

Feran Wolfpaw – Part 6

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Several days later Feran woke early as usual and checked a board in the lounge just off the barracks for the final duty rosters and passenger manifests for the arks. There were twelve of the giant interstellar transport ships built to carry Earth's entire population of 1,189,732 Recombinants to a planet unimaginatively named "Terraformed Earth One." Each ship was equipped to carry 100,000 passengers in deep, low-metabolic sleep. The assignments of passengers to ships based on species by "complimentarity of biological need" was supposed to be posted any day. Alongside the general passenger distribution manifests, the arks' contingency team assignments were to be posted on "duty rosters." It was the duty rosters that inspired trepidation in Feran and slacked his tail with worry as he approached the peg wall hung with fresh papers bound in stacks on clipboards. There were two possible roles Feran, with his flight training, could be assigned: pilot or co-pilot. He wanted neither – "Responsibility" had become a distasteful word to him – but if he had to fill one, he hoped it wasn't "pilot."

He thought of Allaria. The duty rosters were bundled together on a clipboard by themselves, one sheet per ark. The rest of the assignments were clumped on clipboards alphabetically by Recombinant last names. He picked up the "K" sheaf of papers and flipped through the pages. Allaria wasn't there. His eyes watered and he put the clipboard away quickly.

Feran took down the duty roster clipboard and pawed through it looking for his name. On the eighth sheet he found it. His ears and shoulders drooped. He had been assigned pilot on the Romulus.

"Dang," he said. He took consolation in the fact that the probability of something going wrong was near 0, so the only thing he'd likely have to pilot was a shuttle to carry settlers to the surface of Terraformed Earth One. He read the rest of the Romulus' roster and lingered over one name that made his tail involuntarily sway softly:

"Co-pilot: Karmah Foxx"

"You're welcome." Feran started at the voice behind him. It was Donald, peering at him over a cup of coffee.

"What do you mean?" Feran asked.

"She was assigned pilot of the Remus. I pulled some strings and got Shock 'promoted' and Karmah re-assigned as your co-pilot. I figure after 20 years in hibernation, that would be a pleasant sight to wake up to. Call it a graduation gift. The rest is up to you."

"Always watching out for your students. What a guy." Sarcasm had become Feran's way of thanking his instructor who had incidentally become as much a friend as he could think of from a human over the past three months.

"Also, I smuggled you a case of bourbon aboard. It's marked 'cough medicine'."

"Thank you, Donald," Feran said, appreciatively.

"You might need it if she turns out to be a ... well, you know what I mean."

Feran smiled and then looked serious. "Why do you even care what happens when we leave this rock?"

Donald sighed and looked at his feet. "Repaying a debt, I guess." Feran was expectantly silent, so Donald continued. "Oh, what the heck," he said. "When I was a kid – 5 years old – it had been raining for a week. There was flooding and we

were cooped up in the house. When the sun finally came out with no rain in the forecast, my mother took me and my brother to a park to get us out of the house. The park was near a river, and we were fascinated because of all the debris floating in it. We were right along the shore, watching the river, and my mother told us not to go near it, but I was five, what did I know? She turned her back for a moment, and I was at the river's edge. I stepped in the water – you know, just to splash, like little kids do in a puddle? But it was deeper there than I knew. I stepped in and went to my knees. The current was fast and pulled my feet out from under me. Next thing I know the shore is rushing by and I'm getting further and further out from it. The water was rough and fast, and it kept rolling me and pulling me under. I coughed and couldn't swim in it. Once when my head was up I heard my mother screaming my name. I cried out for her, 'Mommy! Mommy!' but the water was in my throat and I couldn't make the words. I was terrified. I was so scared.

"And then, all of a sudden, I feel these strong arms around me and I'm rolled over on my back, looking up at the sun in the clear, blue sky and a voice says, 'It's OK. I've got you. You're safe now. I've got you.' And then I'm sitting on shore, trembling and coughing, and this otter-man gets down on my level and smiles and touches me on the head, really soft. He says, 'Don't worry. My name is Father Benson. You just rest a minute. When you're ready, I'll take you back to your mom.' He sat there with me and looked at the river and talked about the sky and the sun and how good it felt and other things that made me feel happy. And then he stood up and held my hand while we walked back to my mother.

"At first my mom looked angry when she saw us – I think it was seeing me with a Recombinant – but then she looked at me, and when she looked back at Father Benson, her face was different: soft and ... humble. Anyway, she thanked Father Benson and asked, 'What can I do to repay you?' and he said, 'You just

make sure Donald grows up to be a man of peace.'

"Somehow I grew up thinking that meant being a soldier. I joined the navy, believing the water was important to my destiny in some way. That's when I learned to fly. Anyway, I guess I thought that a man of peace is a man who fights for peace, and that a good soldier is a soldier who carries peace onto the battlefield. I thought that if I was to be a man of peace, the midst of war was the place it was most needed. Sounds kind of naive, I know."

Feran shook his head and gestured for his friend to continue.

"So, when the Treaty formed the Resettlement Authority and they asked for volunteers, I jumped at the chance. After you all leave there will be no Recombinants left on Earth, except maybe a few stragglers hiding out in the mountains and such.

"Maybe this whole thing is wrong and I'm just doing wrong for the right reason. I don't know. All I do know is that this is my last chance to repay a debt. If I can just make sure you are ready – really ready – if there is an emergency, and you save all the lives on the ship because I helped you now, then I think I will be the man Father Benson wanted me to become."

Feran was quiet for some time after Donald finished. "Anyway, that's why," Donald added, looking a little embarrassed.

"Donald," Feran said fondly, "you may just single-handedly restore my respect for humankind. You are truly the man of peace Father Benson hoped you'd become."

Donald smiled. "Well, congratulations, pilot!" he said and turned to go.

Feran hung the clipboard back on its hook. "I need some of that coffee," he said.

"No coffee for you. Or breakfast," Donald said over his shoulder. "The terraformer's beacon has been idle-green for 30

days now. They're loading you up today."

Feran frowned and his tail curled to his ankles. "Not wasting a minute, are they," he said, but he had more on his mind than his own departure.

"Donald," he said. His voice was deadly serious. Donald stopped and turned to face him inquiringly. Feran continued, his voice tight. "Are the Recomax inmates going?" he asked.

Donald was quiet for some time, searching Feran's face. He'd gotten pretty good at reading Recombinant body language and Feran was certain he was picking up the depth of his anxiety.

"No," he said. His voice was grave and Feran picked up disgust in his tone. "I'm sorry, Feran. The Resettlement Authority determined they would be too much of a security concern, so they were ... put down." Feran felt nauseous and coughed on the sob in his throat.

Eight hours later, stomach growling and naked to the fur, Feran lay back in his hibernation pod next to Karmah's still empty one. Technicians prepped him with monitor leads and I.V. needles and then opened the valve on the sedative cocktail that would put him in an induced comatose state. The last thing he thought before the sedative made his mind go dark for 20 years was that he'd not buried his bottle of Beam on that island in the Bahamas where they collared him.

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