

**ROCKET FOX: FLIGHT OF THE NIGHTHAWK**

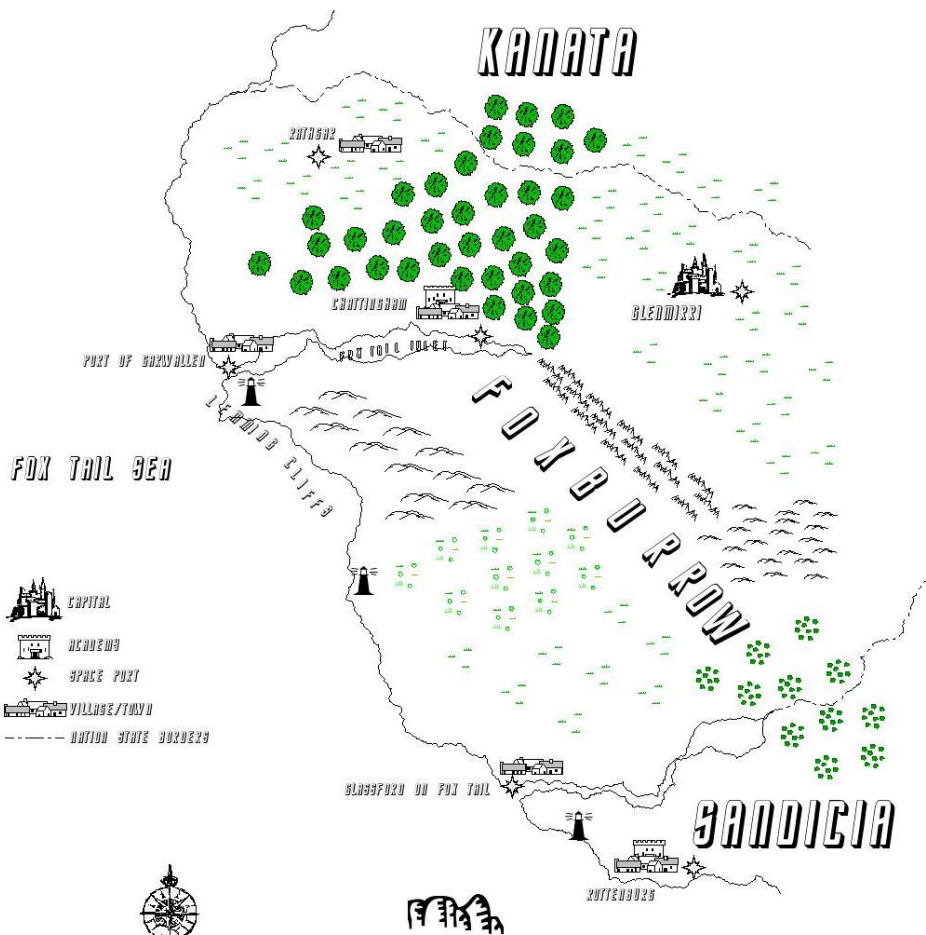
**BY TIM HOLTORF**

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## **DEDICATION**

To Kenneth Graham for sparking an idea.

To Gene Roddenberry for helping take it beyond the stars.

To my parents for always being there.



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## CHAPTER ONE

### THE VULPINE STAR SYSTEM

Space, the final frontier.

No, that's not right. When you get right down to it, everything, every story, happens in space. It is all interconnected, after all. It's all apart of the greater whole. Let's see, how to start.

In a galaxy, far, far away.

No no. That's not right either. But I suppose it is correct, actually. After all, this story does take place far, far away from what you humans would consider your home. Yet,

we're not that far away at all. We are your neighbours, after all.

Perhaps a better way to describe this would be to start with the where of the story; where this all takes place. It takes place on a planet, or at least a planetary system. Right within what you humans would call The Milky Way. Some of you may think that what I am about to tell you is the most wondrous thing ever, others, not so much. It might rail against what they have come to consider normal. I know this because it happens on my planet as well.

My planet is a small, blue planet not unlike Earth. It is the third planet in a system called the Vulpine Star System, fifty thousand light years from your own world. It's not that far, especially when you consider that the closest galaxy like the Milky Way is millions of light years from our own. But my planet is called Vulpinia Prime, and it shares what scientists call a habitable zone in orbit around our sun, with another planet called Pau Theta II. Pau Theta II is the second planet in the system, and while it does have an atmosphere, and could support life, we haven't found anything other than microbes. You see, Pau Theta II takes 265 days to orbit our sun. And one day on Pau Theta II is 265 days, meaning it takes that long for the planet to revolve on its axis. Therefore, one side of the

planet is always facing the sun, and the other side is in perpetual darkness.

Vulpinia, on the other hand, is very much like Earth. It takes 364 days to orbit the sun, one day is 28 hours long, and it contains all the necessary building blocks to maintain a proper ecosystem. At least, a proper ecosystem that would be compatible with Earth. We have life that is a joy to see. Plants and animals that are distinct and varied, yet very familiar in some regard to your own.

One might think that with all of those similarities, that it's possible there are more humans on this planet. My planet. I am afraid that I must inform you that assumption is incorrect. Life didn't start the same here as it did on Earth. You see, a different species rose to become dominant on Vulpinia. Whereas primates evolved on Earth to become humans, on Vulpinia, there were two species that rose to dominance. They began from the simple fox, and the simple cat.

Today, we call ourselves Vulpinians, even though we are two distinct species. The Vulpine and the Felanus. You might see us and think we're rather small in comparison to humans, but to us, we're just right. Our towering heroes and champions stand at a decent height of five feet tall. Some just a bit taller,

but not by much. We have retained our fur covering, which keeps us warm during colder seasons and helps us to recognize the different clans and tribes that exist on Vulpinia.

While we do walk upright, like you humans, that is where a lot of the similarities end. Oh, yes. We still have our curiosities, our adventurous nature, even our intelligence and a passion for discovery and exploration. When the time comes, we also have the ability to form our armies to defend our homes. But, unlike you, we've retained certain aspects of our genetic ancestors. We still have tails, which, some say, is a Vulpine's failing. We are quite vain about our tails. It is often said that the perfect Vulpine will have inner and outer strength, great intelligence, a passion for the arts and the sciences, and will have a tail envied by all.

While the Vulpine do put a great deal of emphasis on tails, the Felanus have varied stances on their own tails. Some have long, sleek tails, others just a small bob. There is even a religious sect that believes the hierarchy of their order cuts their tails off at a young age, leaving only a small bob. Therefore, when they walk there is a small spring to their steps.

The Vulpine and the Felanus have lived side by side in peace for over three millennium. We have shared ideas,

philosophy, art, religion, science and technology. Together, we began to explore space.

While this may be a tale that takes place far, far away, in a final frontier of space for you humans, this story actually begins on the surface of Vulpinia. In a nation state called Foxburrow, the district of Warrenshire, and the community of Chattingham.

I suppose that before I detail this lovely little community, nestled in among the rolling hills and forests of this district in Foxburrow, that you'll most likely want a bit more detailed explanation of the star system. Fine, I suppose you deserve as much. Keep up with me, now.

At the center of our star system is the sun, a star much like any star. As a matter of fact it's not much different than the star that supports the Solar System. Her blazing surface roils with fire, giving of beautiful explosions every so often. She blows her breath across space to touch the atmosphere of our planet, and thereby creating all manner of brilliant and beautiful artwork in the northern and southern regions of Vulpinia.

Right next door to the sun, orbiting her quickly as a small pet who is far too excited to see its master, is Pau Theta I.

The planet retained its scientific designation that had been given to it over a thousand years ago. Pau Theta I is a completely uninhabitable world, as all of its water has long since evaporated thanks to the close proximity to the sun. Yet, Pau Theta I continues on an orbit that remains steady, and just out of reach from being devoured by our bright star.

Beyond the orbit of Pau Theta I, is the planet mentioned before, Pau Theta II. She was erroneously named, as scientists originally thought that she was a twin of Pau Theta I. Centuries later, it was discovered that she was not, but by then the name had stuck and there was no force in the system that could change the name at all. Pau Theta II has a breathable atmosphere, though I personally am not certain why anyone would wish to live there. Beside the millions of micro-organisms that live on her surface, Pau Theta II has never registered any native lifeforms. So, for now, all Pau Theta II serves as is a maximum security penitentiary, and headquarters of the famed Main Authority; a quiet group of bounty hunters who search the galaxy looking for wanted criminals.

Next is Vulpinia Prime, or, as those native to the system call it, Vulpinia. I do believe that I mentioned the noted aspects of this planet, and would only bore you with continued

information about the agricultural, artistry, scientific, religious, economic and political aspects of my home world. Let's just say that Vulpinia has a varied and diverse number of cultures that criss-cross between the two species that live on this planet.

Fourth in this star system is Vulpinia II. When she was first discovered, it was believed that she was the same size and mass as Vulpinia Prime, and many of the first star gazers wondered if there might not be a civilization on that planet like there was here. As the years went by, it was discovered that not only was Vulpinia II smaller than our planet, but it also had a very poisonous atmosphere. If there ever was a civilization there, it either died out thanks to the poisoning of their atmosphere, or they were somehow able to breath toxic gases. Still, Vulpinia II does give one pause to wonder if the planet had more to it than it gives on at present.

The fifth planet in the system is a large, gaseous planet, with six moons orbiting it. One of those moons happens to be of similar size as Vulpinia. So bright was this planet in the night sky, that early star gazers, the ones who developed our religious beliefs as a matter of fact, called the planet The Great Mother. They believed she was a goddess that helped create the universe and gave her children the Vulpine a place to live.

We're still waiting for the answer as to why the Great Mother would make a planet, and put her chosen children on it, then allow for a completely different species to exist along side them. Many scholars have taken note that the early texts of the religious hierarchy have, for lack of a better term, evolved to match the current state of affairs on Vulpinia.

Though, there is some in the religious sects who believe there always was something there, we just weren't looking. Which may have a hand in what the sixth planet in the system is called; Felanus. When one looks up in the night sky and catches sight of Felanus winking back, it almost looks like a cat. I suppose that depends on how you squint your eyes. But, it is believed by some that The Great Mother and Felanus were sisters, and they made the universe, star system and the home that we live on for all of us. To be more precise, The Great Mother is a gas giant that takes ten years to complete her orbit, and she is 320 times the size of Vulpinia Prime. Felanus is slightly smaller than The Great Mother, and takes approximately nineteen years to orbit the sun. The most distinguishing feature of Felanus, however, is the rings around the planet, which many have suggested is the reason why when viewed from Vulpinia Prime that she appears to look like a cat.



Beyond the orbit of Felanus there is a field of ice shards which hold themselves in orbit, several million kilometers away from Felanus. And beyond that is the rest of the Lupine Sector of space, which contains the star systems Lupine, Critainia, and Panthera. Each home to the Lupine and Jackai, the Critainians, and the Pantherans and the Lionids. But we'll get to those later. Let's not get ahead of ourselves, shall we.

Now, back to Chattingham.

Chattingham. The community holds a great deal of history. Built as a lord's castle, to oversee his lands, it was eventually sacked and taken over by the commoners who tended to his very lands. Sick of his malice toward their living conditions, they lifted themselves to freedom and built a new community upon the ashes of the old castle.

It wasn't just Vulpine, either. There were a good number of Felanus that lived and worked those lands. The people lived together in harmony in a new community after they banished the lord and cemented their own freedom.

As the years past, Chattingham became a quiet place who's citizens enjoyed simple lives. They had want for nothing at all. Eventually, one entrepreneurial Vulpine put Chattingham

on the map with the construction of a grand library, and hall of learning. Her goal was to make a safe and enjoyable place for students to learn, nestled in the rolling hills of the Uther Valley. Vulpine and Felanus came from kilometers around to study the arts, sciences, philosophy and more.

Time marched on, and a military college was constructed, allowing the student body of the Rathgar College to double in size. Chattingham also had a prosperous aeronautics industry, as some of the parts for many of the early planes were built right there in Chattingham. Eventually, the military college added the school for air cadets, and many of the graduates from the Chattingham Academy and Rathgar Military College went on to join the famed 76<sup>th</sup> and 103<sup>rd</sup> Fighter Squadrons.

As the expanse of space became open to the Vulpine and Felanus, Chattingham also evolved to meet this change, as the Academy opened a wing dedicated to space exploration. Eventually, a space port was opened. During all this time, however, Chattingham remained tranquil and relaxing.

Centered in Warrenshire, Chattingham is only a few kilometers from the Lemming Cliffs that border the Fox Tail Sea. Sometime during the march of history, while Chattingham

was reaching middle age, the Port of Garwallen was settled, and overland routes were built to help bring supplies and mercantile goods to Chattingham. As Chattingham grew, so to did the Port of Garwallen.

It was decreed by the Foxburrow Parliament that the lands surrounding Chattingham would remain untouched, as they were a part of a long history. So while the community would still find her growth, she would retain a great deal of her historical charm.

As with any community steeped in history that runs parallel with military actions, Chattingham has her ceremonies to honour past, fallen members of such a society. Tucked away in a small grove of trees sits a memorial, a small clearing made to erect the structure. There are no bodies there, but the names of each pilot who's life end came too quickly, or who's service was one storied in the halls of the local pub. It is here where Vulpine and Felanus come to give thanks and remember their honoured dead.

Now you know the planet in the vastness of space, the people who you will meet, and the community where this all starts. What's that? How do I factor into this tale? Sad to say, I am not a player in this story, I am merely the narrator. The best

Vulpine novelists don't write about themselves, they chronicle the lives and events of others. But I do know the players very well.

Let me introduce them to you.

## CHAPTER TWO

### ROYAL VULPINE AIR CORPS

As I said, this story isn't about me. I will get to those major players in just a moment, but first you must know a little about where they are from. Not in the grand sense, but where they are from at the beginning of this story. Which actually takes place a long time ago. Over two thousand years ago, in fact.

You see, we citizens of Vulpinia have been explorers for some time. At one time we became explorers of our great oceans, meeting our sisters and brothers from different

continents, sharing ideas and hopes. Granted, it wasn't always that way. Both the Felanus and the Vulpine have had our differences that even went as far as conflict, but in time we settled those differences. When it came time to explore space, we took what we learned from the past and used that to help shape our future.

One of those lessons from the past was that while exploration was our primary goal, we had to be ready to defend ourselves should the need arise. This actually never came from an old sea captain's philosophy, but from an air marshal's experience. So when the first grand space faring vessels ventured into the vastness of the unknown, each ship was made ready with a full squadron of fighter craft.

As the years went on, weapons were improved upon for larger vessels and even peace negotiations between our people and the species in the neighbouring systems had occurred. But having a squadron of fighter pilots had become tradition by that time. There was no turning back.

The Royal Vulpine Air Corps had gained a reputation throughout the sector. When the Lupine called for assistance during the Great Lupinian Land war, two armoured fighter carriers were dispatched to give them aid. Squadrons were

known for their titles alone. The Flying 103<sup>rd</sup>. The 76<sup>th</sup> Airborne. The Fighting Cats of the 82<sup>nd</sup>. Anyone who joined the ranks of the Royal Vulpine Armada had their heart set on commanding or being a part of one of the famed squadrons. Even those outside of the Vulpine system looked upon the Royal Vulpine Air Corps with absolute awe and wonder.

Chattingham was just one of eight schools dedicated to the training of air cadets; from academic right up to low orbit fighter training simulations. Young Vulpinians from across Foxburrow knew of the school by the time they were old enough to crawl. And many of them dreamed of the chance to join such a prestigious organization.

Before any student can join the academy, they have to graduate from the military college. Once they have completed graduation, they are evaluated to see if they are fit to enter the academy. It is a very strict evaluation, and only a small percentage of those wishing to become an air cadet are giving such a prestigious opportunity.

Education does continue as an air cadet. It's more than just tactical advantages and piloting an aircraft. Each Vulpine and Felanus must be taught the sciences, diplomacy, etiquette, battle strategies, tactical planning, even oral presentation. It was

that latter that gave one of our pilots a bit of difficulty.

Yes, yes. I know, I've doddled on long enough about the locale and the organization. I suppose it is time to tell you about the three pilots that you will encounter. The three for whom this story is all about.

Senia Felix. Clarfax Billings. Hardy Maynard.

Three young and eager Vulpine with the dream of reaching the stars and joining the famed 76<sup>th</sup> Airborne. All three grew up together, although their families came from different backgrounds. Senia and Hardy both had the common markings of most Vulpine; red fur with white patches on their faces and muzzle. Hardy, though, did tend to let her hair grow out a little longer. Some thought that was because she preferred it that way, but in reality, she most often forgot because she was too busy with her nose in a mechanics guide or studying the inside of an engine. Hardy was also a teasing sort, more often so with her friends or anyone she was particularly close to. While she rarely got her hair cut, she was particular about her tail, often times brushing it just before bed time. This wasn't just thanks to Vulpine vanity about tails; it also helped get out all of the engine grease after a day in the mechanic shop where she would



most often be found.

Senia most often had her hair trimmed so it remained just around her shoulders. She liked the length, but knew that she would have to have her hair cut when she entered the academy, so at a young age she began having monthly hair cuts just so she could get used to it. Just as any other Vulpine, she tended to her tail, brushing it nightly, but this was more for her position in the ranks of cadets. A pristine uniform, a well groomed tail, and a diplomatic attitude were the trademarks of a fine officer. These were a few of the reasons why Senia saw fast promotion and reached the rank of Left-tenant so quickly. Oh, there were other reasons, for certain; keen eye, able to see the best qualities in a Vulpine or Felanus cadet, tactful responses at days end debriefings. She managed to do all that while still having a very bad lisp. Over the years she had tried to control it, immersing herself in books and reading aloud to help her. In time, she managed to soften her speech impediment, but she still had difficulty with her “S” words.

Finally, there was Clarfax. Clarfax, much like Hardy, was often found with his muzzle in a book, almost absorbing the information from within. Though, he never had his muzzle in an engine block, as was the case with Hardy. He was intelligent

beyond expectations, which often substituted the common Vulpine trait of vanity. He was never very mindful of his tail, much to the chagrin of Hardy who would take it upon herself to ensure that his was kept neat and clean. Which was rather easy, considering a bookworm didn't have as much engine grease to contend with. At the academy, Clarfax could always be found in the physics and exobiology buildings, which were two of his passions. Even though he had the bookish nature found with most academics, he was still an accomplished pilot. He took in all the information he could, and thrilled at the application, to see the results for his own eyes. Clarfax was also rather fetching to the eyes, and often would catch the attention of quite a few young vixens. Also, much to the chagrin of Hardy. Hardy liked him for all his attributes, and that quiet bookish nature of his. But most of all, she valued their friendship.

All three were fast friends. All three had made a pact when they were just kits. They were there the day the train returned to Chattingham, carrying the last of the fighter pilots from the long Great Lupine Land War. They appeared so regal in their eyes. And the stories they told. For these three, it was love at first sight. They wanted to take to the skies and join the ranks. It was mostly thanks to the charismatic nature of one

Left-tenant Colonel Artemis Dawkins, one of the most storied fighter pilots in the history of the Royal Vulpine Air Corps.

They heard how he and the remnants of his famed 76<sup>th</sup> squadron, along with a few from the 103<sup>rd</sup>, broke through enemy lines to ensure that supplies were brought to a settlement in the neutral territories called Dorgotha Ravine. When they arrived, they found four more pilots from the 82<sup>nd</sup>, and together with the Jackai settlers they managed to stop the advancement of the enemy.

When these three young Vulpine heard that tale, they knew right away that they wanted to join the academy, and eventually become pilots in the 76<sup>th</sup> Airborne.

Before we continue on, I must explain one thing to everyone. That is the ranking system in the academy. All first years enter with the rank of cadet. Graduation to second year will ensure that the students will have the rank of private. Third year, they continue with the rank of private, but by mid-term of the third year, that's when the senior officers and faculty begin to pare down the best of the best. Each house within the academy will have their own commanding officer, who is awarded the rank of left-tenant upon graduation from third year.

By mid-term third year, most cadets are promoted to corporal. In fourth year, all cadets have their ranks set, with a majority being corporal, some private and the house leaders with the rank of left-tenant.

Left-tenants have a very important duty. As house leader, they oversee all drills, inspect barracks, give weekly evaluations, and conduct training exercises with the cadets. They also provide conciliatory duties and disciplinary duties. The former occurs much more than the latter.

I did mention a house system, didn't I. There are eight houses at the academy in Chattingham. The houses act as squadrons, but as Vulpine law will not allow anyone under the age of 19 to become a full squadron member, they cannot call themselves an official squadron at the school. Unofficially, they are squadrons, however. The houses do also act as a sort of competitive spirit to motivate the students. Each house has their own rough ball team. They have scores from exams, training exercises and can have points deducted if any cadet receives disciplinary action. And a house can receive a major blow if a cadet is expelled for any reason whatsoever.

To be quite complete, the house names are as follows; House Ocelot, House Fennec, House Lynx, House Bobcat,

House Swift, House Red, House Falcon and House Kestrel. House Falcon is the only house that consists entirely of civilian students.

As for our three young heroes, they are in the House Ocelot, a prestigious house that many a famed fighter pilot has been a member of. So let our story fully begin, and allow us to look in on our three young cadets and meet their friends at the academy. I believe that what may begin as something rather mundane might indeed prove to be rather adventurous.

As the saying does sometimes go; a Vulpine pilot never knows where the winds may take them.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **LEFT-TENANT SENIA FELIX**

Remember how I said before that there are often times when Senia Felix must oversee disciplinary action to any cadets that step out of line in her house? Well, it's rather sad that is just how we have to begin this tale. Under normal circumstances, this would be a simple matter. But, these are not normal circumstances, for the action that Senia must take involves a very close friend. That is one thing about Senia that is part of her charm, but also a failing. She is incredibly loyal to her friends.

And there is no greater friend to Senia than Jada Hawkspur. Jada was an excellent student and would have had a star filled career as a pilot, with the exception of one small matter. She had an incredible temper. For the most part, she kept it in check, but when someone might say something that would dishonour her family or heritage, well let's just say the worst in Jada would come out. Such was the case in this matter.

Jada was a middle continent Vulpine, coming from the vast plains of the Kanata Territories. She was leaner than her Foxburrow cousins, and her fur was slightly more beige than the stark red of those who lived along the coastlines. She grew up in a family that was tied to the land, and made their living as farmers. Jada loved her home, but she often talked about journeying to see the stars. When she arrived in Chattingham, one of the first people to make her feel at home was Senia. It wasn't long before Jada was often seen with Senia, Clarfax and Hardy, laughing and working together.

For Senia, she tried to push back everything so she could do her duty without bias. But when she entered the faculty chambers that were used for such messy purposes, she saw Jada waiting patiently to be called. She couldn't stay away, couldn't walk past without saying something.

Timidly, she approached her dear friend.

“Jada,” she said quietly as she took a seat in the waiting area beside her friend.

Jada looked up, smiling softly. She was wearing her uniform, neatly pressed, her hair pinned back in the small pony tail she often would wear. There was no malice in her eyes when she looked to Senia, none at all. “I know what I did, Senia,” she replied quietly. “As soon as Sergeant Willham hit the ground, I was ready for it.”

“I don’t like these things, you know.”

“I know,” Jada replied with a small nod. “This is only the third time you’ve had to do something like this.”

“But this is the hardest,” Senia said, almost as though she were finishing Jada’s sentence. “I know that the members of our house will vouch for you. Sergeant Willham said something deplorable. We all heard it, even me. I was there.”

“I know,” Jada replied with a small chuckle. “I remember you jumping in to pull me back before ... well, before anything else happened.” They both sighed and fell silent for a moment before Jada continued. “This needed to be done, I think. Maybe not this way, meaning, me punching Willham. But, I’ve heard others say he was harsh to several



other students.”

“Well, after this is over I am personally filing a complaint with the board of appeals,” Senia said in a stern voice. “It’s utter nonsense. That type of attitude should not be tolerated. Even if it is coming from a superior officer. They have to set an example, after all.” She sighed as she let a thousand thoughts fly through her head. “There has to be ways to let the board of judiciary know that...”

“Senia,” Jada said in a soft voice, knowing that her friend would stop and pay attention to her. “I want you to tell the truth. I am willing to face the consequences of my actions,” she said as she put her hand up to prevent Senia from protesting. “I know what I did, and I will not have my own actions jeopardize those of any of my house mates, alright?”

Reluctantly, Senia agreed, nodding to Jada. In a way, it was like a great weight had been lifted from her shoulders. She could always tell when Jada was being sincere. This was one of those times.

“Left-tenant Felix,” a bold voice called out. Senia and Jada rose to their feet as they recognized the voice of Captain Rita Mallard, a black furred Felanus. She had been with the faculty for a long while, and was ever much a paragon of honour

and duty. She tried to hide it, but there were those who said she felt for the predicament that Jada was in. “At ease, both of you. Left-tenant, if you will please come in, the board wishes to ask you a few questions.” Senia nodded and began to make her way to the hearing chamber. Mallard turned to Jada and sighed as she let her shoulders slump just a bit. A wordless gesture, but it spoke volumes. She was disappointed, but only slightly. Mallard was one of those in the faculty who looked upon Jada with promise and hope. “It shouldn’t be long, Private Hawkspur. We’ll be calling you after we ask Left-tenant Felix some questions. I suggest you get a beverage while you wait.”

Jada nodded in reply, offering a salute as the captain began her way back to the chambers. She didn’t know who would have the more difficult time; herself or Senia.

The inner chambers of the board were rather spartan. A simple desk where three colonels sat; each with paper work and data pads in front of them, a console computer off to one side, recording everything that went on during the proceedings. Two clerks who would quickly do background checks for information for the three colonels. And two guards at the entrance of the room, which stood at the ready as though they

were part of a parade procession. Large windows allow light into the room, as the sunlight shone onto the hardwood floors. Everything seemed to echo in this room, the loudest sound, however, came from a clock that hung on the wall just above the entrance.

Senia entered the room, followed closely by Captain Mallard, and stopped beside a table facing the three colonels. She saluted, and remained at attention until told to seat. Finally, she took her seat in one of those uncomfortable auditorium chairs, behind a utilitarian desk. Captain Mallard joined her, taking her own seat to Senia's left. It was Vulpine law that for any hearing, no matter how small, those who would be questioned would always have a representative. In the many years Captain Mallard had served at the school, she had always acted in such a capacity. Many said it was because she had some compassion, but also had an air of diplomacy about her.

“Left-tenant Felix,” one of the colonels spoke up as he looked over the data pad once more. He was an older Vulpine, and from what the students knew of him, he was a stickler for tradition. “This hearing is merely being held to clarify a few points,” he continued as he looked up and took off his glasses. “We merely wish to ask you a few questions regarding Private

Hawkspur and that is all. Do you understand?"

"I understand completely, sir," she replied in a bold voice, but trying to keep her lisp to a minimum.

"Very good," the colonel said with a nod, satisfied with Senia's answer. "You know Private Hawkspur quite well, I understand."

"Yes, sir. Very well, sir," she replied without hesitation.

"Do you consider her one of your trusted friends?" he asked as he put down his data pad.

"Yes sir, I do," Senia stated with a firm nod. "We have been best friends since we were accepted to the Academy."

"And during the time you have known Private Hawkspur, have you ever attempted to mislead anyone regarding her grading and evaluation?" The question came as a surprise. Senia believed this to be merely a formality for final questioning before the ruling was handed down.

"Never, sir," Senia replied after some hesitation. "I have treated Private Hawkspur like any other in House Ocelot. And, if I may, sir, I am most certain the board knows that I have a close friendship with Corporal Hardy Maynard, Corporal Clarfax Billings and Left-tenant Philburt Collinsworth."

"Yes, Left-tenant," one of the other colonels spoke up,

waving a dismissive hand. “The difference being that none of the others you mentioned have ever slugged a superior officer in the jaw.” She sighed openly and picked up her own data pad. “I believe there is really only one question which remains, Left-tenant. What is your own recommendation for what punishment be handed down to Private Hawkspur.”

Senia took a deep breath, remembering the words Jada said in the hallway. Speak the truth. “There is no precedent for her actions. The ruling itself should be clear. Private Hawkspur should be stripped of rank, and discharged.” The colonels all nodded, satisfied with Senia’s answer. “However,” she said, catching the board off guard. “It should be noted that in the long history of this establishment, an occurrence like this has happened 283 times. In 200 of those cases, the incident occurred toward the beginning of the students education. The remaining cases happened toward the end of their six years. They were allowed to continue on to graduation, where they were given a civilian degree. If the board so wishes, I also recommend that Private Hawkspur be allowed to finish her final year.”

The three colonels sat back in their chairs and muttered among themselves for a few moments. Senia had done

something many others would never do in a situation like this. Tactfully, she brought up past cases, showing that there was precedent for Jada to remain until she graduated; albeit in a civilian capacity.

“Very well,” one of the colonels spoke up and motioned to the guards. “Please let Private Hawkspur in.” One of the guards quickly saluted and left the room to carry out his orders. It was only a few seconds, as he returned followed quickly by Jada. She came to the same desk where Captain Mallard and Senia sat and stood on Captain Mallard’s left side. Both Mallard and Senia rose to their feet, knowing that now was the moment the board would officially hand down their ruling.

“Private Jada Hawkspur,” the chair said as he rose to his feet. “It is with great disappointment that I must do this, considering that you were ranked quite high in your house and in the school proper. Private Hawkspur, you will be stripped of rank. You will be barred from service on board any vessel within the jurisdiction of the Royal Vulpine Armada for at least ten years. That includes space faring craft as well as sea faring vessels.” The colonel picked up his data pad and punched in a few keys. “However, let it be known for the record that this Academy does not shrug off a student’s education lightly. You

will be allowed to graduate and given a civilian degree in your chosen field. While you are allowed to continue your education, how will be barred from participation in any extra curricular activities associated with your house, and no achievements made by you will be added to house points. Do you understand the ruling of this board?"

"Yes sir, I do," Jada replied quickly with a firm nod.

"You will have opportunity to appeal, should you so wish," the colonel added with some caution. "However, as you are most likely aware, appeals take time."

"Understood, sir," Jada replied. "I have thought it over, and have felt that whatever decision the board came to, I would accept it. I will not be seeking appeal."

"Very well," the colonel said as he took his seat and picked up his gavel. "I declare this hearing officially complete."

The walk from the main faculty building where such hearings as this disciplinary hearing take place was not far from the House Ocelot barracks. A series of buildings which were well build, but in such a way to prepare each student for life on a base. It was mid afternoon, and this meant most everyone would be gathered at the barracks mess for tea. Almost all of

them knew today was the final ruling for Jada's hearing.

Captain Mallard walked with Senia and Jada until they reach the entrance to the barracks grounds. She turned and offered a small salute to the two Vulpine, and began to walk off to her own office when she stopped and looked to Jada.

"For what it's worth, Private Hawkspur," she stated in an even voice. "While I understand the consequences and ruling handed down to you, this academy will be poorer now that you will be barred from the Air Corps." She offered a nod and turned, but again stopped and said with a small smile. "And for what it's worth, if I had been in your shoes, Willinham would have gotten it just as good from me." She didn't wait for another word from either Senia or Jada, but just continued on her course.

"Did that sound like an endorsement to you?" Jada asked with her usual smirk.

"Hard to tell," Senia replied before steering them toward the mess hall. "I guess now it's time to face a different kind of hearing. No doubt, thanks to our incredible security to keep things quiet, will ensure that everyone knows today was the day for your final ruling."

"A barrage of questions," Jada said with a sigh. "I don't know if I can face that."



“They’ll only be voicing frustration,” Senia corrected her. “Just as I did on the second day of your hearing. And they have every right. Of the top pilots, you were number five. We’re losing a good pilot.”

“You know,” Jada said as she lowered her voice, leaning over to Senia a bit as they walked. “I hope your objections don’t get yourself into trouble.”

“I’ll handle myself,” Senia reassured her. “But the ruling board had to know my feelings. It was no different when Jennings hearing came about, nor when Caliope’s. They were in our top fifteen. I know there’s discipline, but there’s also a loyalty to your house. To your comrades.”

They approached the mess hall in a leisurely walk, as though they were crossing the yard from the barracks like any other day. But, this was different. They could both see into the building, the number of faces looking outside, waiting. “Time to face the music,” Jada said with a sigh.

Inside the mess hall, you could hear a pin drop. It seemed as though every member of House Ocelot was waiting to hear word of the outcome. Someone would have to say something before rumours started. Senia looked to Jada, who only nodded. Jada knew that Senia had to say something, but

she also knew Senia would say it in a diplomatic and truthful way.

“If I could have everyone’s attention,” Senia started, speaking in as clear a voice as her speech impediment would allow. “I am certain that you are all waiting to hear the outcome of the hearing. So I’ll announce it here and now, and that way any rumours can end with this announcement. The ruling board has come to the decision that Jada Hawkspur will be stripped of rank and barred from serving aboard any vessel in the Royal Vulpine Armada for a period no less than ten years.” There was a groan of protest that went through the cadets who had gathered. Senia quickly put up a hand for silence, and then continued. “However. Because Jada is so close to graduation, she will continue her studies and once complete, granted a civilian degree. I don’t think that there will be any difficulty for her obtaining that.”

“At least we’ll still have her for our rough ball semi final match,” one young Felanus said with a dejected sigh as he attempted to find some silver lining in this sow’s ear.

“I wouldn’t hold my breath on that, Sparky,” Jada said with some reluctance. It was enough of an admission and confirmation that Jada had been barred from any extracurricular

activities that most had suspected would have happened. Now it had been confirmed, and it sent frustration through the room.

“Everyone!” Senia called out as she held up her hand. When the room settled down once more, Senia looked to the Felanus who made the comment. “Corporal Sparks, if you have something to say...”

“Permission to speak freely,” he asked as he tried to hold back his own anger. Senia nodded and gave him her full attention. “With all due respect, this is complete bollocks. Jada was one of our best. And to be honest, I was there when Willy said what he said. He deserved getting a slap across the jaw.” He grumbled slightly and took a deep breath before he finished. “And to top it all off, we’ve lost one of our best strikers.”

“I’m glad that I rank so highly for a match of rough ball,” Jada said with her usual laugh. “But, I appreciate the sentiment, Sparky.”

The group began talking among themselves once again, and Senia began to realize there was something that they could still do for Jada at the very least. “I think,” Senia called out over the other voices, letting them know she had something to say to each of them. “There is still something we can do. It’s not protocol, but in this instance, protocol be damned. It’s

tradition for each cadet to be given a send off dinner. And as Jada ranked so highly in squadron and pilot tests,” she said and looked to Sparky. “And as her position as striker on the house rough ball team.” That brought about a small chuckle throughout the room. “But I think Jada has at least garnered the respect of all of us to deserve at least that. Perhaps you could arrange something, Corporal Sparks. Off base, that is.”

“We can probably contact one of the restaurants in the village proper,” he suggested. “Maybe in a week. After the semi final.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Senia remarked with a smile and nodded to Sparky, then looked to Jada. The suggestion was good enough to bring spirits up with the group for the time being at least. Senia then looked around the room for a moment, suddenly taking note of two people that were missing. “Sparky,” she said as she moved over to the aforementioned Felanus. “Have you seen either Hardy or Clarfax?”

“Um... Hardy couldn’t stand waiting around,” he informed Senia. “So she went off to the motor pool to see if there might be something she could do.”

“Like forget her troubles and worries in an engine block,” Senia said with a sigh as Sparky nodded in agreement.

“And Clarfax?”

“Last I heard, he was taking in the guest lecture this afternoon,” Sparky replied as he shrugged his shoulders. “Colonel Tyrell had invited Professor Bellton to speak on quantum mechanics. Last minute booking from what I’ve heard.” He scratched behind his ear for a moment before adding. “I could go find them if you want.”

“No, thank you though, Sparky,” Senia replied. “You’ll have your work cut out for you getting this dinner ready. And try to keep it quiet, we don’t need the faculty hearing about it. As far as anyone should know, it’s just a celebratory dinner, after the semi final.” Sparky nodded quickly and turned around in his chair to start jotting down some notes. Jada had slid up beside Senia and nudged her lightly.

“Good way to turn a negative into a positive,” she said with a smile.

“You’re my best friend,” Senia said in a low voice. “I’m not letting you off this base without at least a good send off to remember us all by.” She sighed, still feeling the weight of the day on her shoulders. “Keep an eye on Sparky, would you? Reel him in if you have to, I know he gets overly excited about assignments, no matter what scale.”

“And just what are you going to do?” Jada asked.

“I’m going to find Hardy,” Senia replied with a shrug.  
“I’ll try to see if I can’t somehow get her to pull herself away from an engine block long enough to tell her the news.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

### CORPORAL HARDY *MAYNARD*

The motor pool for the Academy was rather large and contained all manner of vehicles. Some quite vintage, dating back over 300 years. More museum pieces, but they were used to give students an idea just how far we'd come from using a combustion engine to a vehicle that uses neutrino coils and solar collectors for fuel.

This was the place where Hardy Maynard could often be found when she needed to think. Immerse herself in the simplicity of an engine and she could push back everything else

in the world, if only for the moment. But so lost did she get in the depths of an engine block, that she often ignored the world around her. Other sounds would be completely overlooked when she was in the process of something as simple as an oil change. But it was where she liked to be. It was her comfort zone.

Which really shouldn't have surprised her when she finally did look up from her work to find one of her tools and found Senia standing behind her. She didn't jump, didn't scream out for being startled. Her eyes just blinked and she let out a breath. "An' just how long were you standin' there?"

"About five minutes," Senia replied with a grin. "I didn't wish to disturb you. First time I ever did that, I remember that a wrench was hurled in my direction."

"Except that was a bicycle," Hardy said with a chuckle and fully rose from her crouched position by the vehicle's engine block. "Clarfax's as I recall. An', we were eight." Hardy moved across the small garage and sat on a bench as she looked up to Senia. "I'll assume by yer appearance an' the fact yer still in yer dress uniform that the hearin' is over."

"Yes," Senia said with a nod and sat down beside her. "Jada's been stripped of rank but she'll be allowed to complete



her education. Albeit with a civilian degree.”

“Thank the Great Mother for some small positives,” Hardy said with a sigh and brushed back her long hair. “I still don't think it's fair. But then, fairness never did overrule tradition or military chain o' command.”

“Sadly, no,” Senia said quietly. “I've given Sparky the task of arranging a dinner. One week from tonight. For Jada, I think it's the least we can do.”

“That's 'round the time the rough ball semi final is,” Hardy said with a conspiratorial grin. “I take it that yer gonna use that as a cover?”

“More or less, yes.”

“Just make sure Sparky doesn't blab to any o' the other House Left-tenants,” she said as she reached into a satchel and pulled out a couple of drink boxes. She handed one to Senia.

“I've got Jada making sure he toes the line,” Senia replied as she took the drink. She fiddled with the straw as she continued to speak. “One more month and we have our graduation weekend. I assume you've got your escort all ready?”

“Of course I do,” Hardy chuckled. “I don't think it's a secret 'bout me an' Clarfax. Mind you, it does take some prying

to get him out of the science building. Especially when there's a guest speaker.”

“Oh, so not much different than coaxing you out of an engine block,” Senia remarked with a grin. Hardy made a weak punching motion and hit Senia's shoulder, while the latter feigned pain and hurt. “But in all seriousness, we aren't that far away from our final evaluations and placements.”

“I heard the tribunal is going to be on the Omega One orbital platform,” Hardy said. “That we'll be shuttled there over a ten day schedule.”

“House Ocelot has three different tribunals that are overseeing the final evaluations,” Senia said with a nod. They'll start one week after final exams. And, we still have one more simulation to go through.”

“That'll be a long day for you,” Hardy chuckled. “You oversee our simulations, and then Captain Mallard divides the house Left-tenants up into groups to give them a final simulation.”

“I know,” Senia said with a sigh. “I just hope I'm paired with Philly. He's all about teamwork.”

“It's a very House Lynx trait,” Hardy said as she patted Senia's shoulder. “I suppose I should get cleaned up, and get

some rest. This waiting actually tired me out.” She looked directly to Senia and smiled. “Thanks for coming to find me.”

“Of course,” Senia replied as she smiled back. “I wouldn't want you to hear the news from someone else.” Senia rose to her feet and offered Hardy a hand up. “Come on. I'll help you clean this up and put the tools away. You know how Custodian Ramirez gets when the motor pool is left in a bit of a mess.”

Even within an institution that carries so much tradition, students will often times find tradition for themselves. Such is the case with Senia, Hardy and many of their friends. One night a week they would gather for a quiet dinner in the village, partake in quiet conversation and enjoy each others company. On a night like this, the honour of House was put aside for the joy of camaraderie and laughter. Even Left-tenant Philburt Collinsworth had left the comfortable confines of House Fennec in order to join in the festivities. There were six of them in total for this night; Senia, Hardy, Jada, Clarfax Billings, Private Aria Sharspeer and Philly. This was the main bulk of the group, though there were often others who joined in.

Philly was a tan coloured Vulpine with larger ears and

always looked like he was on the brink of telling a good joke. His mother was Air Marshal of the 103<sup>rd</sup>, and it was his dream to join the ranks of that squadron. Aria was a tall, spotted Felanus, one who was often described as teetering between dainty and duty bound. She had kept a lot of her own private life very, well, private. At least her private affairs were kept in such a manner, and no one badgered her to dig them up. And then there was Clarfax, a black furred Vulpine who always seemed to have his snout stuck in a book, even when at dinner. That is, unless Hardy was present.

On this evening, much to the chagrin of Jada, the conversation had turned to her recent hearing. For the most part, they had discussed minor details of the hearing and the resulting ruling. For her part, Senia was able to at least steer the conversation to other, more immediate activities.

“One month until graduation,” Senia said at one pause in the conversation as she sat back and sipped her tea. “And there's still a great deal we have to do before the final ceremonies.”

“I heard a rumour,” Philly said in his best conspiratorial voice as he leaned forward as though hatching some grand scheme. “Who the guest speaker may be for the ceremonies.”

He nodded with a grin as he sat back in his chair. It seemed as though an eternity passed before Aria finally spoke up.

“Philly, it's not polite to say something then sit back like the cat who caught the canary.” She studied him a moment, then narrowed her eyes and smirked. “Unless you're wanting us to guess, which would be odd considering you've always been bursting at the...”

“Alright,” he finally said with a broad smile as he sat back up in his chair. Aria was right, he couldn't wait to tell good news when he'd heard it, even if it was just a rumour. “Word is that the Barrow's Revenge is making a routine stop at the Vulpine Trade Commission shipyards toward the end of the month, and that Left-tenant Colonel Artemis Dawkins has agreed to speak to the students during the ceremony.” There was small murmurs that went through the group. Artemis Dawkins was renowned for his expertise as a fighter pilot, his tactical genius, and his ability to diffuse a hostile situation without firing a shot. Many of his tactical patterns were standard learning tools at the Academy.

“Dawkins,” Senia said with a revered whisper. “He was the reason why I joined the Academy.”

“He was the reason a lot of us joined the Academy,”

Hardy said with a smile. “I still remember when you, me, and Clarry were all kits, waiting at the train station for the pilots to return. Signaled the end of the Great Lupine Land War.”

“I remember you were more interested in finding out the engine capacity of the Maverick Mark V,” Clarfax said as he nudged Hardy lightly. The others chuckled lightly. Hardy hadn't changed much, she'd always had an interest in mechanics from a very young age.

“That hasn't changed,” Aria piped up as she poured some more tea for herself and offered to fill up anyone's cup. “I swear that I had to video record Hardy at night to prove to her that she talks about engine combustion and neutronium coils in her sleep. And I think she moves her hands like she's repairing an engine, too.”

“That's not unlike the fact it took a while to convince you that you purr while you sleep,” Hardy retorted with a smile. Hardy and Aria were roommates for the six years they were at the Academy, and they had to get used to their small nuances right away.

“I only do that when I'm happy,” Aria replied, clearing her throat as though embarrassed by the mention of her nocturnal habit.

“You must be happy a lot then,” Hardy chuckled.

“Any word on the semi final game?” Philly said as he changed subjects. “With Jada out, you’re going to need a new striker.”

“Word travels fast,” Jada said as she looked to Senia.

“Well, we are one of the most secure Academies in the North Eastern hemisphere, so naturally word of your predicament would have gotten around,” she explained with a sigh, then looked to Philly with a smirk. “No talking House business. Especially when you consider House Ocelot’s opponent happens to be House Fennec.”

“That’s right,” Hardy grinned as she looked across the table to Philly. “You might get the wrong idea and send word to your own rough ball team.”

“What!” Philly said with some shock. “No, just making conversation is...”

“It’s Clarry,” Jada said quickly with a grin. “He’s taking my spot on the striker line.”

“What?” Clarfax said with some shock as he looked from Hardy to Jada. “I’m... what... striker? Pardon.”

“That’s right,” Aria said as she picked up her tea cup. “Clarry is secretly one of the best strikers in Foxburrow, and he

plans to bring his best to the pitch in the semi final against House Fennec.”

“Alright,” Philly finally said with a resigned sigh. “No discussion of House business. For what it's worth, though. I think Jada should be on that pitch. Make the game more interesting.”

“There's nine other players on the field, Philly,” Jada reminded him. “I'm just part of the greater whole when it comes to it. I'm not the reason why we've done so well in the House League.”

“Well, how about this, Philly,” Senia said as she removed her napkin from her lap and set it on the table in a neat crumple. “We've got four days before the semi final match, you can find out when the whistle blows to start the game.” She smiled across the table to Philly who only shrugged in defeat. Senia took out her pocket watch and shook her head as she checked the time. “We'd best get back to the barracks. It's late, and we've still got a lot of class time left.”

The others at the table agreed and slowly made their way out of the quaint restaurant. Senia and Philly took care of the bill, then the six began the short walk back to the base. The sun was setting on the day, a light breeze in the air that moved the



leaves in the trees ever so gently, and the birds chirped and sang their evening song.

For the moment, as Hardy walked arm in arm with Clarfax, everything was right in the world.

As the evening drew to a close, each went their separate ways. For Hardy and Aria, that meant returning to their quarters. As mentioned before, the two roomed together, and had grown used to a nightly routine. Each cadet was paired with another, and they roomed together during their entire time while attending classes. This was extended to those who were civilian students as well, which made up the entirety of House Falcon. For those of House Ocelot, the sixth year cadets had grown to know their bunk mate and their House comrades very well.

Though, some still had their secrets.

“One month from finals,” Hardy sighed as she packed away her clothes into a hamper near the entrance to the small room. “And we've still got a lot of activities left.”

“I know,” Aria agreed with a nod as she sat on her bed. “We've still got the last simulation, there's the semi final, and the final if we win...”

“When we win,” Hardy corrected with a chuckle.

“Alright, when we win,” Aria said with a small smile. “And there's the surprise maneuvers that we still need to accomplish. It's getting to the point where I don't know if that's going to happen, however.”

“Are you kidding,” Hardy said as she walked into the small washing room to retrieve her brush. “I'm getting pent up anticipation with all the waiting. To get a chance to fly those Maverick Mark VIIIs in a real field test. Not just the holo-simulations.”

“But those holo-simulations are fun,” Aria grinned. “To test the controls of the test ship the Nighthawk. That was something.”

“I noticed something amiss with those controls,” Hardy said as she returned from the washroom and sat on her bed. “It seems like they're hiding something. The controls felt... I don't know. Unfinished.”

“Well, it is an experimental fighter craft.”

“True,” Hardy agreed with a nod as she began brushing her tail. “Oh, and let's not forget the last thing. The official graduation ceremonies. The look on Senia's face when Philly mentioned Dawkins as guest speaker.” She laughed at the memory. “Senia was always hero struck by that one, I'll tell

you. I just look forward to seeing Clarfax in a kilt. Always thought he'd look dashing in one.” Hardy looked over to Aria for a moment, taking note of the slight apprehension in the young Felanus woman. She also wasn't purring like she usually was. “Aria, is something wrong?”

“Just thinking about the graduation ceremonies is all,” she replied with a sigh. “I still have a date to ask as escort.”

“Anyone in mind?”

“Oh, yes,” Aria replied with a smile and a nod, and for a moment it seemed to quell the feeling of apprehension. “I've been meaning to talk to a young Felanus in House Falcon. Robert Quickfoot. Very bright, he's the one who has those long discussions with Clarfax.”

“I've seen him before,” Hardy said as she continued to brush her tail. “He seems quite shy unless he's talking about quantum mechanics or astrophysics.”

“That's one of the qualities I admire about him,” Aria said with a nod. “But, there's also...” She paused for a moment, as though she struggled to find the words. Hardy stopped brushing her tail and looked directly to Aria as though encouraging her to continue. “My parents will be coming, naturally. And, well no one knows who they are...”

“Yes, I know,” Hardy said with a grin. “You’ve kept that very quiet. I always wonder why.”

“My parents are Claude and Maria Sharsppeer,” she said without hesitation. Hardy blinked as she looked to Aria for a moment. Sharsppeer was the family name of the ruling class of the Ocata nation, so it was no secret that Aria was a member of the royal family. But Claude and Maria Sharsppeer were the royal monarchs, the king and queen of Ocata.

“That,” Hardy finally managed to say as her mind tried to put it all together. “Means. You’re. Great Mother, my roommate is the Princess of the Ocata Royal family.”

“Yes, it’s true,” Aria said with a nod.

“My goodness, I feel so embarrassed now,” Hardy said as she looked around her room with some worry.

“Hardy!” Aria cried out as she tried to pull Hardy back to her senses.

“Well, it’s not proper to... do some of the,” she caught herself for a moment and looked like she was going to apologize, but Aria managed to catch her before she began.

“Hardy,” she said calmly. “Nothing is different, really. I didn’t want word spreading around because I didn’t want to be given favours or have my status affect others in the House. My

professors and superior officers knew, but they kept things quiet.”

“Well, that stands to reason,” Hardy replied with a nod, now that she was back in full control of her faculties upon hearing this news. “Wait! You mean Senia knew. Senia can't keep a secret from me if she tried.”

“She kept this one,” Aria replied with a sly grin.

“And I've been your roommate for six years and not once did I know.”

“You do have the habit of immersing yourself in your studies,” Aria reminded her. “Remember fourth year? When you managed to drag an engine block in here just to cram for a mechanical engineering exam. You looked like a grease ball.” The two chuckled with the memory.

“I did get into a bit of trouble for that,” Hardy said with a sigh. “But, I made some points for managing to replace the engine and make Custodian Ramirez's jalopy run smoother.”

“That you did,” Aria said as she climbed into bed. “It's getting late. We've still got one last astrophysics lecture. Maybe Robert will be there.”

“You never know,” Hardy said as she climbed into her own bed. “Maybe you'll find an opportunity to talk to him as

well.” The pair chuckled lightly, then wished each other a good night. For Hardy, she was like Aria in that she also had someone that she wished to see at the lecture in the morning. Clarfax Billings.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **CORPORAL CLARFAX BILLINGS**

The main astronomy building at the Chattingham campus was often a buzz with activity. Various people from far across Foxburrow and into the neighbouring Ocata nation came to view the stars and exchange ideas about the beginning of the universe. There were tours of school children that would often come through, guided by the more knowledgeable members of the Royal Vulpine Armada who had their day exploring the sector of space that the Vulpine star system lay in. And there was the students of the Academy who just couldn't steer themselves away from the vast knowledge that lay in the halls of

the building.

One such student was Clarfax Billings. A dedicated scientist, he achieved his rank of corporal through hard work, top training ability and excellent disciplinary measures. He managed to advance a great deal of thought on theories that had come before. But he was also quite humble, because he always mentioned the support he received from some of the civilian students who had interests in the same fields he did.

Clarfax was a black furred Vulpine whose family hailed from the northern regions of Foxburrow. When he was first born, his family moved to Chattingham, as his mother took on a career in agricultural science, attempting to find ways to improve crop growing conditions in some of the harshest climates. While Clarfax had a curiosity like his mother, his lead more to the stars.

On this day, he had difficulty containing his excitement. He moved quickly through the groups of Vulpine and Felanus that had made their way to the main observatory lounge as he was going to the building's main library. There, he would find some of his classmates and friends.

Those friends included Robert Quickfoot, a stout Felanus whose intelligence and curious nature was only matched by his



awkward social stature. Robert was always nervous when talking to large groups of people, but felt comfortable among his friends. Claudia Whitefur was there as well, who minored in astrophysics, while she was majoring in marine biology. Gilbert Shortclaw, a spotted Felanus who wore a large pair of spectacles and always read books a little too close to his face. All of them were gathered around a table, discussing quietly some of the theories they had gone over in class. Just the three Clarfax wanted to see.

Clarfax approached the table holding a large bundle of rolled up maps in his arms. He had a very broad grin on his face. His three friends stopped their chatter immediately, knowing full well that Clarfax had some very big news.

“It just came in,” he said quickly, feeling the words coming out a little too fast. Still smiling, he looked to the bundle in his arms. The three had a small pause, and then wordlessly and quickly cleared off the table of any books and such that might be in the way. With excitement, Clarfax rolled out the maps, placing a large one in the most prominent position.

It was a star chart, detailing the known object throughout the galaxy that had been recorded by the Vulpine, Felanus,

Pantherans and Critainians. This map also had the locations of several deep space exploration stations highlighted.

“There's nothing new on this map, Clarry,” Gilbert stated with a somewhat disappointed sound in his voice.

“Just wait for it, Gilly,” Robert said with a sigh. He knew Clarfax was one for dramatics, and it looked as though there would be a great deal of information to tell on this day.

“Alright,” Clarfax began as he tried settling himself down. “The furthest distance we know of is from ancient star charts the Critainians recorded during the Great Crossing.” He pointed to one section of the map that was marked 'Uroth system'. “And, we also know that the joint exploration in deep space that began twelve years ago has been involved in very intensive study.” He pointed to another section of the map which read 'Lupine Deep Space Station 12'. “They just sent back this,” he said as he took out a smaller map, and proceeded to overlay it in a section of the map which had no markers at all.

“There's nine planets in that system,” Robert said as he studied the chart.

“No,” Gilbert spoke up, correcting Robert. “This one here is just a planetoid. Says it's a small, ice like word.”

“You know what's really fascinating,” Clarfax said as he

took out another star chart. It looked like a copy of an old map, and had several Critainian markings on it. The title read 'Uroth' in bold lettering. "This new system is almost a duplicate of the system the Critainians came from." He hurriedly sifted through his papers until he found a book filled with notes. "Here it is," he said as he opened it up to a marked page. "The third planet of the system lay in the habitable zone of the planetary system. Study has show that it holds life, and the dominant population has a social system of government, industry and trade. Though they have not mastered flight, they have built great ships to cross the oceans of the world, and it appears as though they are at the cusp of creating the first steam engines." He looked up to the others with the same grin he'd had since he found out the information.

"Do they have descriptions of the people?" Claudia asked as she leaned over the table to see the book.

"Oh yes," Clarfax replied as he sifted through more of his papers. "Here it is." He laid out a series of papers which shown an upright, bi-pedal being, slender in form with very delicate features.

"They look..." Robert began as he studied the images. "...like simians or primates. Sort of like monkeys."

“They don't have any tails,” Claudia said as she took a close look at one. She smiled as she studied the intricate detail of the clothing in the picture. “Very impressive work on their clothing, though.”

“They don't have fur, do they,” Gilbert said as he looked closely to the images, then back to Clarfax. “Do they?” Clarfax shook his head in reply. “How in the world do they keep warm, then?”

“The research findings haven't fully come back,” Clarfax explained as he took a seat. “This is only the first of the information that the astrological society has allowed to be released so far.”

“Look at their ears,” Claudia said, pointing to each of the images. “On the side of their heads, but long and pointy.” She took a close look at one of them carefully. “They must have excellent hearing, I suppose.”

The four continued to pour over the information contained in the maps and the research notes, completely oblivious that they were to be joined by a fifth. Little matter really to Hardy Maynard. She enjoyed watching Clarfax excitedly go over new research findings.

“Oh hello, Hardy,” Claudia said with a smile as she

looked up. The three males all jumped slightly as they were jarred into awareness of someone else.

“Hardy, you gave us a start,” Clarfax said with a nervous laugh as he caught his breath.

“I didn't mean to sneak up on everyone,” Hardy said with a sly grin as she leaned over to ruffle Clarfax's hair a bit.

“I heard you, Hardy,” Claudia said quietly with a chuckle, looking to the three males for a moment.

“Well, I just popped by to see if Clarfax was free,” she said and looked to the table. “Looks like the astrological society finally released their findings.”

“Yeah, Clarry was just showing us,” Robert said with a grin as he looked through some of the papers again. “This all so brilliant.”

“I was just wondering,” Hardy said as she looked to Clarfax. “If I might be able to steal you away for an hour. However, I'll completely understand if you have something more pressing to do.”

“Spend the afternoon with you,” Clarfax said with a smile as he blushed slightly. “I think I can pull myself away from this for a bit.”

The pair walked out into the campus garden, one of the more quiet spots in the entire village. The Chattingham gardens, which resided on the campus grounds, were actually there before the first college was erected. It was a tranquil spot that had several quiet pathways the wound between flower bed, bushes, trees and even a small brook that flowed into a central pond. Here students and villagers alike came to relax and let their worries ease a bit, or even just to stop and smell the roses. It was also a place many of the students came to study the flora that came from all over the region.

For Hardy and Clarfax it was a wonderful spot to spend some quiet time together. It wasn't unusual to see the pair of them walking slowly hand in hand down the pathways. This wasn't an uncommon occurrence, as many Vulpine and Felanus who came to the college would eventually find a mate and fall in love. But for these two, they shared these feelings since they were kits. A little healthy competition between them, a lot of encouragement from each other and a long lasting friendship that turned into something much more.

“I heard that the deep space observatory had sent in some information from it's findings,” Hardy said to him with a small smile. “So I decided I'd better let you tell the others

before I give you some news.”

Clarfax looked to Hardy with a smile, knowing that whenever she had some good news she always kept it to herself until the very end. “Well I know it's not the graduation ceremonies. We had made our plans months ago. Would it have anything to do with the upcoming rough ball match?” Hardy shook her head, a sign that Clarfax should take another guess. “Some secret information on the last training exercise?” Again, Hardy shook her head, leaving Clarfax to ponder just what it might be. “We haven't gotten our scheduling orders for the final evaluations, have we?”

Hardy smiled and took out an envelope from inside her jacket and handed it to Clarfax. As he opened it, she spoke. “I received my orders this morning. Senia did as well. She's going to be reporting to Space Port Omega One, exactly one week after the graduation ceremony.”

“That's only seven weeks away,” Clarfax said as he read over his letter aloud. “Corporal Clarfax Billings, it is with great pleasure that we inform you your evaluation will take place in seven weeks, three days. Report to the ground based space port in Chattingham and you will be shuttled to Omega One where you will meet with the Evaluation Tribunal upon arrival.” He

looked to Hardy with a smile.

“The best news,” Hardy said as she wrapped her arm in Clarfax's. “I have my evaluation the same day.”

“Do you think...” Clarfax began, but paused almost not wanting to spoil it, but eventually finding his excitement too much. “Do you think we'll get accepted for service with the 76<sup>th</sup>?”

Hardy shrugged lightly. “Not sure, but it is hopeful. Our evaluations are some of the earliest, and those usually mean they are the good ones. We'll have the pick of the lot, I'd say.”

“What about Senia?”

“You know as well as I do that senior officers always have their evaluations first,” Hardy explained.

“Wouldn't that be exciting,” Clarfax said as he thought of the prospects, his eyes seeming to gloss over. “The three of us, serving with the 76<sup>th</sup>. A dream come true.”

“I love it when you get that far away look in your eyes,” Hardy said as she gave him a hug, nuzzling her muzzle gently against his. “Reminds me that you're more than just an officer with the Royal Air Corps.” She backed up just a bit to look him in the eyes. “You're also a dreamer.”



Not far from the gardens was a quaint little eatery and tea house. Like the gardens the Royal Foxburrow Tea House was in the village long before the college saw the first groundbreaking ceremony. This tea house also had the distinction of being in the same family for that entire time. Over the many centuries, it became a place for the students to congregate and have a good tea and even a small meal. Clarfax, along with Hardy, Senia and Jada had partaken in this place since their arrival six years before. It had become a part of their daily routine, and a part of their lives while they attended college, so today was not unlike any other day for the four of them.

It had become somewhat a common thing to see Clarfax and Hardy walk into the tea house arm in arm, and even the current proprietor of the establishment had thought that it was a delight to see them. The four always had the same table, and always came at the same time of day. Today was just like any other day. The only difference now, Jada was just a regular civilian.

“Thought you two would be here,” Clarfax said as he and Hardy approached their usual table.

“I may be stripped of rank,” Jada spoke up. “But I'm not

planning on breaking some of our traditions. Some, even the rigid disciplines of the air force cannot break.”

“We were just discussing our plans once graduation,” Senia comments as Clarfax and Hardy took their seats.

“Hardy delivered my letter,” Clarfax announced. “The date is set, I'll have my evaluation soon enough.”

“Nervous>” Jada asked.

“No, of course not,” Clarfax said with a wave of his hand. He took a deep breath and looked to his three friends, finally admitting the obvious. “Very, if you want the truth.”

“I have every confidence,” Hardy said with a grin. “I see nothing that can stand in our way. As far as I'm concerned, 76<sup>th</sup> here we come.” She looked around the table catching the looks in the eyes of her friends, and then defended her comment further. “We have the best scores in the entire group of sixth year cadets. We have the best records, the most commendations. We will get the best pick of placement when the time comes. It's not arrogance. It's confidence.”

“I truly hope so,” Clarfax said with a nod. The conversation died down a bit as a server came and brought them all tea and biscuits. Once they had all been taken care of, Clarfax changed the subject, directing a question to Jada.

“What are your prospects?”

“I did get a letter, actually,” Jada said with a firm nod. “I made a few calls to the Vulpine Trade Commission, and I received a wave this morning from Captain Red Streak of the Dorgatha. She said she's currently evaluating my skills.”

“A Jackai captain,” Hardy said with a smile. “She'll probably take that one black mark as a good sign.”

“Well, it'll be a different experience,” Jada said with a shrug. “But I know the work will be hard, and from what I've heard, Red Streak runs a tight ship.”

“I take it you received the news from the deep space observation platform,” Senia said as she looked to Clarfax.

“I did,” he nodded firmly. “I took it straight away to Robert, Gilbert and Claudia to show them. I promised that if something came in, they'd be the first to see it. It's very exciting news.”

“I had to pry him away from the group,” Hardy said with a chuckle. Clarfax only looked to her and shook his head with a smile. He knew she was exaggerating the earlier action.

“One thing that I am very certain of,” Clarfax finally said as he raised his tea cup. The others caught sight of the motion, a signal that Clarfax had something important to say, and was

preparing a toast. “Whatever does happen with our evaluations, and our placements. Whether we get the postings we want, or we find ourselves someplace else. Let us make certain that we never stop being friends.”

“To friendship,” the other three said in unison, gently clinking their tea cups against one another.

Friendship was always the important thing with these four. It had been tried and tested before many times. They'd always pulled through and found their friendship was stronger than ever. And they had always been able to rely and trust each other more than anyone else.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **ALL THINGS SCIENTIFIC**

The main breakfast hall on the campus was open to all who attended classes, both civilian and air cadets. It wasn't unusual for members of House Falcon to intermingle with members of House Ocelot, House Fennec or House Lynx; and you could still tell the difference between them. While the main houses of the campus all wore their cadet uniforms complete with house colours and stripe ranks on the shoulders, the members of House Falcon wore shirt and ties with dress slacks and had a small cloak. While House Falcon members associated

with any and all other houses, it seemed that they felt more comfortable with House Ocelot.

Also a usual happenstance was the slightly late arrival of House Falcon members to the breakfast hall. House Ocelot was often there first along with members of one or two other houses. But there was one member of House Falcon who managed to beat the rest of her house. Claudia Whitefur, a happy and perky Vulpine named for her fur covering which was pure white. Smaller than many others, she was actually much younger, having advanced her education due to her intelligence. Many thought this would be a detriment to her social skills, but she proved that was not the case at all.

On this morning, like many other mornings, she happily skipped into the hall and took a seat at one of the long tables where members of House Ocelot and House Falcon had gathered to begin the day. There was many in both houses that she recognized; Aria Sharspeer, Clarfax Billings, Hardy Maynard and Jada Hawkspur of House Ocelot, and Robert Quickfoot had all gathered for the morning meal and to chat among themselves. It appeared as though Clarfax and Robert were both pouring over a few books as they ate, getting in some final study before the morning lecture. Hardy was finishing

brushing Clarfax's tail, chastising him for his lack of grooming etiquette. Robert, a rather short and stout Felanus with tan and grey fur, was reading over his books diligently. The world seemed lost to him as he poured over theories on astrophysics.

“Good morning, everyone,” Claudia said cheerily as she took her seat across from the others. She looked around the hall for a moment, as though looking for someone “I was hoping Left-tenant Felix would be about, I had something I was going to tell her regarding the upcoming rough ball semi final match.”

“Captain Mallard came and requested Senia,” Jada informed her. “She actually asked that we mention that she was looking for you as well.”

“Oh!” Claudia said with surprise. It wasn't often that the Captain asked for her, though not surprising considering she was the student head of House Falcon. “Did she say what it was about?”

“No, she didn't,” Hardy replied as she shook her head. “She asked that you meet her and the other House leaders in the faculty lounge.”

“I best get going, then,” she said with her usual smile and trotted off happily toward the faculty lounge.

“You know, her happy attitude can be infectious at

times,” Aria mentioned once Claudia had skipped out of the breakfast hall. “I don't mind positive, infectious attitudes.”

“Too bad she wasn't a little older,” Hardy said as she filled up a glass with orange juice. “She might make a good pilot.”

“Doubt that,” Clarfax spoke up as he looked up from his book. “Claudia wants to be a marine biologist. Has no interest in military matters or even piloting a deep space vessel.”

“She did mention she'd like to travel to the other star systems,” Robert added. “But only to study marine life. She really likes fish, for some reason.”

“You two know a great deal about her, it seems,” Aria said as she finished her morning waffle.

“Well, she is in every single one of our science classes,” Robert replied. “And, she's also my house leader, so, there is that.”

“She's also infectiously cheerful,” Clarfax added with a nod. “Which is something we need with what's happened lately.” He took out a pocket watch and looked at the time. “Oh, blimey. We best get going,” he said as he gathered up his books. Robert looked up at the large clock on the wall and quickly followed suit, both lads moving as though they were



going to be late.

“You've still got twenty minutes,” Jada remarked as the others watched the pair.

“Five minute walk across the yard,” Robert explained as though he'd calculated this all out previously. “Ten minutes to get through the facility to the lecture room. And thirty seconds to find a good seat.” The other three just stared in disbelief, that someone would actually calculate all of that. “If we hurry, we can shave some time off the ten minutes.”

“Right then,” Hardy said as she finished her juice and gathered her things. “Best lead the boys across the yard, then.” The other two chuckled lightly at the comment, then moved to join Clarfax and Robert. “Just hope Senia and Claudia aren't late.”

Clarfax, Robert, Aria, Jada and Hardy made their way across the yard, soon joined by other students making their way to the science building on campus. As they walked, they discussed the upcoming lecture, the previous day's lecture and speculated on what possibly Captain Mallard would want with Senia and Claudia. It became painfully clear once the science building came into view.

Captain Mallard stood at the entrance to the science building and appeared to be in a heated conversation with someone. Behind Captain Mallard, the leaders of the different houses, including Senia and Claudia, stood silently. As the group of students drew closer they saw just what it was that was causing such a fuss.

Six female Vulpine had chained themselves to the entrance of the science building, while a male stood by with a stone look on his face. He was dressed in the common trappings of one of the more religious clans of Foxburrow. He never flinched as Captain Mallard tried to speak in diplomatic and even tones, keeping her temper in check.

“Mr. Farnsworth,” she said as the small group was in earshot. “This is a violation of campus security. I do not care who you are, this action is illegal. You have not explained yourself at all, neither to the duty guards who found you, nor since the arrival of the house leaders and myself. So if you please, enlighten me as to the reason for your actions that mean to disrupt the routine of the campus.”

“With all due respect, ma'am,” he said in a loud voice as he tilted his muzzle in the air. “I do not expect a vixen to understand, nor do I expect a military official to realize the

grave disservice that this building is doing to our youth.”

“And just what would that be, Mr. Farnsworth?” Captain Mallard asked, still keeping her temper in check. She was nearly at her wits end with this one. Students had heard of this Vulpine male and his actions from past reports. He had a habit of dragging a few of his flock onto the base and disrupt daily routines. Nothing he did was ever seen as violent, but it did violate security. He and his followers would spend a few days in detention and then be released.

“We all know what the Great Mother and her sister have taught us as we have grown in society,” he began, his voice pitched as though he were reading his sermon. “That we were born for this land and we are duty bound to stay here. This building and the... teachings within, is blasphemous to what we know to be true.”

Captain Mallard took a deep breath and turned to face the house leaders. They stood at the ready, will to back her up should she require. Claudia seemed the most ready, as this interruption affected her directly. She spied the group of students and looked back to Farnsworth. “Perhaps if I called upon the base chaplin you might consider moving your people aside.” Farnsworth gave no indication either way, but that did

not deter Captain Mallard. “Private Sharpspeer,” she called out. “Front and centre.”

“Yes ma'am,” Aria said as she stepped forward and saluted.

“Fetch Chaplin Rosewood and have her meet us at the entrance,” she said to the young Felanus. “Perhaps if we added some spiritual guidance to this debate, we might get somewhere.” Aria saluted quickly and ran off in the direction of the base chapel. Captain Mallard turned her attention fully on Farnsworth.

The small group of students stood behind the house leaders, milling about and whispering among themselves. The house leaders, Claudia included, stood firm, watching the small group of Vulpine that blocked the entrance.

“I recognize this group,” Clarfax said quietly. “Flatlanders. They believe that Vulpinia is one massive plate. Held up by four rhinos or hippos or something like that.”

“We know that's not true,” Robert replied. “Even I've been to Space Port Omega 1, I've seen the evidence first hand that our planet is, well, like a big ball.”

“Why don't they just take them all up in a shuttle and prove it to them?” Clarfax said with an exasperated sigh.

“You can't force people to do something,” Jada replied in a low voice. “The Flatlanders are very, very stubborn in their beliefs. Their beliefs may be outdated and backwards, but that doesn't give us the right to tell them they're stupid.” They looked to their right as they saw Aria returning, the portly frame of the base Chaplin quickly following behind.

Chaplin Tania Rosewood was a veteran of the Great Lupine Land War and many knew that she appreciated her posting on the base much more than her position with the 82<sup>nd</sup>. She was a stout Felanus who took no guff from anyone. Even someone as stubborn as Farnsworth.

“Barnabus Farnsworth,” Tania called out with a sigh as she stood beside Captain Mallard. Her voice was deep, but had a soothing sing song accent to it. “Thank you, Private Sharspeer, glad I was called out.” She looked to Captain Mallard and nodded. “Remind me to requisition a decent communication link in the base chapel.”

“I'll make certain that we talk to Colonel Traymore about that,” Mallard replied with a smile. She was more at ease since Tania arrived.

The Chaplin turned her full attention to Barnabus. “How many times is it this year, Barnabus? Four? Five? This has got

to stop.”

“With all due respect, Reverend,” Barnabus retorted. “Until the college accepts my proposal that teaches of the truth of flat land...”

“Theory of flat land,” Tania said quickly, then motioned for Barnabus to continue.

“Until then, we shall continue to make protest,” he concluded with a firm nod that was signified with a slight harrumph.

“Barnabus,” Tania said with a sigh. “If this were a thousand years ago, you and your lot would have been dragged to the stocks already. Fortunately, we did away with such punishments centuries ago. We've had this discussion many times before, Barnabus. Your theory is a dying one. We have proof of the way things are. I've tried to show you images...”

“Fabrications!” Barnabus cried out.

Among the throng of students that had gathered, Clarfax and Robert whispered to each other. “See? Too stubborn and set in their ways to allow themselves a possible different theory.” Clarfax said with a sigh. “And I'm sorry, Jada. Yes, you have to be polite and discreet when dealing with people like Barnabus, but he and his ilk are spitting on proven theory. Why

should we be any different to call him out.”

“That’s the basis for scientific discovery,” Robert said as he tried to keep his voice low. “Be presented with a series of events, try to explain them to a point, revisit the events with different possibilities. Even question your own findings.”

“Hey!” Clarfax whispered toward Senia, just low enough to not drown out the small group at the entrance, but loud enough that Senia might hear him. “Psst! Senia.”

It was Claudia who turned to look and noticed Clarfax. Claudia reached over and nudged Senia lightly and motioned to the group of students. Eventually, both Senia and Claudia stepped back to talk to Clarfax.

“What is it, Clarry?” Senia said in a low voice.

“Maybe if some of us students explained,” he suggested. “He might give up if we state that this is railing against our beliefs.”

Senia looked to Claudia who nodded back as though answering a silent question. Six years at the academy, Senia learned to value the advice of others, even if it came from small glances and quiet nods.

“Alright,” Senia replied. “But let us open it up. Mr. Farnsworth might see an interruption as argumentative and

become even more stubborn.” Clarfax nodded in agreement and waited for Senia and Claudia to make their move. “Excuse me,” Senia called out from behind Captain Mallard and Reverend Rosewood. “Might I make a suggestion which could end this stalemate.”

Senia had their attention now, as Captain Mallard, Reverend Rosewood and Barnabus looked directly to her. “Falcon House leader Claudia Whitefur and myself have come to suggest perhaps letting some of the student explain the necessity for such a building as this. Maybe that will shed a bit of light on the situation.”

“Oh yes indeed,” Claudia piped up in her usual happy voice. “If that's alright with all here.” Captain Mallard looked to Reverend Rosewood, and then both looked to Barnabus. The latter harrumphed in reply, which was taken as an agreement of terms. Satisfied, Senia and Claudia motioned toward Clarfax and Robert.

Clarfax nudged Robert and nodded toward the Chaplin and Captain Mallard. Robert didn't catch it at first, but began to understand what Clarfax was doing when he began walking toward the two superior officers. “Captain Mallard,” he said as he cleared his throat. “Reverend Rosewood. Mr. Farnsworth.”



He took a deep breath and looked to Robert, who was just now starting to realize what Clarfax had in mind. “This is more than just a military college, Mr. Farnsworth. More than a training facility for fighter pilots. We're also receiving our education, and often that means that we take classes that may, how shall I say...”

“Butt heads with established beliefs,” Robert said quickly, rather embarrassed with his own sudden outburst. But he understood what Clarfax was getting at.

“Precisely,” Clarfax replied with a nod to Robert. “Just because some of these theories may seem foreign and different than what we grew up with, we still have the right to learn about them.” He watched Farnsworth's reactions carefully. The older Vulpine seemed to be listening carefully at the very least. “To attempt to shut them out or, if I may be so bold, censor them, well, it's an affront to the very establishment of higher learning.”

Everyone watched Farnsworth very carefully. He seemed to be weighing his options, and to Clarfax, it appeared as though he struck a chord. Without actually saying it, Clarfax was attempting to show that Farnsworth's actions of attempting to block the class and shut it down was no better than those who called the Flatlanders stupid and backward. It was a bit of

diplomacy that Clarfax had learned from Senia.

“I suppose,” Farnsworth replied as he came to his own decision. “That I can see your point, young sir. I don't have the right to oppose your own education as you wish it.” He reached into his coat pocket and took out the key to the chains that the Flatlanders had used to chain themselves to the doors.

“Oh by the Great Mother, thank you,” Reverend Rosewood said as she removed her hand from her jacket, revealing that she had been holding onto a set of bolt cutters. “I was hoping that someone would try to reason with you, but if that failed I wasn't gonna hold back and cut you all out.”

Finally, after all of that, the students began to filter into the main lecture hall. For many, this was quite the treat; their professor was quite knowledgeable in the field of astrophysics and very well respected. Colonel Nelson Tyrell, a former student who went on to have a storied career with the Air Corps, but not as a fighter pilot as some might guess. Nelson Tyrell became quite vocal about allowing young Vulpine and Felanus who wished to study at Chattingham should be allowed to do so. Any young student, whether military or not. You see, Nelson Tyrell was a scientist before he was drafted into the military

during the Great Lupine Land War. He showed skill as a pilot, and was enlisted to fly in supplies to the different encampments during the war. After his service, he petitioned the governments of Foxburrow and Ocata, where he grew up, and suggested that air cadets could find value from learning alongside regular civilian students.

After twenty years, the suggestion has been paying off. The air cadets are exposed to different view points in a wide range of fields, and civilian students have the opportunity to see the rigors of life for Vulpinia's air cadets.

Nelson Tyrell happened to be a well liked individual as well, and his classes were often filled. A black furred Felanus who grew up in Ocata, he was one to marvel at the mysteries of the universe, and spared no breath in sharing his discoveries with any who would listen. He was also well liked by the entire faculty.

“Good morning, everyone,” he called out to the students as they took their seats in the lecture hall. “Little bit of excitement this morning, as I understand. I'd ask Barnabus to come in and apologize to you all, but I think some of the decor would be a bit off putting to him.” The students chuckled as Tyrell motioned to a model of the Vulpine Star System. “In all

seriousness, however, this does bring up a point of history that does need to be discussed, and to show everyone just what we once thought of our world over a thousand years ago.”

Suffice to say, dear reader, Colonel Tyrell continued a rather engaging discussion on how the history of star gazing and space exploration changed the views of everyone on the planet. With the exception of a few, that is. A well discussed three hour lecture, which for those in attendance felt was more like an hour. Tyrell always made certain that his talks were engaging and encouraged comments from his students during such lectures.

Once the time had passed, the students began to exit and prepare for their next class. Senia was called over by Claudia, who began to talk in excited, yet conspiring tones about the upcoming rough ball semi final match. A few others began heading to their dorm areas. As for Clarfax and Robert, they stayed behind. So too did Hardy and Aria.

“I see the ever present Corporal Billings and Mr. Quickfoot have remained behind,” Tyrell said with a smile as he moved over to where they sat. “And Corporal Maynard. I take it you're waiting for Clarfax to finish.”

“I'm taking him to lunch after,” Hardy said with a broad

smile and nudged Clarfax. “Thought I'd stay here and make certain he didn't sneak off to the library or the astronomy building as he is often want to do.” She chuckled a bit as Clarfax seemed to blush.

“And Private Sharpspeer,” Tyrell said as he spied the spotted Felanus. “I know that you and Hardy are roommates, but...”

“Oh, I wanted to talk with Bobby about something after the lecture,” she said with confidence and a firm nod then looked to Robert. Robert only blinked and gave Aria a look like a deer caught in the headlights. Hardy knew what Aria was doing.

“I see,” Tyrell said with a knowing smile. He could tell when a young female had her interests in someone. “Well, now that we have that information out of the way, what can I do for you?”

“Need a little confirmation,” Clarfax explained as he sat up in his seat. “And maybe some support. I've been talking with Bobby and, well.” Clarfax looked to Robert and gave him a nudge. Robert seemed to jump a bit in his seat with the nudge. He was still looking at Aria, rather confused with what she had said. “Tell him, Bobby.”

“Oh, um, yeah,” Robert said as he regained his composure. “I know that others can get placements on board vessels or at research stations. But a lot of them are military vessels. What are the chances of getting on board a vessel like the Huntsman?”

“Ah, one of the best scientific vessels of the Vulpine Armada,” Tyrell said with a nod. “Yes, it's true that the Huntsman will pick military trained personnel first, but they also look for skilled civilian scientists as well.”

“That means I'll have to make my mark, I suppose,” Bobby said with a sigh.

“I wouldn't worry about it too much,” Tyrell replied. “I know of two ships that are always looking for a good scientist and usually accept recent graduates.” Tyrell took out a data pad and punched a few keys. The display showed two ships and their specifications. “The Dorgatha and the Barrow's Revenge.”

Bobby took a look at the display and read over the specs for a moment before replying. “I thought the Dorgatha was just a salvage ship.”

“She is,” Tyrell said with a nod. “But she requires someone with your type of qualifications. Astrophysics helps someone like you recognize spacial anomalies, and others on the

ship will need them identified and informed if they are in danger and have to change course or if they can continue on without any change.”

“Well, it is something, I suppose,” Bobby said with a sigh. “How do you apply to get on board?”

“Captain Red Streak often sends out a wave whenever she needs new crew,” Tyrell said as he tucked the data pad away. “Tell you what, I'll keep an ear open and if something comes up, you'll be the first to know.” Bobby smiled and nodded his head, excited at the prospect.

“See,” Clarfax said as he patted Bobby's shoulder. “I told you there's other ways to get out there and explore. Just be on your best behaviour if you get on board with the Dorgatha. Only Jackai vessel worth her salt in the sector.”

Ah yes, the Jackai. A quick pause here, as these creatures will become quite prominent later. The Jackai are one of two races on the planet Lupinia, part of the Lupine Star System. There are two main tribes; the Hyna and the Jayna. The Hyna are vicious and barbaric, while the Jayna are much more friendly. Granted, the Jayna can be just as vicious as their tribal cousins. For now, let's continue with the small conversation at hand.

“So is that all?” Tyrell asked as he looked to the four students. “I hope that was helpful to you.”

“Yes Professor Tyrell,” Bobby said as he rose to his feet and gathered his books. He was smiling now, thinking about star ships and the great beyond.

“Perfect,” Aria said as she also rose to her feet. “Now I can take you around to the tea house, I wanted to talk to you, Bobby.” She looked to him with a smile and Bobby only looked back with a slightly confused look on his face. Eventually, Aria managed to steer him toward the exit.

“I don't think Bobby has any idea,” Hardy said with a small chuckle.

“Aria really likes him, doesn't she?” Clarfax asked. He sighed and shook his head. “She'd have to take the direct route with him, he's always got his nose in a book.”

“You mean more than you?” Hardy said, playfully laughing.

“Hey now,” Clarfax replied, unable to contain a small chuckle. He knew she was only teasing.

“Well, if that's all,” Tyrell said as he walked back to his desk at the front of the lecture hall. “I have some work to do.”

“Of course, Professor,” Clarfax said as he rose to his feet



and gathered his things. Hardy followed suit, and eventually the pair left the lecture hall with the purpose of getting some well needed food.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### TRAINING GROUNDS

Claudia Whitefur awoke with a bit of a start. She could have sworn she heard something, and looked over to her roommate, a white spotted Felanus named Rita Longclaw. Rita was sound asleep, purring lightly away. Claudia and Rita had been roommates since they joined the academy as civilian students. They were the same age, and had similar interests. Both were incredibly gifted, but they did have their differences. Claudia was an extremely light sleeper, while Rita could sleep through a thunderstorm.

While there was no sound to be heard, as Claudia did

strain to listen for something other than Rita's soft purring, she did find a sudden need for a refreshment. The dorm's kitchen had a wide variety of juices available, and the students of House Falcon had run of the kitchen at all hours. Unless, that is, the cook was present. Then the kitchen was his.

Claudia slipped into her bathrobe, retrieved a torch and quietly ventured out into the hallway. She carefully closed the door behind her and began to tip toe carefully down the hallway. Oh, she knew that she could have slammed the door shut and Rita would have slept through it without a care, but that would have been extremely rude and thoughtless. So Claudia kept very quiet, even when in the hallway away from any of her sleeping housemates. She crept carefully down the stairs to the main floor and finally turned her torch on so she could see.

But she found she didn't really need it, as she spied some light coming from the common area. There was definitely light, and now she could hear voices as well. She strained very carefully to listen to the conversation and try to make out to whom the voices belonged.

She heard Carmen Wingbottom and Willard Manfred, a pair of Vulpine students who were enrolled in the aviation program. It wasn't uncommon for the pair to be up all hours of

the night and into the morning talking about ship designs or fuel capacity. Claudia had caught them many a time. But this time was different, as Claudia heard them discussing the flight pattern of a cargo ship.

“Base load can't be too much,” Claudia heard Carmen say. “Specially for a craft this size.”

“It's not a cargo ship per say,” Willard corrected. “It's a passenger ship.”

“And we are going to need passengers,” Claudia heard a third voice. This stopped her. Carmen and Willard hardly ever discussed ships or flight patterns with anyone else. But Claudia recognized the voice. Jada Hawkspur. Had Jada been involved in some of their discussions since she was stripped of rank? Claudia had to find out, and so she boldly walked into the common room.

“I thought I heard Jada...” Claudia stopped talking as she saw Jada, Willard and Carmen weren't the only ones here. Colonel Tyrell and Captain Mallard stood beside a small table where Jada, Willard and Carmen were going over what could have been schematics for a ship.

“A good morning to you, Miss Whitefur,” Colonel Tyrell announced with a grin. “Wasn't expecting you to be up this

early in the morning.”

“I.. um... heard a noise,” Claudia tried to explain, though felt a little foolish while she did so. “It turned out to be nothing, so I was coming downstairs to get a drink.”

“Most fortunate that you're here,” Captain Mallard said as she took out a data pad and examined it closely. “Miss Whitefur, you volunteered for assistance with any training exercises that might crop up for the air cadets.” Claudia nodded as she looked to Captain Mallard, who continued talking once she received confirmation. “Today is the day, and I know it's much earlier than usual for many of the students here in House Falcon, and that there was no warning, but that is all a part of surprise training runs.”

“What exactly am I supposed to do?” Claudia asked.

“If I may, Captain,” Jada said as she looked to Captain Mallard. The captain nodded and allowed Jada to continue. “This is the last training run for House Ocelot. There is to be another house taking part, but we don't know which one. All we do know is we are expecting them to attempt to stop what House Ocelot has to do.” Jada motioned for Claudia to approach the table. On it was the design schematic for a Kingfisher class passenger shuttle. A twelve seater with three pilot stations. The

Kingfishers had limited shields and no weapons, and were used primarily for shuttling those wishing to travel to the Omega One Space Port.

“That's like the shuttles that fairy into the ground based port here,” Claudia said, recognizing the design.

“Exactly,” Jada said with a nod. “But in this training run, we're mounting a rescue operation.”

Claudia's eyes opened wide. She began to understand the scope of the training session. Pilots from House Ocelot would be escorting and protecting the Kingfisher.

“Who do you need to fill the passenger list?” Claudia asked.

“I have that information here,” Captain Mallard said as she handed Claudia a data pad. “If you, and Colonel Tyrell, of course,” Mallard said as she turned to the Colonel and nodded respectfully. “Could wake the students on that list and have them meet int the common room. Mr. Wingbottom and Mr. Manfred will escort everyone to the shuttle craft. Private...” Captain Mallard caught herself, and almost continued by using a rank to identify Jada, but she couldn't do that in front of a superior officer, even if she felt Colonel Tyrell had the same thoughts about Jada as Mallard did. “Miss Hawkspur will act as

former air force and track communication to the squadron that will escort you.”

Claudia nodded, then looked to Colonel Tyrell who smiled and began to escort her back to the main dorm rooms on the second floor. As they disappeared, Captain Mallard turned back to the three pilots.

“Game plan, students,” she said in her most commanding voice. “Once more, then we begin to proceed.”

“I’ll prep the shuttle,” Jada stated quickly. “Get her ready to be airborne.”

“Once the group comes down, I’ll help ‘em pair off,” Carmen added.

“When they’re ready, I’ll keep a watch out on the ground as we begin headin’ to the shuttle,” Willard continued.

“As the group is loading, I’ll keep an ear out for comm traffic,” Jada concluded.

“Excellent,” Captain Mallard said with a firm nod. “Miss Hawkspur, carry out your part now. I’ll head over to the House Ocelot Dorm and waken the cadets.” Jada nodded quickly and gave a standard military salute before she scampered off. Carmen and Willard tried saluting as well, but it seemed a little bit off compared to Jada’s. Nevertheless, Captain

Mallard smiled and nodded to the pair. “Nice try gentlemen. Keep practicing, however.” With that, Captain Mallard left the two, and hurried to her transport.

A two seater hover car, quick vehicles that helped officers get around the academy grounds with ease. For Captain Mallard, who had driven these vehicles enough times in her career, it was only a ten minute drive. She parked the small vehicle, turned it off and exited before making her way into the House Ocelot main dorm.

She strode with purpose through the common room, into the mess hall, up the stairs to the second floor and into the cadets' barracks. The first room at the top of the stairs was always reserved for the house leader; in this case, Senia Felix. As members faculty had master keys to each room, Captain Mallard opened the door without hesitation, and walked right up to Senia's bed.

“Time to get up, Left-tenant,” she said as she roughly shook Senia in her bed. Senia awoke quickly, at first a look of annoyance on her face, then shock at seeing Captain Mallard. Her roommate, a white spotted Felanus, stirred in the bed across the room from Senia. “You may as well get up too, Corporal Talon.” Captain Mallard moved to the front of the room and



watched the pair groggily look about. “Get dressed in your flight uniforms while I rouse the others. Meet in the briefing room and I'll detail what you'll have to do.”

Senia quickly nodded as the sleep began to ebb from her eyes and raced to get into her uniform. Her roommate did the same, and the pair quickly dressed and gathered their gear, then headed to the main briefing room. They were the first to arrive, but were soon joined by many of the others in House Ocelot, all with questioning looks in their eyes. But Senia soon realized what was going on. This was it, this was the final test.

“We're going up today,” Senia remarked to Corporal Talon. The Felanus looked to Senia and nodded in reply. “I'll need a co-pilot, what with Jada ...” She paused a moment, still not able to bring herself to speak the words aloud. Corporal Talon only offered a firm nod, an indication to Senia that nothing more need be said.

Finally, Captain Mallard entered the room and walked to the front, facing the group of cadets. “At oh two hundred hours this morning, we received word a transport ship was entering this area of space,” she announced, treating this test as though it were a regular detail. “There's a good chance there will be hostiles that will either want to capture the transport, or shoot it

down. Our job is to offer protection for the transport until it gets to its destination.” Mallard turned to a map which displayed the area of the college campus, the air traffic lanes, the village, and most of Warrenshire itself. “Which will be right here,” she added, pointing to a place on the map; the landing field for House Bobcat. “The transport ship has a passenger manifest which has been uploaded to each of your data pads. There will be twelve passengers, three pilots. All design specs of the ship are also on your pads.”

Captain Mallard said no more, but it didn't take long for Senia to step forward. “We'll need six aircraft,” she announced, not allowing her speech impediment to deter her. “Talon is with me, she'll be my co-pilot. Billings and Fitz, you take second. Hardy and Sharpspear, third.” She called out six more names, each pilot moving to the front of the room as Senia spoke. “We'll have to co-ordinate communications and radar. Corporal Greta, that's your job,” she said as she nodded to a stripped, brown coated Fenalus. Greta replied with a firm nod, then began to gather her own team. “Alright, we should be set. Let's head to the airfield and prep the fighters.”

“I'll remain here at the command center with Corporal Greta,” Captain Mallard said as she looked to the corporal. “I'll

monitor your actions from the ground. Left-tenant Felix. Pilots,” she said as she offered the twelve pilots a salute. “May the Great Mother watch over you. Good luck.”

The Maverick Mark VI. A dependable fighter craft, highly maneuverable and very fast. Used primarily for quick attacks and aerial battles, especially in deep space near their transport carrier, they can be put into service for escort should the need arise. Equipped with vertical take off and landing, the Maverick Mark VI is fueled with solar powered cells and a neutronium coil drive. As far as weapons go, the Mark VI has three sets of forward phaser banks and one torpedo launcher.

These aircraft were retired shortly after the Great Lupine Land War, but they found a new purpose as training vehicles for the next generation of pilots. Fighter pilots were now using the upgraded Mark VIIIs in the field, which weren't too different from the Mark VIs. For the twelve cadets undertaking this mission, they were all too familiar with the Mark VI and her capability.

The aircraft were like a second home for these twelve, and in truth the entire membership of House Ocelot. They moved quickly as they went into the hangar where their ships

were prepped and ready to launch. Senia and Margo Talon climbed into theirs first, and began last minute check lists to ensure everything was ready.

“Fuel calibration levels,” Senia called out as she fired up her targeting display.

“Steady.”

“Weapons array.”

“Online and ready.”

“Sensor net.”

“Working at maximum capacity.”

“Prepare liftoff,” Senia said as she made one last check to ensure she was buckled in properly into her cockpit. Corporal Talon did the same, and finally gave the nod to bring down the canopy of the craft. As it fit snugly in place, Senia fired up the engines of the Mark VI, she whined at first, but began humming, then she began to slowly lift off until she was hovering only a few meters above ground. “This is Ocelot One,” Senia said into her communicator. “Ready to rendezvous with the transport. Prepare for standard formation and keep a weather eye on the horizon.” She received acknowledgment from the other pilots, and finally the go signal from the Ocelot command station.

The six Mavericks moved slowly, guided by the ground crew, as they began their ascent. Senia and Talon first, followed by Hardy, then Clarfax, and finally the last three pilots. They moved into a standard wing formation, with Senia taking point.

“We are five by five,” Talon reported, her voice communicating to the other pilots as well. “I have the transport ship on sensors. Plotting course to rendezvous.”

“Taking us to one thousand meters,” Senia announced as she skillfully handled the controls of the Maverick. “Are we in communication range with the transport?”

“I have them on the grid,” Talon stated. “Hailing them now.”

“This is civilian transport Kingfisher,” the familiar voice of Jada Hawkspur said over the comm. “We read you loud and clear, Ocelot escort. We have received coordinates and are en route to meet with you.”

“Affirmative, Kingfisher,” Senia quickly replied. “Ocelot Five, Ocelot Six. Keep a close eye on your sensors. Check for any incoming hostiles.”

“Read you, Ocelot One,” came the replies from each pilot.

“Ocelot Control, this is Ocelot One,” Senia announced

into the comm. “We are on course to rendezvous with the Kingfisher.”

“Understood, Ocelot One,” came the reply. “Ocelot Control will continue to monitor the situation and keep you apprised of any anomalies.”

“This is Ocelot Five. We have visual of the Kingfisher,” the pilot of the fifth Maverick announced. “Coordinates, eleven dash five nine Mark zero zero.”

“Understood, Ocelot Five,” Senia announced. “Changing course to intercept. Keep the formation tight, and go into radio silence until we meet the Kingfisher.”

The six Mavericks soon joined the Kingfisher transport ship. A bulky vessel, it had very little for weapons and even less for shielding. An older model ship that many cargo captains favoured due to size and durability. They weren't much for speed, but they also did not pose as a serious target as most pirates tended to leave them be. Every so often, however, a Kingfisher would be used to carry precious cargo, and those rare times a squadron of fighter pilots would be called in to protect her.

Soon, the Kingfisher was flanked by the Ocelot squadron. Two craft on her port and starboard stations, one

craft at her aft and Ocelot One taking point.

The sun was just creeping up over the horizon as the small convoy began to make its way to the House Bobcat airfield. It appeared as though everything might be safe indeed.

“Ocelot One, this is Ocelot Six,” Corporal Vivian Mills called out over the communicator. “We’ve detected a small unit of craft approaching from zero three dash one five Mark one six. Initial scans were jammed, but we’ve managed to determine they are House Fennec squadron.”

“Those are your hostiles,” the voice of Captain Mallard said over the communicator.

“Keep tight to the transport,” Senia said as she kept a tight grip on her crafts stick. “Time to intercept?”

“Two minutes,” Mills called out.

“Time to House Bobcat airfield?”

“Ten minutes,” Mills called out again.

“Looks like we’re going to be in a fight,” Senia said with a hiss. “Keep tight and don’t fire until I give the word. Ocelot Six, you have permission to break off and pursue. I’ll leave the time to your discretion.”

Captain Mallard stood quietly in the communications

room, watching the movements of all the cadets and listening to the chatter. Each move was carefully cataloged in her memory for later evaluation.

“Ocelot One, reading confirmed. Four fighter craft with House Fennec markings.”

“Advising House Bobcat airbase of situation.”

“Prepare to modulate communication frequency to three four one.”

Mallard was impressed, and though she tried to remain stoic as she watched, she couldn't help but smile. After all, she was the faculty liaison for House Ocelot, and many of their training exercises were based her own designs that she modified from her own experiences.

“Ocelot Six is breaking off from formation.”

“Understood, Ocelot One through Five are moving formation to cover the opening.”

“Ocelot Six just took out two fighters.”

“She's taken damage.”

There was a silence that filled the room with that announcement, then confirmation that Ocelot Six was hit and coming down.

“Have a team meet the pilots at the rendezvous point,”



Mallard finally said as she broke her silence. “Bring them to the command center.”

With academy training programs, pilots were always expecting to be fired upon. They went through several drills regarding what to do in the event a craft was about to crash and even if a craft has been fired upon. In this situation, all training craft were outfit with holographic weaponry. The weapon units would target tracers on 'enemy ships' and if they hit, that ship would suddenly cease to operate at maximum capacity for the area it had been 'hit' in. Under normal situations, pilots could guide their craft into base without problem. However, if the pilot found a majority of the systems were destroyed, the air craft's autopilot would kick in, and begin to steer the craft back to home base. This announced that the craft had been completely destroyed in the training simulation. In this case, pilot Corporal Vivian Mills and co-pilot Private Harry Pinkerton, had succeeded in destroying two enemy aircraft, but had sacrificed themselves to the four fighters.

Nevertheless, they would still get an evaluation of their actions before their time in the exercise ended. Captain Mallard felt they performed quite well. She turned her attention back to the room, once again listening to the chatter.

“House Bobcat has sent reinforcements.”

“The final enemy ships are retreating.”

“House Bobcat has given landing clearance.”

Mallard's attention shifted as the doors to the command center opened and the two aforementioned pilots walked in. “Corporal Mills. Private Pinkerton. Excellent work. You may get out of your gear and wait in the house conference room,” she said with a nod to the two cadets. Both gave a nod and a salute, then rushed off to get out of their flight suits. Mallard stepped toward the communications console and punched in her codes, allowing her to speak directly to the pilots and those in the room at the same time. “Excellent work, all of you. Now, if you would, gather in the house conference room in thirty minutes. I'll give you your final evaluations.” She paused before cutting the communication, but decided to add one more thing. “I would also like Miss Hawkspur to be present for this.”

The cadets gathered in the main conference room, all taking part in an early morning cup of tea. The sun had risen fully now, and the idle chatter seemed to focus between the training run and the fact that breakfast would be in order. The remaining ten pilots joined Mills and Pinkerton, with Senia

giving congratulations all around. Even a welcoming smile was given to Jada as she sat down among the pilots for this final debriefing.

The chatter quieted quickly as Captain Mallard entered the room. All cadets rose to their feet and stood at attention, including Jada.

“As you were,” Mallard announced as she stood before a podium that faced the cadets. She placed a data pad on the surface and read carefully from it before speaking aloud. The cadets settled back into their seats as they waited for Captain Mallard to begin. “As you know, this was your last training exercise,” she began, looking to all of the cadets. “I’m happy to say you performed quite admirably. And if it’s any indication, you’ll have no difficulty dealing with House Fennec in the upcoming rough ball match.” The cadets chuckled lightly to the remark before Mallard continued. “Out of a possible 500 points, I award you 475. The only marks withdrawn was the loss of Ocelot Six. It was unavoidable, but the goal is to attempt to get every craft to the target base in time.” She looked to Mills and Pinkerton. “Individually, I’m awarding each of you 50 points. Quick thinking, and excellent marksmanship.” Mills and Pinkerton smiled and offered a nod in thanks.

Mallard turned to Corporal Greta next. “You kept the communication lines open, Corporal. Key in ensuring that the escort was successful. For you, and for those on your team, I award you 50 points each.” There was a small celebratory congratulations that went around the room as the group that made up command central lightly cheered. Next, came the pilots themselves. “Left-tenant Felix and the remaining pilots. Quick thinking, no hesitation, and lastly, sticking to the transport. You understood the importance of the transport and stuck with it. Excellent work. For that, 50 points for each of you.”

The pilots cheered and there were hugs and congratulations that went around the room. They quieted down again, however, as Captain Mallard raised her hand for some order. “There is one last detail that must be addressed,” she said as she looked to Jada. “You may have been stripped of rank, but you're still a member of House Ocelot. You kept a civil head during the exercise, especially with the unpredictable nature of the civilian students.”

“It wasn't that difficult, ma'am,” Jada said with a smile. “Half o' 'em went back ta sleep, an' only Bobby was the most problematic. An' he just had to pee quite badly.” There was

some laughter that went through the group.

“I think from now on,” Captain Mallard said with a smile. “It should be impressed upon Mr. Quickfoot to take care of business before anything pressing need be done. Nevertheless, I can still award you 50 points for your actions during the exercise.” There was a cheer that went up through the room, and each cadet congratulated Jada with a pat on the shoulder. For Senia's part, she gave Jada a hug.

Captain Mallard held her hands up for order and attention once more, speaking when everyone was paying attention to her again. “Now, that is your final training run of the year. Each of you has done extremely well. As House Liaison, I couldn't be more proud of each and every one of you. Some of you still have some classes,” she said as she looked to Clarfax and a few of the cadets around him. “But also importantly, there is still the rough ball match coming up. There is a practice this afternoon before the upcoming match, so those who are on the team get some rest. All right everyone. Dismissed.”

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### ROUGH BALL

“Alright everyone, gather 'round, gather 'round,” Millicent Yarborough called out as the players of the House Ocelot rough ball team finished their stretches. Millicent was a rather tall Vulpine with long ears and tawny fur. She was a former professional rough baller herself, having once played for the Warrenshire RC in the Nations League. “Tomorrow, as you all know, is the semi-final match against House Fennec. I don't think I have ta remind any of you that House Fennec only lost one game this year. That bein' to House Falcon.” The gathered

players paid close attention to Millicent as she spoke, knowing full well the grand upset that House Falcon put on House Fennec.

It was considered an easy match for House Fennec, but they let their guard down, and House Falcon went onto take advantage of several miscues from their opponent.

“What House Falcon managed ta do, we've got ta try,” Millicent explained carefully. “We'll be in tough, however, as House Fennec won't be as over confident against us. Now, we'll have a wee change o' strategy and player set up, seein' how our star striker won't be with us.” Millicent didn't need to mention anything else about the events regarding Jada. It was common knowledge now all over campus, and most likely into the village itself. “Hardy Maynard,” Millicent called out with her authoritative voice. Hardy stepped forward quickly, paying close attention. “You're movin' ta left inside wing. Yer stronger on the left side I've noticed, an' maybe we can give House Fennec somethin' ta think about in that area.” Hardy nodded firmly, smiling at the chance to be one of the main offensive rushers.

“Clarfax Billings,” she called out again. Clarfax responded in similar fashion to Hardy. “We're movin' you ta the

striker position. You've got a knack for it, plus the opposition'll have somethin' new ta try an' combat.” Again, Clarfax nodded firmly. “Aria, still jumper. I've yet ta see anyone able ta out wit you in the center circle.” Aria smiled with a nod. The jumper was a key position, especially when the match would begin. Jumpers usually set the tone of the match. “Mills, Pinkerton,” Millicent called out again. The two Felanus who had piloted Ocelot Six stepped forward. “I'm movin' you from second line ta first line. You both will still be on defense, so no change there. As for the rest o' the line up, no changes.” Millicent tucked a clipboard she was carrying under one arm and held a whistle close to her muzzle. “Alright, everyone. Let's try a few practice scrums an' set tone for your game play. This'll be early practice so no full contact, understood?” The players nodded in reply and waited for the first whistle to blow.

Millicent let out a shrill whistle and the players began moving to their positions like a well oiled machine. Senia took up her position in goal, Aria to the center, Hardy on the left wing, Clarfax on the striker position, as Mills and Pinkerton took their positions on defense along with Margo Talon and Corporal Greta.

The team was quite confident and very professional in



their actions. Everything went by the book, and often, Millicent would give several tips on how to better their play. It wasn't uncommon, after all, for cadets to be offered positions with some of the professional leagues across Vulpinia. Rough Ball was, of course, a planetary past time. The most popular sport among both the Vulpine and Felanus races. It had a long history on the planet, one that held a great deal of tradition.

And I suppose, dear reader, that you might wish to learn something about this. Well then, let us pause as we look to the history and rules of the sport of rough ball.

Rough Ball is, most likely, the most important sport in the entire history of the planet Vulpinia. It's history alone spans three thousand years. Every match ever played has been recorded, documented, and referenced. Right from the very first game ever played.

The development of the sport was actually used to help end an ancient war between the Vulpine and the Felanus. Not all Vulpine and Felanus races were involved in the war, mind you. But the five primary nations involved were Foxburrow, the Ocata Nation, the desert nation of Sandicia to the east, the northern tundra nation of Kanata, and the equatorial nation of

Mayala had hostile actions toward each other for centuries before.

Fortunately for the populace, during that time there were those who had developed civil relations that had no affiliation to any government or crown. Yet, they tired of the constant warring between the five nations. They needed to create a contest that would do away with bloodshed. Something that could be used to salvage peace.

A group of twenty creative Vulpinians came together, using bits and pieces of sport from each nation to create something that would resemble a part of each nation. The pitch represented Foxburrow, the central most nation in the conflict. A small net to be used by a goal keeper that represented Kanata. Ten players on the field to represent the ten different races caught up in the conflict. The size and shape of the ball, to represent the ball used in a popular game in the Ocata nation. Sand semi circles near each of the two goals to represent Sandicia. And finally, no matter whether there was rain, snow or shine, the game was always to be played outdoors in the manner that those of the Mayala nation played their own games.

Now, there was a complex series of rules that needed to be made for such a game. Over the three millennium, those

rules were modified and amended and changed to fit the changing times. Today, there has been a solid set of rules that has been unchanging for the last one hundred years.

The standard size of each playing field is 105 meters long by 65 meters wide. There is a center line dividing the field in half, and goals at each end. Each goal is surrounded by a 35 meter wide semi circle of sand, and each goal is five meters wide by three meters tall.

Each team has ten players on the field at all times. Five players are offensive and help direct the rush of the ball forward, while four players act as defenders and protect their own end against oncoming rushes from the opposing team. One player acts as the goal keeper and keeps within the area of the sand to guard against any attempts by the opposing team to score.

To begin each game, the center-men from each team, often called the quarterbacks, meet in the center of the field and wait for the head referee to toss up the ball. Each player would then jump for the ball, hoping to knock it back to their own teammates. This is when the strategies of offense and defense begins. Defenders will try to tackle the ball carrier, while the ball carrier will attempt to pass the ball off to continue the rush

up the field. Ball carriers can only take three steps and then must bounce the ball off the turf and catch it again. Forward, overhand passes are not allowed, but an underhand lateral back to a teammate is. A forward motion with the ball is allowed only if the ball carrier bumps the ball with the heel of their hand.

For scoring purposes there are two types. Either a ball carrier may cross the goal line with the ball and have his or her team awarded three points, or skillfull players may kick the ball through the goal posts and that team is awarded six points. In both scenarios, the goal keeper can use their net to either catch the ball if kicked, or push the player down before crossing the goal line. The net cannot be used as a weapon, either to strike at or trip up a player with the ball. These are the simple and quick rules to the game, there are many more which involve penalties, scrums, and player substitution. Suffice it to say an entire book could be written on the rules of the sport alone.

As it stands, rough ball has become the most popular sport in all of Vulpinia. There is the traditional Five Nations Cup, played every five years to commemorate the end of the war those many millennium ago. The Universities Cup, which different colleges and universities participate in each year. The Eastern and Western Leagues each have their own professional

level of rough ball. And then there is the college level of play, as students from different houses have their own rough ball teams and compete against each other throughout the course of the school year.

Even the distant planet of Pau Theta II has a group of four teams that play during the regular run of the rough ball season. Sometimes, the champion of the Pau Theta League is invited to participate during the Five Nations Cup.

To become a rough baller, as it is often called, is just one of the dreams of many young Vulpine and Felanus children. The sport helped end a war on Vulpinia, and therefore it holds a great deal of tradition and honour. It brings people together in a way nothing else ever has. Even the smallest community has a rough ball pitch, where spectators bring out lawn chairs and small picnic lunches to watch a match or two. Naturally, some of the grandest stadiums are in the largest centers on the planet, such as Ocata Stadium, the Fox Den or the Mayala Bowl. Those three alone can seat over one hundred thousand fans each.

So when citizens of Vulpinia talk about rough ball, they aren't just engaged in idle chatter. It's very important to them, because it plays such a large role in their lives.

The shrill whistle sounded out, bringing an end to the practice. Millicent Yarborough waved the players toward her, calling for them to gather around. “It was an early mornin' practice,” Millicent said with a firm nod to the entire group. “But you've done well. That may be in part due ta the fact that getting up at five in the mornin' is common place for everyone here.” She smiled as the players chuckled lightly at the small joke. In truth, it was a compliment to their dedication as air cadets.

“Here's what I'll need from each o' you before tomorrow's match,” Millicent said, her voice quieting a bit as she took a more serious tone. “I know that you will all be nervous. But we've all worked hard ta get where we are durin' this season. You've all done well. It's not over, though. We've got one game left.”

“And then the final match,” one of the players called out, a tall looking Vulpine with black fur. There was a small chuckle from all of the players at the comment.

“Yes, but let's focus on tomorrow's game, Gregory,” Millicent said with a friendly reminder. “Tonight, get some rest. A proper bed time for all o' you.” She looked to each player for a moment before she concluded her small speech. “Alright, get

cleaned up, an' I'll see you on the pitch tomorrow.” She let out one more shrill whistle and the players began to make their way back to the change rooms.

“A bit of lunch?” Senia asked of Clarfax and Hardy as they walked together back to the change rooms. “I could go for a good meal after a long practise like that.”

“I'd love that, myself,” Hardy replied. She sighed as they walked along. “Funny, isn't it. How we've been together here for six years. And now it's all comin' to an end.”

“Not bitter sweet, I'd hope,” Clarfax stated with a smile. “We've still got evaluations, and placements. I'm fully confident we'll all have the proper choice of where we want to go.”

“Which means,” Senia said with a smile as she lift a finger to the sky. “76<sup>th</sup>, here we come!”

Lunch on a fifth day of the week was almost always held at The Flying Fox in the village proper. It had become a regular spot for air cadets, visiting pilots and old veterans alike. It wasn't uncommon to hear one wily old veteran schooling some of the younger cadets on the tactics of air combat, flying the old air craft or even some of the more harrowing escapes

that had become legend around the small tavern and diner. Those tales were most often told during the evening hours. During late morning to early afternoon, it seemed much more quiet.

On this day, only a few of the villagers had made their way into the diner for a spot of lunch and maybe some tea. There was old Mr. Crandal, who was always seen at the diner at eleven o'clock, reading his paper and smoking his pipe at the sidewalk tables with a cup of tea at hand. Miss Swifter was there as well, taking a rest from her daily deliveries around the village as she would always complete the mail run in Chattingham. A few of the young kits and cubs from the nearby Chattingham Elementary School would often stop by to purchase sodas. And finally, a few of the Academy students were almost always present.

For Senia, Clarfax and Hardy, they had become just as well known as many of the others who frequented this place, and they received greetings and salutations as they walked inside and took up their usual table. As was often the case, the proprietor of the Flying Fox would always greet them, as was the case with every customer.

“Just a wee bit before noon time,” Abigail Crenshaw



said in her cheerful, sing song tone. “A bit early ta see you three here.” Abigail, or Abby as she was known, was tan coloured Felanus who had come to Foxburrow from the eastern desert of Sandicia years ago with a business prospect in mind. Before the outbreak of the Great Lupine Land War, she had opened her tavern and diner and done quite well for herself.

“Just finished rough ball practice,” Senia informed her.

“Oh that's right,” Abby said with a big grin. “T'morrow's the match against House Fennec. Been so busy 'round here I almost forgot.” Abby was the kind of hostess who knew her clientele very, very well, and she could always be able to make dinner and supper suggestions to each customer. “Clarfax, we've got a lovely Sandician salad, complete with fresh lettuce, cucumber, a smatterin' of goat cheese an' lightly sprinkled with a tasty toppin' that's not too spicy an' not too sweet.”

“I'd love that, Miss Crenshaw,” Clarfax said with a nod as he smiled at the thought of the dish. “And maybe, if I could also have a slice of your famous lemon pie.”

“I'll get you the pie after the salad,” Abby said, then turned to Hardy. “Thick slices o' ham, topped with equally thick slices o' pale cheese, lettuce an' tomato, with a light sauce,

all between two thick slices of rye bread. As an added bonus, a side dish of fresh prawns, lightly battered.”

“Oh, Miss Crenshaw, you make it sound wonderful,” Hardy said, nearly smacking her lips together. “In truth, I know that what you describe is only a teaser for what's to come.”

Abby grinned and patted Hardy's shoulder, then turned to Senia. “You look in the mood for a late brunch. A thick, Malayan waffle, topped with rich, whipped cream, strawberries and drowned in a thick Kanatian syrup.”

“Remind me, that should ever I grow despondent, that I just need come here and listen to you speak of food, Miss Crenshaw,” Senia said with a smile as she nodded her approval of the suggested dish.

Abby giggled lightly and clapped her hands, adding one final thing. “It is early in the day, so I believe a tall glass of apple juice would suit. Though, as an added incentive for tomorrow's match, I just recently procured four kegs of Rose Petal Ale. Come here after the match, and win 'r lose, I promise one round on the house for the team.”

“Oh, you can count on that, Miss Crenshaw,” Senia replied with a big grin. Hardy and Clarfax nodded quickly in agreement, and Abby, satisfied with her ability to pin point what

her customers wanted, hurried back to the kitchen to fill the orders.

“Have I mentioned how much I love this place?” Senia said as the three were left to their own discussion.

“I just hope we'll find someplace like this when we get our placement,” Hardy remarked. “Though, I've heard the main ship that the 76<sup>th</sup> is often carried on has an excellent diner like this.”

“I thought deep space carriers had large mess halls,” Clarfax piped up as he tried to recall some obscure information from a book he once read.

“I know for a fact that the Tritan has a mess hall, a forward lounge, and a tavern style diner,” Hardy said with a grin.

“But the Tritan is a star destroyer,” Clarfax argued as he tried to think of his old classes in ship history. “They have limited crew.”

“No no,” Hardy said as she shook her head, stating boldly her knowledge of ships in the Vulpine Fleet. “The Tritan is a star cruiser, and has a crew compliment of three thousand, and an additional air craft support of five hundred.” Hardy turned as she heard chuckling from Senia's chair. “What?”

“You two,” Senia said as she tried to compose herself. “You always do this. It's either Hardy's knowledge of ships, or Clarfax's absolute certainty of spacial anomalies or even stars in the sky.”

“Keeps life interesting,” Clarfax said with a firm nod. The three chuckled in unison for a moment, then looked up as they were greeted by a cheery voice.

“Hello everyone,” Claudia Whitefur said with a smile. “Wasn't expecting to see you three here.”

“It's a traditional spot for air cadets,” Senia said as she motioned for Claudia to sit down. “We've been coming here every fifth day of the week for six years now.”

“I don't make it here too often,” Claudia said as she took her seat, carefully setting down her bookbag. “And when I do, it's usually on the second day of the week. But today was a good day, so I wanted to treat myself.”

“A good day?” Clarfax asked as he leaned forward. “What did you do?”

“It was my last final exam,” she replied with confidence.

“I take it by the sound in your voice that you aced it,” Hardy said as she nudged Claudia.

“Naturally,” Claudia replied.

“Well, I really wasn't expectin' ta see a fourth t'day,” came the voice of Abby as she approached the table with a tray. She talked as she set down plates in front of the three air cadets. “Let's see. I think I have you figured out. Lovely watercress sandwiches on whole wheat bread, three lightly cooked farmer sausages, an' a bowl o' strawberries an' fresh farm cream.”

“Yes please, Miss Crenshaw,” Claudia replied with a smile. She turned back to the others as Abby left once more to take care of the order. “And that is why I like coming here for a treat, because Miss Crenshaw knows exactly what I like.”

“Back to the exam,” Clarfax said as he pulled up his chair to the table. “How'd the others do? Bobby? Gilly?”

“Gilly looked pretty confident,” Claudia said with a nod. “Robert was his usual self, but I think he did fine. He knows the material better than anyone.”

“I heard Robert is more worried about placement after he graduates,” Senia said before taking a sip of her juice. “He'll have a lot of options open to him, I know that for certain.”

“After the exam, he and Aria went off to the memorial together,” Claudia stated. The conversation paused as Abby returned with Claudia's order. Once they were all squared away, they began to eat, continuing their conversation between bites.

“I heard Aria and Bobby are going to the graduation ceremonies together,” Hardy said in a quiet tone. “I wonder if Aria's told Bobby yet.”

“Told Bobby what?” Clarfax asked as he nibbled on some lettuce leaves. Claudia seemed equally curious.

“Hardy!” Senia said as she shook her head. “Aria asked that we not gossip about... you know. It's disrespectful to do that.”

Clarfax seemed rather confused, but it was Claudia that put two and two together. “Oh, you mean that Aria is the eldest daughter of the Ocata Royal Family?” Hardy looked to Senia and merely motioned to Claudia. “I thought everyone knew that.”

“I didn't,” Clarfax said with a huff as he finished his salad. “It would appear I'm the last to find these things out.”

“That would be because you have your head in a book all the time,” Hardy teased lightly.

“Why don't we pop around the memorial after we're finished,” Senia suggested. “I haven't walked through there in a few weeks, be nice to remember who came before us. And maybe we'll run into Aria and Bobby as well.”

The four agreed and continued their meal, chatting about

various things such as the upcoming rough ball match, graduation, expectations after school and much more. Including a wish that they never stay out of touch.

## CHAPTER NINE

### DISTANT MEMORIES

The four students were right. They walked through the floral arch that lead to the memorial grounds of the village, and there among the headstones and plaques on a set of benches in the middle of the park were Aria and Bobby. They seemed to be in a deep conversation and it was visible that Bobby was holding a small floral token, often left pinned to the plaques as a remembrance of one or several individuals who sacrificed their lives while in service of the Royal Air Corps.

Although the four walked quietly through the paths of



the memorial garden, Aria and Bobby still heard them, glancing up as they approached. They stopped together as some small unit, Senia removing her uniform cap as she spoke quietly. “I hope we weren’t interrupting you both.”

Aria smiled and looked to Bobby. He shook his head and tried to smile back. The others could tell he was thinking of something rather painful, which was often the case when one came to these gardens. “It’s... it’s okay,” Bobby said as he coughed and cleared his throat. “I was just telling Aria about my dad. Jacob Quickfoot. He flew with the 82<sup>nd</sup>, a small squadron dispatched to Lupinia during the land war.” Bobby left out the word ‘great’, often giving his thoughts that the word should mean something more than just massive. That it should mean something wondrous. And that war on Lupinia was anything but wondrous.

“I had read about your father,” Hardy said as she took a seat on one of the benches, Clarfax sitting next to her. Senia and Claudia also sat down on the benches. “He flew with Nattie, Carla and Dunny and had to crash land in the desert.”

Bobby nodded as he held the small token carefully. He looked to Aria who seemed to give him an encouraging smile as she placed her hand on his shoulder. “He got stung by a viper

scorpion when his craft crashed. The others got to him, thinking that the viper scorpion was alone. Dad said they'd heard about them, but they hadn't ever experienced a sting from one. They did get to Dorgatha Ravine and there was a doctor there who helped him." He looked down to the flower token once again and sighed deeply. "But they only had so much and the poison went through him pretty fast. He managed to come home, but he got sick a lot."

The others sat silently, letting Bobby describe everything. How his father and three other fighter pilots joined to defend a Jayna tribe stronghold during the last year of the war. Though he could barely walk, he did his part to assist with what he could; learned about the differences between Hyna and Jayna citizens and grew a new respect for Pantherans, as one had become his doctor during that time.

"Dad always told me," Bobby concluded as he managed to find a bit more strength as he told the tale of his father. "He never regretted becoming a fighter pilot, but he knew it wasn't a life for everyone. He and mom both encouraged me to take up sciences, and to look to the stars." He sniffled and wiped his nose with a handkerchief he pulled from his pocket. "Sorry. Talking about dad gets to me sometimes. I miss him."

“I don’t doubt you do,” Senia said with a nod. “Sometimes it helps to talk about loved ones long gone. It keeps them alive, in here,” she said, pointing to her temple, referencing that Bobby would always remember his father. She then touched her hand over her heart. “And in here as well.”

“Thanks,” Bobby replied as he offered a small smile. “And thanks for listening everyone. Now,” he said as he took a deep breath and rose to his feet. “I think I want to spend some time around people.”

“Well, you’re in luck,” Claudia said with a grin. “We’re people, and you could spend it with us. If you’d all like, we can go back to the campus, maybe go to the cafeteria and enjoy a few chocolate milkshakes.” Claudia’s suggestion sparked a great deal of interest in all present. It was quickly agreed upon that it was a very good idea indeed, so all six of them - Senia, Hardy, Clarfax, Claudia, Aria and Bobby - all gingerly stood up and walked leisurely back to the main campus for more jovial discussions.

The path back to the barracks was a quiet one as the six students talked and laughed together. They decided to take the overlook, a small hill which looked down on both the village

and the academy, and everything in the surrounding countryside could be viewed from that spot. Many of the towns folk often would stop by just to relax and enjoy the wonderful view. There weren't many people there on this afternoon, except for old Mr. Crandal, who Senia, Hardy and Clarfax all saw at the Flying Fox earlier that afternoon. He was an old Vulpine who used to fly cargo ships with the Vulpine Trade Commission. Wearing his usual tweed coat and leaning on his cane as he smoked his pipe, he seemed to be watching something down in the barracks below.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Crandal," Claudia said as the six students reached the top of the hill. The older Vulpine turned and nodded his greeting and looked back toward the barracks. Claudia followed his gaze, catching sight of what appeared to be a smartly designed transport ship and four black fighter craft. All of them were parked on the main visitors' tarmac where craft from orbital platforms and visiting ships would land. "Oh, there's newcomers to the academy!" Claudia exclaimed with some excitement.

"Any o' you kits tell me what those are?" Mr. Crandal said as he motioned to the five craft and looked to the six. He wasn't asking because he wanted to know, he was asking to see

if the students knew. Quickly, Aria and Hardy began to search through their satchel for something to see more clearly. "Ah! Without the aid o' anythin' ta help," Mr. Crandal said with a grin and took another puff on his pipe.

"That looks like a captain's yacht," Senia commented. "I've seen that design used with the Vulpine Trade Commission before." Mr. Crandal nodded in agreement, and merely stood back and waited for the six to continue.

"Those fighters look like the old Maverick Mk V," Hardy commented.

"They were never painted black," Aria said as she looked to Hardy. "The Royal Vulpine Air Corps is blue."

"That's right," Mr. Crandal said with a nod.

"And those craft were decommissioned years ago," Aria added. "Not long after the Lupine Land War."

"Wait a second," Hardy said as she stepped forward and studied the craft for a moment more. "Black Maverick's, along with a fancy captain's yacht."

"That can only be one thing," Senia said as she came to stand beside Hardy, her eyes suddenly wide with excitement. "That's the Midnight Squadron. That's Left-tenant Colonel Artemis Dawkins' squadron from The Barrow's Revenge. And

that means the yacht is..."

"Captain Crena Clarendale's," Aria added as she stepped forward, finishing Senia's sentence. Everyone knew about the Barrow's Revenge, a transport ship converted to include better weapons and shields and a heavier payload. And, fitted with a hangar bay to house the equally famed Midnight Squadron.

"That's right," Mr. Crandal said with a chuckle and took another puff from his pipe. "With any luck, you kits will be able ta meet 'em today. From what I understand, Dawkins is getting a tour o' the facility with a few o' his mates." He paused a moment and looked to the six students once again, each of them looking on in wonder at the five craft. "Well, what are you all waiting for. If you go now, ya might be able ta meet 'em." Mr. Crandal chuckled as he watched the reactions from the six. They tried to be very casual about the whole thing, but he could tell that they all had a bit of hero worship in their eyes. He just chuckled and watched as they began to make their way down the hill, walking a little faster than normal without breaking into a run.

As much as the students tried to keep from breaking into a run, they couldn't hide their own excitement. The fabled

Barrow's Revenge was in orbit, and there was a chance that not only the captain, but members of the Midnight Squadron were somewhere on the Academy grounds. They just had to find out where.

"I bet he's in the aerodrome. Colonel Dawkins, that is," Hardy said with a grin as she walked at a fast pace across the main tarmac. "He'd most likely want to see what we're using for training purposes."

"Are you certain of that?" Senia remarked. "I've read he often thought the Mark V's were the best ships ever built. He could be in the main administration building, having a chat with administration staff."

"No," Aria replied with a grin as the main barracks for House Ocelot came into view. "You're both forgetting something very important. Dawkins was an Ocelot. He'd most likely be there, and Captain Mallard would be giving him a tour. I bet my tail on that." The six chuckled lightly at Aria's comment as they crossed to the main building of the barracks. Most likely Mallard would be entertaining Dawkins there, keeping him up to date with what accomplishments the House had made.

Aria's suspicions held true, for as they walked through

the front doors of the main lobby they were soon answered. There with Captain Mallard, sitting in one set of couches in the main lobby was Left-tenant Colonel Artemis Dawkins and Sargent Harriet Taggart. Dawkins was a stoic looking Vulpine, with black fur that seemed to match the brown of his leather flight jacket. He wore an old style pilot's cap at a slight tilt and had a monocle. Taggart was a white spotted Felanus, and as the stories often told, she was Dawkins second in command and most trusted friend. She was often mentioned in any writings to have a pipe on her person at all times, but on this day she hadn't lit one up, most likely due to the rigid rules regarding smoking on the barracks. As the students entered, all three turned to look over.

"Ah, and here we have some of House Ocelot's finest," Captain Mallard said as she rose to her feet. "Along with a hard working pair from House Falcon," she added with a nod toward Claudia and Bobby.

Dawkins and Taggart stepped over to the group of students, offering them each a pleasant smile. He nodded when he recognized the left-tenant's stripes on Senia's shoulders. "You must be Felix," Dawkins commented as he offered his hand to Senia. She gladly, though with some nervousness,



accepted it. "Captain Mallard has been telling a few riveting tales about you and some of your friends."

"Yes, thank you, sir," she said, slightly embarrassed with her speech impediment. Dawkins picked up on it right away, but only smiled and gave Senia a small nudge.

"The best pilots," Dawkins said in a low voice as he leaned closer to Senia. "Are the ones able to overcome any handicap. No matter how big, or how small they may be. Don't feel you have to be quiet around me and Taggart, understood?" Senia nodded with a small smile, relieved that she didn't embarrass herself too much. "Now, Left-tenant. Perhaps you could introduce us to the others you're with." Senia was more than happy to comply, introducing Hardy, Clarfax and Aria as comrades in House Ocelot, and even making quick mention of some of their own accomplishments at the academy. She then turned her attention to Claudia and Bobby, introducing them both and detailing some of the things that they had done in House Falcon.

"Mark o' a true leader, that," Taggart replied with a nod as she nudged Dawkins lightly. "Know 'er own crew an' she also makes it a habit ta get ta know those outside o' her comfort zone." Senia blushed slightly, but kept her stature straight. She

felt some pride at the compliment given to her.

"Indeed," Dawkins replied. "It was one of the most important things we had to deal with during the war." He circled around the couches and motioned for the others to take a seat, an sign Taggart had seen too many times. She chuckled lightly as she watched the cadets and pair of students quickly sit down. Even Mallard seemed riveted. "During the war on Lupinia, there were several times we had to re-evaluate our situation. My crew soon found out that a lot of the intelligence information that we did not receive with the greatest of accuracy. I remember there was a captain who, during the war, felt that everything we had received was absolutely accurate. But members of my squadron had some very contradictory information. As an example, Dorgatha's Ravine," Dawkins said as he looked to Robert. Bobby knew immediately that Dawkins had recognized his last name, Quickfoot, and associated it with his father. "We knew of the four fighter craft that were lost not far from the ravine, but intelligence said that all hands were lost, all four pilots killed. Nevertheless, we had been sent to search for any remains, which we found the hulks of the crashed fighters. This captain had said that was evidence enough, but as it happened, Taggart and one of my officers, Simms, still flying

with me today, as it would happen. At anyrate, Taggart and Simms had performed quite thorough scans of the area and they found tracks leading away from the crash site. There were two Vulpine and one Felanus that walked along with three Jackai. But, there were three other pairs of tracks. At the time, we were told it was merely three more Jackai, possibly from the same tribe, but Simms knew it was not so. As Simms pointed out, the tracks were in fact longer than Jackai footfalls. Which could only point to either Pantheran or Lionid. As it turned out, it was the enclave of Red Tail and his people, along with three medical personnel all of whom were Pantheran. But the fact was, we had observed and did not make assumptions. Had we not, things may have turned out very different."

"What happened to the captain, sir?" Hardy said quietly.

"I'm not sure, really," Dawkins replied with a small chuckle. "I never kept up with the intelligence group after the war, and it wasn't shortly before I retired from service and joined the Revenge." Dawkins looked up toward the doors to the main lobby and caught sight of an older Vulpine standing just in front of the doors. It was Colonel Stigian. Dawkins smiled politely and nodded. "Good afternoon, Colonel Stigian."

"Dawkins," Stigian said in his usual gruff tone. "I had

heard you and the captain of the Revenge had arrived. I didn't think you'd be here."

"Once an Ocelot, always an Ocelot," Dawkins said as he held out an open arm to indicate all those who sat at the couches. Even Claudia and Bobby had to feel some pride with that, even though they weren't in the same house, it meant that there were some of the alumni who remembered where they went to school and had a great deal of pride. "I had no idea you'd be here, Fillias. I hadn't seen you since the end of the war. You've obviously done well for yourself. When last I saw you, you were only a captain." Dawkins smiled as he nodded to Stigian. He was aware that Fillias had heard the story Dawkins had just relayed, and with this short conversation, now the students and cadets knew as well that it was Stigian who was that old captain during the war.

"Yes, well," Stigian replied as he shuffled from foot to foot. "Perhaps if you've some spare time during your visit we can catch up. For now, I have some business to attend to." Stigian nodded, though Dawkins, Taggart and even Mallard could tell there was something troubling him. In Mallard's case, she sensed something more from Stigian, so when the door closed behind the Colonel, she slowly rose to her feet.

"If you all will excuse me," she said as she turned to Dawkins and Taggart. "I have something I need to look into."

"Ah not at all, Captain Mallard," Dawkins said with a smile. "I've been looking forward to talking in more intimate confines with some of the students and cadets. Besides, I believe there's a rough ball match coming up with the old alma mata and I'd like a recap of the season." Dawkins looked to Taggart and chuckled. "Deep space, hardly gives us any chance to find out how the matches are going." Captain Mallard nodded politely and smiled, turning to the cadets who had risen to their feet in respect to Mallard. She nodded to each of them, then went about her way.

She had to find out what it was Stigian was up to.

Colonel Stigian closed the door to the small communications room quietly. It was extremely difficult not to slam the door as hard as he could, considering he remembered Artemis Dawkins indignation during the last year of the Great Lupine Land War. Stigian was only a captain then, but he was assigned to tactical research. Until Dawkins showed him up. Stigian always swore he would get his revenge on how Dawkins made him look like a fool.

He sat down at one of the communication terminals and took out a small device, placing it on one of the panels as he pressed a few buttons. Immediately, the device began sending out a signal. It wasn't long before there was some response that came across the communications console.

"Stigian," came a gruff sounding voice, very deep and seemed to come from someone who had seen a great deal of battle. "Is that you? This better be important."

"It's me," Stigian replied trying his best to calm his nerves. Dawkins' earlier story combined with the usual indignation of this charming individual could be enough to grip anyone. "Everything is ready. The transfers of the top five pilots will be to none essential areas."

"Excellent," the voice said with a smile. Stigian imagined it wasn't a very welcoming smile. "By moving the less capable pilots into strategic positions, it should weaken the forces enough and will put individuals like yourself in a much better position to 'save the armada', as it were."

"Believe me," Stigian snarled in reply. "My talents have been wasted as I've merely been subjected to disciplinary hearings and overseeing the security of the administrative offices. I wanted this to move more quickly, however..."

"You said you wanted to make sure no one would be physically hurt," the voice reminded him. "This is the best way. And it will ensure that when the time comes, the Royal Vulpine Armada will serve in a capacity fitting to it when we take over. Understood?"

"Yes, I understand," Stigian replied, albeit reluctantly.

"I must go, for now, Stigian," the voice said. "I'll be in touch. Don't contact me again." With that, the communication link was severed. Stigian looked around the room carefully, knowing full well he was alone, but still felt that sense of being watched. He took the device and pocketed it quickly, then made his way to the door, calming his nerves as he went.

His nerves were almost completely frazzled as he opened the door only to find Captain Mallard standing on the other side. Her hand poised as if ready to open the door. "Mallard!" he nearly shouted. "You startled me. What are you doing here?"

"I was..." Mallard began as she studied Stigian. He didn't seem like his usual calm self. "I thought I heard something and came to investigate." She peeked into the room, knowing it was one of the more private communications rooms often used by staff and administration. "Were you talking to someone?"

"I was sending a message to an old friend," Stigian said, taking a deep breath before he spoke. Right now, he just wanted to get out of that room and get away from Mallard. "Someone I knew quite well back in the war. I was informing him that Dawkins was here. The Left-tenant Colonel's visit today reminded me I hadn't spoken to my friend in some time."

"I see," Mallard replied with a nod. "Well, I apologize if I may have interrupted you." Stigian nodded, then pushed his way past the captain and left quickly. Mallard watched Stigian for a moment until he was gone from view, then turned her attention to the console. Stigian was hiding something, that she was certain of. But what exactly it was, she'd have to investigate.



## **CHAPTER TEN**

### **LET THE GAMES BEGIN**

Rough Ball always has been a favourite past time of all Vulpinians. This has been said before, but even at the college and university level, communication organizations have set up transmissions of matches at every level. For those in the Warrenshire who cannot make it to matches, there is the Foxburrow Communications Network that makes sure everyone has access to watch or listen to the game. And for those who tune in to said matches on the radio, they are used to hearing the voices of Carmichael Stat and Yvonne Collridge, two

broadcasters who have not only been passionate observers of the game, but used to play in it as well. Carmichael used to coach at the Premier League level, while Yvonne at one time was a feared striker for the Ocata City RBC. They know the game very well.

"Perfect weather for today's match," Yvonne said as she began the broadcast. "The semi final match for the Royal Academy here in Chattingham as House Fennec tries to defend their title against House Ocelot. Carmichael, we've got a good line up for today's game, let's look at the way these two teams stack up against each other."

"Indeed, Yvonne," Carmichael replied as he read off his statistical sheets. "House Fennec isn't making many changes at all, their starting lineup will have Clair Middleton in goal, Harriet Shortclaw as jumper and star striker Philburt Collinsworth is ready for today's match. There are a great number of changes to House Ocelot's lineup. Senia Felix is still in goal, Aria Shardspear still at jumper, but with the recent events surrounding Jada Hawkspur's disciplinary actions she has been banned from competition. As a result, Clarfax Billings has been brought up to the striker line. Mills and Pinkerton have been moved from second line to first line defense."

"Any predictions as a result of those changes," Yvonne asked as they kept the banter going before the first whistle to open the match would sound out.

"Some solid moves," Carmichael replied. "However, House Ocelot has only had a few days to practise with this new line up, so there's no telling how they'll work together in game time situations. House Ocelot has been known as one of those teams that can improvise quite well on the fly, but they're up against a strong House Fennec squad that has prided themselves on a solid unit throughout the regular season. I'm staying with my prediction from last week's Rough Ball Report, and picking House Fennec to win a close match in the dying seconds today."

"You've rarely been incorrect in your predictions, Carmichael," Yvonne said with a smile in her voice. "If that's the case, the fans should be treated to an excellent match on the pitch today. We're seven minutes from the opening whistle of today's match as the players come out onto the pitch. Enough time to tell everyone listening at home that the officials for today are Herbert Shorttail acting as head referee, Maria Cortez and Julian Crookshank as the lines officials, Unia Clearwater and Gwen Finnian as the goal judges. As the players warm up, Headmistress of the Royal Academy, Air Marshall Cecilia

Collinsworth is making her way to center field. The referees have joined her as have the captains of both teams. For House Fennec, that's Philburt Collinsworth, Clair Middleton and Helena Longtail. For House Ocelot, that's Senia Felix, Aria Shardspear and Hardy Maynard."

"They're going through the official coin toss," Carmichael spoke up as he read off his stats sheet. "They'll be using the official coin commemorating the 76th Fighter Squadron lead by Left-tenant Colonel Artemis Dawkins who was instrumental in making sure supplies ran to the appropriate lines during the Great Lupine Land War."

"Indeed," Yvonne said with a nod. "We're graced with the Colonel and some of his squadron in attendance today. The Barrow's Revenge, a cargo transport ship with the Vulpinian Trade Commission which the famed Midnight Squadron is a part of, has docked in orbit as Dawkins was asked to speak at this year's graduation."

"I understand the Colonel is a huge fan of rough ball, and a staunch supporter of House Ocelot," Carmichael spoke up. "To be honest, an understatement as rough ball is a passion of many on Vulpinia Prime." It wasn't really necessary to state that on air, however, both Carmichael and Yvonne had to stretch out

the time while the official coin toss took place.

"The officials are signalling," Yvonne said as she described the official coin toss for the listeners at home. "House Ocelot won the toss and have elected to kick off. This will give them the advantage of having the ball during the second half and allow them to press the attack early. House Fennec has announced they'll take the west side of the field. Wind isn't a factor in today's match, as it's a light breeze under a sunny sky. Field temperature is twenty degrees Celcius with a no chance of rain."

"Perfect weather for a perfect day of rough ball," Carmichael said with a firm nod.

"We'll turn things over to the Public Address announcer now, who will officially open up today's match."

As the announcers were going through the motions of the usual pregame broadcast, in the stands, Jada Hawkspur was nervously watching. She wished she were on the field with her mates to help with the match. But she told herself, Senia was an excellent leader, Aria was the best athlete they had and Clarfax would make a good replacement striker. But these reminders of her classmates and teammates' prowess did not subside any feelings of nervousness. This would be the first time she had to

watch a match from the stands.

Things would look up, however, as Jada soon discovered. As she stared down at the pitch, watching her friends warming up, she felt a light thump on the seat to her left and another on the seat to her right. She turned, slightly startled, then smiled when she saw Claudia Whitefur and Robert Quickfoot.

"Good afternoon, Jada," Claudia said in her usual cheery fashion. Robert nodded with a sheepish smile. Jada nodded to them both, finding herself feeling a little bit better. "We saw you in the stands and decided to join you." Both Claudia and Robert were carrying a few souvenirs, Claudia had a bag of snacks and Robert had an ice tea in hand. Claudia carried a penant that said in bold letters "House Falcon supporting House Ocelot". Jada couldn't help but smile. "How are you doing this afternoon?"

"To be honest," Jada replied with a sigh. "Nervous. I'm not looking forward to this match. It's the first time I haven't been on the pitch."

"Well, um," Robert said in his usual quiet tone. "This is actually the first game I've seen live. Most times, I just listen on the radio or watch it on the screens at Falcon boarding house."

"It'll be a different experience," Jada replied with a nod. "Much louder, naturally. But as long as you're with us, you should enjoy it." She looked to the pitch once more, taking note that the players were lining up for the singing of the school anthem. "We best settle in, the game's about to start."

For many of the faculty of the academy, they had their own private boxes to watch the matches from. Often they were filled with every one who worked in some capacity on campus. Today was no different, as Captain Rita Mallard wandered about the main box and greeted several of the staff. She took note that there was a couple faculty missing, including Colonel Stigian, which suited her just fine. She had hoped to speak with Air Marshall Collinsworth, Colonel Tyrell and possibly Reverend Rosewood. Mallard, for the most part, was calm and reserved as the opening jump ball was played. Inside, however, she was rather excited and slightly nervous. Like her students, she was hopeful they could come away with a victory, though she practised behind reserved and cautious.

This reserve held firm as she watched the opening drive, as House Ocelot took the ball in close to House Fennec's end zone, finally punching in a three pointer as Pinkerton carried the

ball over the goal line. She let out a small breath that she'd been holding during the drive. At least they had the opening score. Mallard had become so practised at exhibiting a calm nature, that even startled she managed to keep her composure. So it wasn't a surprise that she merely turned at the mention of her name, finding Air Marshall Collinsworth, Colonel Tyrell and Reverend Rosewood enter the private box.

"Thought I'd find you here," Collinsworth said with a grin. "I recall it was six years ago you began staying in the private box, so you wouldn't feel compelled to call out to the field and offer support to the players."

"I felt a more reserved stance was needed," Mallard said with a nod and a salute to each of her superior officers.

"Oh, come now, Captain," Tyrell said with a smile. "There's no fun in that at all." The small group chuckled at Tyrell's comment, then turned their attention back to the pitch as House Fennec continued to move the ball. "I managed to put a few words out to some of my old friends from the war," Tyrell announced in a quiet voice. "General Natalie Gerring for starters.

"Gerring," Collinsworth said as she thought on the name for a moment. "Gerring is in command of ground forces, isn't



she? She has no connection to the Air Force."

"No, but she is stationed on Omega One orbital platform," Tyrell informed them. "And I know the final evaluations and placements have been scheduled to take place there beginning the end of next week. Plus, Nattie makes sure anyone who sets foot on Omega One is directed to her office before going anywhere on the station. Including those who'd be involved with the pilot evaluations."

"If I recall correctly," Reverend Rosewood spoke up. "It was Nattie and her partner, Pitts, who managed to convince the brass to give Dawkins' plan a solid going over. Up until she spoke up, most were going to reject it out of hand." Rosewood mentioned Pitts, who along with General Gerring, served in the Great Lupine Land War. Colonel Reginal Pitts, a highly decorated member of the 54th Infantry Battalion that General Gerring was in charge of so long ago.

"As I recall," Mallard said in her usual calm tone. "General Gerring has a habit of hunting down and exposing any wrong doings with ease. She's known to make a habit of it."

"Nattie was an excellent scout, from what I recall," Collinsworth stated with a firm nod. The small group stopped to watch as House Ocelot scored a second three pointer to tie the

match up at six a piece. "But she'll need evidence to go along with our suspicions, and right now all we have is suspicions and hearsay. We'll need to have something concrete for the general."

"As it happens," Mallard stated with a small smile. Her way of being smug, though one could never really tell. "I found Colonel Stigian sending an encoded message. I couldn't tell where the message was being sent to, but I did manage to have a recording downloaded into my personal database."

"Personal database," Collinsworth said with a scoff. "Make sure you get that out of there before Stigian tries to investigate and pin anything on you."

"Already done," Mallard said as she held up a data rod. "I copied it to this data rod and removed the information from my console. I then went and performed a security lock down on the transmissions console, stating it needed an overhaul. Nothing publicly, but it's mentioned in the daily duty logs of the academy."

"And those duty logs Stigian doesn't have access to," Collinsworth said with a smile. "Excellent work, Captain." Mallard nodded her thanks. "Tomorrow, I'll contact Omega One station and invite General Gerring and Colonel Pitts to the

academy. Often there are pilots who graduate from the school who must interact with army, so it would be a good experience to see that branch of Vulpinia's armed forces here." The group stopped to watch as House Fenec orchestrated a second six point touch to lead the match. The match was a great seasaw battle between two very skilled opponents, but it seemed very likely that House Fennec had the tactical advantage.

In the stands, three spectators were literally on the edge of their seats. Five times, Claudia and Robert had to help Jada suppress the urge to march down to the sidelines, knowing full well that her presence might well be seen as a foul and could cause House Ocelot the match.

"We've only scored two touches," Jada said as she gripped her seat. "They have to see that they've strengthened their left side. They've got to hand the ball off to Ridgewell more."

"I though you said she wasn't as good as Clarfax," Robert said with some nervousness. This was even worse than if he was watching House Falcon against House Fennec.

"I believe they'd see that as a tactical advantage," Claudia suggested. Both Robert and Jada looked to Claudia. She was always more the scientific mind, and rarely spoke of

sporting events, even though she did appreciate a good game of rough ball. "Well, they do know that Clarfax is a good athlete, so it's obvious they are stacking that side in order to slow him down. And it's obvious they're making it difficult to leave any openings to go to the left side." Jada and Robert didn't say anything, leaving Claudia feeling a bit nervous. "What? It's very elementary."

"Claudia," Jada finally said with a soft smile. "You have the mind of a battle strategist. Why aren't you in the piloting course?"

Claudia blushed a bit and smiled sheepishly. "I'm four centimeters too short," she quietly admitted. Their fears, however, had not gone unnoticed on the pitch. They watched as House Fennec's head coach called a quick time out with two minutes left on the clock. Millicent Yarborough called the squad in quickly. She'd noticed the one flaw that Claudia had taken notice of, and she had a plan.

"You've been doin' well, team," she opened the huddle up with, making sure that each player understood they were doing very well. "Now here's where we take a different strategy. Sharspear, Mills, try to get the ball to Ridgewell. Ridgewell, you need to be ready. House Fennec is leaning on

the left side, covering Billings as best they can." The small Felanus who wore a head scarf nodded quickly. "Felix, you're a bit too tight in goal, make sure you get out just a bit. It'll give you an advantage and make any rushers and kickers a little wary. Pinkerton, stay close to number 5, she's got a good leg and scored both kicks, so we've got to force her to change her tactics. We've got a couple of minutes b'fore halftime, so go out there and tie the score. Give it yer all!" She thrust her hand in the center of the huddle and the players all responded in kind without hesitation. A quick cheer and they ran back out onto the pitch with a renewed spirit.

Two minutes seemed like forever. But, with dogged determination, House Ocelot managed to tie the score. There was no mistake at all in their strategy, and House Fennec fell for it, having to regroup on the fly. Naturally, it was only two minutes, and the second half was still to be played. Fortunately, all players for House Ocelot, and their supporters, came away without any injuries and felt as though they had a huge weight lifted off their shoulders.

With the exception of Robert Quickfoot, that is.

Robert was so enthralled with the action on the field, he

found he was drinking his soda cider a little too fast. Because of this, he had to have a long half time visit to the washroom. At least he had Jada and Claudia there to give him a hand, and they managed to get him to a washroom before any accident happened. When he came out, he was looking a little worse for wear.

"Oh, I feel so sick," he moaned as he leaned against the door frame of the stadium washroom.

"You drank your soda too fast, Robert," Claudia said with a consoling sigh as she wrapped an arm around his shoulders.

"I know," he replied with some reluctance as he nodded. He was moving a little slow, but was feeling better thanks to the ministrations of Claudia and Jada. "I'm just glad you two were here to help."

"Are you kidding," Jada said with a chuckle as she helped Claudia guide Robert back to the stands. "Consider it payment for keeping me from marching down to the pitch and making a fool of myself." She gently patted Robert's shoulder, who only looked up with a small smile. "We should probably find a good shady spot, keep you out of the sun."

"And get you plenty of water," Claudia agreed as she

gave Robert a firm nod. Robert nodded back in reply. At least he had friends to help him. It was much better than when he first arrived to take quantum mechanics and astrophysics. He didn't know anyone, and had such a hard time fitting in. Then he met Gilbert Shortclaw, and found they had similar interests. Their friendship helped get them through some lonely days. Then, they met Claudia, who's cheery nature was often infectious. Thanks to Claudia, that opened the door to meeting others, such as the friends he'd made within House Ocelot. Never had he thought that air cadets would associate with the likes of him, but after six years, he found it to be the best years of his life.

And now he was cheering on his friends on the pitch.

As Claudia and Jada helped Robert find a shaded seat, the players had made their way back onto the field. They looked as though they had a renewed purpose. This was their time, after all, and they proved they could confuse and confound their opposition. They just had to make certain they could keep that confusion up, and hope House Fennec would falter. If they could, it would be the greatest upset in the history of the Academy. But they still had the entire second half to play.

Millicent Yarborough didn't call them into a huddle, but

Aria Sharpspear and Senia Felix did. The pair were natural born leaders. Even Senia, with her speech impediment, always seemed to capture the attention of the audience and inspire.

"We've got thirty minutes left in this match," Senia said as the huddle settled down. "We can do this. We fought back and tied it, now we can take it. We're known for our unique ability to strategize on the fly."

"The minute Fennec starts hitting our right side," Aria added as she looked from face to face. "We switch. But we'll switch it up in different ways. Go back to Clarfax, then back to you Ridgewell, but don't be too surprised if we end up coming to you, Mills, and Pinkerton. We keep up the attack from all angles, and keep them on the defensive."

"Thirty minutes," Senia reminded them with a smile. "And we send House Ocelot back to the final for the first time since Left-tenant Colonel Artemis Dawkins and Sargent Harriet Taggart did during their days at the Academy." The players all nodded in agreement, firm in their convictions. "Thirty minutes. Let's not waste a single second."

Sometimes thirty minutes can be a long time, but often in certain situations, thirty minutes isn't very long at all. Aria Sharpspear and Clarfax Billings took the opening kick off and



went up the left side, hoping to fool the defense. It worked, as the pair, together with Ridgewell, raced into the Fennec end and scored a touch. They managed to hold back the push of House Fennec during the next series, and began back again, this time scoring a kick to put themselves solidly in the lead by nine points. The next ten minutes was a back and forth struggle, as neither team could find the advantage.

House Fennec, however, had the reputation for being stoic and undaunting. After a ten minute long tug of war, Fennec gained the advantage. Lead by Philburt, the forwards raced up the middle until they entered Ocelot territory, but knew they would have a difficult time getting a kick past Senia and Pinkerton. That didn't stop them from making a push for a touch, leaving them down by only six points.

The two teams struggled for another five minutes, neither really taking the advantage or giving it up. But House Fennec found a hole, and drove hard toward the goal. House Ocelot's defenders weren't expecting it, and they found themselves only three points up, with two minutes left to play. The struggle continued, and House Ocelot drew some breathing room, getting a touch to go up by six points again. A masterful push that saw Ridgewell score with only a minute left. House

Fennec wasn't done, though, as they pushed back and managed a masterful play of their own that saw them achieve a kick in the last thirty seconds. It looked as though it would go into extra time, as the two teams began their strategy. House Ocelot began back up the field, holding as much hope in their eyes as House Fennec had courage in their hearts.

The mood at the Flying Fox was very somber. Abigail Crenshaw had set aside one of her special dining rooms for House Ocelot to use, but originally it was hoped that it would be a victory celebration. Instead, it would be the end of the season for the rough ball team, and the last game that many in the House would play. Still, as promised, Abigail made sure that everyone had a pint of rose petal ale at the ready. Even Claudia, Robert and Gilbert had joined their friends in House Ocelot. Senia asked if they could come, after all, House Falcon had supported the House Ocelot squad.

As those who had gathered mingled and spoke in quiet tones, Senia looked from each individual and offered a look of support. Before she stood up to address the group, she looked to Clarfax, Hardy, Jada and Aria, four of her closest friends. They looked to her and nodded, an encouragement to their comrade

and an acknowledgement that at least this wasn't the end of the world.

Senia rose to her feet, holding her pint in her hand and cleared her throat. Everyone in the room stopped talking and looked in her direction as she began to speak. "The first thing I'd like to say," she began in a calm and consoling voice. "Thank you to Corporal Sparks for organizing all of this. You've out done yourself, Sparky. You have out done yourself, and you've managed to accomodate some of our friends from outside House Ocelot." She raised her pint to Sparky, who smiled and nodded his thanks as those near him gave him a few well deserved pats on the back.

Senia took a deep breath before continuing. "We lost. It's a sad reality indeed. But, we did give them one good show for it. And, in the long run, we had earlier bested House Fennec in the final evaluation, so I guess you could say we're square with them now." There were a few chuckles that went through the room. "Let this be a lesson for us to carry on as we continue to grow. Not every situation is going to be one that we'll come out on top of. Remember our defeats, celebrate our victories, but never forget to live." She raised her pint to them all, her comrades responding in kind. "We've not long before we're all

going to go off to our assignments. Some of you will be joining the 82nd, a few others the 76th, I know several of you are hoping for planetary patrol. It's going to be a very exciting time for all of us. I only ask that you keep one thing in mind as we prepare to leave this place. Never forget any of the faces in this room." She looked about the room carefully, nodding to each person as she spoke. "Over the past six years, I've grown to consider House Ocelot more than just an academy house. We're a family. We've supported each other, worked together, played together. We've had our share of victories, and," she paused as she nodded slightly, their defeat to House Fennec still sharp in her mind. "We've had our defeats. But one thing is important. We've shared them together."

All those in the room rose to their feet, holding their pints as they could sense what was about to happen. "I had asked Corporal Sparks to organize this event for another reason," Senia continued. "We lost one of our own several days ago. Because a superior decided it best to use a mocking slur, and forced a reaction, Jada Hawkspur was stripped of her rank. While the action is being investigated so that such comments are never used again, we still lost Jada as a part of our ranks. But, she is still with us. She will always be with us and will always

be a part of our family." She looked to Jada directly and smiled. "Jada, you've been my best friend for a long time, I've come to know you very well. Your integrity and your determination were things I always admired about you, but it was your caring attitude that shone the brightest. No matter what you do after we leave this academy, I'll always remember you, and I feel it's safe to say so will many others in this room." Jada nodded in reply with a small smile. She didn't like the attention focused on her, but in this case Senia was speaking from the heart. Senia turned to again look around the room to each of her comrades. "Let us carry the lessons we've learned here at the academy with us throughout our lives." She raised her pint and was met with everyone in the room raising in a toast.

As the gathered cadets and students put their pint glasses down, it was Miri Ridgewell, the small grey coloured Felanus who helped so well in the day's match, who began to sing.

*When the long day is done  
And the sun does set  
Let us all call as one  
And never forget  
We're all here together with our kind  
And we hold our heads high*

*With courage in our eye*

*As we sing the praises of Ocelot*

As she sang, others began to join in with her, singing the House Song of House Ocelot.

*Hand in hand with our eye on the horizon*

*We'll set our sites and never back down*

*There is nothing that can make us run*

*We'll fight to the last*

*As we clear the ramparts*

*And we prepare for our repast*

*We are House Ocelot*

*We are House Ocelot*

*We hold our heads up high*

*We are House Ocelot*

*We are House Ocelot*

*And our courage will never die*

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### STARBASE OMEGA ONE

Space Port Omega One, sometimes called Starbase Omega One, is the largest ship yard in the star system. Not only is it a port of call for merchants and travelers, but it is also the home of the Vulpinian Ship Yards. Both civilian and military vessels are constructed here, each with their own ship yard sections. Everything from destroyers to cruisers and escort vessels, and even cargo transports and fighter craft are constructed in the best ship yards in the quadrant. Here the famed sailing cargo vessels that the Vulpine and Felanus used to

explore space were created, along with the heavy destroyers that the Vulpine used in several space fleet actions. The Vulpine Pantheran War was a busy one for the starbase, as they not only constructed new ships, but revolutionised space travel. Omega One was the launching point for the Royal Vulpine Armada when they were called upon by the Lupine Star Alliance to assist during the Great Lupine Land War.

So well constructed is Omega One, that many of the other species in this quadrant of space have tried to duplicate her designs. She is a veritable fortress, with all manner of defensive and offensive capabilities. Should a hostile species attempt to invade Vulpinia Prime, they'd have to get past Omega One first. And even then, with the starbase's communications system, she'd have a fleet of ships ready to respond to defend their homeworld.

Omega One isn't just a well fortified military installation. Omega One also serves as a port of call for merchants from around the quadrant. Since the end of the Vulpine Pantheran War, trade became more common between the Vulpine and the Pantherans. Before the war, only the Lionids, terrestrial cousins of the Pantherans, engaged in merchant trade with the Vulpine and Felanus. Since the war, however, even Pantheran merchant



vessels have docked at Omega One.

There is also Omega One's science station, a massive listening post that points to unknown sections of space to try and determine just what is out there, if there are any other life forms that have not been discovered. The primary function is just to explore, never to communicate if they happen to find a species on a planet that is not yet capable of space faring flight. The Vulpinians believe it is immoral to interfere with the natural progression of any species.

Omega One is separated into several decks that surround a large central hub. The highest point of the hub contains the science stations and the listening post.

One deck down, is the officers stations, including the commanding officer of the station, General Natalie Gerring. Together with her attache, Colonel Reginald Pitts, they make sure that the station operates at peak efficiency. The operations of the station takes up two whole decks.

The third deck leads toward the ship yard, with military and merchant ship yards on opposite sides of the station.

Fourth deck is the docking ring for military vessels of the Royal Vulpine Armada.

Fifth deck, docking ring for visiting diplomats and

researchers, as well as any allied military vessels.

Sixth deck is the merchant vessel docking ring, and cargo transport area. The ring has a large number of cargo bays that are designed to house perishable items, livestock, non perishables and other merchant goods. This deck also has a large shopping area, where visiting merchants can haggle over different produce, visit old friends and relax after a long journey in space.

The final deck is dedicated to waste management and reclamation. All waste from the station is housed in this final deck, which is built to be a larger distance away from all other decks. Here, waste is separated and recycled to be used for station operations, whether that be as fuel to operate things like life support, station engines, gravity plating or whatever else the engineers need.

Omega One also happens to be the location where many of the final evaluations and assignments are handed out to new recruits, cadets, or officers. Each branch of the Royal Vulpinian Armed Forces has an evaluation section on the station, located on the operations decks of the station. All cadets, recruits and officers must report through the stations primary check point before entering operations. This is done so no unauthorized

personnel enter operations, and if there is anything suspicious, it can be found out quickly.

As mentioned before, Omega One is under the command of General Natalie Gerring, and it is she who approves of all movement in and out of operations. Most is merely routine, but there is the odd occasion when she personally will become involved in a new guest who might arrive.

Lately, she's found that has been happening a lot.

General Natalie Gerring, three times awarded the medal of valor for her actions during the Great Lupine Land War. She was instrumental in holding the line of advancing Hyna Jackai troops that were attacking a Lupine stronghold on the desert planet. She was, is, a commanding ground force strategist, has extensive knowledge of battle formations and attack patterns for ground forces. But her true bright spot is her diplomatic ability. When Admiral Tor Clarendale is unavailable for diplomatic meetings, General Gerring is usually called upon.

Born in the northern provinces of the Kanata Nation, Gerring would often say that her upbringing was one that made her a bit more tough. Instead of living in the more temperate coastlines of Kanata, Gerring grew up in the interior, one of the

landlocked provinces. Extreme cold during winter, and incredibly hot during the summers. Like most who are born in that area, Gerring was of the Swata people, an ancient race of Vulpine who had welcomed the harsh climate with open arms. This could be one of the reasons why there never seemed to be very much that phased her. Even her insistence on taking shorter leaves of absence was often thought of as bizarre considering most other officers would take their allotted time off. But Gerring had a philosophy; she'd already been through hell, and commanding a starbase was a cake walk compared to the heat of battle, especially on a planet like Lupinia. Checking daily duty roster reports and filling out requisitions was easy when compared with her seven years on the front lines. As far as Gerring was concerned, any day she stepped into her office in the operations deck of Starbase Omega One, she was on vacation.

It seemed only her attache, Colonel Reginald Pitts, fully understood her actions.

Pitts didn't grow up in the harsh climate of the Kanata interior, but he did grow up among the Feniri people in the southern regions of Vulpinia Prime. He was a black furred Felanus, and like many from his birth place, he had a stoic calm

that never seemed to falter. Many never understood why he associated with Gerring, but ever since they served together on Lupinia, he was never far from Gerring. The General could always depend on Pitts' council, his suggestions and his calm. He had a great deal of insight, and was a practised observer. As much as General Gerring was dutiful to her command, Pitts was just as dutiful to his ability to observe the comings and goings of Starbase visitors. He knew a great deal about the traffic coming into and out of the station, and always kept Gerring appraised. Many of their discussions always took place early in the morning, usually around 0500 hours.

Much like this morning.

Gerring was always a stickler for detail, especially with her uniform. It was always neat and tidy when she arrived for her early morning shift. Her steps were always determined and with purpose. Crew members of the station could time Gerring's arrival to her office with microsecond precision. Often as the General would make her way to her office, she'd greet officers just coming on shift or ending their shift. And as always, there was something else that Gerring could count on as she entered her office.

Pitts stood in the room as she entered, a fresh, steaming

cup of coffee at the ready. He held it out to her as she entered. "I anticipated your arrival, General, and made certain that a fresh pot of coffee was made."

"Thank you, Colonel," Gerring said with a smile as she accepted the coffee. "You know me very well, but then, we've had a few years together. This is one habit I anticipate every morning." She moved to her desk and took her seat, shuffling through several data pads. "What's on the agenda today, Colonel?"

"The science vessel, RVA Huntsman, has completed refit," Pitts said as he took a seat across the desk from the General. "Supply crews will begin restocking the ship in preparation for her deep space mission. It is suggested that the restock may take two days."

"That'll give Captain T'Chall some extra time in the science labs," Gerring said with a chuckle as she leaned back in her chair.

"Indeed," Pitts replied with a nod, then continued with the morning announcements. "The RVA Tritan is scheduled to dock at 1600 hours today. I have made the preparations to receive Admiral Clarendale and arranged diner with him this evening."

"Finally back from his diplomatic mission to the Wayfarer's Belt?" she replied as she looked over the datapad. "It'll be good to see Tor. I haven't had as much time to catch up with him as I had wished." She sipped her coffee and tapped her datapad, her ears leaning forward as she saw one item on the list. "What about that glitch in the communications array that was detected several days ago? Anything further on that?"

"To my regret," Pitts continued, almost with a touch of an annoyed tone in his voice. "I have been unable to determine the source of the communications wave that we detected. Nor have I been able to decode it. It is quite troubling." Gerring nodded, but knew Pitts had more to add to the statement. "However, during a communication with planet side, I may have come closer to solving the mystery. I was contacted by Air Marshal Cecilia Collinsworth this morning, who asked if she might be able to speak directly with you. Her request was to meet face to face." Gerring set her coffee down and gave Pitts her full attention, prompting him to continue. "The Air Marshal, as you know, is the headmistress of the Chattingham Air Academy and College of Scientific Research. She informed me that recent events have taken place and brought to her attention by Captain Rita Mallard, one of the House liaison. It

would seem several unauthorized transmissions have taken place on the Academy grounds."

"Does she have a suspect?"

"As a matter of fact, yes," Pitts replied with a firm nod. "She also sent me an encrypted data file which contained information about the carrier wave that her suspect used. It matches the frequency we've been having trouble with aboard the station. She feels there is cause for concern that some of the top graduates of the Academy will not be given preferential placement upon graduation."

"Did she say who her suspect is?" Gerring asked in a quiet tone.

"No," Pitts replied in his straightforward fashion. "But she did say she'd be able to reveal that information if you were able to transport to Chattingham. If not, she said she'd arrange to transport to the station with the first group of cadets that would undertake their final evaluations."

Gerring nodded as she picked up her coffee cup once again, considering her options carefully. "Let's assume for a moment, that Collinsworth's suspect may know she is aware of the situation. I don't want to risk an attempt on her life, especially with a transport shuttle full of cadets. Contact her,



and inform her that we'll arrive tomorrow morning. We just need to have some official reason to be there, so as not to raise any alarms."

"I have taken that into consideration, General, and anticipated your concerns," Pitts said as he nodded. Gerring only smiled, still finding her reaction amazement whenever Pitts could deduce her actions. "As it so happens, Lieutenant Colonel Artemis Dawkins will be giving a commencement speech to this year's graduating class. I believe it would be favourable to pay our respects to someone we served with so long ago."

"Get on it, Colonel," Gerring said as she picked up one of the data pads with a smile. "Contact Collingsworth and tell her to expect us in Chattingham at 0800 hours tomorrow. For now, we'll just keep this between the two of us, and Air Marshall Collingsworth." Gerring nodded to Pitts, an indication that she wanted him to carry out his duties. He nodded in reply, rose to his feet and walked with purpose out of the office.

Air Marshall Cecilia Collingsworth sat at her desk, waiting patiently. She'd made her call to Starbase Omega One, discussed her findings as best she could without giving too much away, and was promised by Colonel Pitts that he would

contact her later in the morning. Once the communication was ended, she put in calls to Mallard, Tyrell and Rosewood, then went about her morning paperwork. Normally, that wouldn't take too long, but her mind kept drifting back to the short conversation she had with Pitts, when he revealed that the station had been investigating an anomalous carrier wave. It was difficult to believe that someone within the Royal Vulpine Armed Forces would be conspiring in some manner. Even at this level, where someone would have an interest in the students. She wondered, just how many other people had been compromised, placed into positions to commit treason, and just how far into the Armed Forces did it lead to.

Just as she finished her paperwork, the doors to her office opened, and in walked Mallard, Tyrell and Rosewood. Collinsworth rose to her feet and offered them each a chair, then busied herself getting some tea.

"Just in time," she said as she placed a tea service on a nearby end table next to the now occupied chairs. "Knowin' Colonel Pitts, he'll have already discussed this with the general, an' will be callin' shortly."

"If Pitts is anything like he was durin' the war," Rosewood offered as she filled her tea cup and added a lump of

sugar. "He'll have a plan. Or at least, Gerring an' him will have cooked somethin' up."

"Which means we got here just in time," Tyrell added then looked to Mallard. "I don't know if you ever met the colonel, but the man is extremely punctual. And his mind... brilliant man, shame he didn't accept a tenure at the scientific academy."

"I never had the opportunity," Mallard said as she sat comfortably, stirring her tea. "I reached Lupinia Prime only a few short months before the war ended."

"I'd say you were lucky," Rosewood said in reply as she sat behind her desk. Collinsworth was just about to agree when the communicator screen chirped to life on her desk.

"Moment o' truth," she said as she tapped a few keys. Soon, the face of Colonel Reginald Pitts appeared. "Good mornin', Colonel. I trust you've relayed our earlier discussion to the general."

"I have indeed," Pitts replied, then nodded toward the others in the room. "I trust this is your inner circle, as it were." Collinsworth nodded, a wordless reassurance that anything said in front of these three was kept in confidence. "As you inquired, I did indeed discuss our earlier conversation with General

Gerring. At her suggestion, she wishes to investigate the matter more closely, so she believes it best to visit Chattingham and see the matter for herself. If this is a coded communication, then this is a problem that must be dealt with immediately."

"I would tend to agree," Collinsworth said with a nod. "If we can nip this in the bud fast, then we might be able to see a chain reaction. Maybe uncover who is actually doin' this."

"I trust you have no suspects at this time?" Pitts asked with his usual flat, emotionless tone.

"None at all," Tyrell spoke up. "Captain Mallard was the first to notice it, and she came to me. I went immediately to the Air Marshall. Reverend Rosewood was brought in because she's good at hammering out ideas quickly."

"I seem to recall that," Pitts replied with a small nod. "After all, it was Rosewood who came up with a plan to assault a fortified bunker with little to no casualties on either side during the war."

"I'm glad ya remember," Rosewood said with a small smile.

"I have a photographic memory, Reverend," Pitts replied. "There is little that I forget. Are there any others that may have some suspicions? Or have been investigating?"

"If you mean students," Mallard spoke up as she set down her tea. "If there are any, they'd be Left-tenant Felix, Corporals Maynard and Billings, and Private Sharpspear. And possibly a pair of civilian students, Claudia Whitefur and Bobby Quickfoot."

"Are they trustworthy?"

"Yes Sir," Mallard replied without any hesitation. "Felix is one of the most trustworthy cadets I've ever taught."

"And Claudia and Bobby are loyal," Tyrell added. "If there's anything that would happen, they'd go to Felix first, and then come to us."

"I find that curious," Pitts said in reply.

"It's common for civilian students to gather advice from cadets when it comes to dealing with the military faculty here at Chattingham," Collinsworth explained. Pitts nodded, an indication he understood completely.

"Very well. You can expect General Gerring and myself to arrive at the college landing area tomorrow morning," Pitts said in his usual manner that would indicate he was ending the transmission. "Until then, Air Marshall. Colonel Pitts out."

As the view screen went blank, Collinsworth turned to the others. "Let's not make a big deal outta this. When Pitts and

Gerring arrive, I'll meet 'em on the tarmac along with Reverend Rosewood. Colonel, Captain, I want you two ta do as ya would on any day. Any duties you have, take care o' 'em. Once the general arrives, then I'll send for the both o' ya." Tyrell and Mallard nodded in understand, and Collinsworth let out a long breath as she sat back in her chair. "Now, is there anythin' less stressful ta discuss on this fine mornin'?"

The day was rather uneventful. Cadets and students across the campus were either completing the last of their exams, beginning final evaluations, or preparing for the graduation ceremonies. For Senia, Hardy and Aria, they found themselves with an afternoon free, and decided to spend it quietly. They retired to the main lobby area of the House Ocelot barracks, located in the main building. Here there was the usual comforts that could be found in any barracks; a small tea and coffee area, pantry, an entertainment section for watching the latest wave channels, a reading nook and an area just to sit down and converse with others. It was this area that the three students had taken to sit, relaxing before they had anything pressing to do.

"...think he'll manage quite well," Hardy said as she

picked up a cup of tea. "Clarfax has always had a good mind for biology, and he's shown an interest in medicine."

"Won't that put a strain on your relationship?" Aria ask.

"We know there will be times we're apart," Hardy said with a nod. "But, we've promised to write each other should that come to pass." She looked to Aria and grinned. "What about you, though? I heard Bobby's been accepted to travel with Captain Red Streak on the Dorgatha."

"Oh yes," Aria said with a sigh. "We talked about that for a good long while. He seemed rather nervous about the whole thing, but I found out Jada has accepted a position on the Dorgatha as well. So it shouldn't be so bad, he'll know someone there. But, I will miss him terribly. I suppose it wouldn't have been any different had I been stationed on some deep space carrier." Aria looked over to Senia for a moment. "You and Jada must have spoken about the Dorgatha."

"I actually suggested it," Senia replied. "It was either that, or the Barrow's Revenge. On the Revenge, there might have been an opportunity for her to train under Left-tenant Colonel Artemis Dawkins."

"That would have been amazing had she had that opportunity," Aria said.

"I almost think had that happened, you'd have quit your commission and gone off to join her," Hardy said with a teasing smile as she nudged Senia lightly.

"Well," Senia replied with a smile. "Had the opportunity been made available... I guess we'll never know." The conversation stopped as the three heard a small thud coming from the back of the room. It was soft, but most assuredly sounded as though someone had dropped something in one of the storage compartments. "Did... you hear that?" Senia said as she rose to her feet and began walking toward the back area.

"I did," Aria replied with a nod as she stood up to follow Senia. Hardy followed suit, and the three slowly made their way to the five doors that lead to the storage areas in the main lobby. There really wasn't anything of value in the back, just some old junk that from time to time the students would try to see if they could use some of the parts to do makeshift repairs. More often than not, anything in there was seen more as museum pieces than anything worth practical value.

"Remember when Bobby and Clarfax tried to make their own radio in second year?" Hardy said, thinking back to their early days at the Academy. "Were trying to use old vacuum tubes to catch any and all carrier signals that broadcast rough



ball matches." The three chuckled at the memory. "I had to save them from getting embarrassed. Oh, I remember what a job they did on that rig they were trying to make."

The three quickly quieted down as a louder thud could be heard. It was definitely coming from the second door of the storage rooms. They listened carefully for a moment, wondering to themselves what could be going on. It went from being just a noise to something that seemed a bit more serious. As they were about to voice their concerns, the door opened and Colonel Stigian walked out. All three quickly stood at attention.

"Colonel Stigian," Senia stated in a bold voice. "We weren't aware you were here, sir."

Stigian stopped, watching the three cadets carefully. It was obvious he wasn't expecting them, but still he slipped into military decorum quickly. "Cadets. I wasn't aware you had free time this afternoon."

"Just taking a moment during the lull in activity, sir," Senia explained. All three remained at attention, waiting for Stigian to call them down.

"I see," he replied as he closed the door to the storage room. In his left hand was a book he gripped rather tightly, it was leather bound, and appeared to be a personal journal. "If I

knew you were here, I'd have asked you to help me search for this," he said as he held up the book. "However... at ease, cadets." The three went from the proper attention stance to a more relaxed stance in front of a superior officer, hands lightly clasped behind their backs as they gave Stigian their full attention. "Excited about the graduation ceremonies?"

"Yes sir," Senia replied with a nod. "We've worked hard to get to this point, and I have confidence that we'll continue to do so once we receive our placements."

"Very well," Stigian said with a nod and a smile. "If you three will excuse me." Stigian adjusted his cap on his head and made his way slowly out of the lobby. The three watched him until the door way had opened and closed. It was Hardy who first spoke.

"There are no books in the storage compartments," she said in a quiet voice. "At least, not ones that looked like the one he had." Hardy looked to the others as she thought back to what she'd seen in the compartments. "Old manuals on yellowed paper, but nothing leather bound."

Senia turned and looked between Aria and Hardy for a moment, then marched over to the storage compartment. "Something has been going on lately. I know a few of the

faculty have been acting rather... secretive. And there's something about Colonel Stigian that rubs me wrong." She tested the door as Aria and Hardy followed her. "I know it's wrong to question authority, but in this case, I just can't shake this feeling." She pushed lightly on the door and it opened with ease, then entered. Aria and Hardy followed, Hardy found a light switch and turned it on.

Inside was what could only be described as a large pile of junk. Neatly organized, however, but still a large pile of junk. Old components, early data pads that no longer worked, a model of the first Tritan to sail across space, old pictures and paintings of early space flight. And in the middle of the room was an ancient communications console. Sometimes the students would harvest parts from such old devices to see if they could be used to replace shot components in today's technology. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't, but they used the experience as a learning tool.

Senia walked up to the console and placed her hand on its surface. She looked to Hardy and Aria. "It's warm," she said with some surprise.

"What?" Aria remarked as she stepped forward. "Someone turned it on?"

"I'd be more surprised that someone got it ta work," Hardy said as she sat down in front of the console, looking for a way to fire it up. "Ah ha!" she said as she reached under the console and found the proper switches. The old screens came to life, but the cadets could tell that there had been a few modifications done to this old piece of machinery. "Definitely rebuilt, but not using the usual carrier waves."

"There's been some data entry that's been erased," Aria said as she pointed to the communications log. "It was used recently. The last log entry is one week ago, early in the morning. I'd say when we were on our last training run. And it was used today, but the data files have been erased."

"Can you get them back?" Senia asked as she stepped back to let Hardy and Aria work. They knew more about the workings of the device, and Aria was a communications specialist.

"Give me a moment," Aria said as she tapped a few keys on the console. "Ah, there it is," she said with a grin as the data nodes began to reveal themselves. "They were erased the log entry files, but not from the memory buffer. Whoever did this was sloppy."

"How old are those files?" Senia asked as she watched

Aria work.

"...twenty minutes old."

"That means someone was in here with Stigian," Hardy said as she moved out from under the console. "We only arrived fifteen minutes ago at most."

"Either someone was here with Stigian," Senia said with a sigh after she thought about all the logical possibilities. "Or it was Stigian who was using this console."

"If that's the case," Aria said as she studied the files carefully. "He's going to be in a lot of trouble. If I'm reading these correctly."

Senia read the files over Aria's shoulder, then took a deep breath as she contemplated her next move. "Get a data transfer rod," she finally said, nodding to Aria. "Download all the information onto it. Hardy, make notes of what changes were made to this console. We'll attempt to find out where these communications were being sent to. We have to work quickly, because I want this information taken to the Air Marshall herself no later than an hour from now. Agreed?" Hardy and Aria nodded quickly. "Alright, let's get to work."

Cecilia Collinworth sat at her desk, enjoying her tea.

With all of the recent activities, she found she needed this small distraction to keep her sanity. Stigian was a possible spy working for someone that was at present unknown. According to Colonel Pitts, there was a possibility Stigian wasn't the only one. There was a conspiracy going on and it was suddenly affecting the day to day routine of the Chattingham Academy. The only problem was that there was no hard evidence that Stigian was actually sending transmissions off world. Collinsworth and her little crew needed a solid plan, some way to get Stigian to slip up.

Usually, Collinsworth found, when she started thinking of such things, she would have a cup of tea. Usually, the answer would come to her in the most unusual of ways. This day, that was very true.

As Collinsworth read through her duty files, the comm from her secretary sounded out. "Air Marshall," the young Vulpine male said in a calm voice. "There are three cadets here to see you. They say it's urgent."

"Please inform the cadets that I do not wish to be disturbed at this time," Collinsworth said in response as she tapped the communicator. "Tell them to come back in an hour, and I'll be happy to accomodate them."

"Ma'am," the secretary said again. "Left-tenant Felix says it is a matter pertaining to Colonel Stigian."

Collinsworth looked up from her desk to the doors to her office. Could this be something she had been looking for? It was a huge chance, but right now, she'd take it. "Send her in, Falstaff." She clicked the communicator off and sat comfortably behind her desk, waiting for the left-tenant to enter. As Collinsworth found, Felix wasn't alone. As the doors opened, Felix entered, followed by Maynard and Sharspear. "Should tell my secretary to identify everyone who comes calling at my office," she said as she rose to her feet and moved in front of her desk. The three cadets saluted smartly as they stepped into a line. "At ease, cadets. Now, what is it I can do for you? You said you had... something to say about Colonel Stigian?"

"Yes ma'am," Felix said in a bold voice, ignoring her lisp. The information was too important to worry about her speech impediment. "We understand that this is rather unorthodox, having information about a superior. However, as we've learned, it is something that needs to be reported."

"Go ahead, Left-tenant," Collinsworth said with a nod.

Senia looked to Aria and nodded. Sharspear stepped

forward and held out a data rod for Collinsworth, and began to explain. "Left-tenant Felix, Corporal Maynard and myself were off duty, taking a repast in the House Ocelot lounge. We heard a sound, and discovered the Colonel coming out of one of the back storage rooms."

"If I recall," Collinsworth said as she took the data rod. "There's nothing but a large amount of junk in those storage rooms."

"Correct, ma'am," Aria continued. "However, there was an old working communications station. I suspect no one thought it still worked. As it turned out, Stigian was using it. And he was sending messages. We haven't gone through the data we downloaded, but we did match the carrier wave."

"Matched the carrier wave," Collinsworth repeated as she walked around her desk again, sliding the data rod into a computer terminal. "Does that mean you know who he was sending information to?"

"Unfortunately, no, ma'am," Hardy spoke up quickly. "He'd covered his tracks very well. However," she said with a smile and looked back to Aria. Aria caught it and smiled back as she continued the explanation.

"We have a fix on a ship which seems to be hiding itself



behind our moon's orbit," Aria said. "The largest one. It masked any attempts at scanning."

"And you did this how, exactly?" Collinsworth asked as she looked from her computer terminal to the three cadets.

"Before we came here," Senia continued with the explanation. "We went to the barracks sensor array and did a scan for vessels in orbit. There is a trail that we found which does not match any known vessels in the Armada. We did run into some trouble, however, in identifying the ship." Senia looked to Hardy to continue. This was more up her alley.

"We went to the Critainian data base," Hardy said with a nod. The Critainian database was a very thorough library of information that could be easily cross referenced with Vulpine star charts and much more. "We cross referenced it with the Vulpinian database and discovered two distinct emissions. One seems to be the familiar trails a Jackai raider gives off when at slow impulse or only using thrusters. The other comes from an old adversary of the Critainians. The Raptory."

Collinsworth rose to her feet slowly. Jackai and Raptory. The former were nothing more than independent space pirates, who prey on merchant vessels whenever they could find an opportunity. No match for anything this sophisticated. The

Raptory, however, was another matter altogether different. The Critainian database described them as a very malicious species who's only desire was conquest. Flag ship captains, high ranking military personnel and government officials were told of these beings, distant relatives of the Critainians. Everyone in this sector of space from Vulpinians to Pantherans was warned.

"Cadets," Collinsworth said slowly. "This is very serious indeed. Normally, I'd request you return to your barracks and await further instructions, but it's too far now. I want you three to remain mum about this. Not a word to anyone. I want to make sure I'm in constant contact with you three at all times until 0600 tomorrow morning. When I expect you to report here."

"Ma'am, what about my bunk mate," Senia inquired quickly. Corporal Talon had been known to become too curious at times. A trait often shared by many who had come to the Academy from Sandicia. "Corporal Mia Talon. She might ask questions."

Collinsworth thought on this information for a moment before finally answering. "Say absolutely nothing to the corporal, understood? If she asks why you're heading out that early, just tell her you've an appointment in my office. That

should be enough." Collinsworth was satisfied with the quick nod from Senia and breathed a bit easier. She felt these three were trustworthy enough. "I should warn you. General Gerring and Colonel Pitts are arriving from Starbase Omega One in the morning. She'll most likely want to ask you a few questions. In the meantime, keep your ears open for any other suspicious activity. I doubt anything more will crop up, but one never knows for sure." The three nodded firmly, understanding their instructions. "Very good. Dismissed."

The three cadets saluted Collinsworth and made their way out of her office quickly. There was more information that they had uncovered, which on the one hand was very good. But on the other hand, it was very foreboding.

## **CHAPTER TWELVE**

### **GENERAL GERRING'S ARRIVAL**

The next morning came quickly. Senia rose at 0500 hours and quickly got herself ready, though she did stop momentarily wondering where her flat mate, Corporal Mia Talon, was. It was not usual for Mia to be up before Senia was, nor was it usual for Mia to be out of their shared room before Senia either. Senia shrugged it off, knowing she had to get to the Air Marshall's office in fifteen minutes. A quick call to Hardy and Aria wouldn't hurt however, and she picked up her hand held communicator and patch into Hardy's frequency as

she made sure her dress uniform was fitting correctly.

"Hardy here," her friend's voice came over the comm without hesitation. "I assume this is Senia."

"It is," Senia replied as she buttoned up her last button on her burgandy jacket. "I'm just about to head out the door and make my way to Air Marshall Collinsworth's office. Are you and Aria on your way?"

"We just left our room," Hardy said in a quiet voice. "The rest o' the barracks is still in slumber-land, probably wake up in another half an hour. Any trouble on your end?"

"None at all," Senia replied as she picked up her cap and placed it neatly on her head between her ears. "Though Mia isn't in our room. Usually she's still asleep when I get up. Most likely nothing, she was always an early riser toward the end of each year." She brushed down her slacks before giving one last approving look in the mirror. "I'll meet you there, Senia out." she pocketed her communicator and turned to her door, opening it as quiet as she could so as to not make any loud noises. Just one problem. Her path was blocked.

Mia Talon stood on the other side of the door way, in her own full dress uniform, hands held behind her back as she stood at ease. Senia cocked her head to one side, suddenly realizing

that Mia had every intention on making her way to the Air Marshall's office with her.

"Good morning, Corporal," Senia said with a light nod.

"Good morning, Left-tenant," Mia said with a smile, though her voice was quiet. "Off to the Air Marshall's office? This about Colonel Stigian?"

Oh dear, Senia thought to herself. "What exactly do you know about this business, Mia?" Senia replied as she stepped through the threshold of the door way and closed the door behind her as quiet as she could. Hopefully, Mia was actually going to be on Senia's side in this matter. But since this new discovery, there had been doubts that had crept into Senia's mind. Doubts that included just whom she could trust.

"Chattingham has the best internal security around," Mia said without hesitation. "Which means, most of the cadets know about the rumours going about regarding the Colonel."

"Rumours?"

"Colonel Stigian has been acting unusual," Mia said as Senia began to walk down the hall, motioning for Mia to follow. "More so than usual, mind you. I've always felt something was off with him, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it." The pair made their way out of the barracks and Senia caught sight of

Hardy and Aria, and waved them over.

"What I'm going to tell you, Corporal, must be within the strictest of confidence," Senia said as she stood before Mia. She looked over to Hardy and Aria as the latter looked around the area, listening intently for any sounds that might indicate they were being followed. She looked back to Senia and nodded, indicating they were alone. "You'll come with us and divulge any information you have to the Air Marshall. Right now it's believed he's been sending covert messages to a ship in orbit around one of our moons. We aren't sure, but it could be a Jackai pirate ship, however it has a Raptory signature to it." Mia's eyes widened. She'd listened and read as much as she could about the hostilities between the Raptory and Critainians, but no one had any idea what their ships or even the Raptory themselves looked like. "We aren't sure why he's doing this, but General Gerring has been called in to help investigate this matter. Say nothing to anyone about this, not even speculation, understood?" Mia nodded quickly in reply, then Senia motioned for the four to make their way to the Air Marshall's office.

They met very few on their way to the office. A groundskeeper here, a cadet making his or her way to a library there, but none stopped them to inquire about the four

whatsoever. Not until they reached the main administrative building, where they came face to face with Captain Mallard and Colonel Tyrell.

"Good morning you three," Mallard said as she looked them over, and then her eyes fell to the small Felanus, Mia Talon. "Corporal Talon." She looked directly to Senia with an unasked question hanging in the air. Senia knew exactly what it was.

"She knows, ma'am," Senia answered without any hesitation. "It would appear that there are rumours abounding about the colonel's strange behaviour. We three are not the only ones who've noticed it."

"I see," Mallard said, turning her attention to Colonel Tyrell.

"Best not to keep the Air Marshall waiting, I'd say," he said with a soft smile, then reached for the doors and opened them, motioning for the four cadets to enter. Mallard and Tyrell were right behind them. The secretary was not in that day. Usually he didn't begin his duties until 0800, and this being 0600 it was two hours before he'd start the day. Air Marshall Collinsworth, however, was in and already looking over paperwork at her desk as she enjoyed a fresh cup of tea. As the



six entered her office, she looked right to Corporal Talon.

"I'll assume that the usual rumours have begun," Collinsworth said as she rose from her seat and moved in front of her desk. "It's obvious that they haven't changed much since I was a cadet. Hard to keep such things quiet for long. I was at least hoping that a few hours would have sufficed, however."

"Ma'am," Senia spoke up as she saluted. Collinsworth saluted back and nodded for Senia to proceed. "Corporal Talon informed me that many of the other cadets have noticed strange behaviour from the colonel. There may be more information than we currently have."

"Exactly what General Gerring intends to find out," Collinsworth said with a nod, then turned her attention to Mia. "You're here now, Corporal. That means you're a part of all this." She moved back to her desk and set her tea down carefully before she continued. "In less than two hours General Gerring and Colonel Pitts will be landing at the main port. I want you four with us when we greet her. She'll no doubt wish to interview a great number of cadets, so if you know of anyone, Corporal Talon, who has any additional information, let the General know when you speak with her." Mia nodded she understood the instructions completely, and Collinsworth

continued. "I've managed to have a few additional conversations over encrypted communications with the General in preparation for her arrival. I have come to agree with her suggestion. Left-tenant Felix, the General has informed me that she would like you to report to her temporary office on the school grounds at 1500 hours today. And she wants you to put together a list of those cadets you feel you can trust completely. It would seem that you're going to have to put aside your dream of the 76th for the time being, because the General has other ideas about your future." Senia blinked once and just stared at Collinsworth. Often, when a General or an Admiral of the fleet would call upon a cadet for special assignment, it usually meant a posting on a starship. "You'll receive more information from the General later this afternoon, Left-tenant. For now, we can wait for the General. So sit down, make yourselves comfortable. And have some tea."

Often, when important dignitaries arrived at Chattingham, there was a full compliment to greet them, as well as cadets from each house to stand ready at attention to greet them. In this case, however, the arrival of General Gerring and Colonel Pitts was such short notice, no such orders were given.

Considering the information that surrounded their arrival, it was actually for the best.

Air Marshall Collinsworth stood on the main docking platform, a raised level that faced the main tarmac just outside of the air traffic control tower. On the level below and behind the Air Marshall stood Colonel Tyrell, Captain Mallard, Reverend Rosewood and the four cadets who had arrived earlier at the Air Masharll's office. For thsoe four, it felt suddenly different for them. They had participated in greeting ceremonies in the past, one time involving a Pantheran contingent which included the commander of the Imperial Pantheran Fleet's flagship, Admiral Felan Tal. Usually the arrival of such an important figure was required to have a full colour regiment available, it was Vulpinian tradition. But this was not a traditional arrival, considering the unorthodox events surrounding it.

General Gerring's vessel was known throughout the Vupinian Star System. A fast, heavily armed escort cruiser, one of the best in the fleet. A ship that's main purpose was carrying ground troops for deployment planet side. A Kestrel Class escort ship, she'd seen her fair share of action, but that was years ago. Now, she was only involved in training exercises. Still,

the appearance of the vessel as she prepared to land was impressive indeed. Measuring 150 meters in length, equipped with four forward phaser cannons, six photo torpedo launchers forward and aft and two sets of phaser banks. Crew compliment was 35, with room for military ground forces that numbered 150. During the Great Lupine Land War, ten such ships were deployed to Lupinia Prime to assist the Lupine in their fight against the Hyna Jackai. The Kestrel was the last ship of her kind from that era, and was now seen more as a diplomatic vessel than one that would engage in war. For the cadets at the very least, the presence of the RVAF Kestrel was quite the show.

Once the ship had landed, the disembarking plank lowered from the main bulk of the ship, and all could see the General and the Colonel making their way toward the control towers. As they drew closer and within earshot, Senia gave the order to come to attention. All four of them stood at inspection readiness as the General approached.

"General Gerring," Collinsworth said as she offered a salute. "Welcome to Chattingham Academy." She stood aside and motioned the General toward the others on the lower platform. "Colonel Pitts, I believe you've spoken with Captain

Mallard." Colonel Pitts nodded toward the Captain as Collinsworth spoke. "This is Colonel Tyrell."

"Yes," Gerring said with a smile. "I remember Tyrell from our days together during the war." She nodded to Tyrell in greeting. "Good to see you again, Nelson."

"Same to you, Nattie," Tyrell said with a smile of his own, nodding with respect. There were very few that could get away with calling the General Nattie, but Tyrell was one of them.

"This is Reverend Rosewood," Collinsworth continued. The usual exchange of greeting continued.

"And these must be the cadets you spoke of before, Air Mashall," Gerring said as she stood before the four cadets. All four still stood at attention. "At ease cadets, before you break something." The four seemed to relax a bit, standing tall with their hands behind their backs as they stood respectfully in front of the General and the Colonel.

"If I may," Pitts spoke up, taking note of the fourth cadet. He was looking toward Corporal Talon. "During our conversations, I was informed of three cadets who had approached you yesterday, Air Marshall." Everyone turned their attention to Corporal Talon. Mia's reaction was a bit

nervous as she wished to speak up, but looked toward Senia, hoping her commanding officer would vouch for her presence. Senia, it appeared, was all too happy to oblige.

"Corporal Mia Talon, General," she said as she stepped forward. "Mia is my bunk mate, and has been my co-pilot from time to time during training runs. She informed me of some... unsettling rumours. She may have information vital to your visit today."

"Then perhaps we should attend to that, Lieutenant Felix," Gerring said as she approached Senia. "But not here." She looked back to Collinsworth as she spoke. "Perhaps we should retire to your office, Air Marshall. I'd like to get to the bottom of this as quickly as possible, then plan our next move, if necessary."

There was more than one communication console on the grounds that Colonel Stigian used to make his contact. One such console was located not far from the viewing area that overlooked the tarmac of the landing area. Stigian recognized the configuration of the ship that landed, knew it was the Kestrel, and knew who was in command of that ship. The arrival of General Gerring could mean only one thing. There

were those who suspected something. Unfortunately, Stigian did not know how far that knowledge went, he could only guess at that. Which is what his mind kept doing as he made his clandestine call to a ship in orbit of one of Vulpinia Prime's moons.

He took a deep breath and tried to calm his nerves as he input the last of the sequence into the console. "This is Stigian. Are you there?"

"We're here," a quiet voice came over the comm system. It was masked, and sounded deeper than it should have, obviously manipulated by voice modulation software. "What have you to report, Vulpy?"

"Things have gotten desperate," Stigian said as he tried to control his voice. "General Gerring and Colonel Pitts just arrived from Starbase Omega One. She doesn't just make unannounced visits to Academies. They just arrived on the tarmac in the Kestrel."

"The warship?" the voice asked with some anger. "She didn't bring troops, did she?"

"No," he replied as he shook his head, as though the voice on the other end would see that. "I checked, the ship only has the basic crew compliment. But I did see Gerring greeted

by Collinsworth, Mallard, Tyrell and Rosewood. As well as four cadets."

"Do you think the cadets are suspicious?"

"Possibly," Stigian snorted as he recalled one of the cadets. "One was Left-tenant Felix, the one I told you about. She can be nose-y. It wouldn't surprise me if she had some knowledge about these plans."

"We will have to increase our time table then," the voice said then remained silent for a moment, as though contemplating the next move. "Move ahead with our previously discussed plan. But place the device in the main faculty."

"An explosive in the main faculty?" Stigian hissed. "You promised there would be no casualties, that no one would get hurt."

"I said that things would go well if there was no interruptions, no road blocks in the plan," the voice hissed back. "We now have complications. If you're not willing to do it, then I can terminate our relationship and find someone else."

"No! No," Stigian said with a great deal of nervousness as he placed a hand on the back of his neck. "I'll arrange everything. The device will be set to explode this afternoon. Most likely this meeting will take place for the better part of the



day."

"Very good," the voice said, much more calm than before. "We'll keep in touch." The comm system went silent and Stigian stepped back nervously. Quickly, he looked around to make sure no one was watching or listening, then with great haste he made his way toward his own quarters on campus.

Often, when one conspires to do something unspeakable, it can throw their judgement, and their powers of observation, well off course. This was definitely the case with Stigian, as he failed to make sure that there really was no one listening. In the room where he had used the comm system, there was a large number of bookshelves. Sometimes, students and cadets would come in to find some old book that might have an historical reference, something obscure. Other times, books were brought in for storage before being transported to the Critainian system where they would be catalogued and entered into the great library on the Critainian home world. The best time to do such inventory was toward the end of the school year. A few students would volunteer for such privileges. Claudia Whitefur and Gilbert Shortclaw were two such students.

Those two students just heard all of Colonel Stigian's conversation. They stepped out of the rows of shelves to the

location where the comm system sat and just looked to each other.

"What do we do?" Gilbert asked in a quiet voice. His tail was twitching back and forth, a habit that displayed whenever he was nervous.

"We need to speak with Professor Tyrell," Claudia said, for the first time in a long time, she didn't have a smile on her face as she spoke. This was an incredibly serious matter. "And we need to find Senia." She looked to Gilbert, putting a hand on his shoulder to reassure him that she'd stand by him when they went to Tyrell and Senia. "We need to do it now."

For an hour, Claudia and Gilbert searched the grounds for any sign of Senia, but couldn't find her at all. No one had seen her, nor Hardy or Aria. What was even stranger, Mia was also missing. Four House Ocelot cadets. Maybe they were still in their meeting with Air Marshall Collinsworth. But an hour long meeting, that was something not heard of very often unless it meant trouble. Claudia and Gilbert's search had roused the interest of Clarfax, Robert, Jada and Mirri Ridgewell. Especially after they had heard what the pair of students had discovered. They decided it was time to go directly to the

source and report what they had found. As they'd heard, Captain Mallard and Colonel Tyrell were also in the meeting, as well as Reverend Rosewood. The suggestion was brought up to discuss it with one of the other House liaison with the faculty, but Clarfax and Mirri agreed, they should go direct to the air marshall's office. Whether it was advisable or not, the situation was far more important than going through proper channels.

The six marched right into the air marshall's outer office, surprised that there was no secretary at his post. Which meant they could have finished their meeting and gone elsewhere.

"Bloody..." Clarfax said as he looked about the office, then turned to Mirri. "Any idea where they might have gone?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," Mirri said with a light shrug, then looked to see what Robert was doing. "Bobby! What are you doing? Don't go up..." It was too late. Robert was already listening at the door. He had incredibly good hearing, but never used it that often in such a manner.

"I can hear them," he said in a whisper as he listened at the door. "They're still inside."

"Look out, Bobby," Jada said as she approached the door. She had every intention of barging inside, it seemed the only way to get Claudia and Gilbert's message to the Air

Marshall. Jada looked to Clarfax and Mirri, obvious concern on their faces. "What are they going to do to me? Demote me? I've already got my passage on the Dorgatha and I've had my education, so there's nothing I have to worry about." She turned to the door again and this time stepped forward and placed her hand on the handle. It wasn't locked, which was a good thing, it would be embarrassing to attempt to enter and find yourself still barred. Quickly, without a second thought, she entered the room.

"...have an idea as to..." General Gerring was heard to say, then stopped as everyone in the room turned to look at the six students who had dared enter the room. Senia sighed openly and muttered to herself, recognizing each person there. Gerring looked back to Collinsworth with an arched eyebrow.

"What is the meaning of this?" Collinsworth bellowed as she rose from her chair behind her desk. She marched around the desk and stopped right in front of Jada. "Explain yourself, Miss Hawkspur."

"I deeply apologize for this interruption, Air Marshall," Jada said as she stood at attention in front of Collinsworth. "But Miss Whitefur and Mr. Shortclaw have some rather alarming information. They over heard a transmission being sent. By

Colonel Stigian."

Collinsworth looked back to Gerring and the others, then quickly ushered the six inside and closed the door. Clarfax and Mirri stood at attention beside Jada, saluting to General Gerring and adding their own apologies. General Gerring rose from her own seat, set down her coffee cup and walked over to the six. Claudia, Gilbert and Robert were trying hard to reflect the stance that Jada, Clarfax and Mirri presented themselves with, but came up a little short.

"Regular student body, I assume," Gerring said as she stood in front of the three students. Claudia nodded politely and whispered a 'yes ma'am' to Gerring. The General moved over in front of the other three. "And cadets."

"Former cadet, ma'am," Jada corrected Gerring. "I... am barred from service due to an altercation with our drill sargeant. But allowed to complete my education. I've already been accepted as a helm officer on the Dorgatha. However, if I may, ma'am, I believe Miss Whitefur's information is more important than any transgressions I may have caused."

Gerring nodded and returned to her seat. "Go ahead Miss Whitefur," she said giving Claudia her full attention.

As Claudia looked about, everyone was waiting for her

to speak. She stepped forward just a bit, cleared her throat and began her story. She told them how she and Gilbert were taking books to the storage rooms near the transport area. Ones that were to be sent to Critainia for storage in the great library, and then she explained the conversation they overheard. There was a quiet reaction to the telling of the explosive device that had been mentioned. "And that's all we heard, Ma'am. The Colonel left and we began looking for Senia right away."

"Why Lieutenant Felix?" Gerring asked.

"Since we started our education here six years ago," Claudia explained. "We were informed should there be any problems at all, we need only speak with one of the other house leaders. Professor Tyrell," she said as she motioned to her familiar House liaison. "Well, he encouraged us to speak with each one, but we found that Senia and Philly... I mean, Left-enants Felix and Collinsworth." She looked to the Air Marshall and bowed her head just a bit. "No disrespect meant to your son, Ma'am."

"It's alright, Miss Whitefur," Collinsworth said and gave Claudia an encouraging pat on the shoulder.

"Anyway, we've always gone to Senia and Philburt whenever there's been an issue," Claudia continued. "We knew

that Senia was in this meeting, so we decided to come straight away to see if she was free."

The room was silent for a long moment. Finally, Collinsworth spoke up. "Under normal circumstances, you lot would be in a lot of trouble right now." She glanced to the three students then turned her attention to Jada, Clarfax and Mirri. The three seemed to become more rigid at attention. "However, these are not normal circumstances. Captain Mallard. Would you assemble security details and begin a sweep of the entire campus." Captain Mallard nodded quickly, then exited the room to carry out her duties. "Colonel Tyrell, we'll need a search to begin of this building immediately. Can you suggest anyone that might be willing and ready to do a search of the main building?"

"I can name six cadets," Tyrell said as he moved beside Collinsworth, looking to Clarfax and Mirri, and then to the four cadets seated on one of the couches in the room. "And one former cadet that could assist." All seven knew exactly what was coming.

"Excellent choice, Colonel," Collinsworth said with a nod, then barked an order to the eight. they moved into a line up quickly. Collinsworth was about to begin giving them

orders, but was politely interrupted by Gerring.

"If I might hold back Lieutenant Felix," she said as she looked to Senia. "I have something I wish to speak to her about." She looked back to Collinsworth, then to Pitts who nodded as he took out a data pad. Collinsworth nodded in reply, understanding completely, then began issuing orders.

For Senia's part, she excused herself from the line up, and moved to her seat next to the General. She was just a tad confused, and had no idea what to expect. She needed to be with her friends, searching the building, making sure everything was safe. But she couldn't ignore a superior office, especially one such as General Gerring.

What Senia didn't know was that she would soon be given an opportunity of a life time. Even better than joining the 76th.

Aria, Hardy, Clarfax, Mia, Mirri and Jada followed Captain Mallard and Colonel Tyrell into the lobby of the main faculty building. Outside the windows they could see official security personnel moving around the grounds. They were stopping anyone who was walking the pathways and asking questions, but not in a forceful manner. They wanted everyone



to remain calm, after all. When the eight were near the main entrance, it was Tyrell who spoke up, issuing his own orders in a much more relaxed manner than Collinsworth would have.

"We'll split into teams of four," he said in a calm voice. "Mia, Jada. Search the faculty lounge at the back. Clarfax, Hardy. I'd like you to search the maintenance yard on the north side of the building. Aria, Mirri. Take the library on the second floor. If any faculty member stops you, explain what you're doing truthfully, but keep calm. Have them contact myself or Rita." Colonel Tyrell stopped and looked to Captain Mallard for a moment, then smiled. "Sorry, Captain Mallard."

"It's alright, Colonel," Mallard said with a small smile, then turned her attention to the cadets. "Keep your communicators at the ready. Should you either find the device or see Stigian placing a device, do not attempt to apprehend him alone. Contact the others and wait for us to rendezvous with you. As Miss Whitefur said, Stigian was overheard talking about planting a device somewhere here on the faculty grounds and he'll most likely be here right now. We don't know what he'll do should he be discovered. Understood?" The six nodded quickly in reply. "Good. Let's begin."

The group separated and went to begin searching in the

areas they were instructed to. Clarfax and Hardy had possibly the easiest area to search through, as the maintenance yard was only a couple of sheds surrounded by trees that backed up onto the main faculty building.

"This whole business has gotten out of hand," Clarfax said with a sigh.

"And it's made certain ta disrupt all of the plans for the cadets," Hardy agreed as the pair pushed through a set of doors that led into the maintenance yard. "I know Senia and Jada were going to have dinner tonight, then get their uniforms ready for the graduation ceremonies tomorrow."

"I'm not too impressed with Stigian right now," Clarfax said as his pinned back over his head. "First, he manages to be the one voice that calls for Jada's expulsion from the college, now this." Clarfax spoke in annoyed, but quiet tones as he carefully opened one of the sheds to inspect it. A small gardening shed. "I've heard he's been asking around about certain students."

"Rumours, ta be sure," Hardy said with a sigh as she shone a flash light into the depths of the shed. "But with what's happening now, the stock in those rumours probably went up." Her ear moved as she picked up a noise coming from a power

relay on the side of the building. It was one of five power relays that lead into the main faculty, all drawing power from the solar array set up on the north side of Chattingham proper. "Did you hear that?"

Clarfax and Hardy moved from the shed and listened. There was definitely some movement, along with muttered cursing. The pair ducked into the tree line and hid, listening carefully. It could have been a maintenance worker, after all, but they needed to be sure. After a few moments, they finally had confirmation. Inside the main power relay room, they could see a figure. It looked like whoever it was, happened to be rigging something to one of the junction boxes.

Hardy looked to Clarfax who only sighed, happy they had found something, but worried they might be too late. Hardy took out her communicator and sent out a signal to the other teams, making sure to speak quietly. "This is Corporal Maynard. Corporal Billings and I may have found the Colonel in one of the power relay rooms, the one in the maintenance yard."

"Good work, Corporal," Captain Mallard's voice came over the communicator. "Stay out of sight and wait for us to arrive. Mallard out."

Colonel Pitts helped Claudia, Gilbert and Robert settle down as he poured each of them a tea, as well as refilling Senia's. While the colonel did this, Gerring rose to her feet and began to speak, holding the data pad Pitts had taken out earlier.

"In rare occasions, Lieutenant," Gerring began as she looked over the data pad. "There comes a time when cadets are called upon to band together. Especially in defense of our home planet. There are only three instances of this happening in the long thousand year history of the Royal Vulpine Armed Forces. And what I am about to say will make it the fourth time." Gerring looked to the three students as she continued to speak in a calm and even tone. "I think it goes without saying that you three will need to keep this information quiet for now." The three nodded slowly, not wanting to be too over enthusiastic nor did they wish to show the general disrespect. "I've gone over your records, Lieutenant. Your entire six years here at the Academy have been exemplary. You've shown yourself to be a leader, a confidant, a mentor and a friend. Your tactical abilities show you can think on your feet. You have an investigative mind, you crave exploration. And you have a diplomatic attitude when you approach certain situations. All of these are

exactly the kind of material needed for a starship captain."

Senia looked directly at General Gerring, unable to speak as she tried to comprehend what was being said. After a moment of silence, she finally found the ability to form a proper sentence. "Are you saying... that I can command a starship? But I'm trained to be a fighter pilot."

"Lieutenant," Gerring said with a soft smile. "You may have wanted to be a fighter pilot. But you, along with every other cadet at this Academy was trained with the abilities needed for any position within the armed forces." Senia began to realize just what General Gerring was getting at. "Once the others have returned, and once we have a better idea of the current situation, I have a task for you. I want you to select twenty five other cadets that you know have the capabilities to work together on a starship." Gerring tapped her data pad and handed it to Senia. She took it, eyes widening as she saw the display of a ship's registry. This ship wasn't like any other in the fleet. Small, like an escort vessel. But powerful. She had two hangar bays with six fighter craft. A rear shuttle bay which housed a captain's yacht, that also was a formidable fighter craft. "She's called the Nighthawk," Gerring said as Senia looked over the data pad. Both Robert and Gilbert tried to peek over, but

Claudia put a stop to that, mouthing 'that's rude', and allowing Gerring to continue. "She's a prototype, a new type of craft. Faster than anything in the fleet. More powerful, but she also has the capability for improved data collection. She's more than just a warship or an escort vessel. She's also a science vessel. And she doesn't need a large crew in order to function at her peak efficiency." Gerring let that information sink in for a moment.

Senia read over the schematics of the vessel again and again, all the while thinking she knew exactly who she would enlist with this ship. "To what purpose, may I ask, General?"

"I have a plan in mind, Lieutenant," Gerring replied with a nod. "But I won't go over it yet until we've shed some light on the current situation here on campus. And once you've selected your crew."

Senia looked up, blinked once or twice, and held a quizzical look on her face as she stared at General Gerring. Finally, she was able to find her voice and squeaked out a question. "My crew?"

"Yes," General Gerring said with a nod and a reassuring smile. "You'll be commander of the Nighthawk." She paused, allowing that information to sink in before adding one more

piece of information for Senia to consider. "Captain Senia Felix."

Captain Mallard, Colonel Tyrell, and the four other cadets were quick to arrive at the maintenance yard. Clarfax and Hardy were watching over the power relay room, taking note in quiet whispers everything they could see as a figure moved about inside. Whoever it was didn't seem to be having much luck. Hardy saw the others and pointed toward the room. As the six ducked down in the tree line beside Clarfax and Hardy, they too watched the goings on of the individual inside the power relay room.

Captain Mallard looked to Colonel Tyrell, and both nodded wordlessly. They knew what had to be done. Mallard motioned for Aria and Mirri to stand on either side of the door. The other four were instructed to stay out of sight, but close at hand should whomever it was attempt to bolt out of the room. Quickly, they moved into position and waited for the next signal. Tyrell and Mallard approached the door, the Colonel letting the younger and faster moving Captain to take point. Mallard pressed her head close to the door and listened, her ear twisting a bit as she heard shuffling and scuffling beyond the

doorway. She also heard some muttering, sighing as she recognized the voice. She muttered quietly back to Tyrell that it was indeed Colonel Stigian. Tyrell nodded and began to count, Mallard knowing full well that the colonel wanted the door broken down, she nodded waiting for the signal.

The Colonel and the Captain threw themselves at the door with great force, as both their bodies managed to break it down successfully. The sudden noise and intrusion startled Stigian and he cried out and lifted his arms, too afraid to fight off any possible attack. But none came, only Colonel Tyrell approached him as he roughly grasped Stigian's shoulder. "Maintenance work is a bit out of your field, isn't it Filias?" Stigian was still too shocked to reply.

"This is a proton device," Mallard said as she studied the object Stigian had been working on. "High yield. If it went off, it could have destroyed the campus and Chattingham along with it." She looked to Stigian and a growl escaped her lips. "Fortunately, it would appear as though the Colonel was having a difficult time connecting the detonator."

"Good thing we arrived in time," Tyrell said as he looked to Stigian.

Filias Stigian looked from Tyrell and then to Mallard, his



expression one of worry and fear. He then saw the six cadets who had gathered near the door. Including Jada Hawkspur. Out of all the expressions directed towards him, hers was the most telling. One of complete betrayal. He gasped for air as he tried to speak, looking from each in the small room.

After several moments, he merely fainted.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### A TRAITOR IN OUR MIDST

Stigian was quickly collected and taken directly to the infirmary. While he might have been faking his fainting spell, all believed he was indeed suffering from a great deal of stress. To ensure his health and well being was of the utmost priority. Besides, answers were needed, and only Stigian could give them. Air Marshal Collinsworth and General Gerring were both looking to see if they could get to the bottom of this situation, and so the two of them, along with Colonel Pitts, Colonel Tyrell, Captain Mallard, Reverend Rosewood and all the cadets

and students, went into the observation area that overlooked a treatment ward at the campus medical facility.

"I hope he's alright," Senia muttered quietly as she watched the doctors examining him. She felt a few look in her direction at her comment and she became a bit more defensive. "I'm aware he had planned to ensure I'd never become a pilot, but that doesn't mean I can't show some compassion toward him."

"Senia's right," Jada remarked. "Besides, you can hate him for what he's done, but not for who he is."

"Such are things as the hallmarks of leadership, Captain Felix," General Gerring announced as she stood behind the seated cadets. The cadets, save for Senia looked back to Gerring for a moment, catching the smiles from the other officers as if they were offering quiet congratulations. Even Claudia, Robert and Gilbert were smiling, having seen and heard exactly what General Gerring was eluding to. They then each turned their attention to Senia.

"I... got a promotion," Senia said sheepishly as she buried her nose into a data pad.

Hardy caught a few of the words, and a couple of names, including her own. "Why does that pad have me name on it?"

"I'll tell you after you get your promotion," Senia replied with a soft smile, tucking the data pad into her jacket. She glanced toward Hardy and merely smiled. Hardy's only reply was to give a slight huff. Senia had a secret, and Hardy wouldn't be finding out until she absolutely had to.

General Gerring crossed her arms as she watched the doctors. Something seemed to be very wrong. Colonel Pitts looked to her for a moment, knowing full well that the medical staff had come against a road block in waking Colonel Stigian. When he looked to Gerring, out of the corner of his eye he saw something else.

They weren't the only ones in this observation deck. Several chairs to the right stood an individual wearing what looked like the official suit of a medical physician on an official visit. His appearance was unmistakable, and not just because Gerring and Pitts had served with him during the Great War.

He was different, for he wasn't Vulpine nor Felanus, but he was a member of the third species that occupied Vulpinia Prime. He, and the four medical students that were with him, were all members of a species that mostly kept themselves secluded from the rest of the planet.

Altogether, the five made up the only Procydon that were

currently in Chattingham.

I believe it may be best to interrupt at this juncture to explain what, or who, exactly a Procyon is.

The Procyon have existed on Vulpinia Prime since the Vulpine and the Felanus. All three species evolved at the same time. The Procyon, however, were very much happy living in their own section of the planet, which occupied a large portion of the eastern most continent. They were recognizable by their short legs, round bodies, long snouts and what some described as rather beady looking eyes. Like the Vulpine and Felanus, the Procyon also had fur covering their entire bodies, and it was topped off with a rather magnificent tail, and in some way rivaled the thickness of Vulpine tails. It was big, thick, long and had intermitent black and white stripes that seemed to circle around the tail perfectly. Their faces were small, even for having such a long snout, though framed neatly by a pointed and sweeping tuft of fur that went out from the sides of their heads. Combined with their pointed ears, they rather much looked like a star.

I could go into long details about the way they look, but suffice it to say, they had the appearance of a rather

sophisticated and well dressed raccoon. This fact alone may be one of the reasons why the Procyon secluded themselves for so long from the rest of Vulpinian society.

You see, for the longest time they were segregated, believed by all that Procyon were nothing better than thieves. Because of this, their society flourished on its own, without any outside influences. They weren't even part of the Five Nations War. And it's only been recently that rough ball was introduced to the population of Procyonia. However, in the past two hundred years, the false stigma had begun to subside, and a few Procyon elected to serve aboard ships in the Vulpine Fleet. Always, however, in pairs.

That's one thing about the Procyon that differs from Vulpine and Felanus society. When a Procyon decides to enter a field of study, it's almost certain so will the mate. From politicians, to diplomats, to law enforcement officials, to doctors, if a male or female decides to do something as a part of Procyon society, so will that individual's mate. When the nation holds elections, they aren't just electing one representative from a district, they are electing two. It is Procyon law that only mated pairs may enter political positions, that way and equal number of males and females can take part

in every aspect of legislation.

From time to time, some Procyon decide not to find a mate, and strike off on their own. Those that do are either very young, or have sadly outlived their mate. The latter situation is often the hardest, because the surviving member by that time has grown accustomed to there always being someone with which to share everything.

In the case of what General Gerring and Colonel Pitts saw, they saw someone who would most likely be able to give the best assistance ever imagined. Former field medic during the Great Lupine Land War, current Dean of the College of Medicine at Procyonia's finest institution of learning, Dr. Leonard Ringtail.

General Gerring looked to Colonel Pitts and nodded wordlessly. Pitts knew what she had in mind, and returned the nod, feeling that the assistance of Dr. Ringtail would be most welcome. She excused herself from the group that was watching the medical treatment of Colonel Stigian in the theatre, and together with Colonel Pitts approached the doctor. Dr. Ringtail gave a slight jump as he was quietly explaining some of the procedure that was seen to the others. Startled, he looked

up, somewhat agitated and was about to explain how rudely he was interrupted, but instead stopped. After all, he recognized Natalie.

"Well I'll be," Ringtail said with a smile. "It has been a long time." He extended his hand to Gerring and then to Pitts, each shaking it in greeting. "A general now, Nattie. You've gone up in the world. As with you, Reginald." He turned to his four charges and offered introductions. "Everyone. This is General Natalie Gerring and Colonel Reginal Pitts. I served with them when I was a field medic during the Lupine Land War." The four nodded, seeming to recognize the names having been taught that nasty little bit of history during their education. "Nattie. Reginald. This is Doctors Herman and Katlyn Ringtail." Leonard seemed to beam with pride. "My son and his mate." Both Gerring and Pitts made their introductions to the pair and allowed Dr. Ringtail to continue. "And this is Michael and Sarah Littlepaw, both accomplished nurses. All four just graduated from the Procyon College of Medicine and are trying to choose their field of interest."

"We've been keeping our options open," Herman spoke up, his voice with a similar tone and pattern to his father's. "But we've discussed possibly serving about one of the ships in the



fleet."

"Yes indeed," Leonard stated with a firm nod. "One of the reasons why we're here in Chattingham. There is a great number of contacts which we can discuss matters with that are here. Though it's fortunate you are here, Nattie." Leonard smiled and offered another firm nod.

"I'm sure we can offer any assistance to see what options we can give the four of you," Gerring replied as she looked to each of the four recent graduates. "However, it is your own expertise that I'm hoping we might be able to have on this day." She turned to the theatre as the doctors continued to look over Stigian. "Some may believe that Stigian faked a fainting spell, but I've seen the look in his eyes before. It's all too familiar," she explained as she looked back to Dr. Ringtail.

"Are you assuming that there is some sort of Jackai mind control device involved?" he asked. Gerring nodded, knowing that Ringtail had a great deal of expertise in this area. "Incidious devices, as I recall. Surgically implanted into the base of the brain stem, they send subliminal suggestions through a series of controlled shocks and seem to rewrite the brains neural patterns to make these suggestions more appealing to the victim. As I recall, the Hyna tribes used it to attempt to

overthrow the Jayna tribe's central government. And, were nearly successful in doing that to the Lupinian's tribal councils as well." He turned to his four charges. "I'll need your assistance, plus this will be an excellent chance for you to see some of the dangers that you will not find here on Vulpinia." The four nodded in reply without any hesitation.

Gerring approached a small comm panel near the glass and pressed a button. "Doctors." The medical staff that was examining Colonel Stigian looked up, and one of the doctors moved to a communication panel. "If you don't mind, I have someone here who may be able to assist you. Dr. Leonard Ringtail has seen the condition Colonel Stigian is in before."

"We'd appreciate it," the doctor replied. "Especially from someone like Dr. Ringtail. We've found something, but have no idea where to start with the removal of a small device located in his neck along the vertabrae."

Gerring looked to Leonard with a smile. "Your reputation preceeds you, Doctor."

Leonard smiled and gave a small chuckle, then reached over to the comm panel. "My hands aren't as steady as they once were, doctors. But I can guide you through the process if you can handle the physical work." The doctor in the theatre

nodded enthusiastically. "And I'll be bringing four observers with me, who may also be called upon by yourselves to assist should it be warranted." Again, an enthusiastic nod. With that, he turned to his charges. "Very well, we have work to do. Let's go and get ourselves cleaned up. We'll need to make sure we're prepared before entering the examination room." Leonard turned to Gerring and Pitts, offered each a smile and a nod, then ushered the four toward the exit of the observation deck.

Gerring and Pitts returned to their seats with the others, and as she was sitting down, Gerring made a comment directed to Captain Felix. "Four recent graduates of the Procyon College of Medicine. The Procyon are known for their expertise in medicine. It would be wise to consider them for the Nighthawk's medical staff."

Senia turned to look at Gerring, offering a nod in reply, then back to the windows that looked down into the examination room. The other cadets looked over to Senia once again, and she caught Hardy mouthing the word Nighthawk with a quizzical look in her eye. She only sighed, knowing she couldn't speak on the matter at present, and so she wordlessly motioned for the others to turn their attention to matters in the examination room.

Doctor Ringtail and his four charges entered the theatre quickly, making certain not to touch anything in the room until they had approached the main operating table. He looked over Stigian carefully, taking note of his even breathing, then looked to the screen displays that showed x-ray images of the device attached to Stigian's spine. He hummed carefully, thinking about the new evidence upon closer inspection, and finally turned to one of the other doctors.

"This shouldn't be as difficult as I first thought," Leonard said to the other doctors as he pointed out the device on the screen. "Whoever did this, wasn't very good at it. As you can see here..." Leonard said as he pointed to the device, especially where it attached to Stigian's spine. "Normally, this is to have direct contact with the victim's cerebellum. But in this case, they only attached it to the spinal column. It was probably done several months ago, if not a year. These devices, insidious things, attempt to rewrite neural patterns and make the victim more complacent to suggestion."

"So we should be able to remove," one of the Vulpine nurses stated.

"Indeed, miss," Leonard replied with a firm nod. "We'll

still have to be careful, because the wrong move and we could paralyze the Colonel for life. At least, the worst case scenario is no longer death for the patient. Now, Drs Ringtail, if you could assist..." he said motioning toward one of the other doctors.

"Dr. Simms," a red furred Vulpine replied with a nod.  
"Dr. Byron Simms."

"Yes, if you two could assist Dr. Simms," Leonard added after the introduction. "Dr. Simms, should you need anything, just call upon these two fine young doctors and they'll assist you." Simms nodded with a smile and gathered two of Dr. Ringtail's charges to his own workstation. "Now, if nurses Littlepaw, if you could assist..." Again, he motioned to a Vulpine nurse for introductions.

"Nurse Hiller," the biege furred Vulpine replied and turned to the mated pair Littlepaws.

"Excellent," Leonard said before turning to the last doctor in the room. "I apologize we didn't do introductions before, young miss. You are..."

"Dr. Hilda Crimms," the black furred Vulpine replied.  
"Your reputation is quite well known among our medical staff. I'll be happy to assist you, Doctor."

"Excellent," Leonard said with a broad smile. "As I said

before, you'll have to be my hands for this. I'm not as steady as I used to be." Having gathered everyone together and prepared the operation, he then turned to a communication console and nudged a button with his elbow. "General Gerring, this will take a while. I suggest once the operation is done that you don't try to talk to the Colonel for at least twelve hours so he has a chance to rest. I'll update you once we have completed this procedure."

"Of course, Doctor," Gerring's voice came over the comm. "We'll await your results after you've completed the operation."

Leonard gave a firm nod toward the observation deck, then turned to the others in the room. "All right, everyone. Let us begin."

General Gerring and Colonel Pitts opted to stay in the observation deck as the procedure went forward, but suggested the students and cadets could leave, the General noting to Senia that she had a great deal of work ahead of her. This only piqued the interest of the other cadets, each of whom could barely contain their questions until they walked out of the medical facility.

"Now," Aria said as she took a deep breath and stretched. "Now that we aren't sitting in cramped theatre chairs, perhaps we can resolve this mystery as to why General Gerring has been dropping hints like pound cakes to someone with a sweet tooth. Perhaps you can explain, Captain." The last she did not say with spite, but the title was emphasized to show all of their interest for this sudden promotion.

Senia looked to each cadet, even Jada. The only ones not staring at her with suspicion were Claudia, Robert and Gilbert. Finally she sighed and resigned herself to answering their questions, albeit in a rather secretive manner. "All of the events that we've been witness to has lead up to a suspicion that the General has had for a while. That we are being infiltrated by some outside source. She has taken it upon herself to enact Article 16 of the Royal Vulpine Armed Forces."

"When dire measures are warranted, the commanding officer can promote as seen fit in order to protect the Vulpine Star System," Mia said, recalling the article from her own studies.

"Exactly," Senia replied with a nod. "Therefore, as I am one of those closest to this, General Gerring has given me promotion and commission of a ship." She looked to the cadets,

all of whom were staring in stunned silence. "A ship that will need a chief engineer," Senia added as she handed a data pad to Hardy.

Hardy froze for a moment, looked to the data pad, then to Senia, finally took the data pad and read it over. She gasped quietly as she read over the information. "Nighthawk class escort vessel. Fastest ship in the fleet, heavily armed an' armoured..." She stopped reading and looked to Senia. "Chief Engineer?"

Senia nodded in reply. "You're the best engineer I've ever seen. And I'll need you to gather a team to work with you. Put together a list of names and present them to me at 0900 tomorrow morning." She then turned to Clarfax, and handed him a data pad. "The Nighthawk is going to need someone familiar with astrophysics and communications."

Clarfax had the same look in his eyes that Hardy had first given, but eventually took the data pad and began reading it over. "Senia, this is... this is..." Clarfax stumbled a bit over his words as he couldn't take his eyes off the data pad.

"I think that's Clarfax speak for 'I'm impressed an' grateful'," Hardy said with a chuckle as she nudged Clarfax.

Senia smiled and motioned to Clarfax, hoping to bring



him back to the conversation. "I'll need you to put forward the best names for a science crew." She then turned to Mia and handed her a data pad.

Mia took it, but didn't look at it right away. "It's either security or helm," she said without hesitation. "I know my strengths, and I know how you think, Left-tenant." Mia paused a moment, then added sheepishly. "I mean Captain."

"Helms officer, actually," Senia replied with a soft smile. "I need someone who can pilot a ship with precision, but also knows when to punch through in order to get the job done."

Senia then turned to Mirri and handed her a data pad, which the young Felanus looked over quizzically. "It was a difficult decision, and as Mia already pointed out, the choice of security chief came down to you two." Mirri took the data pad and looked it over a moment, then gave Senia a firm nod. "I'll need recommendations for a full security compliment from you."

She paused and looked to the four for a moment and tapped a few buttons on her own data pad. "You are now officially promoted to Left-tenants. Now, you've got some work ahead of you, Mia, I want you to study the ship's schematics and familiarize yourself with her. You're going to be at the helm,

but I also want suggestions who else would make good helms officers." Mia nodded firmly, then turned to Hardy and Clarfax. There was a pause, each one smiling, partially in shock, but partially excited. Finally, the four went off to complete their assignments.

"That's going to be a lot of work," Aria said as she looked to Senia. Even Jada nodded in agreement. "Going through all of those names and putting together a crew."

"Well, that's why I'm glad the Nighthawk only has a crew compliment of fifty," Senia said with a small smile, then looked directly to Aria. "Besides, I'll have a first officer who will assist me."

"I don't know who you have in mind," Aria replied with a shrug, then realized the look Senia was giving her. She stammered slightly before she finally could speak properly. "Me? You bloody well picked me? I've no experience in command situations."

"You have, Commander," Senia said, calling Aria by her newly given title. "I've seen your scores and I've witnessed how you work with command structure. Plus, I'm adding in your background being a part of the Ocata Royal Family, you have diplomatic skills which will be necessary. I need someone who

can have a different opinion than I might come up with, someone who I can rely on and trust."

"But you know Hardy and Clarfax so much better," Aria replied.

"I also know their skill sets," Senia said. "Hardy will be invaluable in the engineering room, Clarfax will be perfect for detecting any anomalous readings. I need you at my side, Aria." Senia gave Aria an encouraging look. Finally, Aria sighed and nodded, whispering 'alright'.

With that, Senia entered it into the record. Captain Senia Felix offers field promotion to Commander Aria Sharspear.

Senia spent a good portion of the late afternoon and much of the evening in the House Ocelot lounge in a quiet corner reviewing those students who's records were exemplary and would make excellent crew members. The Nighthawk had a small contingent of fighter craft, so a team would be needed from communications to pilots to a commanding officer. She settled on Corporal Martin "Sparky" Sparks to head the crew, with Corporal Fredrica Greta as Sparky's second in command. As for pilots, Senia chose two from her own house that she knew would make the cut; Mills and Pinkerton. She'd have to

send for each of them to attend the meeting in the morning along with Sparky and Greta. She felt confident that Hardy and Clarfax could come up with a list of potential candidates to fill up their rosters for both science and engineering stations. Just as she felt Mirri could come up with a good crop of prospective candidates for security detail. She'd definitely have to go over the lists with Aria.

She sighed heavily, as this was all just a little overwhelming and moving much faster than she'd hoped. Most of the potential positions had been filled but there was still a great deal more that needed to be done. A full medical team for example. General Gerring had suggested Senia look at the four young doctors that had come with Dr. Leonard Ringtail. She wasn't sure, however, because they weren't military. But that wasn't important when it came to the safety and health of the crew.

The other position was the ship's cook. It would be a grave mistake to leave port and not have a cook. She chuckled to herself as she thought of each of them taking turns coming up with a menu for the course of the journey.

Senia's attentions were interrupted as a group of people entered the lounge. She rose to her feet when she saw General

Gerring and Colonel Pitts, talking in quiet tones with Dr. Ringtail and the other four medical graduates. Respectfully and quietly, she approached the group, standing at ease and not saying a word until she was addressed.

"I believe that Stigian should wake up at 1000 hours tomorrow," Ringtail said with confidence. "He's doing much better since we removed that device from his spinal column."

"Good news, Leonard," Gerring said with a smile. She turned and stopped as she saw Senia. "Captain Felix. I trust you've had an eventful afternoon."

"And evening, ma'am," Senia replied. "I have a meeting tomorrow morning with the senior staff of the Nighthawk. Chief engineer, science officer, and first officer have been informed. Commander Aria Sharp Spear has been entered into the record as accepting her position as my number one." Gerring and Pitts both nodded in reply, impressed with how efficient Senia had been. They both took note of the data pad she held. It was obvious she'd been reviewing candidates for the different positions. "There are two areas which I have not been able to fill as of yet. One of those is the ship's cook. Naturally it would be foolish to leave dock without a nutritional expert on board. The other happens to be medical staff." At this she

turned to Dr. Ringtail and addressed him directly. "I was wondering if I might talk to your charges about the positions which we have vacant on the Nighthawk."

Leonard Ringtail looked directly at Senia, impressed that she addressed him first, as that was customary practise with Procyon affairs. If an older representative was present, he or she would act as the primary arbiter in any negotiation, even if he or she was not the beneficiary of any rewards or position. He knew exactly what Senia might be asking. "I assume, Captain, that you have an offer for these four as permanent medical staff aboard a vessel."

"Yes, Doctor," Senia replied with a nod. "The Nighthawk is a deep space escort vessel. I expect she'll enter some combat situations, and I understand that none of your associates are military trained but I'm more concerned with having medical professionals on board. Matters of protocol can be taught, and as such the only place that they'll have full access to will be their own quarters and the medical bay. That will be their domain."

Leonard thought on this for a moment, then looked over to Gerring and smiled. "Always looking out for talent, aren't you," he said with a chuckle as Gerring only shrugged lightly.

He turned to his four charges. "Ultimately, this decision will be up to you four. The downside is, you'll be on a military ship, you may enter combat. But, the opportunities outweigh everything else. You may be privy to some new and different ideas about medicine."

The four gathered together in a small huddle for a moment, discussing the proposition quietly amongst themselves for a moment. Finally, after some minutes, the Doctors Ringtail approached Senia. "We've given it a bit of a talk," Herman Ringtail said with a nod as he stood not far from Senia.

"Our original plan had been to continue studies and then take residence in one of the major hospitals in Procytonia," Katlyn added.

"However," Herman spoke up with a confident voice. "This is an opportunity that we can't pass up. The experience we'd acquire would be valuable, plus we can't leave a crew without a good medical team." He looked to his companions, each of whom gave a firm nod, then turned back to Senia. "We accept your offer."

Senia smiled and seemed to let out a breath she'd been holding. "Good. I'll see to it that a full list of materials is made available for you, and preparations made for crew quarters."

She sighed again and looked to her data pad. "Now I just need a cook for the ship's galley."

"You know, Captain," Leonard said as he stepped forward. "I may be able to help you there as well. Let me make a call and get back to you on that." Senia nodded, smiling as she showed her appreciation to Doctor Ringtail.

"Now that we've settled that," Gerring said. "It may be best to get a good night's sleep. We've got a lot to do in the morning."



## **CHAPTER FOURTEEN**

### **THE PLOT REVEALED**

Morning came very quickly. Too quickly, in fact, for Senia's liking. At 0600 hours both she and her bunk mate Mia awoke to a sharp rapping on their door. They opened it to discover a package for both of them was delivered, which contained their new uniforms. Senia believed this messenger, or maybe one or two like him, had been to a few other dorm rooms across the campus, and in all houses. Nevertheless, both Senia and Mia made their usual morning routine of washing up and dressing. The new uniforms fit nicely; each was a standard

black top with black leggings. For both Senia and Mia, they had red piping down the legs, and each had a crest with the official RAAF logo. The top was a side button up tunic that could hang at the top should the wearer decide upon a more casual feel. Each tunic had shoulder clasps, which matched the piping down the leg.

After dressing the pair went down to breakfast right away. To their surprise, the other members of the senior staff and others mentioned in Senia's communication with General Gerring were present. Mills and Pinkerton, Greta and Sparky, Hardy and Clarfax, Aria and Mirri. Even the doctors and nurses had been presented uniforms of their own, albeit a more civilian variety. Senia looked over each of them carefully; Hardy, Mirri, Sparky and Clarfax each had data pads they were reading over. Sparky was going over his with Greta, and both seemed to be mulling over some great decision.

As Senia and Mia approached, Mirri rose to her feet quickly. "Captain on the deck," she called out as she presented herself in standard military stance. The others who were gathered all rose, with the exception of the medical staff, who were not as accustomed to military protocol as yet. "Well... in the mess hall, rather," Mirri added somewhat sheepishly.

"I appreciate your vigor, Left-tenant," Senia said with a smile as both she and Mia took their seats at the table with the others. As everyone was sitting down again, Herman Ringtail spoke up.

"I'm not certain if we were to stand," he said as his four companions nodded in agreement. "We aren't used to such things, I'm afraid."

"It's quite alright, doctor," Senia assured him. "These things will take time, though I'm more than certain Left-tenant Ridgewell could give you a manual for reading so you're prepared in the future."

For the next half an hour, the group eat quietly, with only minor discussions among them. Sparky and Greta kept going over pilot rosters, passing data pads back and forth as they'd look over different candidates carefully. Mirri was reading diligently from her own data pad, which proved to be the entire articles of protocol for security aboard any deep space vessel. Hardy seemed to be studying the ship's engine schematics. Clarfax was going over science rosters. The only ones who seemed much more casual were the four Procyon medical staff, chit chatting mildly with each other, and every so often striking up a small conversation with anyone else close by.

As the group finished their breakfast, Senia rose to her feet to get everyone's attention.

"I know it's early," she began, making sure to use words that would hide her speech impediment. "However, all of the staff that will be needed to make the final crew decisions is here, so we may as well begin." She looked to Mirri first. "Security teams. How are they coming along?"

"I have a list of potentials," Mirri replied quickly as she motioned to a small pile of data pads neatly piled in front of her. It was obvious some were more for security protocols and some of the more legal requirements aboard a vessel. "I managed to narrow it down to fifteen candidates. I know some will have already accepted positions through their evaluations, but they are mostly wishful thinking."

"Good," Senia replied with a nod. "Once you have those settled, send the completed list to Aria and myself so we can see your choices. Hardy. The engineering team."

"Done," Hardy replied with a smile. "I sent a wave to you this morning with a completed list of potentials. Once it's approved, I can contact those listed and give them their orders. I know for a fact each would jump at the chance to be on a ship like this. Which they most likely will when I show 'em the

schematics." The group chuckled softly at Hardy's enthusiasm.

"I've taken a look at the list," Aria said as she looked to Senia. "A good group, and I've given her the go ahead to contact them."

Senia nodded, then looked to Clarfax. "Knowing Hardy's enthusiasm, it most likely rubbed off on you as well. How does your search go?"

"I already sent my list to Aria," Clarfax said with a grin. "A team of six, which will make for a good rotation."

Senia smiled and nodded in reply, then looked to Sparky and Greta. "And you two, how are the pilots coming along?"

"Difficult," Greta replied as she set down her data pad. "Most of the really good ones have already accepted positions, though there are a few who have managed to wait it out. I've already got a meeting lined up with a few of them. I can schedule them to meet together and you can go over each one with me and Sparky if you'd like."

"Set up a meeting at 1500 hours," Senia replied with a nod. "It will most likely look more urgent if we had a few others there." She looked between Aria and Mirri. "I'd like you two there as well." Each nodded quickly, confirming they'd make certain to be present.

"Naturally," Sparky piped up. "We had to cross off the top five names off our list right away." Everyone, save for Greta gave Sparky a quizzical look. "Difficult when you're top choices happen to be the captain, chief engineer, chief science officer and commanding officer. And of course, Jadda."

"Yes," Senia said with a nod. The tribunal was still fresh in her mind, even though she tried not to show it. "That'll be a sword that hangs over our heads for a while. As for the others," she said as she took a deep breath. "Well, can't have everything, now can we. Though, I'm sure we'd all like some practice from time to time." This brought out a few chuckles, which helped lighten the mood. Senia then looked to the medical staff. "I trust you have made an inventory list for the medical bay?"

"Completed it before breakfast," Herman said with a firm nod. "Katlyn and I sent a wave to you and Aria just before breakfast. Once it's approved, we can send requisition forms off to the general." Herman paused a moment and looked to the others briefly, then looked back to Senia. "We searched out Left-tenant Commander Ridgewell last night. She helped us a great deal with making sure we cleared all the channels properly."

Senia smiled and gave a nod of approval to Mirri.

"Excellent work."

"If I may," Katlyn said as she rose to her feet. "Dr. Ringtail... that is, my father-in-law, wished to convey that he contacted a proper cook and he'll join us in a day. I believe he'll arrive during your graduation ceremonies. Mr. Angus Copperbottom is his name. He's an older fellow, but he has experience aboard deep space vessels."

"I believe I know that name," Senia said with a smile. "He served aboard the Tritan years ago, didn't he." Katlyn replied with a nod. "Excellent work, Dr. Ringtail. Thank you very much, and please convey my thanks to your father. He'd been extremely helpful. That is, should I not meet him first."

"You might, Captain," Herman spoke up. "He'll be tending to Colonel Stigian's care when you and the General go to speak with him."

"Which reminds me," Senia remarked with a sigh. "It's getting to that time. Commander Sharpspear, Left-tenant Commander Ridgewell. I'll want you two present when we meet with the General as we see to Stigian." She looked to Sparky and Greta as she continued. "If you two could contact those on your prospective list and have them meet us as we discussed." Sparky and Greta nodded firmly in reply. "Hardy, I

assume you will have an inventory list of supplies we'll need."

"Already put that in," she replied with a grin.

"Excellent," Senia said with a nod. "That leaves one last thing we need. A barber. The last thing we need is the lot of us shedding on board the vessel without a good trimming."

"I actually took care of that," Aria spoke up. "The barbering school in Chattingham recently had their own graduation, and I contacted a couple of barbers. Twins, Chester and Clarissa Manning. They seemed eager for the chance, especially on a deep space mission." Senia nodded to Aria, smiling her approval with the efficiency that each member of her senior staff had gathered their information together.

"Excellent work all around," she said as she looked to each person at the table. "Well, we all have our duties to perform. Let's get a move on. Aria, Mirri. You two are with me. The rest of you. Dismissed."

After breakfast and the meeting of the new senior staff of the Nighthawk, Senia, Aria and Mirri went to join General Gerring, Colonel Pitts, Air Marshall Collinsworth and Dr. Ringtail in the medical ward. It was quiet, as most activity was in the main faculty and in the different campus barracks and



houses in preparation for the final graduation ceremonies. Senia thought of that for a moment, how she, along with her friends, had spent the last six years preparing themselves to become fighter pilots. How things suddenly change.

Fillias Stigian was resting comfortably in the post op ward. He appeared fine, if not a bit drained. Still, there appeared to be a mix of relief and a great deal of regret on his face as Senia entered the ward. Gerring, Pitts and Collinsworth were standing on one side of his bed, while Dr. Ringtail was administering to Stigian's needs. Ringtail gave a clipboard with all the information regarding Stigian's condition to a nurse, who then went to carry out her own duties. Senia, Aria and Mirri stood at the end of Stigian's bed, offering a salute to their commanding officers. Gerring looked over to the trio and smiled.

"Those uniforms look sharp on you three," she said as she gave each a nod. "I received your crew recommendations this morning. You've put together a good group, Captain Felix." Gerring looked to Aria and smiled. "And you, Commander Sharspear. I'm sure your parents would be very proud of this accomplishment."

"Considering the circumstances, ma'am," Aria replied as

she nodded. "I hope they're proud that I'll be representing Vulpinia in such a capacity."

"You know, Commander," Mirri said in a quiet voice to Aria, but not quiet enough for the others not to hear. "I think it's rather ironic that the only one who doesn't know about your family lineage happens to be your bunk mate."

Aria chuckled lightly, catching sight of the smiles for the others. "I think Hardy's forgotten about that, now that she's seen the engine specs of the Nighthawk."

"I think she fell in love," Senia added. "Clarfax better watch himself." There was a shared laugh with that comment, ending only when a pained groan came from Stigian.

"Ah, Fillias," Dr. Ringtail said as he focused his attention on the Colonel. "Awake at last. How are you feeling?"

"Like I've been in a fight with a Kanatian snow bear," he said as he let his eyes focus for a moment. He looked around the room, taking note of each person there, then focused his own attention on Leonard. "Leonard! I haven't seen you..."

"Since the war, I imagine," Dr. Ringtail said with a chuckle. "Unfortunate that we had to have a reunion like this, but, thankfully you're going to make a full recovery."

Stigian let out a breath of relief, then looked to the three at the end of his bed. "Article 16," he whispered. He knew what had happened, seeing the three in their command uniforms. "It's that bad, isn't it."

"I'm hoping you can tell us that, Colonel," Gerring said softly. "I assure you, now that we know you were being manipulated, we can ensure that you won't be blamed for any responsibility."

"If only that were true, General," Stigian said with a sigh. "About a year ago, I received a communication. Unknown source, but they said... it said, that I could have my revenge for such a disgrace during the land war. Part of me must have believed that, because I went to meet the one who wrote the message. I never saw them directly, but I always remember those eyes." He took another deep breath and closed his eyes for a moment. "Those yellow eyes with that black slit in the middle. That hiss in the voice. Saying all I had to do was remain calm and they'd make sure I would never have to worry about anything again. I felt like I was floating. And then... the past year has been a blur." He opened his eyes and looked directly to Senia. "I regret all of it, but I regret the injustice I did to Jadda. The plan was to embarrass members of the core

cadets with the best futures. Something always held me back." He stopped, acting though he just remembered something. "Sergeant Willham. You need to find him. They did the same thing to him. That was part of the plan, you see. To undermine the cadets, make the forces weak. The process would have taken years." Collinsworth moved to a console, calling for security to find Willham immediately and detain him.

Where did you go, Colonel?" Gerring said quietly, encouraging him to continue just a bit more. "Where did you meet this individual?"

"Just... outside of the city of Rondu," he said, though with a small degree of difficulty. "On Pau Theta II."

"General, I'm going to have to insist that Fillias get some rest," Dr. Ringtail interrupted. He moved to tuck in Stigian's bedding around the Colonel, but felt a hand on his own arm.

"Leonard, I know you mean well," Stigian said in a raspy whisper, followed by a cough. "But they have to know."

"There'll be time enough for that later, Colonel," Gerring said as she nodded to Ringtail. "Captain Felix and her crew still has two days before rendezvous with the Nighthawk at Starbase Omega One."

Stigian nodded and finally seemed to calm himself. He

looked toward Senia and took another deep breath. "I feel so ashamed for what I did to Jadda." Senia nodded her reply, then moved to follow Gerring and Pitts as they left the room. In a small waiting area, Gerring spoke in soft tones.

"The Colonel is going to need more rest, which means we won't be able to gather enough information as we need before you go," she said to the three. "At least we have a place to begin. How familiar are you three with Pau Theta II?"

"I know that it was a colony, the first colony, when Vulpinians began exploring space," Senia offered.

"They separated contact with Vulpinia Prime several centuries ago," Mirri added. "Communication has been rare, we've never had a precise idea of what has been going on with the population."

"It's also home of the Main Authority," Aria stated. "The policing unit of the RVAF. And is the home of the maximum security prison." Gerring nodded to each in kind, then turned to Colonel Pitts.

"During the Lupine Land War," Pitts said as he read off a data pad. "The government of Rondu completely severed ties, official and unofficial, with Vulpinia Prime. Their last message was, I quote 'we're going to go it on our own'. What we do

know of Rondu is that their society is greatly different than ours here. When we dismantled our banking system and decided to move toward a wealth of knowledge and exploration, Pau Theta II did not. It is believed that many of those in power are direct decedents of those who supported the status quo during the Gender War of 1200 years ago, and that they wanted to model their society on that example. Because they still have an archaic monetary system, they have a great divide in wage equality, as the city sits on a river, the north side being home to the affluent and influential, while the south side is poverty and disease stricken. As to the bases of power in the city, that we cannot be certain of, as they have built a defense perimetre around the planet which restricts any and all communication. Even the Main Authority must adhere to a communication liason before sending or receiving messages." He placed his data pad under his arm and seemed to mutter the last as he showed his frustration with the communication system. "It is most annoying."

"So it seems I have no choice but to send you into hostile territory your first time out, Captain," Gerring said as she straightened herself. "I hope you feel up to the task."

"Even with everything we've seen so far, ma'am," Senia

said with a firm voice, not even paying attention to her speech impediment. "I knew we'd be in for a fight. I just hope we can use some diplomacy to get us what we need." Senia looked to Aria and Mirri for a moment, each of them nodding in agreement with Senia's statement. She looked back to General Gerring. "If you'll excuse us, ma'am, we still have a core of fighter pilots to prepare. And we have a lot of information to go over. In two days time we'll be ready to launch."

The day was busy, and it wasn't getting any less so. Senia, Aria and Mirri had to make their rounds, gather the last remaining members of the crew. Clarfax had already brought together his own science team. Hardy her own engineering team. The Doctors Ringtail along with their nurses, the Littlepaws, had put in a full list of inventory they'd need before launch. Mirri had already gathered her own security crew, and Mia had brought in other experienced pilots who she felt could pilot an escort vessel like the Nighthawk. As a precaution, Mia was with her group taking them through the steps with holo tests, making sure they'd be ready. Some of them were also members of different departments; one that Mirri felt would make a good security officer, another whom Clarfax could see

some scientific talent, and two more who had engineering experience.

Now, they just had fighter pilots to concern themselves with. Fortunately, Greta and Sparky had come through.

As Senia, Aria and Mirri entered the small meeting room set aside for this introduction, Greta called out 'captain on deck' and all present rose to their feet. The only exception were two Felanus and one older looking Procyon. Senia recognized them as civilians, but wondered what they were doing there. Little matter, it would be something she'd have to deal with after speaking with the pilots.

Of the pilots, some she recognized, and some she didn't. Each was still wearing the different uniforms of their respective Houses. Three from House Lynx, three from House Kestrel, and six from House Swift. A good mix of Vulpine and Felanus pilots. One such pilot Senia did recognize. A Mayalasian named Chloe Grivana, she created quite a stir when she first arrived at the academy. While Mayalsians have their own science academies, they don't have their own military or air force academies. Chloe wished to join the air force, and when she arrived in Chattingham with her parents, it caused a bit of a worry. The faculty had to remind everyone that Mayalasians



were quiet different. While they were indeed Felanus, they were the only race on all of Vulpinia Prime that had no fur. Instead, they had skin colourations. The reason why this caused a stir, a lack of fur is one of the signs of the mange; a terrible disease in Vulpinian history.

While that information has some interest, it does not in fact pertain to the current situation. After all, Senia didn't think about it as she stood in front of the pilots, the only thing she thought of was all twelve of these individuals and their ability.

"According to Left-tenant Commander Greta and Left-tenant Sparks, you twelve have some of the best piloting test scores," Senia said as she addressed them all. "Please, have a seat," she added as she motioned to the chairs. All twelve took their seats, keeping their attention focused on Senia. "I'm sure you're curious as to why you've been called forward."

"With all due respect, Captain," Chloe Grivana said as she raised her hand; Chloe spoke slowly, so it sounded like her speech pattern was rather lazy, but Senia had heard she could be vocal when she needed to be. Senia also heard Chloe was a very take charge kind of pilot. "Commander Greta informed us that Article 16 had been implemented. We're mostly familiar with the article in question. Left-tenant Sparks filled us in on

the rest."

"I hope this isn't something that puts you off," Senia said as she looked over a data pad. "I know many have their sights set on different fighter squadrons."

"I think we can manage, ma'am," Chloe said quickly. "We're fighter pilots, and I know I can only speak for my mates in House Swift, I believe it's safe to say we'll be doing what we wanted to do. Fly fighter craft."

"Besides, Captain," a grey coated Vulpine male added quickly. "It would be safe to say that our commanding officers all had their own dreams changed on them."

Senia offered a small smile as she looked over these twelve pilots. Each had agreed with everything both Chloe and the Vulpine had said. This was a good thing indeed. "I know that here in Chattingham we have our loyalties to our Houses. But as of today, that changes. From this point onward, your loyalty is with the Nighthawk and the safety of the Vulpine System. Greta and Sparks will both give you all a full briefing on the fighter craft you'll be flying. I'm sure you'll find it amusing that these new craft have been dubbed the mini hawks or hawklings. I trust you lot might come up with a better name for them." There was a small chuckle that went through the

room. "You're also going to need a squadron leader, and again, both Greta and Sparks have given me their suggestions." Senia stepped forward, handing Chloe a data pad. "Congratulations, Left-tenant. You will be working with Greta and Sparks to form this team."

Chloe looked to the data pad for a moment, hesitating somewhat, but eventually taking it carefully in her hands. "I didn't think you'd pick me as squadron leader. I've often been called..."

"Arrogant, egotistical, a tad flippant, and somewhat confrontational," Senia replied with a nod. "I'm familiar with the full report, I had the chance to summarize each during lunch and on my way here. Besides, isn't that the earmark of an exceptional pilot." Chloe smirked and nodded to Senia in reply. "For now, I believe Greta and Sparks have you all scheduled for some holo time to prepare yourselves for the craft you'll be flying. I won't keep you any longer. Dismissed."

Greta and Sparky looked to Senia and smiled. Senia replied with a firm nod, they looked like a good group. As they filtered out, Senia finally turned her attention to the other three in the room. "Now then," she said as she, Aria and Mirri stood facing them. "You three are..."

"We are Simon and Hector Longfur," one of the two Felanus said as he rose to his feet. His fur, along with that of his companion, was incredibly thick, and ranged from a dark brown around the face to a light beige everywhere else. "Aria... or rather, Miss Shardspear..."

"I think she's commander, Simon," the other Felanus interrupted Simon. It appeared as if the two were twins.

"Commander," Simon said as he nodded to Hector. "Yes, indeed. As I was saying. The commander informed us that there would be a pair of positions available on board the ship, which were focused on the grooming aspect of personnel."

"And you two are experts in that field, I take it," Senia said as she approached them, giving Aria a look over her shoulder. Aria was smiling, giving away that she knew this pair. "Are you recent graduates of the school in Chattingham."

"Yes indeed," Hector said with a firm nod. "We had thought of opening our own boutique, however, we realize that there is something to be said for tending to the grooming needs of the crew of a starship."

"I'm sure you'll work out fine," Senia said with a small nod as she motioned to Mirri. "Left-tenant Ridgewell can get you settled and make sure that everything is in order. Mirri, if

you would," Senia said as she looked back to her chief of security.

"Of course, Captain," she replied as she stepped forward to the pair. Both instantly looked right at Mirri's headscarf.

"I like that," Simon said with a nod.

"It's a lot like Mia's," Hector added.

"If you're speaking of Left-tenant Talon," Mirri said as she motioned toward the door, offering that the three could speak openly as they walked. "Then you'll be happy to know she'll also be a part of this ship."

"Oh! Excellent!" the pair of Felanus barbers said. They chattered away excitedly as Mirri lead them down the hallway. Senia looked to Aria, who still had a beaming smile. Senia's only reaction was a sigh and shake of her head, then she turned her attention to the older looking Procyon who slowly rose to his feet.

"I b'lieve that I be next ta talk ta, Cap'n," he said with a husky tone to his voice. "Me name is Angus Longear, former galley cook with the Tritan many years back. I been operatin' a small bistro since then, but me son an' his mate have taken it over. I thought o' retirin', but tha's borin', ta be quite honest." Angus took a step closer to Senia and Aria, sizing them both up.

"Lenny give me a call the other day, an' hopped a transport. Felt this might be a good opportunity ta get meself back into the swing o' things again." He leaned over to Senia and gave her a quick look. "I'm certain you'll wish ta check me credentials. By the by, yer a bit o' a wee one, aren't you."

"I'm... short, yes," Senia said with some hesitation. She also took note of Angus' look when she spoke. "And I'm fully aware I have a speech impediment. I assure you, it does not affect my ability to command."

"Self confidence," Angus said with a firm nod. "I like that. Well, I just wished ta say me greetings ta the captain, so if you'll excuse me, I should get me things together. I trust we'll be leavin' in a day 'r two." Senia nodded confirmation. "Good. I'll have an inventory which I'll need ta get t'gether. Can't launch without a good store o' food. It'll be a bad idea ta head out without a proper tea send off." Without another word he turned toward the door, walking slowly as he hummed an old folk tune, leaving Senia and Aria to give each other a look of amazement.

"This is moving very fast, isn't it," Aria said as she seemed to relax.

"A bit, yes," Senia replied. "But it also seems to be

rather interesting. We've surrounded ourselves with a lot of familiar faces and some very colourful characters, it would seem." Senia took a deep breath and thought of the things they had left to do. There wasn't much left, not with the Nighthawk, at least. There was still graduation, but that seemed less important now. Still, Senia had an idea. "Gather everyone, and have them report to the Flying Fox at 1900 hours this evening. Even medical staff, our two barbers and our new cook. I'll speak with Mrs. Crenshaw, see if she can set aside one of her dining rooms. I want the crew to meet everyone. It's important they get to know one another."