

All Things Being Equal, I'd Rather Be In Vegas

by Sean O'Keefe 2013©

"All things being equal, I'd rather be in Vegas."

Manny looked at her husband with another of those faces that told him that she had no idea what he was talking about and could he really stop doing that. He just looked back at her and smiled. There was no way he could possibly change and he had absolutely no intention of doing so.

"What do you mean?" his wife finally asked him. "I thought you were happy living on Cait."

Scanner reached forward and scratched his wife under the chin lovingly. "Ah am, sweetheart. Ah just know the you-know-what's about to hit the fan and I don't want to be here when it happens."

At least that was a euphemism she was familiar with. Yes, things were about to get very messy.

One consolation was that the world wasn't about to come to an end. No, the sun wasn't about to go nova or the planet fall into a passing black hole. It was much worse than that. Drallah had broken his grandmother's favourite drinking bowl.

It had been a month since the *USS Millennium* had left them on Cait to not only crew the new *USS Jolly Roger* but

to surreptitiously keep an eye on the fragile state of this planet's political situation. The civil war was still very fresh in the minds of the locals and the court cases trying those involved in war crimes were still continuing. While the people of Cait had regained their world from their corrupt government, there remained pockets of support for the former regime.

There had even been some killings. The perpetrators had been caught and dealt with quickly, but all the same, it was still happening with worrying regularity.

And now this. The three pieces of Pashtallah's ornate drinking bowl looked clean enough to put back together.

"Why don't I just glue them back together?" Judd suggested.

It wasn't just his wife that made a face, it was his son, Drallah as well. "Ewww!" he said in disgust. "I bet she could not only smell it but taste it, too!"

Scanner frowned at the boy. "You're not helping, son," he said, reproving. "You broke the darned thing, how about some useful ideas of what to do with it."

Drallah simply flicked his tail back and forth. It was his way of shrugging and saying "I dunno".

Manny shook her head at her husband. "You'll have to remember your father's not one of us, Drallah. His human nose isn't as sensitive as ours." She then lightly cuffed her son behind the ear. "You should be more careful with your

Grandmother's stuff. We live in her home, you know!"

"Yes, Mum," Drallah said, then slinked off towards his room that he shared with his sister, Lila.

"And make sure you've done your homework!" Scanner shot after him.

Rather than reply, Drallah simply twitched his whiskers in annoyance. While he appreciated being in a loving family instead of being the bane of his natural parent's existence, he sometimes had to remind himself to show his adoptive father some respect.

Scanner noted the boy's reaction, but let it go this time. It was still early days, their legal adoption of their two children being officially only two weeks old. All the same, he wished Drallah would at least reply when he spoke to him.

Once his door was closed, Judd gave vent to his feelings. "I wish he would show me a bit more respect," he said. "I think I deserve that much."

Manny licked her lips and gave her husband a weak smile. "I don't think he means anything by it. In my culture, from a very young age we are taught that physical strength is to be respected. I'm afraid that when most of my people look at you they see a weak offworlder."

While Scanner did his best not to be offended, he didn't quite succeed. "After all we've done for this planet I think I can expect a bit of respect."

Unfortunately, his wife did not pick up on his annoyance. "It's not entirely their fault, Scanner." She held up one of his arms in her paw. "By our standards you'd be considered the runt of a litter."

Her comment didn't help. "So what? Does someone have to be a Hercules to get some respect on this planet?" Seeing red, he none-too-gently put down the bowl shards on the bench and stormed out the door and down the ladder he had attached to the treehouse trunk.

Manny watched him go, bewildered.

There were times when Scanner wished this planet had a bar. He would have used the public transporter to take him there in a blinding moment and downed a bourbon. Or two. Or three.

He was getting tired of this world and its attitude towards outsiders. For a modern society, Cait was finding a hard time getting over the prejudices of the past.

Scanner's brother-in-law, Krashtallash, had played a principle part in waking the people up to their foolish attitudes towards colour. For millennia people like Crash, who had black fur, had been ostracised due to their people's erroneous assumptions regarding their character. They had been told Cait's greatest religious figure, known only as "The Teacher", was a rare white Cait who had been killed over two thousand years before by people with black fur.

The truth turned out to be quite the opposite. While the colour of the killers remained unknown, a test of the Teacher's DNA (which had been preserved) showed that he, too, had black fur.

At least black Cairns were able to walk the "streets" of Cairn once more without disdain. Not so for offworlders.

That wasn't exactly true, Judd had to admit to himself. It wasn't that he was unwelcome. It was just that everyone around here thought him a weakling.

There were a few pockets of people who hated him for a whole other reason.

"Where to?" the transporter's computer requested.

Funny, Scanner didn't remember the walk to the machine. All the same, he needed to get away for a little while and the closest place he could think of where he wouldn't be looked upon as a fragile child was the Starshine Cafe. He ordered the machine to take him there and a moment later he found himself standing only a hundred metres from the tree that housed it.

"Gotta love those public transporters," he mused to himself as he took off at a brisk pace.

Now he was out in the clear with dirt underfoot and sunlight streaming through the canopy of leaves overhead, Judd began to settle. He wondered to himself if he was over-reacting but he knew he wasn't. The people outside his household weren't the only ones who treated him that

way.

As he walked he deliberately kept his eyes forward. He didn't know what others were thinking of him right now and he didn't care. That wasn't true, either, he told himself. The problem was that he cared too much.

When he came to the tree he mounted the steps two at a time and pushed open the glass door.

As soon as he cleared the doorway he was greeted by a pink and tawny ball of fur who loved hugs as much as his wife did. An averaged sized man, Judd was still surprised when she picked him up off the floor.

"Commander Sandage!" she said with an voice that sounded like she belonged in a roadhouse diner, not a cafe on Cait. "It's good to see you!" She put him down and ushered him towards his favourite booth - which he noticed was occupied.

"Hi Tish," he replied. "Don't worry about the booth. A table near the window will do fine."

The waitress looked at him as if he had suddenly grown another nose. "No way! This is your booth - yours and the Llash clan's." When they got the booth Tish waved the customers present out and away. "Don't you see we've got a hero here?" she said. She pointed at an empty booth nearby. "Go sit there."

Fortunately for Scanner, the occupants had been Denebians. They were a people who wanted to quarrel

with no-one. It wasn't in their nature to fight. On the contrary, their world had a long history of being conquered due to the fact the Denebians would practically throw out the red carpet whenever an invader showed up on their doorstep. "You can have the whole planet, just don't shoot us" was their motto.

As they scuttled away Judd felt embarrassed. The flip side on this world to not being respected was getting too much. He didn't want to be treated as a hero. Just as an equal. Sometimes he simply wanted to be able to blend into the crowd.

Not possible on a planet populated by sentient felines. Not even in this cafe that catered mainly to offworlders and tourists.

Scanner slipped into the booth with its padded leather seat and wooden table and did his best to smile at his benefactor. Tish only wanted the best for him. He knew that. He just hoped she couldn't read human faces well enough to realise how embarrassed he felt at that moment.

"What can I get you?" she asked. The way she said it made Judd wonder if she was munching on chewing gum as well. The image of those pointed teeth being glued together with pink gum brought a slight cheer to him – which dissipated when the cafe's owner, Tisktabrisk, a huge, cheerful tawny Cait, sauntered over to welcome him some more.

It was all becoming too much. He had come here to get away from the things that were annoying him and all he seemed to be able to do was attract them. “What am I?” he thought. “A magnet for gawkers?”

All the same, he put on a brave face. He looked up into the male's warm, brown eyes and said as politely as he could: “Hello, sir. I've just come for a quiet coffee and a chance to reflect.”

Tisk hadn't worked for twenty years in his industry without learning to recognise a “please go away” when he heard one. He purred quietly and said: “Understood, Commander. We will make sure you're not bothered.” He took Tish by the arm and led her reluctantly away.

Judd watched her go, mildly amused. Even given her circle of friends, the young female still got stars in her eyes.

As he waited for his brew Judd turned in his seat and put his back to the window. He dragged his weary legs onto the bench seat, knocking the table leg beneath it and remembering once again that it was loose and he really must remember to fix it. He wouldn't impose on Tisk for such a simple task, the Cait was kind enough and they were like family here.

Now seated, he did his best to relax. It wasn't easy considering he would still see the glances from the other patrons in his direction. He hated being the focus of all

this attention. He found it invasive and just added to his frustration. Didn't these people have lives of their own? Couldn't they do him the basic courtesy of leaving him the Hell alone?

He turned his attention from the room to a simple examination of his shoes. He wiggled his toes inside his sandals - he was glad for a climate warm enough for him to do so - and simply enjoyed the sensation for a moment. He had been blessed with webbing between his toes that had made him a little faster in the pool - in his estimation. The only drawback was that he couldn't wear flip-flops. There simply wasn't room between his toes for them. All the same, he enjoyed giving his toes a little wiggle and the thought that the people around him probably thought he was nuts. Or human. Either one.

His coffee arrived, carried by a much quieter Tish who set it down politely then turned and left. He smiled after her for the simple courtesy, then took a moment to savour the bitter brew. He suspected Tisk was importing the beans just for him, but the proprietor would never admit it. He sighed and let the aroma fill his nostrils before taking a sip.

His musings were interrupted by the whine of a transporter beam. It was an odd occurrence on this world as most transporter use was via the public system which was this world's version of public transport.

As the red beam spread out and upwards a Cait appeared in the centre of the room. As it was a strange event naturally everyone was looking that way. As soon as the being coalesced every Cait in the cafe bowed. Queen Faith had dropped by for a visit.

Faith was a Cait of peculiar stripes. She had not been born to nobility. Indeed, the notion of nobility was foreign on Cait. However, this world was ruled by a constitutional monarchy watched over by an elected sovereign. The previous Queen had come to a premature end and, due to her acts in bringing an end to the violence, Faith had found herself instantly elected.

Faith wasn't even her real name. Born Castashack, Faith had come by her moniker by a young Lieutenant who thought her name too cumbersome. Reflecting on her profound faith in Cait's Teacher and his teachings, he had given her what he thought was a thoroughly appropriate name. Four billion other beings agreed.

Indeed, if you asked someone in the street what her real name was they would be lost for words.

Humble and completely personable, Faith had grown up some since coming to "power". She was much more politically savvy, but that didn't mean she played by their rules. She remained down-to-earth and completely honest.

"Friends," she said in her melodic and guileless voice. "Rise. We're all family here."

Obediently, the Cait raised themselves up. Scanner noticed that he hadn't been the only offworlder who had prostrated himself. Most of the other beings had offered her their respect as well.

Once upright, Tish bounded over and gave their monarch a lick on the cheek which Faith returned. Since their meeting some months before the pair had become fast friends and Faith could frequently be found in the cafe. It happened often enough that her security people now knew where to find her when she absconded, which Scanner was certain was the case today.

Ever aware of her surroundings, Faith quickly noticed Scanner's presence. Even dressed in civvies - jeans and a islander shirt - he was hard to miss.

"Commander Sandage!" Faith said, deliberately using his title. He knew it was a way for her to honour him. "It's good to see you. I've been spending a lot of time with your sister-in-law and her husband. I can always count on them for sound advice."

Judd knew this to be true. Krashtallash, his present Captain, and his wife Susanna Llash, a Federation Ambassador, had been tasked with assisting the new government find its feet on honourable ground. The previous government had nearly torn the planet apart with divisive notions kept in place by the dragon of political correctness.

"You honour them and me, your Highness," Scanner said. Now the pleasantries were out of the way they could speak once more as friends. "How's life in the Palace?"

Faith wagged her whiskers in annoyance. "All too often lonely. I'm kept busy with official duties, but when the evening comes around I usually find there's nothing more for me to do than watch the viewer."

Scanner wrinkled his nose in disgust. "I've seen some of the local vids. Not exactly good drama." His mouth turned upward as the subversive part of his mind spoke. "I can fix you up with some of the old twentieth century cartoons. Sometimes there's nothing funnier in the universe than seeing a coyote send himself into orbit."

The Queen had no idea what a coyote was, but the cheeky look in his eye told her all she needed to know. Faith was still young and loved a good laugh. Something told her she should take up his offer. "Please send me the link, Scanner. Now, if you'll excuse me...."

That was one thing about the Queen he really liked. She may have been this planet's monarch but she was never above being polite because it was the nice thing to do, not because it was expected of her. Scanner gave her a warm straight-from-the-heart smile. "Of course, Faith. Don't be a stranger."

Faith turned to go. She had really only stopped by to say hello to Tish and grab some of the local brew. Being

Queen had its advantages, but she was always aware there were many constraints on her time.

Scanner returned to his seat and placed his hands around the mug of coffee, cherishing the warmth. Seeing Faith was a nice diversion but the fact was he was still feeling stressed. He had come here to relax and he planned on doing just that.

The sound of a transporter beam didn't surprise him and he assumed the Queen was heading back to the Palace. He realised something was wrong when he felt the tension in the air around him rise.

He turned to see and found a huge, tawny Cait standing with his back to Scanner, eyeing the Queen. Fearfully, she took her transporter remote out and reached for the emergency beam out button when he knocked it out of her hand, sending it flying across the room.

Oddly, the new arrival said nothing. He simply kept advancing on the Queen after a quick look about the room. It was as if he had summed up everyone and discounted them as being a possible threat.

He reached into a satchel and took out something that resembled a thick necklace. Scanner immediately recognised its significance.

Something snapped within him. It was bad enough that his wife and child didn't see him as equal to a Cait. He was tired of the comments from them and others that the

“poor human” should be looked after because he wasn't as strong as them or had a thick hide that would protect him from claws or could climb like they could. He loved this world and its people, but right now the whole planet and its inhabitants had royally pissed him off.

Now this interloper had added insult to injury with his dismissal of him. It was just the last straw. His blood boiling in his veins he no longer saw reason. Just a target for his frustration.

Scanner reached under the table and quickly unfastened the only screw that still held the leg to it. It fell quietly into his hand.

In one quick motion he slid out of his seat and stepped up behind the stranger, making certain his footfalls were silent. He raised the leg and put everything into a swing that would have driven a baseball into orbit.

The wood made a satisfying thud as it bounced off the back of the attacker's skull while he was about to fasten the collar around Faith's neck. He fell to the side, stunned and tried to recover when Scanner swung again, driving the end of the shaft into the Cait's version of a solar plexus, bringing him to his knees, gasping for air and wondering how this tiny human had gotten the drop on him.

Scanner scooped up the now fallen collar and snapped it around the assassin's neck, certain that the thick collar would not come off, then leaned forward and tapped

the button on the front of it.

The hired killer's eyes went wide with fear as it began a high pitched beeping. The pitch quickly started rising and they both knew that time was short. In that slow motion moment he looked up into the eyes of his assailant and saw only blind fury.

Going for a phaser at his hip, he failed to clear it in time before Scanner swung one final time, knocking him senseless. He then leaned forward over the slumped form and touched the recall button on fallen Cait's belt. As expected, the huge male disappeared in a beam of light as a transporter whisked him away.

The remaining rational part of Scanner's mind guessed the bomb would go off about a second after reintegration. There would be no time for deactivation - or anything else for that matter.

Feeling suddenly exhausted, Judd dropped the table leg and stared at the floor, barely conscious of what had just happened. Weakened, he slumped to to his knees. He vaguely registered that Tish and Faith had taken him by the arms and, with Tisk's help, they lifted him back into his booth.

Things only seemed to come back into focus when he once more felt a hot mug of coffee in his hands. He gratefully lifted it to his lips and sipped the bitter brew. The liquid invigorated him and brought him back into the

land of the living.

He looked up and found himself mildly surprised that Faith was peering into his eyes, concern clear in her face. "Are you all right, Commander?" she asked.

The memory of what he had just done came flooding back and his eyes widened in shock. He looked back into the Queen's compassionate eyes and said: "I'm fine, Your Highness. More's the point, are you OK?"

Faith gave him a content smile. "I am now I know you're OK. Thank you so much for what you did! You saved my life. Again."

Scanner cast his mind back mere months when the planet's former spiritual leader, Zif, had tried to kill Faith under similar circumstances. That time, it had been a team effort to overcome him. This time he'd done it on his own. He gave Faith a wan smile. "All in a day's work," he said glibly.

There was something in his voice that gave Faith pause. "There's something bothering you, isn't there?" she asked.

Any answer he might have given was silenced when the Queen's royal guard suddenly beamed in and surrounded her. It was clear to all that the visit was over. Before she could utter another word four of them beamed out with her in their midst leaving one behind. He was a no-nonsense type who immediately sought out the

proprietor and grilled him.

Not wanting to wait around, Scanner retrieved Faith's transporter remote then walked over to the door and slipped out whilst everyone else tried to get a word in edge-wise.

He spent the afternoon walking. He avoided the transporters and headed in the direction of the Destiny Tree. He knew it was only about an hour's walk from the cafe so he started out with little care about anything but trying to clear his head and take in the beauty of his surroundings.

If there was one thing he loved about the people of this world it was their love for nature and how they tried to create domiciles that made the least impact on their surroundings. The homes were either in the trees or subterranean. Those that were in the trees were made out of wood and beautifully decorated.

Scanner wasn't normally interested in such things but today it was something that was contrary to the norm for him. So, he took delight in the homes and was almost sorry when he finally came to the open grassy field that was centred by the incredibly old Destiny Tree.

It stood there, a constant reminder that everyone's life was short compared to it, yet it tended to give one the impression that they mattered all the same. Once before he

had been here with the children as they played and had simply sat on the green grass watching them. His attention had been drawn to the tree that the Cait's revered Teacher had been nailed to millennia before and found himself fascinated by it. After all this time this tree had stood as a testimony to life. Even though it was associated with death, its outstretched branches and broad, green leaves demonstrated nothing but the beauty of life.

Once more, Judd took up a position on the grass, put his hands behind him to prop himself up and stared at the tree. Its leaves rustled a little in the light breeze as the branches gently swayed. It was almost as if it was waving to him.

The scene before him reminded him of a park back home on Earth where he had grown up. There had been hardly a single branch that he hadn't climbed on. He had once scared his parents with his adventuring when his head had popped out of the foliage on its peak. His father had ordered him down quick smart in no uncertain terms.

Judd found himself homesick. He had been in space so long, and now here on Cait that he had distanced himself from his own kin. He almost had to struggle to remember what his mother looked like, God rest her soul. His sister was married to a man who spent most of his time running a boomer from planet to planet. He got the odd letter from her as they ran their interstellar trucking

business, but they were few and far between. Both of his parents had been only children so he had little family left. Aside from his wife and children. People he loved yet he didn't feel respected by.

A friend had once told him that a woman needs to feel loved, but a man needs to feel respected. He agreed with that. He knew Manny loved him, but didn't respect him as an equal. In a way, it left him feeling more like a beloved pet than a husband. His children, also of this world, reflected their new mother's attitude. He was at a loss of how to rectify that and it frustrated him no end. His heart ached for what he needed.

Something obscured his view. He hadn't actually been looking at the Tree. His vision had been inward, yet the movement brought him back to the present. He looked up and saw an adult female Cait looking down at him curiously. She didn't seem embarrassed to be caught staring.

"Can I help you?" he said, not quite hiding the hostility he was feeling.

Fortunately, the female didn't pick up on his feelings. "Are you the human called "Scanner"?" she asked hopefully.

How on earth did she know who he was? he thought. "What's it to ya?" he said, wishing this woman would just go away.

His positive reply seemed to galvanise her. She turned and called out to others she knew who were nearby. "It *is* the one called Scanner!" she called jubilantly. Then she did a peculiar thing. She dropped down on one knee and lowered her eyes. "It is an honour to meet you, sir," she said.

Scanner was stunned by the reverence in her voice. "I'm nobody," he said to her, finding that he actually believed it.

"No, sir, you're not." The certainty she felt was absolute.

Judd looked around him and found that the word had gotten out. Not only were the Cait she had spoken to coming at a run, but so were others from a number of different directions. "What's going on?" he said to himself.

The female said: "The people are grateful to you for what you did for our Queen."

Scanner shrugged. "It was nothing. Faith was being monstered by this bastard and I wasn't going to let him get away with it."

By this time Judd was surrounded by Cait who had adopted a similar attitude to the first. "Sir," a male said, his voice deep and honouring, "we have all seen the video from the cafe. You fought a Cait who was much bigger than you without fear for your life. You have proven yourself to be greater than any of us."

Judd did not feel equal to their devotion. He knew he had acted out of blind anger and, recalling the moment, he simply wasn't thinking at all. He just chose the assassin as a useful outlet for his frustrations. "I was just doing what anyone would have done," he said, trying to downplay his actions.

The female spoke again. "No, sir. Nobody else moved. Only you stood against the killer. You defended the Queen, a female that is near and dear to all our hearts at great risk to your safety."

Another said: "So the Queen has declared a banquet in your honour tonight. Since you disappeared after the incident, sir, she has put out a call to all to find you and let you know of her gratitude."

Once more, Judd tried to deflect. "Faith doesn't need to do that. I would have done the same thing for anyone."

His words had the opposite effect. As one, they all looked up at him with complete reverence. "You honour us," a male said.

To Judd's surprise, he was taken by a transporter beam and suddenly found himself on the *Jolly Roger's* transporter pad.

His brother-in-law Commander Krashtallash, a huge black Cait, his wife, the Ambassador, and Manny stood there looking at him incredulously.

"I can't leave you alone for a minute, can I?" Crash

said with a smile.

Susanna added: "You certainly know how to ingratiate yourself to the Queen." Judd got the impression she was a little jealous.

The third, Manny, simply looked at him with a mixture of annoyance and fear. "I'm so glad you're alright. What were you thinking taking on that killer?"

It was exactly the *wrong* thing to say. Before he could reign in his words he snapped: "Doing the right thing no matter *what the cost*, just like any other human would do and what no other Cait DID! I didn't give a flying fruit loop about what might happen!" he shouted. His voice got even louder. "I just wasn't going to let that bastard to get away with it!" He punched the air angrily. "And now I find that I still get more respect out of others on this planet than I get out of my own family!"

Before anyone could speak, Judd turned to the transporter operator. "Now, get be off this bloody ship and beam me back to my home! I've been told Faith has invited me to dinner and I don't want to let *her* down."

The Cait operating the platform followed his instructions without question. As the beam took Judd he saw his wife step forward looking mortified.

When Judd got home he found himself alone. He mused that Pashtallash had taken the children out. He was

glad for that. He knew himself well enough to know he wasn't in the best place emotionally just then.

He walked over to the comm unit and noted there was a message waiting for him. It was coded for him alone so he stood still for a moment while the computer did a retina scan of him.

A well preened Cait looked at him from the recording. "Commander Sandage, you are formally invited to a meal in your honour this evening at eight after median at the Queen's Palace. A flitter will be sent to transport you there at seven. Please be suitably attired."

"Such formal language," Judd muttered. "Must have been born with a stick up his ass."

He sighed. As much as he *didn't* want to go out that night, he felt obliged to attend. He had a lot of respect for Faith and he would never want to embarrass her.

He looked up at the chronometer and noted he had an hour before the event. As he headed for the sonic shower he started divesting himself of his attire. He called over his shoulder: "Vid, News Prime."

The viewer wall snapped on and the anchor started talking. He was so engrossed that he failed to notice the topic of the hour was him.

Surprisingly, the oversized limo flitter showed up on time and the rest of his family *still* wasn't home. He was

beginning to wonder what had happened to them. He shrugged. While he tried to convince himself that he didn't care where they were his heart told him he was a liar.

The flitter's back door was being held open by a pretty, female Cait who paid him little attention, attired as he was in his dress uniform. Ever the gentleman, Judd gave her a brief smile then stepped into the passenger area.

He was surprised to find it occupied. The older Cait sitting there looked up at him as he sat and Scanner found himself under the scrutiny of one who thought himself greater than others.

The female door holder slipped into the car and sat closely to Scanner. *Too* closely.

Judd was aware this was all wrong. "Who are you and what do you want?" he barked.

The elder Cait just looked at him in amused disdain. "Oh, look. The human rodent wants us to be nice to it."

Judd scowled back at him. "This *rodent* is a Commander in Starfleet and doesn't like being insulted. Back home we used to neuter uppity cats. Don't tempt me."

The elder's fur bristled and Judd couldn't help but notice the female was mildly amused by his comments.

It was at that point Judd noticed the phaser in her paw pointed at him and the fact the flitter was a kilometre in the air. He had nowhere to go.

"What do you want?" he snapped. "I've got places to be."

Now the elder Cait was growling, his teeth bared. Judd wasn't intimidated. He'd had to deal with his children when they got nasty as well.

"I am Tintabell, you stupid mammal! I will not be spoken to like that!"

The female adjusted her phaser to show they meant business. Judd found it curious that she wasn't trying any physical duress.

"With a name like that I'd wonder if you were a pixie. I wouldn't know you from the Easter Bunny." Judd deliberately needled him, hoping for some kind of confession.

Tintabell's eyes flared, but he managed to keep control. He snarled: "You and your Starfleet friends ruined the destiny for me and my people. My company built the weapons we were going to conquer this corner of the galaxy with and now, due to your interference, I'm looking at bankruptcy."

Judd sighed. It all came down to a petty grudge. "You're the one who sent the assassin, ain't you?"

"Of course!" Tintabell's tail swished angrily. "The new queen is the prime example of just how decadent our people have gotten. Without her, our people still have a chance to find their heart again."

Scanner scowled at him. "You're just pissed that you lost some money." He shook his head, pityingly. "You sad, little man."

Tintabell leaned forward and snapped: "I am not a man, human! Don't insult me!"

Before Judd could come back with a useful retort, Tin said: "It's time."

The female leaned forward and reached under the seat. She came back with a collar that looked just like the one he had used on the assassin. She turned and quickly snapped it around Judd's neck.

Tin gave Judd an evil grin. "Now, earther. When we land I'm going to throw you out of this flitter into the middle of the crowd and set you off."

Judd held no illusions that not only would he die, a whole lot of other people would be killed as well. A glance out the window convinced him that time was growing short. The top of the Palace could be seen over the windowsill.

Fortunately for him, his female captor followed his gaze out. He raised his right arm, and, before she could react, he smashed her nose in with his elbow. His time with the Cait had taught him their most vulnerable points.

The female howled in agony and brought both paws up to her now bloody face, giving Scanner ample opportunity to snatch away the phaser from her hand.

He slid along the seat away from the wounded female and pointed the business end of the phaser at Tintabell. The elder Cait just gave him a baleful glare.

"What do you think you're going to achieve with that?" he asked, loathing the fact he was even talking to Judd. He turned his hand over to reveal a small box. "This is a remote control device. I can set you off with a simple press of this button. Once it's done within seconds your collar will explode. I don't mind telling you that I don't mind dying in an explosion that will kill most of the ruling party."

Judd rolled his eyes. "I thought you'd say that." Menacing, he raised the phaser.

His bluff called, Tintabell did the unthinkable. He pressed the button. Immediately, the collar started beeping. The female started screaming and reaching for the door.

The former arms dealer looked at Scanner in surprise. He was totally calm and actually smiled as the timer counted down!

"You know there's only one thing you need to check when you put a collar on someone," Scanner said confidently. "You should make sure it fits!"

Judd reached up and slipped the oversized collar up and over his head. Knowing had only seconds to go he tossed it under Tintabell's seat, took hold of the female's paw with his right hand then slapped the emergency beam

out button on Faith's remote that was in his pocket. In an instant, both he and his escort disappeared, leaving Tintabell scrambling for a collar he would never reach in time.

In the midst of the Queen's palace hall people scattered as the transporter beam coalesced into two forms. The Queen's guard stepped forward to repel the invaders and were surprised to find their phasers pointed at the guest of honour and an unknown female who was looking the worse for wear.

The female immediately started looking about her, trying to come up with a plan when they were all shaken further when the flash and boom from a distant explosion was heard through the eastern facing windows.

Through it all Scanner stood firmly, confidently, keeping a solid grip on the female. He looked to the Captain of the Guard and said: "Take this female into custody on charges of conspiracy to commit the murder of not only myself, but the Queen as well."

That jolted the Captain into action. He stepped forward menacingly towards the still nameless female.

"Who are you! Is this true?" he barked.

"No!" she cried, pulling away from Scanner. "Keep me away from this crazy human! He killed Tintabell and tried to kill me as well!"

Judd gave her a gallows smile and said off-handedly: "If the pair of you hadn't tried to blow me up like you tried to blow up the Queen you wouldn't have a problem, would you?" He turned to face Faith, who had stepped forward to discover the source of the commotion. "Your Majesty, this female and her boss, Tintabell, were the ones who tried to kill you earlier. They tried to put a collar on me as well then dump me in the middle of your party."

Faith was a good judge of character and she wanted to believe Judd. However, the blood on the female's face made her wonder what else had happened.

At that point they were joined by a familiar white form. Amantasandage stepped out of the crowd, preened to within an inch of her life and looking a million dollars. She looked from one to the other.

The female captive recognised her and believed she had an out. "I don't trust Amantasandage! She is his spouse and is biased!"

She was right, Judd knew. Then his wife surprised him and took the Queen's hand. He realised she was letting Faith see what she did as she looked into their minds.

He noticed her recoil as she touched his mind. He understood he was still harbouring a lot of anger and tried to squelch it. Instead, he showed her his memories of the flitter conversation.

Manny pulled away seconds later and Judd saw a new

appreciation for him in both female's eyes. She then turned and looked into his captive's mind. It took only a fraction of a second for Faith to point an accusing finger at her. "Sintabring! How could you do such a thing?"

At least Scanner finally knew her name. No doubt Manny had plucked it out of her mind.

Next to him, the female finally let down her guard. "Tintabell was right about you," she said to Faith acidly. "You're a lousy leader. May you rot in Hell."

That was the last thing she got to say before the Captain ordered her to be taken away.

Faith turned and took Judd's hands in her paws. "I was going to do this later, but now is the perfect time."

Curious, Judd just looked at her askance. Around about them, the hundreds strong crowd quietened to silence. All Judd could hear was breathing.

The Queen spoke up so all could hear. "Let it be known that, for his bravery in putting his life on the line not once, but twice, today in my defence I declare, according to the ancient custom, that Commander Judd "Scanner" Sandage is not only adopted by the clan Shack, but I consider him my brother in flesh and spirit."

Judd knew she was saying it in her mother tongue, so he was probably missing some of the importance of the declaration. What brought it home to him was the crowd's reaction. As one, they all roared their agreement and

appreciation for the newest Cait.

He was most surprised by Faith's next action as the monarch, followed by everyone else in the room, bent the knee and honoured him. Fortunately for him, he was the only one who understood what was going on when a human turned bright red.

The next morning, Judd woke to find himself alone in his bed. He sighed and rolled over onto his side, propping himself up on his elbow. He had spent a good portion of the night dreaming about bombs going off and knew he could have done without it.

He looked over to the other side of the bed and sighed again. He wondered where his wife was this early in the day. A glance at the clock showed him it was still half an hour before his family usually rose. It was truly puzzling.

He sniffed the air and wondered what the smell was for a moment. In this home it was unusual. Cooked *anything* was odd.

He pulled on his dressing gown and followed his nose out the door, down the hallway and into the kitchen.

To his surprise, he found not only Manny, but her mother as well, cooking! In a normal Cait home cooking anything over heat was practically unheard of. Only a few things were ever prepared that way.

So, for Judd to find his wife looking over a frying pan

whilst cooking a *fish* was more than odd, it was bizarre.

"What's goin' on here?" he asked incredulously as he scratched at his morning stubble.

Manny looked up from her ministrations and handed the task off to her mother, who did her best to look like she knew what she was doing.

She stepped around the counter and advanced on her husband and then surprised him when she dropped to a knee. She looked up at him sheepishly and gently took his hand in her paw. "My husband," she said humbly. "I have not honoured you as I should and I want you to know I'm sorry. When I touched your mind yesterday I saw how you felt and, more importantly, *why*. I've been guilty of not only demeaning you by making you seem less than a Cait, but I've actually encouraged our children to do it, too." She cast her eyes down and said: "From from this day forward I vow that I will respect not only the head of our clan, but the brother of our Queen."

Judd smiled. Her words were music to his ears. "So, Faith wasn't kidding." He gave her hand a gentle tug and brought his wife back to her feet. She may have been a good six inches taller than he was, but at that moment she made him feel like he could touch the clouds.

As Pashtallash tipped his breakfast onto a plate she said: "On our world, Judd, you're now the next best thing to the Queen. That's the level of the honour she has given

you. No longer will people wonder why my white kit married you. The females out there will all be wishing *they had.*"

The notion stunned the human. "Seriously?"

His mother-in-law joined her daughter as they stood before him. "Your actions brought our entire clan honour, Judd. I may have had my reservations when I first met you, but over time I began to understand Manny's choice. Yesterday just cemented it. You didn't run from battle. You engaged the enemy and didn't flinch at doing what was necessary."

Ever the humble one, Scanner just shrugged. "I just did what anyone would have done in my place."

Manny took him in her arms. "No, my husband. You were exceptional." She gave him a huge hug and Judd felt the wounds beginning to heal. "I'm so sorry," she whispered in his ear.

In response, he returned the embrace lovingly.

Pash said: "Now, Judd, we've made you a breakfast that we know you'd like because it's time for us to get used to how *you* do things, not just you putting up with the Caitian way."

Manny let go of Judd and, as they turned to get their meal a blur of black fur leapt out of the hallway, bowled him over and smothered him in a mass of feline arms, bodies and tails.

Judd rolled on the floor with his children and tickled them when he had the chance. He gave as good as he got and, even though they accidentally drew blood under his clothes he didn't mind. They were finally treating him like the other Dads he knew here.

"Hey, Dad!" Drallah said when they stopped mucking around. "Did you really blow up those assassins?"

Before he could answer, Lila said: "I heard the one who tried to kill the Queen was seven feet tall!"

"What did it feel like to kill them?" Drallah eagerly asked.

It was the tone of his voice that brought Scanner up short. The last thing he wanted was for the children to glorify violence. He sat down with them and told them: "I did what was necessary," he said in all seriousness. "I had to protect the Queen and all the innocents at the ball. I didn't *want* to kill, but I had to. Do you understand?"

As the kits tried to grapple with the concept he noticed his wife looking at him and she felt her mind touch his. "You make me proud with every word you speak, my love," she said in thought, entwining the words with the emotions she was trying to convey.

He smiled back at her. It was going to be OK. He caught her eye and said: "Back at ya, my love."