

"I know you're not enjoying your work," she murmured, not needing any great volume in their tiny quarters. "It's hard to imagine who would enjoy nudging asteroid chunks around. We have an opening in my traffic control office..."

Taylor's ears and tail both perked.

"...but it requires a level two math rating." She hurried on when Taylor tucked his tail. "I can help you study!"

"Thanks Heather. That means a lot to me, and I'd love to study you." He blinked when she giggled, then groaned. "With you. Let's get something to eat; I must be running on fumes."

Taylor brushed the door controls and let Heather lead the way to the mess hall. They spoke about work on the way, and she shared some of her own rough moments from the first week guiding and approving courses for the mining tugs and repair vessels that the Sojourner and its two sister ships carried.

"Hattie had just finished reminding us about our tag-out and lock-out responsibilities, lecturing to us while we stood in nice orderly ranks, when one of the mechanics got blasted out of a maneuvering thruster she was working on! She rolled fifty feet, finally fetching up against a stack of lube drums, but on the way she bowled over half the working shift! In formation, they were ducks in a row!" Taylor couldn't stop giggling in spite of himself, and Heather's wicked grin only encouraged him.

"Was she alright?" He managed after a moment, brushing a tear from his cheek.

"She hasn't been able to get her fur to lie flat since, and she ralphed on the deck chief who reached her first. Other than that? Sure, she's fine. She had to retake the tag-out training though." Their laughter preceded them as the pair entered the mess hall, the happy sound dying out as they stepped over the threshold.

Two hoofers lay bleeding on the floor of the mess hall, and Chris stood over them, arm hanging broken at his side. Blood oozed from his left boot, adding to the nearly-black puddle he stood in. Every other hooper in the hall was grouped in a semi-circle around the scene, some simply mute and horrified witnesses, while others gripped tools or serving trays and glared at the injured canine-type. Behind Chris, the other canines had arrayed themselves, but there was no more unity among their ranks. Whatever had happened, not everyone backed the German shepherd.

"Chris...?" Taylor heard himself say, and the shepherd locked eyes with him, one filmed with red.

"I don't know you." Chris turned from the mutt, and growled at the defensive line of equine, caprine, and bovine types. "Sit down and finish your meals, or your next one will be through a straw, I promise you."

Just as a beefy donkey lunged towards Chris with a screw-driver, a black-furred blur hit him in the ribs, throwing him onto the bodies of the first two unconscious hoofers. Before the herbivores could react to this fresh assault, eight lupine-types, massive wolves with frozen eyes, moved to flank the hoofers. Security had arrived in force.

"Look at this! LOOK! They don't even care about the dogs, just us! That deviant, boy-breeding Shepherd chews a pair of us to bits and we're the villains!" The donkey on the floor brayed, one arm clutching his bruised or broken ribs. One wolf pricked his ears at this, and snarled once, a

sound like a uniform being torn in half. All eyes on him, he spoke.

“Violence will never be tolerated on this or any other vessel in the fleet. It is not a part of our mission. It is not a part of our breeding.”

The donkey looked about ready to challenge that last statement, but a glare from the wolf cut him off.

“Everyone involved in this incident will be punished exactly as law dictates.” More and more of the security officer's teeth grew visible as he spoke. “Departure from the law leads to chaos. I will never abide chaos on this ship.” Both the canine and hooper sides of the confrontation shrank from the display. One type was bred for strength and endurance, the other for loyalty and management, but the creature putting on its show between them was bred for a position requiring violence and intimidation...and it was exceedingly well-suited for it.