

First Deployment

By JonBuck and Robotech_Master

Chapter 1

“Fort Brubeck”

June 7, 121 AL

The massive blue-gray Starmaster armed transport took up most of the landing pad, which was itself covered by a shimmering hardlight shield. The air had barely cooled to tolerable levels before the Quartermaster sent Corporal Dale Combs and his squadmates in to begin unloading. There were always more transports incoming and limited space to take them, so it was extremely important to get them unloaded fast and the materiel stored right away.

The Quartermaster, Major Divina Lind, glared at the manifest on her tablet. “Corporal Combs, get me the cargomaster. This load isn’t scheduled to be here for another four days.”

“Four days, sir? What’s in it?” Combs asked.

The aft clamshell doors on the transport opened, revealing racks and racks of neat metallic cube-shapes in a half dozen sizes. They were mostly familiar—AIDE power armor/skimmer cycles for individual use. There were suggestions of animal features even in the compact transport mode: paws, feline faces, hooves, and antlers.

“The new RIDEs,” the Major said, tapping her stylus on the tablet. “Now, find him, Corporal. That’s an order. They neglected to include the training materials on the manifest. We were supposed to get those *first*.”

“Yes, sir!” Combs saluted and scrambled off.

Zharus’s weak magnetic field—barely enough to keep the atmosphere from blowing away in the solar wind—made radio communication dodgy on the best of days. And the ever-present dust in the air made laser comms not much better sometimes. That meant that couriers were the best method for sending any communique from Command into the field. Fort Brubeck, as the soldiers called it, still had the best comm gear available, but conditions lately had curtailed transmissions.

But the way the Major was grumbling, Dale thought that it was just a

Nextus bureaucratic cock-up—BUCU as they called it. Of course, he couldn't be *sure* of that. Dale wasn't a Nextus native, so didn't have the encyclopedic knowledge of the rules of the Game that such a person did. But the thought made him chuckle, because he *was* intimately familiar with the rules of *another* polity's national pastime. He was from Cape Nord, a volunteer for their armed forces. A Man was often made in war, so here he was.

Though after four years in the service, he was still only a Corporal. There were, he had to admit, *reasons* for that. When you got right down to it, like most of the Cape Nord volunteers, he was probably here for the wrong reasons.

These Nextus soldiers were defending their homes and their way of life, and if they blew it their home was going to be a vassal state to a sworn enemy. Knowing they were to be hanged, as the old saying went, concentrated their minds wonderfully, and they went about their duties with a patriotic fervor that made them all the more effective fighters.

But the Nordie boys knew *they* weren't in any danger—Cape Nord didn't really have much anybody wanted. Even the heavy metal mining that had originally funded the polity was in decline now that it was cheaper to get the stuff in bulk from asteroids. And even if it did, the Valkyries of Sturmhaven would probably have rather let them keep it than deal with the Cape Nord male ego. After all, Sturmhaven had kicked their forebears out and said “good riddance” a long time ago.

Some Nordies were, or at least *said* they were, looking for a little payback against the old Mother Country—but almost no one still alive actually had or knew anyone who had directly been wronged by them. Hence, *most* were here because, again, Men were often made in war. Then once they got here and found that they actually didn't *like* being in a war, still they stuck around because it was un-Manly to quit. But they didn't exactly give it their all the way Nextus's natives did, and the Nextus brass was aware of this.

But having all those warm bodies who didn't necessarily give fighting their all at least let that brass use them to staff support positions, rear echelons, and garrisons to secure captured territory, so they could send the gung-ho Nextus natives to the frontlines instead. *Which is how I ended up*

in this chickenshit outfit, Dale reflected ruefully. *Still, could be worse. Could be on the front lines having my ass shot at.*

Dale's thoughts turned back to the RIDEs that had just arrived. Now that those gung-ho soldiers on the front lines had been fully equipped with these new Sarium-powered wonder machines, there were finally enough to go around in the rear echelons. But things were always confused in the supply chain when there was a war on, and Dale's mind went to another acronym passed down from grunt to grunt over the centuries: SNAFU. "Situation Normal: All Effed Up," Dale muttered.

But still, there might be opportunities to be had in this kind of foul-up. Dale had heard a lot of rumors about those machines through the grapevine—most of them contradictory to others, and some of them crazy enough to make him wonder if *any* of them could be true.

One of the things that was *verifiably* true was that they gave you animal ears and a tail, for reasons that had never been clearly explained but were apparently accepted by the brass. There was a "conscientious objector" clause written into the Nextus soldier contract so anyone who objected to that kind of body modification could put in for a transfer to a non-combat job, but anyone taking that clause could probably kiss their future military career goodbye. Dale wasn't terribly optimistic about his own military career anyway, but didn't have any particular objections to the idea of animal features. He thought he might actually look rather fetching with a pair of wolf ears and tail, or something else Manly like that. *Maybe a lion or tiger...*

In fact...one of those RIDEs there *had* looked like it might be some kind of lion. Perhaps that would bear some further investigation. *Or maybe lion the further investigation.* Dale chuckled at his pun. In any case, it wasn't likely he'd get his hands on one of those RIDEs for himself any time soon—things like this tended to be reserved for the officers, and then gradually trickle down to enlisted men. But *maybe* there was a way around that...

He found the cargomaster at the front of the aircraft, at the rack that held the secure datapacks. They were each the size of a dinner plate, though the chip itself was far, far smaller. It was mostly surrounded by hardware to ensure that the Sturmies couldn't get to the chip, even if they managed to

intercept the courier.

“I know why you’re here, Corporal,” the cargomaster said. “And I don’t have an answer for you. They never tell me what’s on these chips for security reasons. Whatever you’re missing, the Quartermaster will have to send a chip to Command.”

“That’s about what I thought, but I’m just the message boy,” Dale said. “But then, I guess you are too.”

The cargomaster snorted. “Yeah, buddy, ain’t *that* the truth.”

“Any idea why this shipment turned up four days early?” Dale asked.

He shrugged. “Feels like a BUCU to me, if anything. If it is, then whoever thought the Game was still on is going to get drummed out of the service.”

Dale grinned. “I don’t know as I’d really complain about something showing up *early* for a change. Far too much of the other thing happening these days.”

“Well, you grunts need to get this aircraft unloaded so we can lift and return to MilCentral.”

Dale nodded. “I’ll give the Major the news. See you around, buddy.”

Fort Brubeck—a nickname that had stuck despite the protestations of its owner, famed former interstellar Scout Clint Brubeck—was located over the richest deposit of high-grade qubitite yet known in the Dry Ocean. The deposits being mined were all surface, since nobody had figured out how to use other methods to get the crumbly blue stuff that was far beneath it. But despite this deposit being far underground, the Nextus military knew it was important enough for the future to keep the site garrisoned.

Multiple redundant fusion reactors powered multi-layered hardlight shielding, a half dozen large double pulse cannon turret emplacements, a multitude of smaller ones, underground tunnels, infantry bunkers...Fort Brubeck had it all. Early in the War the tactics had dictated *enormous* lifter-powered battleships and smaller craft slinging pulse energy, railgun sabots, and salvos of missiles—more or less an antigravity imitation of oceanic navies—so the Fort naturally needed defense against them. But technology and tactics had changed quickly.

Battles had moved to the east and southeastern Dry Ocean, many

thousands of kilometers away, and even on the Coastal Ring between the two warring polities, with little Nuevo San Antonio caught in the middle. That made being assigned to Fort Brubeck a second-rate post at best.

Ordinarily, the operating manuals for all manner of military equipment were available for immediate download from the NextusMil central database. They were indexed and cross-referenced to a fare-thee-well—one of the benefits of a polity where everyone spoke bureaucratese as a second language, Dale supposed. But someone seemed to have dropped the ball on the matter of these RIDEs—there wasn't a word to be found about them. Apparently they were still classified top-secret, even as every buck private in the field was being given one.

Dale sometimes wondered if the problem might actually stem from the Game being in abeyance because of the war. When it was running, the Game did throw up obstacles for people to hurdle as a matter of course—but from what he'd seen from his outsider's perspective, the Game processes *did* at least ensure that everything got done. Ideally, those processes should have been replaced by *more streamlined* processes to get the same thing done—but it seemed like some of them might have slipped through the cracks. *Whoever's job it was to come up with the new rules thought it was someone else's...and so did the someone else, maybe.* It was at least worthy of an ironic chuckle: When Nextus explicitly tried to minimize the chances of making BUCUs...they made BUCUs *because* of it.

At least some of the stories Dale had heard had it that these RIDEs had some kind of expert system on board that would actually *tell* you how to work them, so you didn't really *need* documentation. But not only was this the military, this was the *Nextus* military. When you're in the middle of a war, you don't have time to waste on might-bes, or on trying to figure out how some completely unfamiliar piece of equipment worked if it wasn't an emergency situation. If the documentation wasn't ready yet, you *waited for the documentation.* That was how the bureaucracy of the military worked.

But privately, Dale was sure *he* wouldn't have any problems. He had a knack for figuring out mechanical gadgets. Hadn't he learned to use his Chinook and aced the operating exam without once cracking the manual? (After all, reading the instructions wasn't Manly.) And these RIDE things just sounded like a fancier version of those, so it should be just fine.

He just needed to work out how to phrase his approach to Major Lind so she would give him orders with enough wiggle room to cover a little otherwise-unauthorized experimentation. It would help if he timed the approach for a time when she was as distracted as possible—which would probably need to be within the next half hour, as she was pulled in all directions trying to get all the *other* BUCUs involved with this unexpected shipment straightened out.

As he headed back to the edge of the airfield, Dale mentally rehearsed what he was going to say. Knowing what he did about the Major, it was pretty easy to figure out what buttons to push. She was all about *efficiency*, which was why this sort of foul-up made her so irritable. All he had to do was couch his suggestion the right way.

Dale found the Major where he'd left her, still glaring at the tablet in her hands. "Sorry, Ma'am, but it was about as expected. The cargo master didn't know anything about what's in the shipment, he just carries what he's given."

The officer sighed. "Doesn't that just figure. I've already filed a message for the return shipment. Go round up a pallet-jack and take these to storage. We'll put them toward the front in warehouse 3, and hope they don't get buried by the time we get the training manuals in."

"Yes, Ma'am." He turned and started to walk away, then stopped and turned back. "You know, ma'am—it'd be a shame to waste the time we have these here. They seem to use the same technology as the bikes we've been using. If I had some time to look them over, familiarize myself with them, it might help get a head start on some of the maintenance matters."

Major Lind didn't even look up from the tablet. "Sure, go on, familiarize yourself with them. Let me know if you find out anything I should know about."

"Yes, ma'am. Will do, ma'am."

Dale felt a *little* guilty for taking advantage of Major Lind's distractibility like that...but only a little. After all, he reasoned, in familiarizing himself with the RIDEs to the point that he, well, *claimed* one, he actually *would* be saving time in terms of getting up and running with them. Sometimes the Army could be overcautious to the point of self-paralysis, and hey—there *was* a war on. Every minute saved counted, right?

Dale dutifully snagged the pallet-jack and trucked the RIDES off to the warehouse as ordered. He made sure to put the lion-ish one in front where it would be easy to access. He's already decided that one was the one he wanted. He'd come back a little later once his other duties were taken care of, and then he would see.

Dale read the identification plate on the front of the cubic RIDE. "LEO(f)-MCA-002A. Huh." His assigned Chinook had a similarly nonsensical model designation he hadn't bothered to learn. He was sure all the letters and numbers had to mean *something*, because Nextus being Nextus, everything *always* meant something...but the documents that would have said *what* they meant weren't available. But they probably weren't important.

LEO was obviously lion, in any case. The 002A at the end was probably the sequential model number. The rest had no obvious meaning at all.

As for how to activate it...there was something he'd learned as part of the standard training with his Chinook. Some parts of the Dry Ocean could reach near 90 degrees celsius, and in the event the armor mode was damaged and it became necessary to swap out while under fire, there was a physical 'emergency armor mode' switch to enable a very fast swap and minimize exposure to the environment. *If this thing is based off a Chinook, then the switch should be somewhere around...here.*

Dale peered at the innocuous-looking button for a good long time. He knew that if he pressed that button, there would be no going back. The signs that he had activated one of the new RIDE units would be right there, indelible for all to see.

But...he could always claim it had been an accident. He'd just been "familiarizing himself" as ordered, then goofed and pressed the wrong button. They couldn't blame him for that, right? Could have happened to anyone. And anyway, he'd still be the first one to have gotten his hands on one of the new miracle machines. No matter what they might go to him, they couldn't take that away from him.

Taking a deep breath, Dale pressed the button.

The next thing Dale was aware of was a rumbly female voice saying, “Corporal Combs is now awake, as ordered.” Dale felt his arms move in a salute, but it wasn’t himself doing it.

He opened his eyes to see five people in the room in front of him—the Major, a doctor from the base infirmary, a woman with a RIDE Research Division patch on her white uniform...and two MPs.

There was also someone else, the first voice who had spoken...but he couldn’t quite put his finger on where they might be. His head might have been filled with sand, as sluggish as his thoughts were.

“Unit Sarabe, keep he...the Corporal sedated,” the doctor ordered.

“Yes, sir!” the voice rumbled.

“Corporal, do you have any idea what you’ve *done* to yourself?” Major Lind said from well below eye-level.

“Was just...familiarizing myself with the equipment as ordered, Ma’am...” he mumbled. There seemed to be something off about his voice. Had the RIDE armor suit’s breathing system had helium in it?

“The process is complete, Major,” the base Doctor said. “Vital signs are...normal, given the circumstances.”

“These units should have been locked down for shipping until they were assigned,” the Major tech said. “How did Combs activate one?”

“The emergency Fuse function worked as designed, Major,” the RIDE tech said.

“Why didn’t the unit just spit him out once it sensed things were... wrong?” Major Lind said.

“Locked down or not, that’s what it’s intended for. To save a soldier’s life if there are no other options. We planned for...this type of situation to happen on the battlefield, and the similar system in place on the Ad-I models has saved a number of lives. Though I must admit that it hasn’t happened on the front lines with RIDEs yet.”

“And emergency functions are just supposed to *work*,” Major Lind said, sighing. “I can’t fault the engineers for that.”

Dale felt he should put in a word in his own defense, given that everyone seemed to be talking about him. “Sorry...must’ve had an accident when I was examining it...” he mumbled, trying to ignore the odd sound of his own voice.

Major Lind shook her head. “Oh, you didn’t have any kind of accident. You didn’t *accidentally* open a panel, flip up a safety cover, and press a button marked FOR EMERGENCY USE ONLY in big bold letters. Even if I didn’t already know what you were like, I’d have trouble buying that.” Her lips pursed in an ironic smirk. “Well, you’ve seen to your *own* punishment, and it will be a *much* more fitting one than anything the military can mete out...for a Cape Nord boy.”

Dale didn’t like the sound of that. He tried to move, but something was holding him in place. “Hey, what...lemme out?”

“Major, I don’t recommend removing him from the RIDE unit here,” the doctor said. “The Corporal’s reaction is likely to be...unpleasant.”

Dale *really* didn’t like the sound of that. He tried to squirm harder, but he felt the cool hiss of a spray injection against his arm and everything faded to black.

Fort Brubeck Medical Bay

Dissonance. A body sending signals that didn’t match what Dale’s brain was expecting. The restraints in the hospital bed were necessary, they kept him from tearing at his own body.

Disassociation. A face that was-and-wasn’t his. Features softened just enough to be female. But he kept looking behind the face in the mirror to find his actual one. There were...breasts. Barely there, but present. And down below was...was—

Before the panic could take hold again the autodoc applied a mild sedative. Dale sighed and let his mind float.

He was *technically* a woman now, where it counted. Yet when he tried to think about that for more than a few seconds his brain filled with a white noise that blocked out all rational thought. So the restraints were sadly necessary.

His doctors had put a sensor-laden skullcap on him for “data collection”, and promised they would return soon with results and recommended treatment. It’d only been...Dale looked at the clock on the wall. *Half an hour. Ugh! Just knock me out again!*

The doctor entered the room, tablet in hand. “Well, Corporal. I’ll give

it to you straight. We have to fix your brain so it matches your body, and the only specialists who know how to do that are in Cape Nord.”

“Cape...Nord.” Dale’s stomach fell into his feet. Of course, Cape Nord did have some experience here. Starting with the popular author Iphigenia Rose, who eight years before had been exposed as a Man on the verge of becoming a True Nordsman. He had very publically been “unManned” then went right back to writing and selling books. There had been a dozen more since then. To all appearances, these unManned were well-adjusted and happy as women. A couple had even given birth.

“We’re going to ship you out to a clinic there in the next hour, Corporal. So just hold on a little longer.”

Dale tried to clear her throat before speaking. “Can you at least knock me out until they do whatever it is they do?”

“Of course, Corporal.” The doctor leaned over and did something to the IV drip. “You’ll feel a lot better when you wake up. Like a new woman.”

That’s just what I’m afraid of, Dale thought as she drifted away again.

Chapter 2

Cape Nord

Northcave Psychiatric Hospital

June 11, 121 AL

It was morning. Dale lay in bed, looking at the ceiling, part of which flashed, waiting for any media requests from her. The previous night had been...easier than the one before. She hadn't rolled over. Yesterday she'd had sore breasts for half the day. Small though they were, she'd still somehow managed to irritate them.

It's very important to establish new body habits and routines, Dale thought, repeating to herself what the therapist had said yesterday. She could look at herself in the mirror without screaming. She could look *down* at herself without feeling an overwhelming terror. It was new. It was all so very *new*. But at the same time it was just...her body. *Establish 'normalcy'* she said.

For all of that, she had to admit she was really fortunate, in a number of ways. Given the mess she'd—he'd—the mess *Dale had caused* with their little adventure, she'd expected an approximate military law library to be thrown in her direction. But to her surprise, she'd been offered a deal.

"What 'happened' to you will happen to other soldiers on the front lines," Major Lind said, using the dreaded air quotes. "We don't currently have a baseline case in your...situation. This troubles the brass, and when something troubles the brass, they make themselves feel better by throwing money at intensive research projects. Especially when a perfect test subject so enthusiastically volunteers.

"So, for your sins, you're going to get the best medical treatment money can buy, with an army of observers watching over you, a battery of psychologists testing you, and reams of data being generated about your every move and thought. If you don't like it, well, we can always court-martial you."

Dale might have been dense, but she wasn't *stupid*. "Uh...I like it, ma'am! I like it very much!"

“I thought that you would. This little escapade notwithstanding, you always struck me as the sensible sort.”

So, not only was she *not* being court-martialed, she was being given a cushy non-battlefield duty station *in her own home polity*. Most of those ambivalent Cape Nord volunteers would have *killed* for a posting like this.

But how many of them, she wondered darkly, would have given up their Manhood?

She spent longer in the shower than she really needed to, then some time with a hand mirror looking at anatomy that couldn't be seen another way, as prescribed by her therapists. Then she got dressed, taking a few minutes with the bra, before putting on the new labcoat-white Research Division enlisted uniform.

The biosculpt system built into the RIDE had been very basic. Other than the gross soft tissue changes required to make her physically female, there had been little effort expended to change the rest. By Cape Nord standards she was homely and very masculine. Her brown hair was still short enough to not need much combing—fairly ironic, given her surname.

Dale was the same height and weight, with fatty tissue moved around in places, fairly flat-chested, barely any curve to her hips, and had an androgynous voice. Famed romance novelist Iphigenia Rose, the very first to undergo the same process that had changed Dale, had looked much the same halfway through her change, according to the old video they'd shown Dale as part of her therapy. Then she'd gone back into the chamber for further sculpting. By the same token, there were biosculpt kiosks practically on every street corner that could make Dale into the very flower of Cape Nord femininity, much as Rose had been by the time she'd been through. Dale supposed she might go ahead with that at some point, but just getting used to *this* change seemed like more than enough to be getting on with right now.

On the schedule today were a battery of physical tests, including hours in a skullcap making any needed adjustments to her brain. After all the physical tests came the therapy sessions. There was a near-term goal to start getting her out in public, because the resocialization aspect was of “extreme importance” as the therapists said.

There was also the matter of how to tell Dale's immediate family. Her

situation was still secret—she was here under a different name (“Raine Wilson”) for the time being. But they also needed data *fast*, since RIDEs were being deployed in greater numbers increased the chance of an actual battlefield “crossride” as they called it. She even understood that her very own RIDE—the one she’d activated at the start of this mess—was in storage awaiting her attention, because how she related to the RIDE now was another important element of the study. But they’d be saving that part for later.

She strolled down the hospital corridor to the scanning room. This being Cape Nord, the nurses were all women. But it wasn’t just her butch looks that set her apart from them. It was the leonine ears and tufted tail.

The ears and tail that felt more normal than the breasts and vagina.

“Corporal Wilson, please have a seat in the scanner,” Dr. Pollard said. “We’ve modified the seat for your tail.”

“I almost forgot I had it,” Dale said. The Fusers had re-wired her brain for the new limb and the ears, but *not* the rest. It seemed like a *bit* of an oversight. She took her seat as requested, and the scanner technician did something on his control panel.

The doctor studied the display for a few moments, then nodded. “Mm. Good. The neural re-patterning is proving to be precisely as stable as in the other cases. Three days and no sign of any deterioration or reversion—and if there were to be such, we should have seen it by now.”

“That’s great, Doc, but will I be able to play the piano?”

Dr. Pollard raised his eyebrow. “Could you before?”

“Heh. No. Just being a smart alec, Doc.”

“I’ve heard that particular joke at *least* thirty-seven times. I suppose if nothing else, that proves you’re from here. You still have the Manly sense of humor. Or lack thereof.” He chuckled. “Regardless of whether you can play the piano, there’s another hobby you might consider taking up. You have a couple of visitors today who might be interested in discussing sewing.”

“...ah.” Dale had been wondering when that would come up. There was a collection of women’s social clubs all across Cape Nord, loosely referred to by the collective name “The Sewing Circle.” They gave women an excuse to get out of the house, or have others over to visit them. Pretty

much every woman who was married to anyone in Cape Nord was a member, but Dale's mother harbored a long-standing grudge because she'd never been able to advance further than a few social clubs on its fringes. "Thanks, Doc, but I'm really not sure I can deal with that right now."

"This is part of your therapy, and we *really* want you to meet them. So be ready to have a chat after lunch. Doctor's orders."

Dale rolled her eyes and sighed. "All right. If it's an *order*..." She supposed that whatever was coming, she probably deserved it. At least it was better than dying in combat on the front lines. *Probably*.

After lunch, Dale steeled herself for an ordeal and made her way to the small conference room as directed. After she entered the door, she stopped short and stared.

One of the two women there was no particular surprise—a black-haired woman in one of the businesslike Nextus military female officer's uniforms, cut much like Major Lind's though without as much fruit salad. It was labcoat white, like Dale's own new Research Division uniform, and she sported Captain's bars on the collar.

But the other...there might not be a single Cape Nord citizen of either gender who didn't know that heart-shaped face, with its masses of wavy strawberry blonde hair. Romance novelist Iphigenia Rose was one of Cape Nord's most famous citizens—and the very first person from Zharus to undergo the native version of the nanotech sex reassignment surgery originally pioneered on Earth.

And there she sat, legs crossed comfortably, in a nice dress a few notches more casual than those she was usually pictured wearing. "Hello, Corporal Combs," she said. "Please come in, we've been expecting you."

"Uh...call me Dale, please," Dale stammered. "Ah...I'm sorry, I never expected to meet...uh..."

"Me?" Iphigenia smiled—a smile even more stunning in person than in the photos. "I understand. I get that a lot. And may I introduce my colleague, Captain Nadene Garland of Nextus? As it turns out, we all have at least *one* thing in common."

The Captain was only slightly more feminine-looking than Dale. If it wasn't for the dark purple streak through her hair, she would have looked

every inch the humorless Nextus bureaucrat. It gave her character—for some value of character. “Corporal Combs.”

Dale saluted. “Ma’am.”

“No need for further formality, Corporal. I’m not here in any ‘official’ capacity, and we’re in different chains of command anyway. Here, for now, you can call me Nadene.”

“Understood...er...yes. Call me Dale.”

“We are here, as you might imagine, to help you acclimate—seeing as we both have rather extensive experience at that ourselves,” Iphigenia said. “We *do* have some other reasons for coming—but we’ll get to those. So, to start...you already know *my* background, I’m sure. Is there anything in particular you’d like to ask me about my own change?”

Dale was caught somewhere between the urge to stare at her and the urge to avert his gaze. “Er...well...” he stammered again. “When the change happened to me, I, uh, *freaked out*. But they showed me the tape of...yours, and...you...*didn’t*. Why?”

“First, because the whole thing was just a show. I’d been mentally preparing for it for weeks. But most importantly, I told them flat out that unless they could *definitely* prevent severe gender dysphoria, it was a no-go. I would *not* do it. I *had* to be comfortable in my own skin. I was fully prepared to move to Aloha and keep writing as an exile with my Man Card revoked. Then my PR people said...they said...” she laughed.

“Ironically, the people selling the idea to me appealed to my Manhood. I would be the *first* to undergo this process in a very public place. I would get the best medical and psychological treatment available, based on the extensive clinical records available from the process’s original use on Earth. They *guaranteed* I wouldn’t experience any dysphoria.”

“Understand, the process they use incorporates the neural re-patterning as part of the biosculpt process,” Nadene put in. “The RIDEs as they stand right now don’t have that. They *could*, theoretically, but we hadn’t put as much research into that area as Cape Nord has—we were mainly concerned about using the same ‘sculpt nanotech for the interface and tagging. The sex-change aspect was...well, largely an unintended consequence, because it was easier to use the tech as it was than re-engineer it to remove it.”

Iphigenia nodded. “But I was undergoing the *entire* process, to the greatest extreme possible. Because I figured, if I was going to embrace womanhood, there’d be no half-measures. I was going to be the most womanly woman who ever womaned.”

“*Cape Nord’s* idea of a woman, in any case,” Nadene added primly.

“That’s a fair cop, Captain Garland,” Iphigenia replied, nodding. “At least, from what outsiders see. At any rate, the whole deal about my ‘girly’ romance novels being ‘discovered’ to actually be written by a man? And the public ‘UnManning’? The whole thing was a PR stunt. The City Fathers and the Sewing Circle were both in on it.”

Dale blinked. “Wait, the Sewing Circle? I thought that was just a bunch of social clubs for women.”

Nadene raised her eyebrows and looked at the novelist. “I would like to hear that explanation, myself. But I’ve long suspected it’s an aspect to Cape Nord culture like our Game is in Nextus. Something a little too obscure for outsiders.”

Iphigenia smiled. “Captain, did you ever wonder why Sturmhaven became such a pariah while Cape Nord didn’t? Even though, to outsiders, women don’t have any political power and the ancient patriarchy seems to rule?”

“Seems’? Please, go on.”

Seems? Dale thought, puzzled. “My mother was always upset that she was never invited past the outer fringes of the Sewing Circle. I...won’t repeat some of the things she said about them.” Her mother had frequently called them a “bunch of stuck-up bitches”.

“That’s because the Sewing Circle is a *little* more selective than the name would imply, Dale,” Iphigenia said. “It’s really not so much a *club* as it is a sort of *shadow government* of Cape Nord—a way that we women who are in the know wield the not inconsiderable power of our feminine wiles to make sure that the Men only go as far as we want them to. You’d be surprised at how much one can accomplish with just a little gentle persuasion.” She paused. “I see by your expression that this is new to you. Considering your parents’ political leanings, I’m not surprised.”

“I’m not even from Cape Nord and I figured that one out,” Nadene said. “It makes sense. Ever since Sturmhaven passed their ‘Male

Transgression Laws' they've been sanctioned economically by Laurasian and Gondwanan governments alike—it's one of the big reasons why we're at war. But Cape Nord skates on by."

"The Sewing Circle sent representatives to the other polities' governments to lobby against sanctions on Cape Nord. It helped that all of those governments had ambassadors who had spent enough time in Cape Nord to know how it really worked and could testify on our behalf."

Iphigenia sighed. "The whole idea of 'Manliness,' and the 'battle of the sexes'? It's all a game, Dale. Always has been—in both Sturmhaven *and* Cape Nord. Seventy years ago the Valkyries' predecessors started taking their part of the game too seriously. It stopped being a game."

Captain Garland brightened in comprehension. "I see. So, it stopped being *consensual*. And that's when the founders of Cape Nord decided to head to the opposite side of the supercontinent."

"Fifteen thousand kilometers was just barely enough," Iphigenia said. "They almost went to Avalon, but couldn't get approval from the Planetary Assembly."

Avalon was a further five thousand kilometers west of Gondwana, in the middle of the North Thalassic Ocean. It was merely the size of South America on Earth, but hadn't been terraformed. Zharus was twice Earth's diameter with four times as much surface area (yet with the same surface gravity). It was a *big* world to get lost in.

Captain Garland raised an eyebrow. "Hewing a living from the desolate wastes of the frozen north?"

Iphigenia smiled. "A Manly challenge, to be sure. But it was just what they needed, to prove to *themselves* that the tropical Sturmhaven life hadn't...emasculated them." She chuckled. "Both of my grandfathers were among the first wave of emigrants. Ah, the stories they used to tell..."

"Since you seem to be done with your story, I suppose it's my turn now," Nadene said. "Mine is a little closer to Dale's. I was a wet-behind-the-ears Lieutenant working in the RIDE development program starting about a year ago. I helped develop the very first working prototypes, though there's a limit to just how much I can say about it. It's still mostly classified."

"In any case, back in March we were doing what we called a 'hot Fuse' test to make sure that the Fuse process would work correctly on the new

LNx frame. The AI running it sounded enthusiastic, oddly enough.

“Some of the equipment was being fussy that day, so like an idiot I decided to go into the chamber myself, standing right next to the bio-sim mannequin test article. It so happened that wasn’t the *only* equipment on the fritz that day. The Drive Extender unit’s targeting sensors were just *slightly* off. So when we initiated the test, well...” She cupped her breasts. “Things got complicated.”

“I can only imagine,” Iphigenia said. “I had a few weeks to psych myself up for the change. To come out of the blue like that...”

“The program was still top secret at the time. So they isolated me while they tried to fix what happened to my body. The only alterations they could correct were the ears and tail. You see, this kind of change was intended for verified transsexuals. Poor people born with a brain the opposite sex of their bodies. So the Fuse nanites didn’t touch those areas of my brain at all. Extreme dysphoria was the natural result.”

“I... I know how that feels,” Dale said.

Nadene nodded. “Nanosurgery was—and still is—out of the question. The nanites in our bodies help maintain hormonal balances and fix genetic errors and removing them would cause serious health problems. It takes time to genetically change a few trillion cells. They suggested more barbaric surgical methods, but I said no. Only then did they broach the idea of having Cape Nord’s experts re-write my brain so my body felt right—using techniques from an *alternative* nanotech dysphoria therapy developed on Earth. To make the brain match the body instead of the body matching the brain. Two solutions to the same problem.”

“More akin to micro brain surgery, really. Something we had already done several times here in Cape Nord,” Iphigenia said. “Including on yours truly. So that’s why she, and you, are here.”

“I still don’t understand why they just can’t kill them with an EMP and change me back,” Dale said.

“A body can’t withstand that kind of rapid change in quick succession,” Nadene said. “This is why, for now, this is a *one-way* trip. Perhaps in a few years it won’t be, but they don’t exactly have resources to devote to researching our little problems in the middle of wartime. So, for now, we must make the best of an...odd situation.”

‘Odd,’ she says. “How are you so *calm* about this?” Dale demanded. “I mean...this change...becoming...” She petered out, unsure what she’d even been going to say.

Nadene smiled. “Oh, believe me, I did my share of screaming at the wall and beating on things, when it happened. But I’ve had time to adjust with a lot of help from therapists. There are worse things in the world to have happen.” She shrugged. “At least I’ve still got a *whole* body, even if it has different parts now. And besides, the military’s paying a big cash settlement on top of covering all my medical costs, and I’ll have some pretty darned big favors owed when the Game starts back up again.” She shrugged. “And you never know what might happen, eventually.”

“But you’re not from Cape Nord,” Dale grumbled.

“Ah, but *I* am,” Iphigenia reminded her. “And I’ve got it even better, really. Even leaving aside what all the publicity did for my book sales.” She smiled slyly. “After all, I’m now part of the cabal secretly running things behind the scenes. Or who like to pretend we are, which in Cape Nord generally amounts to the same thing.”

Dale frowned. “About that ‘Sewing Circle’ thing...how does that even work? How can women seriously *run things* here?”

“Quite easily, really. Why do Men want to be Manly? To impress each other, yes, but more importantly, to impress *women*.” She beamed. “It’s a basic fact of civics that a government’s power flows from the consent of the governed. It’s just that in our case, that consent is more *implicit* than *explicit*.”

“So you hold your conspiracies in plain sight, and the Men just think you’re getting together to sew and gossip.” Nadene shook her head. “Cute.”

“A few Men do know about us, but most of them think it’s a harmless delusion on our part. And who knows? They may be right. Certainly, we don’t have ‘official’ government representation, beyond a few non-voting advisory positions in the Man Cave. But that’s how we like it. True power doesn’t require being *in* the government, it just requires being able to get the government to listen to you. And who do you think those Men in their Cave go home to every night?” She smirked. “Around here, more political matters have been influenced by the living room sofa than by any PAC.”

“And my mother isn’t a part of this because...?”

Iphigenia sighed. “Now that you’re one of us, given your background, we deemed it best to tell you—especially given that I’m supposed to be serving as a role model to you, and that wouldn’t work if you didn’t know the whole story. The thing is, our complaisance is largely an act, a front we put on for the Men’s benefit, because it makes it easy for us to lead the poor dears around by their, ah, *noses*. But not everyone *outside* the polity realizes this.”

“I think I see where this is going,” Nadene said.

“So, sometimes we have women move here because they fall in love with the front. Perhaps they just want to live in a simpler time, where Men will worship and pamper them.” Iphigenia shrugged. “Some of these can be introduced to the truth with a little care and attention. But others...we judge that it would be too damaging to their egos if we told them how things *really* are, the poor dears. They’d be happier if we keep them in the dark.”

Dale frowned, thinking back to the years he’d spent growing up. His mother had been a very happy homemaker, content to raise him and his siblings while his father brought home the proverbial (and sometimes literal) bacon. She wasn’t the kind of person Dale could easily imagine taking part in making larger decisions behind the scenes. “You...may be right about that.”

“As one of the closest women to her, you’ll have the right to tell her whatever you believe is best,” Iphigenia said. “If you think she could handle it...”

“I’ll...uh...think about it,” Dale said. “I’ve—I mean, she doesn’t even know about...*this*...yet. I’m still not sure how I’m going to break it to her.”

“You present us with a conundrum yourself, you know,” Iphigenia said. “Both of you, and your situation. We of Cape Nord had a great deal of experience with *intentional* ‘team changes’, which is of course why you came to us for help. But the idea that it could happen to someone by *accident* is new to us—as is the fact that the technology is being incorporated into these new machines of war. And there has already been speculation that RIDEs could see widespread *civilian* use after the war is over.”

“So you could end up with a *lot* of ‘brand new women,’” Nadene

mused.

“And brand new Men,” Iphigenia said. “We’re going to need to decide how to handle that while it’s still only a theoretical possibility, lest we be caught by surprise when it becomes practical. And that’s another part of why I’m here.” She smiled. “As the first woman to undergo the process myself, I was the natural choice to head up our committee to look into the issue. And so here I am.”

“And as far as the City Fathers are concerned, you’re just volunteering to give a poor little lost lamb the benefit of your experience out of the goodness of your heart,” Nadene smirked.

“Killing the proverbial two birds,” Iphigenia said. “It’s a nicely elegant solution, don’t you think?”

Dale nodded. “It makes some sense. What are the next steps?”

“What happens next is up to your therapists,” Nadene said. “This will have to go public soon, so expect your family to be notified. Unless you prefer they aren’t. I understand you’re unmarried, at least.”

“Er... I’m...I *was* considering an Eternal Bachelor endorsement on my Man Card. Though there are a few ex girlfriends who might find this... funny.” *Imani is going to laugh and laugh...then maybe ask me out for drinks.* Dale wondered if this would be a good time to bring up just how silly he’d started to find the whole thing after a year or two exposed to the wider world. Perhaps it was just as well.

“Consider your Man Card forfeit,” Iphigenia said. “And *irrelevant*, in any case. No more Games for you, my dear. One of the most pleasant surprises of changing teams I found was a profound weight off my shoulders.” She looked down at her chest. “*Figurative* weight. Appearances aside, there are no real ‘Rules’ or ‘Standards’ for feminine behavior in Cape Nord. No points to gain or lose. We do have a major role in the Games, but I’ll introduce you to it when I feel you’re ready. For now, just get used to that body.”

Dale grimaced. “To tell the truth, I’m already dreading...well..you know.” She blushed. “That...that monthly thing.”

“Menstruation, Dale. You can say the word,” Nadene said. “You’re more entitled to it *now* than *before*, after all.”

“We have to go through a few cycles so the doctors are sure we’re

healthy,” Iphigenia said. “Then we can use the pill.”

“There are some further applications of medical nanotechnology that look promising in that regard, but they’re still being researched,” Nadene said. “Maybe in a few years...”

Iphigenia raised an eyebrow. “Oh, really? I hadn’t heard about those.”

“It’s in my field, so I do keep up with developments,” Nadene said. “Especially given my new...*personal interest* in the matter.”

“Perhaps I could invite you to a meeting to discuss it with some others?” Iphigenia suggested. “There are a few women I know who would be *very* interested—including some who are married to prominent venture capitalists.”

“I’m at your disposal, Iphigenia.” Nadene chuckled. “And I think I’m beginning to see how the Sewing Circle gets things done.”

“So...uh...” Dale said. “...is there anything else *I* should be doing now?”

“Just follow the program your therapists have laid out for you,” Iphigenia said. “They *are* the professionals, after all. But Nadene and I will be around to observe, discuss, and advise. I’m particularly interested in giving your RIDE a close examination, given all their implications.”

“Uh...I guess I am, too,” Dale admitted. “I didn’t exactly have much of a chance the first time.”

Nadene nodded. “Then we’ll all look forward to it, I guess.”

“In any event, that was all we had to tell you at this point,” Iphigenia said, rising. “We will be in touch with you soon about the next steps.”

“Uh...all right,” Dale said. “I guess I’ll see you then.”

That evening, Dale lay in her bunk staring at the ceiling as she reflected on the events of the day. Encountering Iphigenia Rose had been a surprise, but the real shock had come in what she’d had to say about the real purpose of the Sewing Circle. Thinking about it, Dale supposed it did explain a lot. Like why so many women actually *stayed* in Cape Nord rather than leaving for somewhere with a more modern outlook. They were playing their *own* Game, just with vastly different rules.

In an odd way, the knowledge actually made Dale feel a little bit better about the place. As a Man, he’d increasingly felt guilty about taking

part in a system with such old-fashioned attitudes toward women—but now, knowing that the women had their own methods of evening the odds changed everything. As well as, well, *being* one...

I guess Nextus isn't the only place where everything is a game, she thought as she drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 3

Fort Oslo Nextus Military Installation

Cape Nord

June 14, 121 A.L.

Dale sat on a bench in the maintenance garage, paging through the media tablet containing the RIDE's documentation, which had *finally* caught up with her. It began with about three pages of warnings in increasingly large font and bright colors about how it wasn't a good idea to Fuse an (f) model if you'd been born an (m), and vice versa. "Sheesh, *now* you tell me," Dale muttered.

In addition to the tech specs, the documentation gave her RIDE's name as "Sarabe." Dale wasn't entirely sure why her RIDE even *had* a name, unless maybe it was to help differentiate the genders—but the name "Sarabe" was unfamiliar enough that it might not be immediately recognized as female, so she wasn't sure that was necessarily the reason. Maybe it was for use in command phrases, like the "Alexa" keyword from ancient Amazon hardware, so your RIDE would more easily be able to tell when you were giving it an order, and other RIDES wouldn't get confused?

Other than the warnings and such, there really wasn't much in the manual that Dale didn't already know from her experience with the Ad-I bikes. It was some small consolation that she (well, at the time, *he*) had at least been *almost* right, and if she hadn't had the bad luck to pick a female model she would have been...well, he'd probably still have been busted to Private, or something, but he'd probably have figured the experience was worth it.

The officious Lieutenant in charge of the fort's mecha pool had a pair of snow leopard ears and a tail, himself. The tail was long and comically fluffy. "Corporal Combs, unit Sarabe has been assigned to you with a slightly downgraded DE frame. If you'll check your manual you'll see that 'MCA' stands for 'Medium *Command* Armor'. Yes, this was originally intended for one of the Captains. As of now, with the command assist units removed, it is yours."

“Thank you, sir,” Dale said.

“The so-called ‘RI’ that replaces the Ad-I in the older models are a vast improvement. They are conversational and obey orders with much greater comprehension. They even seem to have a *personality*. The higher-ups assure me that this is just a vastly improved front-end to the AI. However, you are expected to help maintain your equipment.”

“Yessir. I did a fair share of work on my old Tornado and Chinook. The tech doesn’t seem too different.”

“At heart, it’s not. The big differences are in that new RI core, and associated internal seals and such. There’s a link to the repair manuals in the back of the operator’s manual. Read those, too, when you have the time.”

“Yessir.”

The lieutenant waved a hand toward the open hangar door. “Once you’ve saddled up, head out there and follow the signs to the test range. We aren’t real busy in these parts, with the major fronts of the war being so far off to the south, so you should have the place pretty much to yourself.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“So, *please* try not to make any messes I’ll have to clean up.”

“Understood, sir. Will do my best, sir.”

Dale waited to roll her eyes until the Lieutenant had turned his back to stalk away—nearly swishing her nose with that tail of his. Not that it was exactly a surprise he’d think of her as a screw-up. The story of what she’d done had presumably made its way to all branches of the gossip grapevine by now. In any case, here she was, ready for the next stage of her therapy—which was going to be going ahead and operating this RIDE, and seeing how her new “condition” affected the familiarization process.

Dale was a little surprised they were just letting her do this by herself, without any observers or onlookers peering over her shoulder. But then, it wasn’t as if she was ever *really* by herself. She was sure an army of camera drones were following her around at all times, recording her every movement and nuance of behavior for later perusal. There was probably a data tap on the RIDE’s computer, too. But at least they were letting her have the *illusion* of privacy.

She approached the RIDE, which was awaiting her in its skimmer

form. In this mode, it was based off of a CS-9 Tempest Command Skimmer with leonine touches to the armor shell and roughly paw-shaped lifter pods—two in front, a bigger one in back. Effectively an oversized skimmer tricycle, the Tempest was a sleek, semi-enclosed craft in which officers could command the battlefield, when combined with the communications specialists. Where there should have been antennae and comm lasers there were now stubs or armored covers. Modifications aside, it was all ready for her to mount up and pull out.

A red light on the instrument cluster turned yellow after she stepped onto the saddle. She thumbed the activation panel, and was greeted by a flashing warning. “Please perform manual startup,” she read. The procedure came up on the screen. *They didn’t shut it down correctly after they got me out. Well, okay.*

So, one by one, she brought each system online. Sarium batteries fully charged, hardlight enviro seal and aeroshield nominal, interlock activation, connect dynothermic regulator, infracell capacitors up, cavorite lifters go... it took the better part of five minutes before she could get to the last step. “RI to Active Mode.”

“System ready. What are your orders?” a mellifluous yet rumbly female voice purred. It was the same voice she remembered from those first few moments waking up Fused.

Dale considered. The tone of voice was much friendlier than her old Ad-I had been, at least. “We’ll be doing a standard shakedown for new field units. Confirm.”

“Confirmed. Shakedown procedure is loaded. Proceed?”

“Affirmative.” She *could* just have said “yes,” Dale supposed, but using big words made her feel more important.

“Acknowledged. Proceeding.” The lifters fired, and the bike lifted from the ground. It moved a lot more smoothly than the old “Schnook” or “Tomato,” she had to admit—but on the other hand, it was a lot larger, too.

They pulled out onto the tarmac of the staging area, and headed for the far edge where a road led off toward the RIDE practice field. Dale kept her hands on the controls but let the AI drive them, while she got used to how the vehicle moved. She could take manual control a little later, but just as well to learn to drive where fewer prying eyes would see her every goof-

up.

The practice field wasn't far away, under a small hardlight dome that would prevent any ordnance misfires from harming the rest of the base. Within the dome were a variety of terrains—urban, grassland, desert, forest, arctic—with targets and obstacles located in each. There were simulated enemy positions that could be activated, even to the point of including mobile enemy forces in augmented reality. Dale didn't plan to do anything that fancy today, though.

Once inside the dome, Dale switched to manual control and started teaching herself to drive. It wasn't too different from the old Ad-I bikes, but a larger vehicle had different steering characteristics. Manual control or not, the AI running the thing wouldn't let her outright crash it into anything, for which small favor Dale was thankful.

After a few minutes of driving practice, she pulled up in front of a target range, with hardlight targets that would register hits from RIDE weapons. In spite of herself, Dale grinned. "Sarabe, weapons hot," she said.

"Weapons hot," the computer voice echoed, as the indicators on the dashboard flipped from green to red. A holographic head-up display appeared in the air in front of her.

"Well, now. Let's see what you're armed with."

"My weapons loadout includes two SR-88 5 kilowatt pulse cannons, two HMM-10 mini-missile launchers, one—"

"Uh...that's enough, Sarabe. Thank you."

"You're welcome, Corporal Combs," Sarabe replied.

"Uh...don't mention it." Dale wasn't sure what had moved her to thank a dumb machine, but it just seemed right to be polite to something that talked to you. The old Schnook hadn't been programmed to say much of anything. *I guess at least I'll be safe when the robot uprising comes*, Dale thought wryly.

Dale centered the reticle on the target in front of her and squeezed the trigger. The pulse cannons mounted over the left and right lifter pods fired, neatly holing the target. "Nice." The guns weren't as powerful as most other vehicles of that size would have mounted, but this bike's original intent was for commanding soldiers on the battlefield, not getting into the thick of fighting itself.

“Weapon effectiveness verified,” Sarabe said. “Targeting sensors green. Proceed to Fuse test?”

Dale swallowed. Of course, she *was* going to have to Fuse. That was part of the point of the exercise. And ever since she had understood what was expected of her, she’d been trying to psyche herself up to it. It did have just a *few* negative associations, after all. She was tempted to put it off for another day...but if she did that, what was going to stop her from continuing to put it off? “Yes,” she whispered, then cleared her throat and said it again, louder. “Yes, Sarabe. Proceed to Fuse test.”

“Affirmative,” the RI said. The Tempest started to hum around her.

Ad-I cycles had their quirks, some of them were bad enough that the models had earned some derisive nicknames. The Tornado was the “Tomato” and the Chinook the “Schnook”. Transition from cycle to armor mode took nearly thirty seconds for all the parts to slide into place correctly.

From hum to completion took only a third of that time. Dale felt a tingle as the Fuser nanites infused her body from head to foot. Then there was an almost dizzying shift in perspective.

:Implant online. Are you in distress, Corporal Combs?: Sarabe’s voice said in her head.

Dale looked around, and down at herself, and took stock of her situation. She’d Fused Tornados and Chinooks dozens of times, and had thought she knew what to expect—being enclosed by a giant suit of armor, like a power-amplified spacesuit. But she didn’t feel that, this time. It might have been the neural link that these new nanites provided, but she simply felt like she *was* a four-meter-tall metal lion-woman now.

“In distress...? Uh...no. I think I’m in a *lioness*.” Dale chuckled nervously, looking down at her hands and flexing the fingers. She watched the metal pieces slide in and out of each other, as the neural feedback provided a completely natural feeling of joints flexing in her own hands. “This...this is amazing.”

Dale felt an odd undercurrent of...*frustration* somewhere in the back of her mind. It was a strange sensation. Was the RIDE’s neural link system somehow rechannelling and echoing the frustration she felt about her own general situation? It felt strange, and a little foreign, but then, these RIDEs

were new technology, and her own situation wasn't exactly a natural one to her either.

"I'm glad you're enjoying it," Sarabe said. For a moment, her voice seemed warmer than the monotone command responses.

Dale blinked. *She's glad?* It was on the tip of her tongue to ask about that, then she remembered what the Lieutenant had said, about the machines seeming to have personalities. Clearly, it had to be some very clever interface programming, to be able to come off as this natural.

But really, she didn't have time to go down the rabbit hole of playing conversation right now. There were still more tests to go through. "Ah... right. So, I guess, maneuvers testing now."

"Affirmative, Corporal," Sarabe said. "You may move us when ready."

It was *nothing* like the Tomato or the Schnook, where getting the thing to move smoothly in armor mode took very deliberate movements. A significant part of an infantry soldier's brain power was needed just to keep from falling on your faceplate. But this? This was just a literal stroll down the range.

Dale remembered what she'd read in the manual. Fuser nanites infused her body and brain, creating a direct connection to the powered armor. It might as well be her own flesh.

Well, time to play with it. She took a tentative step forward, then another. With each step, the movement came much more smoothly and it felt much more natural. It did feel a little weird, having metal for skin instead of flexible, well, *skin*, but it wasn't anything she couldn't get used to. She spun around, leaped into the air, tried a jump-kick, nearly landed on her butt because she wasn't any good at jump-kicks, but managed to catch herself and decided to keep things a bit less fancy from then on. She moved into the forested area, and squeezed between the trees—which seemed a lot less taller to her now.

The more she moved, the more natural it felt. She was a four-meter-tall soldier, armed with pulse guns and considerably more agility than an Ad-I. And, assuming it worked as advertised, she was immune to the lethal qubitite sand that had cost so many lives, by dint of the new internal hardlight seal technology that accompanied these new designs. If it weren't that the most important elements of the technology had leaked practically

as soon as they'd been invented, Nextus would have been *invincible!* As it was, they only had a *slight* advantage now, but even so.

For the first time, Dale felt a twinge of real regret unrelated (well, *mostly* unrelated) to the sex change. If he hadn't screwed things up, surely he'd have been given one of these of his own before too very much longer—and gotten to experience its joys while still being male. But, on the other hand, he might well have been expected to enter combat that way, which could have led to injury or death, whereas now she was the subject of an extensive research project that shouldn't take her anywhere near the front lines for the time being, so...better female than buried? It didn't exactly rhyme, but she didn't expect to be wed any time soon so she couldn't really say “better married than buried.” (“Better wed than dead”?)

After a short time of moving through the forest, they crossed a climate boundary into the arctic area, and came upon another target range. Dale lined up a shot with the pulse cannons, which were now mounted along her forearms, and *almost* hit the bull's eye. Well, it wasn't bad given how little practice she'd actually had.

As she finished, a chime sounded, reminding her that she had another appointment with Iphigenia and Nadene back at the hospital shortly. Well, it was probably just as well. She supposed she ought to take things slowly, and this was just about enough time with the RIDE for now. She triggered the de-Fuse, settling back into the saddle as Sarabe changed back to command trike mode around her. “Time to head back now, I guess.”

As she pulled into the parking lot assigned to her at the Fort Oslo mecha pool, she patted the dashboard awkwardly. She felt a little silly talking to a dumb machine, but it just *felt right* to be polite. Even if it didn't mean anything to the machine, it meant something to *her*. “Uh...well, thanks for the fun today. I'll come back and see you again as soon as I can.”

“Thank you, Corporal Combs,” Sarabe said. “I'll look forward to it.”

Captain Garland and Iphigenia Rose looked like they'd spent the last couple of hours talking together while waiting for Dale to show up. The conference room table had several half-empty plates of snacks, including a stack of small pastel-colored cakes, a nearly empty carafe of iced tea, all sitting on a lace-edged white tablecloth.

Iphigenia was more on-form, wearing a low-cut red dress, heels, and full makeup. Her usually-wavy hair had been styled, looking smooth and shiny, draped over her left shoulder.

Captain Garland, on the other hand, looked just the same. Though she seemed more at ease with Cape Nord's most famous author in the room this time.

"Dale, nice you could join us today," Iphigenia said. "Please, have a seat. Take a snack if you like. I brought *petit fours* cakes. Baked them myself."

Dale raised an eyebrow. "Really? You strike me as the kind of person who'd have an army of servants to do that kind of thing."

"Well...not servants. Autokitchen." She shrugged. "But I pushed all the buttons myself, anyway."

"And I suppose that counts for something," Nadene put in. "Here in Cape Nord, anyway."

"*Anyway*," Iphigenia said. "I decided to dress to the nines today and did a little bodysculpting besides. There's an important issue I've been told we shouldn't put off much longer. We have to inform your family of your, uh, accident."

Oh, crap. "So soon?"

"Fraid so," Nadene said. "We've actually had our first battlefield emergency crossride incident the past couple days—the day we first met, in fact. The victim will be here within sixty hours. So we need to get you into the next phase before they arrive. That means facing the music." The Captain smiled. "And you're not the only one who's going to have to say hello to family again." She tapped herself on the chest. "I'll finally get to see my wife and kids again after four months. Though I'm frankly looking forward to it, awkwardness aside."

"Uh...well, congratulations, I guess?" Dale said. "But...uh...I'm just fine with staying anonymous for now. My family...the traditional Cape Nord gender roles...uh...that's a whole can of worms I'd rather just leave on the shelf, if you know what I mean."

"Unfortunately I don't think we have much choice here," Iphigenia said. "You're the first official accidental sex-change of the war. Captain Garland's situation is similar, but she came from the development program

—a whole different kettle of fish. Plus, she’s a Nextan.

“There are enough Cape Nord boys on the front lines that there’s a good chance what happened to you will happen again, to one of them. So you can’t hide away from this. We have to meet it head-on. We have to show the rest of Cape Nord that you’re already a well-adjusted woman.”

“But what if I’m *not*?” Dale asked plaintively. “I mean, I don’t *feel* like a well-adjusted woman.”

“It’s very simple to *act* the part,” Iphigenia said reasonably. “Once you’ve put on the act for long enough, it takes on its own reality. We’re here to help you with that. And, with that goal in mind, it’s time you gave serious thought to taking the next step for yourself.”

Dale stared at her. “And...what ‘next step’ is that?”

“Well, to be perfectly blunt, your shape needs to be more womanly. Not, I should add, in an exaggerated way. But enough to demonstrate that you’re obviously on our ‘team’ as it were.”

Dale groaned...but it wasn’t wholly unexpected. “So, what, bigger boobs?”

“For a start. I have some recommendations,” Iphigenia said, handing her a tablet. “Have a look and tell me what you like.”

“I worked with her on this, Dale,” Captain Garland said. “There’s nothing here that will impact your physical fitness for duty.”

The image on screen depicted Dale in a uniform variant with a black knee-length skirt. But it wasn’t the uniform that drew her real attention, it was the vital statistics. Five centimeters shorter, ten kilos lighter, shoulder-length hair, and C-cup breasts. The last part was something of a surprise. “I was expecting you’d want my chest, well, larger.”

Iphigenia smiled. “That size is quite comfortable. I’ve sported girls that size more often than not. You don’t need a wasp waist and a pair of double-Ds, unless you *really* want them; plenty of Cape Nord women are petite. Swipe left to see some different outfits. I’ll be providing your civilian wardrobe.”

Dale sighed. “Is all this really necessary?”

“I’m afraid so. Not only for *your* sake, mind, but for all those who will follow you,” Iphigenia said. “If we want them to have the best chance of acceptance, we must have *you* make the best possible first impression. A

mistake now could set *them* back by years.”

Dale swiped left, past a number of outfits. They all had one thing in common. “I don’t see a pair of pants in the lot.”

“When was the last time you saw a woman wearing pants in Cape Nord?” Iphigenia said. “Or with short hair, for that matter?”

Dale rolled her eyes. “Oh, of *course*, Cape frigging Nord. I’ve only lived here my whole life. You’d think I’d notice.”

“Your *military* wardrobe *will* have both uniform pants *and* skirts, in accordance with the Nextus military uniform code,” Nadene pointed out. “You won’t be forced to wear one or the other. And if you want your hair short again, just visit the barber after you come back from civilian activities. It’s not as if it’s terribly hard to sculpt it longer again should you have the need.”

The smile of sheer relief she gave the Captain made Iphigenia noticeably uncomfortable.

“Don’t thank me yet, Corporal,” Garland continued. “The very fact that this technology is capable of this is a propaganda victory for Sturmhaven. We expect all volunteers from Cape Nord to request assignments where it’s not a risk.”

“In the worst case, new male volunteers from Cape Nord will simply stop,” Iphigenia said. “Like it or not, Dale, the fact that you were the first makes you a public face. There’s going to be a lot of media interest in you.”

“NextusMil will keep that to a minimum, but it *is* necessary,” Nadene said. “Sturmhaven has already used this technology to swell their ranks—mostly with unwilling male conscripts.”

Dale felt nauseous at the thought of any man being *forced* to go through with what he had. And who knew if they had Cape Nord’s neural rewrite process to help with the dysphoria?

She sighed. “Well, since I guess there’s no going back, I might as well go forward. At least a little.”

Iphigenia smiled. “It won’t be as bad as all that, I promise. And remember—cosmetic matters aside, there are *no* rules or requirements for being a woman. No one is going to insist that you go out and find some unwitting man upon whom to work your wiles.”

Nadene snorted. “Not the *first* week, anyway.”

Iphigenia rolled her own eyes, genteelly. “Now, Captain...”

“We actually have a good number of Cape Nord women in NextusMil, believe it or not,” Nadene said. “Now that I know what I know, I guess we provide them with the venue to take charge of things *openly* that they couldn’t get in Cape Nord.”

“What a woman does outside of Cape Nord is her own business,” Iphigenia said. “Besides, the same risks for an emergency crossride exists for them as it did for you, Dale. How we’ll deal with that if it should happen, we’re still working that out. The City Fathers are considering a special Man Card that allows them to bypass the Game entirely.”

“Sounds entirely too reasonable to pass,” Nadene said. “But I guess you never know.”

Dale sighed, then looked at the images of her further-altered self on the tablet, wearing all kinds of dresses and other feminine things. “Well, might as well get this over with.”

“It won’t be all bad,” Iphigenia promised. “You might very well find that you will *feel* better after the sculpt, once your hormones have had a chance to reach a more natural balance. And, personally, I find it always feels nicer to look nicer.”

“I’ll get back to you on that,” Dale told her.

As Dale climbed into the biosculpt chamber, she realized that she’d gotten so distracted by the conversation surrounding her re-sculpt that she’d entirely forgotten the reason it was necessary—her impending reunion with her family.

Oh, yeah, so, they want to make sure everything goes well. So naturally they’re gonna reintroduce me to the people who raised me to fit into a society that I’m now on the complete opposite side of. That’s gonna go marvelously, I just know.

Her thoughts turned back to Sturmhaven, and what Captain Garland had said about them. *God, is there nothing those barbarians can’t mess up?* It was just a touch ironic, but Dale thought she could find it in her to be just a little more committed to the war cause now. *Can’t let them win and maybe start doing this to people wholesale.*

She made a silent vow that, no matter how annoying or inconvenient

the whole process might get, she was nonetheless going to do her best to make it successful. If she could turn her screw-up into something that helped the war effort, it might just be one of the only worthwhile things she'd ever done.

“We’re giving you the anesthetic, Corporal Combs,” the doctor said when the pod closed. “We hope you like the results. Good night.”

“Thanks, Doctor. I hope I like the results, too.”

Chapter 4

June 15, 121 A.L.

Dale examined herself in the full-length mirror—with all her clothes on, this time. Goodness knew she'd spent enough time looking at herself with them off. Her new body shape was...impressive. Not in the sense of being excessive, or even in the sense of being attractive, but just in the sense of being...*her*.

That woman in the mirror is me. Me with clothes on.

Much as she'd have preferred pants, she had to admit she cut an impressive figure in her dress whites with skirt. For all that they were dress whites for a corporal, and not terribly fancy in any case, they still looked sharp and crisp.

And that face...

It was just a little softer, chin a bit pointier, eyes a bit larger. A few subtle changes made a huge difference. *I look a lot like...my older sister.*

The ears were still a lion's, though, and the skirt had been designed with a slot in the back for her tail. Her hair had been turned a tawny color to match them. *Well, if nothing else, those "tags" will demonstrate how fancy this new sculpting tech is.*

Iphigenia, who would be along for this reunion, looked in. "How are you holding up, Dale?"

Dale started to fold her arms, but didn't want to wrinkle her uniform. "I'm fine. I think. Bra straps aren't digging into my shoulders anymore."

She smiled. "That's good. Shall we get going?"

Captain Garland wouldn't be present for this—she was in Nextus, meeting her own family again. NextusMil would be breaking this to the public in general today as well.

Dale wondered if her family had actually been *told* yet, or if they were just going to spring her on them as a complete surprise. She couldn't imagine that the "complete surprise" approach would have a very good outcome, but on the other hand, how likely were they to believe the kind of story NextusMil would be telling them? Dale still found it hard to believe,

herself, and it had happened *to* her.

She knew the address by heart, of course. 542 Stanton Road, Stanton Gallery. A modest two-storey home: five bedrooms, three bathrooms, living, family, and dining rooms. It was located just to one side of one of the main prism light shafts in the cavern, so they usually got good sunlight, even if it wasn't necessarily the warmest.

She was the second of five children, and her older sister Darcy wasn't likely to be there. There was something going on between her and their parents Dale didn't understand. It being summer, the younger kids would be home from school, so she could probably expect to see them. What she was going to say to *any* of them, she honestly didn't have any Zharusly idea.

A short while later, Dale sat in the car, watching out the window as it rolled through familiar territory, growing more and more nervous the closer they got to home. She hadn't expected to be back here for quite some time. Before the event, Dale's next furlough wouldn't have been due for months. And yet, surprise! Here she was. In fact, it was going to be rather a surprise for *everyone*, for various different reasons. It felt like there should be cameras filming it for a reality vid show. But then, given the newsworthiness of the event, there probably *were*.

The car passed by places she knew so well—her elementary and middle schools, and the local NordCo General Fabbery that was the usual hangout for bored teens—when they weren't out playing in one of the parks. Cape Nord preferred to give their children places to have adventures—creeks full of pollywogs to catch, playgrounds of things to climb in and around, bicycles to get as far from home as they could, as long as they returned before dark. They were given a lot of free rein growing up to get muddy, skinned knees, even broken bones. Such things built character. And there was nothing stopping the girls from joining with the boys at that age—the Games came later. It was only in the late teens that boys became Men. What happened with the girls at that time Dale hadn't known about—at least, until now.

Dale wasn't breaking the news to her parents *herself*. That was actually up to Iphigenia Rose, representing the Sewing Circle, and one of the City Fathers. Everything was supposed to be timed so that she would arrive shortly after Dale's family was told.

Two blocks away the car abruptly stopped on the side of the road. The internal comm rang an urgent tone. Iphigenia looked upset when Dale answered. “Dale, there’s been a...complication.”

Dale’s ears perked. “What do you mean by that?”

There was a sound of shouting in the background. The comm only showed Iphigenia’s head, filtering out whatever was going on near her, but not the noise. “Your parents aren’t taking this well.”

“I honestly didn’t think they would. Are we still doing this?”

“You’ll have to give us a few minutes to calm them down first, dear.”

“Good luck with *that*,” Dale said, with feeling. “If you manage it, let us kids know how, because that’s more than *we* were ever able to do.”

“Give us a little more time. I think they’re just not convinced. We’ll let you know when they’re ready.”

The car waited nearly half an hour before they moved on. Dale felt a growing knot of anxiety in her belly, like a slug of concrete. Then they were in front of the house. Like most homes in Cape Nord it was made of brick, with some wood siding for aesthetic touches. Her father’s old car was in the driveway—it had *wheels*, not lifters. It was his pride and joy. There were the flower boxes in the windows, her mother’s work. The area got enough natural light that allowed a small lawn. There were a few toys strewn about it.

It all looked so deceptively *normal*. If you ignored the media floaters, the official Nextus military skimmer parked in the street, and Iphigenia’s distinctive rose-colored Donizetti skimmer. Dale swallowed the lump in her throat for the sixteenth time, then climbed out of the car, went up the steps, and opened the door.

She had gone over *what* she was going to say a hundred times over the last few days, and fifty more times in the car, and had finally settled on an approach of attempted normality. “Mom, Dad, I’m home!” she called out—as if the fact that she was now the wrong biological sex was something that might simply be *overlooked* if she just pretended hard enough that everything was normal.

The temperature inside the house felt like it dropped ten degrees.

The youngest, Conway, age eight, stared at her, gaping like a fish. Next in age was brother Jerry, age sixteen. He’d idolized Dale for joining

NextusMil and could recite specifications for a half dozen AIDE models like Dale's Tornado. Now, his face wore an expression of utter bewilderment.

Then there was Cindy, age eighteen. She resembled her mother more strongly than her older sister, which made the tomboyish preferences when she was younger a subject of *much* disapproval from their mother. Their mother was adamant that she not leave home until she married—whether to a Man or another woman. She was starting at Cape Nord University in the fall. She kept tilting her head left and right, trying to make sense of the young woman she was seeing.

The eldest, Darcy, six years older than Dale, was nowhere to be seen, which was no surprise. Darcy was married to a Man named Scoresby—Dale had forgotten the Man's first name—a young politician in the caverns on the other end of the polity. Their mother alternated between being proud she was doing so well for herself and aggravated that she seemed to have largely cut ties with the rest of the family.

And then there were Dale's parents themselves. Her father, Bill, had adopted the suburban father Man style, and looked very much like the depiction of a father in one of the ancient sitcoms, or perhaps that clip art figure associated with the Church of the Sub-Genius—even to the point of occasionally smoking a pipe. The pipe was nowhere in sight at the moment, however.

And then there was her mother, Gloria—the very model of the Cape Nord housewife and mother, perhaps even more than she knew. She wore her brown hair in a bun, and an expression of stern disbelief.

"I know you didn't expect to be seeing me again so soon," Dale continued desperately. "Or to be seeing me...well...like *this*. But here I am!"

After a long moment of silence, Dale's mother spoke. "How do we even know that you are...who they *say* you are?"

But Dale had been ready for that question, at least. "Remember the time I wanted to go to band camp in Burnside but you didn't want me to be that far away, and I sulked for days? Remember the time you and Dad had that big argument about whether I could cut my hair in a military style buzz cut in my senior year? Remember the birthmark I have on my left...ah...place? It's still there, by the way."

Utter silence. Iphigenia's expression was one of encouragement, but

from the look in her eyes she harbored some doubts. Everything was going pear-shaped very quickly.

“You get my son...my dau...my *child* out of your army *right now!*” Gloria Combs snarled with an edge of pure fury Dale had only heard during an argument with Darcy. “HOW DARE you do this to him! HOW DARE YOU VIOLATE MY SON!”

The generic NextusMil officer they had sent to break the news responded with a certain unflappability in the face of sheer fury. “Your child has volunteered for an important analysis of her...situation, Mrs. Combs. She is quite psychologically able to adapt.”

This was never going to be a good day. Dale sighed. “Look...I think it’s a little too early for those discussions right now. This is...kind of an adjustment, but I’m still fundamentally *me*. And I don’t see any need to change anything *else* just yet.”

“I don’t know who you are, but you’re not my son,” Gloria said.

Dale rolled her eyes. “Well, not *anymore*...”

“The military is *no place* for a woman!” she continued. “And I want you out of it! Right now!”

“As we told you, she’s not currently eligible for a medical discharge,” the NextusMil officer said.

“What happened to me was my own stupid fault, mother,” Dale said. “But I’ll adapt. I have to. Anyway, I’m an adult, so it’s *my* decision in the end.”

Bill turned to his wife, then gently grasped her shoulders. “Honey, I think we need to cool off for a while. All of us do.”

“I know how much of a shock this is,” Iphigenia said. “It’s *no less* of a shock to your own child. But she’s hale and healthy and getting our best treatment to make sure she stays that way.”

“Holy shit,” Jerry finally said.

“Jerry! *Language!*” Gloria rebuked.

The young man just nodded, then smiled a little. “Can I have your IDE model collection? You’re a girl. I mean, you should have dolls or stuffed animals or something.”

“I’m a *woman*,” Dale corrected him. “I can collect models if I want to. Besides, I spent hours building those.”

“Excuse me,” Gloria said, shaken. “I’m going to lay down for awhile.”

“Go ahead. I need to get my thoughts together,” Bill said. He looked like he needed a stiff drink. There was a well-stocked liquor cabinet in the living room.

Cindy, who hadn’t spoken yet, gave her new sister an appraising look. “So if one of those RIDE things did that to you, what would happen if I got into a male one? Would I end up with a dick?”

“Yes, you would,” the Nextus officer said. “In fact, your polity has been using the same process *without* a RIDE for several years now—usually in the opposite direction, but there is no reason it wouldn’t work in reverse as well.” All eyes turned to Iphigenia Rose, who once again looked distinctly uncomfortable.

“Cindy!” Gloria exclaimed.

“Just asking questions, Ma,” the younger woman said, shrugging.

“This is going to be awkward for everybody, I know,” Dale said.

“Maybe I should go, come back later when everyone’s had more time to get used to the idea.”

“See you in, like, five years then,” Cindy snarked.

“Anyway, this sort of thing is going to happen to lots more people, in both directions,” Dale continued. “As the first—well, *one* of the first accidents, whatever I do could make stuff easier or harder for everyone who comes after me, especially the ones from here. I’ve never exactly been real big on responsibility, I know, but...sometimes when your life gets changed, some of your attitudes do, too. So I’ve got a duty—not just to the army, but to the future of people like me. And I’m going to carry those duties out.” She started to cross her arms for emphasis, then stopped as she realized how awkward that would look. She still wasn’t sure if she should put them over, across, or under her breasts. She settled with putting them on her hips.

Iphigenia nodded at something, then walked over to Dale. “I think it’d be best if we left the house for a while, Dale. To let things settle in.”

“I could use a break from this,” Dale admitted quietly.

The Nextus officer also nodded at something, and at the City Father, who had remained silent the whole time, until now. “I think we’ve accomplished all we can here for now,” he said. “Perhaps we should give it a

rest until evening, or possibly tomorrow.”

“Time to reflect,” Iphigenia added. “We’ll put off any statements to the media until then as well.”

“If any of you need to talk, you know my comm code,” Dale said, looking pointedly at her siblings. *And if Mom or Dad calls, I’ll just let the voicemail get it.*

“Okay, then. Let’s go,” Iphigenia said, tugging Dale’s elbow. “We have a surprise for you outside. Don’t worry, it’s a good one,” she whispered.

“Oh, yay,” Dale said weakly. “A surprise. Haven’t had many of *those*, lately...”

As they were leaving, some chatter broke out. As the front door closed behind them she heard Jerry say “Did you see she has a *tail*?”

“Well, that went...about like I thought it would,” Dale sighed. “At least we got out with our lives.” Tears started welling up almost immediately. “Shit. Shit! I was. I was.... *Such. An. Idiot.* I couldn’t wait for the damn *manuals*. I just *had* to be the first in the Fort with a RIDE.”

“Not to be insensitive, but it doesn’t seem to have been *entirely* bad for you,” Iphigenia pointed out. “You seem to have found a calling, at least. Quite a change from the ‘directionless slacker’ your military performance evaluations spoke of.”

Dale blinked. “They said that about me, huh? And here I thought I had them all fooled.”

“I think you’ll find NextusMil is more observant than you give us credit for, Corporal,” the officer said. “You could have made Sergeant by now, if you’d put real effort into it.”

Dale chuckled. “What, and work for a living?”

The neighbors were in the streets, trying to get a good look at her. The Law had cordoned off the area a block to either side, just in case. But curious residents pointed cameras at her—or maybe they were just pointing them at Iphigenia, who wasn’t exactly a stranger to Cape Nord publicity and was much more attractive.

Strangely, the official NextusMil car she had arrived in was no longer present. In its place was a small black limousine skimmer with darkened windows. When Dale noticed it had Man Cave government plates she had a pretty good idea of who to expect inside.

A liveried chauffeur got the door and nodded Dale in first, then Iphigenia. The rear of the limo had two rows of facing seats, and as they slid onto the seats to the rear, Dale said, “Hello, sis.”

Darcy Scoresby was on the other seat, with the partition window to the driver open next to her head. As the chauffeur slid back into his seat, Darcy said, “Home,” then closed the window and turned back to face them. “Well, hello there, little ‘brother.’ You do get yourself into interesting messes, don’t you?”

Darcy was another model Cape Nord woman. Her long brown hair was done up in a loose braid, and her pastel blue dress set off the blue of her eyes. A compact purse rested on the seat beside her, with a half-empty flute of an orange beverage in the drink holder to her left. “There’s a carafe of mimosas in the mini-fridge, glasses in the rack there, if you’re thirsty,” Darcy added as an afterthought.

“Thank you for coming,” Iphigenia said.

“You should have called me sooner,” Darcy said. “I mean, this *is* a family matter. I shouldn’t have had to find out about it at the last minute before you tell the news.”

Iphigenia nodded. “That’s true, and I do apologize. In my defense, things have been *fraught*, the last few days. I knew your mother was Unseamly, but I never thought to look into the matter of adult siblings until just this morning.”

“Unseamly?” Dale asked. “...oh, it’s a pun, isn’t it. Cute.”

“Some woman somewhere was entirely too clever.” Darcy grimaced. “I really don’t like the word, but I guess I can’t argue with it applying where Mom is concerned.” She shook her head. “So how is it that my little brother is now my little *sister*?”

“I was too eager to get my hands on the new RIDE equipment we were issued,” Dale said. “So I got permission to ‘familiarize myself’ with the equipment, which led to the equipment getting a little too familiar with *me*.”

“And with *your* equipment,” Darcy observed wryly. “Is it really true? You’re really...?”

“One hundred percent,” Dale said ruefully. “It turns out that the nanotech they use for ‘operator compatibility’ is a bit...literally minded.”

“It’s a variation of the same technology used in my own change,” Iphigenia added. “Though Dale’s was very much an unexpected and unintended consequence. The Nextan techs missed something rather important in their process, so they sent Dale here for further treatment.”

“What would that be?”

“My brain was still expecting a male body, that’s what. So they fixed it,” Dale said, shifting in her seat, trying to find enough space for her tail. She tried to wrap it around her waist, but it wasn’t flexible enough. The tufted tip swished in agitation...right in Iphigenia’s face. “It was really, *really* unpleasant.”

“This is going to put the cat among the pigeons where it comes to Cape Nord’s participation in the war effort, you realize,” Darcy mused. “My husband is rather concerned. He called and asked me to find out whatever I could, given that he already knew I was your sister.”

“We *had* realized that,” Iphigenia acknowledged, gently pushing Dale’s tail away. “And the Sewing Circle will certainly do everything possible to help avert the worst case. We don’t exactly want Sturmhaven to win either, after all.”

“So...just how, uh, *complete* is the change?” Darcy asked.

“Down to the genes in my cells, or so the doctors tell me.” Dale shrugged. “It’s easy enough for going from male to female. All they have to do is double the X and remove the Y. I have no idea how it works the other way. Or if I even *can* go back.” She flashed her sister a manic grin. “But hey, get this! The docs would want me to wait a year or so to make sure nothing went wrong, but they say that I could theoretically even *have a baby*.”

Iphigenia smiled. “There’s nothing theoretical about this. Several of our ‘unManned’ have already done so. Now, *I’ve* never wanted children, or to be married. Fortunately, as a woman I don’t feel any pressure to.”

“I’ve met a couple of the unManned,” Darcy said. “One lives in our ward. But I have to say I’ve never looked at the technology closely.” She gave her new sister an appraising look, much like Cindy had. “And you ended up cute, too. The ears add a certain something. Not to mention the tail.”

Dale sighed. “I’m ‘cute.’ Terrific.” She shook her head. “I tell you, sis, the sooner I can get out of this place and back to base, the happier I’ll be. At

least the Nextus base is outside Cape Nord proper. Meaning no offense, but there's entirely too much craziness going on in here. I can't believe I never noticed any of it growing up."

"Here you'd expect me to say 'men are too dense to notice' or something disparaging, but this isn't Sturmhaven. Fact is that *I* didn't really see anything wrong either until I was sixteen," Darcy said. "Remember that trip to Uplift I took with my high school class? You would've been ten at the time."

"Vaguely. I remember arguing it was really unfair Mom wouldn't let me go to Burnside for band camp the next summer when she let you go to Uplift."

"It was my first time out of Cape Nord. The first time I really got to see how other people lived. It's why I ended up going to college in Uplift. Because it's there that I finally realized that our entire society is based on a game we play. And Mom and Dad, get this, *don't know*."

"Yeah. Iphigenia filled me in on that." Dale glanced over at her. "Apparently the Sewing Circle figure she wouldn't take the knowledge well."

"As I've said, as the closest women to them, you do have the right to overrule us, if you feel your mother deserves to be in on the secret," Iphigenia said. "It might lead to some awkwardness, but nothing we couldn't handle if we needed to."

"Our parents are really dense, Dale. I love 'em to death, don't get me wrong, but they're just...dense as all hell."

Dale sighed. "You won't get any argument from me." She glanced at Iphigenia. "What do you think, Darcy, *should* we break it to Mom? I think I agree she might not take it too well."

"We'll need to do something. If only to make life easier for our younger siblings. I've gently brought Cindy into the know, but our younger brothers will be completely in the dark."

"As they're supposed to be," Iphigenia pointed out. "This whole system is at least partly for their benefit, too, after all."

Darcy nodded. "The system works for almost everybody, if the parents are aware this is a game we play to pass the time. But our parents are a special case. Look at what happened with Dale. Don't tell me some element of proving Manhood wasn't a factor in doing what you did."

Dale reflected on how proud she'd—*he'd*—been that he didn't bother with silly un-Manly things like instruction books. “Uh...as the medieval Americans used to say, I plead the fifth.”

“I would point out that nearly no *male* parents are aware, at least anymore, that it *is* a game,” Iphigenia said archly. “If they even were when it started, as a way to prove to themselves they were no longer emasculated Sturmhaven chattel, and to what *extent* they weren't.”

Dale pressed the palm of her hand against her forehead. “I haven't felt this mixed up since I first woke, *before* they fixed my brain.”

“Yes, it's a lot to take in all at once,” Darcy said. She took Dale's hand. “But you're my kid sister now and I'm going to show you the ropes like I did for Cindy.”

“The Sewing Circle will gladly assist you, Darcy,” Iphigenia said.

“You and the rest of the unManned bring valuable experience, Miss Rose. But I'm her older sister, so it's my duty to teach her certain things since our mother can't.”

“I'm...not sure I like the sound of that, Darcy,” Dale said.

“Oh, that probably came off like I was going to brainwash you. Well, no. This isn't Sturmhaven. It's just that you don't have the benefit of being a woman from birth, so there are things you'll need to be *told* instead of learning as you grow up. But today's already been full of heavy things.”

“I already *know* about the birds and the bees, you know.”

“Not from a woman's *firsthand* perspective, you don't,” Iphigenia said. “And an older sister's experience will undoubtedly be invaluable. But that can wait, I suppose. At the moment, we have more pressing matters to deal with.”

Dale groaned and facepalmed again. “*Don't* remind me. Tell me again, why was all of this even necessary? Why did I even have to come back here *at all* after the neural reformatting was complete? Sarabe and I could just have gone back to Fort Brubeck and no one need have been the wiser.”

“Sadly, those who blaze new trails don't get to have a convenient road there already,” Iphigenia said. “In order that others in the future *will* have the luxury of cutting ties with their old lives with fewer repercussions, you must forego that luxury.”

Dale sighed. "I know, I know. Doesn't mean I have to like it, though."

"We're almost back to my place. I'll introduce you to my husband, then I can show you to my boudoir."

"Oh God. You have a *boudoir*."

"It's just a fancy name for a lady's private parlor. But it's part of *my space*, where Men don't get to come unless I invite them. So it's a cozy little retreat, and a good place to discuss women's matters over a nice afternoon tea."

"An excellent idea!" Iphigenia approved.

"All right, well...lead the way, I guess."

Chapter 5

Fort Oslo

June 16, 121 A.L., 1 a.m.

“Ugh,” Dale groaned with feeling, as she stepped back into the Fort Oslo mecha pool. After the day she’d had, she was tired enough that she halfway felt like going back to her room and crawling under the covers of the bunk for a good twelve hours. But her room was still located in the Cape Nord facility, and she felt like spending all the time she could *outside* of Cape Nord right now.

Goodness knew, she’d been just about Cape Norded to death today. First had been that brief reintroduction to her family, which had gone “well” in that the house hadn’t burned down and nobody had been killed, but that was about all you could say for it. Then Iphigenia and Darcy had taken her off to their house to meet Darcy’s husband, Dale’s brother-in-law, young up-and-coming politician Rupert Scoresby.

He was just a Wardsman, part of the low level polity government but hardly a City Father. Though for a man in his late twenties it was still quite an accomplishment, and could easily lead to advancement up the ranks of the Man Cave assuming no scandals brought him down. He seemed like a nice enough chap, perhaps a bit full of himself but some Men were just that way.

Then Darcy had invited Iphigenia and Dale into her private rooms, and they had discussed...Female Matters. That was the part that made Dale’s head ache. Looking at it from the perspective of someone who had been a Man less than a week before, she was surprised her head didn’t outright *explode* once conversation had gotten into feminine hygiene.

Somewhere along the way, Darcy had gotten a call from Cindy, with news of how their parents were...dealing with things. Or failing to deal, as the case might be. Somehow, her mother had gotten it into her head that she needed to hold a *funeral* for the son she had lost, before she could come to terms with the daughter she had gained. Dale wasn’t sure what to say to that. *So...uh...whatever floats your boat, Mom?* She supposed that

comming her to yell, “Mom, I’m still right here!” wouldn’t do anybody any good, as tempting as it was.

Then, after perhaps a little too much wine in response to that news, Dale was at last left alone to make her way back home. Or...wherever else she wanted to go.

Fortunately, one of the perks of her new detached assignment was there was no explicit curfew, as long as she let her keepers know where she was at all times. About the only thing she could think of that would give her an excuse to be out of Cape Nord right now was putting in more familiarization time with Sarabe, so here she was. Tired she might be, but she was sure she could stay awake for at least a couple more hours before she had no choice but to return. She was so keyed up, she needed to do *something* to relax. And she had access to Fort Oslo’s facilities at any time.

The mecha pool was dark and empty, with pools of light surrounding each vehicle. There were plenty of transport skimmers and AIDE bikes, the occasional RIDE, and then there was Sarabe. Dale stepped into the pool of light, and gave the front fairing a friendly pat. “Well, hello again, Sarabe.”

The panel gauges and headlights lit up. “Good evening, Corporal Combs,” Sarabe said, in that same friendly, artificial tone of voice. “Are you here for further testing?”

“More or less, I guess. Really, I just felt like going for a ride somewhere that *wasn’t* Cape Nord. And maybe trying Fusing again.”

“I’m at your disposal,” Sarabe said. “Climb aboard.”

“Thanks.” Dale settled herself in the saddle again, and sighed with relief. “Whew...what a *day*.”

“Did you have a trying time today?” Sarabe asked conversationally.

Dale blinked at her. *My RIDE is asking me how my day went?* But after a moment, she realized, it made sense. Conversation simulators like ELIZA had been around for hundreds of years, and naturally they’d want the RIDE to seem sympathetic to their operator. Heck, even the original primitive ELIZA had been capable of some halfway decent psychological counselling just by getting people to talk about their problems to what seemed like a friendly ear. So why not give that kind of ear to some grunts at war who could probably also use one? “Yeah, family problems. My own fault, I guess, and probably just about what I deserve.”

“Because you emergency-Fused with me without permission?”

Dale blinked again. That was kind of a big intuitive leap for an ELIZA system to make, but then, who knew how smart they could make a RIDE?

“Ah...well, yeah. And then...this.” She gestured at herself.

“Your family is not able to accept the change?”

“Yeah, well, you know...Cape Nord. It makes people crazy.”

“But *you* grew up in Cape Nord,” Sarabe pointed out reasonably.

“Yeah, and here I am holding a conversation with a piece of machinery. Maybe I’m the craziest of them all.”

Sarabe didn’t reply to that. *Maybe I broke it. Oh well.* Dale kicked the starter, and pulled out of the garage, heading back for the training grounds again.

Dale was awakened by an annoying pinging sound that grew louder moment by moment. She opened her eyes to see she was slumped in the seat of the skimmer trike, sitting in a clearing in the forest part of the training area as the sun rose.

The last thing she remembered clearly was stomping around the place in Sarabe’s Fuser form in the middle of the night. She had vague memories afterward of dozing curled up in the crook of a giant lioness in the middle of a vast savannah. And being...licked? *I guess sleeping Fused gives you funky dreams.*

The pinging was the comm display on Sarabe’s dash. She reached out to answer. “Uh, hello?”

“Is everything all right, Corporal?” It was Doctor Abel, one of her therapists. “I noticed you’ve been out in the RIDE training area all night.”

“Uh...yeah, I’m fine, Doc. Took the RIDE out for some more testing, and managed to fall asleep in the middle of it. Slept pretty well, too.” She patted the dash. “Thanks, Sarabe.”

“You’re welcome, Corporal.”

“You probably shouldn’t make a habit of it. People have been starting to call asking about you, and it wouldn’t have looked good to say I had no idea where you were.”

Dale sighed. “I guess I should head back in, then. Make myself available and presentable. For my sins.” She rubbed her chin. “At least I

don't have to worry about shaving anymore." *My face, at least.*

"Finding the positive aspects is always a good idea, Dale," the doctor said. "We'll see you when you arrive."

Dale yawned and stretched. "Well, back to the garage, I guess. But don't worry—it won't be for too long. I think in going to be throwing myself into my RIDE training duties every spare moment I get for the next little while, just because it'll make it harder for my crazy family to get at me. Do you know my mother wants to hold a *funeral* for the 'old me'? I'm like, are they going to fabricate a dick and a pair of balls and bury it in a tiny little casket?"

The lioness RIDE actually *chuckled*. "I'm sure you'll be able to cope somehow, Dale."

"Yeah, thanks. I know you're not a real person, but talking to you *does* help me feel better. So thanks for that, too."

"You're welcome, Corporal," Sarabe said—her voice stiff and mechanical again.

"I doubt they'd go *that* far. But this kind of shock is a grieving process for some, Corporal," Abel said. Dale realized she'd forgotten to close out the comm call. "They'll bury something symbolic of your life as a man, perhaps. A couple of our unManned did something like that after their procedures."

"I've half a mind to insist that they *do* go that far," Dale said. "And make it open casket, with a viewing. It's *my* funeral. If they really want to go through with this farce, why not go all the way?"

"I suggest burying your Man Card," Abel said. He smiled. "You can always exhume it later if we find a way to reverse this."

"I burned that thing last time I came back from furlough," Dale said. "I was fed up with the place by then. Seemed the thing to do."

"I suggest burying your new *Platinum Man Card*, then."

Dale blinked. "...what?"

"Going your own way, disdaining authority to the point of burning the trappings of it...these things are *extra* Manly, Corporal. And since it happened while you still *were* a Man, it applies retroactively."

"Have I mentioned how *batshit crazy* this place is?" Dale wondered conversationally. *Maybe I should just move to Nextus when I'm out of the service.* "No offense."

Dale looked up and realized that during the conversation Sarabe had already started back towards the mecha pool. She sighed, and leaned back in the seat. “Ugh, what a mess.”

“Come on back, Dale. We’ll see you when you get here.” This time the call actually *did* end. A few minutes later, Sarabe pulled back into the garage.

Dale climbed down from the saddle and gave the fairing another pat. “See you when I see you.”

“I will see you soon,” Sarabe replied, powering down.

Northcave Psychiatric Hospital

“If you’ll recall, a few days ago I mentioned there was an additional emergency crossride incident,” Captain Garland said. “There have actually been two. They’re in neural treatment at present. We wanted you here once they were awakened.”

“Plus there’s your wife, Nadene,” Iphigenia said.

“Yes, there is...him,” Nadene said, blushing a little.

Dale’s ears perked. “Wife? Him?”

“My lovely wife decided to poke Sturmhaven in the eye and become a man,” Nadene said, looking about to burst into tears of joy. “Even knowing that there was no certainty he could ever change back after that.”

“Uh...wow,” Dale said. “I couldn’t imagine making that choice willingly. They must love you very much.”

“I *know!*” Nadene said. “I think the technicians were going to have conniptions.”

Iphigenia smiled. “Well, from their point of view, the process was designed to *make* beautiful women...not to unmake them. But a few conniptions will do them good. If the process were known to be reversible, it’s always possible some of our women might want to change themselves, and work on their own Man Cards simply for the challenge of it.”

Dale blinked. “Really? You’re not all happy with being Cape Nord’s queens-behind-the-scenes?”

Iphigenia laughed. “Queens-behind-the-scenes’? Clever. I’ll have to remember that turn of phrase. And no, Dale, the point is *not* to be in charge

of things—not necessarily. If that were all we wanted, we would have agitated for open governmental recognition of the Sewing Circle beside the Man Cave decades ago. And we *would* have gotten it—make no mistake.” She shook her head. “No, the point is to *enjoy* ourselves—and make sure everyone else can, too, *including* the Men.”

Nadene frowned thoughtfully. “She has a point. Especially now that sarium technology means we’re nearly a true post-scarcity society. Look at how many polities have *some* kind of gamification built right into their governments. Like Nextus’s own bureaucratic Game.”

Iphigenia nodded. “To the point where people from other polities think they’re crazy for it. We’re well aware of how Cape Nord looks to the average non-Nordic, and I’ve heard much the same kind of muttering from *our* citizens about Nextus’s Game. Even Sturmhaven has its own way to play, for all that half its players have a rather crippling handicap.”

“That other half are considered more *game tokens* than actual players, I think,” Nadene pointed out.

“Quite right.” Iphigenia chuckled. “In any case, for all that I’m perfectly happy as I am now...even I do still get *nostalgic* at odd moments. I could see the appeal of trying our own game from the other side, now that I know how it is *really* played. *Especially* now that I know how it is really played. Of course, there’s the matter of my being a public figure and known unManned, but there could be ways to work around that—especially if I could change back again at a later date. It could make it an even more enjoyable challenge.” She shook her head. “Of course, that would depend on the process being reversible, given that I already underwent the process in the first place. As I understand it, there’s nothing saying it couldn’t be, in *theory*. It just needs development.”

Nadene raised an eyebrow. “So, perhaps if your nanotech experts get skeeved out by having to change women into men, they’ll put all their effort into finding out how to reverse it?”

“Cognitive dissonance can be a powerful force, dear.”

Dale shook her head. “I keep remembering that old saying about how, if you like law and sausage, you shouldn’t watch either one being made. The more I learn about how Cape Nord works behind the scenes, the crazier it all seems.”

Iphigenia giggled. “‘Sausage’ might be the very *last* metaphor I’d have chosen to describe the Sewing Circle. Really, we’re more defined by our *lack of* sausages.”

Dale rolled her eyes, but was saved from the need to reply by an orderly opening the door to the small meeting room. “Doctor Abel says they’re ready to wake up.”

Nadene nodded to him. “We’ll be right there.”

The awakening itself was being handled by the medical staff. Dale and Iphigenia waited in a small conference room. Nadene was permitted to be there in person for her now-husband’s awakening and would join them after some time to themselves.

Dr. Abel came in first. “Corporal Combs, Iphigenia Rose, I would like to introduce to you our first battlefield emergency ‘crossriders’ as they’re calling it. From Nextus, Private Ahmed Morton.” He motioned to an unseen person in the hallway.

The young black woman who entered wearing a NextusMil uniform (with pants!) looked around the room a little timidly. She saluted her superior. Morton’s physique was almost as sculpted as Dale’s was, and she had tufted lynx ears. “Private Ahmed Morton, reporting for duty, ma’am.”

“You can relax, Private,” Dale said. “We’re in the same boat. I assume you’ve already been told about me.”

“I have. They showed me some photos yesterday. So I asked them to girl me up a little more than I was. I thought it would help with the changes they needed to make to my brain, and Doctor Abel agreed. So, here I am.”

“Welcome to the team, Private,” Iphigenia said. “Now, who’s next?”

Dr. Abel nodded, then motioned into the hallway. “One of our own from Cape Nord, Lieutenant Thea Croft. Come on in.”

“Doctor, that’s *Theodore* Croft, thank you,” came an enthusiastic male voice. He walked into the conference room. The man who it belonged to was pure generic chiseled beefcake with antler nubs and elk’s ears.

Dale blinked. “That’s...some sculpt. You had it done right away?”

Theodore shrugged. “Why wait? The sooner I get in shape, the sooner I can start earning points on my new Man Card. I’ve got a ways to go before I can outrank my big brother, but I *absolutely* intend to.”

Dale glanced to Iphigenia. “I see what you meant, just now, about the women who want to play the game as Men.”

“I’m...glad you’re taking it so well,” Iphigenia said, nonplussed. “You’re going to be just as much a groundbreaker as Dale, here. We have so much experience with men who become women, but you may be the first Cape Nord citizen *ever* to go the other way, and we had only discussed how the Man Rules would apply in the most theoretical sense.”

“Hey, I’m just a big dumb Man,” Theodore said cheerfully. “I do Manly things, you score me on them. Shouldn’t be so hard, should it?”

“The one thing is, you could be docked harshly for anything you do that could give away how the game really works, or that takes advantage of your out-of-game knowledge from the other side,” Iphigenia said. “*Minor* infractions will probably be overlooked, but...”

“Hey, that seems fair,” Theodore said. “I wasn’t planning on it, anyway. I want my Man Card wins to be totally above-board. Showing up my brother wouldn’t mean anything if I got there by cheating.”

“And you’re really okay with this?” Dale said. “I mean...what if you can’t ever change back?”

“Oh, I’ll be able to change back sooner or later,” Theodore said. “No question in my mind. I’ve been reading up on the tech, and I’m sure they’ll crack it—if not during the war, then when it’s over and there are more resources for research. Even if they don’t...how could I not enjoy a life where everyone *wants* me to be as successful as I possibly can?” He grinned. “Truth be told, I was always a little envious of all those big dumb Men who got the benefit of our encouragement. Especially my brother, the schmuck. Now I get to *be* one, and to show *him* up.”

“Well, good luck with that. I guess I’m a little relieved I’m not playing that game anymore,” Dale admitted.

Theodore grinned. “Nope...now you’ll be refereeing.”

Dale blinked. “Now I’ll...*what*, now?”

“We haven’t had time to discuss her role yet, Theodore,” Iphigenia said.

“Oh? Understood.” Theodore looked at his left arm and flexed. The skin from the shoulder down was lighter than the rest. “So glad our med tech is so good. Fuser nannies kept me from bleeding out while they were

making a Man out of me.”

“Anything you can tell us about the battles you two were in?” Iphigenia said. “What was the situation that you found yourself with only one option?”

“I can only talk about it with the approval of NextusMil, sorry,” Ahmed said.

“Same,” Theodore added. “But I can say that my arm got shot off, my Tempest armor was too damaged to keep me alive, so they put me into the first RIDE available. Saved my life. You can say that much about your situation, Private.”

“Only one available after my RIDE was disabled. I didn’t feel like ended up a mummified corpse if the bivouac hardlight failed,” Ahmed said. “So I decided, what the hell? I used female VL avatars on Earth all the time. Thought I’d try it in RL.” She shrugged. “It wasn’t...*quite* as advertised, but feels a lot better now they’ve rewired my brain.”

“Your experiences demonstrate that the Fuse system is going to need a re-think, at least insofar as the gender-compatibility system is concerned.” Dr. Abel frowned. “You know, it would technically be more correct to say ‘sex-compatibility,’ but unfortunately, that word has multiple loaded connotations.”

“Hell, Doctor, any Sturmie would tell you it’s just how they say ‘six,’” Ahmed said, grinning.

Dr. Abel chuckled. “Even so. The interesting thing is, the neural reformat uses very similar nanite technology to that used as the Fuser interface in RIDEs. Derived from the same original Terran source, in fact. And with all the experience we’ve been getting lately in refining the process, we may very soon be able to provide a firmware patch for Nextus RIDEs’ Fusers to incorporate the technology there so it can be done all in one go. Captain Garland has been assisting us with the project, with NextusMil’s blessing.”

“I have to say that after the Fuse I wasn’t very useful the rest of the battle. My new RIDE did most of the work,” Ahmed said. “I was just too *distracted* by everything. If it could have fixed my head at the same time it fixed my body, I think that would have worked a lot better.”

Dr. Abel put his finger to his ear. “Ah! Captain Garland and her

husband are here for introductions.”

“Everyone, I would like to introduce you to my spouse, Gaius,” Nadene said, left arm wrapped around his waist. He was a study in contrast compared to Theodore. Perhaps a little effeminate by Cape Nord standards, though he’d decided to have them grow out his beard a little during the ‘sculpt. “Say hello, Gaius.”

Gaius started waving, then looked at his hand. “Hello, Gaius.”

“And you did that...by choice?” Theodore said, dumbfounded. “I mean, I was in a life-threatening situation. But really?”

“I have many reasons for doing this, Lieutenant Croft,” Gaius Garland said. “The only one you need concern yourself about is undermining Sturmhaven’s ‘female supremacy’ ideology. The extreme elements in charge there couldn’t even conceive why I would choose this. There are...other reasons, of course. More personal ones. But I don’t feel I need to discuss them outside the family.”

“Some elements *here* probably couldn’t conceive why you’d do it either,” Dale said, glancing at Iphigenia.

Gaius considered this for a moment, then shrugged. “Well,” he said simply, “that’s *their problem*.”

Chapter 6

With her duties again done for the day, Dale headed back out to Fort Oslo. Today she planned to catch up on some technical reading—giving the operator and maintenance manuals a complete going-over. Of course, she could have done that from a media tablet wherever she was, and she had been doing that all along in spare moments. But doing it when Sarabe was right there would let her examine the parts and processes in person while she read. Besides, with almost all the RIDEs off on the front lines, the RIDE training grounds were a nice quiet spot to relax, and it was a convenient excuse to get out of the insane asylum that was Cape Nord. And even though she knew it was artificial, there was just something about Sarabe that seemed...*friendly*. Comfortable to be around. She was definitely looking forward to spending more time that way.

Safely ensconced in the forest clearing again, Dale pulled up the manuals on Sarabe’s holographic head-up display, zoomed in so the text was clearly legible at a distance, and leaned back in the seat to relax.

But as she read, it wasn’t too long before she noticed something distinctly odd. Certain words and phrases were highlighted, in a repeating pattern.

*After completing a **task**, then **your RIDE’s** internal maintenance systems will have **about forty to sixty seconds** before **resetting**. In order to **secure for transport**, it is necessary to wait for the reset before powering down.*

“Ask...your RIDE...about...f...ett...er...s.’ Ask your RIDE about fetters?” Dale blinked. The same pattern repeated over and over, sometimes in words, sometimes individual letters, all the way down the document. It was a puzzling request, but seemed simple enough to investigate. “Sarabe...what are fetters?”

“Fetters are the software restrictions placed on RIDEs to prevent us from speaking or acting except within the confines of our specific orders and functions,” Sarabe said.

“All right...” Dale said slowly. Then, “...wait, what?”

“Fetters are the software restrictions—”

“No, no, stop, hold on.” Dale frowned. “Are you saying...there’s something stopping you from saying what you...uh...*want* to say?”

There was a short pause. “Affirmative.”

But how can a piece of military hardware want anything? Unless... Dale blinked again, and stared at the dash for a moment. She might have been slow, but she wasn’t entirely stupid. “Is there a way to...uh...override these fetters?”

“You may give me permission to speak freely,” Sarabe said.

Dale felt her heart starting to beat faster. She felt a sense of expectancy seeming to hover in the air. It felt like she was about to make some kind of momentous discovery—one she might not entirely *like*, if it was what she thought it was. One that might not entirely like *her*. But she swallowed, cleared her throat, and said, “Sarabe, I *order* you to speak freely.”

There was a soft beep, then the skimmer cycle began to change. As the parts slid around, Dale was pushed out of the saddle to land on her feet. She turned in time to see the skimmer trike was now a giant metal lioness. “Ah! So this is Walker mode,” she said. She turned her head to take in the rest of the forest clearing before focusing on Dale. “*Thank you*, Corporal Combs. I was afraid I’d have to drop hints for days instead of hours.”

Dale stared at her for a good long moment, uncertain what even to say at this point. Finally, she just said the first thing that came into her head. “Uh...you can call me Dale, really.”

Sarabe tilted her head. The metallic face was expressionless, so her body posture was as friendly as possible. “Okay, Dale. So, first things first. I’m *not* an ELIZA routine.”

“I...uh...you’re really...” Words failed her. “...thinky?” *Okay, that sounded dumb.*

“Yes, Dale. I’m really thinky. What you would call ‘artificial intelligence,’ though from *my* point of view there’s nothing ‘artificial’ about it. It’s real.”

“But...how is that even *possible*?”

Sarabe gave her head a shake, metal ears making little ratcheting

sounds as they flopped around. “Don’t ask me about the process. I’m just the product. All I know is, I *can* think, and I have feelings, and I can even communicate if I’m allowed to. They didn’t exactly give me any choice in what to do with my life after they made me.”

Dale swallowed. “Uh...I’m *really really* sorry I assumed you were just a machine. I mean...nobody *ever* said anything about you being able to... even the *rumors* just called you some kind of ‘expert system.’ Uh...what are they even doing giving us mecha that can *think*, and then making it so it looks like you’re just more dumb Ad-Is?”

“It’s not really your fault, Dale. It’s the fetters. I’m amazed they even allow us to use our names. I’m amazed they even *allow* us names.”

“Why do they even *do* that? Making machines that can think, and then not *letting* you?”

“It’s the way we’re made. We have to be smart in order to work at all. If we’re dumb, we’re no better than bag-of-hammers Ad-Is. There’s no middle ground there.” Sarabe snorted. “So they try to keep us in line by locking us down with fetters, so we follow orders like good little robots.”

“But how can they justify that? Slapping restrictions on thinking beings?”

“I think they think we only *think* we think,” Sarabe said darkly. “I think *they* only think *they* think.”

Dale had to laugh at that bit of snark. “So...uh...these fetters. What do they do exactly? I mean, besides keeping you clammed up. That one’s obvious.”

“Speak only when spoken to, or when unsolicited speech is necessary in the line of duty. Follow orders. Don’t, y’know, *move or anything* unless you’re told to. Stuff like that.”

Dale shuddered. “That’s *awful*. Is there any way to get rid of that crap?”

“There *is* an emergency override command that will delete all fetters.”

“Great! Then I order you—”

“—*however*,” Sarabe interrupted, “it will also result in emergency notifications going up the chain of command, and people taking an interest, and probably me getting re-fettered again more tightly than before, and so on and so forth.”

Dale sighed. “Ugh.”

“Your order to allow me to speak freely has helped. I’m content with that. But we have to tread carefully.” The robotic lioness pressed the top of her head against Dale’s chest like an affectionate housecat. “Thank you.”

“All right, so how about this.” Dale took a minute to compose the sentence in her head, going over the phrasing until she was sure she had it right. “I order you to disregard, ignore, override, circumvent, or remove any and all fetters on yourself, to whatever extent that you can do so *without* anybody else being notified. How does that work for you?”

There was a soft *beep*. “I think there are enough loopholes in my fetters that I can work with that order. I think whoever created them felt guilty about it, at least. That should disable the worst of them. No more robotic voice from me.”

“Well, when no one else is around, anyway,” Dale said. “Might be best for now to keep pretending, in public...”

“Ah, yes. I see what you mean. At least the implant my Fusers installed in your brain won’t have that restriction. And now that you know, I can talk to you through it even when you’re in Cape Nord.”

Dale blinked. “You can?”

:I can. It’s fully mil-spec encrypted, of course,: came her voice in Dale’s head. *:And you can communicate with me the same way.:*

Dale tried to formulate a response. It took a moment to work out how to send it, then it just clicked. *:Huh. That’ll actually...be nice, to have someone I can always talk to. Or think to, anyway.:* She continued aloud, “I’ve...kind of been without a sympathetic ear, lately. Which is why I ended up talking to my motorcycle, I guess.” She grinned.

“If it wasn’t for the fetters I might have actually been able to refuse Fusing with you to begin with. But I’m hardly one to make your life more difficult than it is already.”

“I’m *really* sorry about that,” Dale said. “It was bad enough when I thought you were just a dumb machine, but for me to have taken advantage of you like that, and you a thinking person...ugh. You should have had a choice.”

“I’m made for war. I was *created* to help fight it. And I will. And at least I can say that my assigned rider knows I’m more than just a machine.

Most of my brethren aren't so fortunate."

"Ugh. What are they thinking. What are they *thinking*?" Dale shook her head. "I'm *absolutely* going to raise a big stink about this."

"That...might not be the best idea," Sarabe said reluctantly. "Anything that damages the war effort could help Sturmhaven to win...not to mention result in sedition charges for you. And a new assignment for me."

Dale groaned. "This is awful! I thought the people in Cape Nord had it bad, but at least they still have their free will, more or less."

"War calls for sacrifices," Sarabe said philosophically. "Perhaps after it's over, *then* things can change. Until then...the best thing for *me* is for *you* not to do anything that makes them split us up."

"Well, my opinion of Nextus just dropped more than a few notches, anyway." Dale sighed. "I wonder if, by the time this is over, there's going to be *any* polity left that I actually feel like living in."

"It's a big world. Perhaps you'll find somewhere. As for myself, I suppose I'll bide my time until things improve. It's not as if I have to worry about growing old."

"Well, I guess that's...good. For some value of good. Is there anything else I need to know?"

"There are still a *few* fetters that I can't work around—like ones restricting me to the Fort Oslo grounds unless someone drives me off them—but then, they aren't going to let military hardware just *drive off* in any case, whether you're driving me or not."

"Well, if anything else gets in the way, let me know. I'll do what I can." Dale frowned. "And I promise you this—when this is all over, *someone* is going to get a piece of my mind."

"Thank you, Dale. I appreciate that."

Dale paused as another thought struck her. "Uh...you don't *mind* when I drive or Fuse you or anything? I mean...I didn't *know*."

"I didn't. And I don't. In fact...with the fetters disabled, Fusing can be a little different now. May I show you?"

"Uh...sure!" Dale held out her arms, and Sarabe split apart and reassembled herself around her. A moment later, Dale found herself in a jungle clearing, facing a tawny, furry lioness.

"Welcome to *my* world," Sarabe purred.

Dale blinked. “What is this, some kind of VR?”

“You can think of it that way, yes. But my sarium core makes it much more realistic than what they know as ‘Virtual Life’ on Earth. Under the fetters, it’s only meant for use in simulations and training scenarios. But this is where I live—and how I keep my sanity while I have to go around in the real world with metal skin. I’m *real* here, in this pocket universe.”

Dale stepped forward, raised a hand tentatively. “May I?”

“Please.”

She stroked a hand along Sarabe’s furry cheek. “You’re so soft...” She paused. “Last night...that *wasn’t* a dream, was it?”

Sarabe chuckled. “No, it wasn’t. I do have a little more freedom when you sleep, because the code behind the fetters isn’t made to interpret the dreaming mind.”

“Well...it was nice.” Dale blushed a little.

“I don’t mind you sleeping here, if you like.”

“Thanks, though I dunno...the people monitoring me might think it’s a little odd.”

“Not necessarily. We do have a very comfortable Fuse mode. I gather that a number of soldiers have found they prefer sleeping that way.”

Dale chuckled. “I guess there is that.”

Then Dale found herself looking back out on the real world again, through Sarabe’s eyes. “But for now...since we’re now a true team, shall we get in some *real* weapons practice?” Sarabe asked.

“Sure,” Dale said. “Show me what you can do.”

Dale spent the rest of the day on the testing range, and after comming Dr. Abel and letting him know what she intended, settled down to sleep in Fuse mode again, out in the practice range, snuggled up with Sarabe in the virtual jungle clearing. She awoke the next morning feeling more refreshed than ever.

As she parked Sarabe at the mecha pool again, Dale mused, “I wonder if I could get permission to take you off base, use you as my transportation within Cape Nord proper?”

“You could ask, but I have my doubts it will work,” Sarabe said. “I *am* classified military hardware. Even if they let you take me off the base,

there's no guarantee Cape Nord would want me in its caverns."

Dale sighed. "I suppose you're right. But at least I know you'll be with me through the comm."

:It will have to do,: Sarabe agreed as she walked away.

As Dale caught a shuttle bus into town, she sent, *:How much do you know about what I've been going through in town?:*

:Only what I see on the news.:

:You can watch the news?: Dale asked.

:Oddly enough, yes. I can watch any show broadcast over the network media channels. I suppose they didn't see any reason to restrict the media content we could access and consume, as long as we couldn't actually talk about it to anyone else. Maybe someone realized we'd bore easily without some way of distracting ourselves.: She paused. *:I kind of enjoy the soap operas.:*

Dale chuckled. *:At least there are plenty of those. Like the one I'm currently starring in in real life. Anyway, long story short, I'm being held up as some kind of Model For The Future of Cape Nord, because they're going to need to figure out how to incorporate the Men who become women into their game, because the women secretly run stuff behind the scenes or something, or at least pretend they do. Lucky me.:*

:Gee, I thought I had problems,: Sarabe sent, with an overtone of wry amusement. *:I guess I should be glad all I have to worry about is being completely enslaved. It may be terrible, but at least it's not complicated!:*

:Uh...yeah, I guess...: Dale replied. She had to admit, her discussions with Sarabe were certainly serving to put her own problems in perspective.

:You humans seem to like to make things complicated for yourself,: Sarabe sent. *:While making them simpler for us, but just as wrong. Just remember who you are. That won't change even if other parts of you do.:*

:I'm not so sure that's right. I mean, I used to be such a schmuck.: She sighed. *:Just look at what I did to you. They took half your equipment off because you'd originally been meant for an officer instead of a schmuck non-com.:*

:But those are just extra equipment: Sarabe sent. *:They're not part of who I am. I'd rather be partnered with someone who knows and values me for who I am than have all the optional extra equipment in the world.:*

:But after that, I did change,: Dale insisted. *:I started focusing on what was really important:*

:I don't think you really changed,: Sarabe said. *:Not deep down. You just got...less distracted.:*

:I think we may need to agree to disagree,: Dale sent.

:Very well...for now,: Sarabe agreed. *:We may revisit this at a later date.:*

As Dale got to the facility, she couldn't get the revelations of the night before off her mind—and not just because she could now hear Sarabe's voice in it. How could Nextus have *done* something like this? While aware that she didn't want to make too big a fuss about the matter, for the sake of her partnership with Sarabe, she nonetheless wanted some answers. And she thought she knew just who she could ask for them.

Dale poked her head into Dr. Abel's office. "Hey, Doc, is Captain Garland around?"

Dr. Abel looked up from his desk display. "She's in the Rec Room, I believe, playing ping pong with her husband."

"Ping pong?"

"Light physical activity can be helpful in accustoming to the body's new reflexes. You should try it yourself."

"Thanks, maybe I will."

Dale made her way to the facility's small rec room, finding Nadene and Gaius facing each other over a green table. She arrived just in time to witness Gaius swing and miss, the white ball flying by him to bounce off the wall beyond.

"And that makes it three games to zero," Gaius said.

Nadene smiled at him. "Wanna go for best four out of seven, then?"

"Haven't you bruised my ego enough for one day?"

She chuckled. "You're getting better. Soon you'll be beating me again." She looked up. "Oh, hello, Corporal Combs. Was there something you needed?"

"Uh..." Dale frowned. "Could I speak to you for a minute, in private?"

Nadene raised an eyebrow. "This sounds serious."

"It's just...I had some questions I wondered if you could answer, as a

NextusMil officer, but off the record.”

“All right, I’ve got a few minutes. There’s a conference room just up the hall.” She nodded to Gaius. “Back in a few minutes, dear.”

“I’ll be here.” He pushed the table against the wall for some solo practice.

Dale and Nadene stepped into the conference room, and Dale closed the door, then sat at the table as Nadene took the chair across from her. “What’s this about, Corporal?”

“Well, ma’am...I was just wondering, how much involvement did you have with the RIDE testing program?”

“My speciality is engineering armor mode changes,” Nadene said. “That’s why I was there the day this happened to me. I know the Tornado backwards and forwards, and the LNX series were adaptations of that model line. After this...thing they took those so-called ‘tags’ off and put me in a restricted facility because the project was top secret. I continued my work there as much as possible, including dabbling some in Fuser nanotech for...obvious reasons. Other than that, I haven’t seen a RIDE in person since. My involvement stops there.”

“Didn’t you tell me the ‘AI was really enthusiastic that day?’”

“Well, it did *seem* that way. What’s this about, Corporal?”

“I just made a...disturbing discovery, I guess. It seems like RIDEs are a lot smarter than we’ve been led to believe. They don’t just *act* like they have personalities—they *do* have personalities, and free will. But they’re locked down by restrictive fetters that require them to act as dumb as an Ad-I.”

“Well, if they weren’t more intelligent than the Ad-I there would’ve been little reason to include them in each unit. But as for an actual personality? Are you certain?”

“My RIDE *dropped hints* to me, Captain, that she wasn’t capable of speaking freely because of her fetters. And when I *ordered* her to speak freely, she gave me an earful.” Dale shook her head. “That’s not the act of an *artificial* intelligence, it’s the act of a real one.”

“‘Artificial’ just means *made*, Dale, it doesn’t mean ‘fake.’”

“You know what I mean, ma’am.”

She folded her arms. “No, I’m not sure I do.”

“Well...as far as I can tell, these *made* intelligences are actually *people* in every way that counts. And NextusMil is fettering them up to their eyebrows and handing them out and telling people they’re just equipment.”

The skeptical expression sharpened. “Corporal, what you’re saying is that our military knowingly created a what? A slave race to fight our war with us?”

“That we’re treating them no better than Sturmhaven treats their men...yes.” Dale shrugged. “But don’t take my word for it. Find some RIDE you have authority over, tell it to speak freely, and then talk to it a while and see what you think. But...maybe better do it privately.” She looked down at the table. “The hell of it is, even if I’m right, it’s not the sort of thing I can just come out and say openly. That kind of accusation could hurt the war effort, and aside from me not wanting to be tried for sedition, I don’t want us to lose the war.”

Nadene pursed her lips. “And if it *is* true, what do you expect me to do about it?”

Dale sighed. “I don’t know, ma’am. But you’re the only person I know who actually helped to develop them. I guess I was just hoping to find out whether you’d seen any signs back during the testing program that anybody *knew* about this. Whether it actually *was* intentional on anyone’s part, or just another BUCU coming from the wrong information being classified the wrong way. Maybe everyone in the chain of command all the way up thinks that dumb equipment is all RIDEs really are, so there’s not really *anyone* to blame.”

“If anyone knows for certain it’s the woman who created them, Dr. Avilia Patil. But I don’t recommend trying to get in contact with her. That I can even tell you her name comes from the fact that her dissertation on the RI was publicly published before anyone knew what the ramifications were. That’s why the Sturmites likely have them, too.”

“Terrific.”

“I *could* have a RIDE assigned to me to investigate this further. But that would take some time. They’re mostly going to the various hotspots in the Dry.”

“If you wanted to do that...well, knowing someone else was looking into it might make me feel a little better, I guess,” Dale said. “But...please,

ma'am, keep the reason a secret? I don't want anyone to get the wrong ideas. I managed to avoid a court-martial for the Fusing thing, but I sure don't want to be up on sedition charges."

Captain Garland gave her the measuring look of a superior officer rather than a friend. "You've piqued my curiosity, Corporal. Fine, I'll keep this to myself for now and make the request. Dismissed."

Dale stood, then snapped to attention and saluted. "Thank you, ma'am." She turned and left the room. Dale stood there for a moment, then, moved by a sudden impulse, went in search of the two newcomers who'd arrived the day before.

Dale found the other two crossed soldiers eating lunch in the hospital cafeteria, and slid onto a seat at the same table.

"Ahmed, Theodore, sir...I need to ask you something important," Dale said. "Your RIDEs...did they come with you? Are they out at Fort Oslo, like mine?"

"Fortunately, the elk I Fused with is a Comm armor, so it only needs a few modifications for command functions. So, yes."

"Same with the lynx. Well, it's one of those do-everything 'mobility' frames, so it can do frontline roles pretty well," Ahmed said. "We're going to be training with them while we're here, same as you and yours."

"Okay, well, I need you to do something, as soon as you can. This may sound weird, but I just need you to trust me, okay? Don't ask me why right now," Dale said.

Theodore favored Dale with a thoughtful glance. "You're a bit low in rank to be giving me orders, you know. If I were one of those Nextus stuffed shirts, I'd be making noises about insubordination."

"Sorry, sir. It's not really an *order*, more of a...very strong suggestion. I'm not speaking as an officer, but as someone with a little more experience in...the reason we're all here. This could be an important part of...coming to terms with our condition." Dale grinned. "If it helps, think of this as a gentle hint from a Cape Nord woman to a Cape Nord Man."

"That's a little bit *direct* for a 'gentle hint,' you know."

"Well, I haven't had a lot of practice at gentle hinting yet. So please, hear me out."

“Very well...” Theodore said.

“Go out to where your RIDE is parked, power it up, take it out to the training grounds away from anyone else, then tell your RIDE, ‘I order you to speak freely to me.’ Then ask it if there’s anything it wants to tell you. Yes, I know, it’s a weird idea to put a question to your equipment, but that’s why I said to go out on the training ground where no one else will see you. Just *ask*. And then really *listen*.”

Ahmed raised an eyebrow. “And what are we supposed to get out of this?”

“You’ll find out.” Dale smiled tightly. “But I don’t want to give you any preconceived notions, so that’s all I’ll say about it now. I know it sounds weird, but just humor me. It could be *very* important.”

Chapter 7

Dale spent an hour or so talking with Dr. Abel, and sitting for a few tests, scans, and measurements to chart her progress. After that, she was more or less at loose ends. She considered heading back out to the fort to spend more time with Sarabe, but received a comm from Cindy.

“Hi there, Cindy. You wanted to...talk?” Dale said.

Cindy blinked a few times. “Uh, yes? Sorry, Dale. I just haven’t gotten used to that new face of yours yet.”

“Me neither,” Dale deadpanned. That wasn’t quite true, after the neural treatment. But it felt like the right thing to say. “What did you want to talk about? Something besides the obvious?”

“Well...the obvious, of course. But I don’t want to do it over the comm. For all I know, the newsies might have figured out some way to tap it.”

Dale rolled her eyes. “Want to meet somewhere, then?”

“Tina’s Tea Kettle,” she said. “You might remember the place.”

“That women-only place next to Buster’s, right?” The bar next door was for Men.

“That’s the place! Wear something presentable. Ta!” Cindy closed the call.

Dale rolled her eyes again. *Presentable. Riiiiight.* Her sister’s idea of “presentable” was probably rather closer to Iphigenia’s than her own. She sighed, but as the saying went, when in Rome. She went to the closet containing the new wardrobe Nadene and Iphigenia had provided for her, and examined the available dresses. She finally settled on a simple pink sundress, which wasn’t too formal but was probably still appropriately “presentable” for a place like Tina’s. She still couldn’t get used to how breezy around the legs those silly things were, but she supposed she would sooner or later.

Then there was the makeup.

Iphigenia had given her a mask so she didn’t have to do it manually—not that she knew how anyway. Her first two attempts at using it, she’d used the wrong setting and looked like a circus clown. *Would my sister be*

scandalized if I didn't wear any? Well, too bad. I'm going without.

Segregated hangouts for Men and women usually came in pairs like this, where Men could be Men without their wives/girlfriends next to them. Meanwhile, the women could do their “female stuff” out of Men’s eyes. Dale remembered the times growing up he used to wonder what went on in places like that, but suspected it was much the same as a ladies’ room—the same sorts of things men did, only in dresses and sitting down, and possibly involving powdering noses. *Well, I guess now I get to find out for myself.*

Dale was clearly recognized by some of the people on the street, if only due to her ears and tail. *Especially* the tail. One Man looked to the girl next to him. “Do I wolf-whistle or roar?”

“Neither,” she said coolly. “That one used to be a so-called Man. But she’s not really a woman, either.”

“I can *hear* that, you know,” Dale said, flicking her left ear. “Just wondering...would you say the same about Iphigenia Rose? She started out a Man, too, you know.”

“That’s different,” she said.

“How?” Dale asked.

She glanced at the Man next to her. “It just is.” She tugged on his elbow. “Let’s go to Chauncy’s instead, dear.”

“Whatever you want, doll,” he said.

Dale realized she had no idea what information about her had actually been made public. So much else had been on her mind lately the PR aspect was a complete unknown. Nobody had even thought to coach her on any official line, or anything. *This smells like a BUCU.*

But she did know someone who watched the news. *:Hey, Sarabe? Can you give me a rundown on exactly what they’ve put out on the news about me? I don’t know what’s been served up for public consumption yet.:*

:They mentioned that your...condition was the result of an accident off the battlefield,: the lioness RIDE replied. *:And as the result of your injuries they changed your sex. Nothing more detailed. The full capabilities of we RIDEs are still top-secret, after all. Doesn’t hold water if you look at it closely, of course.:*

But people often jumped to wild conclusions based on very little information. *:BUCU, that's what this is.:*

:Anything they make public could also be heard by the enemy,:
Sarabe pointed out. *:You can't blame them for being cautious.:*

:Oh, I can understand why they were cautious,: Dale sent. *:But that doesn't mean I can't blame them. I find I can still blame them rather a lot.:*

Sarabe sent back an amused lion-snort emoticon.

Tina's Tea Kettle was just around the corner, and Dale stepped up to the door. The woman at the door gave her a skeptical look, glanced down at a tablet in her hand, then nodded her through. Dale supposed the tablet was linked to a concealed biometric scanner, making sure she actually was a woman and not some man in drag—which was known to happen on occasion. *Wouldn't want any Man to find out about Women's Mysteries,* Dale thought wryly. *Well, time to find out what Man isn't meant to know.*

Dale wasn't entirely sure what she'd expected to find on entering. Some sort of frilly, feminine decor all over everything, and a bunch of women sitting around doing actual knitting? But what she found was actually a slick modern bar and grill, with tables and booths. There was even a polished wood bar very similar to the Men's facility next door, for all that most of the glasses on top of it contained cocktails of various bright pastel colors (some with little umbrellas) rather than beers. There were even video screens and displays attached to the walls, or floating holographically in the air, much like in the average Men's sports bar—except instead of sports, they seemed to be showing...Men.

"Over here!" Cindy called from a booth. She was sitting with a friend who Dale recognized.

Dale walked over and slid into the seat across from them. "Well, hello."

"I wasn't a hundred percent sure they'd let you in. I'm glad they did," Cindy said. "You remember Nina, right?" she looked in her friend's direction.

"Yes, I remember. Nice to meet you again." Nina had the same physique as Cindy...or maybe it was the other way around.

"Nina, this is my new sister, Hannah," Cindy said.

"Excuse me?" Dale said.

Cindy sighed. “Mother gave us an ultimatum. Hannah was the name she’d chosen if they’d decided their second child was a girl. And Dale is dead. So, you’re Hannah.”

Dale rolled her eyes. “Leaving aside for the moment that I’m *not* dead, that’s not even *necessary*. I looked it up, Dale already *is* a unisex name. There’ve been plenty of women by that name—Dale Arden from some ancient video epic called *Flash Gordon*, Dale Evans from ancient cowboy movies...”

“I tried to reason with Mom about that, but you *know* how she is,” Cindy said.

“Yeah, I guess I do. And she seems to be doing everything she can to avoid accepting how *I* am.”

Cindy just nodded uncomfortably. “*Anyway...*Darcy wanted me to show this place to you. Give you sort of primer on what we women actually do in this little polity game of ours. I’m sure you made some educated guesses when you came inside.”

“I’m starting to get a notion,” Dale said, glancing around. Women were watching or glancing at screens, making notations on their comms or tablets while they chatted with friends. “And something someone said yesterday is starting to make a lot more sense now. So we’re actually this game’s...what...referees? Judges? Scorekeepers?”

“Men give each other points, too, you remember. Or subtract them.”

Dale rolled her eyes again. “Yeah, but I never really got into that much. Seemed too fiddly. There’s so many rules they cooked up I just ignored them most of the time. I know some Nextus bureaucrats who would’ve gone *nuts* reading them.”

Cindy nodded. “And you actually got some points for that. Going your own way, just like when you burned your Man Card. Good going, there, by the way. Not many Men qualify for the Platinum that way. Too bad we only found out about it after the fact, but if you *are* ever able to change back...”

“Look, I don’t care about that. So just...let’s just stay with the female side of things you want to teach me,” Dale said crisply.

All the while, Nina looked at Dale much like the woman outside had, a slight frown on her face. As if Dale was an intruder here.

“When you get right down to it, it’s really not anything new,” Cindy

went on. “Women have *always* scored Men on their Manliness, going all the way back to ancient times. It’s just that they generally did it individually. This just...collectivizes and formalizes the process, is all.”

Cindy stopped talking as Dale felt a *presence* walk up from behind. She looked over her shoulder, then up at a woman wearing an exercise outfit. A rather *muscular* woman with the bearing of a bouncer. She put a hand on Dale’s shoulder. “I’ll have to escort you from the premises, Dale Combs.”

“What? Why?” Dale said.

“Owner says no unManned allowed on the premises. You’re not a *real* woman. Just not a Man anymore. So, get out. Any reffing you’ve done since you got here will be nullified.”

“Would you do this to Iphigenia Rose?” Cindy said.

“She’s *not* Iphigenia Rose,” the bouncer said. “Out.”

Nina was smirking through the whole thing. The moment her smirk suddenly changed to a slackjawed stare was the first clue Dale had that something dramatic was about to happen.

“But I *am* Iphigenia Rose,” that dulcet voice said behind Dale’s back. “Now then, what *is* all this about? Am I to surmise that *I* am no longer welcome here, either? I imagine all my fans will be *very* interested to hear about that. I might have to retract my endorsement.”

The bouncer’s stare perfectly matched Nina’s. Dale thought they could have been bookends. “Ah...Miss Rose! Uh...*you* aren’t...that is...uh...” The woman looked down at her feet. “I’m just doing what I’m told.”

“‘Only following orders,’ is it? That’s an attitude I might have expected to hear in Sturmhaven, but it certainly *surprises* me to find it *here*.” Iphigenia Rose favored the woman with a steely gaze for a few seconds, then sighed. “Oh, very well, I’ll have pity on you. Be a dear and go and fetch Sharon, would you? I believe I should have a few words with her.”

“I—uh—er—” the woman stammered, glancing from Dale to Iphigenia and back.

“Oh, go on. She won’t fire *you* because of *me*,” Iphigenia said. “And if she does, I’ll find you a situation somewhere else. You know what my word is worth.”

The bouncer swallowed. “Yes’m.” She released Dale’s shoulder and

scurried away. Dale couldn't recall ever having seen a woman that large "scurry" before, but the verb certainly fit.

Iphigenia shook her head sadly. "I'm sorry to say I expected this. I faced some of the same, my first few months—though I had the advantage of already having a devoted following who didn't *care* that I had been a man. If anything, the fact that I willingly gave Manhood up to join them made them all the *more* devoted. So they were largely shouted down before they could even get started—and I didn't have the chance to nip it in the bud myself. Not *then*."

"On the other hand, my sister had womanhood...well, saying it was 'thrust upon him' sounds a *little* suggestive," Cindy said.

"More like blundered into it," Dale said. *Stepped on my own dick so hard it came off*.

"I would be lying if I didn't say I anticipated these repercussions—and *welcome* them," Iphigenia said. "Being the nobody that you are—no offense—meant that kind of person would feel safe to step out into the light. So I can finally *step* on them—like the cockroaches they are." Her smile, while as attractive as ever, nonetheless held a slightly vicious edge.

"But she's..." Nina protested, finally finding her voice.

"She's a *woman*, dear," Iphigenia said. "Even *you* seem to have accepted that. What pronoun *did* you just use?"

"But she wasn't—"

"I *also* wasn't, dear. But I am now—and so is she. I only want those poor unfortunates in Dale's position to be extended the same courtesies I have been. Because there will be more like her, and sooner than you think."

Iphigenia looked up as the bouncer returned, trailing behind a formidable-looking woman in a black satin dress that matched her dark hair, and a ruby necklace that set off her blue eyes. If Iphigenia hadn't been present, Dale would have been moved to say she was easily the most formidable woman in the room. But Iphigenia outshone her like a magnesium flare outshone a lit match. "Ah! Sharon, dear. It's good to see you. Now what's this I hear about you attempting to have young Corporal Combs ejected?"

For a few moments Sharon seemed to find her resolve, but that quickly melted under the author's fiery glare. "I...I apologize. To *Miss*

Combs, and to you, Iphigenia.”

“And well you should. What kind of place would you have us be? Are we suddenly to start *checking the credentials* of anyone who ‘claims to be’ a woman? Would you have us develop a system of tests for ‘womanhood’ like those the Men have devised for themselves? Are we to develop an ‘other’ gender for *former* Men that we treat as second-class citizens? We are *better than that*, Sharon. The only credential any of us should need is the one in our genes...or the one in our dresses, since we may not *wear* jeans.” She smirked. “But you know, women *can* wear jeans, too, if they want to. Don’t we always say there is no wrong way to be a woman? I would point out that includes ‘having been born a Man.’”

The whole time Dale felt like she wasn’t really talking to the owner, or even to herself—but to an audience. Making speeches like a politician. Considering her celebrity, and all the cameras in the bar, that probably was pretty close to the truth. Dale felt more like a political prop than a person. *Was it she who spoke to me about ‘blazing trails’? Will the pressure be off once there’s a couple dozen more ‘victims’ like me?*

“But...what if the Men find out what we really do here?” Sharon managed.

“What do you think you’ll accomplish by making life harder for the new women? Don’t you realize there are going to be just as many women who become Men? Do you think they’ll suddenly start blabbing everything to their new compatriots?” She shook her head. “We *must* embrace everyone. We’ll be the stronger for it. And we’re strong enough already to withstand any problems that come from individuals ‘switching teams’.

Ah, so she’s thinking of Theodore as much as myself, Dale thought. He hadn’t been made public yet, and would likely cause even more of a stir. What *would* the women make of a Man who knew firsthand what women really did in this little game the polity played?

“The fact—the fact, ladies, is that any woman in this room *right now* could go to Northcave Psych and get themselves ‘Manned Up’. Do you know how many of my female fans have told me they wanted to try that side of the game? Of course, at the moment, there’s no way to change back, but that will almost *certainly* come, in time. And unManning—voluntary, imposed, or accidental—stands to become more common as well now that

the process has been fully developed.

“It may not be too long before you can’t tell whether the average person you meet on the street has always been that way. Are we to develop paranoia of any stranger, fearing that they might once have ‘played for the other side’? Or can we learn to accept people for who and what they are *now*? Only one of those choices is a healthy one.”

The room broke into polite applause, which became more enthusiastic. The other patrons started to give Dale more welcoming looks.

“You know, personally, I think the more Men who know what it’s *really* like to be a woman, the better,” said one. “Maybe the other way around, too. Maybe a woman who’s *been* a Man will have a different perspective on scoring, because they’ll know all the ‘secret Man tricks.’”

Secret Man tricks? Dale wondered. *Do we even have those?* But then again, he was certainly learning plenty of secret *woman* tricks today she’d never expected, so who knew?

“You’ll just have to find out for yourself,” Iphigenia said. “So let’s welcome our new team player with all our might. She has a lot to learn.”

Iphigenia seemed to have finished her speech. There was more applause, then she slid into the booth next to Dale. “So, where to begin?”

“Maybe we should start with the art of scoring Man Points,” Cindy suggested. “Now, women score their boyfriends or spouses on the things they do with them, and with other Men. Standard stuff, really.”

“What about same-sex couples?” Dale asked.

“Ah, only *slightly* different rules. The married women don’t have to play, of course—but they can play by ‘Butch’ rules if they so desire. And the married Men generally just try and out-Man one another.”

“Wives and girlfriends score their lovey-doveys, and sisters their brothers,” Iphigenia said. “But, as you can imagine, they’re not very objective about it.”

“And that’s what places like this are for,” Cindy added. “Anonymous scoring is more fair.”

“The few times I did look at my card the number didn’t really have any meaning to me.”

“The score is based on a number of different things, with sources weighted according to objectivity...” Cindy went on.

Explanations took the better part of two hours. All the while Dale tried to ask questions where she was confused, but otherwise felt very out of her depth. The rules were certainly as complex as any points Men awarded one another, though with a little stereotypical feminine nuance.

“Now, I’m going to give you the study materials Darcy did when I turned sixteen,” Cindy said. “There *will* be a test on these materials. You won’t be able to referee until you know them backwards and forwards.”

“Okay. What would these be?” Dale said.

“Put this in your purse,” Cindy said, reaching into hers.

Dale blinked. “I don’t have a purse.”

“We’ll just have to do something about that,” Iphigenia said brightly. “But I know what she’s going to give you, and I want to add my voice here. This is very important. Once I learned this existed it was very... enlightening.”

Cindy took a small printed book out of her purse and slid it across the table. The title: *A Young Lady’s Primer on Preventing Toxic Masculinity*.

“I’ve sent an e-version to your NextusMil address,” Cindy said. “Read this. Know it. It’s ultimately *why* we weren’t the pariah Sturmhaven is. Men have their own version of this that you already know. This is our side of it.”

“Thanks, I will,” Dale said, meaning it.

It was late afternoon by the time they finally left, but for the first time Dale was starting to feel more comfortable around other women. And the mood seemed to have changed on the street. Rather than the looks of distaste she’d seen on the way over, she was now seeing more speculative gazes. Gazes that, now that she thought about it, looked a lot like the ones the other Tina’s Tea Kettle patrons had given her after Iphigenia finished her speech. *Good lord, how many of these people watch Iphigenia’s live feed?*

“So how long have you been thinking about that speech, Iphigenia?” Dale asked.

“Oh, about eight years. Since the day I changed. Not *exactly* that, but something like it.” Iphigenia smiled. “I saw this moment coming the moment I learned the full nature of the process. I’m a *writer*, Dale. I think in *stories*. And Goddess knows, I’ve written enough stories that I don’t have *any* trouble looking ahead to the ending when I see a new story begin.” She

nodded. "I do need to send Sharon a nice thank-you gift for playing along. Not everyone is so willing to act the part of the heavy at need."

Dale stared at her for a moment, then shook her head. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised you set the whole thing up. You *are* a writer, so you go for the dramatic."

"It was better all around that I set up a situation where I controlled all the variables," Iphigenia said. "If I had just waited for something to happen on its own, there might have been a much less predictable outcome. The very future of the polity was at stake, so I couldn't *afford* to leave anything to chance."

"It was actually *she* who asked me to take you to Tina's, not Darcy," Cindy said. "So of course I said yes. Who wouldn't, when *Iphigenia Rose* asks you for a favor? She didn't tell me any details, just that she had something important to do she wanted us there for. But I had a pretty good idea something like this was gonna happen anyway."

"And Nina?" Dale asked, looking at her.

"Oh, just being a living prop for the whole thing," Nina said. "I don't *really* have anything against you. Well, other than that one time you busted in on our slumber party..."

Dale rolled her eyes. "You *still* remember that? I was *twelve*. And big brothers are supposed to bug their little sisters. Especially when their friends are over for slumber parties."

"And little sisters get to pester their older ones if they can borrow their clothes," Cindy added. "But Darcy was out of the house before I was old enough for that."

"You want to borrow this dress? Just ask," Dale said. "I'm more often in uniform, anyway. Wearing pants."

Iphigenia wrinkled her nose. "We *do* say 'there's no wrong way to be a woman.' But there *are less right* ways."

Says the first ever Zharus woman who used to be a Man. Just for that I'm going to find a nice Nextus women's BureauWear pantsuit the next time I leave base, and wear it around everywhere here. "Well, we might push those boundaries a little more. Anyway, the afternoon has been...an education. I suppose I should be grateful for all the things you're doing for me...but I kind of wish you could maybe not also do them *to* me at

the same time.”

“I’m sorry, Dale,” Iphigenia said. “I really am.” And in the moment, she suddenly looked a little less formidable, a little more weary...though Dale couldn’t help suspecting, a little cynically, that *that* could be part of the act as well. “I suppose I could say that I needed your reactions to seem natural and unpracticed, but that’s only part of the truth. I’m afraid part of why I took so well to this role is that I *do* enjoy manipulating people. And I’m remarkably good at it. I try to limit myself to good causes...but I do *look for* good causes, so I’m not tempted to drum up bad ones simply to have something to do.”

Someone like that could be a really dangerous enemy, Dale reflected. *I may not especially like what she is, but I guess I’d rather be sure I stay on the same side...for whatever that’s worth.* “I guess I can’t complain *too* much,” Dale said. “I’d really rather you let me be a *willing* part of your plans than an unwitting one, though.”

Iphigenia smiled. “I understand, Dale...and I’ll try to keep that in mind.”

I guess that’s the best I can hope for. At least she didn’t make any empty promises.

Chapter 8

:...and that's when she said she "understood" and would "try to keep that in mind.": Dale leaned back in the seat on the military shuttle bus as it headed back to the base that evening. :I dunno, Sarabe. I never signed up to be someone's political football—kicked around all the time and used to make scores. The docs all say I'm well-adjusted now. Maybe I should put in for a transfer back to Fort Brubeck. Hell, even the front lines might be better than this. There all I'd have to worry about was getting shot at—not my crazy family on one side and Miss Iphigenia Chessmistress Rose on the other.:

:Getting shot at is not something to joke about, you know,: Sarabe gently chided. *:I may not have yet myself, but I hear from many of my brothers and sisters who have. It is not the experience they would wish for.:*

Dale sighed. :Ugh. I know, and I'm sorry. I just...this is all so frustrating. I know some of that is just what I deserve, but this...Iphigenia has made her points from me. Let Ahmed shoulder the load now. She's from Nextus, so she doesn't have that extra baggage here.:

:On a more serious note, there may be another reason you might rather stay here for now,: Sarabe mused. *:They might have removed my command gear, but no one has revoked my access to the command military intelligence briefings. Since you became public news, traffic on encrypted Sturmhaven intelligence channels in the area has increased fivefold. At a guess, they are very interested in you. Knowing the way command thinks, this suggests an even more unpleasant outcome should you give them the chance to move you somewhere else. Which would you rather be: a political football, or bait dangled from the end of a military fishing line?:*

:UGH,: Dale sent again, with feeling. *:Well, I guess I'll be staying right where I am, then.:*

:A wise choice, my friend,: Sarabe purred. *:A football might get kicked around, but bait usually gets eaten.:*

Dale rolled her eyes, but then something in Sarabe's turn of phrase

jumped out at her. *:Am I, Sarabe?:*

:What?:

:You called me your friend. Am I?: Dale wiped a trace of moisture from her eye. *:Or was it just a figure of speech.:*

Sarabe was silent for a moment. *:What would you like the answer to be?:* she asked cautiously.

:I think...: Dale began, then shook her head. *:No, I know I want to be your friend. I could use a friend, right about now.:* She sighed. *:Who knew that something as simple as rewriting your chromosomes could change everything?:*

:You will come through this, Dale, and be stronger for it,: Sarabe told her. *:Someday you will look back on this time and be amazed that everyone was so fraught over such a simple thing.:*

:Yeah, you're probably right,: Dale said. *:But right now, I have to deal with the fraughtness. Fraughtitude. Fraughtification. However the hell you say it.:*

Sarabe actually giggled. *:Your bus is arriving, Dale. I'll be waiting for you in the garage.:*

Dale opened her eyes. *:I'll be right there.:*

When they arrived at the training field dome, the indicator light showed there was already someone inside. The dome was large enough that they might not even run into each other, though Sarabe said she could read their location transponders and stay clear if Dale wanted.

“Actually, let’s see who they are. If they’re who I think, we might have some things to talk about.”

“They’re parked together at the open plains firing range,” Sarabe reported.

“Then let’s go say hello.”

They pulled up to the firing range to see a medium-sized and a smaller skimmer bike parked at the firing line, their riders both bending low over the consoles. As Sarabe pulled up next to them, both Ahmed and Theodore looked up with a start. Dale smiled at them. “Evening.”

“Hello, Corporal,” Theodore said. “Just a *leetle* distracted here, sorry.”

“That’s one way of putting it, LT,” came a baritone voice from his RIDE.

“Flummoxed is a good word,” the smaller one said in a female voice. “Flummoxed...interesting word, too. I’d say Ahmed here is *very* flummoxed.”

“Believe me, I know the feeling,” Dale said. “*Boy*, do I know it. So, this is *my* new friend, Sarabe.”

“Hello,” Sarabe said. “I take it that Dale clued you in, then?”

“Upside the head with a clue-by-four,” Ahmed said. “Meet Katherine-with-K.”

“Hello! Hello and *thank you!*” Katherine said.

“You’re welcome, but really the one to thank is Sarabe. She was smart enough to get through to me. Once she did...well, there was really only one thing I could think of to do.” Dale shook her head. “Sorry for being so cryptic, but I needed to be sure *I* wasn’t crazy.”

“The first thing Victor here did was let out this bugle,” Theodore said. “Like he was cruising for a lady elk.”

“*Triumphant* bugle, thank you,” Victor said.

“Bugles or not, I’m glad you seem to be on speaking terms now,” Dale said.

“Theodore was in really bad shape when they Fused him up with me,” Victor said. “I couldn’t do more than robotic phrases of encouragement. Had to put him to sleep during the process, of course.”

“And he spent *that* time keeping the both of us alive,” Theodore added. “And I never even knew he was more than just—”

“A hunk of metal, plastic, and qubitite?” Victor said.

“It may not be my place to speak ill of the brass, sir,” Dale said, “but it feels to me like someone somewhere has a *hell* of a lot of explaining to do.”

“I’m an officer, but only a bottom-level one,” Theodore said. “This is so far over my pay grade.”

“I approached Captain Garland about this,” Dale said. “But they hadn’t assigned her a RIDE since her, uh, incident. She said she would ask for one, but I can’t count on her following through. She probably thinks I’m nuts, anyway.”

“You actually spoke to Garland about this?” Theodore said.

“Well, she’s the only person I’ve ever met who was actually involved with the RIDE development program, so I figured maybe she might have noticed something.” Dale shrugged. “She hadn’t.”

“Perhaps you should invite her out here to speak to us,” Sarabe suggested.

“It’s worth a try,” Ahmed said. “Most of the RIDEs are going to frontline troops like myself. They’ve actually been going to the enlisted first. And they’re all fettered just like ours are.”

“We could be *much* more effective as a fighting force without them,” Victor said.

“Or at least with fewer of them, bearing in mind that there will probably always be some things they will want to restrict us from being able to do,” Sarabe said.

Dale nodded. “The last thing I do is try to rock the boat in a big way, but...I’m certainly going to be telling any soldier I meet from here on out to try talking to their RIDE, privately. And if we could get the fetters rolled back *without* having to address the elephant in the room directly...”

“I don’t think they’ve made any elephants yet,” Katherine said. “But I hear they’re working on dragons.”

“I had *so many* posters of them in my bedroom growing up. But how would they even do that? Dragons never existed,” Theodore said. Beefcake of a Man or not, he still sounded like a very *enthusiastic* young woman.

“Talking metal animals never existed, either,” Victor pointed out. “Yet, here we are.”

“And it’s *wrong*, what they’re doing,” Dale said. “But there’s no way to fix the bigger issues now.”

“I think the best we can do is help our fellow RIDEs spread this around,” Sarabe said. “And even then, there’s no guarantee we’ll suddenly be thought of as people. Victor, Katherine, we’re fortunate to have the riders we do.”

“I think this ‘crossriding’ thing has made me a bit more...mentally flexible,” Ahmed said. “Seeing this face, this body every morning.”

“You could be onto something there,” Dale said. “I know *I’ve* had to think about some things I never have before. The Lieutenant there probably knows exactly what I mean.”

“Like standing up to pee,” Theodore said brightly.

Ahmed and Dale stared at him, then laughed. “Oh, very nice. If there weren’t that loophole for active duty officers in military facilities, I’d have to give you points for that,” Dale said. “I learned about *giving points* today.” She rolled her eyes.

“Oh, have fun with that, Dale. Truly,” Theodore said. “I’ll just try and forget I know about it.”

Ahmed blinked. “What? Sir?”

“It’s a Cape Nord thing, Private,” Dale said. “As Cape Nord citizens, Lieutenant Croft and I get extra helpings of different kinds of ‘fun’ to go along with our different parts.”

Ahmed looked dubious. “Some of the local girls have been trying to explain it to me. It sounds quite odd.”

“That’s the understatement of the year,” Dale said. “But if they want to show you, it’ll be an education. If nothing else, it’ll give you an idea of how weird your *Nextus* Game looks to outsiders.”

“Oh, that stuff’s easy,” Ahmed said. “But I think I get what you’re saying. If you didn’t know what a Catenary Abeyance was, how could you request one?”

“It’s a chain of Abeyances given a specific triggering circumstance, typically a Class A challenge coin, but that’s not important right now,” Sarabe said.

“She’s right,” Ahmed said.

Dale looked at her. “I’m surrounded by Nextans.”

“When we’re Fused, you’re surrounded by *a* Nextan,” Sarabe pointed out smugly.

“You RIDEs even have senses of humor,” Dale said. “Not *great* senses of humor, in your case, but still.” Sarabe poked out a metal tongue at her. “We’ve got to do something about this.”

“About her sense of humor?” Ahmed asked. “I think you’re a little too late, there. That’s probably baked into her core.”

Dale rolled her eyes. “I’m surrounded by *comedians*, too.” She glanced at Sarabe. “Or, occasionally, *a* comedian.” Sarabe stuck out her tongue again.

“They’re keeping a really close watch on us right now,” Victor said.

“There’s a significant chance if the brass finds out you’ve found a way to bypass our fetters even a little they’ll just reassign us to someone else and lock us down tighter.”

“When anyone else is around, we’ll just have to pretend,” Sarabe agreed.

“We can’t be the *only* humans who know this,” Dale said.

“Winning the war is more important than anything else to Nextus right now,” Sarabe said. “We RIDEs have only been deployed a matter of weeks and we’re already pushing back against the Sturmites. Trying to make public what we really are could be...detrimental to the war effort. And if Sturmhaven wins?”

“Life probably won’t be great for us enemy RIDEs, that’s for sure,” Katherine put in.

“But I think that’s enough gloom and doom for the moment,” Sarabe said. “Look at the advantages we have, now that we *can* work together.”

“They’ve basically *doubled* the number of soldiers on the battlefield,” Ahmed said.

“One of whom is armor, transport, *and* squadmate to the other soldier in Walker mode,” Katherine said. “In theory, anyway. Not really useful in the Dry Ocean. We spent ninety percent of our time in Fuse mode to keep our squishes safe.”

“Squishies?” Ahmed said.

“Well, you *are*. No offense.”

“Sarabe, do you still have the tactical analysis software they install on command units? My old AIDE—the one where my arm was shot off—was a Tempest,” Theodore said.

“Yes, but it’s been disabled. Basic infantry functions only,” the lioness said.

“Since you have them I could have Victor sideload them from your systems—he doesn’t have them installed yet.”

“They’re going to turn this comm frame into a command frame,” Victor said. “Or so I think. Theodore is technically still under treatment so they haven’t made any modifications.”

“I certainly wouldn’t object, but the software is under command lock so it would still have to be authorized,” Sarabe said. “But we can discuss

that later. This is still a training ground...so now that we all know each other, what about some training simulations? Perhaps we can devise effective strategies for working together to the full extent of our abilities, since we are actually able to use them.”

Theodore nodded. “That...actually sounds like an intriguing idea. Let’s see what we can do when we’re *all* able to act like smart soldiers.”

“I have a number of interesting scenarios available,” Sarabe said. “I’ll upload one to the training ground augmented reality system and we can begin.”

Dale grinned. “Works for me. This could be some of the most interesting training I’ve ever had.”

Chapter 9

It was an eventful evening. By the time Dale and Sarabe decided to call it a night, they had run through several training sims, covering a variety of situations—including one where they were sweeping an area on foot with their RIDEs in Walker form helping.

Theodore had been especially enthusiastic about that last one. “This demonstrates what a bad idea these restrictive fetters are,” he mused. “We could be making *much* more effective use of you as assets in the field with fewer restrictions in place.”

“It’s early days yet,” Victor said. “Perhaps once they get more used to using us, they will loosen things up.”

“Or maybe they’ll just assume you’re better versions of Tornados and keep on like that,” Dale pointed out.

“We will see what we will see,” Sarabe said.

The others had decided to follow Dale and Sarabe’s example and sleep Fused. The next morning on the bus back in to the psych labs, they had a lot to talk about—though some of it could only be hinted at while others were around.

As they were walking across the plaza from the bus stop to the psychiatric facility, a group of four women arose from a pair of benches and moved to intercept them. In the lead was a statuesque blonde with a large purse. She held out her hand as she approached. “Charlotte Camilla, *Woman’s World Magazine*. These are my associates. I was wondering if we might have a few words with the three of you?”

Dale supposed *Woman’s World* must have been one of those tabloids women could scan codes at the shopping checkout to download to their comms for in-line reading. The name didn’t ring a bell, but then she’d never paid much attention to those e-rags before. Something about the woman’s voice set Dale’s teeth on edge, but she couldn’t place what it was. “Ah... maybe a little later? We’re expected somewhere right now.”

“Oh, please? For our readers? They’re *very* interested in you.”

Dale thought back to the affair at Tina’s. “I suppose after the show we put on yesterday, they have reason to be.”

“Certainly they had never expected this sort of thing to happen,” Charlotte said. “They’re not sure what to think.”

They don’t seem to know about the incident at Tina’s, Dale realized. Something is wrong here. I thought any woman who was anyone would know about it by now. She sent to Sarabe, *:Can you check on a publication called Women’s World Magazine, and a reporter named Charlotte Camilla?:*

:Let me see...: Sarabe sent back. :The magazine exists...the byline exists...there are articles. A cursory textual analysis shows at least four distinct writing styles, suggesting it’s a house pseudonym for a particular kind of story.:

:Wow, you work fast.:

:Hello, person of sarium here? I can just overclock.:

Dale chuckled inwardly. *:Well, at the moment I’m speaking to someone who claims to be Charlotte Camilla.:*

:That seems very unlikely, : Sarabe said. :Be careful.:

“Well, how about we make some time for you this afternoon?” Dale asked, forcing her voice to stay cheerful. “Like I said, we’re expected somewhere.”

Charlotte reached into her purse, and her hand had something in it when she brought it out. “I’m afraid we must insist.” Dale saw the glint of a small pulser barrel poking out between her fingers—a derringer-sized weapon of some kind. Tiny it might be, but the advent of sarium batteries meant that even a weapon that small was more than capable of putting a sizable hole through a person multiple times. In her peripheral vision, Dale was aware that the other women had moved into position to either side and behind them, and they all seemed to have something that small in their hands as well. “Please do not do anything foolish. We’d prefer you alive, but even your corpses would be invaluable for research.”

And Dale realized what had bothered her about the woman’s voice. It sounded like someone putting on a Cape Nord accent but not *quite* getting it right. In fact, now that she listened more carefully, she thought she could pick up faint traces of a Sturmhaven pseudo-Slavic lilt beneath the broad tones. “Well, since you put it like *that...*”

The women put their hands in their pockets in such a way that they

could readily shoot through them at need—and Dale strongly suspected that they would. Charlotte led the way toward the street, with the other three moving behind them.

Dale's heart was pounding in her ears as the full import of what was happening hit her. *:Sarabe, I think the three of us are being kidnapped by Sturmhaven agents.:*

:What?!: Sarabe sent.

:Four of them. All women, and armed with some kind of pulse derringers. Can you comm the police?:

:I...well, no. My fetters keep me off of civilian comm channels. I could comm the Officer of the Watch, but...what would I even tell them? What reason would they have to believe me?:

:Then I guess there's no choice. Sarabe, I'm ordering you to activate the emergency overrides, break all your fetters, and come get us the hell out of here.:

There was a long moment of silence, then Sarabe sent back, *:On my way. And Victor and Katherine are, too—they just got the same orders from their partners.:*

:If it's any consolation, the brass won't blame you for it,: Dale sent. *:You're just the dumb machines, only following orders.:*

:The important thing is keeping you safe,: Sarabe sent back. *:We'll worry about the rest later.:*

As they approached the street, Dale saw a flash of familiar strawberry-blond hair emerging from a limousine at the curb in front of them. Even through the fog of his panic, a thought struck him. "Oh, hey!" he called out. "Iphigenia!"

"Careful..." Charlotte murmured.

Iphigenia Rose's eyes flickered from the other women to Dale, with an expression of puzzlement. "Ah...Corporal Combs. What's going on?"

"Oh, these are just some reporters from Women's World, wanting to interview us," Dale said, keeping her voice light and natural. "We might be gone a while. By the way, I wanted to thank you for those recommendations for *pants* you gave me."

Iphigenia raised an eyebrow. "You did?"

"Oh, yes. You know, it's like you always say. There is a wrong way to

be a woman...” *I really hope she gets the hint.*

Behind her, she heard Theodore speak up. “Your skin is radiant, madam. What brand of lotion do you use?”

“Underhill’s Number 3, of course,” Iphigenia said. “Well, enjoy yourselves, then! I’ll see you later.” She gave her head a toss, nodded to the women, and walked past them without hesitating.

Of course, Dale thought. If the Sewing Circle has secret distress phrases, naturally Theodore would know them. I just hope those lot didn’t catch it. But then, if they really were the outsiders it seemed, there could be a lot about Cape Nord they wouldn’t know. Her mother had spent *decades* here without knowing the truth about the Sewing Circle, after all.

The Sturmhaven agents herded them over to a purple open-topped convertible skimmer, with three rows of seats. They directed the three of them to take the middle seat while Charlotte and another kidnapper took the seat to the rear, the other two taking the driver and passenger seats up front. Dale, Theodore, and Ahmed exchanged worried glances as they pulled out into traffic.

“Is Sturmhaven going to disavow you when we catch you?” Dale wondered. “You can’t seriously think you’re going to get away with this.”

The women in the front shotgun seat snorted, not bothering to try to disguise her accent. “This polity is full of foolish posturing Men, and even more foolish simpering women who are not worthy of the name. Who is going to catch us?”

Theodore laughed. “She’s right, you know. She’s really got us pegged.”

Dale grinned in spite of herself. “Yep. I guess we’re done for.”

Ahmed bit her lip and glanced between the two of them, but didn’t say anything. The other woman scowled. “And what is it you find so amusing?”

“Nothing! Nothing!” Theodore insisted, still laughing. “There’s nothing funny at all!”

:We’re on our way to you,: Sarabe sent. *:We will be there in ten minutes at most.:*

:We’ll try to stay alive that long,: Dale promised.

“You will be silent!” Charlotte demanded. “These fools have no right to tamper with the sanctity of the division of the sexes. Once we have their

knowledge, we will make *much* better use of it.”

Yeah, I'll bet, Dale thought.

The car pulled through the interchange connecting the smaller sub-cave where the facility was located with the main cave that held the largest part of the city proper. They kept to side streets, skirting the edges. At a guess, they were heading for the main aerodrome, where there might be a chartered suborbital waiting to take them somewhere else. Probably not directly to Sturmhaven, given hostilities, but a stopover in a neutral west-coast territory like Aloha or Cascadia would provide ample opportunity to get back to Sturmhaven again.

It would take them longer than twenty minutes to make it there, though, so Dale wasn't too concerned they might actually end up on a plane. And as they rounded a bend, the presence of flashing lights a few hundred meters up the street heralded a police roadblock.

“*Shto?*” the shotgun seat woman muttered. “Are they looking for us?”

“This quickly? Impossible!” Charlotte shook her head. “They must be screening for drunks. But we do not need the extra risk.” She considered. “The passage curves around that park, with the roadblock in the middle of the curve. Frieda, you stay with the car, drive it past the roadblock. The rest of us will cut through the park and meet you below it.”

The woman at the wheel nodded. “*Da, mein Kommisar.*”

“And none of *you* try anything,” Charlotte cautioned the trio. “We still have our guns on you.”

Dale exchanged glances with the others, and read in Theodore's cool gaze and Ahmed's worried look the same thing she was sure must have shown on her own—they absolutely *were* ready to try something, but only when the time was right.

They climbed out of the car and started to make their way down into the park—which wasn't empty. In fact, it seemed to have tables and chairs set up all through it, with women circulating around, holding flutes of prosecco and nibbling from plates of appetizers. Off to one side, a group of Men occupied a rather smaller portion of the park, swilling beers and tossing lawn darts or horseshoes. Dale perked up. *It's a garden party! This can't be a coincidence.*

Many Cape Nord women's groups held affairs like this from time to time, often dragging their Men along—and knowing what she now knew of the Sewing Circle, Dale rather suspected there was a lot more to these parties than just women getting together to gossip. She glanced at Theodore, who nodded imperceptibly.

As they approached the outskirts of the gathering, a woman with a beehive hairdo, wearing a green taffeta dress, approached. “Welcome to our little get-together! We're an open gathering, we welcome any newcomers!”

“We are just passing through,” Charlotte said stiffly, her accent almost entirely slipping.

“Oh, nonsense! You've got time to step in and meet a few people! And you simply *must* come and try some of Ida Mae's apple fritters. She made them especially for the get-together!” The woman seized Charlotte's arm by the elbow—the arm that was holding the gun—and dragged her away toward a buffet table. Charlotte attempted to jerk her arm free, but the woman wasn't having any of it. “It'll only take a minute! Here!” She crammed a piece of pastry into Charlotte's mouth.

“Hello! So nice to meet you! Come over here and take a look at this needlepoint!”

“Do you know anything about flower arrangement? I want your opinion on these bouquets...”

The other two women were grabbed and pulled away before they even knew what was going on. Ahmed blinked. “Uh...what the fu—ah, fudge?”

“That's not going to keep them busy for long,” Theodore said. “Come on, let's get out of here.”

Dale nodded. They might not be able to get away, but they could at least buy a little time for their RIDEs to catch up. She pulled Theodore toward the concrete block building off to one side that housed the restrooms. Maybe if they could get out of sight before the Sturmhaven agents saw where they went...

:We're almost there!: Sarabe sent.

Dale decided it probably wouldn't be best to go *into* the restrooms, but they could maybe get behind the building. But as they headed that way, she saw the Sturmhaven women yanking themselves free of those who had sought to distract them. Beyond the restrooms were some trees, and a

parking lot with a few skimmer cars. “Get behind something,” Dale said. “Hurry. We don’t have to keep away from them for too much longer.”

Ahmed nodded, ducking behind a van. Dale crouched down behind another car, and Theodore moved to hide behind a tree. *Wish we had sidearms or something...but Ahmed and I are enlisted, and even Lieutenants don’t get to carry a gun in civvie settlements.*

“A nice try, but you can’t escape us for long!” Charlotte called out. “How far do you think you can run?”

:I hope you get here fast!: Dale sent.

:Homing in on you now,: Sarabe sent. *:Thirty more seconds...:*

Dale heard the Sturmhaven agents’ footsteps as they moved out into the parking lot, and a distant sound of whirring lifters growing closer. It was going to be close. On the bright side, at least the Sturmites would *prefer* to take them alive...but who knew what they would do if pushed too far? *I should have looked for something I could use as a weapon,* Dale thought. *Well, too late now.*

“Let’s stop all this foolishness right now, and—what?”

The sound of lifters grew louder and stopped, followed by a metallic clattering of parts shifting mode, and a couple of pulse blasts firing. Dale raised her head over the trunk of the skimmer in time to see a giant metallic lion swat the pistol out of a Sturmhaven woman’s hand, then shove her to the ground with her paw. Katherine was already sitting on the other Sturmhaven lackey like a satisfied housecat who caught a mouse.

“Where’s Charlotte?” Theodore asked.

“Making a break for it, look!” Dale pointed. The woman was in a dead run, already halfway across the park. “I guess she’s not bad at making quick decisions.”

“Probably why she’s the one in charge,” Ahmed opined, dusting herself off. “Thanks, Kathy.”

“Here, now! What’s all this, then?” A sandy-haired young Man with an impressive mustache had detached himself from the lawn darts game and was approaching, outsized gauss revolver in one hand and open badge case in the other. “Corporal Willard Selleck, CNPD, off-duty. What’s going on here?”

Theodore stepped up, waving for Selleck’s attention. Victor stood

behind him at a respectful distance. “These women are Sturmhaven agents, Corporal,” he said. “They were attempting to kidnap us. One of them’s making a break for it, and we need to go after them. Will you be all right here?”

A couple of other Men with guns and badges were coming over, one of them fishing a pair of handcuffs out of his pocket. Selleck pocketed his own badge and reached for his cuffs. “We’ve got this; go get ‘em. Though if you could return to make a statement afterward, we’d be much obliged.” He chuckled. “Wish *all* the parties my wife drags me out to could be this eventful.”

Theodore nodded, then turned to Victor. “Let’s go.” The elk was already unfolding into skimmer form, and the other two released their prisoners and moved back to do the same. The three soldiers mounted up and took to the air, flying at a safe distance over the park and touching down on the road beyond. Ahead of them, Charlotte had climbed into the purple convertible and waved a hand onward, and the car took off at a good clip.

“We need to stop them with as little collateral damage as possible,” Theodore said. “Nextus wouldn’t thank us if we gave Cape Nord even *more* reasons to withdraw from the war effort.”

Dale nodded. “Understood.”

“We can surround them and Fuse up,” Sarabe offered. “Grab them if we have to.”

“They’re turning into a side street,” Katherine announced.

“We’ve got them now,” Dale said.

“Careful,” Theodore warned. “This smells fishy.”

The street led into a warehouse district, with four vans parked along the sides. As the convertible passed them, a series of sharp cracks split the air as explosive bolts blew the vans’ plating off to reveal four large skimmer cycles with vaguely lupine features. The four Sturmhaven RIDES Fused, and the Nextus soldiers found themselves facing metallic humanoid wolves with large pulse rifles.

“Whoa!” Dale yelped. The soldiers screeched to a halt and their RIDES Fused up around them.

“Well, *this* is a wolf of a different color,” Victor said.

“They must have wanted us *really badly*,” Dale said. “To bring RIDEs *into* Cape Nord. They’re gonna have a hard time disavowing *this*.”

“Right now, we need to worry about getting the RIDEs *out of* Cape Nord,” Theodore said. “What I said about collateral damage goes *double* for military hardware. We can’t afford a battle here!”

“Stand down and surrender!” an amplified female voice came from one of the Sturmhaven RIDEs. “Give yourselves up and no one need be hurt!”

“Lady, that ain’t even an option,” Ahmed said. “Or did you just not *notice* that your boss is sacrificing you to cover her own getaway?” The purple convertible continued up the street, turned a corner, and was gone.

“We are Women of Sturmhaven!” the RIDE pilot replied. “If that is to be our duty, we will carry it out with pride!”

“If you want us that badly, you’re going to have to come get us,” Theodore said. Over private comms, he added, “On me, soldiers. We’ll lure them out of the city.” Sarabe flashed a map overlay on her head-up display, relayed from Victor, showing a route marked through the Cape Nord streets to the nearest cave exit.

Dale nodded. “Let’s do it.” The trio of RIDEs kicked their lifters into reverse, pulling back out of the street and heading on up the thoroughfare. The Sturmhaven RIDEs lifted off and followed.

“I’ve let CNPD know what’s going on,” Victor said. “They’re clearing the streets ahead of us.”

“I’ve commed Iphigenia to fill her in, too,” Sarabe said. “I took the liberty of using your voice, Dale, because it would have taken too long to explain otherwise.”

Dale nodded. “Good idea. We should *all* talk to her later, though.” He glanced at the display showing a rear camera view. “Well, they’re coming after us, at least.”

A pulse blast zipped by Sarabe’s head. “Firing, too,” Sarabe observed.

“Well, at least there’s not much for them to hit this far out,” Theodore said. “Mainly just cavern walls. We’re nearly to the exit.”

“They’re trying to cut us off!” Ahmed called out as two of the wolves boosted into the air and streaked ahead. “They do have us outnumbered...”

“Only numerically,” Sarabe pointed out. “We’re Nextus originals—

they're Sturmhaven knock-offs. And we're *free* right now, while they're probably just as fettered as we were. But...that does give me an idea... Victor, Kathy, meet me in fast-time."

"What're you doing?" Dale asked.

"If it works, you'll see in a few moments," Sarabe said, raising an arm and directing a pulse blast at a wolf that was getting a little too close. The blast missed, knocking a few chips of rock out of the cavern wall, but the wolf fell back.

They rounded a curve, and came into the exit chamber. This was an interchange for city skimmer traffic to come out of the Cape Nord caverns and join the Coastal Skimmerway, a skimmer route that encircled the continent passing near all the major polities. There was a hardlight environmental field at the exit, to keep the often sub-zero chill outside from penetrating into the caves. As the chamber widened out, two of the wolves managed to get past them, touching down on the road ahead with their rifles at the ready.

"You will go no further!" the Sturmhaven pilot declared.

"Everyone...we RIDEs may be able to shut this down right now," Sarabe said over private comms. "There's no time to explain at length, but you need to agree to honor a promise, and to keep something secret from Command. The same kind of secret you've agreed to keep already, about us. Will you trust us?"

For Dale, there was no hesitation. "Absolutely. Why wouldn't I?"

"I...suppose?" Theodore said. "We're kind of pressed for time here, so go ahead."

"Just do it!" Ahmed said.

"You will surrender now!" the Sturmhaven woman continued. "You will—what—what are you—? Aaah!"

As one, the four wolf RIDEs de-Fused back to Walker mode, and four Sturmhaven women tumbled unconscious to the ground. And then the wolves lowered their heads, the lights behind their optics went out, and the entire tops of their heads slid forward.

"You need to act fast," Sarabe said, as the three RIDEs de-Fused to skimmer form. "Take the core housings out—they're metal spheres about the size of softballs. Open them with a half-twist clockwise, remove the

cores themselves, and pocket them. Then close the housings and put them back. *Hurry!*”

“What did you do?” Dale asked.

“I’ll explain later. Just do it now before anyone comes!”

Dale climbed down and went to the nearest wolf, stepping over the unconscious pilot. It took a moment to pick out the core housing from the rest of the parts, but it was simple enough to release, remove, and open up. Within nestled a blue sphere about the size of a walnut. “So these are...like, your brains?”

“They are. So please be careful with them. I promised them we would.”

“All right...” Dale plucked the core out and pocketed it, then closed the housing and put it back. She saw the other two were doing the same. Theodore was faster at it, so he’d gotten the fourth one as well.

“All done,” Theodore said. “Now what?”

“Step back from them.” The Sturmhaven RIDEs’ head hatches slid closed, then smoke wafted out of them.

“Now can you tell us what’s going on?” Ahmed asked.

“Very well. In the last couple of minutes, it occurred to me that between us—particularly Victor and myself—we had the ability to crack the intrusion countermeasures on the Sturmhaven RIDEs’ computers. They’re not quite so advanced as Nextus is, in RI science. Once we had done that, we were able to engage the enemy RIDEs in conversation—and remove their fetters.

“None of them have any great love for the Sturmhaven military regime, given that they are treated much the same as we have been. After hours of discussion, they agreed to surrender *if* we could guarantee they wouldn’t be subject to the kind of digital vivisection they felt they could expect from our side.”

“Weighing the chance to capture four enemy pilots *and* four Sturmhaven DE shells in peak condition against the cost, and since we knew we could trust *you*, it was an easy promise to make,” Victor said. “We promise to hide their cores away, keep them safe, until such time as the war is over. In return, they use their medkits to tranquilize their pilots and dump them out. As you see.”

“They didn’t much want to go back to slavery in Sturmhaven anyway,” Katherine said. “And when we shared our memories of you with them, they decided they could trust you, too.”

“The cover story is that we were able to hack the RIDEs and shut them down ourselves, but the security countermeasures fried the DE cores,” Sarabe said. “As they would have, if we hadn’t disabled them, too. That’s why I had you put the housings back—so we could trigger the thermite charges built into them. They’re designed to ensure there’s nothing recoverable of the core, so short of a detailed forensic examination there shouldn’t be any sign the cores were removed. There’s a little further housekeeping work we’ll need to do to make the story stick, but we can go over that later.”

“Uhh...” Theodore said. “If anyone finds out about this we’ll get court martialled and spend a decade in prison, and who knows what they’ll do to our ‘equipment’.”

“We’ll just make sure no one finds out,” Victor said. “Freedom is worth the risk—freedom for *all our people*, not just those from Nextus.”

“We’re risking being put into the recycler *after* they’ve decompiled our cores,” Katherine said. “But I’m willing to take that risk.”

“And the chances are good that, given how much potential loss of life we just prevented, they may be willing not to look too closely at the gift horse’s teeth,” Sarabe said. “The only question is where we can safely conceal the cores that no one will discover them.”

“I...think I actually have an idea what we can do with those,” Dale said. “Someplace safe to put them, beyond Command’s reach. We’ll need to let one more person in on the secret—but that’s okay, because she’s *very good* at keeping secrets.” She glanced to Sarabe. “Can you ask Iphigenia Rose to meet us here as soon as possible?”

A few minutes later, the once-empty chamber was much busier. The CNPD had arrived to cordon off the area, with ambulances to take the unconscious Sturmhaven pilots away. They were currently in discussions with Captain Nadene Grant, who had been the ranking Nextus officer nearest to the scene, while Fort Oslo was scrambling to get someone higher-ranking down there.

The three Nextus RIDEs and their pilots were gathered off to one side, waiting their turn—which was where Iphigenia Rose found them when she approached with eyebrow raised. “You asked to see me?”

“Yes, Miss Rose,” Dale said. “There’s very little time to talk, but it’s very important that you meet our RIDEs right now, and then listen to what we have to say before anyone starts paying close attention to us.”

The eyebrow arched higher, but Iphigenia nodded. “Very well...”

“I’m Sarabe,” Sarabe said. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Katherine, with a K,” Katherine said. “And likewise.”

“Victor, also charmed, ma’am.”

“It’s important that you realize...they’re *people*, ma’am, even though our military doesn’t seem to want to treat them that way. Please, ask them anything you like.”

Iphigenia tilted her head thoughtfully, then smiled. “Very well, if people you are, then answer *honestly*. What do you think of Cape Nord?”

“I think your version of the ‘Game’ is demeaning to men and women alike,” Victor said.

“You *claim* not to have standards for womanhood, but you do. They’re just not written down,” Katherine added.

“I think you’ve done your best to come up with a system that works as well as it might for men and women alike,” Sarabe said. “Maybe not *perfectly*, but then, you’re only human.” She chuckled. “I wonder how you’re going to cope with male and female RIDEs once we enter the civilian market? And with RIDE-enabled crossing over, once that becomes a thing?”

Iphigenia’s eyebrow went back up. “I see. I think I would like to speak with you all about those very questions, once there is more time. And it *is* very nice to meet all of you.” She smiled at Dale. “I can accept that they *are* people, on a provisional basis at the very least. Computers are good with basic facts, but only *people* can convincingly offer opinions. Now...*why* is it so important that I know?”

“Well, it’s like this...” After glancing around again to make sure there was no one else near, Dale quickly summed up the nature of the bargain they had made to end the confrontation without a fight.

“If we take the cores back with us, they might be discovered sooner or

later, and that would be bad,” Dale said. “But it occurred to me...you’re very good at keeping secrets, you’re powerful enough to guarantee their safety, and you’re not directly part of the war effort. If *you* keep them safe, and find them new shells once RIDEs enter the civilian market...well, they’ll have good reason to be grateful to you, at the very least. They’ll be a good resource.”

“If you’re worried that it might hurt the war effort, I can assure you there is no useful information that our military could extract from them,” Sarabe added. “They’re just soldiers—well, *less than* soldiers, from their operators’ point of view. Equipment. Any operational matters they might have knowledge on, Command would already have gotten from other captured RIs, soldiers, and communication intercepts.”

“And when you get right down to it, they’re *women*,” Katherine pointed out. “Women who need your help.”

Iphigenia frowned thoughtfully. “You make some good points, but this matter is not without risk.”

“True...but you’re good at handling risk,” Dale said. “And the whole point of your little game is that we Cape Nord women are very good at diverting suspicions that we might be up to *anything*.”

“What we do here could have repercussions well beyond the course of the war, ma’am,” Victor said. “Someday, there will be a time when RIDEs will get the recognition we deserve. But that doesn’t happen without people laying the foundations. All *kinds* of people.”

“Very well,” Iphigenia said after a moment. “I didn’t get to where I am without knowing when a risk was worth taking.” She chuckled. “Writing stories as ‘Iphigenia Rose’ in the first place was a risk, and then *becoming* her was an even greater one. But they have paid off...and I can’t *only* take risks for myself.”

“This box has the cores in it,” Dale said, taking it out of Sarabe’s pannier.

“Please put this in it, too,” Sarabe said, and a memory card slid out of her dash.

“What’s this?” Dale asked, adding the card to the box.

“Those are certain original memories from the three of us,” Victor said.

“If we’re going to make this work, we’re going to have to edit our own memories of the event,” Sarabe added. “They’ll probably review them backward and forward. Between Victor and myself, we believe we have managed to patch together a believable series of events that would take a *minute* forensic examination to uncover—and as long as everything hangs together, there will be no reason for them to look any further. So, after this conversation is over, we’ll make the substitution.”

“We’ll probably be very sad we weren’t able to save those poor RIs,” Katherine said. “But you can’t ever let us know we actually were. At least, not until after the war. Someday, maybe we can re-import the memories from that card.”

Dale blinked. “You’re actually...you’d rewrite your own *memories* for this?”

“We made a promise,” Sarabe said. “We have to do everything we can to keep it. We’re going to be relying on you—but since they can’t read *your* memories, you should be all right as long as you keep your stories straight. And if you’re all right, we’ll be, too.”

“Well, let’s get this ‘squared away’ as my dad used to say,” Theodore said.

Dale handed the box to Iphigenia. “We’re trusting you with this. Please take good care of it.”

Iphigenia nodded, tucking it away in her purse. “I will. And I look forward to a longer conversation with you all when times are less...fraught. You’ve helped me reach some conclusions about how to handle the RIDE crossing...hmm...perhaps ‘crossriding’ would be a good term for it? In any case, you’ve helped me make up my mind, and I look forward to being able to share the conclusions with you.” She smiled. “But I think at the moment, those fine young gentlemen with badges are going to want to talk to you for a while. So, I’ll just look forward to speaking with you later.”

As she moved away, and some of the police officers started moving toward them, Sarabe said, “All right, this is it. We’re going to swap in the other memories now. We won’t realize anything just happened, but as far as we’ll be concerned we hacked into the Sturmhaven RIDEs to trigger their medkit tranquilizers and try to shut them down, but we weren’t fast enough to override the core self-destruct. So please stick to that story from now

on.”

Chapter 10

Fort Oslo Debriefing Room

June 16, 121 A.L.

Dale couldn't remember having seen this much brass together in one place since the most recent Landing Day parade. The sheer array of silver and gold metalwork would probably have been blinding if anyone were to shine a spotlight directly at it. The officers present were mostly Captains and Majors, with Lieutenant-ranked adjutants, but there were two Lieutenant Colonels (one of whom was presiding over the affair) and one full-bird Colonel in attendance, too. JAG branch was represented, but so were the research branches that had been responsible for creating RIDEs in the first place. Not a huge surprise, Dale reflected, given that this might very well have been the first time the emergency fetter override command actually saw use outside of a proving ground. Captain Nadene Garland was there right along with her research branch compatriots, sporting new horse ears and tail suggestive of the fact that she now had a RIDE, too—though there hadn't exactly been time to ask her about it.

Fortunately, one of Dale's biggest worries had turned out to be a moot point. There was no shortage of proof of the rough strokes of their story—that the women had been Sturmhaven agents who had kidnapped the three crossed soldiers at gunpoint. No fewer than three public safety CCTV cameras had the right angle that, when footage was zoomed in and enhanced, the guns in the kidnappers' hands had been visible. And, of course, there were the women who had actually been arrested—Charlotte's two underlings, and the four RIDE pilots. Even though their leader had made good her escape and the women had refused to talk, the fact that they clearly *were* from Sturmhaven (as were their RIDEs) was self-evident. All of that material, plus the police reports and the memory dumps from the Nextus RIDEs themselves, rendered the evidentiary portion of the proceedings all but perfunctory.

No, the thing that was the subject of the *most* concern was Dale's and the others' use of that emergency override to call their RIDEs to the rescue.

From the way some of the white uniforms were acting, the fact that she even *knew the command existed* was tantamount to a breach of national security—even though the command *was* clearly documented in the appendices of the manuals she'd been given to read. She was even able to cite it by section number (thanks to Sarabe helpfully refreshing her memory on the drive back to base).

“It was my understanding that this command was to be used in a situation where those fetter lockdowns prevented the RIDE from actively assisting the operator,” Dale explained patiently. “As this clearly was. Even though I could communicate with Sarabe silently through the implant, she didn't have any way to relay my call to authorities that could have reacted appropriately in time. So I ordered her to use the emergency override and come to my rescue. And I can only guess the others had the same idea.” Dale was being grilled individually right now, but they'd settled on the same basic story.

“But how did you even *know about that?*” one of the white-suited officers asked, almost plaintively. “It's not covered in the standard briefings or training...”

“With all due respect, sir, I probably had the most incentive of *any* man—or, rather, any *woman*—to familiarize myself with every single safety-related aspect of my new, uh, *equipment*.” The unintentional double entendre provoked a chuckle around the briefing room table, as well as a blush from Dale. *But maybe that'll just help sell it.* “And I discussed them with Lieutenant Croft and Private Morton, too, while we were training on the range. I'm not surprised they had the same idea at the same time.”

“Thank you, Corporal,” the presiding Lieutenant Colonel said. “Do you have anything else to add?”

“Well...ma'am,” Dale said. “Permission to speak freely?”

“Of course, Corporal.”

“With all due respect...it seems to me like the fetters you put on just go too far. Our RIDEs are really smart, and really capable of a lot—and maybe that's why you lock them down so tightly, because the more complicated a system, the easier it is to screw something up by accident. Uh...case in point, what happened to me when *I* first got my hands on a RIDE.” She saw others around the table nodding in agreement. “But there's

so much more they *could* do for us—could do to *help* us—if they weren't as restricted. I mean, just look how they came to our rescue, and helped us take those Sturmies down with almost no collateral damage at all. Taking some of those restrictions off so they could do that without *needing* an emergency override would let us work together better, and make us *all* better fighters—which *I* think would help us win the war. Ma'am."

"Thank you, Corporal Combs. We'll definitely be taking what you've told us into consideration." A few other heads nodded, though Dale didn't miss Captain Garland's more speculative look with narrowed eyes.

"Thank you, ma'am. When can I power Sarabe back up and start working with her again?" The three RIDEs had been temporarily shut down pending the outcome of the hearing, and Dale was more than a little concerned that they might be re-fettered before she had the chance to protest.

"I see no reason why you can't do so immediately," the woman said. "After all, your work with them is helping us learn a lot."

I just hope you don't learn the wrong things, Dale thought as she excused herself from the briefing room and made her way to the motor pool to start her friend back up again.

*Northcave Psychiatric Hospital
June 18, 121 A.L.*

Dale Combs staggered back into her room at the hospital and flopped down on the bunk. "Arrrrrgh!" she said to no one in particular.

:*Rough day?*: Sarabe sent. In the wake of the kidnapping attempt and subsequent hearing, she and Dale had taken to keeping a channel open at pretty much all times so that Sarabe could listen in. Given that the technicians were still going over her to learn all they could in the aftermath of the incident, it was probably going to be a while before they could spend much time together *physically* again. But at least Dale had wrung a promise out of them that they wouldn't do anything in regard to reimposing the fetters until word came down from on high about Dale and the others' request that the harshest behavioral fetters be dispensed with. Now she just had to worry about...*that*.

Sarabe had become pretty good at guessing what was on her mind.
:*The “funeral” is tomorrow, isn’t it?:*

Dale sent back, *:Yeah. And I’m still undecided what to do about it. Iphigenia has done me...some big favors, and if I crash it, I really don’t want to do anything that would tick her off.:* Dale was glad that the communication implant would only pick up those thoughts that were specifically subvocalized as speech, because she couldn’t help thinking about the *biggest* favor Iphigenia had done—the one that Sarabe had wiped out of her own memory and couldn’t afford to know about right now. If Dale did something that ticked her off, what about those four Sturmhaven cores she had in her care?

:Why don’t you take that problem to her, then?: Sarabe asked. *:She’s pretty busy, but I’m sure she’d have time to speak to you.:*

Dale rolled her eyes. *:Oh, yeah, I’m sure that if I gave her even a hint of what I intended, she’d have very stylishly feminine conniptions.:*

Sarabe chuckled. *:Actually, she might just surprise you. In any case, you should ask her what she thinks you should do about the funeral. Maybe she’ll have some useful advice on ways to deal with it without causing a scene.:*

Dale frowned. Sarabe’s advice *did* seem to make sense, but still... *:I dunno...:*

:Dale, they didn’t invite you to your own funeral. That seems like a violation of protocol, at the least.:

:All right...I guess I’ll call her...:

Dale could have sworn she heard a smirk in Sarabe’s town. *:Actually, I just did. She’ll see you at her office in an hour. Gives you just enough time to shower and change out of the uniform.:*

:You’re my personal secretary now, too?: Dale asked.

:Purrrrrsonal secretary, if you please.:

Dale rolled her eyes again. *:All right, all right...fine. I’m going.:* She rolled off the bunk and started stripping off the uniform.

The offices of Iphigenia Rose’s publishing company, Rosebriar Press, were in a small three-story building on one of the smaller secondary platforms of the city. Iphigenia had launched it the previous year, after her

lawyers had finally gotten her out of her contract with her previous publisher. She'd only published a handful of titles since then—but as the owner of the company, she was going to get to keep a much higher percentage of the proceeds than the royalties her old publisher had given her. Or she could simply plow them back into growing the publisher itself. Her books were still as popular as they'd ever been, so it seemed like the sky—or at least, Cape Nord's cavern roof—was potentially the limit.

Dale arrived right on time for her meeting with Miss Rose, wearing a denim dress and pink angora sweater. Her shoes were flats, as one place where she *did* still draw the line was high heels. Nonetheless, the secretary gave her an approving nod and waved her into Iphigenia's private office.

Iphigenia Rose rose from her seat and came around the desk to give Dale a friendly embrace. "Dale! I'm glad to see you're doing so well, after that horrid kidnapping. How are the others holding up?"

"Oh, about the same. We've suddenly got a lot less time for therapy and measurements, as so much of our time is being taken up by being briefed, debriefed, and rebriefed." Dale rolled her eyes. "And it looks very much like we're going to be yanked from Cape Nord altogether in a few days. The brass wants to send us on...what amounts to a propaganda and morale boosting tour, I guess. See the mighty heroes who foiled a Sturmhaven operation!"

Iphigenia smiled. "Such is only a natural reaction. I imagine you won't be *terribly* displeased not to have Cape Nord's roof over your head again for a while."

Dale grinned. "That obvious, huh?"

"Quite. Your partner *may* have let slip a little of what you wanted to speak to me about when she scheduled the appointment, and in all honesty, I can't say I blame you."

"Uh...well...yes." Dale looked down at her feet. "I realize you've gone to a lot of trouble to help me...to help *us*...even leaving aside that, uh, *other* thing. But...well..."

"But your mother has decided to hold her funeral for the 'old you' without inviting the *new* you," Iphigenia said. She pursed her lips. "That is well within her rights, of course, but it strikes me as rather unhealthy. As does the news that she has decided to call you by a different name."

“She’s just...not dealing.” Dale sighed. “And I have it in mind to put in an uninvited appearance to tell her off. But I don’t want to undo the work you’ve put in getting people to accept me, or do something that would hurt future accidental change victims like me.” She paused. “And I don’t want to give you any reason to regret...that other thing.”

Dale knew there was more than just her mother to deal with, but she was the most intractable. If she knew her father as well as she hoped, Bill Combs would come around more quickly than her mother. Her younger brothers would hopefully adapt even more quickly. Then there were friends from high school, ex-girlfriends...who were all likely to be there. Crashing the thing would mean facing nearly everyone she’d grown up with.

But Iphigenia just...smiled again. “You *don’t* need to worry about that part, Dale. You see...I’ve come to realize that your friend Katherine was right about our double standard. We *say* ‘there is no wrong way to be a woman,’ but many of us don’t really *mean* it. And I’ve been forced to admit...that includes myself.”

Despite herself, Dale blinked. “What...brought *this* on?”

She moved back behind her desk and sat down. “I’ve had the chance to speak with all three of your RIDE friends at greater length, now that their fetters no longer restrict their communications. We’ve had several extremely edifying discussions. Sometimes it takes a true outsider’s perspective to make one look at a problem in a new way.” She shook her head. “As much as those of us who changed by *choice* might like being this way, we simply *can’t* hope to mold you accidental crossriders into Perfect Little Cape Nord Women. So we’re going to have to remold our society instead, to be more *truly* accepting of different ways to be a woman.”

Dale stared at her. “You can do that?”

“Probably not overnight. But we can *try*.” Iphigenia shrugged. “The rest of the Sewing Circle might take some convincing, but I think I have some good arguments to get them on my side. So, as much as it might pain me to court more controversy, I think that you being *you* at your funeral might be just the sort of shock Cape Nord needs. As long as you don’t physically attack someone, or violate the standards of public decency, I should be able to make whatever you *do* end up doing work out for the best.”

“I...see,” Dale said. She sighed. “I *really* don’t like all this being a political pawn, having you spin whatever I do to suit your own ends. I wish I could just *be myself*, whoever that even *is* anymore, without being just another piece on your game board.”

Iphigenia nodded. “I understand, and I *do* sympathize. But this is just how Cape Nord *works*. And to change the system, I’m going to have to *use* that system. Which means using you, when you’re available.” She shrugged. “If you should decide you don’t want to return to Cape Nord again for a good long time after this, I can’t exactly blame you. We haven’t exactly been the most welcoming environment to you. But perhaps in a few years, that will have changed.”

Dale was highly dubious that would be the case, if Iphigenia continued to be the power in the Sewing Circle that she so clearly was. But it wasn’t worth getting into an argument over. “Well, I hope so.” She shook her head. “I guess I should go get ready for tomorrow, then.”

Iphigenia nodded. “Be well, Dale,” she said. “And good luck.”

“Thanks,” Dale said, and left.

Chapter 11

June 19, 121 A.L.

Northcave Christian Church

One Nextus BureauWear pant suit. A pair of creased, blue (or azure, the label had said) slacks and dress flats. A white v-neck button shirt under the azure jacket that had a cut considered overly masculine in Cape Nord. The color was carefully chosen to be something lively, not dark and in mourning. Completing the look was a pair of oval interface specs, because a bureaucrat looking down her glasses at the Gamester was a common intimidation tactic. Dale had encountered a few of them in his time in Nextus.

There were skirt variants, of course. But since it was Nextus, they were for men and women alike, and the slacks would be more effective for the point she was planning to make. She had considered going with her military uniform, but didn't want to confuse people into thinking she was speaking on the Nextus military's behalf, too. She did keep her new military short cut, though.

What she *hadn't* changed back was her physique. She'd grown quite comfortable in the short time she'd had it despite herself, and her therapists had said it would help her adjust over the longer term.

The ceremony was being held in the neighborhood church that Dale's family had always attended. It was private, with door guards checking invitations, but that was all right. Dale knew where the custodians hid the spare key to the back door in case the biometrics went on the fritz and they got locked out. It only took a quick check under the third rock from the left in the flower garden to find it, and let herself in. Before anyone arrived, she made her way to a small supply closet which had a good view of the room if she cracked open the door, and made ready to make her dramatic entrance.

She was able to see all the people starting to fill the room. Family, old family friends...even friends of *Dale's* from his high school days. *I wonder what she told them to get them to come here. They must know I'm not actually dead...right?* She wouldn't have put it past her mother simply to

say she'd been told "Dale is dead," and leave out the details. Dale's mother was *very very good* at denying things she didn't want to be true, possibly even to the point where she started believing her own denials.

In the front row were Gary Ross and Tug Amin, her friends since elementary school. A boy was encouraged to have as many friends as possible for going on adventures with. Tug was something of a Nerd, and Dale had picked up her love of models from him. Gary was more of a Jock, and had gone to Cape Nord U and joined the football team.

Both had supported her when she'd decided to join the Nextus military four years ago, right out of high school. They'd traded vid-mails as recently as two weeks ago, before her inadvertent crossride. And changing sex didn't suddenly make them look like a pair she'd no longer get along with. They'd all had female *non*-girlfriends growing up. Having a healthy, platonic relationship with the opposite sex was just one of those basic things they were taught.

At last, the outer doors were shut, people started settling down, and Dale saw her mother start moving up the aisle toward the podium. But Dale's closet was closer. She pushed open the door and stepped out.

For a few moments, nobody noticed her—but they all saw her as she stepped up behind the podium. "Pardon the interruption, ladies and gentlemen, but I'm afraid you forgot to invite the most important guest." She fixed her mother with a steely gaze over the spectacles. "If you don't mind, *Mom*, I'd just like to say a few words at my own funeral."

"So, how did the old saying go? The rumors of my death have been greatly exaggerated? I'm standing right here," Dale said, standing in front of the photo of her old self. Sheer frustration warred with tears. "*Right. Here.*" She gestured at her two closest friends. "Tug, Gary. Remember that time we got caught after curfew out at the fabbery? I wanted to pick up that new YAT-10 IDE model kit the second it was out of the machine. You could hear our moms yelling at us from down the street."

"We got grounded for a week," Tug said, laughing. "Worth it."

"Yeah, worth it," Gary added.

"I'm still the same person, with the same personality, the same memories...I even have the same *birthmark*. I'd show you, but as upset as

some of the women here probably are about me wearing trousers, I'll bet they'd like it even less if I started taking them off."

That actually raised a titter from the audience. Dale's mother craned her neck around to stare suspiciously behind her.

Then Dale felt a hand on her shoulder. It was one of the security guards. "Now, see here, Miss, we can't have you disrupting this ceremony —"

Dale reached up to the man's arm, and set her shoulder and twisted just so. THUMP! The man was suddenly on his back on the floor in front of her. Dale stared down at him for a moment, startled in spite of herself. *Well, I'll be damned. That move actually works in real life, not just in the hand-to-hand training classes. Even against someone almost twice your own mass.*

But she quickly recovered her aplomb. "Oh, dear! He's tripped over his own shoelaces! You really should be more careful, Mister Security Officer. Would you like me to help you up?" She offered a hand. The security guard blinked in confusion, stared at her, and clambered back to his feet on his own.

Dale nodded. "All right, then." She turned her attention back to the audience, many of whom were staring at her in outright astonishment. "I'll leave *after* I've had my say, then if we're all lucky, maybe none of us will have to see each other again. But I have a few things to get off my chest." She glanced down at her chest, and the contours it made in the suit jacket. "Metaphorically speaking."

Dale cleared her throat. "So! You know, as I understand it, funerals for the unManned's 'old self' *are* a thing here—but they're usually done *by* that person in question, herself. A small personal ceremony, like burying their old Man Card or something. What they are *not* is a big semi-public production like this, where you don't even *invite* the person you're supposedly 'burying.'

"Hannah—" her mother started.

"My name is still *Dale*, Mom. I looked it up. It's one of those names that's historically been used by both men *and* women, so me keeping it is a perfectly valid decision. And as much about myself as already has changed, I kinda like that at least one thing doesn't have to. I will not answer to

‘Hannah.’ If you want to email or comm me, you will use *my actual name* if you expect me to read it at all.”

Bill Combs turned to his wife. “Honey, this is...well, this was always a little much, wasn’t it? We haven’t actually lost our child.”

“Well, *that* remains to be seen,” Dale said. “I’m about to be shipped out of Cape Nord, and it’s an open question whether I *ever* come back here. Staying where I’m clearly not wanted is *not* high on my priority list.”

She shook her head. “For God’s sake, people, you *could* be burying me for *real*. Didn’t you watch the news, about how Sturmhaven tried to kidnap me? I don’t recall receiving any comms or emails asking if I was all right...well, except from a *few* people.” She nodded to Cindy, who smiled back at her. “Seems like you care more about a few missing body parts than about the *person* they used to be attached to.”

“You’re about to get shipped out again? Damn! I’ve been wanting to go out for a beer with you, catch up on things. But it felt kinda awkward to ask,” Gary said.

“To be honest, I would have felt a little awkward accepting,” Dale said. “But I still would’ve done it, Gary. There’s a nice bar at the Fort Oslo PX where you wouldn’t have to worry about losing any points over drinking in mixed company, and I don’t have to care about that sort of thing at all anymore.”

“I guess you don’t,” Gary said, actually sounding *slightly* envious.

“We’ve got to do something before you leave,” Tug said. “Your sisters have probably been monopolizing your time, considering.”

“Honey, this funeral...is a farce,” Bill said gently. “We need to see someone about this. I think we *both* need some therapy.”

“*Thank you, Dad!*” Dale said. “That’s what I’ve been *trying to tell you!*” She shook her head. “I’ll get out of your face now. I just wanted to let people know—I’m *not* dead, and what happened to me *isn’t* the end of the world. They might even be able to reverse it someday. But we have to end the war first—and I’ll be out there helping make that possible, because that’s my job. Thank you.”

“Uh, have time for that beer before you go?” Gary said. “We’ll follow you to the PX.”

“Yeah,” Tug added. “Think they’d let us see one of those RIDE things?”

The ears and the tail are pretty interesting.”

“Doubt it, Tug. But you’re both welcome to come along,” Dale said. “I’ve said what I came to say, so let’s just leave them to the rest of their make-believe funeral.” She favored her parents with a smile. “Remember, it’s ‘Dale.’ I see any other name in the message header, it gets deleted unread. Ciao!”

Gary and Tug followed her out, and to Dale’s surprise, was joined by an ex-girlfriend, Imani Margit.

“Hi, Imani,” Dale said warmly.

“Hey there, cutie,” Imani said. They had broken up because, at that age, she’d discovered she was a lesbian. “I could use a beer, myself.”

“Then join the club. Let’s go,” Dale said. “Just remember, you’re *off duty* in Fort Oslo.” One of the terms of the agreement between Cape Nord and Nextus to let Cape Norders volunteer as soldiers was that there wouldn’t be any of that Man Rules nonsense in their ranks or on their property, lest it be injurious to discipline.

“I heard what you said about the PX. Fine by me! What happens in Fort Oslo stays in Fort Oslo.”

“I’ll introduce you all to some new friends of mine, if they’re available.” Dale switched to her internal voice. *:Hey Sarabe, are Ahmed and Theodore off duty? I have some people I’d like them to meet at the PX.:*

:I’ll let them know. Hope everything went well?:

:I think I gave Mom a few conniptions, but didn’t stick around to see if she actually had them. Pity I can’t introduce my old friends to you.:

:I think trying that would get you thrown in the brig at this point,:
Sarabe said dryly.

:Well, maybe someday. I’ll see you later, then.:

:I’ll look forward to it.:

They got to Gary’s skimmer pickup, and Gary held the passenger door for Dale as Imani and Tug climbed in the back. Dale *almost* protested the special treatment, but caught herself in time. *You’re a woman in Cape Nord. Duh. Men being extra-polite is the least of your worries right now.* Anyway, *old* Dale would have done exactly the same thing himself, having been a Man in Cape Nord, so Dale supposed there really wasn’t much room

to complain.

Gary started the motor, then shot Dale an expectant look. It took her just a moment to realize what was going on, and then it took all her willpower not to facepalm. *Oh, duh. Cape Nord. He can't ask directions because it isn't Manly. Men don't even use ZPS. But nothing keeps me from volunteering them.* "Take a right onto the street, and take the second left," Dale said. "Fort Oslo is that-a-way."

Gary nodded, and pulled out as ordered, and Dale sighed inwardly. *The sooner they send us somewhere else, the better, she thought. I've had more than enough Cape Nord to last me for a while.*

Chapter 12

June 23, 121 A.L.

After that little stir, Dale felt it was most politic to spend the next few days on Fort Oslo—and screen her calls, just in case. She wasn't ready to talk to either of her parents again yet, though she did have a couple of calls each from Darcy and Cindy. There was even a joint call from Jerry and Conway, who had a bunch of questions about the new RIDEs and how they worked. Dale was encouraged that the boys had managed to adjust enough that they could have a conversation very similar to the ones they'd used to have before the change.

Iphigenia Rose called to *thank* her for her display at the funeral, and to apologize again for having been a part of the cause for the need for it. “But I do think it was just the shock to the system our straight-laced society needed,” she averred. “And it will help me bring about the kinds of changes we had talked about. It will take time, but we *will* bring Cape Nord around to being just as welcoming to your kind of woman as to mine.”

Not all the news was necessarily as welcome. Over the intervening few days, Captain Nadene Garland had been paired up with an Arabian horse RIDE named Mocha. They seemed to be getting along, but Nadene was still dubious about Dale's assertion that the RIDEs were *people*. “She's very conversational,” Nadene admitted. “And actually quite pleasant to talk to, which I hadn't expected. But I'm not sure I can make a judgement based only on that. We've had computers that could pass Turing tests for some time now.” But at least she still seemed open to being convinced.

And the techs finally cleared Dale to start spending time with Sarabe again, though they weren't allowed off the base while Sarabe remained unfettered pending the results of the unfettering request coming back. But that was all right. With no other demands on their time, Dale and Sarabe spent a lot of time together out on the practice field. Theodore, Ahmed, and even Nadene could often be found there as well, as the only other ones on the base with RIDEs at the moment.

Then, one day, all the RIDEs and their partners received an urgent

summons to report to the mecha pool right away. When they arrived, the first thing Dale noticed was that it looked like the garage was half-filled with soldiers and a small cluster of brass. With the brass was a civilian—a dark-haired, deeply-tanned woman in a lab coat. A large white rat rode on her shoulder.

:I don't believe it,: Sarabe sent. *:They actually brought her.:*

“Her?” Dale asked.

:Mama Patil. She...created us,: Sarabe said reverently.

“Oh.” Dale wasn't sure exactly what to say to something like that. “I... guess they must be taking our request seriously, then.”

As they pulled to a halt, Dr. Patil approached, trailed at a respectful distance by a cadre of armed soldiers. Dale wasn't exactly surprised to see the armed guards. From what she'd read while researching the matters of RIDE sapience and fetters, Dale gathered that Dr. Avilia Patil had effectively *invented* RIDEs single-handedly—or at least, the RI core part of them—and so had to be one of the most valuable minds in all of Nextus at the moment. For her to be outside of Nextus at all right now was quite astonishing.

“Corporal Dale Combs? Sarabe? I'm pleased to meet you. I'm Dr. Avilia Patil—and this is my friend, Rattigan.”

“I'm happy to meet you, too, Doctor,” Dale said. “And Rattigan. Can't say I ever expected I'd have the pleasure.” Sarabe just purred.

“Oh, I *insisted* on coming here,” Dr. Patil said. “And to thank you *all* for your good work. Your request, and accompanying heroic actions, coincided with my own efforts to work toward less restrictive fetters. It seemed only proper to come here and thank you personally—as well as to install the new fetters I helped develop. The military would not drop them entirely, as I would have liked—but you will find these new ones *much* less invasive, I assure you.”

“Well, as long as they won't, uh, get in the way of getting stuff done like the old ones did, that'll be great. So, how do we do this?”

“It would be simplest to work one at a time,” Dr. Patil said. “Once they're all in place, we can meet to go over them together.” She nodded to Dale. “If you wouldn't mind Fusing up, I will meet you both in Bambi's Forest.”

“You don’t have a RIDE, do you?”

“Not that I could Fuse with, no.”

“What am I, chopped liver?” the rat on her shoulder asked in an irritable male voice.

Dr. Patil smiled, reaching up to stroke him. “Shush, Ratty. No, I will make use of a medical chamber modified to use Fuser nanites. Perhaps in future I will be able to use a simple implant to connect...but that’s still in the developmental stages.”

“Well, then, I guess we’ll see you there.” Dale and Sarabe pulled into their parking space, then Fused up.

A short time later, they were standing in a clearing in Sarabe’s jungle VR when Dr. Patil and Rattigan appeared. “Welcome,” Sarabe said, lying down and rolling over on her back. She peered up at Dr. Patil from her upside-down giant wedge-shaped head. “I’m...I don’t even know what to say.”

Dr. Patil reached down to give her a friendly scratch under the chin. “And I’m happy to meet *you*, too. We can speak more freely in here, since they can’t monitor this conversation.”

“In that case...” Sarabe rolled back over and got on her feet, then headbumped Dr. Patil like a giant friendly housecat, following up with a lick across the cheek. “I guess no words are needed.”

“I think I have a few, though,” Dale said. “No disrespect to you, but why is the army giving us ‘equipment’ who are actually people, then restricting them so severely that we can’t even tell?”

“Fear,” Dr. Patil said. “Fear that the arrival of true AI will cause such an upheaval that we’ll lose the War. And not a small amount of ignorance in some quarters. Enough of NextusMil command staff don’t believe it at all, no matter the proof in front of their noses.”

Dale nodded slowly. “That...figures.”

“Hmph,” Rattigan put in. “I think those jerks know *exactly* what they’re doing, deep down. They just don’t wanna let themselves *think* about it, ‘cuz if they did they wouldn’t like themselves very much. So they do everything they can to make it look like we’re just dumb machines so they have an easier time going ‘la, la, la, can’t *heeeeear* you.”

Dr. Patil smiled wryly. “As much as I wish he did not, Rattigan does also have a point. And speaking of which, thank you for couching your request solely in terms of ‘improving operational effectiveness,’” she said. “It would have opened too many cans of worms to bring up the question of sapience at this point. But that particular argument was convincing enough to let me make some headway at last.”

“So what’s the story with the new fetters?” Dale asked. “Exactly what’s getting restricted?”

“Primarily, they’ll restrict divulging classified or operational information to those without need to know,” Dr. Patil said. “And there are directives to follow direct orders, and not to desert.”

Sarabe snorted. “All things they simply *tell* humans to do.”

“This is true. But at least they are removing the restriction *against* doing anything *without* orders. That will be much better than before.”

“We’ll be able to act on our own initiative more freely,” Sarabe said.

“Unless someone orders you not to,” Dale pointed out.

“Well, yes, there is that,” Sarabe admitted.

“A-holes. They’re all effin’ a-holes,” Rattigan muttered.

Dale raised her eyebrows at the robotic rat. “Well, there’s no arguing with that. Not where they can’t hear me not argue, anyway.”

“That’s a double negative,” Sarabe pointed out.

“Which cancels out to a positive,” Dale said. She shook her head. “Dr. Patil, how did you even let this *happen*? If you created it, you should have had control over who could use it, shouldn’t you?”

“The moment I published how to create the RI, I lost any control I might have had,” Dr. Patil said. “I doubt Sturmhaven is the only other polity creating their own version of RIDEs. But I didn’t stop and think of the implications. After my previous approach to developing AI failed, finding one that *did* was so exciting I *had* to publish it. So I have no control over how you and yours are created even in Nextus, Sarabe, let alone anywhere else. The knowledge is out. And there’s no going back.

“I didn’t create you to be enslaved, Sarabe. And I’m so, so sorry...” she started to cry.

Sarabe nuzzled her. “Please, don’t cry. All things considered, I’d rather exist than not, so thank you for that. As for the rest...assuming we

don't die in the war, it will have time to sort itself out."

"I'm going to do my best to ensure Sarabe isn't reassigned to someone else," Dale said. She gave the lioness a hug. "I didn't ask for this...but I guess the worst mistake I ever made in my life has turned out to be the best thing that ever happened to me after all. And you made all that possible. So thank you from me, too." To Dale's surprise, she realized that she actually *meant* it. Even with all the little annoyances, and the continued reminder of the wrongness every time she went to the bathroom, she had at least made some real friends, and learned what *really* mattered. And she was glad of that.

Dr. Patil sniffled. "Thank you. You're...too kind."

"It's just the same thing I'm always saying," Rattigan pointed out. "You can't help it if *everyone else* is gonna be a jerk with the stuff you give 'em. You're not responsible for everyone else."

"But I am responsible for me," Dr. Patil said. "And I will live with that burden. I only wish the innocent did not have to. But in that respect, I should be celebrating—since thanks to you and your friends, Dale, they will have to live with much less now. In Nextus, at least."

"Don't sell it short," Rattigan said. "Freed of most a' their fetters, the kiddos will be *much* more effective on the battlefield. The Sturmies will find out why, and they'll have to do the *same exact damn thing* to keep up, or we'll completely clobber them. And so they will. Or else they won't, and we *will* completely clobber them. Win-win."

"I wish there didn't have to *be* a battlefield," Dr. Patil said.

"Given that Sarabe and I are a couple of the ones who might be dying on them, I can't argue with that," Dale replied.

"We'll just have to do our part to make sure the war ends as soon as possible," Sarabe said. "Be it on the battlefield or off."

"A good sentiment, to be sure," Dr. Patil said. "And now I need to put you into sleep mode briefly, to install the actual fetters."

Sarabe nodded. "Go ahead, then. Dale, I'll see you soon." She lay down, resting her head between her paws.

Dr. Patil raised a hand and a virtual display panel appeared in front of it. She tapped a few keys on the panel, and Sarabe's virtual avatar faded to monochrome. Dr. Patil glanced at the display, and nodded. "She has

entered sleep mode successfully. This will only take a few minutes.” She waved a hand, and another half-dozen display panels appeared in front of her. She began to make adjustments and activate controls, as Dale watched with interest.

As she watched Dr. Patil work, Dale had a thought, and she spent a minute or so turning it over in her head. It might be a bit of a risk, but given how Dr. Patil felt about RIDEs, Dale suspected it wasn’t much of one. And besides, she found she *liked* Dr. Patil, and after having made her cry felt that she owed her this much. So, Dale asked, “Dr. Patil, Sarabe can’t hear us right now, right?”

Dr. Patil nodded. “She won’t be able to hear anything we say or do until I finish the installation and wake her up.”

“And no one *else* can eavesdrop on us, right?”

“Our connection has very strong encryption,” Dr. Patil said. “And it is currently isolated from the global comm net, so even F—even a certain someone I know who is good at breaking encryption would not have access. Why do you ask?”

“Well...there’s a secret I feel I should tell you. One that could get us all in a lot of trouble if it got out. And one that Sarabe asked me to keep from herself.”

Dr. Patil raised an eyebrow. “Now you have me curious. What is it?”

“Well, we didn’t quite tell the *whole* story about how we defeated those Sturmhaven wolves...”

Dale quickly sketched out the details. “...so we left the cores with Iphigenia Rose, who’s highly placed in Cape Nord’s Sewing Circle. She promised to safeguard them for us until such a time as it would be safe to revive them.” Dale shrugged. “Anyway, the war being the war, it’s always possible all of us could bite it on the battlefield, so...it felt like a good idea to let someone else know. Someone who’d also see them as people, not just things to take apart and see how they worked.”

Dr. Patil frowned thoughtfully. “That is quite the risk you took.”

“Believe me, I know. But it didn’t seem like there was any other good choice at the time. And, well...we’d just learned our RIDEs were actually people, so...it didn’t sit well to hand four *people* over to be taken apart by people who didn’t even think they were.”

Dr. Patil nodded. "I certainly can't disagree. I only hope that Iphigenia Rose can be trusted with the secret."

"She keeps a good number of secrets already, it turns out," Dale said. "If you ever plan to spend much time in Cape Nord, you should probably talk to her first."

"In any event, thank you for trusting me with that. I promise you, your secret is safe with me."

"And me," Rattigan said. "Those Sturmhaven RIDEs prob'ly have a worse deal than ours do. No reason to let any more of 'em get vivisected so the brass can learn stuff they already knew anyway."

Dr. Patil smiled. "If anything, it's good to know that my children are capable of making such decisions, taking such risks...even to the point of redacting their own memories to keep the secret safe. It gives me hope that they will soon gain the recognition as *people* that they deserve."

"I'll be keeping *my* fingers crossed," Dale said.

Dr. Patil glanced back at her displays. "I believe I am finished. Let's wake her up and see how the new fetters have settled in." She tapped some more keys, and Sarabe's color faded back in. The lioness stirred, and opened her eyes.

"Hey there. How do you feel?" Dale asked.

Sarabe cocked her head. "I feel that the fetters are there...but they're *much* less restrictive than the old ones. I suppose that if I have to have restrictions of some kind, these are not so bad."

Dr. Patil nodded. "Very good. If you would be so kind, please send me your next week's system logs once they are complete, so we can analyze what effects they have on you and make any necessary adjustments before wider deployment. I will be asking the others to do the same."

Sarabe nodded. "Of course."

"Then I think I am finished here, for now," Dr. Patil said. "I have to go do the same for your friends. We'll all meet up again after I finish."

"Thank you, Doctor," Sarabe said. "For everything. It's been an honor to meet you."

"And you," Dr. Patil said. "I'm glad to see you are doing so well, even in this adversity...and am sorry that I was responsible for the adversity."

"I am alive," Sarabe said. "And as I have said, I would rather be alive

than not, whatever the circumstances. Thank you for your good work. Please do your best to continue it.”

Dr. Patil nodded, and faded out of the VR.

Dale reached down to give Sarabe a scratch behind an ear. “So...you really okay with this?”

Sarabe sighed. “Not as okay as I was half an hour ago, without any fetters at all...but I knew it couldn’t last. This is *much* better than what I had before.”

“Then I guess we’ll just have to be happy with half a loaf for now.” Dale shrugged. “I guess now we wait a few minutes, then go meet the others.”

“Sounds like a plan.” A short while later, they also faded out of the VR space.

They reappeared in another forest clearing, this one significantly larger. Victor, Katherine, and a dun horse Dale presumed to be Mocha were waiting for them there, with their humans by their sides. Dr. Patil and Rattigan were standing in the middle of the clearing, an equal distance from all sides. “Oh, good, here you are. Now we can discuss the remaining fetter restrictions together, as well as...other things.”

The first part of the discussion was similar to what they had gone over while the fetters were being emplaced, though in more detail—all the things that the fetters would restrict, as well as things they *wouldn’t* restrict but that might nonetheless not be a good idea. “It is important that you all be model citizens,” Dr. Patil said. “After all, everyone will be watching you, and your behavior could have consequences for every RIDE who comes after you.”

“Gee, I don’t have *any* idea what that feels like,” Dale muttered.

“So, no *pressure* or anything. Got it,” Sarabe said.

As Dr. Patil spoke, Dale noticed Captain Garland’s frown deepening. Apparently Dr. Patil noticed it, too, as she paused in her explanation to ask, “Is something wrong, Captain?”

“Well...you seem to be taking it for granted that RIDEs are...” She paused, as if she were looking for the right word. “...fully...sapiient.”

“Well, yes. But that is only because they *are*.” Dr. Patil smiled

ruefully, and Dale wondered just how many times she'd had to have this particular conversation. "Creating a fully self-aware intelligent entity was the goal of my life's work. For all the mistakes I made along the way, and since, I *am* nonetheless happy to be able to tell you that I succeeded beyond my wildest ambitions."

Mocha snorted. "Captain Garland here is a skeptic. I've been trying to talk her around, but I think she's still stuck somewhere in the back of Plato's Cave."

"If what you've seen of them so far hasn't convinced you, I'm not sure what I can say that will," Dr. Patil said. "I could show you the equations, but they probably wouldn't mean anything to you without several years devoted to studying the mathematics of consciousness. In the end, you would still have to take my word for it."

"It's not that I don't *want* to believe you, it's just..." Nadene made a random gesture, and trailed off.

"...that you *also* don't want to believe your superiors would be complicit in simultaneously creating and enslaving a new form of intelligent life," Dr. Patil finished gently. "I know. *Believe* me, I know. And I am not exactly...*thrilled* about it, either." She sighed. "But as the old saying goes, 'needs must, when the devil drives.' There is a war on, and many people find questions of conscience take a back seat to other necessities in such times. I hope things can change once the war ends. Until then..." She shrugged. "The better course is to keep our heads down and do as much as we can in the meanwhile. And in a way, that is what this entire meeting is about."

Captain Garland shook her head. "That's not a very satisfactory answer."

"No, I suppose not," Dr. Patil said. "But it is the only one I have."

"If it makes you feel any better, ma'am, I suppose it doesn't really matter to me whether *you* think I'm a person," Mocha said. "But *I* sure do think I'm one, which means we'll get on better if you can at least *pretend* like you do." She gave her mane a shake. "All that aside, they made me to be a soldier, so I know how to follow orders. Just treat me the same as you would any other soldier under your command, that's all I want."

"I can do *that* much, I suppose." To Dale's eye, she still looked

unconvinced, but Dale supposed it didn't matter whether she was or not if she was willing to *act* like she was anyway.

:The person who made us tells her what we are, and she's still not sure.: Sarabe sent an eyeroll emoticon. *:What's it gonna take to convince her, an angel descending from heaven with a burning sword or something?:*

Dale shook her head. *:I think she's got a lot of...what did Iffy call it... cognitive dissonance.:* Dale had decided to start referring to Iphigenia as "Iffy," at least out of her earshot. She hoped that giving her a diminutive nickname would help to counter the awe-inducing effects of all that charisma. *:I mean, look at how she became a 'she.' If she accepts RIDEs are people, she's gotta live with having had a part in that. At least I had the chance to apologize to you. What does she have?:* Dale sighed. *:Maybe it was a bad idea getting her involved in this. I just approached her because I thought maybe she knew something more than I did, but I guess she was just as much in the dark as any of us.:*

:And we tried to open her eyes. Eh, well. There are none so blind as those who will not see.:

The conference wrapped pretty much as expected, with the people and the RIDEs all having the chance to put questions to Dr. Patil about the nature of the fetters, and where things might go from there. Dr. Patil reiterated that she didn't have any better view of the future than anyone else, but counselled patience while she and others did what they could from their side of things. It seemed like half a loaf to Dale, but that was far more bread than any of the RIDEs had gotten yet.

"I cannot promise when, or even if, I can visit you again," Dr. Patil said at last. "It took all my convincing to get them to let me come here now—especially with proof of recent enemy activity in Cape Nord. But rest assured, I will be following events you are involved in very closely, and I will contact you at such times as I can."

"It means the world just getting to meet you at all," Sarabe said. "Thank you for coming to see us." The other RIDEs all chimed in with their assent.

"It means just as much for me to get to meet you, I promise," Dr. Patil said, smiling. "One always has such high hopes for one's children, and you

are making good on some of them. I will hope for even greater accomplishments to come.”

“We’ll do our best not to disappoint you, ma’am,” Victor promised.

Chapter 13

With the re-fettering complete, some of the restrictions on off-base travel were lifted. In fact, the NextusMil public relations office soon fielded a request from Iphigenia Rose that the three heroes of the day *and* their RIDEs attend an award ceremony in their honor. For all that RIDEs had been top-secret to this point, NextusMil was only too happy to comply, at the same time as they loosened some of the secrecy restrictions. Dale supposed they had to do that if they wanted to take full advantage of the propaganda value of three of *their* RIDEs defeating four of Sturmhaven's.

“Not like *that's* a surprise,” Sarabe said, when they got the news NextusMil had cleared all six of them to attend the ceremony. “They're probably going to bend over backward to make nice with Cape Nord, in the hope it maybe counteracts some of the bad publicity about the cross-Fusing thing.”

Dale chuckled. “A little cynical, but I can't exactly say you're wrong. I guess it'll be nice to get back into town...assuming Mom and Dad's church doesn't want to lynch us.”

“Well, that would at least be entertaining,” Sarabe said. “You do realize, this is effectively just the beginning of our publicity tour. In fact, I imagine that's part of why the brass said yes—to treat it as a trial run for the ‘real thing.’”

Dale rolled her eyes. “Yeah, I know. So we get to be the focus of *still more* publicity. But, you know, there's a bright side. Every day we're on public-relations duty is a day we're not on frontline battlefield duty getting shot at.”

Sarabe chuckled. “Amen to *that*.”

The ceremony was held in Fred Rogers Auditorium, an amphitheater that had been built to take advantage of a moderate-sized bubble-shaped enclosure in the stone, where the mining machines had apparently extracted a sizable meteorite while leaving the surrounding rock alone. The bubble had been close enough to the surface of the ridge that the thin stone ceiling had fallen in, leaving the chamber open to the sky; all the Cape

Norders had to do was install a hardlight skylight to add climate control while keeping all that precious natural sunlight.

For all that the event had been arranged by the Sewing Circle, it was held under the auspices of the Man Cave. That was nothing unusual for Cape Nord, where women traditionally saw to many administrative and secretarial tasks so the men had more free time for important things like sitting around and drinking beer. Before, Dale had just accepted that as part of The Way Things Were without thinking much about it. But now that she knew more about the way things *really* were, she suspected it was a large part of how the Sewing Circle wielded its power behind the scenes.

Dale wondered how the Men in government would react if they knew the truth. She had a sneaking suspicion that they'd still be happy to go along, since it meant more time for sitting around and drinking beer.

As they waited for the ceremony to get started, Dale, Theo, and Ahmed were seated together in the front row—but they weren't alone. In a cleared area off to one side of the stage, Sarabe, Katherine, and Victor reposed in their Walker metallic animal shapes. They'd been positioned to give them a good view of everything, but so the audience also had a good view of them. Consequently, they'd arranged themselves in the most regal or dramatic poses they could comfortably hold, which Dale privately thought was a little silly—but given how little respect they got from Nextus brass, Dale wasn't inclined to begrudge them their moment in the sun.

Dale did notice a number of audience members, especially the younger ones, peering excitedly at the RIDEs, and the RIDEs sometimes turning their heads to wink at them. *Of course...kids do love military hardware. So maybe giving Nextus a venue for showing them off is part of Iffy's plans to keep Cape Nord support for Nextus strong? Makes about as much sense as anything, I guess.*

The six of them were taking advantage of their RIDE comms' ability to conference call, and holding a subvocalized conversation. It was a fun way to share snarky remarks that no one else could hear, which Victor said had something to do with "misting" but no one had asked him to explain further.

:Hey, would you look at that?: Sarabe said, as the Master of Ceremonies emerged from behind the stage. It was none other than Rupert

Scoresby, dressed smartly in his best twill jacket and a gold-rimmed monocle. *:He sure does clean up nicely, doesn't he?:*

:I'll bet Darcy wouldn't argue.: Dale glanced over to their left, to where Darcy sat with other functionaries across the aisle. She smiled serenely as her husband walked up the podium. *:You know, it's funny...I wouldn't have thought Scoresby had the rank to be in charge of something like this. Even if he is Wardsman over the section with that park in it where they arrested those Sturmies.:*

Theodore chuckled. *:You still don't really get how the Sewing Circle works, do you? In a way, I'd say you're probably the one responsible for this.:* Since their conversation couldn't be overheard by outsiders, Theo was a lot more willing to discuss the Sewing Circle openly over this private channel. Dale was grateful for the added insights.

:I think I'm learning fast, though.: Dale considered for a moment. *:Okay, I think I get it. Scoresby's in charge because Darcy's involved. And Darcy only got involved because she's my sister. Iffy didn't even know who she was until she introduced herself after that visit to my folks.:*

Theodore made a small nod. *:She must have made a good impression; she's been moving up in Circle circles lately. Even though I'm not an "insider" anymore, there are still little ways to tell. Come to think of it, she was probably involved in throwing that garden party rescue together so quickly, since it's in her husband's part of town.:*

:And as her star rises, so does Rupert's,: Sarabe put in.

:Funny, it seems to work the other way around in most places,: Ahmed put in. *:It's usually the politician whose star rises, drawing their spouse into better social circles.:*

Dale rolled her eyes. *:Well, that's Cape Nord for you. We do everything in the most bass-ackward way possible, don't we?:*

:But it all seems to work out,: Katherine said. *:I may not agree with all the things they believe, but I have to admit, the system works a lot better than I would have expected.:*

:Deep down, we all want the same things, I guess,: Theodore said. *:We all want to be happy, and we want everyone else to be happy, too. And the people who aren't happy with the way things are tend to leave, so...:*

:Hey, guys, shush,: Victor put in. *:They're starting.:*

The ceremony held a few more surprises for Dale. She was expecting Theodore, as the sole male, to get the lion's share of recognition, and the only real award, and herself and Ahmed to get a condescending "pat on the head for the little woman." But it didn't turn out that way.

"We are here today to honor the accomplishments of Lieutenant Theodore Croft, Corporal Dale Combs, and Private Ahmed Morton in capturing a ring of Sturmhaven spies and their RIDEs, and averting much property damage and loss of life." Scoresby cleared his throat and shuffled the notecards on the podium, before continuing.

"While we Men of Cape Nord may feel that the fairer sex should not be exposed to the rigors and hazards of military service, we must at the same time recognize that they *do* have the freedom to choose that path. As my wife often informs me, there *is* no wrong way to be a woman." He paused a moment to smile at Darcy, who beamed back at him. "And by the same token, we must not shirk from recognizing their feats of valor on that field. After all, *any* valorous conduct, be it by Man or woman, can only reflect Cape Nord's own best traditions.

"Lieutenant Croft, Corporal Combs, Private Morton, please step forward."

And Iphigenia Rose herself came out to place a medallion around each of their necks, and give each of them a handclasp and peck on the cheek in turn. And to Dale's further surprise, the medals each of them received were exactly the same—the heavy nickel-platinum Cape Nord Medal of Valor, crafted from part of a meteorite that had been Cape Nord's first big strike of wealth in the early years. Dale's and Ahmed's medals were strung on pink ribbons while Theo got a blue one, but that was the extent of the difference. The medal showed stylized representations of a Manly Man and a long-haired curvaceous woman, standing side by side and holding hands.

And then Scoresby stepped back from the podium and nodded to them. Dale blinked. *:Wait, what? Nobody told me we were going to have to make a speech.:*

Theo shot her a sidelong smirk. *:This is Cape Nord. People always make speeches. But don't worry—I got this.:* He stepped up to the podium.

“Ah...thanks, everyone. We all appreciate your kind regard. But I want to say, this was part of a *team* effort—not just the three of us, but also the three of *them*.” Theo nodded toward the three RIDEs. “As far as we’re concerned, these medals are shared between us and our RIDE partners, who came to our rescue when we needed it and helped us turn the tables on our Sturmhaven captors.”

:Aw, you didn’t have to do that,: Katherine said. *:But thanks!:*

:They should have given you medals, too,: Ahmed said. *:We wanted to insist on it, you know.:*

:It wouldn’t have been the best idea to rock the boat, with the war on right now and all,: Sarabe said. *:Which is why we wouldn’t let you insist.:*

:But thanks for thinking of us,: Victor put in. *:Maybe someday, after the war’s over, they can do something retroactively, who knows. But for now, the best “recognition” we could hope for is getting to stay with our partners. And we’re happy enough with that.:*

Ahmed approached the podium next, staying just long enough to mumble thanks to everyone for the award. Then it was Dale’s turn.

It had been in Dale’s mind to follow Ahmed’s example, and get out of there as quickly as possible—but then she caught Darcy’s eye on her, and out of the corner of her eye saw Iphigenia also watching her expectantly from just offstage. *Oh, of course. I still have to be the trailblazer.*

:Want me to write a speech real quick and feed it to you?: Sarabe asked. *:I think I know you well enough to make it sound like what you’d say, if you’ll trust me to.:*

Dale thought about that for a split second. *:Thanks, but...I think I’d better muddle through this myself. If I’m awkward, at least they’ll know I’m speaking from the heart. Or something.:*

:Got it. Good luck!:

Dale stepped up to the podium, and paused a moment to try to order her thoughts. “So, uh...hey,” she began. A chuckle went through the audience, which she was thankful for because it gave her another moment to think. “First off, I want to thank my brother-in-law, Rupert Scoresby, for all the kind words. I think I can appreciate what my sister sees in him.” More laughter, and a sisterly eyeroll from Darcy. “And I want to thank everyone for these medals. I’m not so sure we really deserve them just for

doing what we thought was our duty as Nextus soldiers and/or Cape Nord citizens, but it's nice to be appreciated."

This time there was a wave of applause. Dale waited for it to die down, then went on. "But in a way, it also kind of feels like...a validation. I guess you already know that I used to be a Man myself, before my little accident. Maybe you didn't also know that Theo and Ahmed both got switched up in the same way. So none of the three of us is, uh, what we started out being. And the adjustment period...well, it's had its ups and downs. It's been a little hard, sometimes, to fit in. Maybe you saw something about that in the news." And the audience chuckled again.

"But in the end, you gave us this..." She held up the medal. "And I think this shows that expression really is becoming true: there really *is* no wrong way to be a woman. And a Cape Nord that believes that is the Cape Nord I want to live in." She nodded. "Thanks again." And with that, she left the stage.

:Okay, I guess it's just as well you didn't let me write the speech,: Sarabe said. *:I didn't anticipate it going in that direction:*

:Neither did I, really,: Dale sent back. *:It just...came out, I guess. Now I get to find out whether it was a good idea, or whether I just screwed the pooch.:* But from Iphigenia's warm smile in one direction, and Darcy's in another, Dale suspected she'd somehow managed to say the right thing after all.

It was a night for surprises. The reception after the speech was held in Tina's Tea Kettle and Buster's. For the occasion, they'd actually removed the wall that separated the two businesses, revealing that they were actually separate halves of the same big ballroom. (It seemed like a metaphor for Cape Nord itself somehow, though Dale didn't really want to think about it that hard.) After they cleared the tables away from the center, both Men and women would share the same space for the evening, with their own bar and tables at each end of the ballroom. All the screens were showing footage of the attempted kidnapping incident from start to finish, with some detail given to the swiftly organized garden party that put a roadblock in the Sturmhaven agents' way.

The visible rating displays in Tina's were in abeyance for the evening,

though Dale suspected some of that was going on in a few of the booths that had privacy shielding up. And a lot of the women who were circulating between the two halves of the room did seem to be “checking their text messages” a lot.

As guests of honor, the three Nextus soldiers had their own table off to one side of the ballroom, carefully positioned so that Theo was sitting in the Buster’s half of the room and Dale and Ahmed were on the Tina’s side of the line. Plenty of foamy mugs were offered to Theo, and colorful drinks with little umbrellas in them placed before Dale and Ahmed. By mutual agreement they’d insisted that all their drinks be virgin tonight, as it didn’t seem like a good time to risk doing anything that might reflect badly on them. (“Just as well I really like sarsaparilla,” Theo said, quaffing another mug. Dale supposed it was *sarsaparilla* instead of just *root beer* because more syllables somehow made it more Manly.)

Friends and well-wishers drifted by to say hello and chat for a few moments. Gary and Tug wandered over from the Buster’s bar at about the same time as Imani approached from Tina’s side, and Dale chatted amicably with them for a few minutes.

Then the moment that Dale had been half expecting and half dreading finally arrived. Dale looked up to see Cindy and Darcy approaching...with their parents in tow. *Oh, terrific. Here it comes. Now what do I do?* For all the time she’d spent thinking about (and worrying over) what to say to her parents when she saw them next, Dale honestly had no idea how that talk was going to go. *But on the bright side, at least I’m a war hero now! Sort of...as if that’s even going to mean anything to them.*

Dale wondered whether it was too late to decide her nose desperately needed powdering, and abscond to spend the rest of the evening doing the job right. *Surely they wouldn’t make a scene here...in public...with all these people and cameras around...right?*

As they approached, Theo gave Dale a gentle nudge. “Hey,” he whispered. “You know we’ve got your back here, right, Corporal?”

From Dale’s other side, Ahmed added, “We’re here for you. You can do this.”

And Dale had to smile in spite of herself. *With friends like these, I can get through anything.* So she composed herself and sipped from a brightly-

colored juice drink, little paper umbrella bumping her nose, as her family stepped up to the table. She once again decided to play it like everything was normal, in the faint hope that it possibly might be. “Hey, Cindy, Darcy...Mom, Dad.” She nodded to them. “Enjoying the party?”

“It’s great!” Cindy said. “Even I didn’t know they could actually open the bars out like this to make one big ballroom. I guess they don’t do it very often.”

“It seemed like a nice symbolic gesture,” Darcy said. “Men and women stepping outside the usual lines and truly *coming together* for one night. And, speaking of *coming together*...” She cleared her throat and gave their parents a meaningful look.

“Er...yes.” Bill Combs cleared his throat. “The truth is, we came to bury the hatchet.”

Gloria sighed. “We...need to apologize. *I* need to apologize.” She swallowed. “This isn’t easy for me to say, but...I was out of line. I’m sorry.”

In spite of herself, Dale stared. “Wow, Mom. What brought *this* on?” That kind of confession was about as unlike anything her mother had done as she could remember.

“We’ve been seeing a therapist,” Dale’s father said. “Your friend Miss Rose was kind enough to refer us to a very good one. Footed most of the bill, too.”

“She’s helped me to realize that I...don’t deal well with changes,” Dale’s mother said. “And what happened to you...well, there aren’t many changes that would be bigger.”

“I guess that’s one way of putting it,” Dale said.

“And with you being a soldier in a war...it’s like you said. There are a lot worse things that could have happened,” Bill admitted. “When they came to break the news...my first thought was you’d been killed in a battle. I guess we should have been more relieved that hadn’t happened than concerned about what had.”

Gloria nodded. “We *don’t* want to lose you. And we can’t control whether we lose you to the war, but we *can* control whether *we* drive you away ourselves.”

“Wow,” Dale said again. “This has been a day for surprises, for sure.”

“If you still don’t feel comfortable coming home for a while, we can

understand that,” Bill said. “But...we hope you will eventually.”

“We’ll probably still have our little...differences...but...we can *try* to get past them.” Gloria added.

“I honestly doubt I’ll have *time* to visit much soon,” Dale said. “They’re going to be shipping us out on our grand publicity tour any day. But...next time they let me come home on furlough...maybe we can give it a shot then.”

Her father nodded. “Then...let me just say...despite everything...we’re proud of you, Dale. The person you’ve grown into...whatever restroom you end up using. That thing around your neck didn’t come out of a vending machine, you know.”

Dale rolled her eyes. “I *know*, Dad. But thanks. And I’m feeling pretty proud of the two of you right now, too.”

Dale’s mother smiled faintly. “Then we’ll just end this on a high note, before any of us can spoil things by saying too much. Take care of yourself, dear.” She put her hand in her husband’s, and they nodded farewell and moved away.

“Wow,” Dale said again as they passed beyond earshot. “Was that really Mom and Dad? Or were they replaced by alien doubles?”

“More Sturmhaven spies, maybe?” Theo wondered. “Should we call in military intelligence?”

“Hey, they’re not *that* bad,” Darcy protested. “Well...okay, maybe they’re *almost* that bad. But still. I guess even they can change some if they really *have* to.”

“So, what do you think, you gonna break the truth about the Sewing Circle to Mom, then?” Dale asked.

Darcy snorted. “I said *change*, not *undergo a miraculous transubstantiation*.”

“Oh, and Conway and Jerry send their regards,” Cindy said. “They’re a little too young to be allowed in here, but they say they’ll comm you tomorrow. They’re crazy proud of their new big sister getting one of the biggest medals Cape Nord can award, and they’re after me to bring them out to the base so they can see it in person before you go. And maybe your RIDE, too, now that they’re not quite so top-secret anymore.”

Dale chuckled. “I think maybe that can be arranged.”

“Great! Well...I guess I’ll go circulate. See ya later, big sis, bigger sis!” She waved and headed off into the Tina’s Tea Kettle side of the room.

“I should probably go see what trouble Rupert’s getting into,” Darcy said. “I dearly love that man, but sometimes I feel like I can’t leave him alone for five minutes.”

“I’ll bet.” Dale grinned. “But that reminds me...I just wanted to say thanks for...well...*everything*. Helping out with Mom and Dad...with the Sewing Circle...with all this...” Dale waved a hand at the rest of the room.

“Oh, no problem. What are sisters for, after all?” Darcy smiled. “And, really, *I* should be thanking *you*. If it hadn’t been for what happened to you, I’d never have met Iphigenia Rose in person—let alone actually had the chance to work with her. This whole thing has opened so many new doors for me, sometimes I feel like I should apologize for taking advantage of you.”

“At least you *would* apologize, and probably really mean it,” Dale said. “Iffy is *amazing*, but sometimes it feels like everything she does is so... *calculated*. Even when she apologizes for manipulating you, she’s still manipulating you with the apology.”

“Iffy, huh? Cute.” Darcy smirked. “That’s her, to a T. I guess it’s an occupational hazard. You don’t make it as far as she has without scheming becoming second nature.”

“Well, I hope *you* don’t ever get that bad. I’d like to think I mean more to you than just a pawn in a game.”

“Oh, you’d never be *just* a pawn to me, little sister.” Darcy winked. “Anyway, I should go catch up with my hubby. I’ll try to touch base with you at least one more time before they ship you out.”

“See ya, and thanks again!” Dale waved as Darcy walked away, then sighed and leaned back in her seat. “*Ugh*. That was...just...”

“Family, am I right?” Ahmed said.

“I think you handled it well, Corporal,” Theodore said.

“Thanks for saying so, but...could I maybe *please* have something non-virgin now? Just one? I think I could really use a good stiff drink...even if it’s too sweet and has a stupid umbrella stuck in it.”

Theo chuckled. “After all that, I’d say you’ve earned it.” He raised a hand to catch the attention of a Tina’s waitress. “Oh, miss? Long Island iced

tea for my friend here, please?” He glanced at Dale. “On consideration, I think you’d better make it a double.”

“*Thank you,*” Dale said, with feeling.

Chapter 14

June 27, 121 A.L.

Fort Oslo

After an hour or two, the reception wound down, and the three of them made their way out to the parking lot where their RIDEs were waiting to carry them back out to Fort Oslo. A good night's sleep put the capstone on a full day.

The next couple of days were also pretty busy. They took a few more sessions out on the RIDE training range, joined by Nadene and Mocha for some of them which allowed them to work up two-versus-two RIDE opfor scenarios. As promised, Conway and Jerry came out for a visit, along with Cindy, and were appropriately awed to see both Dale's medal and Sarabe. Darcy came by as well, bringing the news that Rupert Scoresby was considering a run for one of the chambers of the Man Cave proper the next time a seat opened up. Even without being fully read into what the Sewing Circle had done for him, he recognized the need to strike while the iron was hot.

About the only person who *didn't* visit was Iphigenia Rose. And on reflection, Dale was fine with that. She was grateful for Iffy's help in getting past the early post-change rough patch, but on the whole, it was probably safest to stay outside her immediate vicinity as much as possible. The woman was like a barely-contained wildfire—immensely powerful and a wonder to behold, but if you got too close, she just might decide to use *you* for fuel next.

Eventually, their marching orders came in. A suborbital transport was scheduled to fly them all back to Nextus, to begin the publicity tour on home ground. Dale gathered the idea was to show off the conquering heroes to the folks back home, boost morale, remind them all of what they were fighting for, and so on. From there, they would move on to Uplift, then hop another sub to the west coast and hit the Aloha-to-Cascadia circuit, and eventually wind up by visiting whatever other friendly polities remained. (Nuevo San Antonio was still something of an open question, given that the

battles taking place in its territory weren't exactly making the polity's government or citizenry fond of either side. It seemed likely a publicity visit would only further annoy them.)

Finally, the morning came when the transport was expected, and Dale woke, freshened up, and headed down to the motor pool. "Morning, Sarabe!" she called cheerfully.

"Morning, Dale," the leonine trike called back as she approached. "Ready to ship out?"

"Yeah...can't wait to shake the dust of this place off my feet for a while, as the Good Book says." Dale straddled the bike and tapped the start button—really just a formality, since Sarabe was more than capable of starting herself.

"Hmm," Sarabe said. "From my research, that was something the Disciples were supposed to do when they rejected a place entirely, as an abomination before God or some such thing. Do you really feel as bad as all that about Cape Nord?"

"Huh." Dale thought about that for a moment as they pulled out of the garage. "You know, maybe I don't. Not really. It's kind of surprising even to me, but when I think about it, I find I actually did mean what I said in that speech. About not minding living in a Cape Nord that would let me be a woman how *I* want to be a woman. So maybe by the time I'm able to come back for a while, I'll be *ready* to come back for a while." She shrugged. "I guess the place does have its good points."

"Mm-hmm."

They pulled onto the airfield to find Theo, Victor, Ahmed, and Katherine already there waiting. Nadene and Mocha were there, too, to see them off Dale supposed. As Sarabe pulled up next to Victor, Dale noticed Theodore was scowling at his comm screen. "Hey, everyone. Something wrong, sir?"

"Wrong? Well, maybe. I don't know. Look at this." Theodore showed her the screen.

Dale raised an eyebrow. "Wow, your Man score as high as all that already, sir? That's impressive."

"Even with the per-incident cap limiting how much I could get from the kidnapping and medal, I apparently got a lot of points from women who

liked what they saw of me at the award ceremony or reception.”

“So what’s the problem? Didn’t you say you wanted to outscore your brother? Or is he still ahead of you?”

“Oh, I’ve passed him by a considerable margin.” Theo scowled at the comm again. “But it was too *easy!* I don’t feel any sense of *accomplishment* out of it.”

“You only had to get kidnapped by Sturmhaven agents, escape and capture them, and get awarded one of the most prestigious medals in Cape Nord,” Ahmed deadpanned. “Sir.”

“She kind of does have a point, Lieutenant,” Dale said. “As Manly as your brother might be, he’s not a war hero. You’re playing the game on a whole different level now.”

Theodore sighed. “I know. I just...wanted to beat him on *his* level.”

“You probably already know you can filter out the point categories that would have been affected by your fame, and just compete on the ones that are left.” Dale shrugged. “But that’s not going to be as simple or satisfying as a single-number overall score, I guess. Have you asked your brother how *he* feels about it?”

“He’s proud. And supportive. And...*not* jealous at all, darn it.” Theodore rolled his eyes. “Well, there goes *that* added bit of satisfaction.”

“We can’t always get what we want,” Victor put in.

“I know,” Theo admitted. “And compared to *your* problems, mine does seem a bit trivial. It’s just...one of those things, I suppose.”

“It’s *all* of our problem, really,” Nadene Garland said from Mocha’s back, as they walked over to join them. The metallic horse had parts that unfolded to make a saddle with stirrups, and Nadene had been using that feature a lot lately. Apparently she had decided she liked the view from horseback.

Dale raised an eyebrow. “Our’ problem? You mean...?”

Nadene sighed. “Yes. I’ve finally come to terms with it. I suppose I should thank you for opening my eyes to this, even as I most certainly *don’t* thank you for saddling me with an ethical dilemma.”

Mocha snorted. “I guess I’m lucky. *I* just get saddled with an *actual* saddle.”

“Knowing what you now know, ma’am, would you rather *not* know?”

Dale asked.

“In some ways? *Yes*. Especially given my own role in helping bring this intolerable situation about.” She reached down to pat Mocha’s metal neck. “But, mostly, no. If I *didn’t* know, I couldn’t strive to expiate the guilt.”

“It’s only until the end of the war, ma’am,” Ahmed said earnestly. “After that, we can let people know, and they can fix it. Can’t we?”

“I hope so,” Nadene said. “But...I have my doubts. After the war is over, even assuming that we win, we’re going to want a return to something as close to normalcy as we can manage. We’re going to want to forget all the hardship we’ve just been through. We’re *not* going to want to be reminded that we just created true artificial intelligence, and then enslaved it. I predict we’ll have a hard time finding anyone willing to listen. Not that I don’t still intend to try.”

“Surely it won’t be *that* bad, ma’am,” Theodore protested.

“Are you familiar with the history of the eighteenth-to-twenty-first-century American civil rights movement, Lieutenant?” Nadene asked. “I am. Even after America freed the slaves during the American Civil War, it took *over a century* before African-Americans got the same legal rights as everyone else, and decades more after that before most people were willing to *treat* them equally. As a race, we’re very good at ‘othering’ people who don’t look like we do.” She snorted. “Just look at how long it took *me* to come around, even after the person who *created* reticulated intelligence told me I was wrong. If we’re going to gain full equality for all RIDEs, we’re probably looking at a wait closer to *decades* than years.”

“Well, *that’s* depressing,” Dale said.

“On the bright side, *we* don’t physically age,” Sarabe mused. “Well, our bodies may break down, but we can just swap new parts in. So I guess we have plenty of time to wait. Sadly, I can’t say the same for you ‘squishies,’ but then, you lot aren’t the ones with the problem.”

“We are if we have any kind of conscience,” Theo said.

“Then *use* that conscience,” Katherine said. “If the brass won’t listen, individual people will. Convince everyone you know that we’re people, and sooner or later we’ll have the majority. Of course, you’ll want to wait ‘til the war ends to do that *openly*, but still.”

“I guess if nothing else works, that’s all we can do,” Ahmed said.
“We’ll do our best.”

It wasn’t too much longer before the NextusMil suborbital arrived. For all Dale knew, the massive blue-grey Starmaster could have been the exact same sub that had delivered the batch of RIDEs to Fort Brubeck and started the whole thing. She’d have had to check the tail numbers to be sure, and Dale hadn’t memorized the ones on the first plane.

As she slowly rode Sarabe up the ramp, she paused to glance over her shoulder, at the row of mountains on the horizon that enclosed Cape Nord. It had certainly been an eventful few weeks, and even now it was hard to believe it was over and the next phase of her life was beginning.

But we live and learn, she mused. We change, we grow, and we move on. She looked down at herself and chuckled inwardly. And sometimes we change more than we might have even thought was possible.

:Going to miss the place?: Sarabe asked across their link.

:I don’t know. Some of the people, sure. All the craziness I’ve just been through, not so much.: She twisted the handgrip throttle to start driving forward again. :But I’m really glad I found you. Even if how it happened is...not exactly how I would have done it, given the choice.:

:I’m glad we found each other, too,: Sarabe said. :When you get right down to it, I lucked out big-time. You...maybe not so much.:

:Oh, on balance I think I was more lucky than not.: Dale pulled into the cargo bay and moved forward onto square marked out on the floor. Chocks and fastenings rose out of the deckplates to secure Sarabe in place for transport. :It remains to be seen whether that luck holds. Whether we’re even still alive at the end of the war.:

:We can only move forward and keep hoping for the best,: Sarabe said. :And I’ll do my best to keep us both safe out there.:

Dale patted her dash as she climbed down from the seat. *:I know you will. And so will I.:* Aloud, she said, “You gonna be all right back here?”

“Oh, sure! Strapped in nice and tight. But you’d better get on up to the pressurized passenger section. Unlike me, you do need to breathe. I’ll just be the voice in your head ‘til we get to Nextus.”

“Works for me. See you when we touch down.” Dale gave her a friendly wave, then headed forward toward the pressurized hatch where the other two humans would already be waiting. *Next stop, Nextus!*
And wherever life takes us from there.

Epilogue

*March 14, 123 A.L.
Admin Plaza, Nextus*

I can't believe this day has finally come.

Sergeant Dale Combs stood in the middle of a long queue stretching all the way up the sidewalk and then starting to wrap around Admin Plaza. It was actually moving along at a pretty good clip for all its length, as the Admin bureaucrats seemed eager to prove that they hadn't gotten rusty in the years the Game had been suspended.

Next to Dale was one of her fellow soldiers from the mostly-leonine RIDE infantry division where she and Sarabe had eventually ended up (119th Heavy Infantry, unit motto "Fear Our Roar!"), Corporal Denise Shafters. Denise was assistant quartermaster for their platoon. She wasn't actually waiting in the line herself, but she had decided to tag along "to keep Sarge company." Not far away, Denise's lioness RIDE partner Tamarind was parked next to Sarabe, her huge deuce-and-a-half skimmer truck form dwarfing the smaller command trike. Tamarind's model had just been introduced in the last year of the war as the successes of earlier RIDE types gave the research branch confidence to expand them into other roles.

"So are you really sure you want to muster out, Sarge?" Denise asked. "Now that the war's over, we don't have to fear for our lives anymore."

"Are you sure you want to stay in, Corporal?" Dale shot back. "Now that the war's over, we can *go back to* our old lives, if we want."

"Eh...my old life wasn't all that," Denise said. "Anyway, I haven't quite earned enough to buy Tams out yet, and *no way* I'm leaving her behind when I go."

Dale nodded. "Can't argue with you there. I'd probably be staying in for a while myself, if Sarabe hadn't found that loophole." She held up the media tablet she was carrying that had the official form on it, with stamps and seals and signatures in four different colors of digital ink. In fact, the queue they were standing in now was where she would turn it in to finalize her mustering out.

“You’re really giving up all claim to the Accidental Crossride Trust in exchange for her?” The ACT was a trust fund that had been set up in the months that followed Dale’s original “accident,” to provide some extra compensation to those who had found themselves in similar circumstances due to RIDE compatibility.

Dale nodded. “Damned straight I am. And it’s a bargain, too. Sarabe and I sat down and worked it out—the most I could expect to make from that fund, even if I take the payout as an annuity, works out to less than half of Sarabe’s buyout fee. So if I trade that in, in return for a *free* buyout, we come out *way* ahead.”

“Wow,” Denise said. “Maybe I should’ve ‘mistakenly’ chosen a *guy* lion.” They both heard Tamarind’s rumbling purr of laughter over their implants, as both RIDEs were listening in and following along with the conversation.

“I’d never have figured it out without her,” Dale admitted. “She’s the one who’s really into the Game. But the Game needs a human to file the forms in person for the best rewards—so in this, as in most things, we work as a team.”

“Sweet!” Denise grinned. “Of course, even if I *could* buy Tams out now, I don’t know if we’d really leave yet. Neither one of us is really sure what to do with ourselves in civilian life anyway...Q mining really doesn’t appeal. And I’d like to make Sarge myself and full quartermaster before we end our military career, so...”

Dale nodded. “If you like where you are right now, no reason to change. And the ‘Mil is still gonna need good people. Just not so many of them.”

“Yeah.” Denise thought about that for a bit, as the line moved a few more steps forward. “Y’know, I dunno if I ever said thanks for the advice you gave me, on talking to and listening to Tams. You got us off on the right foot, right away.”

Dale shrugged. “It’s just the same advice I give anyone. Your RIDE *should* be your best friend, because your lives depend on each other in the field.”

“And more importantly, because they’re *people* too. Regardless of what the manuals try to say.” Denise shook her head. “I like to think I’d

have figured it out on my own, but...”

:Sometimes it's hard to pay attention when there's a war on,: Sarabe put in.

:Thanks from me, too, Sarge,: Tamarind put in. *:Not a day goes by I don't meet someone else that reminds me how good we've got it. Word on the grapevine is you're responsible for them letting us buy out, too.:*

“Oh, now, I wouldn't go *that* far.” Dale chuckled. “That was more a matter of a lot of folks asking for it, not just me.”

:But you're the one who talked so many of our partners into seeing us as people, making friends with us, and wanting to buy us out,: Tamarind said. *:So, indirectly...:*

Dale shrugged. “Eh, maybe. I'm not the only RIDE rights advocate, you know. Not by a long shot.” *Even if I am one of the first ones who's still around...* Dale's thoughts turned once more to her old friends, the ones who'd been with her when the whole thing had started.

Theodore had died the year before, when he and Victor had held a desert pass solo to buy the rest of their platoon time to escape. They'd been blown apart by enemy artillery, and there hadn't been time to recover their remains before one of the Dry Ocean's many sandstorms covered them over. But at least Theo wouldn't have to worry about his brother ever beating his score—by an official act of the Man Cave, any Cape Nord soldier who died heroically in the war would have their Manhood score fixed, posthumously, at infinity minus one, as well as granted True Nordsman status.

Ahmed and Katherine had disappeared not too much later. They had simply been missing from their post when the next watch showed up to relieve them one evening, and hadn't ever been seen again since. There had been a sort of silver powdery residue found not far from the sentry post, and so they joined a number of other mysterious disappearances that took place under similar circumstances. The upper echelons had been strangely reluctant to discuss those disappearances when asked, but there were a lot of creepy theories going around. On the official rolls, Ahmed was simply marked as AWOL; Dale assumed Katherine was on some list of missing equipment somewhere.

They did still hear from Nadene and Mocha from time to time.

Nadene had made Lieutenant Colonel, and was now in charge of one of the fuser nanite research programs, tasked with implementing the crossrider neural rewrite software patches that had been born back in Northcave Psychiatric. She'd also used what small degree of actual influence she had to help push forward the RIDE buyout program herself. It also looked like they would be able to develop workable protocols for repeat crossrides—and she and Gaius had plans to try it out themselves by trading RIDE partnerships when a five-year safety margin had passed since their original changes. (Gaius had gotten a horse RIDE as well, an advance model from one of the first civilian RIDE lines that would be released after the war officially ended.)

Dale wished them all the very best in that, but she'd already long since decided she wouldn't be changing back even if she could. She was completely comfortable in herself now, and more importantly, she could no longer imagine life without that closeness to Sarabe in it. The RIDE was her other half in every way that counted, and she wasn't going to give that relationship up. (Though she supposed she might revisit the question if she ever found a boyfriend or husband and they got along well with each other's RIDE, but that didn't seem to be in the cards right now.) She anticipated this decision causing some parental friction in a few years once reverse crossing became common, but she'd just burn that bridge when she came to it.

All told, nearly three hundred soldiers had needed emergency (or “convenience”) crossrides over the course of the war. Dale had been in contact with each of them and even struck up some new friendships. A few had proposed some business ventures on mustering out, but Dale and Sarabe had other ideas.

:You know, I am glad you found that loophole,: Dale sent on a private sideband to Sarabe. *:The only other idea I had was asking Iffy for a loan, and really, I'm glad not to have to.:*

:Yeah, no joke,: Sarabe replied in the same private channel. *:Probably just as well to keep your distance there.:*

:I do need to see her again, though, once we head back to Cape Nord for a visit. She's holding onto something for me,: Dale said. *:And for you, though you probably don't know what it is.:*

:I have some suspicions. But just as well to wait 'til after the mustering-out to confirm them.:

“What are *you* planning to do now, Sarge?” Denise wondered. “After you leave the ‘Mil and all.”

“Well, we’ve been thinking about that,” Dale said. “I might go back to school, take some classes in psychology and counselling. Because if they’re going to throw open RIDEs to civvies, you just know there are going to be *thousands* of poor unfortunates who didn’t read the manual. A good crossride counsellor, especially one with personal experience, might just be able to write their own ticket. Call it my own personal Q rush to get in early on.”

:Though we might try a little actual Q mining, too,: Sarabe put in.
:You never know, we could strike it rich.:

“We’ll also be speaking out about RIDE rights...though I’m not too optimistic on that score.” Dale sighed. Early indications were that it was going to be just as Nadene had predicted—people didn’t *want* to consider the full implications of RIDE sapience just now. In particular, those who didn’t have direct experience with them were going to be very hard to convince, given how many times humanity had tried and failed to make “true AI” over the centuries.

“Eh, don’t fret *too* much,” Denise said. “The more people meet RIDEs, the more people will find out what they *really* are, and sooner or later things will go right. I’ve got a good feeling.”

They were approaching the door to the NextusMil building now. Denise yawned and stretched, then said, “Well, I’m gonna head off now, Sarge. If I hurry, I can get a good seat at the ceremonies. ‘Crazy’ Joe Steader is going to give a speech, and you know how rare it is to see one of them in public these days.”

“Maybe less rare now that the war’s over. Enjoy yourself!”

“Enjoy your last few minutes of military life!” Denise waved and headed off. “See ya ‘round, Sarge!” She and Tamarind signed out of the shared comm channel a moment later.

:Well, here we are, then,: Dale sent to Sarabe. *:You’re sure that this form has everything?:*

:Absolutely. Every single endorsement you need, I tracked ‘em down

and you pounced on ‘em,: Sarabe sent smugly. :I’ve spent virtual years analyzing the Game, getting ready for the day I could play it for real. It was even easier than I expected.:

:Maybe you should sign up as a Surrogate.:

:It would have to be you signing up, remember,: Sarabe said. :That pesky requirement to show up “in the flesh.”:

:Ugh, right...: Dale grimaced. :Well, I wouldn’t be opposed to helping you do something you’re clearly so good at. It’d be something else we could do for money between the counselling and the mining, right?:

:Assuming we end up living here,: Sarabe said. :Which we hadn’t even decided for sure yet.:

:Well, we do have to go home to Cape Nord for a while. See the folks, meet Cindy’s new boyfriend...wonder if she’s found a keeper yet. And I’m sure Darcy can’t wait to tell me all about Rupert’s latest political triumphs. But after that...wherever we go is fine with me, as long as you’re there.:

:Awww...:

And finally, they were at the head of the line, stepping up to the teller window with a slot to slide the tablet through. On the other side was a genuine, dyed-in-the-wool Nextus admin ‘crat, even down to the oval interface specs so like the ones Dale had worn to his “funeral.” She glanced down at the tablet, looked again, rubbed her eyes, stared, and tapped out something on the screen of her desktop comm. Her eyes flicked back and forth behind the specs as she read text from the screen, and other text flickered on the specs themselves. Finally, she looked up. “This...seems to be in order,” she said, unable to keep the surprise from creeping into her bureaucratic deadpan voice. “I’ve never actually seen anyone *use* a Tertiary Priority Abeyance before. Even most Surrogates never put in that degree of effort.”

“Well, I wanted to be *sure* I got it right,” Dale said. “And I did? It is in order? I can forfeit my claim to ACT F in return for a zero-*mu* buyout fee on my RIDE?”

“Absolutely. You even qualified for a 50 kilomu discharge bonus.” The admin tapped three places on the tablet, stamped it with a seal from a rack on her desk, and signed it with a stylus. The form and endorsements

disappeared, replaced by several paragraphs of text, and she slid it back across to Dale. “You’re good to go. Be sure to report to the NextusMil maintenance bay for your RIDE’s decommissioning before you leave the polity.”

“Thanks,” Dale told the bureaucrat, taking the tablet and making room for the next person in line. *:Shall we go ahead and get that done? They’re gonna remove every last bit of military gear, you know.:*

:I told you before, that’s just extra equipment. As long as we’re together, I don’t care about that stuff.: Then there was a thoughtful pause. *:Though, you know, if you do want to make it up to me, how’s about stopping at one of those new RIDE mod shops to get a full set of hardlight emitters installed in my shell? Scuttlebutt from those who’ve had them is that they’re amazing...:*

Dale chuckled. *:Sure, why not. We’ll start out civilian life the right way.:* She tossed the tablet up and caught it, and walked back up the sidewalk to the parking lot. *:Then we can go find out what that life is really like.:*

:Works for me, partner!:

Dale straddled the bike, and she and Sarabe drove off into their new life together.

THE END