

WARNING! This story contains graphic sexual content, and is intended for a mature audience. 18 or older, please.

Being gay in the 22nd century is not supposed to be a big deal. To Daryl, it was, as he struggled to find himself in a world that he felt he did not fully belong. As his parents pressure him to make something of his life, he answers an ad from an organization called the Wolf Hunters, a band of mercenaries who's job it was to protect ships from pirates, and alien threats. After three months of near cabin fever, his appointment with destiny awaits. Will Daryl find his niche and possibly someone to love, or will he find a horrible death at the hands of the Zephenidians.

Artificial Barriers

By

Lutrian Lutria Wolfe

ver. 3.5

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Spreading my fingers on the glass of the viewport, I stared out at the interplay of blues and greens as they flowed past in streams of color. No stars shone, just pitch black beyond. Hyperspatial travel both fascinated and frightened me. We were technically not in what was the universe, but outside, riding up into the universe's own gravity well, where the speed of light was far greater. "How fast were we going?" I quietly mumbled to myself as I tried to mentally comprehend the speeds involved in superluminal travel. Our velocity was probably around 5 or 6 light years per day or so, as far as I could recall, since we had slowed to begin our patrol. An eddy of dark violet swirled as it drifted past the viewport pulling a tail of pale green behind it.

The light show, I've been told, is merely the alien energies and quasi-matter in hyperspace, interacting with the confinement force field which maintained a small pocket of normal space for the ship and crew to exist in. If the force field failed, death would be instant as the ship and everyone in it would instantly be converted into the energy and quasi-matter of the hyperspatial medium. I stepped back, from the glass, and bumped my back against the door of the sleeping quarters.

The problem with being a new, or what they called, a junior or rookie crew member, was that the sleeping quarters was barely a closet with a bed. At least on this ship everyone had his or her own private accommodations. My bed was more of a glorified shelf with a mattress inset into the wall, with storage bins above, and drawers below, for all of my personal effects. The viewport was on the wall next to the foot of the bed, which resulted in an L-shaped floor plan. To the right of the viewport, was the door to the even tinier bathroom. I sat down my bed, and saw that there was barely an inch between my head and the overhead bins. As I sat, I let my mind wander.

All my life, I had felt there was something wrong with me, but couldn't quite put my finger on it. I was too quiet, non-assertive, and watched helplessly as life passed me by. Therapy sessions when I was a young child did little to help. At first I thought that it was because I was gay and found myself drawn to male classmates. Homophobia though, was mostly a relic of the past. Sure there were fringe individuals and groups who still held onto such views, but for the most part, 22nd century human society was generally accepting of homosexuality, and gender identity. The big hang-up nowadays was interspecies sex, which many Humans felt was disgusting, or a debasement of their humanity.

After a few attempted relationships, which ultimately went nowhere, and after being pressured by my parents to either get a job, or join the Federation Navy. I had to take matters into my own hands. College at that time was a struggle. Loneliness, depression, and boredom took its toll. I needed something to help draw me out, give me some real life experiences. Maybe, it was a longing to travel across the known galaxy, and to possibly make a difference in some way. While I was walking past the local transit station on the way to the university, I caught sight of a flier posted on the wall. I stopped to read it.

Wolf Hunter Captain seeks Additional crew Personnel.

No Experience Needed.

Will Train.

I had heard of the Wolf Hunters. They were a group of mercenaries who escorted ships through dangerous space, and tried to protect and help when things went wrong. They also dealt with threats such as pirates, and Zephenidians. They took care of things that the military didn't want to be bothered with.

The fact that training would be provided, did pique my interest. I took down the info on my MPAD, then I contacted Captain Matthew Benson, who took me to New York to be interviewed. By the following evening, I was back home in Santa Clara, canceling my classes at Mission College, and packing what I needed for what I expected to be a journey which would change my life forever.

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I reached down and slid open a drawer. From the drawer, I removed a device about the size and shape of a cigarette lighter, like the ones which appeared in the old movies, and clicked the switch on the side. Six inches above the device, a transparent display screen formed in mid-air. I took my free hand, and gently tugged the edges of the hologram, out a bit, to enlarge the screen. There was a slight sensation of something there, like the whisper softness of a soap bubble, due to a tactile force field projected by the unit to make the screen easier to interact with. Text and pictures scrolled onto the screen. I used my free hand to select icons with my finger, then waved my fingers upward to scroll through my music library. Bach? The Cure? Ferns of Fluritia? I thought about playing a movie, either one I had stored on the device, or one from the ship's library. Movies would work best, if I placed the holo-display over a black backdrop, which was required to provide the best color reproduction. I chose a random track, which turned out to be a melodic electronic piece from a movie soundtrack, then I set the device down on my bed.

I rested my head in my hands as the music played. It's been three months, and so far, nothing. Sure, there was some training, but most of the core training took only a few weeks.

Advanced training was planned for later, since that required live engagements and actual life or death situations. I was bored. The only bright spot, was that I was turning out to be less of a loser than I feared. Captain Benson, or Art, would generally assign me to a console on the bridge, or to work with a crew person elsewhere on the ship. I wasn't great at anything, but I was what they called an Emergency Replacement Personnel. I had a natural knack at handling most equipment, be it the ship's sensors, communications, various monitoring stations for various ship systems, or even handling the weapons. I felt was lacking in starship maneuvering and navigation skills, though Art assured me that I was doing fine, that it took a lot of time to get really good at it. I still never fit in socially when it came to interacting with the crew, but at least I could fill many useful roles. However the past three months were spent almost entirely in hyperspace as we headed out to the Federation's frontier. I was anxious to see how I'd handle things when they really mattered.

From a speaker grill above my pillow came a male's voice, "Daryl, please report to the mess hall on the double."

I sighed and breathed heavily. This was one of those days. The captain was basically dragging me into a social situation, which I had little say in that matter. I sighed again as I spoke up towards the speaker. "I'm on my way!" It was generally considered more polite for a ship's captain to use the ship's intercom system, even if the crew member had some form of personal communications' device.

Being that I was unsure if being in my normal casual attire would be appropriate, I slipped on the black pants, and charcoal gray shirt of my uniform, and made sure my single gold triangular pip was properly pinned into to the shirt. Once I slipped my feet into my shiny black service boots, I got to my feet. I brushed my hand on the panel next to my door, causing it to slide open onto a narrow, brightly lit, corridor. My MPAD was still on my bed, so I grabbed it in my hand and fingered its switch. The screen winked off, and the music abruptly stopped. I slipped the device into my pants pocket, then entered the corridor. The door quietly sighed as it closed behind me as I walked to the mess hall.

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I fingered by long black bangs as I leaned back into my chair, while Captain Matt Benson

went on with his story, “It wasn’t too good for Jake, poor guy. The torp took out the hyperdrive as he was transporting aboard. He materialized about half way, then the confinement fields just died. The scream was horrible. What was left just sorta blasted across the room at the console. Nasty shit. Bits of guts forcefully materialized, as this green explosion thing erupted on the pad.”

I felt the pit of my stomach tighten. Transporting was worse than traveling through hyperspace. Though transporters didn't work like the ones depicted in popular science fiction from a couple of centuries back, just the idea of being confined inside a forcefield prison and dragged through a short span of hyperspace, still gave me the creeps. Having already spent several months on a ship traveling through hyperspace did little to help with my anxiety. There was just something unnerving about not literally existing in the universe for a time. Using a transporter was worse than hyperspatial travel because the process was just that much more intimate with oblivion.

I asked, “You mean those things aren’t as safe as they-”

Matt sat across the table from me. He was rather ordinary, short sandy blond hair, rather light complexion, thin build. His uniform was the same type of black slacks and very dark gray shirt as mine, with a number of various service medals and a stylized eagle-shaped command rank insignia. I didn’t dislike him, I just got tired of him treating me like a son and I was not overly comfortable with the attention. I guess he thought of me as his pet project, someone to groom into someone like Jake, who was a bit of a jack of all trades himself, who was dearly missed. He spoke in his calm gravelly voice, “Transporting is about as safe a way to go as anything. They just don’t work too well when you lose half your ship while trying to transport. I tried to tell him not to transport, but it was too late. He probably would have still died when the torps ripped through that ship. The fight was not going well.” His voice dropped, and he looked down to his lap. “It was bad, ugly. If we had tried to bring him aboard ourselves, we might not have had enough drive power to make the jump. Probably bridging would have drained us too bad as well, and we didn’t have the luxury of time to set this up.” Matt sighed. “The *Blade of Truth* had just docked, and its hyperdrive was also drained, due to an emergency evac we had to do. Jake called, said he locked onto our pad, so we dropped our damper. We watched helplessly as the torp ripped right through the engineering deck while he was materializing.”

I stared into space wondering again if I had made the biggest mistake in my life. A lot of

the stories the crew have told, suggested that the Wolf Hunters have been on hard times of late. I wondered if I had picked the worst time to join. The room had fallen quiet, as if the current topic had unnerved more than just me. I mumbled, “So ah, what's changed. Why have things gotten so much more difficult of late?”

Art, the navigator-helmsman, sat to my right. He was cute if you didn't mind his weaselly appearance. I couldn't tell if he liked males or females, but struck me as the type who would go whichever way which was convenient, then do something stupid and hurtful when it was convenient for him and less than convenient with whoever he was with. His uniform had only a single medal and his rank pin was fairly elaborate, probably just under the Captain's rank. He appeared lost in thought for a moment. “If you ask me, I think those fucking Zeph's have been more aggressive since they took out our colony on T’Kahtah a few years ago.”

Matt turned to Art and said, “I don't know. The Horace Archer bit of nastiness has left us in a bit of a leadership vacuum. He was a good man. Then he tried to drag his religion into it. We're still without real leadership, and we're in too much disarray. Pirate gangs are also making our lives more difficult. On top of that, we still have those fuckheads who insist on colonizing any pretty piece of rock with no regards to how far out they are. This shit stretches our resources too thin.”

A female voice spoke over the ship's intercom, “Hyperspatial wake bearing 337 mark 12, distance point one-three parsecs. Probably bolted into hyperspace when they saw our wake nearly on top of them. Its location and wake characteristics matches the *Killslay* which jumped from the Tarkus engagement, a week ago.”

Matt rose from his chair and pressed a button on the intercom panel, “This is Captain Benson, engage the target, I'll be on the bridge momentarily,” then he clicked off the comm.

Saved by the bell! I thought, as I got to my feet.

Captain Benson turned to Art and said, “Okay, to the bridge.” He waved in my direction, “Daryl, come with us.” As we entered the corridor, the captain said, “That Zeph would have been safe staying put. He must have seen our wake bearing down on him and just panicked. Only thing in our favor really, is that most of the Zeph's are not true military and sometimes it shows.”

The ship, *Sabre of Justice*, was a three deck affair. Bridge, command and control, as well as the transporter and a detachable service craft, called the *Blade of Truth*, were located on deck

one. Deck two housed the crew quarters, galley as well as limited recreation facilities. Deck three was engineering, as well as the cargo hold. This ship was designed as a multi-role medium-sized starship, huge by civilian standards, and well equipped for a privately owned vessel. I felt a bit more confident in this ship, as opposed to the 2-6 crew KS hull configuration which makes up the bulk of Wolf Hunter vessels. It was larger, harder to kill, had more and larger weapons, and more important for me, more space for when I needed to avoid people. I just wished my sleeping quarters wasn't such a closet.

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For a ship its size, the bridge was rather small but functional. “Take the weapons console, kid,” said Benson as he took the raised center rear seat. “Let's see how well you handle something live.”

The consoles were neatly laid out. Three seats, each with individual, horseshoe-shaped consoles spread around them, with large multifunction displays, occupied strategic points in the semi-circular bridge. A fourth, raised seat, with buttons on the armrests, occupied the rear and center area of the bridge, where Captain Benson sat. I took the seat in the console closest to the viewscreen and re-acquainted myself with it. I've worked this console through computer and live-fire simulations, but never before on an actual live target. Instead of an asteroid, a target drone, or a mere computer blip, this was going to be the real thing. I cautiously pressed a couple of the buttons, and the console sprang to life.

Art, who sat behind me and to my left said, “Our wake has destabilized the target, they're falling into normal space. That was easy. I think they're still damaged.”

“Good,” said Captain Benson. “Daryl, if this is what we think it is, it's a *Killslay* or a variant, just use the cannons. Torpedoes should not be necessary. When we're within scanning range, I want you to read off all the significant data of the target.”

The engines lowered in pitch, and the blue and green cloudy shit which passes as scenery in hyperspace began to slow. I switched on the targeting system, and activated and armed the forward plasma cannons. The console booted up, and all the status indicators lit green. The ship jolted as a green flash lit the bridge, and stars finally appeared behind the misty streaks of hyperspatial travel. The ship began to lurch and shudder, accompanied by the falling whine of

the ship's hyperdrive. I gripped the armrests of my seat and gritted my teeth. The transition from hyperspace to normal space made me feel nauseous, since it was always annoyingly bumpy. After several minutes, the ship lurched again accompanied by a flash, and the mists vanished, and the whine of the hyperdrive faded, replaced by the soft dull rumble of the ship's sublight engines. The stars began to pan to the left as my targeting computer came to life with a visible blip. I hit a button and brought up the ident, and watched as it filled with data. I read it aloud. "Captain, it's a Zephenidian *Killslay* or *Kha'Szhyk* as they're known in Zephenidian. Type 4 modified with dorsal and ventral cargo containers and no landing struts. Hunter Fleet insignias and ident. Length, 28.5 meters. Shields, simple deflection barriers, single-phase, single layer, six active segments with two in reserve. Armament, missile rack, empty, the starboard one appears damaged or destroyed. Forward torpedo launcher, ah, Starflare type 1 equivalent. Twin forward plasma cannons, low yield. Ship shows signs of hull damage and the hyperdrive's transition coils are damaged as well. Fuck this ship should be in a museum, or in a junk yard."

"Good." said Captain Benson. "Generally in a fight like this with limited tactics, you know when we're just here to beat the living fuck out of a vastly inferior foe, we just leave it up to the gunner to dispatch our quarry. Basically fire when ready. Karen?"

A woman with short sandy blond hair sat at the seat to the right of my console. Her uniform was much like my own, with a medal or two, and a rank pin similar to Art's. She pressed a few buttons on her console and said, "I've got nothing on the long range, no approaching wakes, don't expect any reinforcements."

I brought up the reticle on my primary display, and watched as the image of the ship turned and grew larger. On the view screen, I could see a large dot moving against the stars, which grew slowly into the roughly cylindrical vessel which is a typical KS design. Typical KS ships are flattened from top to bottom, with a wider aft section for the main sublight engines, and a smaller truncated wedge-shaped section which made up the bridge, or cockpit. This ship's hull appeared rounder than most *Killslays* due to the auxiliary cargo holds. Since we were moving towards the target, it was well within our forward firing arc, where most vessels concentrate their firepower. I had many options on how best to dispose of the target. The enemy's small size and potentially its increased speed and maneuverability would make targeting specific systems difficult. I manually moved the reticle to a nice juicy point on the dorsal section of the ship and locked it into the targeting computer, so that it would keep the target locked, even if the ship tried

to maneuver. There were so many choices. I could select which guns fired, or select everything which was capable of hitting the target. There was the front plasma cannons, the main torpedo tube, and a set of mass drivers. This didn't include the lateral point-defense guns, nor the aft weapons, not to mention the dorsal and ventral guns, and of course, the missile rack. Once I was satisfied with the targeting, I selected the main front plasma cannons as the weapon to use, then I pressed the large red button in the center of the console.

On the view screen, twin orange-yellow beams speared from near the bottom center of the screen, and converged on the ship, which was immediately enveloped in a blue-tinged, orange glow, as its shields absorbed the blast. The vessel swerved starboard, then down, and leveled off. I fired again, this time the enveloping field seemed to be more transient, and a trail of bluish-gray vapor began to issue from the point of impact. Features on the hull were now visible on the *Killslay* as the *Sabre of Justice* began to overtake it. I let loose another blast. The beams of superheated plasma converged, and ripped through the dorsal hold, causing a geyser of vapor and debris to burst from the stricken ship. A pinkish-white mass sailed from the ruptured cargo hold. I gasped in horror, as my mind kept telling me that it was a frozen Human torso. It might have just been some kind of animal meat, I hoped, as I continued to stare. I pulled myself back together, and mashed the button sending another blast through the torn cargo hold, this time ripping through it, into the meat of the vessel. The underlying hull burned and ripped open causing an even larger plume of vapor and glittering ice crystals to blast outward. The *Killslay* listed and began to tumble. One more shot, left the *Killslay* with nearly the entire upper hull gone. I held my hand over the button.

"It's dead, Daryl" said the captain. They're pretty much totally open to vacuum."

I sat back in my seat and sighed. "Is that a dead Human floating out there? Fuck!"

"It could be anything," said Art. "Food stores, one or their own, just general debris."

I looked down into my lap and again wondered if I had made the worst decision in my life. I could wind up being one of those corpses, frozen in some Zephenidian freezer, or just butchered, and eaten fresh.

The dead hulk slowly tumbled in the inky blackness outside. A small geyser of fuel and atmosphere pissed out from the depths of its mangled hull. I had wished that I was able to participate in the Tarkus engagement, but we were still en route. From what I heard, it was pretty much over as soon as it began. A Wolf Hunter capital ship and a few KS type scouts jumped a

group of Zephenidian *Killslays* outside the Tarkus system. One of the Zephenidian ships did escape, the rest were destroyed handily. Though I guess, in the end, we did participate, since the one escapee was now a drifting wreck.

I heard some commotion behind me, before Captain Benson said, "Let's hear it!"

A frantic voice with a thick unfamiliar accent burst from the speakers, "*Stellar Wind* in orbit around Chul'Za VIII. Bogeys of indeterminate origin approaching, less than four hours away. Our hyperdrive failed, and we can't get it to recharge. Can someone assist us!"

A female voice burst from the background through the ship's comm. "We got one large bogey, maybe two or three small ones, it looks like a Zeph Hunter pack."

Captain Benson mumbled, "They're in luck, we're only about 2 light years away from the Chul'Za system. We'll probably still be too late though."

"Confirmed," said Karen. "I got a set of wakes on an approach course to the Chul'Za system. Zephenidian or pirates." She peered at one of the screens at her console. One larger ship and two small ones, along with a third small one trailing the group by about thirty minutes or so. I think the big ship is a *Killerdeath* or *Morningstar*, and the smaller ships are *Killslays*."

Having some familiarity with ship classification, I knew those were Zephenidian ship designations. *Killslays* were small corvette class ships with a crew of 2-8, typically no more than four. Though individually weak, they can pack a fair amount of firepower, and are very maneuverable. They're a very important ship class, since many ship designs, even some Federation vessels, have been based on the *Killslay* design. They're usually designated as KS type vessels. Even the service craft we had, was based on a KS design. The real threat, however, was the *Killerdeath* or *Morningstar* class ship, a heavily armed medium cruiser which may have a crew of 30 or more. I asked, "Do you think we can take on those ships?"

Captain Benson said, "It won't be easy. The *Stellar Wind*, I'm sure, has some armament. Provided we aren't too late, both our ships should provide more than enough firepower. Art, set course for Chul'Za 8, and get us there fast."

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After the jump to hyperspace, I went back to my quarters to read a chapter of a novel on my MPAD. Boredom and hunger eventually took its toll, so I set the device down on my bed,

and made my way to the mess hall, which was at the forward end of the main corridor from my own sleeping quarters. There was no real kitchen on the ship, instead, all the meals were packaged frozen foods, which were stored on the ship's hold. A system of conveyors would locate the selected food item, move it to the mess hall's dispenser, and at the same time, a heating system would cook it for consumption. I accessed the dispenser's console and selected the pepperoni pizza, and waited as the item was fetched, heated, and brought to the dispensing slot. Within a minute or so, the plastic plate with the steaming slice of pizza, slid from the slot and dropped into the tray. I took the tray to the nearest table, sat down, and swiveled my chair to face the large forward viewport. I imagined the ship as an ocean vessel plowing its way through the sea. Eddies and swirls swept past the ship in the starless void as the ship plunged through the hyperspatial void. After three months of nothing we were now in the thick of things. I just hoped the *Stellar Wind* was armed and could offer some support. It was practically illegal for any ship to operate unarmed outside of the core Federation systems. There was no doubt, we were heading into a major firefight.

The doors slid open and Captain Matt Benson entered, carrying a long, wide, black carrying case. He looked at me. "There you are. You show promise. You're competent in basic navigation, you know how to read the ship's scanners, you seem to be okay at handling the ship's guns. I've got you marked down to work with Sam and Barry down in Engineering once we're through this engagement. We'll probably have battle damage. Jake would be proud to have you filling his shoes." He sat in the seat across from me and placed the case onto the table. "I have something for you."

"Ah, what?" I asked, as I took a bite of the non-nondescript pizza.

He pulled open a couple of catches, unzipped the case, and spread it open. He gingerly lifted a complex rifle-like weapon, and set it on the table next to my tray. I set down the slice of pizza and gazed at the gun. Lots of buttons, a status display, and a tiny computer keypad, adorned the weapon. The business end was a wide tube which was thicker than my arm.

"Holy shit!" I said. "It looks like a cross between a cannon and a computer."

"It's one of those heavy assault guns the military uses. They call it the GG PMG 857. Military brass call it the knife, or the Sushi-Maker."

"How does it work?" I asked, as I cautiously run a finger over the gun as if it might leap at me."

“Don’t let the complexity scare you, kid.” said Matt. “A lot of this shit is just to override the automatic settings, but the auto settings should be sufficient for most uses.” He removed a heavy black brick-like object, obviously a magazine, and with the gun still on the table, slid the base of the brick into a track on the underside of the weapon. Lights flashed on the weapon for a moment, then turned green before going out again. “Okay, Plasma weapons, great at burning through armor, can overload shield and force field emitters, but when it comes to living tissue, sure it’s deadly, but you don’t get the deep penetration you get with projectile weapons. Projectile weapons are better at blowing holes through wet stuff, like flesh, but don’t work as well on armors and are next to useless on force shields.”

“So this somehow combines the two?” I asked.

“Nope.” answered Captain Benson. “I mean, it has an in-built plasma rifle mode which is good to have when you're out of slugs, but its main operation is pure projectile mayhem.” He pulled what looked like a second magazine off the weapon's stock, and turned the open end towards me, revealing a visible pair of cylindrical batteries which looked like they could be elephant gun rounds. “These power not only the plasma backup system, but also the magnetic coils. There's 8 cells in this thing.” He pushed it back into the stock, where it engaged with a loud click. “The actual magazine is full of 1 millimeter Gauss rounds. Basically they're steel jacketed, depleted uranium miniature slugs.” He pointed to a small switch on the top of the stock of the gun. “This sets the weapon to plasma, or Gauss mode, and next to that, is a dial for setting the plasma weapon, and the one next to that controls the settings for the Gauss gun.”

“Seems a bit complicated.” I said. “What does it do that's so special?”

“You're going to love this,” Said Matt. “They call it the Sushi-Maker for a reason. The weapon only operates in full auto. When fired, the magazine sends a steady stream of Gauss rounds, which are propelled by the magnetic coils to over 10,000 miles an hour. In the normal mode, the gun fires them in a specific pattern and at a specific interval, which prevents the turbulence of the leading rounds from throwing off subsequent rounds. And the fun part, is they're computer-aimed to converge to a point on your target. Of course, you can turn the system off so that you can create a spray of deadly devastation in front of you, though I don't recommend you try this. Just keep in mind, there is a bit of a kick. Well, not really a kick. Just that it feels like you're holding a live rocket engine when you fire this thing.”

“Nice,” I said. “So I need to practice?”

“Unfortunately we don’t have a real firing range here, other than the TSI simulator, and this gun hasn’t been programmed into the simulator yet.”

“So, ah, what do you want me to do?” I asked.

“I’m going to have Carl man the ship’s guns for this one. We need a security detachment to board the *Stellar Wind* as soon as we’re in range to help thwart any boarders.”

This was the one job I didn’t want to have, boarding ships and getting personal with the Wolves. “Ah, corridor fighting, I was afraid of that.”

“I’m expecting few boarders once we enter the fray and begin pummeling them,” the captain looked back down at the gun. “Familiarize yourself with the basic controls. You know, how to set it to plasma and Gauss mode, where the safety is, etc.” He paused for a moment as he waved his hand over the complex controls. “You’ve got a good head on your shoulders. A friend of mine who’s an officer in the Terran military gave me this one to test how well it works for killing, and demoralizing Zephys. Not exactly legal, but no one will care out here. Just be careful with this thing.”

I nodded as the captain got up and headed out the door, leaving me to finish my pizza, while staring at this expensive piece of hardware. This was definitely major firepower which I strongly suspected would be major overkill for corridor fights. From what I’ve heard, one generally prefers smaller lighter arms in this kind of situations, though Zephenidians often used heavy weapons, and some folks have learned how to take advantage of this when fighting them. I was lost in thought, then looked back down at this gun, examining the controls.

A female’s voice burst from the intercom, “The bogeys are now attacking the *Stellar Wind*/ They are Hunter Fleet, I repeat, they are Hunter Fleet, one *Killerdeath* and some *Killslays*. The *Stellar Wind* is taking fire. Ten minutes till we engage.”

I got to my feet and looked down at the GG PMG 857 on the table, and gently took it into my hands. It was quite heavy and unwieldy, especially with the magazine which was filled with tiny heavy bullets. The thought that I would be safer with just a plain old pistol crossed my mind. I checked the buttons on the stock, and though complex, it was not too difficult for me to grasp which control did what.

Captain Benson’s voice burst from the intercom, “Darryl Kasemsarn and Scot Nelson, report to Trans Con immediately. Daryl, don’t forget the GG PMG.”

I hefted the gun, and headed out the door. Climbing the step-well with the gun was

difficult, but I managed with some difficulty. There were no elevators, save for the cargo lift, being the ship had only 3 decks. On deck one, Trans Con was located at the aft, just through a wide doorway at the end of the central corridor.

Trans Con was the hub of moving people to and from the ship. To the right, was another wide doorway leading to the Mission Staging and briefing Room. Further along the right wall, were lockers. At the far end of the room was a large circular hatchway, where the *Blade of Truth* was docked. To the left was a semi-enclosed, circular platform, with a large complex control console in front of the open end. I turned to the right and stepped through the doorway.

I stood in a lounge with a long rectangular table running the length of the room. In front of the table, and along the shorter sides, were long bench-like seats. On the far side of the table was a small computer console, and one chair. A large wall monitor, used for briefing and debriefing, occupied the far wall. On the bench on the right end of the table, sat a man who was slightly shorter than me, medium build, with reddish-brown hair, with maybe one rank on his uniform over me. He glared at me with his cold green eyes and said,. “So you finally crawled out of your hole.”

I ignored his comment as I stood in the doorway for a moment, before wandering to the bench on the other side of the room from him. This was Scot, someone who didn’t really like me, so I decided that the feelings were mutual. I placed the rifle on the table, and sat down on the yellow-orange padding of the seat.

“Oh,” said Scot, “Give the newbie the fuckin’ cannon for crying out loud. Look, when we’re aboard that ship, just ah, just keep out of my way. Don’t want you blowing me out the side of that hull. I kind of have this allergy to vacuum, you know.”

I remained quiet as Captain Benson and Art entered the lounge. Captain Benson looked at me, then Scot. “Okay, this is just a boarding and support mission. Just help the crew where needed and engage any Wolves that board. Got it?”

I nodded, and paid no attention to Scot.

“Good,” said the Captain. “And both of you, remain together, no stupid heroics. I know you two don’t get along, but please, leave your problems on this ship when you’re teleported over.”

I nodded again.

“Okay, get equipped,” said the Captain. Communicator, scanner, and translator. Daryl

has the GG PMG to check out, Scot, you need a weapon as well. You know where the supply lockers are. Get equipped and meet Art at the transporter console. Dismissed.”

I got to my feet and walked through the door into Trans Con. At the supply locker, I retrieved a palm sized communicator and a slightly larger Mindlink Translator unit, along with the slightly larger PortaScan unit. The translator was a two part device, the control and translation box, as well as the link unit itself, a cloth and plastic headband with a small lump which aligns on the forehead. I clipped the communicator, the PortaScan and the translator control box to my belt, and donned the headband. I assumed the translator was needed in case the ship had any non-Terran or non-English speaking Terran passengers or crew. There was also the fact that Zephenidians go nuts when a human tries to speak to them. The idea of talking food really screws with their minds.

Once I got everything I needed, I walked to the transporter console. The transporter console was a squashed and curved, horseshoe-shape, and was open on the side, with the operator seated within the horseshoe. Art eyed me and said, “Okay, we’re almost there, join Scot on the pad and prepare for transit.”

The transporter platform was raised a few inches from the floor, and was a large glass disk, about fifteen feet wide, with a similar disk emitting a diffuse glow overhead. Closer inspection revealed fine concentric circles on the floor disk. Around the back side of the disk, was a curved shiny metal wall forming an alcove which enclosed most of the disk. Scot stood on the disk near the center, with a holstered blaster, along with his communicator, translator and scanner, clipped to his belt.

Art advised, “We’re coming out of hyperspace, brace yourselves.”

I figured it was best to sit down, so I did, as the floor lurched and shuddered. Scot, like the show-off he was, continued to stand, rocking as the ship shook, before finally grabbing the rear wall of the transporter alcove. Art worked the controls of the console and glanced at screens and displays. “We’re going for insertion as soon as we’re in range. Prepare yourselves.”

Scot looked at me while trying to hold his balance, and said, “Like I said, once we’re down there, keep out of my way. I don’t want to be around when you start popping holes through all the bulkheads.”

I responded, “Captain Benson told us to stick together, whether you like it or not.”

I could hear Art sighing, and mumbling, “This is going to be a disaster. One big fucking

disaster.” The shaking continued for several more minutes, then the floor lurched once more, and steadied. I got to my feet, and Scot returned to the center of the transport disk.

“Okay,” said Art. “Locking onto the *Stellar Wind*.” After a moment, as he worked the controls, he said, “Gotta lock. It's a confined area, narrowing the field. Also we want to conserve power in case we have to get out of here in a hurry.” Art continued to make adjustments. A glowing green ring about a quarter way out from the center formed on the floor disk. I walked closer to the center of the disk, now much closer to Scot than I wanted to be but had no choice.

Scot said, “We’re ready.”

Art peered at a screen for a few moments, then said, “Transporting in 3, 2, 1, now.”

The air seemed to hum as I held my breath. The transporter room turned to blue-green mist and glitter. There was a definite sensation of movement, a bit akin to a rapid descent. I squinted as bright bands of energy formed about mid-height and broke and diverged, then another band formed and diverged. The bands slowed and stopped, then converged one by one. The sensation of falling subsided and it felt like the floor was rising. Once the last set of bands converged and vanished, the mists and sparkles faded, along with the hum, revealing the inside of a brightly lit corridor.

I finally exhaled as I brandished the Gauss rifle, and checked it to make sure it was set to Gauss mode. I aimed the heavy weapon ahead of me, and slowly turned around to inspect my surroundings. We had materialized in a straight corridor, with a shiny black floor, and beige walls. Flicking the power switch on the gun, the unit buzzed, then emitted a rising whine as the capacitors and other components charged up. Scot moved away towards the intersection ahead of me, as he drew his blaster, and wheeled around. I lowered the rifle and slid my PortaScan off my belt, pressed the power button, and waited the few seconds for the unit to boot. This unit was complex but simple once you figured it out. All kinds of data could be called up with a button press, from atmospheric conditions and composition, to heat emanations, to the presence of life forms. Its range was limited to a few dozen meters in confined areas, such as inside a ship. I set the PortaScan to proximity detect, quiet mode, and slid it back onto my belt. I gripped my weapon in both hands and looked around. Scot was nowhere to be seen.

I cautiously crept down the corridor. A vent above me was hissing steam and some overhanging cables were dangling from a smashed light panel. It was obvious that the *Stellar*

Wind had already taken a bit of a beating. Looking into the doorways, the passenger cabins were relatively small, relatively basic, but had most of the amenities one would expect in any cruise liner cabin— one or two beds, small desks, a couch, and a viewport. Some of these viewports were actual windows, others were simply monitors depending if the cabin had access to the outer hull or not. I entered an unoccupied cabin and glanced through the viewport at the starry void outside. For a moment I saw nothing, then a hail of white-hot flare like bolts flew out into the distance. A distant wedge-shaped ship with two engine pods drifted into view, firing beams of orange-yellow plasma and flare-like torpedoes at an unseen foe. It launched a couple of torpedoes which seemed to be coming right at me. I jerked away from the screen as the view blazed and the floor shook violently. I grabbed my rifle and headed out of the cabin realizing the fight was still going on. The floor shook again and everything was plunged into darkness, lit only by sparks from a ruptured power conduit, and dangling, sputtering wires. Emergency lighting flicked on, but it was dimmer and flickered uncertainly. I pulled out my communicator and pressed one of the buttons. “Daryl to Captain Benson.”

A voice came onto the communicator, “This is Captain Benson.”

“What the fuck is going on out there!”

“We’re routing them.” said the captain. “There were half a dozen Wolves on the ship, but several of them returned to the *Killerdeath* once we entered normal space. I think the others are trying to get back but the two *Killslays* are toast, and we’ve already heavily damaged the *Killerdeath*. They’re still trying to fight, lobbing a few torps at the *Stellar Wind* just to be assholes. Got that last *Killslay* to worry about. It should be coming out of Hyperspace any minute. So until that ship arrives, the two or three remaining Zeph’s are trapped.”

“Okay, good.” I sighed. “Though Scot left on his own right after transport. I can’t find him.”

“I know,” said the Captain. “Art says he sees him and will continue to monitor him. He’s off about 10 meters ahead of your current position, but he refuses to answer hails.”

“Damn,” I said. “I will try to rendezvous with Scot, Daryl out.” I clicked off my communicator. I sneaked down the gloomy corridor with a death-grip on the bulky rifle as I whispered, “Scot! Where the fuck did you go?” There was an overwhelming silence about the place. As far as I knew, most, if not all the crew and passengers were still alive, just holed up in their quarters, or otherwise barricaded in defensible areas throughout the vessel. Any

Zephenidians who might be around would probably be desperate, fighting to the death, against the crew, or defecating themselves in some hiding place. My thoughts were interrupted by a vibration on my hip, coming from the PortaScan. I glimpsed a shadow, and froze. I whispered, “Scot? Is that-”

A gray shaggy shape burst from the intersection, rolled, then drew a blaster which flashed a pulse of phased plasma past me. Instinctively I squeezed the trigger of the rifle. The rifle shrieked like a giant dentist drill as a blue-gray blur spewed from the barrel. The gun pushed against me, like it was trying to launch itself. I realized then, that I should try aiming the weapon, which was slicing the bulkhead behind the Zephenidian like it was tissue paper. The Zephenidian was too busy throwing its hands over its ears to be aware of the fact that its left arm had fallen off, and its torso was being sliced apart. It was a very ugly way to go, as the creature fell into the screaming swarm of super high speed projectiles. Blood and tissue aerosolized violently as the creature shrieked, just before its head fell into the path of the slugs. I released the trigger, and saw the mess of fur, meat, and blood all over the walls, floor, and ceiling. What was left of the creature was nearly impossible to identify. The blood splattered walls, and doorway, appeared as if someone took some kind of large magical knife and just sliced and slashed through them.

Looking at the carnage, I mumbled to myself, “This is a fucking battlefield weapon, don’t think it’s well suited for this.” I adjusted the setting to turn it to plasma rifle mode, and hoped that the weapon’s weight and bulk didn’t get in the way of the weapon’s usefulness. There was the magazine which added a lot of weight to the weapon, so I slid it off of the gun, and I let it fall to the floor with a loud thunk! I thought about calling Captain Benson and arranging to teleport back, so I could switch weapons. However, I knew that this was not an option, since this would drain the ship’s hyperdrive’s power reserves further, and it would take a while to recharge. I had to stick with this weapon for just a little longer, maybe mere minutes. There was probably only one or two Zephenidians left, and they might have been killed by now. Looking down at the ammo-brick laying on the floor, and hefting the gun, the lack of Gauss slugs did make the weapon significantly lighter. I could retrieve it later, once the mission was complete.

Looking back at the mess, the sight of the carnage, as well as the smell of blood, meat, and wet fur, caused me to gag slightly. As I stepped to where the wolf had died, all that was left that was semi-intact, were its feet, along with parts of the lower leg bones. The rest of the

creature was little more than ground and shredded meat, and other unidentified gristly bits. The door behind the Zephenidian was pretty much torn from the frame and tracks. I poked my head into the room, being careful not to slice myself open on the sharp metal, and whispered, "Scot?"

The room was a large observation deck. The far wall was a huge window with a great view of the ensuing battle, despite all the cracks and pits from some of the slugs that made it through the bulkheads. Tables and chairs provided seating, and there were food service counters on both sides of the room. No one was about. I cautiously squeezed between the sharp torn edges of the door, and pushed my way into the room. Once inside, I looked around again. There were no signs of life. The remains of the large *Killerdeath* vessel were visible through the window, tumbling slowly end over end as it vented atmosphere and fuel. A large speck slowly moved into view. I wondered if that was the *Sabre of Justice*, or just a piece of debris. As I watched, I realized it was moving under its own power and appeared to be a small vessel. Was it the *Sabre of Justice's* own service craft, the *Blade of Truth*? The vessel was definitely approaching, and was definitely a Zephenidian *Killslay* class vessel. "My ship will crack it like an egg." I said aloud to myself.

Suddenly, there was a loud thrum as a greenish-blue mist formed in my eyes. A flash and loud *crack* sounded as I noticed the glint of something falling in front of me outside the misty field. The bands of energy brightened and diverged as there was the unmistakable sensation of movement.

I gritted my teeth and waited for the bands of energy to converge to reveal the familiar surroundings of my own ship, though something seemed off. The energy fields seemed a bit more green, and less blue, like it was a different ship. As the bands converged, the view was dimmer, dingier and more menacing. As the fields and hum faded, I found myself standing on a small metal pad inset into an alcove, with a cockpit like bridge in front of me. Standing in front of me, wielding a scythe-like weapon, was a creature who looked very much like one of the legendary werewolves of old. The creature must have been a good six and a half feet tall, a bit smaller than most of his kin, but still menacing. Long braids of fur hung in a fringe under his arms, as well as a mane of long flowing dark gray fur on its head, which hung half-way down its back. Behind it, a tail hung down almost to his ankles, covered in long fluffy fur. The creature glared at me with brown eyes and it bared his fangs. Zephenidians were wolf-evolved creatures, and this creature was definitely befitting its wolf heritage, but the head-mane and the tail were

definitely not typical Zephenidian traits. As far as I knew, Zephenidians lacked tails, and the head manes were definitely atypical as well. Could this be a different species, maybe one of the V'Nari Syndicate species? The creature continued to glare at me, as it slowly approached, brandishing the wicked scythe. I gripped the trigger of the Gauss rifle and hoped for the best. There was a small sputter from the end, and a curl of smoke. The display screen on the butt of the gun turned red, with a long error message, before going dark. I realized to my horror, that the end of the gun had been outside the transporter field, and had been severed. Dropping the rifle, which crashed loudly on the transporter disk, I stepped backwards, pressing my back against the alcove wall, as panic began to well up in me.

The floor lurched and pitched hard to port, throwing me against the wall, then I fell out of the transporter alcove, landing sprawled in front of the huge wolf. I felt that it was over, expecting to feel the sharp bite of the creature's weapon splitting my skull open. The floor lurched again, and sparks showered around me. I reached to my right side, and my hand came to rest on the Gauss rifle, which I grabbed, and tried to pull towards me. The wolf-alien seemed to have other problems to deal with, as it rushed to the control console, ignoring me for now. The creature frantically barked orders into a com-link while it fought with the controls.

That must be Capt. Benson, I thought. I hoped he was merely trying to disable this ship with the idea of rescuing me. The floor lurched hard, throwing me against the back wall of the alcove, as sparks sputtered from a nearby wall-panel. I grabbed the Gauss rifle again, got to my feet, and looked around, before attempting to power the weapon on, again. The weapon buzzed, and the screen and lights flashed red, before going black again. The weapon was useless, and was too unwieldy to serve as an effective club. I let the weapon fall back onto the floor again with a loud clatter, then looked around me. The deck shook again, though this time it was accompanied by the whine and groan of the ship's hyperdrive. My footing became uncertain as I looked wheeled around, trying to look for a place to run.

Behind me, on either side of the transporter alcove, was an archway, each leading into a corridor which I knew, ran the length of the ship. I leaped through the archway on the port side of the teleportation alcove, and ran past a couple of doors on the right wall, as the floor under me heaved and rocked. Ahead, the corridor turned left and about thirty feet or so beyond it turned left again to meet the archway on the other side of the transporter alcove. On the middle of the back wall to my right, was a large heavy door, as well as a smaller door across from it. I looked

at the heavy doorway almost certain it was the door to the engine room, and instinctively reached a hand to the panel to the right of the door. The door slid open, and thick clouds of black smoke billowed from the doorway. My instincts were correct, it was the engine room which was being targeted, and quite a bit of damage had been sustained already. I took a few breaths, then plowed through the smoke into the heat and gloom of the aft section, hoping that the crew of my ship might get a lock on my position and get me out of there. However, I feared I might be already too late, for the creature was already attempting a jump to hyperspace, which would make rescue much more difficult.

Conduits hissed and smoke obscured my vision, though there was a little visibility. The room was dominated by the interior sections of the twin sublight engines, which filled most of the room, leaving three aisles to allow access and maintenance of the engines. The engine to my left was smoldering and spewing flames and smoke from an open access panel. I felt around my belt for my communicator, but found only my Mindlink translator and PortaScan unit. The ship's shuddering continued to grow in intensity as I grabbed onto the nearest wall to steady myself. Nervously, I glanced around the gloom again, and then slowly stepped backwards, almost dizzy from the fumes, as well as an overwhelming sense of dread. I felt something brush up against my backside. I spun around and nearly gagged.

It was obviously a Zephenidian, its wolfish form was slumped against the wall. That was when I realized the creature's neck had ended flush with the wall, with no sign of a head. Unlike the other creature, this one had no tail, and was typical Zephenidian. A bumpy ring of fresh sealant was on the wall where the creature's neck had ended. One of the creature's hands was balled into a tight fist, which was pushed up against the wall, and its legs were twisted in a very awkward manner, like the creature was contorted in agony or panic. It was obvious that this creature died in an utterly horrible manner, its head and face exposed to vacuum while the rest of its body was in normal atmospheric pressure. I wanted to pity the creature, but knew what heartless killers these were. The fact his belly was sunken made it even more obvious how horrible of an end partial vacuum exposure to the face could be.

The floor shook again and I grabbed onto the tortured body to steady myself. Once I got my footing, I let go and stepped back, my eyes still fixed on the gruesome horror. I noticed that the Zephenidian's right hand was burnt, rendering its fist to little more than a charred knob, and there was a huge bloody gash on its right leg, with about ten inches of twisted sheet metal

protruding from it. Glancing at the nearby engine, I could see a jagged flaming opening, which must have been the source of those injuries.

Suddenly I felt a sharp metal hooked blade slide along my throat! I gulped, then froze. A large, powerful, clawed hand grasped my arm, and the blade pressed more firmly against my neck, feeling as if it might draw blood. There was no hope for escape. I held still, hoping this might buy me some time. The creature pushed me ahead of itself towards the door to the engine room and into the corridor. I complied, moving where this creature guided me. The wolf-alien pushed me to the left of the engine room's door, around the bend, then towards one of the doors on the left wall. The creature released my arm to slide the door open, then roughly shoved me inside the room, and closed the door behind me.

The room was dark, lit only by the intermittent green and blue of hyperspatial travel. I slumped to the floor panting from fear as my heart raced. I cautiously felt along my neck, then checked my fingers and sighed with relief that there was no obvious blood. I was safe for the moment, however brief that might be? As my mind began to clear somewhat, I tried to guess what was on the creature's mind. The creature must have just managed to make the hyperspatial jump, and was likely being pursued, so he couldn't be bothered with killing me yet. However I knew it was a matter of time.

As my eyes were slowly adjusting to the dim light, I felt around in the deep shadows, and discovered a bunk which had obviously not been used for some time. This room must have been a guest quarters, or a makeshift holding pen of some kind. As my eyes continued to adjust, I could make out a desk against the front wall of the room, and another bunk closer to the door. My fingers explored along the frame of the bed, looking for any weakness which could result in something which could be fashioned into a weapon. Sadly, the bed was very securely welded together and bolted to the floor plates. I let myself fall back on the bed, and felt all hope ebb. My communicator was gone, but as I felt along my belt, I brushed my hand on my Mindlink translator, but I feared would be useless. I knew if I used it, if the creature was a Zephenidian, or otherwise bound by their rules, he or she would kill me instantly to avoid contact, which is against Prukakian policy. I moaned as I got back to my feet and tried to calm myself. Getting out of this alive would be a miracle, though I reasoned that the more time I could buy, the greater the chance of rescue. The *Sabre of Justice* was pursuing, and this ship was its current quarry. I walked slowly to the door, and pressed my palms on it, before searching along the doorway. The

door felt as if it was a single solid piece of metal, so no way of trying to break it down. I found the handle and gently pulled it to the side. The door held fast. I tried again just a little harder, and I felt the door slide a bit. I was in a state of disbelief, for the door hadn't been locked. Obviously the creature was in a hurry and made the assumption that Humans were not intelligent enough to operate a simple door. I could escape this room, but it would be nearly impossible to fight a Zephenidian without a decent weapon, and I was unsure if there were additional crew members which I'd also have to kill. Even if I was able to dispatch the crew, what could I do, then? Could I get the ship out of hyperspace? Could I get a signal out to get rescued? All this made my brain hurt. I walked back to the bunk and sat as I tried to think of more options.

The Ship lurched, as a flash lit the room, and the ship creaked and moaned as the floor began to shudder. I gripped the side of the bed in a death-grip as I watched the window, and noticed visible stars among the streaks and swirls of color, which meant the ship was exiting hyperspace. After a few minutes the ship lurched one last time, and all was quiet. I expected the creature to barge through the door at any minute to finish me off.

Everything remained quiet. The engine rumbled unsteadily, obviously damaged. My mood wavered uncertainly as well, somewhat relieved that the creature hadn't chosen to kill me yet, but the wait seemed worse than the death I was expecting. Making the most of my time, I placed my hands on the viewport and gazed outside at the myriad of stars which flecked the inky blackness of space. With very few exceptions, one almost never drops out of hyperspace in the middle of interstellar space. There just isn't any point, unless the ship is screwed up and one needed to stop somewhere to effect repairs. I knew the ship could not have gone very far in the short time it was in hyperspace, in fact I didn't even think we had left the Chul'Za system at all.

A large dark shape tumbled slowly into view. Light glinted off some of the features, but most of it was dark and ashen. It was obviously an Oort Cloud or kuiper belt object, a massive chunk of ice and debris which turn into comets when jostled from their orbits to plunge into the inner star system. Several more chunks drifted lazily into view, then a huge black wall slid across the view, blocking out the stars. A diffuse greenish glow from what I assumed were the ships running lights, played across the smooth ashen wall, glowing dully off patches of ice and rock, and glinting off the occasional smooth icy surface. As I watched, I wondered if the creature had taken his ship into a deep cave, leading inside one of the larger ice asteroids. The forward motion of the features slowed, and I noticed that the ship was re-orienting itself, before

lightly setting down onto kind of floor of shimmering ice. The ice was lit brightly green from what appeared to be the ship's running lights, though why were the ship's running lights green. Was it really the ship's lights, or was the hyperdrive's containment vessel ruptured, which would cause a plume of greenish plasma and radiation to spew from it.

If there was a good hiding place, this creature had obviously found it. With just life support, and minimal systems running, detection would be virtually impossible unless each body was deep scanned at close range. However, a ruptured hyperdrive containment vessel would make such a ship much easier to find, unless the drive was shut down. *Killslay* vessels usually had twin hyperdrives so such a situation would still allow the ship to travel, albeit at a significantly reduced speed. "He's a clever one" I mumbled. I reminded myself that he had never locked my cell, so obviously he's not perfect.

A few minutes later, a shape drifted past my view in the window. It was a humanoid shape clad in a space suit, bulging with equipment. The shape stopped, and turned to face me. Its wolfish features were barely visible through the glass of its helmet, but I could tell that he was watching me through the window. We locked eyes momentarily, and stared at each other. After a moment, the creature broke the stare, turned, spurted a jet of frosty vapor from the suit's backpack, and proceeded towards the aft of the ship. Then it struck me, if there were only two crew members on this ship, which I suspected, and one of them had died with his head through the side of the hull, that would mean that I was alone. I was free to commit whatever kind of havoc I could think of. Ideas flooded my mind. I could lock the wolf outside and let him run out of air, or find a way to fire up the engines and roast him to a crisp. I felt my Mindlink translator on my belt, but it was currently off. I switched it on before I stepped to the door, grasped the handle and slid it slowly aside. I entered the corridor.

There was little doubt in my mind where the creature was. I walked to the door of the engine room, touched the panel, and it slid open, spewing smoke into the corridor, though less than before. The corpse of the other Zephenidian was still lodged through the side of the hull with the sealant having formed a tan scab around the breach. A jet of flames and sparks spat out from near the Zephenidian's neck, and it slowly worked its way down. A shriek and hiss sounded as the seal began to split and part. I adjusted my translator and thought-talked to the creature who I knew was outside cutting the corpse from the side of the ship. "I'm loose. I'm loose about the ship, oh wolfy one."

I felt a wave of confusion. I continued, "Let's see. Wanna race? Let's see who can get to the airlock first."

The spray of sparks stopped, and heard in my mind, "Who are you? How did you get in my ship!?"

The shriek died to a loud hiss, as the seal attempted to re-assert itself. I answered, "How I got here? You brought me here. You brought me here so you can kill and eat me!"

"*Chuthnu!* You *Chuthnu*?" The creature stammered. For a while, all that could be heard was the low hiss of escaping air. Then the creature resumed, "Get out of the engine room. Get out and seal the door behind you. If you know what vacuum is, get out of there."

"Okay," I said, "Let's see if you can get to the airlock before I can figure out how to lock you outside!" There was no reply as I exited the engine room, and touched the panel, causing the door to slide closed. I walked up the corridor to the forward section of the ship, where I had first materialized. The left wall had a heavy inset door with a few buttons arranged on one side. I knew one of these buttons would seal the outer door, and maybe another might lock it.

A dull *poof* and a slight shudder rocked the ship, which was obviously the engine room depressurizing completely, violently expelling the corpse. I checked the buttons, seeing if any of them held any clues as to how to lock the outer door of the airlock. I could not read Zephenidian writing, though I continued to spend several long minutes trying to study the panel.

"Don't!" came a voice in my mind. "I am outside the airlock and I'm coming in. If you want to live, you will let me enter."

"You have no intention of letting me live!" I shouted. "Don't threaten me, wolf!" The whirs and hiss, as well as the change in status lights made me realize he was already in the airlock. I glanced around the room, and found a pole-like weapon with a wicked curved hook-like blade laying on the floor. Grabbing the weapon, I gripped it in both hands, as I brandished it. I waited for the interior door to open.

The airlock door slid open and the suited figure stepped out of the dark closet sized compartment, reeking of rotten eggs, and ammonia. I continued to hold the blade in front of me, as I slowly backed away. It was obvious the spacesuit was meant for a normal tailless Zephenidian, and for a moment, tried to imagine how uncomfortable it must be for him to have his tail pinned or otherwise cramped around his rear end.

"We must talk, *chuthnu*," said the creature, as he gripped his helmet, turned it a bit, and

lifted it from his head with a slight hiss.

“What is there to talk about?” I asked as I took another step back, feeling the wall behind me.

He lifted the helmet from his lupine face, and set it onto a shelf in the airlock. “You should not be so judgmental, small one. I had to pull my lover, my mate out of the hull of my ship, and patch the hole. He died in a most ugly way. I will spare you the details.” His breathing seemed irregular, his voice, though spoken in the barking language Zephenidians used, seemed to waver. “I left him on the ice outside. Don’t know if I will retrieve his body or cremate it here.”

There was now little doubt. The bits I could feel from the translation, the creature's use of language, and a general sense I got from the translation, that this creature, was most likely a Zephenidian despite the odd differences. I could also tell that the creature was a male as well. But his mate was also a he? I tried to think of something to say.

“You can say it, small one. I’m a homosexual.”

“Ah?” I thought about revealing my own sexual orientation to him, but decided that my intentions might be misinterpreted, which could be bad in the current situation. “Ah, that’s not really important, just startled.”

“We still have to talk,” he growled. “And I’d prefer if you put down the intestine hook.”

“I feel more comfortable with a weapon.” I said.

“Maybe you’ll reconsider when you hear what I have to say.” He slowly unzipped the front of his spacesuit, removed the gloves, and pulled his arms from the sleeves.

I was still terrified, as I continued to hold the weapon at the ready. “I lost my communicator. Ah, I want to go back to my ship. Please let me go home.”

“You left it on the transfer pad.” he said as he pulled his legs from the spacesuit. “I burned it with a pistol. I didn't want your ship tracking me.” He let the suit drop to the floor, then stepped fully out of the airlock. “We must talk. What do you know about my species, my culture?”

I mumbled, “A little too much, if you are in fact Zephenidian.”

“Yes, my tail.” he said as he reached behind himself and ran his hand through his tail fur. “A recessive trait, uncommon but not overly rare, but usually removed at birth. And most of my kind do cut off the head-mane, if present.”

“So yes, definitely know a little too much.” I said.

“The Establishment of Prukak?” he asked, “You know anything about the culture of my people?” He eyed me intensely.

I nodded, while keeping the intestine hook between me and the Zephenidian.

“My not noticing your translator was a foolish thing on my part. My not locking the door to your cell was a foolish thing on my part. My being a part of all this, the hunt. You do know I can’t go back. You ruined all that.”

“Ruined what?” I asked as I gripped the shaft of the weapon hard enough that my fingers were becoming sore.

“I must go to contemplate this further, small one. I’m going to my room. Don’t disturb me, or I may eat you.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. “What are you contemplating?”

As he turned and walked into the archway to the port side of the transporter alcove, he turned back and glared, “My mourning. Your survival. My survival. Who or what to believe. The death of my mate, was it some kind of punishment?” He turned away and slid a nearby door open, stepped through, and slid it closed.

I was alone again, holding the scythe-like weapon, trying to comprehend what I had just witnessed. The Zephenidian had not locked me up, but had left me free to wander the ship as I pleased. I was not technically a prisoner, well, maybe, hard to tell since I really couldn’t leave the ship even if I wanted to. However I felt that I could do a lot of damage if I wanted to. I set down the weapon, and sat in the left seat at the cockpit, where I glanced over the controls. I surmised I could probably fly this ship if I could read Zephenidian, which I couldn’t. Gazing out the viewpoort, I saw the inside of a dark icy cavern, illuminated by the diffuse glow emanating from the ship’s lights. The tunnel looked a bit too convenient, as if it was artificially created, perhaps to conceal a small hunter pack of *KillSlays*. A small stack of crates tethered by a rope, which drifted near the far end of the cave, was a dead giveaway that the cave was either artificial, or has otherwise been used or occupied.

I stood up, and wandered down the corridor, towards the engine room. The door slid open when I touched the panel. The air was clear of smoke, though signs of damage were widespread. The body was gone and the wall appeared partially torn, but covered with some kind of adhesive and some kind of patch. Small spots of blood dotted the wall and floor around

the seal. The two large engine assemblies dominated the room, each one had consoles, and status displays, as well as conduits and wiring. Which extended along the ceiling and wall. One of the engines was heavily damaged, and some of its status displays were dark. I suspected the Zephenidian had not done much to effect repairs, just pulled his mate's corpse out of the wall and applied a hull patch. I thought about Captain Benson, and though I didn't really fault him, I did feel that if I had been issued a standard blaster, I'd probably be back on board the *Sabre* by now. The Gauss rifle was too large, too heavy, and just a big waste of time and energy. I could see its use on a battlefield where it might be used for suppressing fire, to trap enemies, to cut down large numbers of foes, or, as a means to totally demoralize the enemy. It just wasn't suited for the type of roles that small arms excel in, such as fighting in confined spaces, aboard starships.

A furred hand grasped my shoulder. I tried to turn, but the other hand grasped my other shoulder, and the grip held me firm. Panic seized me again, and I screamed.

"Quiet small one," he growled.

I tried to fight his grip as I yelled, "Let go of me! Get your fucking paws off of me! Go away, go away!" I continued to yell and scream.

"Quiet!" he growled again. "We must talk." As he spoke, he slowly pushed me toward the patched hull. "On the other side of this wall, my mate lies, frozen like a piece of meat."

I stopped yelling with a gasp, and just felt a kind of dreadful horror in the pit of my stomach. His words barely registered as I felt like trying to fight the creature, to tear myself from him. For several minutes my mind swam, and I alternated from wanting to flee, and feeling like I might puke, or pass out. It took me several more minutes before I had realized he was talking about the fate of his mate. I shivered and tried to speak, "Ah, I, I'm sorry."

"It's my fault my mate died," he growled. "I was acting like a proverbial carrion crow. The battle was over. The hunters were defeated, scattered, dying." He tightened his grip on my shoulders and pushed me closer to the wall. "I visually sighted you through the window of the ship and thought I had an easy opportunity, transfer you aboard, then kick my ship into hyperspace. I guess I was too busy staring at my quarry, trying to get the transfer field engaged. Your people's ship was right behind me."

I calmed down a bit, as I nodded, not knowing for sure if the Zephenidian could see or understand what that meant.

He slowly turned me around so I was facing him, then stared down at me while still

grasping my shoulders tightly. “The first shot cracked my shields and damaged one of the engines. My mate, who had more engineering experience than me, remained in the engine room to try to keep the ship running. Second or third blast, he was likely hanging out the side of the ship vomiting his insides into the void.”

I looked down to avoid his gaze, and asked, “What do you want me to do? What can I do to let you allow me to live?”

I heard him growl again, a low growl that seemed more out of frustration than anger. “I have no intention of harming you, small one. I want you to relax. I assure you I won’t hurt you. I cannot go back to my people.”

I was still deathly afraid as I quietly said, “I’ll try. I’m afraid of you, though. I, ah, I hope you can understand this.”

He let go of my shoulders, lowered himself onto his knees, then raised his head back, and bared his throat towards me. He whispered, “You can bite my throat, slash it, strangle it, I won’t fight back. If you want to kill me, or demonstrate control, you can.”

I tried to think of something to say, but I was at a loss. I stared down the Zephenidian who continued to kneel in front of me. I felt his hand grasp mine, and he slowly drew it toward his neck, then placed my fingers around his throat. His fur felt soft around my fingers, and I could feel the muscles, under his skin, tense up, slightly.

“You can squeeze.” he said as he held my hand against his neck. “You have control of me.”

I gently flexed my fingers around his throat, feeling the muscles rippling under my touch. This creature was definitely 250 pounds of lethal carnivore, but the thought that he was now being totally submissive to me was rather unnerving.

He released my hand from his, but I continued to gently grasp his throat. He spoke in a soft soothing near whisper, “I want you to use your teeth now.”

“Ah?” I asked, even more confused, “What do you mean?”

“I want you to grab my throat in your jaws.” said the Zephenidian.

I was rather “weirded out” by that idea and I really didn’t want to do this, but I reasoned that I was on his ship, with his people’s culture as the prevailing law here. I’ve read about how Zephenidians salute by bearing their throats to a superior, but I heard no mention of them actually grasping each other’s throats in their jaws. I slowly leaned down, and gingerly moved

my face towards his exposed neck.

“Don’t be afraid of me, small one,” he whispered in my mind. “You have control. If you want to kill me, you can. If you want to harm me, you can.” He paused for a moment, then continued, “On the console, starboard side, small green button near the viewport. You can hit all the buttons there if you're not sure. It's safe. It's a general distress call. Your people would be able to find this ship very quickly. You'll be safe.”

I held my mouth about an inch from his throat, and breathed in, cautiously smelling the air. I could smell his scent, but it was much less intense than I feared. The closest analogy would be like that of a rather well kept, recently bathed, dog. I closed my eyes and imagined he was just a dog, but why I’d be biting the neck of a dog, still eluded me. I opened my mouth, brushed my lips against the fur, then gently closed my teeth around his throat. I held my jaws around his trachea, feeling his muscles tense slightly under his skin, and smelling his mild musk.

“Grip me harder small one,” he whispered. “I want to actually *feel* you.”

I tightened my grip, and could feel and hear his breath rasp as my grip constricted his airway. “I don’t want to hurt you.” I quietly said with my mind, and as I spoke, I realized that my fear had ebbed appreciably.

I felt one of his hands gently rubbing along the back of my neck, and along my back, which made me a bit uneasy. “Thank you, small one. You can let go now if you wish.”

I released my grip, and slowly pulled away. I quietly said, “I hope that helped in some way.”

“It’s more to help you,” he said. “To help you trust me a little more. Now I want you to come with me. We must talk further.” He got to his feet, turned, and headed out the engine room door. The Zephenidian held his tail slightly aloft and wagged as he walked. I followed him into the corridor, and to the aft starboard doorway. He drew the door aside, and entered. I followed him inside.

There was no bed, just a table with metal benches. The floor showed signs of a bed having been affixed at one time, but it was gone, the table being an addition. He sat on the bench, and instinctively, I sat on the bench across from him, with the viewport behind me. I placed my arms on the table and looked at him. “So what do you need to talk to me about?”

“My species regards your species as mere animals.” he said as he stared intently at me. “Are you unique in your sentience or is your species in fact sentient?”

I answered, "We're a sentient spacefaring species."

"The Establishment of Prukak says using a translator around a human causes instant permanent brain damage. They say anyone exposed must be euthanized to avoid a cruel horrible death." He looked down at the table and mumbled, "It's a cover though. They don't want us to know the truth. The euthanasia is in fact a death sentence. I don't know why my people are doing this. There is a lot I don't understand when it comes to my people's actions." The genocide campaigns against the taileds happened hundreds of years ago, and continued into recent years. They would say we were inferior, more bestial, more emotionally unstable. It got so bad, that taileds virtually disappeared, mostly because tails would be amputated at birth."

I asked, "But your parents decided not to amputate?"

"My father was born in an isolated enclave where the taileds were generally left alone, a kind of reservation. He moved out to the city, and married a non-tailed. I was born tailed. My sister and brother were born without tails. My father fought to have me keep my tail. It was not easy growing up, amid the taunts and teasing. As an adult, I faced much discrimination. I joined the Hunter Fleet as a way to fight for my dignity, a way to make a name for myself, since I knew this was the only viable form of employment for me."

"I'm sorry," I said. "Just that kind of shit is not so unique. You're lucky in one respect. You can hide your race through simple surgery. My species went through a lot of this crap, but this was related to skin color and other traits which aren't so easy to alter."

"I met my mate on the ship I was assigned to," continued the Zephenidian. "Some years later, we pooled our money and bought ourselves this ship." He began to moan and whimper softly.

"I'm very sorry," I said. I wanted to sit next to him, to comfort him, but I felt uneasy bringing myself to touch him, to comfort him. Would he interpret this as a sexual move? Interspecies sex had replaced homosexuality as a major taboo among Humans, and this was something I had never given any serious thought. Despite the taboo, it wasn't that rare in places where different compatible species mingled, such as some major earth cities, some colony worlds, and on starships with mixed crews. Despite that, Humans tended to keep such escapades to themselves.

"It's not you who should be sorry, it's me," he said. "I became a tool of the very system which was used to keep me and the other minorities down. I let the Establishment use me."

“You didn’t know.” I tried to reassure him. “Don’t kill yourself over this.”

He whimpered again. “I’ve had dreams. I’ve had a recurring dream that I was killing a small *chuthnu*, a *chuthnu* child, and when I had severely injured the creature, its sounds changed to language, as it begged for its life before dying. Maybe I should have known.”

I was lost for words. A dream couldn’t be considered evidence, though I wondered. There was obviously guilt on his part, guilt that’s been plaguing him for a very long time.

The Zephenidian gazed intensely at my face. “I’ve noticed you’ve been avoiding an important question. You’ve not asked me how many members of your species I killed or help kill.”

Judging by his dream I knew where this was going, and wasn’t sure I wanted to know. “You’re right,” I said. “But it’s not important, not to me anyway. It’s not important because as far as we’re concerned, it’s over. Your hunting days are over.”

“You’re right.” He moaned, then tried to regain his composure. “I’m talking to you, you’re talking to me. The *chuthnu* I had snuffed out, what would it have been like had I talked to them, if I had sought conversation, maybe companionship, rather than prey. At least ten of your kind, I killed directly. There is no telling how many others my actions helped kill, especially while me and my mate were serving together on our previous vessel.”

“Look,” I said. “You’re a hunter by nature. You fucked up. Shit happens.”

“I don’t think you’d be saying this if you had friends or loved ones who died at the hands of my species, especially if you found out they died by my hands, specifically.”

“It doesn’t matter.” I tried to reassure him again. “I’ve never had any real friends. I’ve never had any real loved ones.” I fought back tears as the weight of what I just said crashed down on me. I was right, family was the closest I’ve had to loved ones, and in a lot of ways, they hadn’t really mattered much. They had pushed me into taking this three months long tedious trip across the known galaxy, and ultimately sending me face to face with a sworn enemy. I looked down at the pitted gray metal table, and said in a low voice, “This can’t be happening. This can’t be happening.”

The Zephenidian asked calmly, “What can’t be happening, friend?”

I looked up at him, who was watching me intently. The word “friend” caught me off guard. I said softly, “My family forced me to get a job, so I, ah, joined the mercenaries which are after your people. I wanted to show them I wasn’t such a loser. I wanted to show them that I

had courage. I wanted to prove myself to *them*! Look where it's gotten me."

I heard some movement, then felt a large hand with clawed fingers gently grip my shoulder. He quietly said, "What's wrong? You are safe."

"But...but." I stuttered. "You were seconds away from disemboweling me, pulling my intestines out as I futilely beg for my life. Three months of boring travel." I was shaking as tears welled up in my eyes. "Three months." I sobbed. I felt his other hand grip my other shoulder. I fought to regain some measure of emotional control, then said, "We came out here to hunt your species, as well as any other hostile aliens and pirates. We try to protect our people the best we can."

"So the *chuthnu* have their own hunter fleet." he seemed to muse as he continued running his claws lightly on my shoulders. "That is good. Your species is not helpless, judging by what happened earlier. The hunters were defeated, and I'm likely the only survivor." He seemed lost in thought for a moment. "Your defense today cost the lives of over thirty of my species. As for your species, I think you were the only *chuthnu* taken. I lost my mate. I lost.... I lost.... friends. Several of my friends were on that Kha'Hurakh vessel. I had served there with my mate, before we purchased this ship."

"Maybe they're alive, captured." I tried to reassure him.

His grip tightened on my shoulder as he spoke, "Your people have the right to do as they please with them. I don't expect to see them alive again." He lowered his head and his grip on my shoulders loosened. "I, I don't want to see them alive, not unless they knew the truth, and are repentant."

"I'm sorry." My mind was swimming over some unnerving possibilities. The whole interspecies intimacy and sex thing frightened me on a conscious level. But there was a strange longing to try it, if an opportunity came about. I tried to suppress it, since it made me very uncomfortable, even made me feel vulnerable. This was possibly one of the last taboos that Human society had, which it was hanging steadfastly to. Even sex with sapient species was often equated to bestiality by many people. In 2061, shortly after Lutrian contact, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana passed extensions of their penal codes, which extended their bestiality laws to outlaw sex with sapient non-Humans. A few other states and many countries also passed similar laws, though all of these were later struck down shortly after Earth joined the Federation. Certain groups were granted enclave status, and thus were able to re-introduce such laws, though

enforcement had limitations in accordance with the Enclave and Group Status Act, which was part of the original Federation Charter.

The Zephenidian was still behind me, gently running his claws along my back as he whimpered, “I wish my mate was still alive, alive knowing that your species is sentient, alive to know the truth. But I know, we would have killed you, if he had survived.”

I tried to focus on my own thoughts about how humanity dealt with its differences, as I tried to reassure him, again. “Don't kill yourself over this. Don't...” A horrible thought struck me. If I had been born in the 19th or 20th century, would I have tried to force myself to be straight? However, this was an active attraction. I thought, that maybe I was following Human society because I was a mere coward. As I thought about this, I realized that, at best, I was neutral towards the interspecies sex thing. And, of course, this creature did try to kill me, and belonged to a species which has been a threat to Humanity for a long time. Also, was I reading too much into this. The Zephenidian might not be interested in that kind of thing, but might just need a shoulder to cry on. Of course, with the Mindlink translator, even what I was thinking about at the time could bleed out and thus be noticed by the Zephenidian.

“Small one,” said the wolf-alien as he continued to gently massage my back, before leaning his head against my right shoulder. I felt his warm breath against my ear. “You seem occupied.”

“I'm frightened,” I abruptly said. “I... I. I mean, I don't really fear you as much. Ah, my brain is fucked up. I'm out of my element.”

There was a little wetness around my ear from what I thought was his breath, before I realized that his tongue was brushing against my earlobe and neck. I draw away from him slightly, then tried to ignore the affection as I continued to comfort the creature with my presence. The Zephenidian's tongue lapped against the side of my neck again in warm wet strokes.

I nervously asked, “Ah, what are your intentions, I mean, what do you intend to do with me?”

The Zephenidian reached an arm around me, while licking and lightly nibbling the side of my neck. “Don't know. You will be returned to your people. What happens with me, I don't know. Your people will find us soon enough, especially with the damage we've sustained.”

I tried to avoid shrinking away from him. My heart pounded, but this close intimacy with

this non-Human was something I was unsure if I wanted it to continue or how far I'd let it progress. He was definitely increasing the level of intimacy too quickly for my comfort, but I didn't want to push him away due to how fragile this situation was. I needed his help to get back to my ship. "I will help you." I said. "There are safe places for Zephenidian exiles to live. The Lutrians, ah," I had to think about their proper species name, "The ah, Chakharans are generally a lot more tolerant than most Humans. You will be safe."

The Zephenidian gently turned me to face him, then licked me on my mouth and nose, causing me to jerk away in surprise, but he maintained his hold on me. "Did I offend you small one? I'm sorry if I did."

"I'm sorry. I just..." I began to stammer as I fought for words. "I, I don't know. I was thinking about ah, trying to ask without asking directly. Your mate's dead. I was merely trying to comfort you. I don't know if for your species this is generally being friendly and affectionate, or if you intend to extend beyond that."

His expression changed, lips drawn back slightly, his mouth slightly agape, his teeth showing in all their glory, but not bared. I could almost feel a sense of amusement from him. "You are trying to ask me if I'm trying to seduce you, aren't you?" He stared into my eyes as I fought for words. "That's an interesting color you're turning."

I started to stammer again, before realizing that I was blushing. "Ah, ah, okay, yes, I am asking if you are trying to get into my pants."

"If I was, what would your reaction be?" asked the Zephenidian as he continued to try to force eye contact with me."

I tried to think of what to say, maybe try to make up some excuses to slow things down a bit, at the very least. "Ah, I don't know. Just too much going through my mind." I said as I tried to avert my gaze. "You're not a member of my species. Too many questions. Cultural differences, physical differences. Would you inadvertently hurt me, would we be able to adequately satisfy one another?" I stammered to buy time. "Ah, ah, I've never given much thought about the potential of a mate from another species. I don't know if I can do it. I'm also worried you may be moving too fast in finding someone new after the death of your mate. I just don't know." I looked down at my lap, while the Zephenidian rested both of his hands on my shoulders. I could feel his blunt claws kneading my skin through my shirt. *Do I tell him? Should I open up to this creature?* I struggled with conflicting thoughts, before deciding that

maybe I should let him know the true me. “Like you, I’m gay. I’m into males. I’ve not really had any situations which I’d call a true relationship. I’ve also had trouble with intimacy. Don’t know, something about a lot of people were just icky in some way.”

“We don’t have to do anything, small one,” he said. “We could try something later, or not at all. My conscience is clear when it comes to my mate. He told me that if anything happened to him, that I should look for someone new as soon as possible, for he knew I’d always love him even in death. I could love someone else, but it would never be the same. Every love is different. Maybe in the afterlife everyone can be together with no artificial barriers, and be happy.”

Artificial barriers, I thought as I continued to sit on the bench, back against the table, while staring down into my lap. Intimacy has always been a problem for me. I tried to blame others, the ones who passed through my life, but feared that maybe, in part, I had been the problem. *Artificial barriers*. The idea that what one does, or doesn't do in life is often controlled by artificial barriers. My being neutral to the whole idea of interspecies sex might not be, in itself, an artificial barrier. My pushing away, my closing my mind, my rejecting of someone who wants to be close to me, despite being of a different species, was that another artificial barrier? I mumbled, “Intimacy. How intimate would you get? I know sexual expression is by nature intimate, but, ah, if I accepted, what would you do with me?”

“Depends on what you want.” He stood over me, while gently caressing my back with his claws. “If you think I’m just going to rape you and it’s over, no, I won’t do that.”

“Because I have a lot of problems. I don’t know if I could go through with it.” I pondered the interspecies sex taboo which was so common in Human society. “My people have been part of the Lutrian Federation for almost a century. Unlike the Lutrians, ah, Chakharans, my species have a lot more sexual taboos, and we’ve hung onto them. We’re not like the Lutrians. We’re not like... We’re not like a lot of species.”

“My people.' 'My species.'” He brought his clawed forefinger and pushed it against my chest. “What about you. You as an individual.” He tapped his claw against my sternum. “Not thinking for myself has left me on a wrecked ship with a dead mate. I want you to talk to me as you, not as your collective species.”

I was taken aback by this creature who was from a society of unquestioning loyalty to a vicious oligarchy. I thought about his words, and about me. When it came to the idea of sex

with other sapient species, what was my real objection. It was society, not me. He didn't smell bad. His body was not ugly, just different. There would be differences, but would they necessarily be bad? As far as the inability of reproduction was concerned, we were both males, and I had no desire to have children. I looked back at his face, and breathed heavily, as my mind was dealing with all the conflict. My decision was simple. I would try to be my own person, though I was scared at the idea. "If you want to seduce me, if you want to try to turn me on, ah," I fought for words. "I'm not going to tell you not to. I'm not going to fight you. Maybe you can figure me out. I won't fight you off. I'll try not to pull away."

He grinned again in his unique Zephenidian style. "I've never encountered an individual who is so indirect. Is this a cultural aspect of your species?"

I thought for a moment, and answered, "I drive members of my own species nuts. I'm shy, and I tend to worry about the most inane things."

He leaned forward and drew his tongue across my face followed by a gentle nose nip, He held my nose gently in his jaws. I felt myself wanting to pull back, but I willed myself to hold my ground as his teeth brushed against the bottom of my nostrils, and his tongue flexed under, and around my nose. The sensation was different from what a Human would be like. It was not merely because of the shape of the teeth and tongue. His saliva was a bit more viscous and slick than what I was used to, and his body temperature was warmer. The scent was definitely different. It wasn't unpleasant, but I couldn't describe it, other than it would probably be more akin to the mouth of an extremely well kept dog who was into having its teeth brushed and flossed, daily. The scent was slightly earthy, but with little of the sulfurous stench, which mars the breath of many humans I had encountered. He released my nose and got to his feet. As he did so, he reached his hand under my chin, and gently ran his claws along it. "I will get us some food, small one." he said. I don't have much variety, just dried meats, mostly."

"My name is Daryl"

He paused, slowly turned and with his eyes fixed on mine, he said, in a half growl "Err-alll."

"Daryl." I said. "Darrrr-All"

"Arrr-Alll" he tried again.

"I guess that's good enough." I said.

"Arrr-All," he said, "My name is," and as he spoke his name, I tried to piece the sounds

together the best I could in my language.

“Jurrr, Jurrr-Ukush.” I tried. Jurrukush?”

“That’s passable, Arrall.” he turned away and padded over to a wall-mounted dispenser and began to fill a bowl with strips of generic looking freeze-dried meat. He returned with the bowl, and set it on the table and sat down. He took a strip and began crunching on it. “Here, try some. Don’t know if it would be to your liking, but it should keep you alive for a while. Don’t worry, this meat is from an animal called an *ukhach*, a large tusked omnivore native to my planet, which we raise for meat.””

I reached into the bowl and took out a thin brown strip of leathery dried meat. I sniffed at it cautiously. It smelled like some kind of cross between beef and pork. I put the end into my mouth and tried to chew it. It’s texture was a lot like leather, and hard to bite through. I worked at it and soon found a technique which allowed me to actually wrestle this meat down. The meat turned out to actually be tasty. It was probably not quite worth all the effort needed to chew it, but I figured that I could handle eating this for a few days at least. As I ate, I watched Jurrukush rip through his pieces like the 250 pounds of carnivore he was, while I struggled through each strip. As I ate, he walked to the counter, and took out two metal cups and filled them with a clear liquid from a makeshift sink. He placed one in front of me, and drank from the other. I sniffed at the liquid and once I was satisfied it was water, I took a sip. It was slightly stale and metallic tasting, but it would have to do.

The Zephenidian seemed lost in thought for a moment as I ate more of the dried meat. Soon I ate my fill, and the Zephenidian eat the last strip from the bowl. The Zephenidian got back to his feet and took the bowl and the metal cups and returned them to the counter. He looked back at me and said, “I’ve set up a proximity alarm in case any ships try to approach us in the tunnels. I’m going to bed. Come with me, I want to show you to your quarters.”

I got to my feet and followed the Zephenidian out the door into the corridor. He led me to the next room forward of the galley and slid the door open, and I followed him inside.

A bed was against the far wall, under the viewport, with a desk with a computer console mounted on it, with a chair in front of the desk. I walked to the bed, and noticed that the cushion or mattress was reasonably soft, but there was no pillow or bedding.

He gently rubbed my shoulder. “This was my mate’s room. It is yours now.”

“Ah, do you have any kind of blankets, pillows, something soft to put under my head, and

something to put over me.” I thought for a moment. “I prefer sleeping unclothed, but if did so, here, I'd freeze. I don't have fur.”

The Zephenidian grinned and said, “Wait here. We don't usually use blankets, but we have them in case of emergencies.” He stepped out into the corridor.

I walked to the viewport to gaze out into the blackness of the cave. A dim, green, wavering glow was still illuminating the area around the ship. “That's a busted hyperdrive all right,” I mumbled to myself. “So much for remaining hidden.”

A few minutes later, the Zephenidian entered, dragging some sheets of heavy fabric behind him. “You can roll one of these up for your head. I hope they'll be comfortable.”

The fabric was dull gray, and as I took the end, it felt like dense wool. I feared the blanket's fabric might be prickly against my skin as I pulled it over my bed. Once I had finished, I took the other piece, rolled it up into thick tube, and placed it at the head of the bed as a kind of pillow. I stepped back and admired my handiwork. “I think that will work, Jurrukush. Thanks.”

He gently scratched my back with his claws, then strode toward the door. As he reached the doorway, he adjusted a control which dimmed, then brightened the lights. “This is the controls for the lights.” He dimmed them again, and said, “I'm going to bed. You may see me shortly, or later when I get up. I may want a challenge before I sleep.” He slipped out of the room, and gently slid the door closed.

I stood there alone with my heart pounding again. I was terrified, but also curious. There was something about Jurrukush which was beginning to turn me on. For one thing, he did smell better than most Humans. There was also the fur. Not the bristly nasty body hair stuff that Humans have, but luxurious, soft, plush fur. *Would he try to seduce me? Could he actually turn me on?* As my mind wondered, I removed my translator headband, and turned off the translation unit, before stripping down to my underpants, leaving them in a heap on the floor, near the foot of my bed. I slid myself under the blankets, and rested my head on the makeshift pillow. The blankets did prickle my skin slightly, but it was otherwise fairly comfortable. I relaxed and stretched.

Captain Benson? I realized that he was very likely still out there. The *Sabre of Justice* was probably scanning the asteroids, with the *Blade of Truth* deployed to allow both to cover more area. Or maybe, due to the damaged hyperdrive, they already knew where the ship was, but were taking things cautiously. Part of me almost didn't want them to ever show up, to

basically leave without me. They'd probably kill Jurrukush if they found him. Unfortunately, this ship was pretty much a wreck. I had no idea if it was still capable of interstellar travel. Maybe the ship could make it to the *Stellar Wind*, if it was still in orbit around Chul'Za 8. If Captain Benson did find Jurrukush's ship, could I convince him to spare him? If I could, would I still have to protect Jurrukush from the rest of the crew?

I heard the door slowly slide open, so I pretended to be asleep, and waited. For a short time, nothing seemed to happen. For a fleeting moment, I thought he might have left, then I felt his tongue lap across my lips. My gut reaction was to try to jerk back, but I was laying in my bed, so I really couldn't, and I fought to control my reaction. I opened my eyes, and saw him looking down at me.

Without my translator, I couldn't speak to him, which concerned me, but intrigued me as well. I looked up into his dark eyes which were barely visible in the dark, and I locked my gaze with his for what seemed like several minutes. Then, without a word, he gently drew my blanket off of me, and grasped and gently tugged at my arm, which I interpreted as his way of telling me to sit. I pulled myself up into a sitting position, and he sat down on the bed next to me. The lack of clothing, save for my underpants, made me feel especially vulnerable. I waited and shivered slightly, not sure if it was nervousness or the chill to the air, or both.

He reached out with both arms and pulled my head into his chest. I didn't resist, as I buried my face into his chest fur. His fur was slightly coarse but soft at the same time, a bit like a German Shepherd's fur, though slightly softer. I breathed in his soft musky scent while reaching my hands up to gently rub the fur on either side of his chest and belly. There was a soft moan coming from the wolfy alien. I felt his lips brush the back of my neck, then felt his tongue lapping in long strokes along my nape. He worked his tongue along my upper back, and returned to licking the back of my neck, creating a sensual warm slick sensation. I rubbed my fingers through his fur, and nibbled gently at the strands. Looking down, I saw that he wore nothing. I could make out some kind of fur covered sheath, and from its fur tufted opening, emerged a pointed pink tip. I reached a hand down and gently caressed the sheath, and lightly rubbed the pink tip with a finger. The skin on the tip felt smooth, and slightly wet. I felt a shudder go through his muscles, and his licking on the back of my neck grew more vigorous, then I felt him gently grip the nape of my neck in his jaws. I moved my hands away from his member, not sure if my attention was making him aggressive, and could cause him to

inadvertently harm me. I felt him continue to gently caress my neck with his teeth for a moment. He released my neck, gently pushed me onto my back and straddled me. The Zephenidian brought his jaws down and grasped my throat with his teeth, causing near panic as I reached up to grab the Zephenidian's shoulders, knowing that trying to fight him off would be futile. It took me a few moments to realize, that he wasn't going to harm me, so I relaxed. He loosened his grip on my neck, and reached up under my chin and grabbed my whole lower jaw in his mouth. I tensed up again, momentarily, as my mind eased into the situation. A different species, a different culture, but somehow this was not completely incompatible. I ran my hands along his chest, digging my fingertips into his fur. This creature was definitely alien, and definitely a carnivore. I've seen dogs play with one another with their mouths, much like Jurrukush was doing with me. Having a partner do this with me, with canine-type jaws, was definitely a realization of what this creature was capable of.

The Zephenidian released his grip, then stared into my eyes again. I didn't try to avert my gaze. Our gazes met for what seemed like a long time, before he raised his hand to his muzzle, and opened his mouth wide, showing his teeth in all their glory. He moved his hand towards my mouth, and placed the tip of his claw between my lips. I felt him pressing his claw against my mouth, gently moving it back and forth until I felt the claw slide between my lips. I opened my mouth to see if that was what he wanted me to do. He withdrew his finger, and brought his muzzle down around my mouth, and he slid his tongue inside.

I've only deeply kissed one Human in my life, and never kissed any other species. Jurrukush's mouth had a distinctive but mild taste, one which was quite pleasant. I opened my mouth wider and let his tongue play across my tonsils. After a while, he withdrew his tongue, and opened his muzzle, in an invitation for me to do the same. Compared to him, my tongue was very inadequate, but I worked it the best I could, licking along the sides of his muzzle, licking his teeth, licking into his throat, as he held his mouth wide open, feeling and tasting every essence of him. At that point I realized he had worked my underpants down around my knees and was caressing my shaft with his hand. As I slid my tongue along the roof of his muzzle, I felt an intense itching and burning sensation at the very tip of my penis. I glanced down and saw he was running the claw of the forefinger of his hand in a slow circular motion at the very tip of my penis, disturbing a large glistening bead of precum which had collected there. Jurrukush slid his jaws down my neck, nipping gently, but mostly leaving a trail of slime as he went, nipping and

nibbling down my chest, and licking vigorously at my belly. The tickling was very intense and as I squirmed from the onslaught, I tried to pull his head away from my belly.

Then his attention turned to the tip of my member, as he touched it gently with the tip of his nose. I shuddered as his broad tongue lapped the bead of precum from the tip of my penis, then he lapped again, before nibbling lightly around the head. I moaned and shuddered again as I felt wet warmth enclose my member. His tongue slid along my shaft, as his hands caressed my scrotum. Then, without warning, he opened his muzzle wide, and took my entire length into the side of his muzzle, then pushed his muzzle down and around, sending me deep into his hot wet gullet. I gripped my knuckles on the blankets and cried out, as spasms wracked my body. I thought I was going to shoot my load right then, but before I could, he slid my shaft out of his mouth. He licked his lips, and looked at me, before reaching down to his member, then he gazed back into my eyes.

I took his member into my hand, and began to rub along the shaft. His member was not what I expected it to be. Well, maybe it was. It was hard to tell because I've not personally dealt with Terran canines before, much less alien canine creatures. His penis emerged from a furry sheath, and by this time, it was fully out. It must have been a good eight inches long, and slightly thinner than my own. It seemed more rigid, like it literally had a rod of bone running through it. It didn't have a distinct head, but instead, terminated with a kind of weird pointed tip, with the urethral opening angled more on the slanted side of the point. The rest of his shaft was cylindrical, with a strange bulged region near where it emerged from the sheath. It was bright pink, moistened either with mucous glands, his own freely flowing watery precum, or both. I reached down with my mouth and gently gave his tip a lick, tasting the salty fluid. He grunted as I cautiously took his end into my mouth, and sucked and mouthed it. I knew I wasn't going to be able to do his mouth and throat justice on his thing, but I tried my best with what I had. He moaned again, and he gently pushed his hands against my shoulders, gently rubbing with his claws. I felt him lean over me, his hot breath was bathing my neck, followed by a few thick drops of drool.

An idea struck me. Deep throating this creature was going to be more than a bit difficult. I was not very practiced in that art, and he was a bit large. I let go of his member, and I kicked my legs out of my underpants, then laid back while spreading my legs, and raising my rump. He watched as he continued to gently run his claws along my sides. The Zephenidian then brought

his mouth close to his own member, made slurping noises with his mouth, then let a long whitish strand of slime issue from his lips where it flowed onto his shaft. He rubbed it over the skin of his shaft, making it glisten. I grinned and was rather envious, "Wish I was a member of your species. I wouldn't need to buy sexual lubricant ever." Without a translator, I knew he wouldn't understand me.

I watched his freshly lubed up member gleam. I would have loved to have had a condom now. I was sure the Zephenidian was safe, from a disease standpoint, but would rather use one for ease of clean-up afterwards. I had to make due without one, and he was apparently quite willing. I reached my hand to his slick slippery penis, and stroked it gently, before bending it downwards, and towards my crevasse. The tip felt pointy and spear-like as it brushed against my sphincter. I pushed myself down, and felt the tip slide between my cheeks, and into the opening. Gritting my teeth, I pushed myself further down onto the Zephenidian's rod, making me realize just how out of practice I was. I moaned and huffed, as I continued to push it fully inside me, save for the bulb which resisted all efforts of insertion. The Zephenidian grasped my upper arms with his hands and pulled himself on top of me, then began to gently thrust inside me. The bulb-like bit bumped against my hole, over and over again. I felt him throbbing inside me as he began to thrust in and out with greater vigor. The Zephenidian moaned and growled, before he arched his back and began to lick my face, and nibble my ears. His fur tickled slightly as it rubbed against my skin, which at first made me shiver slightly, then it began to feel very warm and sensual. I reached between me and Jurrukush and grasped my own member. It was sticky with the drying saliva, so I quickly brought my hand up, spat into it, then reached back down to began to rub and caress my shaft. The Zephenidian licked my face again, then grasped my mouth gently in his jaws, his tongue pushing against my lips. I opened my mouth and felt his tongue slide inside, lapping around my teeth again. I felt his fullness as he began to thrust harder, the swelling continuing to grow as he pushed against my sphincter. My member felt solid and slick in my hand as I rubbed and stroked it, feeling my own sticky precum oozing from the head. With my hand tightly grasping my member, I stroked it in long even strokes as my precum mixed with both my, and Jurrukush's saliva, to make a slick lube which rivaled any commercial product on the market. I bucked against the Zephenidian's own thrusts, feeling the swelling finally get pushed through the sphincter. There was an exquisite sense of fullness as the bulb throbbed inside me. I sucked on Jurrukush's tongue as my body spasmed from the onslaught of sensations

which flowed through me in waves. The Zephenidian withdraw his tongue and growled, as he gripped my mouth in his jaws, sending a momentary wave of fear through me, but his grip was merely firm, not too rough. He growled again and tightened his grip slightly on my mouth, as he emitted a high pitched moaning howl or whine through his nose, while thick strings of saliva slid down my chin. I reached my hand to my chin, and wiped some of the hot goo off of me, and rubbed it on my penis to provide additional lubricant. His member throbbed inside me, like a strong heartbeat, as his humping became a strong quiver, since his member was now locked inside me. As he continued to hold my mouth in his, I gently parted my lips and gently sucked in a mouthful of wolfgoo. There was a slight earthy taste to it, slightly sweet, with a possible hint of my own precum. My body was shaking as I tried to cry out, but his mouth around mine muffled it. With one more stroke, a decade of sexual frustration exploded, spraying a fountain of watery semen over my chest, and over his fur. I gushed forth in a manner I've never gushed, as my testicles felt like they were convulsing. As my load expended itself, Jurrukush gently released my mouth from his, and while still locked inside me, continued to hold me close. He gently lapped at the excess drool on my face and mouth, before lapping at some of the beads of semen I had exploded all over myself. I gently rubbed my hands through his chest fur which was now becoming matted from my semen. I was panting, trying to catch my breath. I felt the bulge slowly shrink, and after a few minutes, he gently pulled out of me. I was spent, and while still rubbing my fingers through his fur, sleep overcame me.

* * * *

A siren wailed and I awoke with a start. I saw Jurrukush sliding the door open, as he bounded into the corridor. Memories of the previous night flooded into my mind. Jurrukush was basically a large drooling but sentient dog, and I had enjoyed the sex immensely. I was relieved that, so far, I didn't feel an overwhelming sense of guilt. With the siren still wailing, I got to my feet, quickly donned my uniform, clipped the translator to my belt, then I slid the translator's headband around my head. I turned on the translator as I headed to the bridge.

Jurrukush was in the left seat working the console. As I approached, he hit a button which turned off the siren, then turned to me and said, "We were scanned."

"By what, ah, who?" I asked.

“I don’t know,” he continued. “Nothing good. If he’s your people, they’ll want bloody revenge. Only thing which might stop them, is if they detect that you’re still alive, but they’ll still want me dead. If it’s my people? I don’t want to deal with them, since they’ll kill both of us if they detect I had a live *chuthnu* here and was speaking to it.”

“What are our options?” I asked.

“Sadly, I’ve done little to effect repairs.” he said. “All I’ve done was cut my mate’s body out of the hull. My mate was my engineer. I couldn’t figure out how to shut down the port hyperdrive, which was breached, and this probably made it easier for them to find us.” Another siren sounded, and he turned it off, then he checked a status screen. “A small vessel is entering the tunnel.” He pressed a few buttons and brought up the schematics of a vessel which looked vaguely like a smaller version of a *Killslay*, but sleeker, with a pair of stabilizer wings.

I recognized the vessel at once, “It’s the *Sabre of Justice’s* service craft, it’s my people.”

“Arral, if you want, I could attempt to transfer you to that vessel.” said the Zephenidian. “I may be able to escape in the ensuing confusion.”

“I don’t think it would be a good idea for me to go back,” I said, as I noticed how sticky and crumbly my shirt felt on my chest, and noticed that my hair was all disheveled and matted in spots. “I’m covered with my sperm, your spit, and with a buttload of your DNA. My folks would kill me if they knew.”

A circle of white light swept by on the viewport, as the Zephenidian pressed more buttons, resulting in a rising rumble from the back of the ship. “There is a smaller tunnel. It’s dangerous, but usable. They probably won’t try to follow us inside.”

I sat down in the seat next to Jurrukush as he worked the controls. Looking at the viewport, I could see that we were slowly gliding into a tight tunnel. The tunnel did a tight turn to the left, then it twisted upwards. I said, “We’ll probably find the main ship waiting outside. Just warning you.”

His handling of the controls was precise, and within another minute, the cavern walls fell behind us, as the ship entered open space. A gray metallic shape hung in the distance, looking more like a short dash or line at our current distance. “I see it, friend.” he said. “That’s a nice ship.” After a moment’s pause, he said, “The service craft has just exited the main tunnel. Orders?”

I stared at my old ship as it slowly drew nearer. I was lost in thought, wondering how I

could convince Captain Benson that not only was I okay, but that this Zephenidian was a friend. We were short one sublight engine, and part of the hyperdrive was likely burning itself up. Even at full strength, a *Killslay* class vessel was no match for Benson's ship. Even though the *Sabre of Justice* was a bit smaller than a *Killerdeath* class vessel, it could easily match one in combat.

Jurrukush rested a hand on my back and said, "Orders? You're the *Hrrff* here."

"I don't fucking know!" I snapped and half sobbed at the same time. "I'm not command material. I don't know if I can go back, not in my current state, not with your juices all over me, and I'm not going to forsake you out here." I could see details on the hull of the vessel ahead of us, and it was turning towards us. "I mean, don't shoot unless we have no choice." A trio of large blue-white energy bolts sped past us from behind. "Fucking shit, who's firing?"

Jurrukush peered at one of the screens. "The service craft just fired light plasma torpedoes. Warning shots maybe?"

"They want us to stand down, surrender. They want me returned and you dead."

"I will cut power and let them board if you wish," said Jurrukush. "You'll be safe."

"No!" I shouted as I turned to the Zephenidian. "I don't want you killed. Can we hide somewhere? Any idea?"

The Zephenidian thought for a moment. "Our port hyperdrive is still venting. Unless I can think of a way of shutting it down, it's going to make us very detectable. I'm surprised it took as long as it did for your captain to find us, unless they spent significant time planing how they intended to engage us." The Zephenidian checked some displays. "As for running, I can't get the starboard hyperdrive to fully charge, so we lack the power to jump into hyperspace."

"So we can't even transport?" I asked.

"We can." said Jurrukush, "Barely. One, maybe two."

The floor shuddered, and the strain of metal and the hiss of vapor could be heard. "Fuck, they've attacking us."

"The larger ship has most of their transport dampers turned off." said the Zephenidian, as he worked the console and peered at a small screen. "They seem to only be protecting critical systems." I realized he was setting coordinates of some kind on his console.

The ship shook violently this time, and I could hear the distinct hiss of escaping atmosphere from somewhere aft. I realized what their tactic was. "They're trying to flush us out, force us to transport to my ship. I don't understand, we could appear anywhere, and be

heavily armed. They probably know there's only two of us, well, one Zephenidian and one me.”

Jurrukush got to his feet and roughly pulled me from my seat, as another blast made the lights dim and flicker. A conduit on the ceiling exploded, showering sparks all around me and the Zephenidian. The scream of wind swept through the room, whipping debris in all directions. He held my arm tight and rubbed his hand along my chin and neck, then drew his tongue across my lips. “You will survive, I won't.” He looked into my eyes for a moment, then whispered, “Go home!”

He roughly shoved me back into the transporter alcove. I cried above the din, “No!” as he launched back to the main console. I lunged from the alcove and crashed against the shimmering transport field as my feet slipped out from under me. I fell onto the vanishing pad as my wolfish friend, and his dying ship, vanished in a kaleidoscope of color. A dark room lit only by the transport field formed around me as the bands converged and vanished, and the sounds of transport, faded.

I fell back onto the cold floor, and cried, for Jurrukush was most likely dying or dead. The room was pitch dark, though as my eyes adjusted, I could vaguely see a shelf-like bed along one of the walls. The lack of personal effects suggested that this was an unoccupied sleeping quarters. An alarm sounded with a hard repeating buzz, as a female voice came over the intercom. “Intruder on deck 2, compartment 4. Send a security detail on the double!”

I tried to regain my composure as I wiped the tears from my eyes, and got to my feet. My legs felt unsteady, and I realized my heart was pounding. I knew it would be best if I met the security detachment, and fabricated an explanation of what happened. Fumbling in the dark, I found the wall panel, which caused the door to open. Blinding light flooded into the room. I shielded my eyes and entered the corridor while frantically feeling for my rank pip to make sure it was on straight.

Several personnel, two men and a woman, their names escaped me, walked towards me. They brandished their weapons at first, before they holstered them. I tried to smile the best I could and said, “I got out of there. I survived the ordeal.”

“Good,” snapped the woman. “Thought the wolf had transported.”

“Nope,” I said. “I got away.”

“Come with us,” said one of the other men. I followed the security personnel up the ladderway to the Trans Con Mission Staging Room, where they ordered me to take a seat on the

bench, before leaving. As I waited, I breathed heavily, and tried to think up a story.

Captain Matt Benson entered the room, less than two minutes later, and looked at me. “Kid, how the fuck did you pull this off?”

“Ah, ah,” I stammered. “I escaped and pushed him out of the transporter when he tried to come aboard, and I went instead.”

“I’m surprised, Daryl. You still have your translator, must have confused the Ze-.” He abruptly stopped in mid-word. He gazed at me then asked, “Ah, what went on there?”

“What do you mean,” I asked.

“You’re a mess.” said the Captain.

“It, it’s nothing.” I said. I began to worry that the captain might suspect something. Looking down, my shirt appeared to be starched with dried goo. I reached up to brush my fingers through my hair, and noticed that it was all tangled, with a patch that was matted near my right ear.

The captain sniffed at the air, then cracked a smile. “I could have you taken to Costello's office and have you examined. Even have any ah, secretions on or in you, DNA tested.”

“Okay,” I said, “There was another prisoner on the ship. Me and the ah, other person we got intimate during our captivity, and we both overpowered the Zeph. Pity he was unable to make it to—“

“Daryl.” he said, “Despite problems scanning that ship, we could only detect two individuals, which, when all the possibilities were narrowed down, would leave just the Zephenidian, and you. In fact, we weren't even sure you were still alive, and thought it was just the crew?”

“Ah, ah,” I knew my story was falling apart and I broke down crying. I wanted to try to make up a rape story, but it would be difficult to make the story believable considering I had no actual injuries, and had already tried to tell two fabrications. I sobbed and rested my face in my hands.

Matt sat down next to me and rested a hand on my back. The contact was jarring and I nearly jumped. “What’s wrong? Is there more about you than just you being gay?” he asked.

“No,” I said. “I’m just gay. Or am I just gay, I, I, I wasn’t interested in non-Humans. I mean, I never thought of this.”

“Daryl, calm down,” Matt said, trying to sooth me. “You, ah, you talked to that

Zephenidian with your translator?"

"Yes," I mumbled. My head was still in my hands.

"You, befriended the Zephenidian?" asked the Captain, "Didn't you?"

"Yes," I responded softly.

The captain paused for what seemed an eternity. "You did more than just befriend the Zephenidian, you ah had a sexual thing going?"

I fought for words while trying to decide what to admit. "Yes." I mumbled softly.

"And it was fully consensual?" Captain Benson asked.

I thought for a moment about what Jurrukush had told me. I quietly said, "His mate died when you attacked his ship to try to rescue me. They had an agreement, to not waste a lot of time mourning, but to move on, find someone else, His idea, he will always love his mate even in death. Another mate he could love, but it would be different, and in the end he hoped to join all of his life mates in the beyond, where artificial boundaries did not matter."

"Who said that?" asked the captain.

"Jurrukush, the Zephenidian." I said. "It was consensual, he wanted to take me as a mate, and I was really beginning to love him. He's dead, I assume."

"I'm afraid so," said Captain Benson. We tried to get a lock on you, but there was too much interference from the damaged engines. There wasn't enough time before the ship vented totally to space."

I sobbed but tried to fight it. "You know that the Zephenidians are victims of their own government. You know how the establishment of Prukak turns them into monsters."

"Daryl," said the Captain. "I know that, but it doesn't excuse them, and we still have to protect our own."

"Captain. He felt betrayed. He felt like a real idiot." I fought back tears. "I didn't want his realization to be in vain."

"Art had suited up and transported aboard the wreckage." said the captain. "I can order him to retrieve the body for you. You can at least give last rites to him before committing his remains back to the void."

"I would appreciate that," I said. "Thanks."

"You're welcome, and I won't tell the crew about your little tryst. Now clean up before you arouse too much suspicion."

I got to my feet and headed back down the ladderway to my sleeping quarters. My bathroom was through a narrow sliding panel on the wall next to the viewport. The bathroom had just enough room for a very small sink, a toilet, and a shower stall which was barely three feet across. Pushing down the shower handle, the room filled with a soft hum and a driving fine mist of water. From a dispenser I pumped out some cream-type soap which was specially formulated for wet sonic showers. The soap made a decent lather, before I allowed the sonic waves, and the mist, to wash it off, secretions and all. The hum stopped and hot air blew down from the vents for a few minutes, followed by another soft humming tingle as the system switched to the final rinse. Then the unit clicked off. I stepped out of the shower and exited the bathroom, and put on a new uniform.

I sat down heavily on my bed and sighed. I was now clean, and presentable, but I felt more empty, more lost. I was a bit relieved that Captain Benson seemed to accept my little fling with the Zephenidian. Sure, Wolf Hunter captains have occasionally helped Zephenidian refugees seek asylum, but even then, I was sure any intimate contact between Zephenidian and any crew members would not be tolerated.

From the speaker over my bed, came Captain Benson's voice. "Daryl, please report to Trans Con as soon as possible."

So it was back up the ladderwell, and to the aft. I had no idea what he wanted, just his tone of voice seemed to show some concern. I reached the lounge and Captain Benson was waiting for me.

"Art has boarded the derelict," he said.

I mumbled, "I don't care or mind if the body is in bad shape."

"There is no body," said the captain.

I thought for a moment. "He must have gotten sucked out into space."

"Nope," said Captain Benson. "We would have seen the body drifting in open space."

"Could he have vaporized in the explosion?"

The captain said, "What explosion. The ship vented into space. If he was alive to activate the transporter for you, he would have died pretty much right there."

"Maybe he used his transporter, ah, transported himself into space or back into that comet thing out there, or just, ah, oblivionized himself."

"Art is working on uploading the ship's logs," said the captain. "Unless your Zeph did

something to them or the ship, we should know soon.”

I thought for a moment, “Wouldn’t your scanners have picked up anything.”

“Normally, yes. But one of our shots had ruptured the hyperdrive containment vessel and it's leaking radiation, interfering with our scanners.”

“Yeah, I knew that.” I said. “I was on that damn ship and watched the glow.” A thought began to run through my mind. What if he did escape and was somehow aboard? Could the confusion of my transport and detection on the security monitors aided his finding a place to hide?

A female voice burst from the ship’s intercom. “Captain Benson, report to the bridge at once. We got a hostage situation on the *Blade of Truth*!”

“How the fuck?” said the captain. “Daryl, come with me.” I followed Captain Benson to the bridge. “Hostage situation? No fucking way!” When we got to the bridge, Karen swiveled her seat towards Captain Benson and said, “A strange looking Zephenidian is holding Art at gunpoint. The Zephenidian is wearing a translator and is demanding to be brought aboard.”

Benson sat down in his seat and said, “Karen, patch Art through.”

She pressed a button and said, “Done.”

Captain Benson said, “Ask the Wolf what his demands are.”

Art’s voice could be heard in the background over the comm. “Captain, he demands to be brought aboard. He says something about his mate being there. How could that be, we’re not holding any Zephs prisoner.”

I was now shivering, realizing everyone, the entire crew, was about to find out. It was over. It was going to happen sooner than later and I had to face the consequences if I wanted to have any chance of saving this Zephenidian. I shouted, “I’m his mate!”

“What the fuck!” shouted Art through the comm. Karen was staring at me with a strange expression, and Captain Benson was trying to keep himself from cracking up in a fit of laughter.

I cried and yelled, “Don’t let any harm come to him, Bring him aboard I beg. We’ll leave this ship if you want when we can.”

Captain Benson looked at me and said, “You will find it very difficult to function as a crew member, here. And with a Zephenidian aboard, we’d basically have to turn around and head to the nearest Federation office, which would mean a good month or more of downtime here.”

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'm really sorry."

"Shit happens, kid," said the Captain. "You had no way of knowing this was going to happen. In a situation, you fight to save yourself. If you wind up with allies, friends, if you wind up liberating one of the enemy, so much the better."

Karen gasped and said, "You are condoning this guy's choice of sex--"

"His sexual practices are totally irrelevant," snapped Captain Benson. "Even if nothing of the sort had taken place, that they just became buddies, we could very well be in exactly the same dilemma. By the way, Daryl, I have an idea. I think someone owes me a favor."

"Who?" I asked.

"The captain of the *Stellar Wind*. They're still in orbit around that gas giant, effecting repairs. Art could run you two over there. I just need to make sure no one is out for blood after the attack. It should be okay. No one there was seriously hurt. Only real casualty is Scot. Stupid fuck running off by himself. Put you in danger by running off, and took a blaster shot in the shoulder in the bargain. He should be okay in a couple of weeks, though."

"Ah," I stammered. "You're serious? You will help us?"

"I will do my best," said the captain. "I'd suggest you round up your personal effects. If they accept, you should be shipping off almost immediately. Consider it a honeymoon."

"Thanks, Captain." I felt relieved. "I really really do thank you for this."

"You're not the first," said the captain. "Well, you sorta are, but your friend isn't the first. I, ah, liberated another Zephenidian three years ago. Over the objection of several of my crew members, I took this scared, betrayed creature to the nearest Federation government offices on Laeness IV, so she could be resettled. This resulted in a good month of downtime, as well."

"A she?" I wondered.

Karen yelled, "That was a nightmare! You had the audacity to put me in charge of the fucking suicide watch. I'll never forgive you for that one."

"Oh Karen," said the captain. "She sobbed for the entire trip to the Laeness system. Ah, the Zephenidian, not Karen. Karen just bitched and complained the whole time. 'Just let the bitch hang herself.' 'Why are we feeding this thing?' and, 'One more day of this, and I'll kill her my--'"

"Captain!" shouted Karen.

"Ah, sorry," said Captain Benson. "But yeah, you and your friend would likely be taken

to the Laeness system. Once all the paperwork and debriefing is completed, you can book passage back to earth, or go with your mate to wherever he's resettled.”

“Thanks again,” I said. I left the bridge and headed to my quarters.

When I arrived at my quarters, I opened the drawers below my bed, and the bins above it, and shoved all my clothing and belongings into my two suitcases, then I pocketed my MPAD. I grabbed my single-piece personal Mindlink translator and affixed the control box to my belt. This translator was newer and didn't require the use of a headband. As I was taking one last look around my quarters to make sure I had not forgotten anything, the door buzzer rang. I yelled, “Come in!”

The door slid aside, and Captain Benson stepped into the room. “The captain of the *Stellar Wind* has agreed to take you and your friend at no cost. He actually has a contingent of passengers who were going to Laeness IV anyways for an ocean cruise. They're going to have some interesting stories to take home with them.” He paused as he glanced around at my suitcases and at the rest of the room. “But, I didn't inform them of the fact you and that wolf are intimately involved, for your safety. So you're not going to be given a honeymoon suite. I'd assume a small stateroom would be okay.”

I zipped up my suitcases, and looked at Captain Benson. “I'm sorry if I never fully fit in here, and I'm even more sorry that things turned out a bit weird.”

“As I said, shit happens.” He paused a moment as he seemed to ponder a different subject. “Oh yeah. What the fuck did you do to my gun? Art recovered it, but it's like, ah.”

“It got bitten by the transporter when the Zephenidian teleported me.” I said. “I'm sorry.”

“Don't worry, kid. I'm going to keep it as a souvenir.” the captain said as he chuckled. “It'll be worth a few stories to whomever replaces you. Well, I do hope you find your niche in life.”

I grabbed both suitcases and opted to take the cargo elevator this time. At Trans Con, captain Benson led me to the transporter and motioned me to the disk. I stopped, set my suitcases down and hugged Captain Benson, who patted me on the back as he returned the hug. Grabbing the suitcases again, I lugged them to the center of the disk. “Thanks for the time on your ship. I'm ready.”

“Not so fast,” said the Captain as he stepped onto the disk, while withdrawing a small rectangular device with a large display screen on the front. “Your MPAD, please?”

“Ah,” I pulled my MPAD from my pocket and held it. “Ah, what do you need it for?”

“You paycheck,” he said. “Sure you didn’t quite fit in, but you did okay. This check is for twelve weeks pay, and a share of bounties earned.”

I switched on the device, and selected the transaction option on the screen. The captain pressed a button on his device. \$2,952.11 appeared on my screen, before the deposit message flashed. It was not a lot of money, considering 3 months of pay, though it wasn’t bad considering that expenses during this time were nonexistent. “Thanks again.” I reached for my rank pip, “I’m sure you’ll want this back.”

“Keep it.” said the captain. “The Lutrians will probably give you some money for bringing your friend, as well. You keep it all, don’t worry about us. And your rank pin I’m sure would be worth some memories back home.”

“Thanks again,” I said.

He walked back to the console and sat in the chair. “The *Blade’s* teleport pad is tiny?” as he pressed a few buttons. “Ready?”

I moved my suitcases into the center of the disk, and stood between them. “Yes, Engage.”

The green circle measured a close fit around me and my luggage, then the *Sabre of Justice’s* transporter room vanished in a play of colors, and bands of energy. The cramped airlock of the service craft formed around me. The airlock of the *Blade of Truth* served double-duty as the ship’s transporter pad. I stepped out into a narrow, corridor, with a few closed doors on either side, with a cockpit like bridge at the end. Art and Carl were sitting in the seats. Jurrukush stood in the corridor just behind the cockpit, wearing a holstered weapon, and wagging his tail. He turned to me and whimpered, before wrapping his arms around me. He licked my face and neck as I ran my fingers through his fur, and almost wept. “How did you survive?”

Jurrukush moaned, and said, “Once I transferred you, I sealed myself in the airlock and suited up. As I exited the airlock, back into my bridge, I realized that your people might attempt to board. I locked onto their cargo hold, and waited for them to engage their transfer system. I simply transferred in the ensuing chaos, since they chose to transport to my engine room. When their alarms didn’t sound, I removed my spacesuit, and waited till your friend returned. Then I came out and took the crew hostage.”

Art sighed. “I wish you were Human. We need people like you in the Wolf Hunters.”

Jurrukush turned to Art, “Maybe you Humans need to be more open-minded. I'd help if you'd let me. But I fear someone amongst you would take matters into their own hands.”

I fought to control my emotions, and said, “Jurrukush, the ship your people attacked, they've agreed to take us home.”

“Home?” asked Jurrukush.

“We're going to be resettled. We'll be able to stay together.”

Jurrukush licked my nose. Behind me, I heard Art moan, before he said, “Please stop that, or I'll want to join in.”

I wasn't sure if Art was joking, but all I could think to say, was, “Don't. You have a ship to fly, and a career.”