

Footsteps of Fear
by Lesley L. Smith

I cowered in the tall grass, but tried not to look like I was cowering. Males weren't supposed to cower, and I was determined not to lose face in front of my younger siblings. Breathe, Six, I told myself. This is just a hunting exercise. No one will rip you open and gnaw the flesh from your bones. Breathe. The grass made a brittle rustling sound, but the wind brought no scent of prey with it. The prey must be downwind.

I shifted on my haunches, wishing I was home safe in my room with my books. "Six," a small voice at my elbow said.

I jumped sky-high, totally breaking cover. It was my counterpart in the youngest litter, Little Six. If I was a better hunter I would have heard his footsteps approaching. I should have heard him; he was too young to be a good hunter. And he was too small, a runt like me.

"Sorry, Six," he said. His ears were flattened against his head.

I crouched down again and focused on him. He hadn't yet grown into his big eyes; I'd been the same way at his age. "Yes, Little Six."

"I'm scared," he said under his breath, as if it was an anathema.

Such admissions were taboo; fear was forbidden. According to pack decree, we were never frightened; we were always brave and destroyed our prey without mercy. Our pack supposedly dominated all others, but I never felt dominant. "I'll tell you a secret," I whispered. "I'm scared, too."

His eyes widened in shock. "Really? I thought males never got scared."

"I think that's a myth. Everyone gets scared," I said.

"So, if we're both scared, what should we do?" he asked.

They didn't call it fight or flight for nothing. A hasty retreat always served me well. "Let's go home," I said.

"But, run away?" he said. "That's not brave."

"No. But it's smart," I said. "We'll live to fight another day." I'd learned long ago to live by my brains rather than my muscles. By the look of him, my brother had best start learning that lesson now, too.

"But, how? We're surrounded." He gulped. "They'll get us."

I grinned. "Don't worry, Little Six. I can get us out of here. I can find the path of least resistance." I'd had lots of practice. I turned and started back to the house.

My little brother followed my footsteps, relieved.

Later that night, the dominant hunters celebrated their victory, acting out their captures, pouncing and growling loudly. As I sat in the shadows, back against the wall, I could hardly believe we were related. They were so aggressive. How had my biological father, a scientist, sired so many warriors? I knew he was One in the pack, but he was smart; they didn't take after him at all.

After they'd worn themselves out, I snatched a small morsel of meat out from under them and snuck off to my room.

I had to study anyway. My school completion test was tomorrow. I couldn't believe a single test would determine my status for the rest of my life; it wasn't fair. Maybe if I did well on the test my father would finally be proud of me, despite my size, but I doubted it. I tried not to dwell on the fact that it

was my only shot; there was no way I'd even get into the planetary hunting competition. I studied until the moon went to bed.

The next day at the exam, I was the last to leave. Several hundred of us had started the test at the same time, but the others had trickled out like blood from a corpse. I tried not to feel like prey as my schoolmates departed before me. I thought the questions required thorough answers, but maybe I was just being too slow as usual.

When I returned home, I was very surprised to find my whole pack waiting for me. Were they finally going to challenge me to battle now that I was an adult? I came within a whisker's breath of turning and running away when I saw them all in the foyer. The only reason I didn't flee was I was afraid of what One would do if I ran away from him, a warrior's death would seem pleasant in comparison.

He strode forward and slapped me on the back. "Six! You ARE a warrior! A science warrior, like me." He roared in excitement.

What was he talking about? I looked at him and my other fathers and mothers in confusion. Some of my siblings almost seemed envious. Of me?

"The test results are in already. You placed First planet-wide on the placement exam. You have your choice of jobs and ...packs! Several packs have asked you to marry them."

My mothers were all beaming. "Marry?" I squeaked. "So young?" It was almost unheard of to marry at my age. Usually it took a long while to prove yourself worthy.

"Yes!" He roared again. "I'm so proud of you. And I hope you'll follow in my footsteps and join the space program."

My father was proud? All my fears and worries had been for nothing; I must be a warrior after all. "Yes!"

I was only too eager to agree to his plans for me. I roared and my pack cheered.

#

I was happily dreaming of Junior Wife--we'd just initiated the mating ceremony--when I was jerked awake. My pillow floated away in the microgravity.

The First Officer, also my Senior Husband, shoved me in my sleepsack as he rushed to his station. "Get moving, Runt! Hull breach!"

"Scientist! Report to your station!" the Captain's voice easily traveled across the small ship.

"Yes, sir!" With difficulty, I extricated myself from the sack and hustled to my station and checked all the data displays. Oh, no. "Detecting a debris field around the ship," I announced. If enough debris hit the ship, the hull and force fields would fail and we'd all be breathing vacuum.

"Debris!" First Officer said, a hint of a growl in his voice. "Why didn't the proximity detector go off?"

He was acting like it was my fault. There was nowhere to run to in the ship; I had to stay at my station. "The debris consists of thousands of tiny particles," I said. "They must be too small to set off the detector." Was it getting harder to breathe? "Captain, shouldn't we get in the envirosuits? What if we lose all our air?" I started panting.

"Obey protocol, Scientist," the Captain said, also on the verge of a growl.

This was no time to rigidly follow protocol, protocol hadn't been designed for this situation. If we followed protocol, we were going to die. I felt danger, as if predators were about to rend my flesh.

When I glanced at the Captain, he resembled cowering prey. How could that be? Was he growling to cover his fear?

The Captain said, "First Officer, report."

The First Officer almost growled but then said, "Following protocol. Maintaining Speed. Force fields holding."

Maintaining speed? We hadn't reduced speed yet? The higher the speed, the more damage the debris made when it hit us. What was wrong with the Navigator and the Captain for that matter? I couldn't help it, I yelped in alarm.

First Officer glanced at me but didn't mock me even though I'd yelped. Oh, Great Hunter, that must mean we were about to die! "Reduce speed! We need to reduce speed," I managed to get out. "Lower speed reduces damage."

"Navigator, reduce speed," the Captain said after a moment.

I didn't want to die; I was married and moving up in the world, I had everything to live for. I clamped my mouth shut before another yelp could escape and tried to concentrate on what I was doing. Look around ship. Look at displays. Think.

"Orders, Captain?" First Officer said.

The Captain didn't reply. He looked like he didn't know what to say, but that couldn't be right; he was the Captain, number One on the ship.

First Officer saw me looking around and growled. Did he think I was challenging the Captain? He'd opposed my assignment on this mission, thinking my small size meant I was worthless. He was wrong though, in space other things besides size were important. I'd prove myself to him and everyone else. If we lived. Would we live? Would I ever see the hunting grounds of home again?

That reminded me of the last time I'd gone hunting.

"Captain," I said. "We need to get out of this debris field. I'll plot the course of least resistance, er, the shortest path out." I started examining at the particle densities.

"Good idea, Scientist," the Captain said.

I found an efficient path out of the debris field and sent it to the Navigator who had yet to make a sound. What was wrong with him? I glanced his way; he looked paralyzed, like game surrounded by hunters.

"Navigator!" I said.

He didn't so much as yelp.

I went over to his station and shoved him out of the way. I reduced our speed and implemented the course change. I couldn't help growling softly at him as I went back to my station. He could have gotten us all killed.

I turned back to my instruments and after a few minutes, we seemed to be in the clear. I breathed a sigh of relief. I couldn't remember being that scared--and I'd been scared a lot.

Navigator cleared his throat and said, voice shaking, "Free of the debris field, Captain."

"Very well," the Captain said in a firm voice, straightening his spine. "Everyone, back to the regular schedule."

I started to go back to my sleepsack, but the Captain intercepted me. "You performed very well, Scientist. I will be putting a commendation in your record."

"Thank you, sir," I said. My father would be proud; I was following in his footsteps. I'd be One in my pack in no time.

In a lower voice the Captain said, "How did you do it? I could barely think straight, I felt so many emotions. Didn't you feel any ...emotions?"

Emotions? Was the Captain admitting he was afraid? That wouldn't be

very dominant. "Sure, I was afraid," I said.

He gasped.

"But I've been frightened plenty of times," I said. "I can still function when I'm scared. You just have to keep going. I ignored the fear and attacked the problem as if its solution was my quarry."

#

The ship was shaking so much it was difficult to focus on the holodisplays. We'd been slowly losing functionality since we went through the debris field. The FTL drive had died and now the inertial dampers must have gone, too.

Luckily, we weren't in the deep space between systems. We had emerged into normal space near a yellow sun with several planets. Based on my analysis of the data, we had two possible destinations: a blue planet, partially covered with water, or its large moon. The blue planet near us had an atmosphere and some kind of plant life, but I couldn't detect any signs of civilization or technology and we needed to make repairs. Ideally, we'd land somewhere with technology.

The Captain said, "We need a decision, Scientist." He'd been much more respectful since the debris field accident. In fact, I'd moved from Four to Three in the crew.

Turning my attention to the overly-large moon, I thought I saw something. What was that?

"Now, runt!" First Officer said. He'd been even less respectful to me since the accident--probably because I'd seen him act like prey. Or maybe because he was worried I'd replace him as Two soon.

First Officer didn't need to tell me if we didn't land soon, we'd crash. I increased the data display resolution and saw footsteps. "I see footprints on the moon's surface!"

"The moon?" First Officer asked. "That's stupid. There's no air."

Just because he was my Senior Husband didn't give him the right to treat me like excrement. "We need technology, not air," I said with more aggression than I felt.

"Scientist?" the Captain asked. "Do you detect technology on the moon?"

"It's an airless world," I said. "But intelligent life made those footprints; there must be technology. I'm sure."

"I object, Captain," First Officer said. "If we aren't able to make repairs, we'll need air."

"Let our Scientist do his job. He saved us in the last emergency," the Captain said. "Navigator, change course."

I wasn't sure with all the background noise, but I thought First Officer growled.

I checked to make sure the Navigator carried out the Captain's orders. When I was satisfied, I leaned back in my chair, grabbing the arms to brace against the turbulence. I might be small, but I was intelligent and maybe more importantly I could function when I was afraid. I'd prove my worth again and get another commendation and be breeding in no time.

As we headed for the surface, I loaded a picture of my Junior Wife; with her ample breeding ports, she was very beautiful. I'd definitely breed with her first and when our children started to dominate the other litters, neither one of us would be junior any more.

"Scientist! Man your station," the Navigator said. "Where is the technology? Where should we land?" At least he wasn't frozen in fear like the last emergency.

I switched back to the data displays. There were the footprints, but ...I felt a tiny flutter of fear. Could I be wrong? All I could see besides the footprints were a few pieces of metal. There had been technology here, but how long ago? I wasn't going to back down though and lose face in front of my Senior Husband and the rest of the crew after all the strides I'd made.

"Scientist!" the Navigator said. Was the turbulence getting worse?

"I'll transmit the coordinates to your terminal," I said, the unsteadiness in my voice having nothing to do with the failure of the inertial system. I sent him the location of the largest debris field.

As we approached the surface, I kept my eyes glued to the holodisplays. By the time we landed, I was overcome with the flight response. There were footprints and a few discarded pieces of metal here, but probably nothing that would help us make repairs. First Officer was never going to let me live this one down. If we lived.

He was already starting to growl. "Runt..."

"That's enough, First Officer. Scientist, report," the Captain said.

"We have successfully landed near one of the sites of the footprints," I said, trying not to let my voice shake.

Navigator growled softly.

It was too late to back down now; I was worried they might attack me. "This is our best chance for technology in this system," I said. "There are several pieces of metal at this site which may be of assistance in our repairs."

The Captain didn't answer for several moments, and I was anxious that I'd see his exposed incisors if I looked at him, so I didn't. Finally, he said, "I see."

"I volunteer to go outside and collect the debris," I said. I might still be able to save the mission and get to breed.

"You!" First Officer said. "You couldn't collect meat in herd of herbivores."

"Yes, I could," I said. "If you are unhappy with my choice, maybe we should go over to the large blue world."

"Actually," Navigator said, "we can't. We don't have enough fuel now."

First Officer launched himself at me, claws extended. "You, stupid runt! You've killed us!" He misjudged his trajectory in the low gravity and I easily dodged him. Avoiding him was definitely the path of choice. The only alternative was fighting him, and I wouldn't stand a chance.

"Can I go outside?" I had to get away from First Officer if nothing else.

"Fine," the Captain said.

Unfortunately, when I got to the equipment locker, I discovered some of the particles from the debris field had gone through there, too. If not for the self-sealing hull we'd all be dead already.

I wanted to give up, but couldn't in front of First Officer. He was so worked up, he might eat me if I appeared submissive.

I started going through the envirosuits and found an intact one to wear. "I'll collect the metal debris and bring it back, okay?"

No one answered me, so I went through the airlock to the surface. Outside, my eyes were immediately drawn to the large blue world--it reminded me of home. If not for the white clouds it would look just like our planet. I let myself pause for a moment. Would I ever see home again? Would I ever see Junior Wife again? It seemed less and less likely.

I forced myself to act like a hunter and start moving. Walking in the low gravity was more like hopping. I had to shuffle along so I didn't escape from

the surface.

When I picked up a piece of debris, I had to be careful not to grab for it too energetically. The first couple times, I lost my balance and would have fallen had the gravity not been so low.

I heaped the pieces of metal in front of the ship's door. Much of it seemed to be intact equipment, albeit scored by micrometeorite impacts. It must be ancient. How old was it?

I couldn't help wondering what had happened here. Had the people who left these footprints crashed? The footsteps would seem to indicate otherwise. And there wasn't enough debris here to be a ship.

I also couldn't help wondering what kind of creatures had made the footsteps. Clearly, they were bipedal, like us. What happened to them? Where were they now? Were they hunters or prey? Did any of them survive?

How many people did they have in their packs? How many acts of domination did they have to complete before they could breed?

Were they ever scared?

When I finished collecting the old equipment, I contacted the ship, "Maybe we should rub out the footprints, so this doesn't happen to anyone else." No one answered.

I tried to open the external airlock, but it didn't work. "I'm done. Why won't the external door open?"

"...better not come in," the Captain said before a growl and a yelp cut him off.

"What?" I asked. "What's going on in there?" But I knew. If things were hopeless, they were turning on each other. I was glad I wasn't in there. There was no safe path inside the ship. I'd never been much of a hunter and I really didn't want to be prey.

In my suit I sat down on the dusty surface, leaning my back against the hull and gazing at the blue planet. This interlude would give me a chance to study the alien equipment. Strangely, now that I knew the mission had failed and I was about to die, I wasn't afraid.

I glanced at the alien footprints again. They were intermingled with my prints, as if we'd all been here on this moon together at the same time.

Were those prints responsible for our mission's downfall? Was I responsible? Had I been drawn to the footprints for the wrong reasons? Had I been unable to admit I was wrong because I was intimidated by my crewmates? I forced myself to stop; those were prey questions.

I sighed. Now, I'd never breed. It was a shame, because I would have made a good father.

I would have been very understanding when my offspring messed up.

And I could have taught them about fear.