs she did not know that well.

The rest of the day passed uneventfully, as did the night. The next morning dawned and there seemed to be a sense of relief as more and more of the ship's systems were returned to normal operation. Florence had been a good hire. LK decided to have a talk with her.

He located her on one of the engineering decks. "Florence, please take a break. I want to talk to you."

She secured what she was working on and came over to him. "What is it, Captain? Have I done something wrong?"

"Only if working twice as fast as everyone else and doing a superb job is doing something wrong," LK said with a smile.

"Thank you, LK."

"You don't have to make up for the time you took for giving the tour. You do know that you don't have to work like a dog. Pardon the pun."

"Pun forgiven and I was half expecting it. And I'm not working so hard to make up for lost time. It's just the way I am. I must commend your crew though."

"Why?"

"They took to working along side me and me giving orders like I

was a regular crew person.”

“Here’s a clue, Florence, to us you *are* a regular crew fur.”

“Even if I was genetically engineered?”

“Florence,” LK said evenly, “most of the crew’s ancestors were genetically engineered. Also our genetics shape who we are and how we act. Nurture plays a part; as it did with you, I assume. Probably given different upbringing you might have chosen a different path in life.”

“Possibly, but I have safeguards that don’t allow me to do certain things, like attack humans.”

LK laughed and said, “Which you probably found twelve ways to Sunday around.” She just gave a small smile. “Here’s something you may not have considered, most furs have the same ‘safeguards’.”

“You do?” Florence asked astonished.

“Yes, we do. They are called ‘morals’. While I’m a peaceful lion and my morals prohibit me from an intelligent being, if there is sufficient reason my morals break down and I do what I must. The same goes for most furs.”

“I never considered it in that light.”

“So you see, Florence, you are a *real* fur.”

“You have given me much to think about, LK. One question though.”

“I’ll try to answer it.”

“What about the robots on Jean. I mean they have advanced to the point of almost autonomous thinking.”

“That is a thorny issue and one reason you don’t see robots like that on this ship. While one could argue that they are manufactured and therefore are not alive. Are we not, in a sense, manufactured? I mean we don’t just appear. Our mother and father have to get together and have a baby. The ‘manufacturing’ process happens inside the mother. With robots it happens externally. So if they have a sense of self, and the other attributes of sentience than I would argue that they are people. Some people would argue they have no soul. But I have to ask, ‘What is a soul? Can you show it to me?’ Of course they can’t. I do believe in the Creator, but I also believe the soul is created within you when you decide to believe.”

“Yes, Captain, you have given me much to think about. However, I must get back to work.”

“That’s true,” LK responded as he looked at the chronograph that’s built into his wristlet. “And I have a appointment to keep with

the mayor shortly. I have a very good hunch that she is very, very punctual and hates to be kept waiting.”

“I do believe you are correct.” With that Florence started back towards her work area. “See you later LK.”

“Probably sooner than you think. Later, Florence.”

After LK left and Florence went back to work her mind was mulling over what he had said. It made sense that she was a person. Did EU foresee this? And it put a new spin on the robot problem. If these furs may consider the robots as people the robots would have to define their society. With all these thoughts she threw herself back into her work. The straightforward world of engineering was her escape from confusing thoughts.

After LK had left Florence he headed towards the starboard forward planet fall staircase. His thoughts were many. Did the people here consider Florence and anyone like her as property? If so, that was wrong on so many levels. She was a living, breathing, intelligent being, capable of determining her own future. She should not be considered chattel, even if her origins were radically different from a “normal” fur’s. The question about the robots was even thornier. He had seen how the robots acted, and he had no doubt some of them would probably be considered people. That was one reason the furs of Homestead refrained from building robots with advanced AIs. It could lead to some very difficult moral and legal issues; like when is a robot dead and could you commit murder against a robot. While he would have liked to ponder these issues more; the mayor arriving focused his attention to his next task.

“Welcome, Mayor and associates.”

“Whew! Hello, Captain. That’s a mighty long flight of stairs.”

“Sure is,” a bodyguard chimed in. “You ever think of putting in an elevator?”

“Well, once you are on board for a while the climb doesn’t seem that bad. And, actually, we do have elevators, but for freight only.”

“Well, I’m ready for our tour.”

“And you shall get it. I must warn you though, you may find our ‘lift system unnerving at first.”

“How do you mean?”

“Not only do they go up and down, but they will move side to side, fore and aft and will spin on their Y axis at times. A lot of people are uncomfortable with them at first, so I thought I would give you a

warning.”

“The warning is appreciated.”

“I thought I would start off with Transport Room 4. This is one of the rooms where one of the matter transporters are located.”

And with that LK started a very thorough tour of the ship. He had to explain most of the systems on board. It wasn't that the mayor and his guards were dumb, but the systems and technology behind them were way beyond anything they were familiar with. One of the things that LK had to explain, and it actually surprised him, was the botany section on deck two.

“Why such a big park area?” the mayor asked.

“It's not so much as a park, but part of our Botany section.”

“But that still begs the question, ‘Why so big?’.”

“Partly due to the fact we do help in terraforming projects and the park setting gives the crew a place to relax. During the night shift, when the lights are turned off, it gives you a feeling of being planet side. We also grow some of our own food here. Makes sense really; we don't have to carry as much fresh foodstuffs in stasis. And the crew just loves being able to come here and pick a fruit fresh off the tree.”

“But what about those large windows? Aren't they a risk?” a bodyguard asked.

“Being in space is a risk,” LK said evenly. “But I think you mean a decompression risk.” The bodyguard nodded. “Well, there are shutters that are closed if we are in a battle situation or any other time where there is significant danger of decompression. The view ports are made up of multiple layers of highly break resistant panes that make a full decompression very unlikely.

“If one of the view ports did suffer a catastrophic break, and the shutters were not closed, the corresponding shutter would close immediately and inflatable gaskets would inflate to seal the area between the view port and shutter. This same system is in place for all view ports on the ship, not just these.”

The guard whistled, “Pretty advanced system. Hope you test it.”

LK looked at the guard and said very solemnly, “When you are in space for months on end you want the most advanced and proven tech on your side. One small mistake can lead to major consequences if you are not careful. And, yes, the system is tested every ninety days. We've been fortunate that we never had to rely on it.”

And so it went. They did meet up with Florence and LK was taken aback by how the mayor treated her. It was as he feared; the mayor saw her as nothing more than property that could be ordered around as she wished. In fact the mayor gave Florence an order, that LK didn't like, that had to do with Florence's work on the ship.

"Excuse me for a minute, Ms. Mayor. Florence, can I speak to you in private?"

"Yes, Captain."

The two of them walked a short distance away and into a small office. "What is it, LK?"

"I do not approve of the way the mayor spoke to you. And that 'direct order' she gave you."

"Yes?"

"Consider that order countermanded by your commanding officer. When onboard this ship, or anything regarding this ship, you answer to a very short list of people and that does not include the mayor or anyone else that is not assigned to this ship or HASS. Understood?"

"Very clearly, LK."

After LK met back up with the mayor and her entourage they continued the tour. He remarked to her, "Ms. Mayor, if I may, I would like to ask something of you."

"Sure, go ahead, Captain."

"When it comes to the personnel or the running of this ship, please refrain from giving orders. I believe you mean no harm, but this ship and its crew is like a fine watch. We go into the unforgivingness of deep space and one small mistake could be fatal to all."

"You're upset about that direct order I gave to that AI?"

"Ma'am," LK said firmly, "that 'AI' has a name and it is Florence Ambrose. On this ship she is considered a lieutenant and will be treated as such."

"You can't give an AI a rank!"

"Ma'am, on this ship she is a person, not an object that can be bought or sold. I think it would be wise if you started seeing her in that light. She has feelings like you and I do."

"She also has 'safeguards'!"

"And you or I don't?"

"Of course not!"

LK halted and turned to her. "Ms. Mayor, you are so wrong. We

do have safeguards, though we have given them another name: morals.”

“True. But she was created by someone.”

“As we were; our mothers and fathers.”

“And her intelligence. You can’t possibly find a comparison to her artificially induced intelligence.”

“You are wrong, ma’am. Most animals have intelligence. Granted not on the level of you or I, but it is still there. As far as her sentience goes, it has been basically established that a child left alone, with no other intelligent interaction, almost reverts totally to a quad animal state. So I would argue that our advanced intelligence is also artificially created by society and nurture.”

“But she had an owner.”

“Didn’t we have an ‘owner’ as we were growing up? I think we did, but we called them our parents. Granted they couldn’t have sold us, but they could’ve given us away. Frankly, ma’am, your arguments smack of the same rhetoric they used for slaves being property.”

“Maybe you are right. I never looked at in that light. What about robots?”

“That is a very prickly issue, that we have avoided by not building robots with that much advanced AI. I guess we’re just avoiding the issue, but I feel it may come up at some point.”

“Captain, have you ever met other beings like Florence, other than yourselves?” a guard asked.

“Please step in here.” With that LK entered a door that was marked Holo Room 1. “Please understand the things you are about to see are not real. They do exist, but only in the confines of this room. They are computer representations of beings we have met.” The group nodded their understanding, but wondered what he meant. “Good. Computer, please show us some people of the Vulpinian race.”

In a few seconds a group of four fox people appeared.

“Ms. Mayor, I present you with a sample, based on real furs, of the Vulpinian race. These friendly people are our allies and have ships that make the *LD* look like a toy.”

“Who owns them?”

One of the Vulpinians spoke up. “Ma’am, I’m Admiral Jason Fox. In answer, to your question, no one ‘owns’ us. We are a free people.”

“Were you created in a lab?”

“In the lab of our mother’s womb.”

“Thank you, Jason,” LK said. And then he said, “Computer please show us some members of the Lutrans.”

This time people of all differing species appeared.

The mayor was agog. “These are all free people? Not AIs?”

“You are correct,” LK said. “These are but a few of the differing space fairing races that we have met. This is one reason I, we, consider Florence a fur. In fact, if you were to refer to one of these fine furs as an AI or property you would be told matter-of-factly otherwise, and probably quite bluntly with not so nice language.”

“I’ll remember that. Quite a diverse group. All are of your contacts, of this type, friendly?”

“Unfortunately, no. Computer, please show us Torel Blackclaw.”

A single anthro black panther appeared. His looks and demeanor showed he was not a friendly being.

“This is Captain Torel Blackclaw, one nasty pirate. He is one of the pirates I was referring to yesterday. He has already taken whole planets over for slave populations.”

The mayor visibly shuddered. “Is there negotiating with him?”

Torel’s simulacrum spoke up, and with a snarl said, “Wench, I do my negotiations over the barrel of a blaster rifle.”

“Did your computer have to do that?”

“Ms. Mayor, the computer is using the attributes of the real Torel. Actually the computer toned him down a little. He’s not normally that nice. And when he is nice you better watch out; for then he has something very unpleasant in store for you.”

This time the whole group shuddered, all of them thinking, “That’s nice? Hate to see what his not nice self is like.”

“What are the chances of him coming here?” the mayor’s aide asked.

“Probably not that great. As I told you, we were thrown way off course by a super nova explosion and we didn’t know this system existed, as it is far away from our normal routes. I doubt Torel has any idea that you are here. The closest our known space comes is about fifty thousand light years away.”

One of the guards said, “Fifty thousand light years? It’ll take you forever to get back.”

“Not really. Once we can get our FTL drive back up and running we should be home in a couple of months.”

“That quickly?”

“Yes, our drive is pretty advanced and jumping into hyperspace saves a lot of time. Computer, please end simulations.”

“Affirmative,” a disembodied voice said and the everyone, save LK and the mayor’s group, winked out.

What the mayor didn’t know was her aide and bodyguards were now realizing how out of her depth she was. This ship was more advanced than anything they had seen to now. And with someone like Torel roaming around, it proved that space was more fearsome than anyone predicted.

“Let us finish our tour,” LK said, as he exited the room.

The mayor looked back into the room, one last time, and she swore she saw Torel there, flashing an evil grin. She shook her head to clear it, hoping what she saw was just her imagination, but she wasn’t sure.

After another hour LK ended the tour where it began. The mayor and her group were amazed at the diversity of species and the technology that was aboard the ship. The food replicaton system was something they marveled at. The crew could have almost any dish they wanted with no problem. Of course the crew was also free to make their own food, and, as the captain had said, there was fresh grown food available in the botany section for those that wanted it.

“Ok, we are back where we started,” LK finally stated. “Transport Room 4. And now for one final demonstration.”

“That is?”

“Please step up on the dais and stand over the disks.”

“Why?”

“I want to save you from walking down all those steps.”

After the group had complied LK said to the operator, “You have the location of their car?” The zebra morph tech nodded. “Good, place them next to it.”

Elmer Malaga looked at the group and asked, “Are you ready?”

The mayor answered, “I guess as ready as we ever will be.”

“OK, starting the process now.”

Out on the tarmac the mayor’s driver was surprised as the mayor and her group winked into existence right in front of him with a brief flash of light.

“Where did you come from?”

“The ship,” the mayor said. “The captain has a way of driving home points that one does not easily forget.”

A second later there was another flash of light and the bodyguards' weapons appeared on the hood of the car. Everyone was stunned and checked themselves for any other missing property. Nothing else was missing, but the "stunt" proved another point.

LK's voice was heard in mid-air. "Ms. Mayor, although I didn't say anything I do not like unapproved and unannounced weapons on my ship, for any reason. I could've ordered Elmer to remove your guards' weapons at any time, but I let them be. Consider it a warning."

"Warning received, Captain," the mayor said wondering why she did so, being probably he couldn't hear her.

"Very good, Ms. Mayor. Good day."

"How did he do that? Talking in mid-air?" the guards asked.

Another voice spoke, "By focusing the sound waves. That's how we can hear you. We keep it up and running for security reasons."

The mayor's group was stunned and on the bridge George was laughing to himself. Let them guess how sensitive it is or if we really keep it on all the time.

The rest of the time repairing the ship went by quickly. LionkingCMSL, for his part, ended up giving tours and granting interviews. The questions were basically variations of the basic ones one would ask any advanced race. People were surprised to find a swimming pool on board and the other various recreation facilities. The Holo Rooms stunned most people. They never thought VR could be so "real". In one case he had one of the larger Holo Rooms recreate the bridge and engineering. He then had some scientists experience the running of the ship. He also had it replay the bridge and engineering logs of when they took the initial hit with a virtual crew in their roles. He then had the scientists take the positions of the crew and replayed the same events. They would've lost the ship as the "engineer" didn't relay the warning to drop out of Hyperspace fast enough.

The real crew, on the other paw, was given limited shore leave. While they enjoyed it they were somewhat unnerved at the sight of so many robots with such advanced AI. Actually a few of them were put out to find out the robots were still considered property, even with the beginnings of sentience starting to show.

Florence for her part was enjoying herself. She was involved in

a crash course of advanced engineering. Her new crewmates were more than glad to explain or show her something she didn't understand. While she didn't fully understand how the front needles opened the Hyperspace gates she had gotten a basic idea of the theories involved. And though their fusion reactors were centuries ahead of what she knew, she learned enough to be able to fine tune the *Savage Chicken's* reactors for more efficient operation. She was also able to get some of the spare parts she needed for the SC's starboard engine replicated. Replication and matter transport theories and operation were still much above her knowledge level, but she had a very basic understanding of how they operated.

Another thing she learned is how a good crew really operated. Even though she had been with them for about a week, she felt like she was part of the crew. She would be ready to ask for something and it would be in her paw before she could ask. It was like the crew had a sixth sense of what would be required at job at paw and made sure it was available.

She half considered asking LionkingCMSL about a position, but decided against it. She didn't want to be seen as an interloper and she still had to watch over Sam Starfall and Helix. Anyway she still had her contract with Sam Starfall, though she was willing to bet that LK could buy out her contract.

She also wondered what the other engineers, of the ships here, would think of her knowledge of things they only dreamed about. Fortunately, for her, LK allowed her to take copious notes and pictures of stuff she worked on. Lee Philips even made sure she had hard copy versions of the systems' manuals. She would get them scanned into electronic versions later, as the two electronic systems were not compatible.

Before she knew it there was a meeting and Lee Philips announced that ship was a good as it was going to get without a total re-fit. LK thanked everyone for their hard work. He singled Florence out for having been a great big help and wished he could keep her on board, but that was not to be. He then announced that in another week the *Lion's Den* would be lifting off for Homestead. He wanted to give the hard working engineering crew some shore leave time. He also had to contact the Ship Inspector so the inspector could give his blessing to the ship's repairs.

Florence went back to the *Savage Chicken* and resumed her

duties there. The duties were straightforward and exciting in their own right, but she felt something was missing. A couple of days later she figured it out. What was missing was the controlled chaos that surrounded her during her work on the *Lion's Den*. There there were furs always moving about, a higher ambient noise level and a sense of urgency. Not that furs were panicked, but they wanted to get home and please LK. Also missing was that sixth sense that the other engineering staff showed of knowing what was needed and when. Also the friendship that they showed her, while on board the ship. She figured that between those two things the ship was repaired in about half the time it may have taken otherwise. LK was right, the crew and ship were like a fine watch. She had overheard his conversation with the mayor.

She threw herself back into her work and was glad that she was able to get some of the parts she needed for that starboard reactor.

A few more days went by and Sam Starfall told her that LK was looking for her. She left the ship and started walking towards the spaceport's exit when she spotted LK carrying an envelope.

"Ahh, there you are Florence."

"Hello Captain. I was told you were looking for me."

"Florence, it's LK, not Captain, as you well know. Anyway, this is for you." LK then proffered her the envelope.

"Yes, I know, but we're not on your ship." She took the envelope and asked, "What is this, LK?"

"Something I wanted to give you before you left the ship. It's your pay for when you were on board the *LD*. I'm a bit traditional and a new crewmember's first pay is always given to them by me, in an envelope, but you caught us between pay periods."

She opened the envelope and took out a slip of paper. On it were the amount of credits, which was sizable, she had been paid and an account number with a password so she could access the balance. "Captain, LK. You didn't have to. You've already paid Sam and this is way too much."

"No, on both counts, and yes I had to. First, you were in my employ as a lieutenant. All my crewmembers are treated as qualified astronauts, and you were no different. The amount shown there is the base rate for that rank and a bonus for getting so much work done in so little time. And I paid Sam for the use of your services, but not your services. You get paid that. You did the work, not him."

"But what will your superiors think?"

LK started to laugh, "Superiors? I don't think so. The *LD* is my ship. I own her; remember. Now my accountants might have something they would *like* to say, but they won't. Good luck with the *Savage Chicken*."

"Thank you, LK and you're welcome. Maybe we will meet later on."

"Possibly. Now, if you will excuse me, I have to get back to my ship."

"As I have to get back to mine. And thanks again LK."

LK turned and waved. He then muttered to himself, "The *Savage Chicken*? The name still leaves a bad taste in my mouth. What would possess someone to name their ship that?" LK shuddered and headed to his ship.

A few hours later, while Florence was in the cockpit, of the *Savage Chicken*, she heard George ask for initial departure instructions for twenty minutes time. Florence raced to the spaceport's door and watched as the crew of the *Lion's Den* made ready for departure.

One of things she saw was a sweep of the grounds for mislaid tools and parts. She took note that they even picked up any trash that was lying around. She wondered about that. She knew LK was strict on neatness, but wasn't this taking things too far? As she heard the thrusters warming up it dawned on her why the litter detail. The ground blast of the thrusters could turn any piece of trash into a lethal weapon. She then heard an announcement from the ship and she placed the voice as belonging to George.

"Attention all hands please board the ship. Lift off will occur in five minutes and staircases will be raised in three minutes. Attention all persons in the general area of the *Lion's Den*. We will be lifting off in five minutes. Please evacuate the landing zone. The ground blast from our thrusters will be quite severe."

Florence watched as the ground crew picked up their pace and made for the staircases.

Three minutes from the first announcement the ship's voice was heard again. "Attention all crew: the staircases are now being raised." Florence saw that this was in fact happening. "Any crews still on planet please contact the ship for immediate transport. All ground personnel please be advised that we will lift off in two minutes. Be aware of ground blast."

People in the area were starting to scurry for cover, especially those who had witnessed the landing.

“Attention ground personnel,” the voice said one last time, “lift off will occur promptly in one minute’s time. You have been warned and this is the last warning. Please stand clear.”

Florence noted that the thrusters’ noise was increasing rapidly and a wind was starting to form from them.

In precisely one minute’s time, from the last announcement, the noise became almost unbearable and the wind was at hurricane force. Florence watched as the huge ship started to rise. First it was the ship taking its weight off the nacelles and then, ever so slowly, the nacelles started to rise. It was first barely perceptible, but the rate of rise started to increase with startling rapidity.

Florence watched with awe. Here was a ship that she helped repair taking off in a manner that she had never seen before.

At five hundred meters AGL the nose swung up to a sixty-degree angle and the aft thrusters fired. After which the *Lion’s Den* took off like a shot, not quite breaking the sound barrier.

Jaws hung open, including Florence’s, because no one expected such big a ship to accelerate that quickly. Even though she knew the ship could do it, seeing it do it was another thing. It was one of the most exceptional displays of pure power she had seen.

“Now that’s a heroic captain,” a voice said from beside her.

She jumped a bit, then realized it was Sam Starfall. “Not heroic, Sam, but respected by his crew.”

“Only a heroic captain would leave in such a grand manner.”

“Sam, a heroic captain leaves without much fanfare. What you saw was a crew anxious to get home.” She paused and thought for a bit, then continued. “Come to think of it, LK did leave without fanfare. They did what they needed to do and left. I guess you may be right, he could be a heroic captain in his crew’s eyes.”

The mayor watched from her office, via a TV report. She was half expecting that LK would do something to prove his points, like fire on a cliff or something. But after seeing the ship accelerate, like its tail was on fire, she realized the captain did drive his point home to her, one last time. That ship had pure unbridled power when it needed it. As careful as the ship was in landing, lift off was another matter. They asked for clearance and gave plenty of warnings on what they were doing, but the acceleration to speed was unexpected

and telling.

She had half doubted some of the things that were told to her by the captain, but now she knew he was telling the truth. Where he was from was far more advanced than she could ever imagine. He also left her with doubts on how she handled AIs, particularly Florence Ambrose. She figured that the leonine captain had to be a very good judge of character, especially being in deep space and meeting all sorts of new people. However, she still didn't quite like how he came across to her, at times. He very easily could've made his points in a quite a less dramatic fashion. She leaned back in her chair and thought about it. She came to the conclusion that the captain was doing what he thought he needed to do to drive his points home. Probably with someone else he would've taken another tack, but, with her, she needed the points driven home hard. She mused she might have not picked up on more subtle hints.

On board the *Lion's Den* the crew were back to their old routine of running the ship and heading home.

"Ok. LK, we're out of the atmosphere and can go hypersonic at any time."

"Thanks, Sam. You can accelerate to escape velocity at your pleasure. Head towards where we entered system at best possible speed."

A few hours later Sam announced they were at the specified point.

"Good. Drop a marker buoy that transmits its purpose on all known local space frequencies and its location on our private channel using encryption protocol Z. I don't think Torel, or his lackeys, have broken that, yet. We don't want to advertise this system's location."

"What signal strength should I use?" George asked.

"Enough signal to reach out for about one days traveling. Sam, also put a flag in the nav computer for this location."

Both men acknowledged their orders and did them.

"Okay, Sam let's head home. Best possible speed."

"Aye, Captain," the otter navigator said as his paws slid across his boards to input the commands.

If there were anyone watching they would've noticed a "hole" opening in normal space and the *Lion's Den* entering it. After a few seconds the hole closed and nothing, save for a lone buoy, was left to indicate that the *Lion's Den* was ever in the area.

Back on the planet Jean a certain Bowman's Wolf noticed a chirping from her wrist. Florence was startled at first, then realized what it was.

"Oh, my," she said. "I forgot to give the wristlet back. I had gotten so used to wearing it." She then thought about it some more. "That's odd, they didn't ask for it back either. I wonder if it was on LK's orders. Probably was. He had to have seen it when we met last." She was going to order it to come off, but then decided against it. It did have a chronometer and other features she would find handy.

What she didn't know, and would find out shortly, is that the balance of the *Lion's Den's* bank account, on Jean, was accessible to her. It seems the account number and password LK gave her was the ship's account, for safe keeping for if they ever did make a return visit. This was not a mistake. LK trusted her and was pretty sure most of the balance would be there if they ever returned.

The End

Acknowledgements:

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Painless Black Wolf © Himself

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And a big thank you to Mark Stanley for creating the Freefall universe and letting me play in it.