

## ***STARDATE 58956.7***

The starship U.S.S. *Swift* approached Nu-Tirath, a planet inhabited by sentient felinoids. The Federation vessel slowed to one-half impulse speed as a Tirathian spacecraft broke orbit and moved toward it.

“Sir, we are being hailed by the Tirathian ship,” Lieutenant Commander Victoria Aiden, the OPS manager, said.

Blake stood up and took a step forward from his chair. “Thank you, Commander. On screen.”

The image of an armor-clad bipedal lion appeared. “I am Commander Raag. Please state your business.”

“I am Captain Blake Adams of the U.S.S. *Swift* representing the United Federation of Planets. I bring greetings.”

“You are expected,” the cat-like being stated. “Please follow my ship into the orbit of our world.”

“Thank you, Commander Raag.”

The image on the main viewer changed from the interior of the Tirathian ship’s bridge to a beautiful view of the alien ship turning toward the planet beyond.

“Transmission ended, Captain,” Aiden said.

Blake sat down and turned his head toward his first officer. “Well, Commander, are you ready for our first away mission?”

Commander Caleb Thorne smiled at Blake. “Yes, sir, but I still think that you should stay on the ship until I and the rest of the away team assess the situation. You know Starfleet’s policy.”

“I have the commodore’s blessing to lead this one, Caleb.” Blank turned back to face the viewer. “Protocol demands that I, as the senior officer, deal directly with the Tirathian authorities; otherwise, they might be offended.”

“Yes, sir, I read the commodore’s report. I just don’t feel comfortable about it.”

“Neither do I, Captain.” Lieutenant Graden Tornis, the Bajoran security chief, looked toward his commanding officer. “From Commodore Stuart’s report, it seems like the Tirathian’s distrust of aliens might be reason for them to act...with deception.”

“Rob...the commodore told me that Tirathians might be distrustful of outsiders because of past experiences with them, but they value honor and will not act dishonorably towards visitors.”

“Especially when their King invited us,” the first officer added.

The turbolift door opened, and the chief engineer, who was also *Swift*’s second officer, entered the bridge and approached the center seat. “You wanted me on the bridge, Captain?”

Blake stood and faced Commander Tracy O'Reilly. "The ship is yours, Commander. I'm leading the away team." He walked around her and started for the turbolift, Commander Thorne following. Blake stopped and turned to face O'Reilly when she spoke to him.

"Captain?"

"Yes?" He was expecting another objection to his leaving the ship, but the second officer surprised him as he saw her smiling.

"Good luck down there."

"Thank you, Commander," Blake replied. He also smiled and resumed his trek to the turbolift.



## To Boldly Go: Heart of a Lion

A U.S.S. *Swift* Story

By Cleve Johnson



Blake and Caleb entered the transporter room where the other members of the away team waited patiently. Blake looked at each person to judge if his first officer had chosen the best people for the mission. Chief medical officer, Doctor Bjorn Bergen was a good choice, and so was the ship's counselor, Lieutenant J.G. Aren Kalendaal, a Betazoid. Ensign Lateefa Nwosu, the ship's exozoologist, was chosen to be on the team because she was familiar with various non-humanoid species and had focused her Academy thesis on Caitians and other feline races. The assistant chief of security, Lieutenant Henry Reynolds along with two security crewmen, Chief Petty Officer Chakel Narvo and Petty Officer Prem Coppolen. Coppolen was from Zanaria, a planet where all the inhabitants were well adept in linguistics. She would be useful if the communicators' universal translators had problems deciphering the Tirathian language. All good choices. His first officer had done well, but Blake thought that one other person would be beneficial. "Mister Thorne, we have a Catian on the ship. Let's add him."

"We don't need a lab tech for this mission."

"No, but I think as another feline, he might be able to help us bridge relations with the Tirathians.

"I see your point, sir." Caleb tapped his combadge. "Petty Officer Raylor, please report to transporter room two for away team duty."

Only a few seconds passed until the reply came. "*On my way, Commanderrrr.*"

"Sir, we only have six pads." Senior Chief Petty Officer John McKinney said as he grinned in Blake's direction.

Blake looked at his first officer. "You got your wish to go down to check the situation first, Caleb. Chief Petty Officer Narvo and Petty Officer Raylor will wait with me to beam down,"

Blake said. As Caleb Thorne and the rest of the team stepped up on the platform and took their places, Blake turned to face the transporter chief. “Mac, energize.”

McKinney worked his magic with the controls, and the first six members of the away team were engulfed in swirling energy before they faded into temporary oblivion. On his console, a light blinked while an electronic chirp sounded. He pressed a touchpad on the LCARS display.

“Swift, *this is Thorne. We have arrived safely outside the king’s palace, and a delegation is approaching.*”

Blake stepped next to McKinney at the transporter controls. “We will join you as soon as Raylor arrives. *Swift* out.”

As soon as Blake closed the transmission, the door slid open, and Petty Officer Raylor entered. “Rrrreporting for away team duty, sirrrr.”

Blake nodded and pointed toward the circular platform where the Bolian security CPO, Narvo, waited. “The rest are waiting on the surface, Petty Officer. I think that your presence will be beneficial.” Blake followed the Caitian onto the platform and turned to face the transporter chief. “Mac, please do the honors once again.”

“Energizing, Captain.”



Adams and the two enlisted crewmen materialized in front of the extravagant structure that served as not only the Tirathian king’s home but also the seat of the planetary government. Blake found himself in front of six members of the king’s guard. They were dressed in sleeveless leather tunics and armored skirts. Crossed sashes completed their uniforms. The guards had no leg or foot coverings for their large hind paws. They each carried a large rectangular curved shield in their left hand and a spear in their right. The spears had decorated points on both ends of the shafts, and a curved blade attached above the handgrip. Blake thought that the lion-like Tirathians looked almost like the soldiers of ancient Rome.

The guards stood at attention. One stepped forward and began to speak. “In the name of King Raaren, I welcome you to Nu-Tirath. You are honored guests and quarters in the palace have been prepared for you.”

“Thank you,” Blake said. “I am Captain Adams, and I accept your hospitality on behalf of my away team.”



Blake was impressed with the accommodations the Tirathians provided for him and the other members of the away team. Not even the most advanced starship had VIP quarters as elaborate. He wondered if he would be able to humble himself to even enter his quarters when he returned to the *Swift*.

Blake's thoughts were interrupted by a knock on the large gold-overlaid wooden door. "Enter."

The door opened, and Caleb Thorne entered. He looked around and let out a long whistle. "Would you get a look at this place? Blake, this is better than that trip we took to Risa right after we graduated from the Academy!"

"Are sure about that?"

"Well, maybe not *quite* as good as that, but the rooms are nicer."

Blake smiled. "And bigger. I don't know what I would do with this much space on the *Swift*."

"Install your own private holodeck?" Caleb looked around the room. The décor was different than the room assigned to him, but both rooms were paragons of exuberance.

"I think the wealth of everything in this room could be sold and allow me to buy my own ship."

"I hear Starfleet is turning the last few *Oberth*-class starships over to civilian science organizations. Maybe you could get one of those," Caleb teased.

"I wouldn't settle for one of those old buckets. I'd take a *Nova* and make some special modifications though."

Caleb laughed. "I'm sure you would, old friend."

Blake went to the window and opened the drapes. He looked out over the prairie and saw the forest in the distance. Beyond that was a mountain ridge. The view rivaled that of Yosemite on Earth. "I understand that the king leads a royal hunt as part of the festival. As honored guests, we might be invited to participate." He turned to face his first officer. "Will that be a problem?"

"Earth and most Federation planets wouldn't approve of killing animals for sport, you know."

"It's not just for sport," Blake said. "There is a feast afterward. The meat is the main course." Blake smiled. "After years of replicated food, will it be a problem to eat the flesh of a real animal?"

"Not as long as it's cooked." Caleb smiled widely. "Remember, I grew up in Florida and ate catfish, several other species of fish, shrimp, shark, and alligator."

"I just wanted to make sure that the local cuisine wouldn't be a problem since it doesn't come from the oceans or rivers."

"Like I said, as long as it's cooked, but some of our other people might have a problem with eating anything that's not replicated other than fruits and vegetables."

"The counselor is a vegetarian. He doesn't even eat replicated meat," Caleb said. "I think Chief Narvo and Ensign Nwosu are vegetarians, too, but I'm not sure about the others."

"I think it's safe to say that Petty Officer Raylor is *not*," Blake said.

“I suppose he’s not.” Caleb grinned. “Every Caitian I’ve met is a carnivore.”

A knock at the door interrupted Blake and Caleb’s conversation. Blake turned toward the door. “Enter,” he said.

The wooden door creaked as it slowly opened. One of the royal guards, spear in hand with one end resting on the stone floor, stood in the doorway but did not enter the room. “The king summons you and your party.”

“Thank you,” Blake replied. “Please lead the way. Blake, followed closely by Caleb, left the room and followed the guard. The other members of the away team were already in the corridor waiting.

“Captain, would it not be a good idea to meet the king in dress uniforms?” Ensign Lateefa Nwosu asked. She wanted to make a good impression.

Blake smiled as the group prepared to follow the guard through the corridor. “If we are invited to a formal function, then we will have our dress whites beamed down, Ensign. We don’t want to put them on sooner than we have to.” Blake had never been fond of wearing dress whites. He found that the collar was too tight around his neck.

“I’m sorry, Captain. I didn’t mean to...,” Nwosu started to say, but Blake held up his hand.

“No need to apologize, Ensign. I appreciate and encourage good suggestions.”

Nwosu’s eyes brightened as she tried not to smile too broadly. “Thank you, Captain Adams.” She had only been on the *Swift*, her first starship assignment, a month before Blake Adams had taken over as its commanding officer. This was her first away mission, so she was unaware of the proper protocol when meeting a newly discovered species.

The guard tapped his spear on the floor to gain the Federation guests’ attention. “The king should not be kept waiting.”

“Of course not,” Blake said. “Lead, and we will follow.”

The company started down the corridor.



King Raaren looked out the large window to survey the plains and forest between the palace and the mountains. His ears perked up as the door to his office chamber opened. He turned around to face it as two of his guards entered, bowed, and took positions on each side of the doorway. The king waited as the Federation representatives walked into the room slowly. He admired how they observed protocol by stopping just inside the entrance and not speaking. The king gave a nod to his guards, who closed the doors, and he made eye contact with the leader of the visitors. “Welcome to Nu-Tirath. I am Raaren, hereditary king of the Graar Dynasty and the direct descendant of King Raar, who unified all the Tirathians into one kingdom.”

After bowing to the king, Blake straightened his body and placed his closed hand over his chest. “I am Captain Blake Adams of the U.S.S. *Swift*. On behalf of the United Federation of

Planets, I greet you. Commodore Stuart sends his greetings and regrets that he could not attend the festival in person.”

“I had hoped that he would attend, but I understand that he is a leader with many responsibilities among your people. When he came to Nu-Tirath, I recognized that he and I are kindred spirits,” Raaren said.

Blake waited until the king stopped speaking, and then he introduced each of the members of the away team, but the king interrupted him right before he was about to introduce Petty Officer Raylor.

“And who is this? He appears to be one like a Tirathian.”

Blake motioned to Raylor to step forward. “This is Petty Officer Raylor from the planet Cait. His people do resemble yours with only a few differences.”

“Perhaps you will join us on the hunt tomorrow,” Raaren said to Raylor.

“It would be an honorrr, your majesty,” Raylor said. “I suspect that I will have the advantage in taking down the first kill.”

Blake’s eyes widened as he turned to face the petty officer. He shot a look toward the Caitian to warn him that his response was inappropriate. He turned back to face the king. “Your majesty, I apologize for Petty Officer Raylor’s offense.”

Raaren narrowed his eyes at the Caitian. “Let him speak for himself, Captain. Why do you think that you have an advantage over Tirathian hunters?”

Raylor did not blink. To do so would be an insult to his ancestors because Caitians were a proud people who would not, as some humans say, backpedal to avoid any consequences for misspoken words. “With rrrrespect to yourrr majesty, I am smallerrr and morrrre agile than your people. Perrrrhaps if yourrr people had tails forrrr betterrrr balance....”

Raaren stepped close to Raylor and stared him in the eye. “We shall see, Raylor of planet Cait, if your arrogance is justified.”

Raylor bowed to the king. “I look forrrrwarrrd to the challenge.”



“Are you out of your mind!” Blake stood facing the Caitian. After the audience with the king, Blake, Caleb, and Raylor returned to Blake’s assigned guest room, and as soon as the door closed, Blake was in the petty officer’s face. “We did not come to this planet to insult the leader of this world!”

“Sirr, he did not appearr offended.”

“If I were you, Petty Officer, I wouldn’t say another word. Just listen to your captain,” Caleb Thorne said calmly. Caleb had known Blake Adams since their Academy days, and he had never seen Blake show anger until now.

Blake stepped back, turned to face the opposite direction, and took a deep breath. He slowly turned back to face Raylor. “We added you to the away team at the last minute, so you weren’t briefed as well as the others about the Tirathians. I take responsibility for that, but you need to know that they are not easily trusting of off-worlders, and they *are* easily offended.”

Raylor lowered his eyes. “I apologize if I have jeopardized the mission, Captain.”

“Captain, if I may?” Caleb stepped closer to Blake and Raylor. He waited for Blake to nod and indicate his permission to address the Caitian. “We wanted you on the away team because your people and the Tirathians are both feline races, which we thought would help the Tirathians be more open and trusting of us. I don’t think that your words to the king were meant to offend, but this is only the second contact that we have had with them, and we need to make a good impression.”

“I understand, Commanderr,” Raylor replied. “If the Tirathians and Caitians have anything in common, then they respect strength. My words to the king will draw us together.”

“I hope so,” Blake said. “I hope so.” Blake, now more settled, gently smiled. “Raaren has accepted you to represent us in the hunt tomorrow, so I expect that you will represent us well. Clear?”

“Yes, sirr.”

“Very good, Petty Officer. Dismissed.”

The Caitian snapped to attention, turned, and left the room.

Blake looked at his first officer. “I’m not sure that I’m the person to head up this mission. I wish Rob was here.”

Caleb smiled. “The commodore would not have trusted you with this mission if he didn’t think that you could handle it, Blake.”

“Thanks for that, Caleb. Unless you’re just sucking up to your captain.”

“If I was one to suck up to my superiors, I would probably be a captain by now.”

Blake started to laugh. “Yeah, and you would be in charge of this mission.”

“Don’t wish that on me. I’m content just to be by your side on this one.” Caleb looked at Blake and gave a thumbs up. “You got this.”

“Thanks, ole buddy. You keeping my head on straight is one of the reasons that I wanted you as my first officer.”



The next day, Blake, Caleb, Raylor, and the rest of the away team entered the large meeting hall within the palace. This was the room where the king would conduct affairs of state, hold feasts, and make pronouncements to his people. On this day, it was the opening ceremony for the Festival of Leonen, the most sacred of the planet’s holidays.



According to tradition, when the largest moon was positioned overhead the plain, eight kings and their armies gathered to fight. Each kingdom wanted to annihilate all the others, or at least conquer the others and absorb the survivors. Each king thought himself the best to rule because each believed himself to be the strongest. Only one—Raar—was wise enough to realize that true strength came through serving the people rather than forcing the people to serve him.

Raar stepped out in front of his army, approached the field, and called out the other kings to join him on the field. The others approached to face Raar, who bowed to the others. He proposed that it would be better to join together rather than fight for control. He suggested that each kingdom provide one member—a champion—to compete in a contest. They would conduct a hunt for the fearsome narath, the largest predator on the planet. The narath stood tall on two feet, dwarfing a Tirathian by more than a meter. It was muscular and had six digits on its clawed hands that could easily rip through flesh with little to no resistance. Its mouth was full of three rows of razor-sharp teeth. Raar proposed that the one to bring back the most narath heads within one cycle of the sun would determine which kingdom would rule over the rest.

The kings agreed, and each chose the greatest warrior from his army to go on the hunt, but Raar said to the others that he would represent his kingdom in the hunt. His warriors objected, saying that his life was too precious to lose; however, Raar replied to his army in the hearing of the other kings and their armies that his warriors' lives were too precious to risk for him. Upon hearing this, Raar received the respect of the other kings and their armies. And they realized from that moment that Raar should rule all of Nu-Tirath because of his wisdom and willingness to put his people before himself. They pledged their allegiance to Raar as the high king and agreed that the hunt should go forward, but instead of hunting for the fearsome narath, they should hunt for bavat, a less dangerous and tastier game fit for a feast.

And so, all of Nu-Tirath became united on the day that the moon Leonen, named for the god of the hunt, was at its highest over the plain. The palace of Raar began construction on that very spot eight days later.

After the story had been recited by the king's proclaimer, Counselor Aren Kalendaal and Ensign Lateefa Nwosu were in awe of what they had heard. They were both fond of the myths of various cultures, and this one seemed to be on par with many of the others that both were familiar with.

Doctor Bergen leaned toward Blake and Caleb and whispered to them. "It's a nice story, but it does not come close to an Icelandic Saga. Where are the heroic deeds? Looting? Pillaging?" He found it difficult not to smirk.

Blake and Caleb both looked at the ship's chief medical officer. Blake was smiling. "I'd like to spend some time with you on the holodeck sometime, Doc."

"I think you would be the perfect person to take on the part of Loki, Captain."

Caleb chuckled. "He's got your number," he said. "You always were a little bit of a trickster."



Blake ignored the first officer as he nodded toward the doctor. “It would be an honor, Doc.”

Caleb tapped Blake on the shoulder and pointed toward the raised wooden platform where the king started approaching the podium. “I think the party is about to begin.”

The king looked around the room as the conversations suddenly went silent, and all present in the room turned to face the podium. All the Tirathians, nobles and commoners alike, bowed respectfully as the king held up his large paw. “I am Raaren, King of Nu-Tirath. It is my pleasure to greet you all, my people and our distinguished guests from the United Federation of Planets, here today.” He pointed a clawed finger upward. “Leonen is over this place as he was long ago to usher in a unified kingdom under my ancestor Raar.”

And all the Tirathians in the room, in unison, loudly proclaimed, “May you reign in strength and wisdom as he did.”

Blake looked around, his mind raced with possible humorous remarks, but he wisely kept them to himself as he focused his attention back on the podium.

“This is the first time off-worlders have joined us for the Festival of Leonen and the hunt; however, it is our honor to not only have them join us in witnessing our holiest days but also to allow one of them to participate in the hunt.”

Blake and Caleb looked around as they heard murmurs from some of the Tirathians. Blake noticed that his friend had a look of uncertainty.

The king held up a paw to quiet his people. “This is unusual, but it is only fitting as members of these people recently prevented us from destruction by powerful aliens who had destroyed life on other planets and were heading in our direction. If not for vessels from the United Federation of Planets intercepting the aliens, Nu-Tirath might be lifeless on this day. We owe the United Federation of Planets our lives and now welcome them as friends.”

The people began to roar. At first, Blake almost assumed that the Tirathians were angrily disagreeing with their king, which would have meant that the away team was in danger; however, he remembered that his friend, Rob Stuart, had told him about some of the Tirathian customs and mannerisms. The roaring was in approval of their king’s praise of the Federation’s actions. Blake had been briefed that the Rhul was the only other off-worlders the Tirathians had developed a benevolent relationship with. Tirathians typically did not trust off-worlders due to past attempts by the Enkara to conquer Nu-Tirath. Blake felt genuinely privileged to be among those who were in good standing with these “lions.”

Raaren looked at his guests. Blake, and each member of the away team, bowed to the king. Raaren pointed to Petty Officer Raylor. “Among our guests is one like a Tirathian. His race is similar to ours, and I have asked him to join in the hunt to allow him to gain honor for himself, his people, and the United Federation of Planets. Are you ready, Raylor of Cait?”

The Caitian stepped forward and bowed to King Raaren. “I am rready, King Rraaren.”

“The hunt will begin at first light tomorrow,” Raaren said as he motioned Raylor to join him on the platform. “We shall see if you can bring in a bav large enough for you and your people to feast on, Raylor.”



That night, Counselor Kalendaal approached his captain, whom he found leaning on the railing of one of the many balconies of the palace. He approached from behind as Blake enjoyed watching the sunset over the distant mountains. “Can I have a word, Captain?”

Blake turned and smiled as the counselor stepped closer. “Of course, Counselor. What can I do for you?”

“I thought you should know that some of our people are...uncomfortable with the idea of eating animal flesh.”

“They told you that, huh?”

“No, but when Raaren mentioned it in his speech, I felt some feelings of revulsion.”

Blake crossed his arms. “Were you performing some unauthorized reading of minds, Aren?”

The Betazoid counselor smiled. “Of course not, Captain. But sometimes people have thoughts and feelings that are so strong, I cannot block them.”

“I have a friend who is only one-quarter Betazoid, and he sometimes senses strong emotions, too.” Blake turned to face the mountains again, noticing that the sun was completely hidden, but there was light coming from directly above as the firesticks burned brightly. “I don’t want anyone to be uncomfortable or go against his or her convictions, but I also don’t want to insult our hosts by not participating in the feast. What would you suggest, Counselor?”

“I think that you should talk with the entire away team and excuse those who have a strong conviction against eating meat. Allow them to go back to the ship before the feast,” the counselor said. “If I understand correctly, the actual feast isn’t until the last day.”

“I don’t have a problem with talking with them and allowing *some* to beam back to the ship, but I need to know if that would be considered...”

“...Offensive to the Tirathians?”

“Exactly. Rob...the commodore...told me that we had to make sure not to do or say anything that might offend them, so I need a favor.”

“Of course, Captain.”

“I would like you to find out if the Tirathians would be insulted or offended if any of our people did not eat the meat during the feast.” Blake faced the counselor again. “Also try to find out how the Tirathians would view us if some of our people did not attend the feast at all.”

“Of course, Captain. I think Ensign Nwosu will be able to help me gather that information if that is acceptable.”

“Certainly,” Blake replied. “Can you let everyone know that I expect all to attend the beginning of the hunting ceremony in the morning?”

“Yes, sir. The king said it would be at first light, which would be about 1040 hours ship’s time.”

“Thank you, Counselor. Please also let everyone know that after the ceremony and the hunters leave, I want a meeting in my room.”

“Of course, sir.”

“I’m getting together with Commander Thorne in a few minutes, so I’ll inform him.” Blake smiled at the counselor. “Have a pleasant evening.”

Kalendaal nodded. “Good night, Captain.” He turned and walked into the palace.



The next morning, while it was still dark, Blake, Caleb, and the other members of the away team gathered with King Raaren and a myriad of Tirathians outside the palace on the lawn next to the royal garden. The sun had not yet risen, so several dozen Tirathians held flaming torches to light the area.

Raaren stood and came forward. He raised his paw to silence the people before speaking. “Today, the great hunt of Leonen begins. To all who have gathered, wish your champions well as they prepare themselves to hunt and bring back food to be enjoyed by all.” The king looked over the crowd to focus on the hunters, twenty-eight in all, one for each principality plus one member of the Federation. Raaren’s eyes made contact with the Caitian’s before he continued. “When the sun begins to rise, and its light touches the stone of Raar, then the hunters are to run toward the forest. The first to take down prey will sit at my right hand during the feast. The one who takes down the most prey will be known as the Great Hunter until Leonen rests over the palace again.”

Blake noticed that after Raaren stopped talking, the crowd remained quiet and turned toward the erected pillar in the garden—the stone of Raar—and each person stood respectfully with anticipation. Blake waited as the darkness began to fade, allowing light to take its place. *The sun must be coming up from behind*, he thought as the light slowly crept across the ground and the crowd until the light finally touched the pillar. Raaren growled loudly, and the hunters, spears in hand, dashed away toward the forest. Blake saw that Raylor did not carry a spear, and he ran on all fours instead of upright as the Tirathians ran. Raylor certainly had the advantage of speed and agility.

The crowd cheered as the hunters departed, and after a few minutes, the king left the garden and entered the palace. Several Tirathians conversed with each other, but most dispersed, some into the palace, others to tour the royal garden. Blake nodded to his first officer and other members of the away team. He turned and walked toward the palace with his crew following.



Blake waited for the last member of the away team to enter his room and shut the door before speaking to them. He looked at each one, and then he focused his attention on Lieutenant J.G. Aren Kalendaal. “Counselor, what did you find out?”

“With Ensign Nwosu’s help, we discovered that our hosts would be offended if we attended the feast but did not eat the main course; however, attendance is not required for all of us. Sir, as the ship’s captain, your absence would be considered an insult to the royal court,” the counselor stated.

“If I may add,” Lateefa Nwosu said, “it would be prudent for the first officer to attend as well.”

“I was planning to,” Caleb Thorne said.

“Thank you, Counselor, and you, too, Ensign,” Blake said. “I know that many Federation cultures have given up eating real meat from animals and find it repulsive, so I will not force anyone to go against his or her convictions by attending the feast. They will be serving the meat of animals brought back by the hunters, so if anyone has a problem with that, let me know now. I won’t think less of you.”

“Sir, I would like to be excused,” Counselor Aren Kalendaal, said.

“I understand, Counselor. Blake looked around. “Anyone else?”

“I would like to be excused, Captain,” Chief Petty Officer Chakel Narvo said. “My people are not meat eaters.”

“Of course.” Blake looked at Ensign Nwosu. “Ensign?”

“I am from Africa, Captain. We protect animals from extinction, but many tribes still engage in limited hunting to prevent overpopulation of certain species, and those animals that are hunted are used as food.”

Blake nodded to acknowledge his understanding. “Last call. Mister Reynolds? Doctor Bergen?” He did not ask Petty Officer Prem Coppolen, because he was aware that Zanarians were omnivorous.

“I have only eaten replicated meat, Captain, but I don’t have any convictions about eating the real thing,” the assistant security chief said. “Count me in.”

“I am descended from Vikings, Captain,” Doctor Bjorn Bergen said. “I find this culturally reminiscent of my ancestors’ way of life. I have no objections to participating.”

“Very well, then. The counselor, Chief Narvo, you are free to return to the ship before the feast, which will be the day after tomorrow.” Blake felt a little surprised that only two members of the away team opted out of participating in the festival meal. He mistakenly assumed that Lateefa Nwosu and the doctor would not have participated, but the fact that they did not respond as he expected helped him to get to know them a little better. “As I understand it, the hunters will catch as many prey animals as they can until first light tomorrow followed by meal preparation

during the day. The feast is the day after tomorrow, and it will include a lot of pomp and ceremony.”

“What do you want us to do in the meantime, Skipper?” Caleb asked.

Blake smiled at his friend’s use of the term ‘Skipper.’ He knew that it was due to Lieutenant Eric Kelly’s influence since ‘the kid’ was, so far, the only other member of the *Swift*’s crew that used it.

“Just try to get to spend time with the Tirathians and get to know them and their culture during the next couple of days. Show an interest in them but be careful not to go too deeply with questions. We want to make sure that we do not offend our hosts or do anything that they might consider out of line.”

Just then a loud knock on the door interrupted the briefing. Blake started to say ‘enter’ but decided to walk to the door and open it himself. “Come in,” he said to the member of the royal guard standing outside in the corridor.

The guard did not enter, but he bowed and lifted his arm across his chest. “King Raaren charged me to inform his guests that Raylor performed the first kill.” Without further explanation, the guard turned and walked down the corridor.

Blake turned away from the door and faced his away team. He smiled, or rather smirked, and said, “Was it me or did he not seem so happy about delivering that message?”

“I think that he wasn’t expecting an outsider to outdo one of the native hunters,” Caleb said.



The next day, when the hunters returned, Blake and the away team discovered that Raylor had indeed outdone the natives. King Raaren announced the results of the hunt and that Raylor would sit at his right hand during the feast. Not only that, but Raylor would hold the title of The Great Hunter, and he would hold the title until the next time that the moon Leonen would pass over the palace again. A quick check-in with the *Swift*’s science officer, Lieutenant Commander Sirok, revealed that would take place in “two hundred seventy-nine days, four hours, fourteen point seven minutes according to how time is measured on Nu-Tirath.”

Blake always found Vulcans and their precise time calculations to be a little frustrating and, at the same time, extremely humorous.

Blake fastened the collar of his dress uniform and pulled the bottom of the jacket down as he stood in front of the mirror. *I’m getting pretty good at the Picard Maneuver*, he thought as he grinned at his image. He made his way to the door of his room and opened it to find Caleb Thorne’s fist getting ready to knock. “Whatever I did, Caleb, don’t hit me. I’m sure we can work it out without violence.”

Caleb unclenched his fist and lowered his arm. “You clean up nicely,” he said. “Are you ready?”

“To eat? Always,” Blake replied. “Where are the others?”

“One of the guards already escorted them to the gathering room to be seated. All except for Raylor. As the guest of honor, he will enter the room and be seated last,” Caleb said. “The guard said that he would be back for us shortly.”

“I take it that Counselor Kalendaal and Chief Petty Officer Narvo have returned to the ship.”

“Almost an hour ago,” Caleb replied. You know, Blake, having Raylor join the away team was a good idea.”

Blake smiled as he patted Caleb’s shoulder. “Sometimes I have a few of those.”

Raylor approached the captain and first officer. His room was four doors further down the corridor in the guest wing of the palace. Like the others, Raylor was in his dress uniform, and he looked uncomfortable. Maybe that was due to the uniform, or it might have been the weight of representing not only his ship but also the Federation at the great feast that was about to begin. “Captain. Commanderrr.”

Blake and Caleb turned toward the Caitian. “You’re looking good, Petty Officer,” Blake said.

“And you have brought pride to your ship and crewmates,” Caleb added.

Raylor nodded. “Thank you, sirrrs.”

Blake reached out his hand to shake Raylor’s...paw. “I think that your contribution to the mission was key to our future relations with Nu-Tirath. You truly have the heart of a lion.”

Raylor did not know what that phrase meant, but he assumed it was a human compliment.

Before he could thank his captain, a member of the royal guard returned to escort Blake and Caleb to the gathering room. “Captain, Commander, please follow me. Raylor of Cait, I shall return for you soon.”

“Lead the way,” Blake said as the guard turned and started down the corridor. Blake and Caleb followed, and Blake turned his head and gave a thumbs-up gesture to the Caitian.

Raylor tried to imitate the gesture but did not have an opposable thumb, and he did not know what the gesture meant. He decided he would ask his bunkmate when he returned to the ship. He also intended to do some research in the LCARS database to find out what the ‘heart of a lion’ phrase meant. But now, he would just enjoy his victory and the accolades of his senior officers.

**The End**