

SKitty

:Nasty,: SKitty complained in Dick's head. She wrapped herself a little closer around his shoulders and licked drops of oily fog from her fur with a faint mew of distaste. :Smelly.:

Dick White had to agree. The portside district of Lacu'un was pretty unsavory; the dismal, foggy weather made it look even worse. Shabby, cheap, and ill-used.

Every building here—all twenty of them!—was offworld design; shoddy prefab, mostly painted in shades of peeling grey and industrial green, with garish neon-bright holosigns that were (thank the Spirits of Space!) mostly tuned down to faintly colored ghosts in the daytime. There were six bars, two gambling-joints, one chapel run by the neo-Jesuits, one flophouse run by the Reformed Salvation Army, five government buildings, four stores, and once place better left unnamed. They had all sprung up, like diseased fungus, in the year since the planet and people of Lacu'un had been declared Open for trade. There was nothing native here; for that you had to go outside the Fence—

And to go outside the Fence, Dick reminded himself, you have to get permits signed by everybody and his dog.

:Cat,: corrected SKitty.

Okay, okay, he thought back with wry amusement. Everybody and his cat. Except they don't have cats here, except on the ships.

SKitty sniffed disdainfully. :Fools,: she replied, smoothing down an errant bit of damp fur with her tongue, thus dismissing an entire culture that currently had most of the Companies on their collective knees begging for trading concessions.

Well, we've seen about everything there is to see, Dick thought back at SKitty, reaching up to scratch her ears as she purred in contentment. Are you quite satisfied?

:Hunt now?: she countered hopefully.

No, you can't hunt. You know that very well. This is a Class Four world; you have to have permission from the local sapients to hunt, and they haven't given us permission to even sneeze outside the Fence. And inside the Fence you are valuable merchandise subject to catnapping, as you very well know. I played shining knight for you once, furball, and I don't want to repeat the experience.

SKitty sniffed again. :Not love me.:

Love you too much, pest. Don't want you ending up in the hold of some tramp freighter.

SKitty turned up the volume on her purr, and rearranged her coil on Dick's shoulders until she resembled a lumpy black fur collar on his gray shipsuit. When she left the ship—and often when she was in the ship—that was SKitty's perch of choice. Dick had finally prevailed on the purser to put shoulderpads on all his shipsuits—sometimes SKitty got a little careless with her claws.

When man had gone to space, cats had followed; they were quickly proven to be

a necessity. For not only did man's old pests, rats and mice, accompany his trade--there seemed to be equivalent pests on every new world. But the shipscats were considerably different from their Earth-bound ancestors. The cold reality was that a spacer couldn't afford a pet that had to be cared for--he needed something closer to a partner.

Hence SKitty and her kind; gene-tailored into something more than animals. SKitty was BioTech Type F-021; forepaws like that of a raccoon, more like stubby little hands than paws. Smooth, short hair with no undercoat to shed and clog up airfilters. Hunter second to none. Middle-ear tuning so that she not only was not bothered by hyperspace shifts and freefall, she actually enjoyed them. And last, but by no means least, the enlarged head showing the boosting of her intelligence.

BioTech released the shipscats for adoption when they reached about six months old; when they'd not only been weaned, but trained. Training included maneuvering in freefall, use of the same sanitary facilities as the crew, and emergency procedures. SKitty had her vacuum suit, just like any other crew member; a transparent hard plex ball rather like a tiny lifeslip, with a simple panel of controls inside to seal and pressurize it. She was positively paranoid about having it with her; she'd haul it along on its tether, if need be, so that it was always in the same compartment that she was. Dick respected her paranoia; any good spacer would.

Officially she was "Lady Sundancer of Greenfields"; Greenfields being BioTech Station NA-73. In actuality, she was SKitty to the entire crew, and only Dick remembered her real name.

Dick had signed on to the CatsEye Company ship Brightwing just after they'd retired their last shipscat to spend his final days with other creaky retirees from the spacetrade in the Tau Epsilon Old Spacers Station. As junior officer Dick had been sent off to pick up the replacement. SOP was for a BioTech technician to give you two or three candidates to choose among--in actuality, Dick hadn't had any choice. "Lady Sundancer" had taken one look at him and launched herself like a little black rocket from the arms of the tech straight for him; she'd landed on his shoulders, purring at the top of her lungs. When they couldn't pry her off, not without injuring her, the "choice" became moot. And Dick was elevated to the position of Designated Handler.

For the first few days she was "Dick White's Kitty"--the rest of his fellow crewmembers being vastly amused that she had so thoroughly attached herself to him. After a time that was shortened first to "Dick's Kitty" and then to "SKitty," which name finally stuck.

Since telepathy was not one of the traits BioTech was supposedly breeding and genesplicing for, Dick had been more than a little startled when she'd started speaking to him. And since none of the others ever mentioned hearing her, he had long ago come to the conclusion that he was the only one who could. He kept that a secret; at the least, should BioTech come to hear of it, it would mean losing her. BioTech would want to know where that particular mutation came from, for fair.

"Pretty gamy," he told Erica Makumba, Legal and Security Officer, who was the current on-watch at the airlock. The dusky woman lounged in her jumpseat with deceptive casualness, both hands behind her curly head--but there was a stun-bracelet on one wrist, and Erica just happened to be the Brightwing's current karate champ.

"Eyeah," she replied with a grimace. "Had a look out there last night. Talk about your low-class dives! I'm not real surprised the Lacu'un threw the Fence

up around it. Damn if I'd want that for neighbors! Hey, we may be getting a break, though; invitation's gone out to about three cap'ns to come make trade-talk. Seems the Lacu'un got themselves a lawyer--"

"So much for the `unsophisticated primitives,' " Dick laughed. "I thought TriStar was riding for a fall, taking that line."

Erica grinned; a former TriStar employee, she had no great love for her previous employer. "Eyeah. So, lawyer goes and calls up the records on every Company making bids, goes over 'em with a fine-tooth. Seems only three of us came up clean; us, SolarQuest, and UVN. We got invites, rest got bye-byes. Be hearing a buncha ships clearing for space in the next few hours."

"My heart bleeds," Dick replied. "Any chance they can fight it?"

"Ha! Didn't tell you who they got for their mouthpiece. Lan Ventris."

Dick whistled. "Somebody's been looking out for them!"

"Terran Consul; she was the scout that made first contact. They wouldn't have anybody else, adopted her into the ruling sept, keep her at the Palace. Nice lady, shared a beer or three with her. She likes these people, obviously, takes their welfare real personal. Now--you want the quick low-down on the invites?"

Dick leaned up against the bulkhead, arms folded, taking care not to disturb SKitty. "Say on."

"One--" she held up a solemn finger. "Vena--that's the Consul--says that these folk have a long martial tradition; they're warriors, and admire warriors--but they admire honor and honesty even more. The trappings of primitivism are there, but it's a veneer for considerable sophistication. So whoever goes needs to walk a line between pride and honorable behavior that will be a lot like the old Japanese courts of Terra. Two, they are very serious about religion--they give us a certain amount of leeway for being ignorant outlanders, but if you transgress too far, Vena's not sure what the penalties may be. So you want to watch for signals, body-language from the priest-caste; that could warn you that you're on dangerous ground. Three--and this is what may give us an edge over the other two--they are very big on their totem animals; the sept totems are actually an important part of sept pride and the religion. So the Cap'n intends to make you and Her Highness there part of the delegation. Vena says that the Lacu'un intend to issue three contracts, so we're all gonna get one, but the folks that impress them the most will be getting first choice."

If Dick hadn't been leaning against the metal of the bulkhead he might well have staggered. As most junior on the crew, the likelihood that he was going to even go beyond the Fence had been staggeringly low--but that he would be included in the first trade delegation was mind-melting!

SKitty caroled her own excitement all the way back to his cabin, launching herself from his shoulder to land in her own little shock-bunk, bolted to the wall above his.

Dick began digging through his catch-all bin for his dress-insignia; the half-lidded topaz eye for CatsEye Company, the gold wings of the ship's insignia that went beneath it, the three tiny stars signifying the three missions he'd been on so far. . . .

He caught flickers of SKitty's private thoughts then; thoughts of pleasure,

thoughts of nesting—

Nesting!

Oh no!

He spun around to meet her wide yellow eyes, to see her treading out her shock-bunk.

SKitty, he pled, Please don't tell me you're pregnant—

:Kittens,: she affirmed, very pleased with herself.

You swore to me that you weren't in heat when I let you out to hunt!

She gave the equivalent of a mental shrug. :I lie.:

He sat heavily down on his own bunk, all his earlier excitement evaporated. BioTech shipscats were supposed to be sterile—about one in a hundred weren't. And you had to sign an agreement with BioTech that you wouldn't neuter yours if it proved out fertile; they wanted the kittens, wanted the results that came from outbreeding. Or you could sell the kittens to other ships yourself, or keep them; provided a BioTech station wasn't within your ship's current itinerary. But of course, only BioTech would take them before they were six months old and trained. . . .

That was the rub. Dick sighed. SKitty had already had one litter on him—only two, but it had seemed like twenty-two. There was this problem with kittens in a spaceship; there was a period of time between when they were mobile and when they were about four months old that they had exactly two neurons in those cute, fluffy little heads. One neuron to keep the body moving at warp speed, and one neuron to pick out the situation guaranteed to cause the most trouble.

Everyone in the crew was willing to play with them—but no one was willing to keep them out of trouble. And since SKitty was Dick's responsibility, it was Dick who got to clean up the messes, and Dick who got to fish the little fluffbrains out of the bridge console, and Dick who got to have the anachronistic litter pan in his cabin until SKitty got her babies properly toilet trained.

Securing a litter pan for freefall was not something he had wanted to have to do again. Ever.

"How could you do this to me?" he asked SKitty reproachfully. She just curled her head over the edge of her bunk and trilled prettily.

He sighed. Too late to do anything about it now.

" . . . and you can see the carvings adorn every flat surface," Vena Ferducci, the small, darkhaired woman who was the Terran Consul, said, waving her hand gracefully at the walls. Dick wanted to stand and gawk; this was incredible!

The Fence was actually an opaque forcefield, and only one of the reasons the Companies wanted to trade with the Lacu'un. Though they did not have spaceflight, there were certain applications of forcefield technologies they did have that seemed to be beyond the Terran's abilities. On the other side of the Fence was literally another world.

These people built to last, in limestone, alabaster, and marble, in the wealthy district, and in cast stone in the outer city. The streets were carefully poured sections of concrete, cleverly given stress-joints to avoid temperature-cracking, and kept clean enough to eat from by a small army of street-sweepers. No animals were allowed on the streets themselves, except for housetrained pets. The only vehicles permitted were single or double-being electric carts, that could move no faster than a man could walk. The Lacu'un dressed either in filmy, silken robes, or in more practical, shorter versions of the same garments. They were a handsome race, upright bipeds, skin tones in varying shades of browns and dark golds, faces vaguely avian, with a frill like an iguana's running from the base of the neck to a point between and just above the eyes.

As Vena had pointed out, every wall within sight was heavily carved, the carvings all having to do with the Lacu'un religion.

Most of the carvings were depictions of various processions or ceremonies, and no two were exactly alike.

"That's the Harvest-Gladness," Vena said, pointing, as they walked, to one elaborate wall that ran for yards. "It's particularly appropriate for Kla'dera; he made all his money in agriculture. Most Lacu'un try to have something carved that reflects on their gratitude for `favors granted.' "

"I think I can guess that one," the Captain, Reginald Singh, said with a smile that showed startlingly white teeth in his dark face. The carving he nodded to was a series of panels; first a celebration involving a veritable kindergarten full of children, then those children--now sex-differentiated and seen to be all female--worshiping at the alter of a very fecund-looking Lacu'un female, and finally the now-maidens looking sweet and demure, each holding various religious objects.

Vena laughed, her brown eyes sparkling with amusement. "No, that one isn't hard. There's a saying, `as fertile as Gel'vadera's wife.' Every child was a female, too, that made it even better. Between the bride-prices he got for the ones that wanted to wed, and the officer's price he got for the ones that went into the armed services, Gel'vadera was a rich man. His First Daughter owns the house now."

"Ah--that brings up a question," Captain Singh replied. "Would you explain exactly who and what we'll be meeting? I read the briefing, but I still don't quite understand who fits in where with the government."

"It will help if you think of it as a kind of unholy mating of the British Parliamentary system and the medieval Japanese Shogunates," Vena replied. "You'll be meeting with the `king'--that's the Lacu'ara--his consort, who has equal powers and represents the priesthood--that's the Lacu'teveras--and his three advisors, who are elected. The advisors represent the military, the bureaucracy, and the economic sector. The military advisor is always female; all officers in the military are female, because the Lacu'un believe that females will not seek glory for themselves, and so will not issue reckless orders. The other two can be either sex. `Advisor' is not altogether an accurate term to use for them; the Lacu'ara and Lacu'teveras rarely act counter to their advice."

Dick was paying scant attention to this monologue; he'd already picked all this up from the faxes he'd called out of the local library after he'd read the briefing. He was more interested in the carvings, for there was something about them that puzzled him.

All of them featured strange little six-legged creatures scampering about under the feet of the carved Lacu'un. They were about the size of a large mouse, and seemed to Dick to be wearing very smug expressions . . . though of course, he was surely misinterpreting.

"Excuse me Consul," he said, when Vena had finished explaining the intricacies of Lacu'un government to Captain Singh's satisfaction. "I can't help wondering what those little lizard-like things are."

"Kreshta," she said, "I would call them pests; you don't see them out on the streets much, but they are the reason the streets are kept so clean. You'll see them soon enough once we get inside. They're like mice, only worse; fast as lightning—they'll steal food right off your plate. The Lacu'un either can't or won't get rid of them, I can't tell you which. When I asked about them once, my host just rolled his eyes heavenward and said what translates to 'it's the will of the gods.' "

"Insh'allah?" Captain Singh asked.

"Very like that, yes. I can't tell if they tolerate the pests because it is the gods' will that they must, or if they tolerate them because the gods favor the little monsters. Inside the Fence we have to close the government buildings down once a month, seal them up, and fumigate. We're just lucky they don't breed very fast."

:Hunt?: SKitty asked hopefully from her perch on Dick's shoulders.

No! Dick replied hastily. Just look, don't hunt!

The cat was gaining startled—and Dick thought, appreciative—looks from passersby.

"Just what is the status value of a totemic animal?" Erica asked curiously.

"It's the fact that the animal can be tamed at all. Aside from a handful of domestic herbivores, most animal life on Lacu'un has never been tamed. To be able to take a carnivore and train it to the hand implies that the gods are with you in a very powerful way." Vena dimpled. "I'll let you in on a big secret; frankly, Lan and I preferred the record of the Brightwing over the other two ships; you seemed to be more sympathetic to the Lacu'un. That's why we told you about the totemic animals, and why we left you until last."

"It wouldn't have worked without Dick," Captain Singh told her. "SKitty has really bonded to him in a remarkable way; I don't think this presentation would come off half so impressively if he had to keep her on a lead."

"It wouldn't," Vena replied, directing them around a corner. At the end of a short street was a fifteen foot wall—carved, of course—pierced by an arching entranceway.

"The palace," she said, rather needlessly.

Vena had been right. The kreshta were everywhere.

Dick could feel SKitty trembling with the eagerness to hunt, but she was managing to keep herself under control. Only the lashing of her tail betrayed her agitation.

He waited at parade rest, trying not to give in to the temptation to stare, as the Captain and the Negotiator, Grace Vixen, were presented to the five rulers of the Lacu'un in an elaborate ceremony that resembled a stately dance. Behind the low platform holding the five dignitaries in their iridescent robes were five soberly clad retainers, each with one of the "totemic animals." Dick could see now what Vena had meant; the handlers had their creatures under control, but only barely. There was something like a bird, something resembling a small crocodile, something like a snake, but with six very tiny legs, a creature vaguely catlike, but with a feathery coat, and a beast resembling a teddybear with scales. None of the handlers was actually holding his beast, except the bird-handler. All of the animals were on short chains, and all of them punctuated the ceremony with soft growls and hisses.

So SKitty, perched freely on Dick's shoulders, had drawn no few murmurs of awe from the crowd of Lacu'un in the Audience Hall.

The presentation glided to a conclusion, and the Lacu'teveras whispered something to Vena behind her fan.

"With your permission, Captain, the Lacu'teveras would like to know if your totemic beast is actually as tame as she appears?"

"She is," the Captain replied, speaking directly to the consort, and bowing, exhibiting a charm that had crossed species barriers many times before this.

It worked its magic again. The Lacu'teveras fluttered her fan and trilled something else at Vena. The audience of courtiers gasped.

"Would it be possible, she asks, for her to touch it?"

SKitty? Dick asked quickly, knowing that she was getting the sense of what was going on from his thoughts.

:Nice,: the cat replied, her attention momentarily distracted from the scurrying hints of movement that were all that could be seen of the kreshta.
:Nice lady. Feels good in head, like Dick.:

Feels good in head? he thought, startled.

"I don't think that there will be any problem, Captain," Dirk murmured to Singh, deciding that he could worry about it later. "SKitty seems to like the Lacu'un. Maybe they smell right."

SKitty flowed down off his shoulder and into his arms as he stepped forward to present the cat to the Lacu'teveras. He showed the Lacu'un the cat's favorite spot to be scratched, under the chin. The long talons sported by all Lacu'un were admirably suited to the job of cat-scratching.

The Lacu'teveras reached forward with one lilac-tipped finger, and hesitantly followed Dick's example. The Audience Hall was utterly silent as she did so, as if the entire assemblage was holding its breath, waiting for disaster to strike. The courtiers gasped at her temerity when the cat stretched out her neck—then gasped again, this time with delight, as SKitty's rumbling purr became audible.

SKitty's eyes were almost completely closed in sensual delight; Dick glanced up to see that the Lacu'teveras' amber, slit-pupiled eyes were widened with what he judged was an equal delight. She let her other six fingers join the first, tentative one beneath the cat's chin.

"Such soft—" she said shyly, in musically-accented Standard. "—such nice!"

"Thank you, High Lady," Dick replied with a smile. "We think so."

:Verrry nice,: SKitty seconded. :Not head-talk like Dick, but feel good in head, like Dick. Nice lady have kitten soon, too.:

The Lacu'teveras took her hand away with some reluctance, and signed that Dick should return to his place. SKitty slid back up onto his shoulders and started to settle herself.

It was then that everything fell apart.

The next stage in the ceremony called for the rulers to take their seats in their five thrones, and the Captain, Vena, and Grace to assume theirs on stools before the thrones so that each party could present what it wanted out of a possible relationship.

But the Lacu'teveras, her eyes still wistfully on SKitty, was not looking where she placed her hand. And on the armrest of the throne was a kreshta, frozen into an atypical immobility.

The Lacu'teveras put her hand—with all of her weight on it—right on top of the kreshta. The evil-looking thing squealed, squirmed, and bit her as hard as it could.

The Lacu'teveras cried out in pain—the courtiers gasped, the Advisors made warding gestures—and SKitty, roused to sudden and protective rage at this attack by vermin on the nice lady who was with kitten—leapt.

The kreshta saw her coming, and blurred with speed—but it was not fast enough to evade SKitty, gene-tailored product of one of BioTech's finest labs. Before it could cover even half of the distance between it and safety, SKitty had it. There was a crunch audible all over the Audience Chamber, and the ugly little thing was hanging limp from SKitty's jaws.

Tail high, in a silence that could have been cut up into bricks and used to build a wall, she carried her prize to the feet of the injured one Lacu'un and laid it there.

:Fix him!: Dick heard in his mind. :Not hurt nice-one-with-kitten!:

The Lacu'ara stepped forward, face rigid, every muscle tense.

Spirits of Space! Dick thought, steeling himself for the worst, that's bloody well torn it—

But the Lacu'ara, instead of ordering the guards to seize the Terrans, went to one knee and picked up the broken-backed kreshta as if it were a fine jewel.

Then he brandished it over his head while the entire assemblage of Lacu'un burst into cheers—and the Terrans looked at one another in bewilderment.

SKitty preened, accepting the caresses of every Lacu'un that could reach her with the air of one to whom adulation is long due. Whenever an unfortunate kreshta happened to attempt to skitter by, she would turn into a bolt of black lightning, reenacting her kill to the redoubled applause of the Lacu'un.

Vena was translating as fast as she could, with the three Advisors all speaking at once. The Lacu'ara was tenderly bandaging the hand of his consort, but occasionally one or the other of them would put in a word too.

"Apparently they've never been able to exterminate the kreshta; the natural predators on them can't be domesticated and generally take pieces out of anyone trying, traps and poisoned baits don't work because the kreshta won't take them. The only thing they've ever been able to do is what we were doing behind the Fence: close up the building and fumigate periodically. And even that has problems—the Lacu'teveras, for instance, is violently allergic to the residue left when the fumigation is done."

Vena paused for breath.

"I take it they'd like to have SKitty around on a permanent basis?" the Captain said, with heavy irony.

"Spirits of Space, Captain—they think SKitty is a sign from the gods, incarnate! I'm not sure they'll let her leave!"

Dick heard that with alarm—in a lot of ways, SKitty was the best friend he had—

To leave her—the thought wasn't bearable!

SKitty whipped about with alarm when she picked up what he was thinking. With an anguished wowl, she scampered across the slippery stone floor and flung herself through the air to land on Dick's shoulders. There she clung, howling her objections at the idea of being separated at top of her lungs.

"What in—" Captain Singh exclaimed, turning to see what could be screaming like a damned soul.

"She doesn't want to leave me, Captain," Dick said defiantly. "And I don't think you're going to be able to get her off my shoulder without breaking her legs or tranking her."

Captain Singh looked stormy. "Damn it then, get a trunk—"

"I'm afraid I'll have to veto that one, Captain," Erica interrupted apologetically. "The contract with BioTech clearly states that only the designated handler—and that's Dick—or a BioTech representative can treat a shipscat. And furthermore—" she continued, halting the Captain before he could interrupt, "it also states that to leave a shipscat without its designated handler will force BioTech to refuse anymore shipscats to Brightwing for as long as you are the Captain. Now I don't want to sound like a troublemaker, Captain, but I for one will flatly refuse to serve on a ship with no cat. Periodic vacuum purges to kill the vermin do not appeal to me."

"Well then, I'll order the boy to—"

"Sir, I am the Brightwing's legal advisor—I hate to say this, but to order Dick to ground is a clear violation of his contract. He hasn't got enough hours spacing yet to qualify him for a ground position."

The Lacu'teveras had taken Vena aside, Dick saw, and was chattering at her at top speed, waving her bandaged hand in the air.

"Captain Singh," she said, turning away from the Lacu'un and tugging at his

sleeve, "the Lacu'teveras has figured out that something you said or did is upsetting the cat, and she's not very happy with that--"

Captain Singh looked just about ready to swallow a bucket of heated nails. "Spacer, will you get that feline calmed down before they throw me in the local brig?"

"I'll-try sir--"

Come on, old girl--they won't take you away. Erica and the nice lady won't let them, he coaxed. You're making the nice lady unhappy, and that might hurt her kitten--

SKitty subsided, slowly, but continued to cling to Dick's shoulder as if he was the only rock in a flood. :Not take Dick.:

Erica won't let them.

:Nice Erica.:

A sudden thought occurred to him. SKitty-love, how long would it take before you had your new kittens trained to hunt?

She pondered the question. :From wean? Three heats,: she said finally.

About a year, then, from birth to full hunter. "Captain, I may have a solution for you--"

"I would be overjoyed to hear one," the Captain replied dryly.

"SKitty's pregnant again--I'm sorry, sir, I just found out today and I didn't have time to report it--but sir, this is going to be to our advantage! If the Lacu'un insisted, we could handle the whole trade deal, couldn't we, Erica? And it should take something like a year to get everything negotiated and set up, shouldn't it?"

"Up to a year and a half, standard, yes," she confirmed. "And basically, whatever the Lacu'un want, they get, so far as the Company is concerned."

"Once the kittens are a year old, they'll be hunters just as good as SKitty is--so if you could see your way clear to doing all the set up--and sort-of wait around for us to get done rearing the kittens--"

Captain Singh burst into laughter. "Boy, do you have any notion just how many credits handling the entire trade negotiations would put in Brightwing's account? Do you have any idea what that would do for my status?"

"No sir," he admitted.

"Suffice it to say I could retire if I chose. And--Spirits of Space--kittens? Kittens we could legally sell to the Lacu'un? I don't suppose you have any notion of how many kittens we can expect this time?"

He sent an inquiring tendril of thought to SKitty. "Uh--I think four, sir."

"Four! And they were offering us what for just her?" the Captain asked Vena.

"A more-than-considerable amount," she said dryly. "Exclusive contract on the forcefield applications."

"How would they feel about bargaining for four to be turned over in about a year?"

Vena turned to the rulers and translated. The excited answer she got left no doubts in anyone's mind that the Lacu'un were overjoyed at the prospect.

"Basically, Captain, you've just convinced the Lacu'un that you hung the moon."

"Well—why don't we settle down to a little serious negotiation, hmm?" the Captain said, nobly refraining from rubbing his hands together with glee. "I think that all our problems for the future are about to be solved in one fell swoop! Get over here, spacer. You and that cat have just received a promotion to Junior Negotiator."

:Okay?: SKitty asked anxiously.

Yes, love, Dick replied, taking Erica's place on a negotiator's stool. Very okay!