



Leaping Lizards

Elizabeth McCoy

Leaping Lizards
by Elizabeth McCoy

Smashwords Edition

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Glossary

Cor-daz – brown and black tabby.

Halloth – a mammalian, bipedal alien species, superficially resembling humans; their blood uses haemocyanin, and their coloration spans from indigo to aqua. Not a Kintaran word.

Khih – yes or yeah.

Lomerf – a falcon- to eagle-sized, warm-blooded, scaled, egg-laying marsupial with four legs and wings, native to Kintara.

Merfah – a rabbit-sized, warm-blooded, scaled, six-legged marsupial, native to Kintara. Yummy to Kintarans. (There's one hiding on the cover.)

Mmsar – a warm-blooded, bipedal reptilian race. Not a Kintaran word.

Mmsarsan – the name for the Mmsar's planet. Not a Kintaran word.

Nih – No, or nope.

Sparriel – a short, vaguely squirrel-like alien race with a penchant for fast-talk and kleptomania (a dominance behavior). Not a Kintaran word.

Wahn – captain, or leader.

Names

Kinahran – Moonfur, Our Protagonist

Choosaraf – First-Star, the clanship Moonfur lives on.

Coli-nfaran – Ferncloud. Her name could also be translated as Feathercloud. Moonfur's mother.

Detchal – Fat-Toe, Moonfur's cousin.

Dettsleet – Big-Eyes, a former comm officer of the *Choosaraf*.

Farafinleet – Embereyes, Moonfur's little sister.

Klarin-yal – no translation; Captain of the *Choosaraf*.

Klr-lin – He's Here, one of the *Choosaraf*'s crew.

K'rava – Like-a-Purr, the *Choosaraf*'s Negotiator.

N'balplar – Without-a-Tail, the *Choosaraf*'s main sensor officer

P'pr-r-thaht N'cheh – We-People Roam Far, or "our clan is far roaming." A clanship.

Teecoli – Tortoiseshell Feather, Moonfur's cousin.

Teritul – Ambiguous translation of Sibling-spots, a pilot for the *Choosaraf*.

Leaping Lizards

Kinahran M'Choosaraf tucked the communication station's ear-set into her left ear and tried to look professional. It was not every day that a pre-adult Kintaran was allowed anywhere near ship's equipment for real, unsupervised, and if Kinahran didn't start seeming competent, she wouldn't be allowed to take her little sister with her when she left the clanship in a few months. She washed her right ear for a moment and straightened the barrettes that kept a tuft of her white fur in front of each ear. Her quarter-cousin, Teecoli, walked by to the shuttle's pilot pad, and Kinahran pulled her tail in, wrapping it over her forepaws.

"Anything?" Teecoli inquired from over her mostly orange shoulder. Like her white companion, the tortoiseshell pilot was making spurious checks of her equipment, touching levers and buttons with her fingers, and putting nervous holes in the floor-padding with her foreclaws. "Has the Captain called in yet?"

Kinahran shook her head. "Nih. Is that good or bad?"

"I don't know." Teecoli flicked her ears in a shrug. "I don't ferry people around any more than you sit comm, normally, and nobody bothered to tell me what your aunt's like when she's hiring humans – especially ones we don't know the protocols for, yet! If we were going to be waiting all night, she *might* have remembered to tell me, but . . ." She twitched her ears backwards again.

Kinahran put one forefoot on the tip of her tail, discreetly concealing her amusement and relief that the older girl was as nervous as the young comm officer. "Maybe she's trying to take a long time, so that the rest of the clan will have more time to clean up the accident before the human sees it." Both Kintarans curled their hind-claws into the floor-padding at the thought of the awful mess that the *Choosaraf's* sensors were in. "I'll call my little sister, and see how the clean-up's going, I think."

"Just be sure to put *her* on hold if your aunt-Captain calls." Teecoli busied herself with pre-flight checklists again, muttering the human words for "Cleared for takeoff" and "Please secure for lift."

Farafinleet, holding comm (and indeed, the entire bridge for the duration of the emergency) on the *Choosaraf*, finally answered – voice only, no visual – in a flurry of clan dialect that even her older sister had trouble understanding.

Kinahran cut into her sibling's apparent panic. "You're chattering worse than a Sparriel! No, we haven't got the human yet, I'm just checking to see what's happening up there."

A breathless pause, then Farafinleet whispered, "Is anyone listening?"

Kinahran turned down the volume on her ear-set so that Teecoli wouldn't hear whatever new horrid thing had just happened. "Only to my side."

A gulp. "You know the merfah that Mother gave me, as a pet, last month when we stopped in at Kintara?"

"Yes . . ."

"It got out of its cage."

"Oh?" Kinahran smoothed her suddenly-fluffed tail out with one hand and hoped Teecoli wouldn't scent her distress.

"And I can't find it!" Farafinleet wailed.

"That's not good. We'll have to do something about that."

"I'm so worried, sister! Its babies were almost ready to come out of its pouch this morning – what if something happens to them?"

Kinahran closed her blue eyes and shuddered. Merfahs were scaled, warm-blooded marsupials, native animals of Kintara, and they bred faster than any vertebrate that Kinahran knew of. While she could hope that both the creature's offspring were also females, she didn't think it was likely. The human Murphy had power over *everyone*, and even a mere three merfahs loose on the clanship could cause damage.

"Well, try to sniff out the problem till I get there – then maybe we can both fix it. Is the mess we used to call the main sensors any neater?"

Her little sister sniffled. "I s'pose it is. There's not so much drifting in front of the bridge window anymore, and I've only seen a couple of adults towing junk back to the cargo lock in the last five minutes. No casualties that anyone's told me about."

A light on the comm panel flashed, and Kinahran chattered, "Aunt calling! Must go!" and switched channels. In exquisite human words, she answered, "*First-star* Passenger Shuttle Three, Moonfur here." In their own language, "Kinahran" sounded too much like "Kintaran" for many sapient's ears, so she used the local translation when she could. *Choosaraf* sounded (to humans) like a sneeze, and so its name was also changed to a local equivalent.

"Moonfurr," her aunt replied, with a slight Kintaran accent, "We will be having one human passengerr. Please make surre everything is properly prepared." She switched to Kintaran. "That seat had better be fastened down behind Teecoli, with working safety-belt and no shed fur on it, or I'll skin you two! Kinahran, the rumor-trail was right; you're going to have to keep a comm-line open for the human – she talks to her computer via implant comm, and you're to patch her through to it when we get out of her normal range." Back to the human language, and dignified formality. "We expect to arrive in fifteen

minutes."

"Yes, Captain, understood. Shuttle out."

Teecoli was frantically checking the chair, wiggling it to make sure it was stable, playing with the seatbelt, adjusting the lean of the seat-back, and bouncing her hand off the cushions to make sure no one had swiped the springs to make something else unique.

Kinahran dived for the hand-vacuum and dashed to the chair, pulling off any fur that might have settled on it. For good measure, the white Kintaran waved it around the room, cleaning the floor-pads and control panels. Her tortie companion set the air circulation on high to keep floating fur from settling on anything.

"Now I understand why K'rava is all but bald," Teecoli muttered as Kinahran vacuumed the pilot's short-clipped mane before doing her own, longer, white one. "And it's not just to be unique."

"At least most of you is in a vacc-suit," Kinahran muttered. She, on the other hand, was entering her final (one hoped) growth-spurt and didn't *have* a suit of her own. Instead, she wore an emergency-bubble on her belt that she could crawl into if pressure was lost. Most of the fur that was being picked up by the air-filters was white, and most of that belonged to her. To be a blue-eyed white was unique, and normally a source of great pride to her, but if one wanted to be inconspicuous for a change? The stuff seemed perversely intent on clinging to anything darker than itself.

When the air-taxi landed near the shuttle, the pair had managed to put the chair back into something resembling a normal position, clean all the fur off it, and toss the mass of fur the filter had caught in the last five minutes out the airlock and bat it under the shuttle – the human wasn't *too* likely to notice it there, since it was planet-night. Kinahran was putting herself back in order and re-inserting the ear-set when the outer lock opened. By the time the inner lock cycled (the air wasn't the issue, but that was the only way that lock would work), Kinahran was settled and busy with spurious adjustments to the comm panel, trying to look professional again.

The captain of the *Choosaraf*, Klarin-yal, was an ancient and scruffy cor-daz – brown and black tabby – with red leather stitched through the edges of her ears. K'rava, apprentice medic and experienced diplomat-merchant, was a pale orange-cream all over, with bright amber eyes and a delightful purring accent to every language he spoke. While the Captain went to the co-pilot's floor-pad, K'rava was smoothly saying, "We have the gravity set for one G now, but if you wish something different, it is easily changed."

"This will be fine," their human passenger said, settling into the chair.

Kinahran was relieved, since if the gravity got any lighter, she was afraid that she would do something clumsy and disgraceful. She was painfully aware of what her growth-spurt was doing to her reflexes anyway.

While Teecoli was running through the final pre-flight check and K'rava was introducing the younger Kintarans ("Teecoli is our pilot, and Moonfur our communications officer"), Moonfur was sneaking blue-eyed peeks at the human. Most, if not all, Kintarans had heard of Selene Holmes, though it had only been five months since the clanship *P'pr-r-thaht N'cheh* had discovered her existence. When it came to matters of sensors, comm, or computers, Ms. Holmes was not only brilliant by the standards of most races, she was also able to create unique designs for Kintaran clanship equipment. Even better, it was said that she was able to take the most unique design a Kintaran had made, and *make it work*. She was *very* expensive to hire – even more than most humans were when they sold properly remarkable things to Kintarans – and would not go far from the human world of New Terra, but to have her work on the *Choosaraf* would impress other clans no end.

Ms. Holmes was also personally unique; her hair, in a short spacer style, was as light as Moonfur's, her skin was paler than any human Kinahran had ever seen before, she wore a strange silvery visor that rumor called a personal multiscanner, and – a sight to make all Kintarans sigh longingly – she wore a biosuit, also a pure, shining white. Biosuits were cutting edge tech. They were extraordinarily tough and comfortable to wear over fur, recycled wastes (useful if one had to deal with bipedal bathrooms for some reason), and changed color with but a little tinkering. Kintarans, especially those cursed with commonplace markings and colors, loved things that they could customize to show off their personal uniqueness.

Unfortunately, biosuits were expensive enough for their human inventors; for Kintarans, over twice a human's mass and with six limbs instead of four (not to mention the tufted tail), such a costly item was a luxury that usually got shoved aside in favor of refueling powerplants or repairing damage acquired from pirate attacks.

"Re arre cleared for lift-off," Teecoli said. Only a hindfoot on her tail kept it from lashing nervously. "Pr-please secure yourself." She began steering the shuttle towards the runway, following the blue lights at the edges of the pavement.

"This craft is not equipped with contragrav?" the human woman asked K'rava. Moonfur couldn't read the expression behind the silvered goggles, but she thought that Ms. Holmes sounded a bit surprised.

K'rava gave a flat-eared duck of his head and looked away. "It is not working

right now, I fear. Some of the parts were needed by the crews cleaning up in the aftermath of the accident." He indicated the lapbelt on the chair apologetically. "If you would?"

Ms. Holmes looked at the seatbelt with the faintest of frowns before fastening it. Kinahran hoped that if any fur was wafting around, it wasn't hers.

Wanting to get through with her duties before the take-off, Moonfur inquired, "Ms. Holmes? May I know the frequency band and net address of your communication implant so that I can ensure you do not lose contact with the planet for any length of time?" She was very pleased with that speech. It used properly complex words and showed off her lack of accent.

The human turned her head slightly, probably looking at Moonfur, though that blank, reflective visor was wholly opaque. "Comm band S-6, address nine-seven-four-one-eight-three-five-nine-six-two," she said, as Moonfur punched numbers swiftly and all but frantically. ". . . three, five, nine, six, two," the Kintaran repeated back, making the connection.. Ms. Holmes paused, head tilted as if listening to something for a moment, nodded once, and resumed facing front.

Teecoli's terror notwithstanding, the take-off was decent and Captain Klarin-yal did not even mutter darkly, much less take over the operation as she had when they'd landed that evening. Not that the Captain had been *that* much better, but at least she'd had (as she'd said) the *authority* to smear them all over the pavement.

Due to the accident, the *Choosaraf* was not allowed in New Terran orbit; instead, they were circling one of the other moons of the gas giant the humans called "Sol Two-Point-Five." Even without fractional warp-drive, the trip took less than a half-hour. That was, unfortunately, enough time for Kinahran to start feeling her racial curiosity tweaking her tail. Sitting at the comm panel, she could have easily have arranged to tap into whatever the human woman was saying to her computer. Not that the white Kintaran would have had any use for what was said, or any desire to spy, but she was *curious*. On the other hand, such a thing would be highly impolite, and if she lost them the prestige that a Holmes-designed sensor array would get them . . . At the least, she'd be shaved and Klarin-yal would notch her ears for her; at the worst, the Captain would have a white tail for a belt and white ears for a belt-pouch.

Kinahran was saved from either fate by Wahn Klarin-yal herself. "Moonfurr, please tell the clean-up crews that we will be arriving soon, coming in at a seventy-degree angle from stripe-side four."

Moonfur nodded. "Yes, Captain," she said, then switched to Trade Kintaran to make the call to her little sister. "Farafinleet, this is Kinahran on the Passenger

Shuttle. Can you get me patched through to the crew leaders? It's the, urr, red and black lever, I think." Kinahran could have contacted the clean-up crew directly, but protocol and procedure demanded that she go through the *Choosaraf* if she could.

A faint hiss-spit of static, and the contact was made. Trying to sound just the faintest bit professionally bored and formal, since such things came through even to aliens like their passenger, Kinahran said, "Clean-up crew leaders, this is the Passenger Shuttle. We will be arriving shortly, coming in at a seventy-degree angle from stripe-side four. We have the human with us."

That last was acknowledged with pleased tones of voice by the other Kintarans, and full-band orders to keep that area clear of tossed debris and free-falling workers. Kinahran cut the connection and squinted ahead, to see if there had been any improvement to the mess since they left for New Terra.

The former main sensors looked a bit better than they had, Kinahran decided, but not much. They were all lucky the crater wasn't any deeper – it had just barely missed depressurizing part of the ship, and had taken out a lot of the *Choosaraf's* armor there. The culprit, a cousin of hers named Detchal, still insisted he hadn't done anything that could possibly have made something explode and there must be a saboteur running around loose. Nevertheless, he was still confined to quarters below the crater, to meditate on the wisdom of secretly re-building bits of the main sensor array when the back-up array had already shorted out from similar modifications.

One of the *Choosaraf's* other shuttles lumbered by underneath the Passenger Shuttle, towing a chunk of the largest dish back from wherever it had gotten to. When it passed by, the full extent of the disaster was clearly visible. Ms. Holmes winced slightly, presumably at the magnitude of the destruction. "This looks like a full replacement will be necessary, not just repairs."

The Captain sighed, and K'rava said, "We feared as much. At least it will be rebuilt uniquely."

"Mm. And this is due to someone's modifications?"

K'rava lashed his tail, thumping it against the chair's floor-support. "The miscreant is confined and there will be no repeats of his mistake. His designs will not be among any that we might offer you."

"Was there internal damage to the ship?"

K'rava shook his head. Kinahran wondered what else he'd downplayed in his description of the incident, in order to secure the human's services.

Ms. Holmes leaned forward, contemplating the *Choosaraf's* unsightly blemish. "Mm. I'll need access to one of your computers now. It will have to understand Terran."

Moonfur recognized her cue and was murmuring to her little sister about re-setting the ship's gravity to a mere one G before Captain Klarin-yal had even glanced over her shoulder. Kinahran also told Farafinleet to *stay* on the bridge – it would be very bad if her younger sister, accustomed to 1.2 Gs, went bounding around and clumsily knocked over their human visitor.

After Klarin-yal had docked the shuttle in the *Choosara*'s main bay, K'rava and Ms. Holmes set off to the computer the clan had prepared when they'd discovered the explosion had damaged the communicator enough that it would be unable to properly transmit computer data. Klarin-yal hung back a moment to speak to the two adolescents. "Decent, decent. Kinahran, you'll be holding the bridge now. Go there, and find me a pilot to do the trip back when our human is finished – an adult one, this time, so we don't bounce when we land. Teecoli, you'll hold comm on the trip back."

The girls nodded. Klarin-yal and Kinahran padded off to their respective tasks while Teecoli ran post-flight checks on the shuttle.

*

Farafinleet, wonder of wonders, was still on the bridge. Kinahran's mother was admired among her clan: without any genengineering at all, Coli-nfarin had thrown four children, two males and two females, and they were all *white*. This sameness of a unique color would have been intolerable for her brood, leading to eventual bloodshed, save that the eldest had eyes as green as Terran grass, the next eldest had eyes of pure amber-gold, Kinahran's eyes were blue, and Farafinleet earned her name (Embereyes, in the human tongue) by having deep pink irises and magenta pupils. Kinahran got along with Farafinleet best of her siblings, because even though the younger Kintaran's fur was pure white, it had a subtly different hue, slightly pinker.

Farafinleet had one of her mane-tufts entirely bedraggled and tangled around one of her large hoop earrings. As soon as her elder sister got onto the bridge, she threw herself at Kinahran, wailing like a baby. Moonfur wrapped her arms and one forepaw around the girl's upper body and tried to make soothing sounds, even though her ears were flat against her head from the noise.

"Couldn't sniff anything out?" Kinahran finally asked when she dared unfold her ears a little to hear the answer.

"Nnoooo," Embereyes moaned. "I called Detchal, since he's just a few rooms over from ours, and now he keeps saying that he's hearing things, and he said he was gonna *catch* my merfah and eat her babies!"

Kinahran sighed. Farafinleet had no sense. "Look, he's just being nasty

because his design didn't work and we're all mad at him. Remember the time your engine simulation blew up just when you thought you had it right? In the middle of that sim-ship race? You were in a snit for a week."

Farafinleet's ears went down. "That was different. That was *my* design. It was for something *useful*, not just some stupid sensor modification."

"Well, Detchal is stupid, then. Look, I have to hunt up a pilot for the Passenger Shuttle, and then we can go looking for your pet and her babies." She started untangling her sister's hair, smoothing the tuft down in front of the ear. Like Moonfur, Embereyes had a bit of fur in front of each huge pointed ear; fortunately for the unnotched state of those ears, she had only a top-holder for her fur-tufts, leaving the locks to flip around as they would, while Moonfur preferred to keep her fur under more control, pinning it into place with barrettes both above and below her ears.

"All right." The child wiped at her nose. She realized what a mess she'd made of herself, and instantly started washing.

*

Kinahran had managed to locate a couple of possible pilots when K'rava called up to the bridge. "Child, who have you got to fly the shuttle? Nih, that's not the problem, really – think, who has lomerfs?" Lomerfs were related to merfahs, except they had wings instead of their middle sets of legs. They were much better pets than merfahs, more intelligent and friendlier. And merfahs tasted better.

"Urrrr . . . Klr-lin has one. It's got babies in its pouch, too."

"Well, don't have him at the shuttle, then. There was one in the computer room – the human saw it and asked that we put it somewhere else. But even in her suit, I could smell fear-stink!" K'rava sounded worried.

Kinahran was shocked. "Why would anybody be afraid of a lomerf? They don't bite unless you hurt them, and they don't have big teeth anyway. And their claws are almost pathetic."

"I don't know why she doesn't like them. Maybe it's because they have scales. Some humans can't stand things like their own 'snakes' and 'lizards.' But we've *got* to keep the lomerfs away from her! And merfahs too, so tell Farafinleet to make sure she doesn't go showing off her baby ones."

She was glad that the visuals were currently off. Her ears were flat and her tail was prickling-huge. "I understand. I'll tell her. I'll make sure that the shuttle's pilot doesn't have a lomerf."

"Good job, child. K'rava out."

Kinahran turned to her little sister, unfolding an ear. "You hear that?"

Farafinleet's own ears were down tight. She shook her head hopefully. Kinahran leaned over and pulled one ear up. "He said that Ms. Holmes doesn't like lomerfs, and probably not merfahs either, so we don't want her to see any. Sounds like K'rava thinks she won't fix the designs if she sees any other of our pets."

The smaller Kintaran squinched her pink eyes shut. Her nose started to run again.

Kinahran sighed. "Look, I'm supposed to be holding the bridge, but it's only comm-stuff after I sniff out a pilot. I can get one of the larger portable comms and just patch everything through to it, and nobody'll know I'm not here unless they *look*. Then we can get a scanner and a snare-loop and try to find your merfah before it finds Ms. Holmes."

"I'll go get the scanner!" Farafinleet cried, dashing out the door.

"Be careful not to run the human down!" Kinahran called after her.

*

After dithering for a while, Kinahran left a note on the bridge, saying she was helping her little sister with something, but had her uncle's old mega-comm with her. Farafinleet arrived with the scanner, and – using the argument that it was *Farafinleet's* merfah – Kinahran sent her little sister down to cargo to get a long-handled snare-loop. Kintarans often hired themselves out as planetary scouts and the like. They were fast, strong, tough, and reasonably quick with their hands. Their ears and noses were better than most of the other spacefaring races', and they were good hunters. So if a human or Halloth or Mmsar wanted something to do with a primitive planet, they called a Kintaran. Or a Sparrial, but Sparrials were all kleptomaniacs, and most other sapients didn't like having "coup" counted on them by losing everything in their pockets and having to ask for it back every twenty minutes.

While Farafinleet was in transit, Kinahran went down to their room. The top was off of the merfah-cage; probably Embereyes had been feeding it, gotten distracted by something, and the merfah had managed to scramble out. She sighed and put her nose down around the cage, trying to sniff out a trail. Results were inconclusive. She stuck her head behind the large mattress that she shared with her sister. There was merfah-scent back there, but no merfah. She sighed again, looking regretfully at the opened paneling near their intercom where she'd been trying to re-wire it to receive the security cameras' images as well. Nearly

the whole length of the wall was off, and the small dark places between the walls would surely be inviting to a small prey-animal about to let its young out of the pouch.

Carefully, Kinahran went and poked her nose into the wall-space. With a gentle inhale, she shouldn't get *too* much dust . . . She coughed and tried again. Yes. It had been there. Hopefully, she waved the bioscanner around the area. Maybe the silly thing had decided to stay put? No such luck. It wasn't in range of the sensors.

Farafinleet arrived, upper body heaving as she sucked air into her lungs, and collapsed onto the mattress. The snare-loop clattered to the floor. "Ran! All way! And back!" the girl panted.

"Should have loped instead," Kinahran told her, picking up the snare-loop and trying to figure out the trick of it. It *looked* simple – just a tough loop of rope, relatively thin, that could be pulled tight with a string that was down near the handle. She switched holding it right-handed, and working the string with her left, and tried the other way around. Her sister was a good test subject, she decided, trying to slip the loop over Farafinleet's tail tuft unobtrusively. She managed it, and pulled it tight. "Gotcha!"

Her little sister yowled, hurt or offended, and started scrambling to her feet. Kinahran pounced first, pinning the smaller Kintaran to the mattress. "Stop that! I have to practice, and you're not bad hurt, are you?"

Farafinleet hissed and tried to bite Kinahran's tail. "Bully!"

"Babysitter. Stop acting like a baby. You want to be stuck on the ship with Detchal and the new baby when I leave? Or you want to come along so we can make our fortunes and found a new clanship?"

"Detchal's stupid! Detchal's a twinning idiot!"

Kinahran's ears went down. "You let an adult catch you cursing like that, and they'll notch your ears, sister!"

"Detchal's *identical twins*," Farafinleet spat, having discovered something that could dismay her sib.

Kinahran twisted around to bat the girl on the head. "I mean it! Notch your ears and shave your tail!" She got off of Farafinleet. "Come on, let's start by scanning down the walls – I think the merfah got in 'cause I had my panel off."

"It's not all my fault, then?"

"No," Kinahran gritted out. "It was your fault first for letting it out of its cage, but it's two white pelts they'll have if your pet shows up and drops its babies on the human's foot. Come on."

The two footsore hours they spent hunting up and down the halls around their room were singularly fruitless. They heard a group of adults chattering tiredly, and hastened back to their room before the off-shift work-group could spot them. With luck, their noses would be too dulled from hours in vacc-suits to notice Kinahran and Farafinleet's scents.

The merfah was in its cage, eating seeds, dried fruit, and dead insects out of its food-dish. It looked up when the two Kintarans hurried in, and started to climb out of the cage. Moonfur sat herself down in front of the wall-opening while Embereyes closed the door to their room. The merfah scrambled out of the cage and jumped off the table, trying to edge around where Kinahran was sitting. Farafinleet pounced at it, missing, but startling it into a run. Kinahran slapped at it as it bounded by, and knocked it into the far wall. Her little sister pounced again, and pinned it with a forefoot. She bent and picked it up, holding it under its tiny fore-feet.

"I think it's still breathing," she said doubtfully. She carried it over and put the stunned animal back into the cage, closing the lid, then folded her arms and rested her chin on them, looking at the pet. Her magenta gaze was unblinking.

Kinahran went over and peered into the cage as well. Her ears and tail drooped. "It doesn't have any babies in its pouch."

Farafinleet shook her head. "They didn't fall out when you hit it, either."

"How many did you say she had?"

"Two."

"How long has it been since they went missing?"

"Since just after the accident, I think. Six hours. I only knew three hours ago." She heaved a mournful sigh.

"Six hours is a long time. We need a blueprint of the ship, so we can figure out where she might have dropped them. Come on, let's go back to the bridge."

Farafinleet looked up at her elder sister. "What if somebody sees her without her babies?"

"We'll say Detchal snuck out and ate them because he's stupid." Kinahran nodded decisively. "And we'll hide the scanner in the wall-panel, and the snare-loop under our bed."

*

The bridge was still deserted, thankfully. The Captain was undoubtedly hanging around the human (since Klarin-yal was the holder of the *Choosaraf's* credit accounts), as was K'rava, and the rest of the adults were either still

working on the sensor mess or eating and sleeping and bathing.

Kinahran pored over the ship's blueprints. "Somebody's been stupid," she muttered, tracing a line. "This wall shouldn't be here, and I know for *certain* that this corridor doesn't go straight anymore."

"It says it was updated last month," Farafinleet said, looking at file-dates.

"Well, they missed some stuff. I suppose it's better than nothing . . . Here, look." She tapped a route with one finger-claw. "This is a straight shot through the walls to cargo bay four. We've got all of K'rava's trade-goods for Mmsarsan there, and that means that it's packed floor to ceiling with crates. If I were a merfah, I'd hide here, 'cause it's hard to catch anything through those narrow gaps between crates, and there's lots of places to hide under the webbing. And there's gravity. Maybe even things to eat, if some of the crates aren't sealed properly."

"I wish I was a shaman," Farafinleet sighed. "Then I'd *know* if this was the right place to look."

"Well, we're neither of us shamans, so we'll just have to use the bioscanner and hope." Kinahran checked to make sure that everything on the bridge was doing fine, and the pair headed back to their room for the equipment.

*

"**Haaaa!**" Farafinleet said, pausing and barely breathing.

Kinahran obediently halted and was as quiet as she could be. She shifted her grip on the snare-loop's handle and tested the still air in the cargo bay, hoping for a whiff of merfah.

White head bent over the bioscanner, Farafinleet lifted one hand and pointed, slightly to the right and up. "There," she breathed. "On crate 11B, between 11.3B and 10Q-delta."

Kinahran went into hunt-mode, snare-loop extended. Front paw up, pause, down. Opposing rear paw and down. Next front paw, pause, down. Opposing rear up and down. She bobbed her head slowly, checking the distance.

The young merfah, displaying a lethal mental mutation, poked its head out to look around the crate. Kinahran looped the snare around it, just behind its tiny fore-arms, and pulled the loop taut. The merfah made a noise like a harsh alarm, only much shriller and more terrified. It sounded twice as big as it actually was, kicking and swinging from the end of the snare.

"Shut it up!" Kinahran snarled, ears pressed tightly against her head.

Hastily, Farafinleet put down the bioscanner and bounded over to grab the little thing around its small mouth, muffling the awful racket. The animal tried to

wriggle away and kick at the Kintaran's hand with its not entirely discountable hind claws. She hissed as it drew blood and let go to lick her hand. The merfah swung from the end of the snare again, shrilling.

"Augh." Kinahran looped the snare tight and locked it, then drew the end of the pole toward her, hand over hand. She fumbled at her belt pouches, one-handedly extracting the bag she'd brought, and pulled it over the caught merfah and snare. Farafinleet was still washing her hand off, so Kinahran huffed to herself, held the mouth of the bag tight around the snare-loop's handle, and used one hind-toe to unlock the snare. The merfah pulled itself out of the suddenly-lax cord and stopped making quite so much noise. She carefully drew the snare-loop out of the bag, making sure that the merfah didn't come with it.

"Sorry," her little sister mumbled through her fingers.

Kinahran sighed and went to lick the girl's ears. "Well, we got it. Look, I forgot to bring anything to fasten the bag with – do you think you can take it back to our room and put it in the cage? Then you can come back with the bag, and if we're lucky, I'll have found the other one, too, and we'll have them all."

The albino Kintaran eyed her sister dubiously. "You'll break its neck and say it was an accident."

"If I have to. But I'd really rather catch them all alive." Kinahran grinned. "Fatten up the little ones to eat later."

"You're as bad as Detchal!"

"I'm hungry! I've been at this for nearly three hours! Look, take the bag and don't let it get away again. If you're worried I'll eat the last one, you'll just have to hurry. But if you let this one loose I swear I'll eat them *all*!"

Ears flat, Farafinleet glared. But she took the bag and loped away. Kinahran sighed and picked up the bioscanner in one hand and the snare-loop in the other. She continued on, methodically scanning the cargo bay.

Over by a dislodged vent-grille, the scanner picked something up. Kinahran stalked it, moving silently along the wall. The last merfah was in the duct – a little too deeply to snare as easily as she'd got its sibling. Carefully, she lowered her nose to just above the opening and inhaled. Yes, merfah. Recent. Close. Within arm's reach, perhaps? She carefully put the bioscanner on the floor and sllllloooooowwwwwly lowered her head to look into the duct. The last little merfah was sitting there, a pale green-tan against the dark gray of the ducting, looking back with its beady black eyes.

Kinahran plunged her hand into the duct, trying to grab the animal. She felt her claws catch in flesh, but they didn't hold. The merfah shrilled and skittered off into the darkness of the vent. Kinahran swore.

*

By the time Farafinleet had gotten back, Kinahran had called up the ship's blueprints on the mega-comm, and was slumped against the wall in horror.

"What's wrong?!" her younger sister demanded.

Kinahran pointed to the ducting line. Her hand shook a little. "This," she said hoarsely, feeling as if she had a furball in the upper-most section of her stomach. "The third one, it got away. It's headed for the area right under . . ." She swallowed. "Right under the computer room. Where Ms. Holmes is. And the Captain. And K'rava."

"But they're not there right now," Farafinleet said. "I just passed them in the hall. They're going to look at the external damage some more, in the shuttle. I heard K'rava say so when I went by."

"They're not in the room?" Kinahran's ears pricked up in hope. She scooped up the scanner and snare-loop and dashed for the door. "Come on!"

*

Kinahran opened the door and poked her head around carefully, just in case. Nobody was there. She glanced at the bioscanner. Yes, the merfah was at the far corner of the room. And yes, there was another defective vent-grille, in the floor near the door. The dratted things were supposed to seal off internally, in case of depressurization, so nobody bothered to fasten down the grilles properly. It was so much easier to get at the fur-filters that way, or to hide things.

She moved, pulled the grille a bit further off, and looked into the vent. Several feet down, her little sister's pink eyes looked up at her from the room below. It had taken them a while to pull off the ceiling panel and duct-elbow, but with a little luck, it would be worth it. "Put the bag in position," Kinahran called softly. Farafinleet nodded and raised herself up, bracing herself against the wall with her forefeet, and held up the bag.

Kinahran went back to the door and made sure it was closed. Then she started stalking around the side of the room. She didn't have the snare-loop this time – it was too big and awkward to be toting in this, the Simulation Room of the *Choosaraf*, where so many of the clan's unique designs were tested before being implemented. Breaking anything in here would get her skinned and spayed for sure. Claws and speed would have to do.

The merfah was wary now. She spied it hiding behind a plastic model of something to do with SickBay (she recognized her mother's mark on it), and it ducked into the depths of the model as soon as it spotted her. She moved over

and thrust her hand in after it. Once again, her claws grazed the animal, and once again the merfah bolted away.

Kinahran wrinkled her nose, showing her teeth, and followed.

The merfah led her a merry chase around the room three times before she finally panicked it into the vent. "Kihh!" she called in glee as it fell. There was an answering cry of "Got it!" from Farafinleet, below.

"Take it to your room! I'll fix up the paneling." She seated the vent-grille securely and left the room, hoping she wasn't leaving too many drifts of white fur behind to betray her . . .

*

She'd nearly gotten the duct-elbow back on when she heard the door open in the room above. She froze.

". . . considering that you have most of this Dettsleat's original components in salvageable condition," the human was saying, "it would probably be easiest to go with a variant of that. Perhaps the design from N'balplar?"

"If you think it would be the easiest," K'rava replied.

The human woman snorted. There was a sudden silence. Ms. Holmes asked, "Ah, are there . . . vermin on this ship?"

The pause stretched very long. Kinahran could almost see K'rava and Captain Klarin-yal looking horrified, ears flat and tails fluffing. K'rava, the diplomat, recovered first. "There should not be any, as far as I know. Why do you ask?"

There were footsteps above at the vent-grille as the human stood next to it. Kinahran pressed the join tightly into place, hoping no light would leak through to betray her. The human said, "There are some IR traces here – something small, being chased by . . . one of your crew, I would deduce. The footprints roughly follow the smaller tracks."

The human moved away from the vent, probably to let either K'rava or the Captain look. Kinahran hastily grabbed up the ceiling panel and held it in place, pressing her ear against it and hoping her fellow Kintarans wouldn't scent her.

There was a faint noise, as of someone rattling the grille. "This is quite secure," K'rava said. "I don't think anything could get through it."

"Mm." The human stepped further away and began talking to the computer, asking for certain databases. Kinahran exhaled in relief and after a few moments, she jiggled the panel into place and quietly left.

*

Unfortunately, she had to pass that door on her way to the bridge. K'rava was just leaving.

"Ah, Kinahran," he said. "I was about to go find you."

"You were?" Kinahran tried to keep her ears up. *Oh no! He scented me! I'm doomed!*

"Yes. You must have a trace of the mystic to be right here. Oh, by the way, none of your sister's merfahs are missing, are they?"

"They're all accounted for," she replied earnestly.

"I certainly hope so. Here, come in." He turned and switched to the human language. "Here is our apprentice comm officer, Ms. Holmes. I'm sure that Moonfur can explain the rather intricate connection that the *First-star* has between the comm and the sensors."

"Good." The white-haired human paused and tilted her head at Kinahran. "Is your heart-rate always that elevated?"

Her ears flicked back in mild dismay and she felt them and her nose go pinker. "Ur, no, Ms. Holmes. Ur . . . I just hope that I can be of help . . ."

The human turned to the diagram on the screen. In tones of long-suffering patience, she replied, "So do I."

*

Kinahran wound up walking back to the shuttle with the small group, feeling as if she'd just walked a tightrope in a hurricane with her paws in mittens. While she wasn't at all bad with comm-gear, she knew when she was hopelessly outclassed. She'd had to scramble to keep up with the concepts the human had proposed, and now she just wanted to eat something and sleep. She stood to one side at the entrance – Teritul would be piloting, and Teecoli sitting comm, so Kinahran had no business on board – and the Captain passed her. But as Ms. Holmes was stepping into the shuttle, the human paused and looked at her again through her silvered visor. "Moonfur, do you often visit that Simulation room?" she asked.

"Ur." She swallowed and kept her ears up. "Yes. And with my little sister, too."

Ms. Holmes nodded. "I suppose that explains what your fingerprints were doing on the grille, though not why there was blood on them." Without a further word, she turned and stepped into the airlock, obviously waiting patiently for it to be cycled.

K'rava gave Kinahran a Look, but also leapt into the 'lock, and they cycled through.

Kinahran licked at her fingers, tasting merfah blood, and bounded for her room. Maybe she could convince Farafinleet they should eat the evidence.

####

About the Author

Elizabeth McCoy's fiction has appeared in Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Sword and Sorceress #7*, in the *Best In Show* anthology by Sofawolf, and in the fanzine *Pawprints* (published by Conrad Wong & T. Jordan Peacock). Her tabletop RPG writing is published by Steve Jackson Games. As her author bios in SJ Games' material continually state, she lives in the Frozen Wastelands of New England, with a spouse, child, and assorted cats.

About the Artist

Conrad "Lynx" Wong is a programmer by day, artist, writer, and gamer by night. His art may be found in tabletop RPGs such as *Ironclaw*, *World Tree*, and *Wonderland No More*. His writing appears in the anthropomorphic-themed anthology, *Furry!: The Best Anthropomorphic Fiction!*

About GURPS

For more information about **GURPS**, Steve Jackson Games' Generic Universal RolePlaying System, visit <http://www.sjgames.com/gurps>. The books that provided inspiration are for **GURPS**, 3rd edition.

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