

Chapter 1: Rank-and-File

The huge water buffalo loomed over his desk, which was covered with loose sheafs of legal documents. He looked up at the uniformed cheetah sitting across the small desk. The bull's eyes were reddened and shiny, and he spoke softly with a ragged, low voice. "Captain Albright?"

The cheetah woman came to attention in her chair, somehow. "Major Hobbs...?"

He smirked, embarrassed, and tapped the gleaming silver leaf on his hat which was neatly folded on the side of his desk. "Ah, it's Lieutenant Colonel now...got promoted last week. And my first major assignment appears to be you, Captain."

That got the young woman squirming, her spotted tail lashing side to side behind her. She started to stammer out a reply. "James, I never meant to--"

He cut her off with a wave of his hoof. "You did your job. By God I know you did because I know you, Amara. You wouldn't be sitting here if you didn't ruffle some literal feathers higher up."

"How badly are they ruffled, sir?" Amara's large amber eyes started to shine with emotion, and she tried to keep from blinking, to keep her tears at bay.

"Bad enough that I've been instructed to...consult with you about your position. You uncovered some nasty business. Coercion, abuse, assault, things that were supposed to stay buried forever. You brought about some real justice, and if it were up to me, those boys would be rotting in jail, and you would be fast tracked to be Major in months."

Amara let the tears fall at all that, bracing herself against Hobbs' desk. "But it's not up to you, is it, sir?"

Hobbs reached out and softly placed his hooves over her trembling paws. "They want you gone, Amara. Out of JAG. Out of the Force. And if you don't resign your commission, they'll make life hell for you and anyone associated with you." He gave her a significant look.

"I feel so selfish saying this, but I just got my silver leaf, girl. I'm on the bench now. Me! A judge! But...if you want to fight this, I'll fight with you. I'll, ah, I'll go down with you for this if I have to. What those men did deserves no clemency. W-we'll see to it that they don't go unpunished."

James squeezed Amara's hands, his eyes red and pleading. She thought of his adorable daughter, the little brown calf riding on her daddy's shoulders as he ran around with her at a

Chapter 1: Rank-and-File

Corps picnic. "I wouldn't do that to you, I couldn't. Not to you or your family. You know that. But...James, what do I do?"

The big bull's shoulders relaxed, shuddering with relief. "You do what you do best, girl. You *run*. Run any which way you want, no matter what anyone else tells you to do. Run *free*. Go corporate, join a real firm. Hell, start your own, you're more than qualified."

Amara sobbed at that thought, the freedom she would have. She had hardly considered life outside the Corps, much less being an independent attorney. "That takes so much...connections, investment, logistics..."

He slowly let go of her hands, sniffing. "But I know you can do it. You've got this, girl. I'll help you in any way I can. Just do me a favor and keep me in mind when they kick me out of this place too, alright?"

She flashed a rare smile, sharp and gleaming. Tears ran down her whiskers as she whispered, "That's a promise, James."