

THE
CYGNUS
SEDONAI
CAPER



Pati Nagle

The *Cygnius sedonai* Caper

Pati Nagle



Evennight Books

Cedar Crest, New Mexico



BOOK VIEW
CAFÉ

My life may look easy, but it isn't, as anyone on Gamma Station can tell you. I'm no lap cat, despite what half the tourists who come through the station seem to think.

Gamma isn't the roughest assignment around, in fact it's fairly quiet most of the time. You got your fugitives, bail jumpers, your occasional small-time smuggler of cheap knockoff wetware or nanoporn — they're usually easy to sniff out because of the fear sweat — and a whole lot of ordinary tourists who trip up 'cause they just don't know the rules.

I watch and report suspicious behavior to my human teammates. People will do things in front of a cat they would never do in front of other humans, which is what keeps me in kippers. That's why I put up with the petting and cooing, even let the rug rats get away with grabbing occasionally. It's part of my job.

No pulling the tail, though. That's where I draw the line.

It's a tempting tail for the brats, I admit. My genetic ancestors were Maine Coons, and the tail is long and very full because of that.

My coat is a dark blue tabby-stripe, with silvery tufts inside my ears and a silver bib on my chest, which is why some of the bipeds call me Tux even though my name is actually Leon. I suppose I would have been less conspicuous with more average-cat genes, but I wasn't exactly in control of the process.

My breeders were looking for even temperament. In my job, you have to stay cool. Interstellar criminals are no easy cheeses. I've run into a few that would make your average house cat shed a week's worth of dust bunnies in a flat second.

I'm also required to be able to talk with my human colleagues, and my breed happened to have a high adaptability factor in that department. Surprise, surprise —

Siamese don't rate so well there. Go figure. Guess there's a difference between conversation and just noise.

The *Cygnius sedonai* caper was a whole different kettle of fish, though. If I hadn't had a good team put together – something Gamma Station Security failed to appreciate at the time – it could have ended very badly indeed.

That morning I did my usual rounds at the market before heading up to watch the first inbound shuttle dump its load. The cleaning crew had just been through, wiping up all the really good, gritty smells and leaving behind their usual chem odor and that fresh-clean slickness to the floors. My claws ticked a little on the polished surface.

Gamma's market is in the central rotunda under the highest ceiling in the station, a full ten meters high with beautiful soaring arches supporting skylights that look out at the stars. The beams are stuffed full of cameras and recorders of every imaginable variety. The theory is that any suspicious characters who come on station will have to come to the market, so the rotunda is the place to get a look at them. That's why all the food and the shops are there. Even the public restrooms are only accessible from the rotunda.

Things can be hidden from cameras, though. Shielded with a turned shoulder or a strategically placed piece of luggage. That's where I come in.

That morning the shops were all open but not doing much business. Everyone was glued to the nearest holopad. That was unusual, so I kept my ears up.

The news feeds were all full of the same story. Someone had broken into the Cygni C IV Global Aviary and stolen a pair of rare *Cygnius sedonai*, a bird native to Cysgee Four and never successfully raised in any other environment. Big news, and since Gamma is the closest station to the Cygni system, definitely worth my attention.

I went on past the game stands and duty-free shops, keeping an eye on the feeds until I got to Ling-Ling's Lightspeed Asian, where I settled down in my usual spot

underneath the end of the lunch counter. The place was minuscule, four tables and a half-dozen stools at the counter, all crammed into a kiosk covered in red-and-gold Chinese frou-frou. It had a double advantage, though. Not only did it have a prime view of the inbound tunnel from customs, but Ling-Ling made the best fish dumplings on the station and I had dibs on the day's trimmings every morning.

I had to actually meow before Ling2, Ling-Ling's clone, noticed and gave me my scraps. That's how engrossed everyone was with the news.

No, I don't talk to the cits. Word would get around, and that would blow my cover. Besides, most of them don't have much to say to a cat. Not much that's interesting, anyway.

After a glance around to make sure there was no suspicious activity in view, I settled down with a dish of fish tails and ripe, stinky guts, and turned my attention to the news.

Cygnius sedonai were prized as songsters and for their rare plumage. The feathers were not only a spectacular blend of rust-reds and brilliant, shimmering blue-greens, but had medicinal properties that were just beginning to be explored. The tail-feathers had already been the source of cures for cystic fibrosis and spider-veins.

The stolen pair were the only two *sedonai* that had survived in captivity for a significant length of time. The Executive Director of Cysgee Four's aviary was beside himself with anxiety for their safety. The feeds ran a bite of him: skinny, elderly guy with silver hair that stuck out in odd directions.

"These birds are practically irreplaceable," he said in a mournful voice. "We had hoped that they would be the first *Cygnius sedonai* to breed in captivity."

The feed switched to a rotating full-spectrum still of the two birds, all scarlet and blue with green highlights. I sat up, sniffing to try to catch the olfactory track, but Ling-Ling's holopad was too cheap and I was too far away from it. All I

could smell was my breakfast. I lay back down to polish it off.

Who would want, and be able, to steal a couple of highly conspicuous, highly valuable birds? Someone with access to them, and who knew how to exploit them, I figured. Either a contract from the sort of private collector who didn't care about robbing the public, or someone in the med industry who thought they could make a few gigabucks off the plumage.

"Halva, halva, halva!" barked a nasal voice at my shoulder.

I looked up at Ling-Ling's annoying mini-peke, a pampered, papered show-pup. His real name was a mile long and totally unpronounceable. We all — by which I mean all the quadrupeds around the station — called him Hosehead.

"Morning, Hosehead." I spoke amiably, but bent a little closer over my dish.

"Halva bite of that for me?"

He never failed. Despite all the chow he got from Ling-Ling — and by the roundness of him he got a lot, pure caviar for all I knew — he always hit on me for some of my meager handout.

I looked down at my bowl. I was down to the spiny bits anyway, so I stood up and moved aside.

"Sure. Be my guest."

Hosehead dived in. I sat down and started washing my face, wondering what Ling-Ling saw in such a useless, funny-looking beast.

He had a black, pushed-in schnoz, round brown eyes that watered perpetually, and sandy-colored hair so long it dragged around his paws. A lot of the time it looked like dreadlocks, but he must have been to the groomer's lately, because today it was fairly tangle-free and the stuff on top of his head was caught up into a stupid blue bow. Over the next few days the bow would loosen and finally fall out, but

at the moment it was still tight enough that he could probably actually see.

I glanced up at the holopad, where the *sedonai* story had rolled around to the top again. There were no details I hadn't already caught, so I looked back at Hosehead. Might as well see if I could get some useful bit of information in exchange for my breakfast.

"So, Hosehead, buddy. Where's your boss this morning?"

He raised his head, licked the flat place where he ought to have a nose, and sneezed. "Shopping for a big dinner. Fancy catered affair. Important client."

"Anyone I know?"

He swallowed a mouthful of fish bones. "No. Some doc from off-station. One who did her." He nodded his round little head in Ling2's direction.

"Oh."

That made sense. Ling-Ling had probably offered the doc a fancy dinner in exchange for a break on the clone.

"I'll have to go by later to see what she's cooking up."

I had eaten some of the weirdest stuff by the back door of Ling-Ling's big, industrial kitchen, which was out in the business ring of the station. The kiosk had only a tiny prep kitchen to finish cooking food that had been assembled at the main kitchen. All the catering jobs ran out of there as well.

I watched Hosehead finish the last of my fish trimmings. Ling2 came to pick up the empty dish, pushing a strand of black hair behind her ear before bending down. She wore a high-necked, long-sleeved top and trousers made of jade-green silk, and smelled like sandalwood.

Hosehead sniffed eagerly at her hands until he figured out she wasn't carrying anything edible, whereupon he waddled off without so much as a thank-you. Ling2 glanced at me with a rueful smile that told me she knew exactly what had transpired, and reached out to stroke my head.

“Nice kitty Tux.”

I gave her a purr. I liked Ling2 better than her boss.

Ling-Ling was too busy for friendly gestures most of the time. She was a tough businesswoman. Not only did she run the most popular food kiosk on station, but she catered out a lot. Anything from kid’s birthday parties to elaborate fusion banquets with exotic dishes from all over the galaxy.

That was why she’d had herself cloned. It was too much work for one, and Ling2 was the perfect stand-in when she had to be in two places at once.

I felt sorry for Ling2 sometimes, even though I knew she was as well-paid as anyone in the restaurant biz. Technically she was family, but I’d never seen any sign of affection between her and Ling-Ling. Must be tough to know you were alive only because the boss needed extra help.

Well, that was sort of my situation as well, come to think of it.

I gave Ling2 a big, wide, golden-eyed gosh-you’re-swell look and another purr while she scratched my ruff. Then I stood up and stretched, and she turned back to her customers.

Wash your hands, kid, I thought as I stepped out into the rotunda. You don’t want to know what I’ve been rolling in.

~

I headed across the rotunda for the port. Most people had seen the *sedonai* story by now and were moving on. I threaded my way among the legs of locals hurrying to their jobs.

Just before I reached the tunnel, I heard a “Psst” from between two kiosks. Devin, my human partner, was staring at me from between a rack of leather coats and a shelf of icerock bookends from Ganymede.

He turned away and walked down the service corridor.

I rubbed my jaw against the coat rack and glanced around to make sure no one was watching before I casually followed him back to a storeroom full of unopened cargo tubs.

Devin closed the door after I slipped in. He sat on one of the tubs and I jumped up on top of two that were stacked, bringing me eye to eye with him.

"You look like hell," I told him. "Party too hard last night?"

Devin rubbed his unshaven jaw. He was dressed in a null-suit that looked like he'd already worn it a week. I keep telling the guy he needs a wife. At least she could dress him so he resembled a member of the human race.

"No," he said, and coughed to clear his throat. "For your information, you have me to thank that you weren't dragged out of bed four hours ago."

I rolled my ears forward. "Oh-five-hundred? What got you up at that hour?"

"That's when those damn birds got nipped. The boss called us all in the minute the news arrived. I told him you'd had a hard day yesterday with that fish oil incident."

"Oh."

I was touched by his thoughtfulness, and licked my chest a few times to hide my emotion. Devin might look like a deep-sleaze, but he was actually a decent guy. I was lucky to have him for a partner.

"Well, thanks," I said, sitting up straighter and meeting his slightly bloodshot gaze. "So what's the word?"

Devin reached in his pocket and pulled out his hand-held holopad. It wasn't cutting edge, but it was a lot better than the cheap set at Ling-Ling's. He set it in front of me.

"Play file 2birds."

The pad threw up the same image of the *sedonai* that had been on the news, but a much better copy. It must have come straight from the aviary, because it was longer and more detailed than what had been on the news.

I leaned forward, mouth open and inhaling intently,

memorizing every detail. The birds' scent was unlike that of any avian I had ever encountered. They smelled delicious, to be blunt about it. Kind of spicy, with tangy overtones.

After one full rotation, the still image broke into motion. I reacted instinctively, putting out a paw to snag the smaller, less flashy female. The ghost feathers brushed under my pads, a silky tease. It was that good a holo.

The two birds flittered around each other and gave a few little mournful "towoos," then the file ended and they vanished. I sat back and gave my chin a lick.

"Central thinks there's a good chance they'll come through here," Devin said. "We're supposed to keep a close watch on all the incoming traffic."

He started to put the holopad back in his pocket, then hesitated. "You got the scent down, Leon? Want another review?"

I shook my head. "No. I'll remember it, unless it's heavily masked."

"There's this, too."

Devin stashed the holopad and pulled out a small, transparent vac pouch. Inside it were a few red and blue feathers. I pricked my ears forward.

"They let those out of their hands? Jeez, aren't they worth a fortune?"

Devin shook his head and scattered the feathers onto his palm, where they lay shimmering. "These are mockups from Cysgee Four's natural history museum. Pretty good, eh?"

I leaned forward, sniffing, then drew back at the stench. "They look great, but they smell like horse glue."

"Yeah, well, usually they're behind plex."

"Can I have one?"

"Sure. Take 'em all, if you want. Everyone else has seen them."

I reached out and gathered the feathers up, careful not to stick a claw into Dev's hand. My thumbs – fully

opposable – are another perk of genetic modification, and really, I can't imagine living without them.

I fanned the half-dozen feathers in my paw like a poker hand, then flicked them shut and stashed them in the pouch I wear under one shoulder like a holster. One of the feather ends poked me in the ribs, and I had to adjust it.

"I'll show them to my buds. Never hurts to have extra eyes watching."

Devin shrugged. He tended to get deaf whenever I brought up the subject of my feline friends.

Teammates, really. They helped me out with certain chores, and I repaid them with choice bits from Ling-Ling's and some of the other goodies that came my way. I'd been trying to talk Devin into getting them official status with Gamma security, but he wasn't interested in non-modified quadrupeds.

He didn't offer to lend me the holopad so I could play the file for my pals, and I didn't bother to ask. It was too big for me to carry comfortably anyway, unless I held it in my mouth, and I hate the taste of plastic.

"Any clues about who we might be looking for?"

Devin shrugged. "Whoever it is had access to the aviary. No forced entry, and no alarms tripped. The dogs came up with zilch, which means the perps covered their scent."

I repressed the urge to sniff. Dogs have their talents – some dogs, not Hosehead – but for anything requiring brain power, they're useless.

"So you might not smell anything," Dev went on, "but keep watch anyway, OK?"

"Roger."

"Time to hit the beat." Devin got up from the storage tub. "Give me a minute to get to Molly's. I'll see you at the customs gate."

"Right."

I jumped down and did a quick inspection of the

storeroom's less accessible corners while I waited for Dev to get clear. No mice. Good for Gamma, tough luck for me.

~

I strolled out and gave the leather kiosk a once-around, rubbing up on all the racks. Along the curve of the rotunda I saw Devin leaning against the counter at Molly's Bar & Grill, talking up the morning girl.

For a smart guy, he showed a pretty indiscriminating taste in females. I flicked my tail in disgust and turned away to head up the tunnel toward customs.

A few doors down was Tammy's Tea Shoppe, a fancy name for one of the lounges where layover passengers could relax for an hour or so. Tammy also ran Steadly's Smoking Room next door, for those customers (usually male) who couldn't face the Victorian bric-a-brac at the tea shoppe. They both served the same basic menu: sturdy sandwiches, meat pies, and soups, plus a selection of frilly pastries over on the ladies' side.

I poked my head into Steadly's looking for Butch, one of my unofficial operatives. He wasn't there, so I figured Tammy had roped him into hanging out in the tea shoppe.

She kept a special stand in the parlor that held a cat bed done up in red velvet cushions. The stand stood about a meter high, had long gold fringe around the edges and a sign that said "Cuddles" in curly script dangling from a little gold chain. Butch hated it.

He was there, though, when I prowled in looking for him. He lay curled up on the red cushions, looking morose. Next to him was an ornate empty bird cage hanging from its own stand of curley-cued wrought iron. Tammy's sick idea of a joke, maybe.

"Psst. Butch."

Butch's head snapped up and he looked at me, then glanced toward the back of the parlor, where three females

of different bipedal species, all in snappy travel outfits, were chattering over their tea and scones. Tammy was nowhere in sight.

Butch leaped down from the stand and hurried toward me, a sight that would easily intimidate someone who didn't know him. Butch was a classic orange tabby, your basic alley cat. He looked round and soft at first sight, especially lying curled up on that red velvet stuff, but he was rock solid. His gait might not be graceful, but the power in his forelimbs was obvious.

"Hey, Leon! Any action?" His eyes were bright green with hope.

"Could be. Let's find a quiet place to talk."

"Not in the smoking room. Tammy chased me out of there with a broom earlier."

"Down by the trash chute, then?"

Butch nodded his massive head, and we made for the service corridor where the nearby kiosks disposed of their garbage. Butch sniffed the floor around the hatch to make sure nothing interesting had been dropped, then sat down and invited me to join him.

"I heard about that thing with the birds," he said. "Tammy had the news on in the kitchen."

I nodded. "Good. Did you get a whiff of them?"

"Uh – yeah, sort of."

"Would you remember if you smelled it again?"

Butch licked his paw and thought about it. "Not sure."

"Well, see if you can catch the story again, and pay attention. The boss thinks those birds might come through here."

"No kidding?" Butch licked his chops.

"And they're worth a bundle," I said, frowning, "so whoever recovers them in good condition stands to be amply rewarded."

"Oh, yeah. Right."

I reached into my shoulder pouch and took out the

faked-up *sedonai* feathers. Fanning them out, I showed them to Butch.

"This is what the plumage looks like. These are mockups, so the smell is wrong."

"I'll say."

Butch frowned and wrinkled his nose, then batted at my feathers, knocking one out of my paw. He pushed it around, trying to turn it over. I put the others away and flipped it for him, exposing the rusty, coppery top surface. The underside was blue-green.

"Pretty flashy," Butch said.

"Yeah. If you spot the birds, don't try to grab 'em. Just come get me. The boss and I will handle it."

Butch gave a last, wistful bat at the feather. "Okay."

I scooped it up and put it back in my pouch. It wasn't that I didn't trust Butch with it, but he was the sort of tom who might forget and leave it lying around someplace where it might be spotted. I didn't want the perps, if they did come through Gamma, to spot fake *sedonai* feathers on that red velvet stand, say. They'd get suspicious, and I'd get in dutch with Devin.

"Seen Leila this morning?" I asked Butch as we started back.

He gave a snort. "I wish. You know she don't mix with the masses much."

"Yeah, I know. Her human brings her to Tammy's now and then though, doesn't she?"

He shrugged. "It's been a while."

"Well, if you see her, give her the scoop. I want everyone keeping an eye out."

"Okay."

We arrived back in front of Tammy's and Steadly's. Butch cast a wistful glance at the smoking room, where a holographic fire flickered invitingly on the hearth between two leather chairs. Then he turned toward the tea shoppe. I watched him slink back toward the red velvet pillory.

“Take it easy, Butch.”

“Sure,” he growled over his shoulder.

One powerful thrust of his hindquarters propelled him onto the stand. He turned around a couple of times and settled in for the long haul.

Tammy’s honey-coated voice wafted out from the back of the tea shoppe. I didn’t want her to invite me to join Butch on display, so I made myself scarce. It was nearly time for the first shuttle anyway.

~

When I got to the tunnel the yellow light on the gate was flashing, warning of an imminent incoming FTL. Futtle-shuttles, the locals called them. The passengers getting off of them always looked a bit shell-shocked.

I trotted up the ramp and greeted the customs inspectors as I passed through into the waiting area. Huey grinned and beckoned me over with a whistle and a wave of his hand.

Huey was a big, friendly galumph with slick dark hair and a face that was an open book. As a customs inspector he was average, too good-natured to be really tough. Most days he was good for a bite of nutribar or equivalent. I strolled on over to collect.

He tossed me a scrap of bagel. Onion – not my favorite. I was tempted just to lick off the cream cheese, but I believe in oiling the wheels so I gulped it down, gave him a cute look, and rubbed against his leg before moving on.

Beyond the gate the ceiling was low and the walls bland, industrial. Everything port-side was geared toward moving passengers into the station as fast as possible. No distracting artwork or advertising, and the few seats were designed to be uncomfortable.

I eased over to a wall to sniff the floor seam, but the cleaning crew had been here too. No amusing smells.

Disappointed, I chased my tail for a couple of turns, then collapsed to wait for the incoming passengers. It would be a while before they showed up. The gate lights were still flashing yellow – they had to go to orange and then red before the shuttle would spill its load.

I glanced around, wondering if Devin would be here in time or if he'd gotten distracted by the chica at Molly's. No sign of him so far, so I stretched out my forelegs and laid my head on my paws. I was just dozing off when I heard a plaintive mew.

"Leon! Daaarling!"

I raised my head and looked back toward the gate. The last creature I expected to see here was Leila, but there she was, peeking out of a jewel-encrusted tote bag over her human's arm. I got up and ambled back through the gate to talk to her.

Leila's a Burmese, with dark fur and the dainty countenance of the purebred rich. Her human, Elsa Grippe, works high up in station management, and is as sleek as Leila in a blonde, bipedal sort of way.

"What are you two doing here?" I asked.

Leila rolled her large, green-gold eyes. "Mamzelle is meeting a friend coming in from Ross something-or-other."

"154," I supplied.

"I'm sure."

"Do you like riding in that thing? I mean, it looks uncomfortable."

"It is, cher, but it's so chic."

Elsa looked down at me at that point, and gave me a nudge with an alligator-clad toe. "Shoo!"

I flashed her a hurt look and moved around behind her, pretending to shove off. A second later, when Elsa had turned to talk to Huey, I slipped in close again to whisper to Leila.

"Did you see the news this morning? Catch the story about the stolen *Cygnius sedonai* from Cygsee Four?"

Leila nodded, breaking into a purr. "Oh, yes! Such pretty birds!"

"Keep your eye out. Central thinks the thief may try to bring them through here."

She gave a wide-eyed blink. "Ooh!"

Elsa was still chatting with the customs inspector. I glanced around to make sure no one else was watching, then palmed one of the fake feathers from my shoulder pouch and quickly took it in my mouth. It tasted as bad as it smelled.

"Hewe," I said, and reared up to spit the feather into Leila's jeweled carrier. It caught on the fluffy trim around the top of the bag. Leila reached a tentative paw toward it.

"That's just for reference," I told her. "It's not the real thing, but that's what the plumage looks like."

"Pretty! But the birds on the news holo didn't smell like this."

"I know. Like I said, it's a fake. Keep it out of sight, okay?"

Leila tilted her head, blinked at me, then with a swift swipe of her paw knocked the feather into the bag. Elsa looked up and reached around to rub Leila's head, then went back to her conversation.

A loud buzzer went off and the gate lights went from yellow to orange. I looked up at Leila.

"I've got to get back to work. You let me know if you get a whiff of those birds, all right?"

Leila groomed her left ear. "Yes, yes, cher. I will, assuming I am not still in this bag. It is very hard to climb out when Elsa has the straps over her shoulder."

I gave her a deadpan look. "The birds are extremely valuable. There could be a substantial reward involved."

Leila edged one ear further forward. "How lovely. I will keep watch for them."

I couldn't tell if she was being serious or sarcastic. It wasn't as though Elsa didn't have enough money to keep

Leila in obscene luxury. On the other hand, most of the people I know who can't seem to get enough money are the ones who already have too much.

"Gotta go," I said. "I'll bring something by for you later."

"Thank you, cher," Leila purred as I headed for the gate.

I had thought more than once about making a play for Leila, though Elsa would be an obstacle. Nothing but the best purebreds for her little Leila-kins.

I had a pedigree, but it was – shall we say – unusual. Even if it hadn't been, I doubt Elsa would have let me near her darling. A Burmese/Maine Coon cross was a bit of a frightening thought.

I slipped through Huey's gate again as the lights went from orange to red. The shuttle had landed, and in a minute the gate would become a zoo. I went back to my spot by the wall and lay down to watch.

Devin slouched up to Elsa and weaseled his way into her conversation with Huey. I hoped he was just doing it for the sake of work, cause I didn't think much more of Elsa than I did of the bar girl at Molly's. Too polished, too cold. Devin needed a nice girl with warm, gentle hands who cooked great fish dinners and always had leftovers.

The first incoming passengers started to arrive, looking tired, clumping their way down the long, sterile tunnel. I sat up, sniffing for a whiff of that exotic tangy-spicy scent.

Anyone with a hand-carry deserved special attention. The regular luggage all got scanned and would be picked up on the other side of the gate. It was the people wanting exception to the scan procedure who were most likely to be trying to sneak something through.

Trouble was, the *sedonai* were small, about the size of a terran robin. One would fit easily into a decent-sized pocket. I watched for people with loose clothing – unusual on an interstellar flight because of its awkwardness in zero G – and

people with packages that they were handling as if the contents were fragile.

A father in a business-casual nullsuit walked up to one inspector, leading his little girl by the hand. The father's briefcase interested me less than the girl's doll – one of those pucker-faced things that didn't move or do anything interesting. It was wearing a dress that was even frillier than the girl's.

I prowled through the legs of the crowd to get closer to her. The doll was just barely big enough to hide a bird inside. If it was there, though, where was the other? On the father? With another passenger?

Just as I was getting near enough to try to sniff out the evidence, the girl got impatient waiting for Dad's briefcase to be searched. She took her dolly by the legs and slammed its head against the floor three times.

"Dad! Dad! Dad!"

So much for that. Any bird inside that dolly was now dead, dead, dead.

I dodged away, my pulse jumping at how close I had come to being in range of that weapon. I continued to prowl through the crowd, trying to look nonchalant while I settled my ruffled fur.

Would the thief care if the bird was dead? I had been assuming the *sedonai* would be more valuable if they were still alive, but it depended on their ultimate destination. I'd have to think about that.

My eye was caught by a solitary female carrying a bright red leather case. She had the fluid swagger of someone who's spent a lot of time driving heavy waldos, but it looked okay on her. So did her nice silver-blue clingsuit, presently set on medium. She'd probably relaxed it after getting off the flight, and it had probably looked damn stunning set on tight.

I glanced in Devin's direction, wondering if he'd seen her and come to the same conclusion. Couldn't see him for

the crowd, so I wove my way in close to try to get a sniff at her bag.

Boy, was that a mistake. I nearly choked on the perfume. Three or four different kinds, from the smell of it. I fell in behind her and let my mouth hang open despite the caustic fumes, hoping for a whiff of the *sedonai* scent.

Nothing. She walked into a customs line and cheerfully opened her case for the inspector, who flinched despite his dull bipedal sense of smell. I turned back to the crowd, scanning for the unusual or the slightly out of place, counting on my eyes and ears until my olfactory recovered from the perfume.

The mass of passengers was beginning to thin out a bit, and I started to think this batch might be a wash. I noticed Ling-Ling in Huey's line, waiting behind a tall, orange-skinned biped that wore what looked like a portable oxygen tent on its head. Ling-Ling was dressed in close-fitting black flowered silk, and carried a small cooler in one hand and Hosehead in the other.

Surprised to see her, I started edging her way. I glanced at the counter where the fem in the blue clingsuit had just passed inspection. She dashed out to the station and into Elsa Grippe's arms, making delighted squealy noises.

Dismissing her, I made my way to Huey's counter and watched Ling-Ling. I couldn't figure out why she would be coming in from off-station, until she put her cooler on the counter for Huey to inspect. Then I remembered she was throwing a big do for the clone-doc. She must have gone to the intersystem market at Eps Indi to pick up something exotic to dish up.

A slug of fear hit me. What if she was cooking up *Cygnius sedonai*?

But, no – she opened the cooler and stood calmly petting Hosehead while Huey took out every piece of meat – including some gigantic green eggs with purplish spots – and even turned the thing upside down to look for hidden

compartments.

I kept watching, troubled by my suspicions. Ling-Ling didn't notice me. Neither did Hosehead, but that was not surprising. He wasn't exactly the brightest bulb in the chandelier to begin with, and with his hair down in his eyes it was no wonder his gaze slid right over me.

"Hey, Leon!" said Devin behind me. "How're you doin', buddy?" He squatted down and scratched my ears. "Anything?" he said softly.

I shook my head like a wet dog, my signal for "no" when we were out in public.

"Well, keep looking. I'm heading back to the market."

I gave him a yowl intended to express my hope that he wasn't going to waste any more time at Molly's, then pretended to chase an invisible rat over to the wall. When I looked up again, Devin was gone and Ling-Ling was closing her cooler. Huey grinned at her and patted Hosehead, who continued to pant like an idiot as Ling-Ling stepped into the station.

I resurrected the invisible rat and used it to get close to the remaining passengers, chasing it all around their legs and sniffing like mad for the birds. My nose was still a bit numb from Elsa's friend's perfume, but I was pretty sure the *sedonai* weren't on any of the last dozen or so to go through customs. When they were all through the gate I went back to the rotunda and resumed prowling my beat.

I was frustrated. Of course, it was possible that the birds hadn't come to Gamma. Something told me they had, though, and we had missed them.

I passed Tammy's, where Elsa and her friend were guzzling tea while Leila sat at their feet in the jeweled carry-bag, looking bored. Butch was up on the cat stand, watching Leila and thumping his tail against the red cushions. I gave them both a nod but continued on my way.

What if the birds were dead? I mused as I passed the leather kiosk. I gave the nearest rack of sheepskin coats a

half-hearted rub, then moved on past the ice-rocks and the taco place, the duty-free pharmacopeia and the instant credit booth. I paused to spray on the latter. Just a personal statement.

Dead birds would be easier to hide, I thought as I moved on, and still valuable for some things, if not for breeding. Could use the feathers for drugs, though you'd get a finite yield.

A collector might want the birds, but they'd bring a lot more alive than stuffed. A really sick collector might even want to eat them.

An image flashed through my mind, of Ling-Ling serving up a dish of *sedonai* in plum sauce to her doctor client.

Her clone doctor client.

Holy crap.

I cut off my beat, making a beeline across the rotunda for Ling-Ling's.

Dead *Cygnius sedonai* would be just as useful as live birds to a clone artist. If it weren't for the purists' disdain for clones, those damn birds could be as common as puke in Molly's restrooms on a Saturday night. Cloned *sedonai* feathers, however, would presumably be as good as originals to the drug industry.

~

I dashed into Ling-Ling's kiosk and jumped up on the counter, ignoring a dirty look from a gate guard having lunch in the nearest seat. Ling2 was still playing hostess.

I sniffed open-mouthed at the smells wafting out of the kitchen, but they were only ginger and peanut oil, soy-beef and shrimp that made my mouth water. I was willing to bet that the birds were not back there. That was something of a relief, but where had she taken them? And how had she got them past us? And was this really a lead, or was I full of it?

Ling2 turned around with a tea carafe in her hand and saw me. "Oh, no kitty! Get down!"

Not wanting to get her in trouble, I hopped down. I had seen what I could from there, anyway. She refilled the guard's teacup, then brought me a couple of fried shrimp tails. I sat crunching one, debating whether to try to sneak into the kitchen.

Hosehead wandered out of the back, saw me and came over. I hastily snapped up the second shrimp tail.

"You here mooching again?" he said, and sat down to scratch his head with his hind foot. When he straightened up, the stupid blue bow was dangling to the left.

The stupid blue bow. He had not been wearing it at the customs gate. Holy, holy crap!

I swallowed the half-chewed shrimp tail, which went down rough and scratched my throat. "Hosehead, where's Ling-Ling?"

"I dunno. Went shopping, but she's back now. Probably over at the big kitchen."

"Right. Thanks."

"Why?" he asked, blinking his watery eyes at me, but I was already on the move.

He was even more clueless than I'd thought. That's why he hadn't noticed me at the customs gate. Whatever dog that was – if it was a dog at all – wasn't Hosehead.

~

I ran toward Molly's, looking for Devin. No sign of him, so I headed for one of the corridors out to the exterior of the station, where the locals lived and conducted any business that was not aimed at travelers.

Passing Tammy's, I saw Butch still up on the stand. I paused and thought, what the hell.

"Butch!" I called, trotting into the tea shoppe.

A familiar gagging blend of perfume assailed my

nostrils. Elsa and her pal were at the front desk, paying for their tea. Tammy frowned at me over her filigreed glasses. I ignored her, turning back toward the rotunda and calling over my shoulder.

“Come on, Butch! Got a hot lead, and I want your help.”

He needed no further encouragement. He took off from the stand and landed with a meaty thump on the carpet not a meter from where I stood.

“Cuddles! Come back here,” cried Tammy, but we were already out the door.

We both broke into a run. I ducked into the corridor and Butch took the corner right behind me, paws scrambling for traction on the slick surface. I slowed to a trot again, trying to plan the next move.

“I think I’ve sussed out the birds, but I’ve got to prove it,” I told him.

Butch panted a little as he kept up with my longer stride. “Where are they?”

“Not sure, but I think I know who’s got them. I only hope we’re not too late.”

“May I be of help, cher?” purred a voice to my right.

I glanced down at Leila, serenely trotting beside me. She had her eyes partly lidded and was looking smug.

“Sweetheart! How’d you get loose?”

“Mamzelle was distracted by some shouting. Very wrong for a tea shoppe. The proprietress was in great distress over something, I can’t imagine what.”

Butch laughed. “She’ll live.”

“OK, hang on,” I said, stopping just around the corner from Ling-Ling’s main kitchen.

I had a half-baked plan for catching Ling-Ling red-handed. It sucked, pretty much, but it was better than no plan.

“Leila. You move pretty smoothly. Slide in there and help me find Hosehead. I mean – not Hosehead, but something that looks like Hosehead. Might be another dog,

but I'm thinking it's an animatron. I think Ling-Ling used it to sneak the birds past Huey."

Leila gave one forepaw a dainty lick. "Cherchez le chien. I understand." She stood up, walked to the corner, then with a coy over-the-shoulder look at me and Butch she sidled around the wall out of sight.

"Butch." I dug one of the mocked-up feathers out of my shoulder pouch. "Find Devin and show him this. He should get the message and follow you back here."

"Got it." Butch took the feather in his mouth. "God, it tasses tawwible!"

"I know. Go."

I watched him head back toward the rotunda, then took a deep breath. Hoping that Devin would come soon, I went around the corner at a casual prowl.

~

The kitchen was huge, probably four times the size of Ling-Ling's Lightspeed kiosk, all shiny steel. It was full of exotic, enticing smells, heaps of colorful vegetables and fruits and containers of who knows what waiting to be made edible. Full of cooks, too, all chopping and stirring away.

I saw the tip of a dark tail curving out of sight beneath a work table. I was too big to go under there, so I slunk around the edge of the kitchen, smelling every cupboard and shelf I passed. I came across a basket of the gigantic purple-spotted eggs Ling-Ling had brought through customs, but no sign of the *sedonai*.

Leila emerged again at the far end of the work table. She glanced over her shoulder and caught my eye, then gave a little shrug and moved on to the next table. I had to admire the way she slunk between the legs of the cooks. A little sable Burmese shadow.

I heard a brisk, high-heel-clicking footstep behind me. Ling-Ling, coming to check on her crew.

I grabbed a cupboard handle, yanked it open, and dove in, hoping she hadn't seen me. I pulled the door almost closed and peered out through the crack.

Ling-Ling started giving rapid-fire orders in Chinese. Leila emerged again, and I felt my neck fur start to stand up as I watched Leila hop from floor to counter right behind Ling-Ling.

She leapt from counter to shelf, then shelf to top of the upper cupboards without a sound. None of the cooks saw her, or if they did they ignored her.

I held my breath as she began slinking around up there, sniffing at boxes and crates. She stopped at a huge, blue and white ginger jar, the lid of which was ajar.

I nearly yowled as Leila put her forepaws on the neck of the jar and sniffed intently at whatever was inside it. She nudged the lid, and it slid off. It missed landing on the cupboard top, falling all the way to the floor where it shattered with an ear-splitting crash.

Ling-Ling stopped talking and whirled, staring up at Leila who sat frozen, wide-eyed, with her paws still on the edge of the jar. Ling-Ling's eyes went wide, too.

"Get that cat!" she shouted.

Leila dropped to all fours, started to jump down, then thought better of it and ran along the cupboard top, dodging between boxes and baskets. Ling-Ling and all the cooks went after her. Food went flying.

I knew they had her trapped, and I did the only thing I could think of. I pulled the fake *sedonai* feathers out of my shoulder pouch and stuffed their ends in my mouth.

Never have I had such a wretched taste in my mouth, and I have eaten some pretty weird things. Those feathers might smell like horse glue, but they tasted more like horse piss. I prayed for Devin to show up soon as I shouldered open the door of my sanctuary.

Ling-Ling was standing on a box, climbing onto the counter. I trotted up and planted myself in front of her,

feathers dangling artfully from my jaws, and said, "Mrow?"

She stared down at me for a full second, then let out a shriek worthy of your worst nightmare. Raised my fur, let me tell you.

She made a grab for me but I managed to evade her and ran down the far side of the kitchen away from Leila. The cooks were still doing their circus act on the counter. Ling-Ling shouted at them to catch me, and the place turned chaotic as pots and pans and bowls of stuff I don't want to mention hit the floor.

A foot-long butcher knife buried itself in a cupboard door a split second after I'd passed it. Ling-Ling was right behind me with murder in her eyes. I put on speed.

I risked a glance up at the cupboard top, but Leila was nowhere in sight. Everyone who'd been chasing her was now after me, and I decided to lead them away from the hot spot.

I dashed out into the corridor and put on full speed for the rotunda. Where the hell was Devin? If he didn't show soon I'd wind up on the menu at Ling-Ling's fancy do.

I could hear her behind me, cussing in Chinese, or so I assumed. I dodged a clot of cits coming home with full shopping bags, and prayed that they would slow Ling-Ling down. Beyond them, a familiar orange shape was speeding toward me.

Butch! I could have cried with relief, except my mouth was full of feathers.

"Whewe's Devin?" I yowled.

"Right behind me," Butch called back, panting.

So he was, stretching out those lanky legs in a run. He saw me and started to slow down. I howled at him, not wanting to risk speech but trying to communicate that I would like him to please rescue me from the homicidal restaurateur behind me.

His gaze rose. "Ling-Ling," he said, sounding surprised. "What's the problem?"

“That cat! Get that cat!” she screeched.

Devin swivelled his head to look at me. “That cat?”

I paused, wishing I could get Devin alone for just ten seconds to explain what was going on. He raised an eyebrow at me, then said, “C’mere, kitty.”

I growled, which between him and me means “Fuck, no.”

Ling-Ling lunged for me and I ducked. Her fingertips caught at my fur.

“Hang on, take it easy,” Devin said. “What did the cat do?”

Ling-Ling crossed her arms, looking pissed as hell. “He ate . . .”

Devin looked at her. “Yes?”

“Something extremely valuable.”

“Ah—looks to me like he ate a bird.”

“Never mind, I just . . . never mind!”

She turned abruptly and stalked back toward her kitchen, heels clicking sharply on the floor. I caught Devin’s eye, then dashed past Ling-Ling, back toward the kitchen.

I had to get there before Ling-Ling did. If we were very, very lucky, the birds were in that ginger jar and still alive.

“There he goes!” yelled Devin. “I’ll get him for you!”

On this clever excuse he ran after me, and Butch came along. When we got to the kitchen I turned and spat out the disgusting feathers.

“Close the door, Dev!”

He punched the control. I glanced around belatedly to see if any other humans were in there. Fortunately not.

Butch started investigating the many items of interest that had hit the deck in our earlier adventure. I headed up toward the top of the cupboards, calling to Leila.

“Leila? You all right? Answer me baby—”

“Hey, Leon, what gives?” Devin called from the floor. “Where are the *sedonai*?”

“Up here, I think,” I told him. “Don’t let anyone in.”

“OK.”

Devin pulled out his security card and started tinkering with the locks, while I leapt up top of the cupboards and made my way toward the ginger jar. Halfway there I found Leila crouched behind an industrial-sized tea caddy. Her eyes were very wide and she was breathing shallowly, staring at the kitchen floor as if expecting a broom to come out of nowhere.

“You all right?” I asked her.

She focused on me finally, blinked, then sat up and started to groom. “Leon.”

“The birds – are they still in the jar?”

“I don’t know. I never saw them, though I smelled them.”

She looked like she needed a minute to compose herself, so I slid past her toward the ginger jar. With the lid gone, the birds might well be gone, too. I hoped they had been frightened enough to stay inside.

A pounding commenced on the outer door. I glanced down at Devin.

“Better check for other entrances,” I called.

“I sure as hell hope you know what you’re doing,” he said, starting through the kitchen. “Jesus, what happened in here?”

Not bothering to answer, I climbed over a fifty-kilo sack of rice and reached the ginger jar. I sniffed at it and caught a definite whiff of *sedonai*. My heart started racing.

I crept up to the jar, slowly, silently. Flattening my ears so they wouldn’t be a tipoff, I cautiously looked over the edge and saw two large black eyes staring back at me.

“Crap!” I shouted, jumping away.

“What?” yelled Devin.

“It isn’t the birds. It’s – oh.”

I realized that the eyes I’d seen were Hosehead’s. I took another look in the jar.

Sure enough, the little creep was in there, or rather his

bowless double was. I watched for a few seconds. The thing wasn't breathing.

"Dev. Come and get this jar down."

He worked his way toward me, cussing as he slipped on spilled wontons. The pounding on the door, which had continued all the while, stopped briefly and a string of vehement Chinese took its place. Then it started up again, louder. It sounded like all Ling-Ling's cooks were taking turns hurling themselves against the door.

Devin hauled a chair over and stood on it to get to the counter. He stepped between a basket of bok choy and a bamboo steamer full of spring rolls, and reached for the ginger jar.

"Careful," I said. "If I'm right, the birds are in there."

He looked in, and nearly fell backward. I made a grab for the jar in case he dropped it, but he got his balance back and threw me a dirty look.

"This is a dog."

"No, it isn't," I said, hopping down to the counter. "It's an animatron, I think. Take it out of there."

He stepped down and put the jar on the counter, then reached in and removed the Hosehead double. I sniffed at it.

"This thing reeks of *Cygnius sedonai*. They must be inside it. Look for a switch."

Devin turned it over, turned it every which way. Butch wandered over and jumped on the counter to sit beside me, watching with ears pricked forward.

Finally Devin fiddled with a spot behind the dog's ear. Its chest popped open, and the two birds fluttered out.

Butch and I pounced on them, even as I yelled, "No claws!"

"Right, boss," Butch said, and held his bird down with a gentleness at odds with his massive frame. "It sure smells good, though."

"I'll take that," Devin said, reaching for Butch's bird.

Butch released the tiny thing, which fluttered and

twittered, its feathers shimmering. Devin looked around helplessly with the bird in his hand and the dog in the other.

"I guess a bird in the hand is worth two in the shaggy dog," I said.

He turned a look on me that would wither a cat tree.

"Just kidding," I told him. "Open the dog up and stash that one, then I'll give you this one."

He did, and added the second bird before shutting the hatch again. I admit, I had trouble giving it up. Butch was right, they smelled delicious.

The pounding on the door stopped. Devin looked at me and I knew what he was thinking — Ling-Ling had figured it out and was on the run.

Devin whipped out his com and connected to central security. Luckily, they shut down all access to the port before Ling-Ling could skip the station. They caught her in her quarters, stuffing cash into her cooler.

Clever distraction, that cooler, and poor Huey had fallen for it. All the while the real contraband had been inside the fake Hosehead.

~

Devin and I discussed it later, after everything had been settled. We sat in his place, Dev having a beer and me digging into a ginger calamari appetizer from Ling-Ling's, part of an unofficial thank-you from Ling2, who would inherit the business once Ling-Ling was put away.

"What I don't understand," I said to Dev, "is how Ling-Ling got hold of the birds. I mean, she had to be working with somebody inside the aviary. No forced entry, right?"

Devin paused to pull at his beer. "Right. Did you notice those green eggs with the purple spots in the kitchen?"

"Yeah. The ones she brought through customs."

"She got them through the aviary's exotics marketing program. Ordered them for her catering business. Perfectly

legit, but it was just her cover for getting in to pick up the *sedonai*. She bribed some poor schmoe to kipe the birds for her."

"Schmoe is going down, yes?"

Devin nodded. "Deep down."

I licked the last of the calamari crumbs off my plate and sat up to wash my face. "Well, Dev, I gotta shove off. I'm escorting a lady to dinner."

His eyebrows went up. "Anyone I know?"

"Deputy-Agent Leila, since you ask."

Leila and Butch had finally been given official status with Gamma Station Security as a result of the *Cygnius sedonai* Caper. I was proud of them, and had already celebrated with Butch, spending an evening going through the trash bin back of Molly's. Thumbs are a wonderful thing, yes indeedy.

Tonight, though, was going to be something else. Leila was a class act, and I'd arranged a very special entertainment for her. I waited to see if Devin was going to comment, but he just sat watching me, swigging on his beer. I headed for the door and reached up to press the switch.

"Good luck, tiger," I heard Devin say softly as I left.

Leila was waiting for me in the corridor outside Elsa's place. I didn't ask how she'd gotten out, and she didn't offer to enlighten me. For a cat with ordinary thumbs, she was pretty damn clever.

"You look beautiful," I said, admiring her glossy coat.

"Thank you, cher," she purred as we started toward the rotunda. "And I owe you thanks as well for taking the heat off me in that horrid kitchen. That was a gentlemanly thing to do."

I could have told her I'd done it for the birds, but I didn't. It wasn't entirely true.

"So, Leon, cher. Where are we going?"

"I have a place in mind if it's all right with you. You like Chinese?"

For a second she froze, and her tail twitched once, sharply. Then she relaxed.

“Of course, cher. I trust you. You have excellent taste.”

I smiled, and rubbed against her slightly as we strolled through the rotunda filled with soft, evening lighting. I knew this would be the start of a beautiful friendship.

About the Author



Pati Nagle was born and raised in the mountains of northern New Mexico. An avid student of music, history, and humans in general, she loves the outdoors but hides from the sun.

She writes in a variety of genres, but is most often drawn to fantasy or (as P.G. Nagle) historical fiction. Her stories have appeared in *Asimov's Science Fiction*, the *Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, and in various other magazines and anthologies, including *Elf Magic*, which featured "Kind Hunter," the story that sparked the ælven world. Her first ælven novel, *The Betrayal*, was released in 2009 by Del Rey Books. Its sequel, *Heart of the Exiled*, will come out in January 2011.

Pati Nagle lives in the New Mexico mountains with her husband and two furry feline muses. She loves to walk in the woods and look up at the stars.

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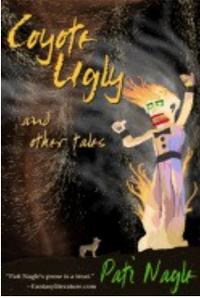
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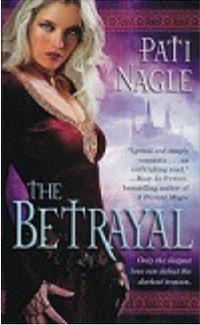
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