

FROM THE AVENGER LOGS...

GOOD MORNING, RECREATION

By Heidi E. Barnes and Rose Culver

PART I: A DAY IN THE LIFE OF LT. PAUL JOHNSTON HENNINGS

Wearing a soft cotton kilt, white gauze shirt, and calf-length suede boots, Paul Johnston Hennings slipped quietly into the Holographic Imaging Chamber. It wasn't normally open this time of day, but luckily for him, no holotherapy sessions had been scheduled and "luckily" he was Assistant Chief of Recreation. The sandy blonde-haired Human entered his selection into the control panel and a Spring-lit countryside appeared around him. A "dirt path" didn't quite hide the treadmill as it rose from a recess in the center of the floor. Holographic technology was far from perfect.

After stretching, Paul centered himself on the treadmill and began a slow jog. He liked to run. It helped him think. He was thinking a lot lately. Not that he didn't—he was, after all, a writer. But this time he was thinking of how he'd gotten here and if "here" was where he wanted to stay. Oh, don't get him wrong; things weren't bad. Chaym was like a sister and he and Mitzi were doing okay. It was just that he was tired. Really tired. He couldn't remember a vacation or shore leave where he hadn't been working—either for the ship, his publisher, or the Galactic Hussies.

It seemed like a lifetime ago when a scared, angry, and very lonely 17-year-old had left home with nothing but a knapsack filled with a change of clothes, a data padd, and a few favorite books. He left behind a house filled with troubled memories and a note reading simply, "There is a kind of abuse that leaves no physical scars, and those who perform it will never understand the extent of its consequences."

He had finally gotten published and the sale of those three poems had helped get him off planet. Where exactly he wanted to go, he wasn't quite sure, but Earth seemed like a nice place to start.

Paul didn't like thinking about that first year and a half. It bothered him how naive he had been. He who had seen and survived and understood how cruel the world could be, apparently hadn't seen it all. Nothing really **bad** had happened on his journey, just, well, anyway....

At 19 he wound up enrolling in Star Fleet Academy and soon the Recreation Officers' program. Explore the galaxy, listen to hundreds of peoples' stories, and get paid to play. That and the instructors encouraged intelligent off-the-wall creativity.

Paul soon became good friends with Chaym Gale' Re'ming'ton; they had a lot in common. The relationship had turned intimate for a few weeks, but, to their regret, each of their personal intensities had started to burn the other's out. Thankfully, it had served to only strengthen their friendship. He had dated Sasha Graevyn in his Junior and Senior year. They had parted on good terms, knowing that soon they would graduate and be assigned to different ships.

The summer before graduation had been a blast, though. Mitzi Mrowr and her heavy metal band, the Galactic Hussies, went on tour and took Chaym and Paul with them. Chaym played bass and Paul was stage manager, for the regular had gotten sick. And so, for fourteen crazy weeks, the band traveled around the galaxy performing 6-10 times a week. Also surprisingly, "Fly Away Lungfish

Baby" had gone triple latinum. Paul had written songs for the 'Hussies before, but had never expected this.

The summer after that, his publisher had pushed him into a literary tour, hoping to capitalize on the success of his second collection of poems and short stories. The schedule was so packed that he'd barely had time to say good-bye to his friends, and almost missed the boarding of his first assignment aboard the U.S.S. Sager.

And that's how his life had been going ever since. Get up early, go for a run, get depressed, write, work for 10-12 hours, grab something to eat, write some more, and maybe get some sleep. Shore leaves were spent downloading the latest news, entertainment, and assorted media, and stocking supplies for the Recreation Department. If leave was long enough, he'd give lectures and readings or else help the 'Hussies if they got a couple of gigs.

Paul had been on the Avenger for a couple of years now and he honestly loved the work and the people. Mitzi and he had been close for a while now, too.

Thing was, he was just tired. His tour of duty would be up in a year and the idea of taking some honest time off was looking very appealing. It wouldn't have to be anything permanent—just a vacation.

His thoughts were interrupted by an adolescent tiger's voice: Hobbes, his personality computer program. "Hey chum, time to get moving. Shift starts in an hour and a half."

Paul sighed; barely enough time to shower, write, and eat. "Thanks, Hobbes. End holo program."

With that, he left the Rec Deck and headed for his quarters, trying not to notice the appreciative stares he got along the way. Kilts were coming back into style. His female "furry" friends had convinced him to try them, and he had to admit they were quite comfortable. No amount of Chaym's begging, pleading, and threats had convinced Carlos to put one on...yet.

Two hours later, Lieutenant Paul Johnston Hennings was in the office of the Chief of Recreation, reviewing the schedule. He had already checked up on things, and last shift had gone well, with no major problems. In a "little while" an Engineering tech was supposed to come and check on one of the electronic game tables.

Chaym had left him a couple of notes and Skin Horse was elaborating. "Chaym wants the pool prepared for the dignitaries. Medical should have information on the exact mineral content. As for what color the pool should be, you'd have to ask Mitzi."

"Fox." Fox was the name of Mitzi's computer personality program.

"Yes, Paul?" Was it just him, or did he detect a hint of jealousy in the male voice?

"Did Mitzi tell you what color the pool should be?"

"No. But I'm sure she would have if she'd known. Anything else?"

"No. Thank you. Skin Horse, please continue."

"The inner child series has been having fewer participants lately. Chaym would like you to come up with a new 'ad campaign'. It should encourage non-Human and Human participation. Separate ads are acceptable. Also, a new Ensign from Operations is coming over. You are to show her around and see if she is an acceptable addition to the part-time staff."

"Anything else?"

"Yes." Paul sighed. "You're doing a good job, Paul. I don't think you realize how much Chaym appreciates your hard work. The Rec Deck is her life, but her friends are the only family she's got right now. Sometimes she forgets to thank them. It's hard for her, too."

"I know. Thanks, Skin Horse."

"No problem at all. Mitzi has left a rather tawdry message for you. Shall I put it on the desk viewer?"

"Yes, thank you." Mitzi's lithe white-furred feline body appeared on screen. Her voice was a soft sensual purr. Paul smiled. She was good for him.

When the message was over, he recorded an accepting reply and sent it to her quarters. He smiled again and then began working on the ads.

Forty minutes later, he was done. One ad was geared toward Vulcans and the more "serious" element of the crew. It emphasized the logic in learning new skills and understanding different cultures by means of their recreational activities. Part of that ad read, "The well known archeologist Sik V'Tan opened up the mysteries of the ancient Pene'nds when she realized that the key to their language lay in the drawings and toys of their children." Another ad stated, "Think of the communion of soul and life that comes from using your body to place ideas and thoughts onto a permanent surface with paint that you've made yourself." Yet another read simply, "Come on—let's go play!"

When he was done, Hobbes informed him that the Operations Ensign had arrived and that for some reason she seemed a bit scared.

"What did you do to her, Hobbes?"

"Why, I only introduced her to myself, Fox, Elmo, N'jane', Wande'le's the Wanderer, Sara..."

"Hobbes! Did you bother to mention Skin Horse?"

"Oh, I forgot about him."

"Skin Horse, please lock Hobbes up in the nursery and tell Ensign Adiane that I'll be with her in a moment."

Paul closed the files he was working on and downed the last of a cold cup of coffee. He left the office thinking the very common thought, "Things are never boring on the Wrecked Deck."

He found the lithe, red-haired Ensign staring nervously about near the main entrance. With his best charming smile, he greeted her. "Ensign Adiane? I'm Lieutenant Paul Johnston Hennings. Welcome to Recreation. Please don't let the 'voices' startle you. They're only the personality programs that we Rec people use to interact with the computer more easily. Some of the programs can get a bit...overzealous. Our main program is called Skin Horse. Whenever you need something, just ask for him or say 'Computer.' I'm assuming you've used our Recreation facilities?"

"Yes, sir. A bit, sir. I've only been aboard a couple of weeks."

"Well, then, I'll give you the grand tour." With that, he led her around, pointing out the various facilities. "This is what we call Main Rec. As you can see, we have game pits which are equipped

for both electronic and non-electronic games, three small media screens, which are always on, and this huge one for movies, special news events, and shipwide announcements. Main Rec is used for large parties, game tournaments, and other events requiring lots of space. The lego pit in the corner is used for all our 'inner child' activities—finger-painting, Toy Day, etc. He directed her forward, to the left, and through a door. The room was filled with people weightlifting, running on treadmills, and riding stationary bikes. Two crewmembers were wielding swords and following the instructions of a long, black-haired Human being projected from a holoscreen. "This is the Gymnasium." Paul pointed toward the holographic image. "That's Duncan MacLeod, our fencing and martial arts instructor. We use him whenever we can't get a live instructor. Lieutenant Xiin, our Physical Fitness Instructor, was lucky enough to find the program in some old files. She updated him and he's been working out pretty well."

The Assistant Chief then led the crewman to the pool. "There's a force field that separates the Swimming Pool Area from the gym. Most times we don't activate it, unless there's a class going on and swimmers get a bit rowdy. Whenever there's a Zero-G activity in this area, the force field must absolutely be turned on. The programs will remind you."

Just then, a tall, brown-haired Human male wearing brightly colored swim trunks adorned with the Recreation logo and a T-shirt reading "Lifeguard" bounded over to them. He stopped in mid-stride, turned around, yelled, "Hey, you! Read the sign!", and turned just as quickly back around to face the new Ensign. "The most important thing to remember, above all else, is that only Rec Officers can fool with the stereo."

Paul laughed. "Ensign Kathleen Adiane, this is Lieutenant Christopher Underwood, Aquatics Engineer, Lifeguard, and Ultimate Ruler of the Zero-G Pool." Chris bowed graciously. "Much to his dismay, we also use this area for cultural and religious activities that require more space than the Chapel can provide." At her look of puzzlement, he explained simply, "A cover slides over the pool."

Just then, a short electric zap was heard, followed by a yelp. The Lifeguard groaned. "Some people never learn!" He bounded away toward the perpetrator, speaking aloud to his personality program in Thanagarian.

Paul then took Adiane up to Deck 4. "As you can see, on our left are the locker rooms." He paused at a section of balcony overlooking the pool. "If you'll look down you'll notice that the diving board has been placed under the open area of the balcony; the same is true of some of the gym equipment. The decks are only about two meters high and it is very important that when setting up any equipment you check its user height requirement. If you're not sure, check the logs. Anything needing more than 1.8 meters goes under a balcony. I've read accident reports from some other ships, and they weren't pretty. On a lighter note, we got a really great picture of a diver just coming down with a nebula visible through the portal right behind her. It even won a couple of contests. Moving on, the tables, chairs, 'bar,' and replicators you see around you are what we call the Bar/Lounge Area. Of course, it's not a real bar—there are no bartenders, but it serves the same purpose. People come here to chat, drink, and lounge about. Alcohol is allowed, but in moderation. You see anyone getting rowdy, you tell 'em to go back to their cabins. Any problems, and you call

Security. But don't worry, most know their limits, and few forget that they are indeed on a Star Fleet ship."

He led her past the second balcony, which was surrounded by more tables, chairs, and couches, to a series of library terminals. "This is our Library Area. Crewmembers can access the main library, do research, work on projects, even watch a movie or show. It's considered a 'quiet area.'" He turned to an empty terminal and spoke a few commands. A red furry muppet face appeared on the screen. "This is Elmo."

The face began to speak with the high pitched voice of a giggly five year old. "Hi, Paul! Do you want to play a game with me?"

"Not now, Elmo. I'd like to introduce you to Ensign Kathleen Adiane. She's a Mission Support Specialist and has come to help us out part-time."

"Hi, Kathleen! That's a pretty name."

"Uh, thank you, Elmo."

"Elmo, can you tell the Ensign what you do?"

"Sure! I help people find things in the library, teach them to use programs they're not familiar with, and help teach over in the classroom across the hall in Flight Ops. Sometimes I even get to help Chaym cook."

Paul explained, "We've built a robotic Elmo, and Commander Re'ming'ton uses him in her beginning cooking classes. Helps put the students at ease."

"Elmo loves to cook! It's fun." The furry creature squealed with glee.

Laughing, Paul turned back to the screen. "We have to go now, Elmo."

"Oh, so soon?"

"Yes. I'm sorry. Thank you very much for your help."

"You're welcome, Paul. It was very nice to meet you, Ensign Adiane."

"Nice to meet you too, Elmo." The crewman smiled and seemed to relax for the first time since arriving on the 'Deck.

The Assistant Rec Chief then led her past the main office to the Holographic Simulation Area. A panel beside its door indicated occupancy. The outside walls were decorated with holos depicting scenes ranging from brilliant sunrises and starscapes to rousing adventures—all of which could be found inside.

"This is the pride of Recreation. Our Holodeck is equipped with the absolute latest technology. Ever hear of the N'n'eyde' Design Team?" The Ensign nodded 'yes.' "Well, Commander Re'ming'ton led that team and Ensign Kay-ai-oo Neha, our head of Holographic Imaging, was a part of it. They helped advance holographic technology to where it is today. The images still aren't as clear as what you'd get with VR gear, but they're working on it. An important rule: do not fool with the programs unless you've been instructed to or have gotten permission from the Commander, Ensign Neha, or her personality program, N'jane'. While they are always open to new ideas, it's just best to ask permission before touching the programming."

Paul took her down the spiral staircase and back into Main Rec. "As you can see, we're pretty relaxed here on the Rec Deck. We like to have fun and joke around, but we take our jobs pretty seriously. With 360 crewmembers from as many different backgrounds all living in a small starship, with sometimes a very long time between shore leaves, it can get pretty crazy trying to keep everyone happy. And with only 5 permanent Recreation Officers,

lucky technicians like you get to help us out. But don't get too nervous. You can ask anyone all the questions you'd like and Skin Horse is always around to help. Aren't you, Skin Horse?"

"Of course, Paul."

He led her over to the Lego Bin Area, which had been covered with a lid and table, upon which lay assorted colored balloons—some deflated, others twisted into barely recognizable shapes.

Assorted off-duty crew were being helped along by a tall brown-and-green receiver male Tridee. His voice was like rushing wind, as he spoke to a blue-hued Octavian. "Gog! put some talc on your tentacles. That way you won't keep sticking to the balloons and they won't pop so much... No, your gods won't be offended. You're not trying to kill the balloons, just twist them into shapes."

Lieutenant Hennings spoke up. "Lieutenant Bbfv Dndn, this is Ensign Kathleen Adiane, on loan to us from Operations."

"Greetings, Ensign."

"Greetings to you and your clan, Lieutenant Bbfv Dndn. May your roots grow long and may your saplings become wise."

"Why thank you!" The Tridee's upper tree-like appendages rustled at the honor of receiving such a greeting.

"Lieutenant, I'm going to leave the new Ensign with you for a while, if it's in accordance with your being?"

"No problem, dude." Bbfv Dndn loved showing off his "knowledge" of Human slang, much to many of the Humans' regret.

After explaining, yet again, to Engineering that "no he didn't have time to fix it himself, could they **please** send a tech", he turned the intercom switch off and spoke out loud to the air. "Maya?"

A deep rich female voice answered, "Yes, Paul?" Maya was the voice of the personality program based on a famous Earth poet and was used for performance art activities.

"How's the dinner concert going?"

"Quite well. The performers regret that you could not attend. However, they understand that you are quite busy."

"With diplomats coming? Yeh. I'm just glad we were able to reschedule and relocate things without too much trouble. Why don't we ever get more warning about these things?"

"Because, as the saying goes, 'Recreation Officers aren't gods, but Star Fleet sure expects us to perform miracles.'"

"Eloquent as always, Maya, love."

"Paul, you should give another reading soon. The crew would enjoy it."

"Not the stuff I've been writing lately."

"Why is that?"

"Nothing." His chronometer beeped. "Gotta go, Maya. Hobbes?" When no reply came, he spoke even louder. "Hobbes!"

A very grumpy tiger voice answered, "What?"

"Is the movie ready?"

"Skin Horse put me in the corner!"

Paul started making his way down the staircase, garnering strange looks from the crew. "You deserved it. Now stop pouting and answer me."

"Yes, the movie is ready. Do you want me to give the three minute warning?"

"Yes."

Multicolored lights began flashing as he reached the front of Main Rec. Standing in front of the large viewscreen, the Assistant Chief of Recreation turned to face the crowd. "Good evening, gentlebeings." A ruckus of musical chirping and rustling of feathers interrupted him. "Yes, and a Great High Laughing Day to the People of Eyeethillueei. May this morning bring much humor to Her people." Paul smiled and began again. "Today's movie is the newly released action adventure vid, 'Quin Flannery & the Ruins of Salki Prime' starring our very own Charles Donovan."

A black-haired Human stood up and bowed graciously. "I'll be signing autographs after the show." This was met with a shower of popcorn and good natured laughter.

Again, Paul spoke up. "Please be warned that this movie may not be suitable for some viewers and their cultures and/or religions, and that no offense is meant by its viewing. Hobbes, start the film." The lights dimmed and the Human removed himself.

Quickly, he checked on things. Lieutenant Xiin was teaching a tai-chi course; Chris was explaining to Adiane how the Zero-G equipment worked. On Deck 4, people were happily drinking, talking, looking over the balconies, and star watching. All the library viewers were in use and a group of engineers were happily arguing about an article in a technical journal. Paul asked Skin Horse to keep an eye on things, gathered some padds from the office, and headed for the classroom.

Assembled there was a small group of crewmembers from Social Sciences. As part of their ongoing training, they were taking a class in Theological Dissertations On Children's Stories & Their Existential Dilemmas.

The author greeted them, "Afternoon, folks. Did everyone do their assigned reading?" All indicated 'yes.' "Great. To start with, I think we'll discuss the way non-deity characters interacted with the deities they encountered. Who wants to start?"

Lieutenant Sukasi spoke up first and others soon followed. "In the story 'Eli-oo & the Field of Coroopa,' N'jane' the Trickster gives the drought stricken village a whole field of grain. It was pretty obvious that all the villagers worshipped her as a god."

"But the boy, Eli-oo, could tell that it was only a mirage."

The discussion continued for a short time until Paul turned it to another of the stories. "What about Skin Horse in 'The Velveteen Rabbit'?"

"Skin Horse wasn't God. He was more like a monk or a very wise man. He knew that there was more to life than just being a toy. He knew that there was a higher plane of existence—that of being real."

"But what about the Velveteen Rabbit? He became real and then was turned into a real live bunny."

"I think real is as close to God as some people come. Then there are a select few who become ever closer to God, like angels or saints."

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By the time the class was over, the movie had ended. Lieutenant Hennings took a look at the 'Deck. Ensign Adiane was talking animatedly with N'jane' at the Holographic Simulation Area, Chris was wrapping things up with the pool and promised to reset the gym equipment, Dndn was cleaning things up in Main Rec, and fi-

nally an Engineering tech was working on the malfunctioning game table.

Most of the off-duty crew were slowly filing out. Charles Donovan was, yet again, imploring Lieutenant Rosealina Pullman to go out on a date with him. After three weeks, you would think he would've given up, Paul thought to himself. The Eyeethillueei's attention was divided between watching the part-time actor and a media screen showing a rebroadcast of the galactic news.

Paul walked up the spiral staircase to the library area. All was fairly quiet. The lounge, however, was more crowded than usual and already more than one person was well on their way towards getting drunk. The long time between shore leaves was affecting the crew, and though he understood how they felt, as Assistant Chief of Recreation, he had to put a stop to it.

He spoke quietly to a couple of drinkers and their friends. Commander Zulkowski, the Assistant Chief Engineer, vocalized a bit, but agreed to go back to his cabin and 'sleep it off.'

Suddenly Paul was slapped in the face. A slurred, "You son of a bitch!" followed.

The slapper's friend, looking scared to death, spoke up. "Sir, please forgive him. His boyfriend back home just broke up with him. They'd been together for five years and were talking marriage and everything. And...and...frankly, sir, you look a bit like him."

Great, Paul thought, this is all I need. Out loud, he said, "Lieutenant, please escort the Commander back to his quarters and keep him there. When he sobers up, inform him that if he ever does anything like that again, not only will I put him on report, but I'll let him spend a night in Lt. Commander rRham's cabin."

The Lieutenant gulped, uttered a stumpled, "Yes, sir," and put his arm around his friend. "Come on, let's go. Jon was an asshole. You didn't need him anyway."

As he turned to the rest of the group, Lieutenant Hennings felt like saying, "Anybody else want to hit me?" Instead, he merely said the familiar phrase, "Last call, everybody. Breakfast crowd's coming soon and will be beggin' the reps for coffee," turned, and left the area.

"Hobbes?"

"Hi, Paul," the program said in a voice that seemed a bit too cheerful.

"Has the Engineering tech finished the repairs yet?"

"Uh, he just got done."

"Great." Paul walked over to the game table. "Please run a standard 3-D chess game." The table activated and a holographic board appeared. The pieces began moving as the computer played itself.

"Stop game. Hobbes, why aren't the pieces screaming?"

"I dunno."

"Hobbes!"

"It's not my fault! The tech did it! I tried to tell him, but he wouldn't listen."

"Start from the beginning."

"The tech was workin' on the audio array and started pullin' out the special wires that you and Chaym installed. So I said, 'Hey, don't do that.' And then he said, 'Who's there?' And I said, 'It's me—Hobbes. You're not supposed to touch those wires.' And then I *very nicely* projected the schematics for him. Then he started saying, 'God clear my eyes and ears. Let me not see and hear the evil of N'jane' the Trickster' over and over again. So I said, 'N'jane'

isn't evil; she's good. And I'm not her, but I'll get her if you want. She runs the Holodeck.' Then N'jane' came on line and said, 'Fear not, Little One. The false prophets teach you to fear me and this is wrong.' And then the tech, who was shakin' a lot by then, started screaming and ran away. So you see Paul, it wasn't my fault!"

"Is this true, Skin Horse?"

"Yes, Paul."

"I apologize, Hobbes. Let me get my tool belt and I'll fix it myself."

As he was finishing up, his good friend and commanding officer, Commander Chaym Gale' Re'ming'ton, entered. He briefed her on what was going on and when she departed for her office, he headed straight for the mess hall.

Like for the rest of the full time Rec Staff, lunch was a rarity for Paul, and he was starving. The replicator produced his order—two slices of wheat bread covered by sliced turkey, a heap of mashed potatoes and gravy, stuffing, and a glass of milk. (It does a Human good.) Seeing Sasha Graevyn, Paul went over to her table and sat down. The gray and white felinoid, wearing an Operations uniform, was halfway through her breakfast—filet mignon.

"Running late, Sash?"

"Well, thanks a lot for the confidence! Like any good department head, I've already been at work for a couple of hours and just stopped for a bite to eat—if that's all right with you?" She smiled, paused, turned his head with her paw, and studied the side of his face. "You've got a bruise. What happened?"

"Some guy thought I was his ex-boyfriend."

"Well you are—mine, anyway."

"Yeh, but I never got engaged to you and then went off and married someone else."

"Oooo, that's bad. It's a shame we never stayed together."

"Welcome to Star Fleet," he replied rather harshly.

"You okay, hon?"

Her friend sighed. "Not really."

"You know what you need—a good old fashioned dump session."

Paul grinned, "You bring the chips and I bring the amaretto sours?"

Sasha grimaced. "Uh, after that whole 'beer incident' I think I'll pass."

"You should've known better. Just an ounce of anything containing hops is like knocking back a whole bottle of 180 proof Yishwick for your species."

"Well, somebody forgot to tell *me*."

"The report was published in 'Recreation Monthly.'"

"Which I don't read."

"Sorry, forgot."

"Anyway, we'll have a grand ol' dump and complain about all the things that are bothering us while we gorge on junk food."

"When are you free?"

"With the Ichthyians coming—definitely not tonight. But cheer up a little. I heard that you were wearing your kilt this morning and the compliments have been quite...suggestive."

Trying to ignore the red creeping up his face, he replied, "It's more like a skirt."

"So? Kilt sounds more masculine—which you definitely are."

Sasha looked at the chronometer on the wall and stood up.

"Though I love talking about your gorgeous body, I really gotta run." She kissed him on the forehead and left.

Paul finished his meal in silence and went to his cabin. He changed into his skirt/kilt and a clean cotton shirt. Leaving, he meant to go to the galley. Instead, he found himself heading for the chapel.

The chapel, though small, managed to be both nondenominational and yet all denominational at the same time. A small portion of each wall, ceiling, and floor was dedicated to each of the main, and a few minor, religions represented on the ship. The alcoves were decorated with assorted tapestries, paintings, candles, and other religious symbols. Benches, cushions, and mats dominated the open floor space.

No one was present when the poet entered. Lighting a candle hanging from the ceiling below painted symbols, he prayed to Chaym's god. "Watch over Life That Walks Alone. Remind her that she has a family, if not a true Tribe, with those of us who love her. Let her know that her Songs are important and will not be forgotten."

Next he went to an alcove adorned with a richly embroidered tapestry and a statue representing the goddess of Mitzi's homeworld, Seltzer, and lit some incense. "Forgive me, Goddess, for I do not have a rose to lay before you. Goddess, please help Your Child to understand why I've been so distant lately, that I'm sorry, and how I love her very much."

At another alcove, he lit four candles and a stick of incense, and covered them with a clear globe. As the smoke began to rise, tendrils swirled in ever-changing patterns around the sides of the glass. "That which is Wind and envelopes the spirit of the one called Sasha, I ask that she not fear abandonment from me. For though I am troubled, and seem far away, I shall never leave her friendship."

Paul then kneeled on a maroon cushion before a simple wooden cross and lit a candle - this one was for himself. He did not believe wholly in any one religion. Rather, he felt that God took many forms, each according to that which different species and cultures could understand—that God was universal. The writer had studied a variety of religious texts and found truths in nearly all of them. However, he was a Human whose family had worshipped in a Christian church. And so, he practiced many of its ways. Crossing himself, a gesture not used by the Baptist faith, but one which he found oddly comforting, the gentle being began to softly pray.

"Dear God, thank you for all that you have given me—the gifts of writing and intelligence, a roof over my head, and food in my stomach. Thank you for a job where I can use my weird sense of creativity and no one bats an eye, well, almost no one, and where I get to work with the people I care most about. Thank you for my friends who are my family—Chaym, Mitzi, Sasha.

"But God, I'm troubled. I want something more, or rather, less. I want to settle down for a while, stop running around so much. No more book signings or lectures; no more toy conventions—at least, not for a while.

"I haven't told anyone yet. I worry so much about how they'll take it. Will Mitzi understand that though I love her, I just can't stay? Will Sasha think I'm leaving her forever? And Chaym Gale', will she feel as though I abandoned her? I know she's got Carlos, but I honestly don't think he understands her writings as I do.

We've shared so much; our Paths have been joined for so long now.

"They're all a part of me and have helped me heal and grow in ways I never dared to dream of. Sasha—a good friend whom I could complain about life to. Mitzi—always the bright spot who could make me laugh, among other things. And Chaym Gale—we shared our pasts and realized we weren't so Alone.

"I don't want to leave them, God. It just feels as though my Path is urging me in a different direction.

"Dear God, I ask for strength and guidance, patience and faith. God bless Mitzi, Chaym Gale', Sasha, and Carlos. Help the commander who lost his boyfriend. Watch over the crew and their ship.

"In Jesus' name and all Your messengers I pray. Amen."

The poet crossed himself again, blew out the candle, and left the chapel.

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The Assistant Chief of Recreation entered the unoccupied galley and locked it with a command that no unauthorized personnel were to enter. He pulled a cargo container bearing the label "Property of the Cooking With rRham & Chaym Show—Proper Protective Gear Must Be Worn In Order To Assure Safety" over to a stainless steel table. After pressing his palm against the ident-a-plate, the container's lid opened with ease. Inside lay 100 kilos of synthesized chocolate, 3 dozen quick frozen tiny birds, and 2 dozen skinned baby rabbits.

Paul crossed over to the deep fryer, added fresh sesame oil, and turned the unit on. While the oil was heating, he prepared the birds and rabbits. The birds got seasoned with a spicy mixture. The rabbits' eyes got coated with a thick gel that was not only tasty, but would keep them moist during cooking. Next, the rabbits were lightly dusted with flour. With the oil now hot, he placed the animals into separate frying baskets.

While the now-cooked meats were cooling, he melted the chocolate. That done, he grasped each bird by the feet, carefully dipped it into chocolate, and set it on the table to cool. By the time he was done, the first ones had cooled and he repeated the process, this time dipping the feet. The rabbits got a double layer of chocolate since they were "heartier."

The task done, Paul placed the "imperfect" goodies into a separate container. Chaym would be putting the Easter baskets together later and would enjoy the treat. Having felinoids and *lupo-felinoids* as your best friends for the past 10+ years had taught him a few things. Carlos, he imagined, would be puking his guts out for far longer than that, especially once Chaym had cubs.

The only thing that did make Paul sick was when he had to make bunny shapes out of ground-up worms, reptile meat, and birdseed. After all, the party was for everyone.

Shaking off the nauseating experience, he dug out plastic molds, melted more chocolate, and poured it into the rabbit-shaped forms. Hours later he had 380 hollow chocolate bunnies and 14 broken ones.

Paul stumbled dazedly to his cabin and upon entering, fell onto the bed. Exhausted both emotionally and physically, he immediately fell asleep.

Skin Horse, who watched over all of his "children," gently lowered the lights.

Sometime in the middle of restless dreams, the man was awakened by the soft touch of a beautiful felinoid. Their love making was gentle, though Paul's body urged him on, seeking relief. With Mitzi's tender caresses and supple body, the relief soon came, though it was not all physical. It seemed as if all of his pent up emotions came flooding over him, rushing out of his body.

And the gentle woman held the lonely poet as he wept, understanding, tenderly kissing his tears away. Exhausted, and yet more at peace, he finally fell asleep.

* * * * *

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF CMDR. CHAYM GALE' RE'MING'TON

A strange melodic howling pierced the quiet darkness.

The large furred beast stirred, grumbled, and rolled over onto the unsuspecting Human.

The Human male awoke—wary, barely able to breathe. He shoved at the lupo-felinoid. “Chaym, it’s time to wake up. Get off me!” He hated mornings.

“Mrrrr...Snuggle!” The great sleeping ball of fur attack-snuggled again.

Captain Carlos Maldonado, Jr. *really* hated mornings. At least his life-mate had agreed to wear a muzzle and mittens on her hands and feet. Otherwise, he would’ve been mauled to death a long time ago.

“Computer, increase volume by 200%.”

The beast awoke, thoroughly startled, and barked at the top of her lungs. The music stopped. Pawing at her muzzle, she turned to Carlos and whimpered, “Why do you do that?”

“Because you wouldn’t wake up.” He helped her out of the mittens.

“I wake up slowly. You know that.”

“Yeh, and then you complain that you’re late.”

Chaym replied with a soft growl and a gaping yawn and rolled out of the bed.

After shaking herself, she reached for a brush with her tail and began smoothing out errant strands of fur. Then she went to the bathroom, thankful that Engineering had installed both a human and lupine toilet in the shared quarters.

She pulled on her Recreation jumpsuit, tapped a few commands into the computer terminal, gave the now-sleeping Carlos a kiss, and left her quarters. She paused just outside and smiled when she heard loud heavy metal music followed by an even louder Human scream.

Chaym dropped to all fours and trotted to the mess hall. There, she ordered a large mug of coffee, a small round loaf of honey raisin bread, t’k eggs—sunny side up, 4 slices of wheat toast, a raspberry muffin, and a bowl of mulberries. (Despite the misconception, Mohnans were not voracious carnivores. Bread comprised 1/3 of their diet and its making played a large part in their culture and rituals.)

She sat down at a table in a corner, mashed her muffin into the berries, and pulled a data padd from a pouch in her jumpsuit. As she ate, she worked on a story she was writing.

And this is how Commander Chaym Gale’ Re’ming’ton spent her mornings. Nice, quiet, peaceful, and unhurried. In a scant ½ hour she would be enveloped in all the responsibilities of a Recreation Chief and the frenzied chaotic pace it took to keep up with them. But for now, the time was hers.

* * * * *

Chaym stepped through the double doors of Main Recreation and past the sign reading “Abandon hope all ye who enter here.”

She was greeted by Rec’s main computer, “Good morning, Chaym Gale’.”

“Good morning, Skin Horse.”

“Skin Horse” was the name of her personality program for Recreation. All Rec Chiefs had one and the main Recreation personnel were encouraged to develop ones of their own. These

programs gave the user a better rapport with the computer, allowing a freer and less rigid exchange of information. In simpler terms, they were “user friendly.” It also helped to perpetuate the idea that Rec Officers had multiple personalities, especially when they ran more than one of these programs at once.

Chaym’s came from the Earth children’s story “The Velveteen Rabbit.” The Skin Horse character was the oldest “real” toy in the child’s room and was very wise.

The personality program spoke in an older male’s voice—soft, gentle, and comforting. Call it a parent/mentor/nurturer substitute (the psychologists did), Chaym Gale’ didn’t care. It was the perfect balance for her energetic “200 things going at once” lifestyle.

The Rec Chief looked around her. Things were fairly quiet this time of “day.” She had planned it that way. “Days” and “time” on the Wrecked Deck could get pretty confusing. The ship ran on three eight-hour shifts. Each crewmember was assigned to one duty shift—Alpha, Beta, or Gamma. Each shift was eight hours long. Each day had three work periods—First (0800 - 1600 hours), Second (1600 - 0000 hours), and Third (0000 - 800 hours.) Every two weeks, a duty shift switched that work period in order to get acquainted with those not assigned to its particular work period. Exceptions were the Captain, First Officer, Division Chiefs, and for the most part, the Recreation staff.

Since each day on the Rec Deck had to account for three different shifts’ day, evening, and night cycles, the same set of activities, with few exceptions, was repeated three times a day. This allowed every crewmember to participate in a myriad of activities.

Chaym had based the activities’ schedule on a biological cycle common to many species and which was considered the Star Fleet work period. For two hours before and after the beginning of a work period, the Rec Deck kept a calm, soothing mood. The pool and gymnasium were open, as well as the assorted game tables, library consoles, and constantly-running media screens. Since at these times it was always someone’s early morning right before work, afternoon when just getting off work, or very late evening/ right before bedtime, no special activities were scheduled. This “lull” also gave the Recreation staff time to plan and prepare for special events, projects, and activities, while support staff from Operations and Engineering performed regular maintenance.

Classes, game tournaments, “inner child” activities, and “dinner” performances (theatrical, musical, poetic, etc.) took place while the “just got off shift” crew were starting to eat dinner.

“Evening” was the busiest time. Zero-G activities (swimming, volleyball, soccer, etc.), movies on the “big screen,” plays, and mainstream crew parties went on ‘til two hours before the next work period. The next “quiet lull” followed and the whole cycle would start over again.

With all this happening, the six permanent Recreation Officers were kept extremely busy. Lieutenant Paul Johnston Hennings, famous poet and the Assistant Chief of Recreation, was in charge of the 3rd work period. Lieutenant Chris Underwood, the wild and zany Aquatics Engineer and Ultimate Ruler/Lifeguard of the Zero-G Pool, helped him out.

Second work period was run equally by Lt. Xiin, Recreation’s Physical Fitness Instructor, and Ensign Kay-ai-oo Neha, Head of Holographic Imaging. Many years ago, Chaym had led a design team which had improved Holographic Imaging technology to a level be-

yond which anyone else had reached. Kay-ai-oo had been a part of that team, and Chaym had requested her upon assignment to the Avenger.

Ensign Mitzi Mrowr, leader of the infamous Galactic Hussies heavy metal band, was in charge of Holidays and Customs and shared the first work period with Chaym. It was a sick and twisted whim of Fate that had put Paul, Mitzi, Chaym, and Sasha (the Chief of Ops), all aboard the same ship, let alone the same Department. They had all gone to the Academy together and tales of their adventures were not exaggerated.

Despite their assigned work periods, these Recreation Officers frequently switched shifts or worked parts of one or more, especially during big special events. And every-now-and-then, it seemed as though every species aboard had a ritual or holiday happening at the same time. These same Officers also taught a class or two and were involved in the various performance art groups, all in their "spare time".

Shaking off her thoughts, Chaym walked around Main Recreation and found Paul lying half-hidden by a game table. He was arguing with a voice coming from a nearby speaker. It sounded like an adolescent tiger's voice, if a tiger actually could have one.

"Hobbes, why can't I connect this wire to the audio output?"

"Because last time you did that the table caught on fire and you blamed it all on me!"

"So what am I supposed to do?"

"Take the green wire right beside the one you're holding, fuse them together, then connect that to the audio output. Then hit it, beg it to work, hit it again, and make sure you're not under the table."

Paul, with some reservation, did just that and Hobbes confirmed success. "See? And you didn't trust me."

Chaym greeted the two as the sandy-haired Human was about to issue a retort. "Morning, guys."

"Aga hanawhu nu éydé téunlé ga yan éydé wsa éynad."

"You're Galévé is improving, Hobbes, but watch the accent on the "é" sound. So what's wrong with the table, Paul?"

"Oh, some Engineering tech was replacing one of the speakers and messed up Tri-D Chess. The pieces wouldn't scream anymore when they were captured or killed."

"How are things going otherwise?"

"Pretty normal. Chris is planning out another Zero-G freeform diving competition and has already prepared the pool for the dignitaries."

"Sounds good. Remind him to put out an add for a Zero-G water ballet team for the Star Fleet Galympics. I'll be damned if I let the Thagard win this year. I'll be in my office if you need me."

The Rec Chief went up to her office, located on the upper floor (Deck 4) right beside the Holodeck. The first shift didn't start officially for forty minutes and she hoped to get some work done.

Her office was small, with barely enough room for a desk, computer terminal, and a large computer screen that lined one wall. In a recessed corner, its angle too small for normal use, was a sleeping cushion, a few cages of snacks, and a coffee pot. The room and ceiling were decorated with paintings of Gale've' stories, an ad poster from one of the times she'd performed with the Galactic Hussies, and holograms from some of her favorite vids.

She plopped herself in the chair. "O.K., Skin Horse, what's on the schedule for this morning?"

"First, your messages: Chief Medical Officer Urbanavage would like you to contact her, Carlos called to say, 'I love you too, dear,' and Lt. Hart wants some balloons and crepe paper for a party she's throwing."

Chaym groaned, hadn't people ever heard of Stores? "Re-route the request to Operations and get Lt. Commander Urbanavage on the 'screen."

An auburn-haired woman wearing work-crumpled medical garb appeared on the desk terminal's computer screen. "Doctor Donna here. What's your problem?"

"Morning, Donna. You called?"

A puzzled look passed briefly across her face. "Oh, right. Let me look at my notes...Commander Zulkowski just had a physical and it seems he hasn't been exercising enough lately. Says he just can't get into it and dropped a hint that he loves horseback riding."

"What am I, a god?! I'd love to fly on an amamalale', but..."

A part of her mind started to whirl. With a plasti-sym body, the right servos, a multi-variable tread mill, and some animal pelts from her cabin....

The doctor continued, "Lt. Commander Murphy found out what made you sick the other day. Seems as though that domesticated Kachee you ate was part of a bad clone batch carrying a mutated B'Tan's e coli virus. That animal should, at the least, have been decontaminated and thoroughly cooked."

"But I need fresh meat. When I get my claws on that freighter captain..."

"Don't worry, we already placed a call to the Trade Commission. Seems as though you weren't the only one who had problems. They'll get her."

"Thanks. Anything else?"

"Not at the moment."

"Good. Do me a favor? Tell Stephanie that I need an update on how the Holographic Therapy programs are running, as well as next week's schedule of sessions. She can contact either me or Ensign Neha."

"Will do. Urbanavage out." And the transmission was cut.

Chaym made some notes and spoke out loud once again. "Skin Horse, please continue with the schedule."

The wall screen lit up. It showed a large, complex chart. The left side was a list of time from 0800 to 0000 hours in 1/2-hour increments. The top listed various ship locations. Activities filled in the body of the chart. One had only to touch the activity on the screen and a secondary screen would appear giving details, preparation instructions, and updates. The wall screen was also programmed to show up to 2 weeks of activity charts, 6 months of special events and holidays, and any other necessary information. This screen was an invaluable tool and the Rec Officers utilized it frequently, knowing that Chaym's office was "always open."

She looked at the screen. Skin Horse had thoughtfully highlighted the activities needing the most attention. Opening the same file on a data padd, she poured herself a cup of chocolate and settled on the sleeping cushion. A knock on the door interrupted her work.

"Come on in, Mitzi. I've been waiting for you." Soon her best female friend, Chief of Holidays & Customs, and leader of the infamous Galactic Hussies band, was standing beside her. "You're certainly in a hurry."

"I thought I could detect the smell of real chocolate drifting under this door," explained the petite felinoid in a "sweetly innocent and yet somehow conniving" voice, "and I thought that you'd probably be wanting to share some."

"How do you know this is the real stuff and not some replicat-or slop I resorted to after sheer desperation?"

"Get real, Chaym Gale'." The conversation went on from there, eventually getting away from talk of chocolate and turning to the Ichthyian delegation. Inevitably, however, it turned back to "girl talk." "One thing's been bothering me all morning."

"What's that?"

Her friend grinned evilly. "What did you do to Carlos this morning? I've got a pretty good idea, but I'm dying to know specifics!"

Mitzi giggled. Chaym laughed.

At that instant the office door swooshed open and in stepped Carlos himself, causing the furies to laugh even harder. The white and purple furred felinoid made a quick retreat and the rust and tan lupo-felinoid stood upright, ready to face the wrath.

"Hi, Honey!" she said in her most cheerful voice.

"Morning, dear. Get my message?"

"Yes. Want some coffee?"

"No."

Chaym gave up trying to be nice. "Look. Don't be mad just because I got you back. I wake up different than you do and you know it."

"It was 'Wake Up and Get Out.' You know I hate that song."

"How many times do I have to tell you it's not as horrible as you think. We wrote it as a joke."

"I don't care."

"Yeh, well, next time don't go blasting the songs of Wande'le's. It's an offense to my people, not to mention my ears."

"I love you...sometimes."

"I love you, too," she replied, then picked up a padd from her desk and handed it to him. "Here, I need you to sign this."

"What is it?"

"Just a requisition from Stores."

The Executive Officer looked at the data quizzically. "What do you need 100 hats for?"

"Classified. Alex already approved it; he just forgot to sign off on it."

He looked at her, the padd, back at her, sighed, and signed it. "Anything else I shouldn't know about?"

"Not really."

"How are the preparations for the delegation coming?"

"Fine. Mitzi's getting everything ready. Hope you have a strong stomach, though."

"Why?"

"Let's just say that if I were you, I'd get an allergy shot from Medical before the banquet."

"Why?"

"Oh, you'll see"

Carlos shook his head slightly, and started to turn away. "I'll see you later."

"Hon?" Carlos stopped. "Don't wait up for me. I'll probably be here all night. I've got a ton of work to do."

"What work? I thought Mitzi was handling everything."

"Yes, but I've still got the rest of Recreation and a Shedding of the Skin ceremony, among other things."

"I get the point. You want me to bring you dinner?"

"No. I'll catch something myself. But it was sweet of you to offer. You want me to save you a leg?"

Most times, Carlos' stomach would have turned, but he was getting used to the eating, or rather, chasing-down-and-killing-and-then-eating habits of his mate. "What kind?"

"Gotta a nice young zerabu in stasis." Zerabu were small Ter-ran herbivore hybrids specially bred for starship crew personnel needing fresh meat. The hearty, well-muscled animals were easily transported in stasis and could be safely stored until needed.

"That's O.K. I'm sure the banquet will fill me up." He kissed her good-bye and left to attend to his own duties.

After Carlos exited, Chaym quickly loped down to Main Rec and announced the night's movie—a feel-good love story. Normally she'd never have scheduled movies two nights in a row, but she was really busy with the big surprise she'd planned for the Human crewmembers.

A couple of weeks ago, she'd been lounging in the Secondary Office, browsing through the barely-organized, chaotic mess of written documents that were stacked, piled, and pinned to the cubbyholes, shelves, and desk, when she'd come across a newspaper article from Earth circa 1982. It spoke of how families were preparing for Easter, filling baskets with chocolate rabbits, jelly beans, and marshmallow chicks, about children anxiously awaiting the arrival of the Easter Bunny, and the thrill of going on an egg hunt. Chaym had tried cross-referencing, but found little. Most of it dealt with the religious aspects and those the ship's chaplain for that week was handling already. Still, the idea of holding an Easter Party with all the trimmings excited her creative mind. And so the planning had begun!

First, she'd obtained permission from the Captain, who not only agreed to keep the whole thing a secret, but had offered to play the part of the Easter Bunny for a shift. While the Easter Bunny was supposed to be "larger than life," the Rec Chief was not one to deny a willing volunteer, and so she'd accepted Admiral Rosenzweig's offer.

As for the other two Easter Bunnies, Sasha had readily agreed and rRham, as well, after being told that he would be able to learn more about "the enemy" by participating in their holidays.

Chaym, Mitzi, Paul, Sasha, and the rest of the Rec Staff had helped to borrow, replicate, acquire from Stores, and make 360 baskets.

Getting the candy to fill them wasn't as hard as they'd first thought. Sasha's adopted uncle, a free trader, had delivered them 25 kilos of jelly beans, a marshmallow press, 200 kilos of sugar, 100 kilos of synthesized chocolate, and 600 eggs—all in the guise of cargo containers adorned with labels reading, "Live Reptiles: Do Not Break Stasis Field" and "For the Consumption of the Following Species Only...."

While Mitzi and Paul were busy making the goodies, Sasha and Chaym were coloring the eggs. The dye itself was easy to make and dipping the eggs into the many colors was fun, one just had to handle them carefully.

* * * * *

Chaym ducked into the storage room and found Paul, now dressed in his morning's civvies, cutting out shapes from colored paper. "Hey, gorgeous, so you actually like the kilt?" He smiled at her, his boyish grin lighting his whole face. Oh, why had she given up sleeping with him?!

"Yeh, now that I got a cotton one. How people ever used to wear wool I'll never know. And before you ask—yes, I'm wearing underwear."

"What?! Where I come from clothes are worn only to distinguish one's profession or for protection."

"Yes, but you love us furless males."

"There was Chewbacca. And besides, what about you and furry women?"

Paul grinned again and the two laughed at the well-worn banter.

Chaym dug some old fur pelts from a bin and began to cut and sew them into a pair of bunny ears and a tail. "Anyway, shouldn't you be watching the movie? I thought you'd like to see this one."

"Not tonight. Besides, had to get work done." He pointed to the paper shapes which he was now gluing together.

"Sorry. I thought it'd be a nice surprise for the crew."

"It will be. They'll love it. Hopefully it'll get them out of the funk they've been in."

"So you've noticed it, too?"

"Uh-huh."

They sat in silence for a while.

"So what have you been writing?"

Paul stared at the wall for a few moments and then sighed. "Poems of longing, of wanting to see if there's more out there....I was thinking of turning 'The Youngest Entourage' into a novel."

"I love that piece. The book would sell well on Kyone."

"Yeh....So, what are you writing?"

"The stories of my people."

"Gale've'?"

"No...of Mohna."

"After what they did to you?"

"It's where I come from, and there's so much more than the embarrassment and hatred of the Gale've' tribe. There's the songs of the Sun and Planets, of how Mohna was created by the joining of Earth, Land, Sea, and Sky, how our towns are built, and how we make our food. I can't let those stories be forgotten. My children will have no Teachers to Sing to them."

"The genetic tests went well?"

Chaym nodded, "They say there's enough similarities between Carlos' and my genetic codes that they can start work on trying to combine them. It'll still take a year or two, but there's hope."

"I'm really happy for you Chaym Gale'. You realize you won't be Life That Walks Alone anymore. You'll be 'Life Running Around Chasing Her Mischievous Cubs'."

"It won't be that bad."

"Uh-huh."

"You ever want kids, Paul?"

"Sometimes I think it'd be nice."

"You and Mitzi ever talk about it?"

"No. She's not the kid type. And besides, it's not that kind of relationship."

"You two are okay, aren't you?"

"Yeh. You should've seen the message she sent me this morning."

"I can guess."

"Exactly."

Chaym's chronometer beeped. "Well, on that note, I'd better go get the late dinner performers set up and you'd better get some rest. You'll need it."

Paul just smiled and turned back to his work.

"Skin Horse?"

"Yes, Chaym Gale'?"

"Please tell Lieutenant Hart, Commander Buonocore, and Commander Csuti to get into their costumes and to meet me in the Crew's Mess in 15 minutes."

"Yes, Chaym Gale'."

Chaym put a rust-colored paw on her friend's shoulder. "I've got some real chocolate hidden in my office if you want some."

Paul shook his head. "You furies and your chocolate cravings."

"I need it to survive," Chaym replied stiffly. "Chocolate has important amino acids that are necessary for my body to function properly."

"You never even heard of the stuff 'til you met Sasha."

"Yes, well, I've adapted."

"Sure you have. Hey! Get your tail out from under there!"

"What?" Chaym blinked innocently and took hold of her tail as it retreated from trying to lift Paul's kilt. "Bad tail! Bad, bad tail!"

"Nice try."

"A woman's got to have some fun." With that, she dropped to all fours and exited.

The Chief of Rec took a quick peek into the Gym and Pool areas, cocked her head and listened for any unusual sounds from the deck above. All was as it should be and the movie still had 45 minutes to go. She told the borrowed Operations Ensign where she'd be and to keep an eye on things and headed for Deck 7.

The Crew's Mess was fairly large and she'd been granted a small corner in which to hold "dinner performances." These consisted of poetry readings or instrumental, vocal, or theatrical performances of groups no larger than 7. It gave the crew a chance to show off their talents and helped to distract those eating from some of the "not quite right" tastes that the food replicators could produce.

The lupo-felinoïd reached the mess hall in little time and was pleased to find the three performers already present, sitting at a table near the door. They were dressed in black unitards with black hoods and white gloves. Their faces were painted black with red lips.

Chaym greeted them, then tilted her head slightly upwards and spoke to the air, "Computer, initiate personality program 'Maya'."

"Acknowledged."

"Maya?"

"Well, good afternoon, Chaym Gale' and good evening to you Stephen, Michael, Robert."

"I'll be sticking around for a while and then Maya will be here if you need anything. So, are you all limbered up and ready to go?"

The performers smiled, stood up, and bowed graciously to the Commander. Two then began to spread slowly through the room while the third started a series of acrobatic flips.

Chaym watched as the mime troupe entertained the evening diners. From their slight facial movements, she could tell that the Vulcans were loving it. A table full of avian Eyeethillueeii made religious gestures in the air and then laughed raucously. Only a few of the Humans seemed to be enjoying the theatrics. She'd thought Humans liked mimes.

After a while, the Rec Chief loped back to her territory. Things would be winding down soon as Rec prepared for "late evening/early morning." The movie ended and couples began filing out to head for their cabins, the arboretum, or various secluded parts of the ship. Others sat around, quietly chatting. The mood was happy though subdued.

She knew how to play the crew. An action-adventure, mystery, or thriller would keep people awake and energetic for hours afterwards. A happy love story or other feel-good one would keep them calm and content. And that's exactly what she'd wanted. The Easter Parties would start on her next shift and she had 360 Easter Baskets to fill and 3 Easter Bunny costumes to make.

The two part-time Rec staffers started putting the assorted couches and "comfy chairs" back in order and cleaning up the left-over popcorn and snacks. Chaym could smell from here what awaited updeck and took the turbo-lift to deal with the problem.

Lt. Bbfv Dndn, a receiver male Tridee, had gotten drunk again on vanilla milkshakes. Dndn was not known to hold his liquor; the intoxicant was leaking from his cells and onto the carpeting. To top it off, he was hitting on two potted trees, asking them if they wanted to go to his cabin, snuggle into some peat moss, and create a couple of saplings.

Chaym got a couple of hyposprays from a locked cabinet in her office and injected one into the Tridee. She enlisted the help of an off-duty Security Officer. "Scott, can you please help Dndn to his cabin? When you get there, inject him with this chlorophyll glucose solution. Make sure you press it at the base of *this* vesticular appendage." She pointed to a "branch" at the top of the being's head.

After thanking the officer, she called Operations for a janitor. The reply, while not "nice," was not unexpected. "Milkshakes again, Chaym? Can't you keep your people under control?"

"He must've rewired the replicator and gotten past my blocks. I **am** on a limited staff, Sasha, especially with the delegation coming."

"I know. Sorry. I'll send someone over."

"Thanks. Do you want to hunt with me tonight?"

"Can't. Got to be at the ceremonies, remember?"

"Right. Mitz'i's handling all of the diplomatic stuff for Rec, so I get everything else. Do you think you'll be able to help with the 'other things' afterwards?"

"Shouldn't be a problem, but you know how these things go. I'll contact you when I'm free."

"Great. See ya later. Re'ming'ton out."

She turned to the other off duty crewmembers who were relaxing in the lounge area. "Last call, folks. Early risers will be here soon, begging the replicators for coffee."

Most acknowledged her with nods. One made a rather rude gesture, and the woman's companions quickly escorted her out.

Chaym walked over to the Library/Reading Area and greeted those who looked up from their viewers and padds. A new Ensign was chatting with Elmo at a library terminal, telling him how over-

whelming everything seemed. The red fuzzy face was assuring him things would get better and that sometimes it overwhelmed *him* and he lived on the Rec Deck! It made the Ensign laugh and Chaym smiled. Personality programs had more uses than people realized.

Checking to see that the way was clear, she jumped from the balcony to Deck 5 and went into the Storage Room/ Secondary Office. She found a neatly stacked pile of cut-out bunnies, chicks, eggs, and other Easter shapes. Paul was nowhere to be found. Maybe he'd taken her advice after all, but it was more likely he hadn't. A famous writer had once said that born writers had ecstatic highs and devastating lows. Paul was a perfect example. So was she half the time.

The Rec Chief finished sewing the rabbit ears, hands, and tail for rRham's costume. The nose, made from pink cloth, fur, and wire, was a bit harder. A big blue art smock became the 'Bunny' jacket and completed the outfit. Trying to turn a 7-foot lizard into any kind of semblance of the Easter Bunny was not an easy job.

Her chronometer beeped—just half an hour before the next shift. Easing the cramps from her muscles, she left the storage room and went to her office.

As expected, she found Lt. Xiin and Lt. Neha checking out the activities schedule. They turned as she entered. "Morning, guys." The two officers returned the greeting and the Rec Chief continued. "I'm keeping things pretty quiet until tomorrow. The delegation should be arriving soon so expect a tour and keep the pool closed until further notice. We're not exactly sure how long the Ichthyians will be here; depends on how the banquet goes. Mitz'i'll be in and out, dealing with that. I'll be about finishing the preps for the party. There's nothing really pressing for you two to do, so if you want to work on projects, now's the time. Just as long as it doesn't make too big a mess or take up a lot of storage space. Close down the galley in seven hours. If anyone complains, say that we're adding some 'special equipment' for the 'Cooking With rRham & Chaym Show'. Watch out for over-imbibers tonight. The crew's been in a bit of a funk and it's starting to show. O.K., I think that's it. Any questions?"

The officers spoke for a short while and then left to attend to their duties. Chaym placed a call to Flight Control.

"Ensign Krizsan here. What can I do for you, sir?"

"I need clearance to hunt. Will there be a hangar bay free in about 45 minutes?"

"Just a moment...Okay, you can use Hangar Bay 2. Would you like us to set up your meal for you, Commander?"

"That'd be great. There's a zerabu under stasis in the cargo hold. Look for container CGR Alpha-12."

"Will do, sir. Anything else?"

"No. Thank you, Ensign."

Stomach growling at the promise of the tasty beast, Chaym stripped off her uniform, shoved it in a corner of her office, and then shook herself. Special Rec uniforms and all, they still felt a bit confining. After taking the "long way down" via the turbo-lift, she dug her VR helmet from the storage room and went into the Gymnasium. It was only moderately busy, and luckily, the large treadmill wasn't in use. Chaym stepped onto it, plugged in her VR gear, and typed in some commands.

The lupo-felinoïd started at a slow lope which gradually gained speed until she was at a full run. Her vision was filled with the sights of an open field lying at the bottom of purple-gray moun-

tains. Short brown grass cracked under her padded feet and her long prehensile tail swung back and forth, balancing a well-muscled body. The scents of wild flowers, insects, rodents, and birds filled her nostrils. She could hear their movements even as the wind rushed past her ears.

Time passed quickly and soon the program ended. Still locked in the thrall of the imagery, the lupo-felinoïd put away her gear and headed for the hunting grounds. Automatic reflexes led her to the hangar bay. The beast barely noticed the forcefield that released the zerabu, for all senses were focused on the prey. The animal, reeking of fear, ran about the large room bleating in terror. The great beast gave chase. With a lunge and slash of claws the zerabu was down. A flash of teeth and its jugular was cut. A quick twist of the head and its spinal cord was broken. The hunter had killed its prey, quickly and efficiently. A near primal scream ripped from her throat.

Relishing the smell, the beast buried her muzzle into the neck and lapped at the blood. Slowly the adrenaline withdrew from her veins. With ease she stripped the hide from the carcass. The lupo-felinoïd ripped out chunks of flesh, barely chewing, gulping the meat down.

Chaym put the leftover zerabu into a stasis container. The hide would be tanned and saved for a later use, the meat made into travel pies, jerky, and/or soup. Her race wasted nothing.

Oh, how she longed to hunt on a planet again! The freedom of open space; to run at full stride. To scent a herd and warily watch them, calculating which of the beasts to take down.

Humans had a lot of misconceptions about her species and those like it. Hers was not a violent race. Hunting was an instinct embedded in their ancestral makeup. It was done only for food, and that only once or twice a week. And leftovers were cooked and preserved. Hides were made into protective garments and other goods. The craftsmanship was so good that any surplus brought a good price offworld. Mohnans also ate bread, vegetables, fruit, and non-hunted meats.

Though the thrill of a hunt could enthrall her, the lupo-felinoïd always knew who she was and where she was. And that was Commander Chaym Gale' Re'ming'ton, Chief of Recreation, who, the beep of her chronometer reminded her, had to get ready for a ceremony.

Ssaai and Zzaai were a pair of life bonded Ceyi. Humanoid in appearance, they were tall and slender with a golden hue to their scalish skin. Once every 416 days they shed their outer epidermal layer. They believed it was a kind of rebirth of both body and soul. As such, a priest, or "One Who No Longer Sheds & Whose Soul Is Complete," presided over the religious experience. Since there were no other Ceyi aboard and there were few crewmembers who could actually vocalize the language and because it fell under her job description, Commander Re'ming'ton got to play the part.

After what seemed like an eternity in hell, Chaym was finally swathed from head to tail in dark gold bandages, textured to resemble scales. Religious symbols decorated the wrappings and a translucent brown veil billowed from her head. She looked and felt like a mummified Egyptian bride.

The Rec Chief stood with the Ceyi upon a huge mound of mud in a plant-covered corner of the arboretum. As the pair began to writhe out of their skins, she chanted the incantations. "Mother Soil, Father Lake, who combined to form the Birthing Place, the

place from where our race was born, give us life again. Take us into your depths, nurture us and heal us so that we may live again. Renew our souls so that we may continue to be Your Children."

An hour later, the beings, new skin glowing bright gold, had wriggled deep into the mud. There they would stay for the next two days, protected until their skin dried. Chaym completed the ceremony and stumbled back to her cabin.

Along the way, she encountered the Ichthyian delegation being given a tour of the ship by Ensign Mitzi Mrowr and Captain Carlos Maldonado. The Ichthyians, clad in their environ suits, started screaming, "Demon! Demon of the Deep!! It will eat us and throw up our souls!"

* * * * *

After the whole "demon of the deep" incident was over, Chaym went back to her cabin, put the ceremonial garb into a clay box, and took a real water shower. Wall mounted blowers dried her fur to "slightly damp." From the closet she removed and set up a mechanical device resembling a cross between a music stand and a jellyfish. C. S. & E. Emporiums Incorporated, Bioweapons' Research, Resource Recovery, and Holiday Travel Resorts had developed the machine to aid those who had lost tentacles. Similarly-limbed races cherished the device as it had given many of their members fuller, more productive lives. The lupo-felinoïd used it to braid her long multi-layered mane. In twenty minutes it had created a close-to-the-skin, beautiful, and complicated braid. While the machine was working, Chaym sat on her haunches and read a book. It was a Terran children's story called "The Pokey Little Puppy." It perplexed her. Why would someone admonish an infant cub for being curious? Children were supposed to be "pokey." That's how they learned. If a cub went too close to a fire it got a few hairs singed and never went that close again. Not to say that parents and Teachers weren't protective, just that they encouraged children to explore their environment. How else were they supposed to find out about the world? What was so wrong about being pokey?! Snorting in disgust, she turned off the viewer. Maybe it was because Humans were descended from primates that they just didn't understand the canine mind.

Chaym went back to Recreation's Storage Room/Secondary Office and proceeded to make the two other Easter Bunny costumes. To help pass time, she requested Skin Horse to give her an audio pick up of the various sections of the Rec Deck. Switching to the Bar/Lounge Area, she paused to listen to a female Human, accompanied by a guitar, singing. A sad melodic tune emanated from the rich deep voice. The lyrics spoke of a woman spacer tired of living the harsh life of a miner, feeling lonely, wanting comfort, if only for a moment.

Chaym Gale' knew the song well, for she had written it. Years ago she'd been sitting alone in a rundown bar, nursing a drink, feeling depressed as hell. Thoughts of the time she'd spent with Sasha and her adopted uncle on his merchant trader ship kept surfacing. They had rescued her from near starvation and desolation, taken her in, and taught her trust and friendship. The fact that she had had such a shitty past sucked. After ordering another tumbler of Yishiwick, she noticed a woman wearing a jumpsuit typical of miners and spacers, sitting alone, halfway through a bottle of whiskey. Her shoulder-length black hair was disheveled, jaw set in a hard

line, but her eyes—they were filled with a forlorn sadness. Chaym's heart went out to her. We are all so alone in this universe, she thought to herself, and pulled out her padd. An hour later the song was written. Two years later and "Merchant Trader Can You Sell Me Some Love Tonight" became a number one hit, thanks to the Galactic Hussies.

The woman began another song, just as mournful. Chaym believed it was Terran.

I close my eyes
Only for a moment and the moment's gone
All my dreams
Turn around and disappear into reality.

Dust in the wind
All we are is dust in the wind.
Dust in the wind
All we are is dust in the wind.

Life That Walks Alone did something rare: she wept. She wept softly for a child born Garve'—born "without purpose"—unwanted, who suffered for fifteen years until she was tossed away off planet, forbidden ever to return. As the first few tears flowed down the side of her face, she remembered the young woman, scared, starving, and utterly alone in the galaxy. She also thought of her own children, who would never be allowed to see from where their ancestors had come, nor sit atop Mohna's mountains, listening for the song of Wande'le's the Wanderer. They would never participate in the Fall/Winter Holiday, when the whole town would bake breads and cook meats and vegetables for two whole weeks and then dance and sing late into the night.

During that time, Skin Horse had shut off the audio pickup and patiently waited until the tears had abated. "Are you all right, my child?" he asked softly.

"Yes, Skin Horse. Just a bit depressed, I guess."

"As are many tonight. You are not so alone, Chaym Gale'. Your ancestors watch over you."

"The Gale've' don't even know I exist."

"And what of your grandmother? Did she not give you that talisman you wear to remind you of her people—of *your* people? Does *she* not watch over you?"

"Yes. It's just hard to believe it sometimes."

"You are strong and have accomplished much. Your tribe would be proud."

"I'm just a Rec Chief."

"Such blasphemy! And from one of my own cubs!" Chaym laughed. "Go now and get some tea and pemmican. It will restore you."

Chaym obediently complied, but first thanked Skin Horse.

"No need for that. It's what I'm here for. Now go. Young Paul is restless and needs watching."

Knowing full well that the lifelike program could split itself many ways, the gentle being merely smiled and went to get a snack.

Discovering Carlos at the Recreation replicator, she greeted him. "Hi, Honey, how'd the banquet go?"

"Let's just say that I'll never look at sushi the same way again."

"Are they still upset over the whole 'demon of the deep' thing?"

"Uh-huh."

"It's not my fault!"

"I didn't say it was. How do you manage to get yourself into these situations?"

"Luck?"

Carlos smirked at the reply and, putting his arms around his life-mate, gave his best "little boy devilish" grin. "So, you wanna go snuggle?"

She sighed wistfully. "I can't. I'm not done yet."

His face dropped into a big pout. "But there's always time for snuggle."

Chaym laughed, "Oh, Honey, I can't. I've still got a lot of work to do. You're so cute." She kissed him. "I love you."

"I love you, too." Not one to give up easily, the Human added hopefully, "Not even a quick snuggle?"

"No."

"But you gotta sleep sometime."

"I will...tomorrow."

"What mean tomorrow?"

"I mean three shifts from now." She continued before Carlos could interrupt. "The project is classified, okay?"

"But I've got clearance," the Executive Officer countered.

"Not for this. Now go. I've got stuff to do."

He harumphed and put on his best rejected face, said, "Fine," and started to walk away.

Chaym grabbed him with her tail, pulled him against her, and then kissed him thoroughly. "I'm really sorry. I'll try to get done sooner. Okay?"

With that, Carlos left the 'Deck and the Chief of Recreation went on to the Cargo Bay.

Hiding the materials needed to make 360 Easter baskets was not as hard as it seemed. One merely had to apply to the cargo containers labels such as "Live Animals," "Classified," and "Property of the Rec Deck—If You Touch This I Will Hurt You." However, finding enough space to hide all the baskets, once they were made, was the problem, especially because they needed to be close to Recreation. She'd either have to close the classroom in Flight Ops or put the lot in a transporter buffer. The problem could wait for now, thought the lupo-felinoid, as she pushed yet another container to the galley.

After the galley doors were locked, Chaym opened the containers, noticing that Paul had remembered to coat the feet of the chocolate dipped birds. When properly baked, bird feet were better than pretzels any day; covered in chocolate they were that much more delicious. And thoughtfully, the Assistant Rec Chief had set aside the "imperfect" goodies for his furry friend's indulgence. Popping one into her mouth, she set about filling the baskets.

By 0200 hours only 200 baskets had been filled and she needed a break. She made herself some real coffee and a couple of slices of toasted multigrain bread topped with slabs of melted goat cheese. The caffeine and carbohydrates would give her the energy boost she needed—so would some exercise.

Chaym Gale' trotted around the ship for a while, poking her head into various departments, indulging a bit in her curiosity. She chatted with a few people including Isejaeth Hijiruach and Naomi Elkins. Charles Donovan thanked her for showing one of his movies,

for it had finally gotten him a date with Lieutenant Rosealina Pullman. Amy Wilson, working late on a project in the Hangar Bay, told her about a new sword she'd just picked up and how she'd have to come by her cabin sometime and take a look at it.

A trio of Eyeethillueeii stopped her and asked if she would instruct them as to how to make na'at cookies—a granola-like concoction of nuts, dried berries, grains, and honey that were a staple on Mohna. When Chaym readily agreed, they each placed two of their multihued feathers in her mane, as a sign of thanks. Very pleased with the adornment, she inquired as to where they were headed. The four foot high avians twittered in delight. Lt. Commander Mark Meadows had agreed to let them watch him brush his teeth.

Though the Eyeethillueeii considered Humans to be their equals and treated them as such, they also found the race to be extremely amusing. Many chose assignments that would allow them to work in close proximity with Homo Sapiens. The avians believed that the greatest gift their god, Eyee, had given them was laughter. By participating in or watching activities that were humorous, one could honor Her and give thanks. From the day the Eyeethillueeii had met the Humans, they knew that they had truly been Blessed.

Chaym bid them a "Great High Laughing Day," it *always* seemed to be a "Great High Laughing Day," and headed back to the galley.

A few hours later she was done and had the baskets "hidden" in the Flight Ops classroom. Wearily, the Rec Chief walked on all fours to her office, and turned on the activities screen. Assorted classes and meetings now had to be rerouted. Yawning, she noticed the time on her chronometer: only four more hours till her next shift started, six 'til the party, and she still had to decorate, set up the food tables, and hide the eggs.

The gentle beast didn't know when it was that she drifted off into exhausted sleep. Nor did she notice when Paul gently lifted her up and put her on the office's sleeping cushion.

Softly, he placed a kiss on her forehead, dimmed the room's lights, and whispered, "Take care of her for me, Skin Horse."

* * * * *

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF ENSIGN MITZI MROWR

Ensign Mitzi Mrowr, Recreation Officer in charge of Holidays and Customs, woke from a dream of diamonds and silk—not to the prearranged Seltzan dove coo she had asked the computer to supply (hardly the most traditional of alarm clocks, but a happy reminder of her home world), but to the distinctly ungentle screams of a Human down the hall.

"Oh, Chaym," murmured Mitzi as she indulged in one of the long, luxurious stretches that made her oh, so glad to be a felinoid, "what have you done to that poor man this time?" It was almost routine, mused Mitzi. Chaym's resistance to alarm clocks, or their computerized equivalents, was truly legendary. Then again, Mitzi was no prize herself. Many were the mornings when Carlos, helping out on a Galactic Hussies tour, or even on a normal (strictly a relative term) shared vacation, had been forced to devise ingenious ways to wake the women (Mitzi, Sasha, and Chaym), who were up until all hours carousing and chattering when duty allowed. Usually, he'd have to do something particularly inventive to Chaym, and she would without fail retaliate, making him wish he'd never—

A lazy feline grin crept across Mitzi's face as she realized what must have happened down the hall. "Score one for Chaym Gale!" she purred to herself, and began to prepare for her day.

Mitzi shared a shift with Chaym. Some Avenger crewmembers wondered if that circumstance wasn't largely a result of the close friendship shared by the two furies, but the truth was that it simply made more sense for Mitzi, who often had to deal with dignitaries and representatives of many different worlds, to be on duty at the same time members of the senior command staff were. It made things easier when it came to informing the Admiral and others of ceremonial etiquette and the like. Of course, thought Mitzi as she made her way to the mess hall, it didn't *hurt* that she and Chaym were so close.

After a light breakfast of Seltzan rosewater tea and animal crackers (she liked to bite the heads off first), Mitzi headed straight to her office. Or, as she preferred to think of it, her "office." It was not, in fact, even close to appearing office-like. It was an archive-filled storage room on the Rec Deck, permanent home to countless records and detailed descriptions of the traditions and customs of all the races the Federation had so far made contact with—at least those who'd been willing to share the information. It was also, thought Mitzi with a sigh as she entered, the occasional residence of a number of pieces of exercise equipment, and bunches of other miscellaneous stuff vital to the survival of the Rec Department. The Rec Officers were only allotted one real office, and though it was fine as offices went, Mitzi needed to be close to her records. Sure, much of the Recreation library was computerized, but it was a never-ending source of amazement to Mitzi that so many cultures actually outlawed the transfer of the written word to the computer screen. They often claimed that such a transference would rob the rituals described therein of their spirit. Her personal opinion was that the insistence was made out of sheer malice.

"Oh well," Mitzi said to herself, "there's nothing else for it. Better get started!" She raised her voice ever so slightly. "Fox!"

"Good morning, Mitzi... what can I do for you today?" Oh, that voice! thought Mitzi. An almost-monotone, with an unmistakable

touch of sensuality; the kind of voice that always sounded like it was just getting out of bed.

"You could solidify into humanoid form in front of me, for starters," suggested Mitzi. She was purring again.

"No can do, sweetheart. But I'd be happy to help you find some records, or check your agenda...or whatever else you'd like."

"Can't blame a girl for trying," responded the laughing felinoid.

This had to be the best personality program she'd ever designed.

"Anyway," she continued, "we've got a delegation from an oceanic planet coming on board today. They're a mostly aquatic species, and will be toting along their own equipment to enable them to meet with the captain. Now, here's the problem, Fox: I need to find out what, or more importantly *who*, our esteemed visitors might be wanting to chow down on. I don't want a repeat of that unfortunate incident with Chaym and the Hamster People of Habitrail." The unfortunate nickname for 124 Arietis VI had stuck, much to the dismay of both its inhabitants and Star Fleet Command.

"They sure as hell *looked* like abotu," murmured Fox, reminding her of what Chaym had insisted at the time.

"Yes, well, they tasted a lot like them, too—" Mitzi stopped suddenly, blushing—a rare thing for a felinoid, and rarer still for Mitzi.

"Never mind... let's just get on with it, shall we?"

"Your wish is my command," replied Fox, gallant as could be. Mitzi wondered if it was possible for a personality program to laugh under its breath, or if she was just imagining things.

"I just need one thing from you before I start," said Fox.

"What's that?"

"The name of the planet, and any relevant cultural designations bearing on our fishy friends."

"Oh, yeah. The home planet is Ichthyos. We have a delegation of several different ethnicities, all, as you put it, fishy in nature. From what I've been able to gather so far, the cultural differences lie more in how food is prepared than in what a meal consists of. The thing is, I want to be *absolutely* sure of what we should serve them after they meet with the Admiral. Seems they place a lot of stock—"

"Fish stock?" interrupted Fox, chuckling. "Bouillabaisse?"

"Very funny," grimaced Mitzi, "but keep the day job. Anyway, Ichthyian culture places a great deal of importance on what foods are served to delegates after a meeting. Certain foods mean certain things to the Ichthyians, boding good or ill for the future of an alliance, even previously-established ones. Meanings are the same planetwide, so we don't have to worry about offending any one ethnicity. That's the easy part. The difficulty lies in the fact that the fishy little buggers are also unified in their religious silence regarding what means what. They claim that if they told anyone, it would nullify the meaning, negating the gesture of the peace banquet."

"So you want me to search the archives for possible anecdotal references to Ichthyian post-conference meals, probably recorded by others present at such functions, am I right?" asked Fox.

"Right on the button, gorgeous. And while you're at it, pray to whatever god computers worship that it's in the computerized database, 'cause if I have to dig through the written archives on such short notice, I do believe I might hurl myself down a turbo-

shaft. I'll be back in a few minutes." With that, Mitzi left the "office" and went to look for Chaym.

On her way to the Rec Office, where she suspected she'd find Chaym curled up on a sofa with a mug of cocoa, going over the day's itinerary, Mitzi passed the pool. She noticed that Paul had already prepared it for the Ichthyian delegation, who despite their "wet suits", would be using it for their sleep periods. She smiled to herself. Good old Paul Johnston Hennings, she thought. They'd been having a wonderful time, but lately Mitzi could tell there was a lot on his mind. She didn't have to pry; they were close and he told her all he could, but there were things that even he didn't know he felt yet. He was sorting things out, choosing a direction. A time might come when their relationship would change, but oddly enough, Mitzi felt sure that they would remain friends. Her time with Paul had taught her that true intimacy could be born only of friendship. She looked forward to fulfilling the invitation she'd sent to him earlier. Skin Horse had pretended to be shocked, but she'd known he'd convey the message.

Mitzi found herself outside the Rec Office door and snapped out of her reverie. Grinning, she knocked rather than using the panel beside the door. She'd often told Chaym that she didn't wish to ruin her nails pushing buttons all day.

"Come on in, Mitzi. I've been waiting for you," called Chaym. Mitzi was standing beside her before the words left her mouth.

"You're certainly in a hurry," observed Chaym, who was, as Mitzi had expected, settled on the sofa with her cocoa.

"I thought I could detect the smell of real chocolate drifting under this door," explained Mitzi, "and I thought that you'd probably be wanting to share some."

"How do you know this is the real stuff and not some replicat-or slop I've resorted to out of sheer desperation?" challenged Chaym.

"Get real, Chaym Gale'. We all know you won't drink the fake swill. Besides, if you don't share, I'm going to be very stingy with a certain box of abotu puffs I happened to receive from some associates of mine." Mitzi proceeded to help herself to a generous dose of cocoa as she curled up beside Chaym and peered at the data padd in her friend's paws.

"So what's going on today?"

"Well," replied Chaym, "other than the fact that you and I are going to be battling to the death over the chocolate you just stole from me, about the only thing happening today is your Ichthyian delegation." She made a face. "They don't smell like fish, do they?"

"I don't know. I haven't gotten a chance to sniff them yet. If you want, I could arrange for you to meet them with the express intention of finding out. I'm sure they wouldn't mind."

"Ha, ha, ha. I don't think so. Anyway, I trust you approve of the arrangements Paul's made with the pool?"

"It's perfect. My other preparations are just about done, too. I've got Fox checking into the culinary dilemma as we speak; he may be done by now. Anything on the routine schedule side of things I should know about?"

Chaym checked the data padd. "Nope. Just the usual. And of course we can't have lunch like we planned, though I assume your date with Paul will more than make up for any time you can't spend with me."

Mitzi pretended to pout. "I suppose I can make do..." She turned suddenly serious. "Listen, though, really... one thing's been bothering me all morning."

"What's that?" Chaym was instantly concerned.

Mitzi paused for a moment, then looked Chaym straight in the eyes and smiled.

"What exactly did you do to Carlos this morning? I've got a pretty good idea, but I'm dying to know specifics!"

The two furries dissolved into laughter, and failed to notice the sudden arrival of none other than Captain Carlos Maldonado, who stood watching them with some trepidation. Eventually they registered his presence, and subsided into giggles.

"You'll have to tell me later," managed Mitzi as she turned to leave. "Poor Carlos!" She patted him on the arm as she passed through the door.

"You'll have to tell her *what* later? And 'poor Carlos'? What's going on? Wha—" The door slid shut on Carlos' protests, along with Chaym's rekindled laughter.

Mitzi returned to her own "office", and was relieved to see that no new flotsam had managed to instill itself among the archives since she'd left.

"Oh, Fox!" she cooed.

"Right here, Mitzi," came the voice, seemingly from a place very near her left ear (another innovative personality program touch).

"Have you got what I need, Fox?"

"I certainly do. To symbolize eternal alliance, the Ichthyians require an all-vegetarian meal. No meat, no dairy, just things grown of the sea. The sea itself stands for eternity in their belief system, therefore its fruits do as well. The veggies also symbolize non-violence."

"Any specific sea veggies, or will anything do?"

"Any and all 'sea veggies' will do, although purple kale is said to add a celebratory touch. You might also be interested to learn that a chalice of sea water is traditionally handed around the table, and all those present should take a small sip as a symbol of sister and brotherhood, as well as of the sharing of the universe's resources."

"Good Heavens," said Mitzi. "I hope none of our land lubbers throws up."

"Funny you should mention that. It seems that vomiting after ingesting the offered sea water is seen as the ultimate sign of rejection. Wars have begun because some poor bastard or another threw up on an Ichthyian peace banquet table."

"Wonderful. I'll just remind everyone to work on their gag reflexes. Thanks bunches, Foxy. I'm going to go see what I can do about this stuff."

The voice was hovering in her ear again.

"Do you really have to go? I thought maybe we could hang out here all by ourselves and...talk."

"Why ever did I program you to be such a tease?" sighed Mitzi, as she left the rec deck to tackle her tasks. Fishy friends, salt water cocktails, attempted seduction by a personality program—the perfect start to the average day in Recreation.

* * * * *

Mitzi leaned against the wall outside the Ichthyians' quarters and took a deep breath.

Cosmically speaking, she told herself as she straightened her dress uniform and tugged carefully at the Seltzan caste chains around her upper arm, nothing else could go wrong today. The gods couldn't allow it, they just couldn't, and Mitzi was quite ready to tell them so, right to their eternal faces if given the chance.

Things had seemed okay when she left Fox. The proper food for the Ichthyians had been easily procured; as it turned out, the members of this particular delegation were not so orthodox that they wouldn't consume replicator foods. This was not the case with all Ichthyians, and that, as Mitzi had learned from that day's research, was a factor in the most divisive circumstance on Ichthyos. Similar as all its peoples were in both biology and theology, the fact that the more pragmatic of them were willing to make certain concessions when faced with "new" cultures and life-forms did not sit well with those who believed that any deviation from age old custom was not to be tolerated. Ichthyian opinions on the subject ranged from labeling it "cultural betrayal" to outright heresy. Ichthyos, thought Mitzi, was as ripe a ground for religious war as ever existed.

Luckily, that was not her problem.

What **was** her problem was ensuring that war didn't break out as a result of that day's unfettered lunacy.

Mitzi, along with Admiral Rosenzweig and Captain Maldonado, had arrived promptly in the designated shuttle bay to welcome the Ichthyian delegates. Mitzi noticed that Carlos had turned an interesting shade of green, and was about to tease him about the culinary merit of kelp and salt water when she belatedly realized the true reason for his discomposure. Chaym, it seemed, had been hunting; a situation Mitzi had been well aware of. She had not, however, been aware that the kill had taken place in this particular bay, nor had she known just how gory zerabu blood stains were.

This knowledge was also something new to the Ichthyians, who were just then alighting from their shuttle. They remained huddled together near the craft, eyeing the blood and Mitzi with equal amounts of fear.

Admiral Rosenzweig approached the Ichthyians, determined to rectify any damage already done.

"Welcome to the U.S.S. Avenger! I am Admiral Alex Rosenzweig, this is my Executive Officer, Captain Carlos Maldonado, and this is Ensign Mitzi Mrowr, our Holidays and Customs Officer. On behalf of the Federation, I welcome you aboard, and though we sail the stars instead of the boundless ocean, I offer you all the hospitality due the weary traveler, be he of sea or sky."

He'd used the ceremonial Ichthyian speech suggested for such occasions, as taught to him by Mitzi earlier that day. She allowed herself a sigh of relief; surely this would put the fishy folk at their ease. Things would be fine.

The Ichthyians murmured among themselves for a moment before the leader of the group stepped nervously forward to address the Admiral.

"Is the fanged one to be our guide?"

Mitzi started wildly.

"I assume you refer to Ms. Mrowr," replied Admiral Rosenzweig calmly, "and I am happy inform you that yes, she is in charge of your care and comfort, such as we can provide, while you are on board the Avenger. I'm sure you will find her a competent and more than qualified liaison."

The Ichthyian, turning to look at his companions, and stealing a pointed glance at the blood on the floor, seemed doubtful.

"I can't help but notice," said Captain Maldonado, "that you're somewhat disconcerted by the rather large blood stains you see before you. I can explain."

"We fear they have something to do with the one you call Mrowr."

"Oh, not at all," said Carlos with a laugh meant to convey reassurance. "Ensign Mrowr had nothing to do with it. You see, every so often, our Chief of Recreation, Commander Re'ming'ton, feels the need to hunt--"

He stopped as he noticed the Ichthyians huddling even closer together.

"This... Re'ming'ton... she is not present?" asked the leader, as he nervously surveyed the bay.

"No," said Admiral Rosenzweig, resolving to take control of the situation, "she's not. You will of course get the chance to meet her during the course of your stay with us." He ignored the looks of terror his assurance drew from the Ichthyians. "In fact, I urge you to make full use of our recreation facilities as your physiology permits. The Commander is an award-winning Rec Officer, and you will find her acquaintance most valuable."

"Besides," muttered Mitzi to Carlos, "Chaym doesn't even *like* seafood."

Carlos snickered, and they were rewarded with a glare from the Admiral.

"Now," he said, "I must temporarily take my leave of you. I'll see you at the banquet, and in the meantime I leave you in the care of Ms. Mrowr, who will give you a tour of the ship and see to whatever materials you need for any religious or cultural observances you wish to make, and Mr. Maldonado, who will be happy to answer any questions you have regarding Federation doings, as security considerations allow, of course. Good day." With that, he was gone. Mitzi couldn't help but think that he looked rather relieved to be on his way. She turned to Carlos.

"Just what," she asked quietly, so the frightened delegates couldn't hear, "are we supposed to do now?"

"Beats me," responded the Captain, smiling. "You're in charge here."

"Thanks tons, Earthling. It's just that I thought with all your experience being scared witless by a lupofelino, you might be able to provide me with some ideas about how to calm our guests."

Carlos still smiled. "I'd rather see what you come up with, Mitzi dear."

Mitzi scowled. "You're up to something, aren't you?"

"Noooo... Well, yes. Remember earlier today, in Chaym's office? How amusing you thought her lovely wake up call for me was? Did you know I happened to recognize the music she so kindly blasted me out of bed with? 'Wake Up and Get Out' by the Galactic Hussies? Did you wonder who might have told Maintenance not to tidy up this bay until later today?"

Mitzi stared at him.

"Revenge," observed Carlos, "is sweet."

"You... you... YOU BAS--"

"Don't you think we ought to get started, Ensign?"

Mitzi struggled to regain her composure. "Oh, yeah, I'll get started all right. Just you wait." She stepped past Carlos to ad-

dress the Ichthyians. He winced as she jabbed him in the ribs with her tail.

"Most honored guests, the sea gods smile upon this hour. I humbly apologize for any misunderstandings caused by the state of this bay. You may be certain that you will not be eaten while aboard this vessel. It's one of my many jobs to ensure exactly that. Now, if you'll please follow me, I'll show you around the ship. Feel free to ask me anything you like." She paused. "I suppose Captain Maldonado will be joining us."

"Absolutely!" piped Carlos.

"Fine, then! Let's go!" She turned to leave, followed by the delegates, stopping only to lean very close to Carlos and whisper, "Revenge is sweet, dear...be a shame if Chaym's muzzle turned up missing this evening, hmmm?"

The look of smug satisfaction on the Captain's face disappeared as he turned pale.

"Coming?" Mitzi asked sweetly.

Carlos swallowed hard and nodded. The group left the bay, Mitzi and Carlos leading an extremely nervous party of Ichthyians.

Things had improved after that. Within fifteen minutes, Mitzi was openly laughing at Carlos' plot, and congratulating him on its successful execution. The Ichthyians were more than pleased with their sleeping "quarters," and Mitzi made a note to herself to give Paul a special thank you for his efforts with the pool. The visitors were equally thrilled with their ceremonial dressing chamber. Ichthyians generally observed a period of non-immersion before dressing for peace banquets, and so required a room decorated with coral, driftwood, and other oceanic accessories, but absolutely no water. As Mitzi had learned, this denial of water symbolized a willingness to look beyond Ichthyian concerns to those of other races.

The color of the decor had been her chief concern; she was aware that some races placed major importance on the use of certain hues—white for purity, yellow for happiness, chartreuse for an outbreak of the flu. Call it superstition, but a belief system is a belief system whether one personally subscribes to it or not, Mitzi thought. On a hunch, she had gone with shades of purple, ranging from palest lavender to deepest purple black. Fox's discovery that purple was a "celebratory touch" proved a godsend; the delegates saw her choice as an omen of undeniable good.

Things certainly had been going well. "Had" being the operative word. Past tense. As in, things had not gone well since they'd met Chaym on her way back from the Shedding of the Skin Ceremony.

Mitzi had finally managed to engage the Ichthyians in a bit of cheerful banter. She'd won their trust with the flawless preparation of their quarters, and they were regaling her with genuinely funny anecdotes about life on their homeworld. She and Carlos were just recovering themselves after considerable merriment over an Ichthyian dirty joke concerning spawning habits when they encountered a golden mummified sea demon. Or, rather, as Mitzi and Carlos knew her to be, Chaym. The unfortunate Ichthyians, however, were not privy to this information, and the resulting confusion took some minutes to rectify, after which the Ichthyians demanded to be taken directly to their dressing chamber with a strident request not to be disturbed until they were to be summoned for the banquet.

And so Mitzi stood, taking yet another deep breath and preparing to escort the Ichthyian delegates to a banquet at which, she

fervently hoped, nothing else could go wrong. She tapped the keypad, was bidden to enter, and immediately swung into the act she'd been rehearsing for the last several hours.

"I'm *terribly* sorry for the fright you all suffered earlier," she cooed, hands clasped before her and a big smile on her face. "It *won't* happen again, I promise, and I really mean it this time. I can't tell you how much your good will means to me; I do *so* admire Ichthyian culture and I'm looking forward to hearing more about it at the banquet. May we put today's events behind us, friends?"

Very few life-forms were immune to Mitzi's charms when she chose to turn them up full blast, and the Ichthyians were soon placated. After a few final touches to their dinner dress, they followed her to the banquet. She led them to their seats and excused herself to check on the food.

She was just about to sample a doubtful looking pile of steamed greenery when she heard her name.

"Pssst! Mitzi! I wouldn't eat that if I were you. It has absolutely no chocolate content whatsoever!"

She turned to see Sasha grinning at her, and, behind her, Carlos shaking his head in wonderment. "I just cannot understand how the furry metabolism can accommodate as much chocolate as you guys ingest," he commented. Back on Earth, they always tell you never to feed the stuff to dogs because it's poisonous to them—" He stopped as both the furries he was addressing fixed him with hostile glares.

"Are you comparing us to *dogs*?" asked Sasha.

"Of course he isn't, Sasha," explained Mitzi. "He knows what we'd do to him if he was, don't you, Carlos darling?"

"Ha...ha... seems like I've put my foot in it!"

"But they're such *cute* feet," said Sasha, turning to Mitzi. "Do you think we should let him off this time?"

Mitzi pretended to think for a moment.

"I think so. Besides," she added with her special feline grin, "he's sitting between us. He's at our mercy for the duration of the dinner!"

Carlos didn't find this to be all that disturbing a prospect, and the three friends took their places.

Admiral Rosenzweig occupied the head of the table, and the Ichthyian delegates were arranged at the opposite end, a placement that Mitzi had learned was important to them at such events as it signified equality with the host—the Admiral and the leader of the delegation were facing each other at more or less eye level (the Admiral was taller), and, in theory and barring any translation assistance needed from Mitzi or the other Ichthyians, could converse directly. Mitzi theorized that this seating preference was one of those things that dated from antiquity and was now merely observed as a matter of custom, sort of like the Terran habit of shaking hands to check for weapons. The sheer profusion of ceremonial foods and ornaments on the table made it virtually impossible to indulge in meaningful conversation until after the appetizers and first course had been cleared away.

"I think I'm going to be sick," muttered Sasha to Mitzi. "Don't these people eat any meat? Must we be poisoned with endless vegetation?"

"Hang tight, Sash. After this is over, you and I are going to get ourselves some fresh meat."

"I don't see the problem," chimed Carlos. "Vegetables are good for you. Isn't it wonderful how serving in the Fleet gives you so

many opportunities to try new things? Take advantage of the situation, that's what I always say!"

"I want meat!" whimpered Mitzi. "I haven't eaten since breakfast and that was hours ago and I want some real food! Bloody, warm, chewy food!"

"Amen!" said Sasha.

"I've suddenly lost my appetite," said Carlos.

Just then, servers carried the main course into the room.

Sasha perked up, but only briefly.

"I never realized just how many varieties of kelp there were in the universe."

"I warned you," reminded Mitzi. "Fox told me all about it."

"You'd think they'd make some concessions for the non-vegetarians attending."

"According to what Fox dug up, they do make allowances, but only when the banquets are held on Ichthyos. When you're *their* guest, they provide you with whatever you need as long as it's within their means, but when they visit you, it's up to you to provide for them. It's a hospitality thing."

"It sucks," observed Sasha.

"Absolutely," said Mitzi.

"Honestly, you two," chided Carlos, "is that really any way for highly trained Star Fleet officers to behave?"

"Most Star Fleet officers don't scream like women when their alarm clocks go off," noted Mitzi.

Carlos made a show of looking offended. "Now, that's not fair, Mitzi. I was set up."

"You started it! You ought to know by now how hard it is for Chaym to wake up without intravenous caffeine. You're mean and cruel and nasty and I don't like you."

"Me neither!" added Sasha.

"Oh, come on, girls. I'm sure if you were in that situation you'd do the same thing."

"Sweetheart, if I want to wake someone up, I don't need an alarm clock to do it," purred Mitzi. Carlos blushed. Sasha began to laugh, choking on the grape leaf-like thing she'd been nibbling. Mitzi grinned at Carlos as a concerned Ichthyian patted Sasha on the back. He was about to level a snappy comeback at her when something made him attend to what the Admiral was saying.

"...and it is, of course, with the greatest pleasure that I take part in ushering in the age of Federation-Ichthyian relations, and I hope that in time you will seek to become even more than our allies; to become a part of the Federation itself."

He bowed to the Ichthyian leader and resumed his seat. The Ichthyian rose.

"I will carry the tale of your good will back to the people of my beloved Ichthyos. I will tell them of the might and power of Star Fleet, and I will tell them of the hospitality and care you have shown us, that the timid and doubtful among them may not be frightened by that might. It will take some time to assuage the doubts of some of my people, but perhaps one day we may indeed become a part of your Federation. I thank you, my people thank you, and the gods of my fathers thank you. May you be forever nurtured by the infinite Sea." He touched his finlike "hands" to his gills (or the spot on his envirosuit that covered his gills) and sat down. Mitzi recognized her cue. She too rose from her seat, aware as she did so of an encouraging squeeze on her tail from Carlos and a wink from Sasha.

"Friends," she began, "it is my duty and my honor to conclude this joining of our peoples. You see before me a chalice hewn of coral, in itself a thing of beauty but made all the more exquisite by what we are about to experience." She lifted a pitcher from the sideboard and continued. "I have some of the precious water of the infinite Sea. It is not from Ichthyos itself, but I trust it will serve our purpose here as the Sea is the Sea from World to World, Tide without end."

Here the Ichthyians nodded appreciatively. Mitzi had learned the ritual well, and they were impressed.

"The water is a symbol of the inherent unity of all living creatures," said Mitzi as she filled the chalice, "and to show our chosen unity today, we will all drink of it. May the Sea be kind to all of us." She took a sip and sat down, conscious of Carlos' grip on her tail tightening—he knew her well enough by now to realize that the fact that she kept her eyes closed was more a sign of fighting off nausea than one of piety. There were no salt seas on Seltzer, and Mitzi was not fond of the sliminess of algae.

She recovered in time to see the chalice sent around the table, and was relieved to see that no one became visibly ill (though she was briefly concerned for the Admiral). The Ichthyians were very much pleased, and told Mitzi so repeatedly as she, Carlos, and Sasha accompanied them back to their quarters to prepare for their sleep cycle in the Rec Deck pool. The delegates were seen safely to their "bed," and Mitzi and Sasha headed for the mess hall. Carlos begged off; the sea water wasn't sitting so well.

"Are you sure it was safe for human consumption?" he asked.

"Positive, Carlos," replied Mitzi, "I had it checked. It was gross and slimy, but it was safe."

"Either way, I'm going to go lie down for a while. Enjoy your dinner, guys."

Mitzi turned to Sasha as Carlos made his way down the corridor.

"Listen, Sash, I need to run to Main Rec for a minute and check on things. Save a seat for me, okay?"

"Sure thing. Say hi to Fox for me!"

Mitzi promised to do so, and left with a smile. She reached Recreation a few minutes later. It was technically several hours past the end of her shift, but she was used to the more or less "on-call" nature of the job and was a common sight around the Rec Deck even during her off duty periods. It could be grueling, but Mitzi wasn't complaining. Her wacky schedule enabled her to develop a level of friendly acquaintance with segments of the crew she might otherwise have never have gotten to know—although there were still some people in Engineering she would like to get better acquainted with, she thought, as she passed the Tri-D chess table.

She reached her office and went in, relieved as always to be able to change out of her dress uniform and into the spare set of extra comfy clothes she kept there. She summoned Fox as she was removing her tunic.

"At your service, my lady," responded the disembodied voice, "what action on my part would bring you the most pleasure at this particular moment?"

"Well, Fox dear, you could tell me if I have any messages," answered Mitzi, thinking as she did so that she really had to do some research into android technology.

"Let me see, sweetheart... You have a request from some crew members planning their next shore leave...they want informa-

tion about the "place" of women, culturally speaking, during carnival on the planet they intend to visit."

Mitzi looked disgusted. "That really pisses me off, you know. All they really want to know is how little responsibility they'll have to bear for any 'relationships' they get into down there!"

"Actually, dearest Mitzi, you're wrong there. The request came from a group of ardent feminists—some friends of yours, I think—who made it clear that they would not be contributing to the economy of any planet that makes a tradition out of anti-female behavior."

"Now that makes me very happy, Fox."

"Oh, yes? How happy?" He was pulling his I'm-standing-right-behind-you trick again.

"Very, very happy," replied Mitzi as she wiggled into her casual clothes, "so happy I wish you were connected to a warm body so I could *show* you how happy I am!"

Fox sighed. "I live a life of eternal frustration, Mitzi."

Mitzi giggled. "How do you think I feel? Do I have any other messages or can I just go drown my sorrows in a side of zerabu with Sasha?"

"You have a reminder from Commander Re'ming'ton about the Easter party...nothing specific, she seemed to think you knew what it was about..."

"I do."

"... and something from Lieutenant Hennings, but it's not important."

Mitzi, who had been dividing her attention between Fox and her boot lace, immediately snapped to attention. "From Lieutenant Hennings? What do you mean it isn't important?"

"The stars are beautiful today, aren't they, Mitzi? Oh, by the way, did you hear about what happened with the Engineering tech and Hobbes?"

"Skin Horse!" Mitzi called, cutting Fox off in mid diversion. She could feel an almost tangible cloud of indignant jealousy emanating from the computer sensors.

"Yes, Mitzi?" came the soothing (and cooperative) voice of Chaym's personality program.

"Skin Horse, would you mind accessing the message left for me by Lieutenant Hennings? Fox is in a mood."

Skin Horse chuckled. "Certainly, Mitzi. There's nothing to worry about. Paul just wanted to let you know that he is very much looking forward to seeing you this evening."

Mitzi relaxed and smiled. "I already knew *that*. He told me as much hours ago. Are you sure it isn't the same message?"

"I am sure, fluffy one," teased the computer gently. "It's a different message, one with a certain air of urgency about it."

Mitzi was quiet for a moment. When she spoke again, her tone was serious.

"He's got a lot on his mind, Skin Horse."

"I know he does, child."

"I don't suppose you know any more than I do?"

"I am sorry that I do not. I can do many things, but I cannot read the minds of those in my care. I cannot know what they do not wish to tell me."

"I wish I could help him more," said Mitzi, visibly concerned.

"You are too hard on yourself, Mitzi. He tells you more than he tells most people, because he knows he can trust you not to attempt to make up his mind for him. Hard as it may be for him, he

knows that he has to come to certain conclusions about certain things on his own and in his own time. There are no quick fixes, as the Terran saying goes. I have tried to tell Chaym Gale' the same thing: Paul has wonderful friends; he will be fine, yet still she worries."

"And you say you can't read minds," scoffed Mitzi, impressed and touched by Skin Horse's obvious concern for his charges.

"I meant it. However, one does not have to have psychic abilities to be able to surmise the truth if one is paying attention to what goes on around one."

"A fact many of our non-computer friends would do well to realize," observed Mitzi.

"Excuse me," said a voice. It was Fox.

"Yes?" said Mitzi.

"I was just wondering, have I been grounded or something? Am I allowed to talk now?"

"I don't know, Fox. I'm a little upset with you. It wasn't very nice of you to try to keep Lieutenant Hennings' message from me. What do you think, Skin Horse?"

"I agree with you, Mitzi. Fox was behaving badly."

"Care to defend yourself, Fox?"

"I don't see what the problem is. Lieutenant Hennings is always leaving you messages. You never minded before when you missed one or two."

"Excuse me?"

There was momentary silence.

"You know, I have some very important data to look up, and I really need to dedicate all my attention to it. I'll just sign myself off right now and get to it."

"Fox! Don't you dare, Fox! Fox?!"

There was no reply.

"Tell me, Skin Horse," said Mitzi, "unless I'm mistaken, a Star Fleet computer, or, say, a personality program in that computer, has to answer when summoned, right?"

"Correct, Mitzi."

"So he's actually pretending not to hear me?"

"That would seem to be the case, Mitzi."

Mitzi tried to look annoyed and couldn't. She shook her head in amusement as she stood up, stretched, and prepared to leave for the mess hall.

"I'll see you later, Skin Horse. Thank you for everything."

"You're welcome, Mi'tazhani," replied the computer. The sound of her birth name uttered in the kindly grandfather tones of the computer made her smile, and she was still thinking of it when she joined Sasha at their favorite table.

* * * * *

Mitzi sat on the edge of Paul's bunk. He had not heard her come in—quiet as a cat, that's what I always say, she thought—nor did he awaken when she took the place she now occupied. She gazed down at his face, smiling softly to herself as she brushed a lock of sandy hair off his forehead.

"Whatever are you dreaming of, Paul Johnston Hennings?" she said, very quietly. She watched him as he lay there, not wanting to wake him; she knew that an untroubled sleep was not as common an occurrence with him lately as she would have liked. Many times over the last few months she had lain awake, watching him pace

his quarters, or hers, often pausing to write furiously, sometimes looking out of the window as if he could find the answers he sought out there, somewhere among the stars. She and Chaym had spent long hours discussing him, and in truth had already known what Skin Horse had surmised. They could offer support, but Paul was wrestling with things only he could truly defeat. Still, it was nice to be able to talk to someone about him, to know that she was not alone in her concern. Paul had given her a lot of himself, but there were things Chaym knew about him that were mysteries to Mitzi and Sasha. Strangely, Mitzi had never been jealous of this fact, nor of the nature of Chaym's and Sasha's pasts with Paul.

She was lost in thought, staring out the window from where she sat, and did not notice that Paul had been awake and gazing at her for some time until he broke the silence.

"You know I hate clichés, but I wanted to offer you a penny for your thoughts," he said, taking her hand.

"I was thinking of you. Of how I worry about you," Mitzi replied, tracing the line of his jaw with her free hand.

Paul frowned. "The last thing I'd want to do is make you worry, Mi'tazhani."

"Skin Horse called me that earlier. Do you think it's an omen?"

"I think it's a sign of how much I love you."

"You told it to him, didn't you?"

"Yes. I told it to him and I told him only to use it when he thought you needed it."

"I was talking to him about you."

Paul drew her close to her. "You shouldn't worry about me, Mi'tazhani."

Mitzi raised her face from his bare shoulder to look into his eyes. "I always worry about the people I love," she told him, "especially when they seem to think that being strong means keeping things to themselves until they're all torn up inside. Skin Horse acted as if he thought you needed a friend very much tonight. What's wrong, Paul?"

Paul seemed to be struggling with himself for a moment before he answered her, his voice low. "I didn't want to lay all this on you..."

"I know, I know. Just tell me what you can, if you can."

He closed his eyes and his arms tightened about her. "Oh, Mitzi, I do need you tonight," he whispered, and began to tell her as much as he could of the many things that had been bothering him for so long. Much of it she and Chaym had already guessed, but it was good to hear him getting it out. She let him talk without interruption, and as he wound down she could feel the tension leaving his body. She stroked his hair as she listened, and after some time he smiled sadly up at her.

"I just don't want to hurt you, Mitzi. You come to me like some mythical goddess, and here I am telling you that I might be wanting to leave this place."

She placed a finger on his lips in a *sshhh* gesture. "Mythical goddess! I love the writer in you, Paul Johnston Hennings."

He grinned back, seeming to come out of his melancholy a little. "It's true, whether it's the writer in me saying it, or just the average guy who happens to think you're beautiful."

"That's just the point, Paul. There's nothing average about you. You *are* a writer, and that makes you special. You see things most people don't; you *feel* things so much more deeply. That's why I want so much to see you happy, even if it means..." She

stopped, as surprised as he was by the tears suddenly welling from her eyes. She bit her lower lip and tried to get a handle on herself as Paul reached up and cupped her face in his hands.

"Mitzi, honey, don't do that. Not for me... Please, love, don't."

Mitzi shook her head violently, breaking his gentle grasp. "Not for you? Oh, Paul, you just don't realize... We *love* you, Paul, and you *deserve* it, okay? We love you and you deserve to be happy even if it means I have to lose you. Maybe it's hard for me to say that, but it's true. So don't you go staying here on my account, 'cause if you do I'll be really pissed, all right? I'll just be so mad at you that you'll...you'll...oh, you'll just be really sorry!" She blinked hard, trying to deny the last of her tears, visibly frustrated by her temporary lack of vocabulary. Paul, though deeply affected by the force of the felinoid's affection, could not help smiling at her attempt to feign anger at him. After a moment she noticed his expression and began to laugh herself.

"I am such an idiot. Big speech time and I blow it."

"You didn't blow it, honey, far from it. And you aren't an idiot. And listen: no matter what happens, you will never lose me. There is a place in my heart reserved just for Mi'tazhani Mrowr, and that's not going to change."

"Is the place reserved for me anywhere near the one reserved for Chaym?"

"Right next door. It's a duplex."

"Sasha?"

"Triplex."

"Good." She snuggled against him in a somewhat suggestive manner, pausing to kiss the hollow where his neck met his shoulder. He shivered pleasantly and was beginning to concentrate exclusively on her presence when she stopped once more to look into his eyes.

"It goes both ways, you know. I will always be there for you. We all will. Don't you forget that, Paul Johnston Hennings. You don't always have to be the strong one." She kissed him then, full on the mouth, and he ran his hands through her hair, down her back, making her whole body tingle even as he removed the light robe she'd worn for propriety's sake on her way to his quarters. He was naked already, and as Mitzi shifted to remove the sheet which had separated them up to that point, their bodies came into full contact. She drew her nails lightly through the hair on his chest, down toward his taut stomach, and he moaned softly.

"Mitzi, my Mitzi... I do need you, I do..."

* * * * *

The U.S.S. Avenger continued on its course through the cosmos. Ichthyian delegates dozed peacefully in a converted swimming pool, personality programs dispensed advice, compiled research, or pouted, depending on the day they'd had. Somewhere on board a lupo-felinoid from Mohna slept, muzzled, beside a Human who did not sleep, concerned as he was about what "alarming" surprises the morning might hold. For some, the day was over; for others, "morning" was close, too close in some cases; for still others, the after-work period was just beginning, with its dinners, movies, and games of Tri-D chess. Life goes on, thought Mitzi, as she lay beside Paul, and drifted into a dream of home on Seltzer... Chaym was there, and Sasha, and Carlos, and Paul...

-----THE END-----

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