

FreeRIDers: Integration

(The Director's Cut)

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With Jetfire

Prologue: FreeRIDers

Zharus

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There were no eyes in the trackless desert to look up and see the twenty-meter-long skimmer speeding a few dozen meters overhead. The airborne vehicle was part cargo craft and part tow truck. Stubby wings extended from the sides, the blue gravitic thrust from its dual impellers almost lost against the turquoise sky. An envelope of manipulated gravity kept it from falling as a shaped, transparent forcefield swept the air aside in front. On the nose was a logo: *Freeriders Garage*.

No complex life existed in the Dry Ocean; a drought of many millions of years had squeezed every last drop of water from above and beneath its cracked hardpan surface. No eyes except for electronic ones looked down. Inside the skimmer, its occupants faced one another instead of the world outside.

“If you’d tell me where the hell the crash site actually is, Officers, I wouldn’t be thinking of catnapping.” Ryan Stonegate pulled his ball cap down over his eyes as he leaned back in the worn pilot’s chair. He’d pushed the old Deuce as fast as he dared without coming apart since his clients insisted it was urgent, but it was time for them to come clean. They were thousands of kilometers from their homebase in Uplift. “I’m starting to get really tired of being jerked around, here. Give me a damned good reason why I shouldn’t just invoke the escape clause in our contract and head back to the garage right now.”

Waiting for an answer, Ryan reached out and stroked his RIDE’s hardlight fur over his clients’ scowls. Ryan spent a great deal of time tuning Kaylee’s hardlight emitters to get the right soft texture, and it had paid off. Kaylee looked and moved exactly like a flesh-and-blood lynx. This was a stark contrast to the Nextus Materiel Recovery Officers’ RIDES, who were bare metal.

Officer Wilson’s gunmetal gray fennec, the size of a pony, flattened its ears and regarded him with cool yellow optics. Even with the hat over his eyes he could see her expression via the skimmer’s internal cameras, since they were hooked into his cranial implant. The diminutive officer’s comically large ears folded back. “We were about to anyway, Mr. Stonegate. We just didn’t want to risk someone tapping into your system here. You know the moment we go dark the vultures will swoop in and it’ll be a race to the salvage.”

“Suborbital salvagers are a bitch,” Ryan agreed, sitting up again, lifting his hat with his tufted lynx ears. “They just get cheaper and cheaper to buy’n’fly.”

The cargo flier had crashed in the Towers, the deepest, hottest part of the so-called Billion Year Drought that left the majority of a supercontinent without a drop of water and turned an ocean the size of Earth’s Pacific to sand, dust, and hardpan. Zharus’s geology, geography, and place in the human sphere of influence were still under intense study after over a century and a half of settlement.

Ryan tapped into the skimmer’s external sensors with his implants, slowing it to a more sedate two hundred kph. The skimmer was now over two thousand meters below

sea level, in seventy-five degrees Celsius weather. The air pressure was almost half again greater than at sea level here. The Towers were at the very bottom of a long-inactive subduction trench, where the last of the moisture had finally dried and left massive evaporite deposits. Gypsum, halite, sulfates, and a number of minerals unknown to human science. Katabatic winds descended off the 11,000-meter peaks looming to the west. No human could survive outside, and even standard environmental suits would stop functioning after only a few hours in the omnipresent qubitite dust. Long-term survival here needed special technology—a suit a prospector could live in for weeks on end.

“Well, where is it, Officer Wilson?” the RIDE mechanic asked the woman again. Her partner’s ursine RIDE regarded him with suspicion. “Tell me now, or we’re out of here. I don’t need the money.” That much was *slightly* untrue, but he sensed he’d seized the initiative. What was a cargo flier doing going over the Western Wall, anyway? Suborbitals were the best way to ship cargo across Gondwana. The supercontinent was just too large, too dangerous, for low altitude flight through the Dry Ocean. The qubitite contamination was already getting into the Deuce’s systems despite the hardlight shielding, but they wouldn’t be around long enough for it to matter. “Well, at least there’s nobody to rescue. Should’ve had an RI flying that plane.”

“Turn this junkheap of a skimmer thirteen degrees to starboard,” the male Nextus officer said. “Maintain speed for another twenty minutes, then Fuse up.” He nodded at his partner, then stepped in front of his mecha bear.

Wilson opened a secured carrying case she’d kept very close the entire trip, then held the four-centimeter long tube between her fingers. “Per our agreement, these are combat-grade Fuser nannies. Not the civvy type you’re probably used to.” She looked at his lynx. “Can your RIDE handle it? It’s rather old.”

“My RIDE’s been overhauled by me personally. My cat’ll keep up.” *Oh boy, here it comes,* he said to his RIDE through their link.

:It’s okay, boss. Who cares? Let ‘em laugh, his RI partner Kaylee replied, licking the back of her oversized paw. *:Time for a nap anyway. See you in my dreams.* She padded over to the Fusing alcove and sat down on her haunches patiently.

Behind Officer Wilson her partner’s bear began to partly melt, flowing around him as the burly man stood with arms spread wide. Some parts of the bear became semiliquid while the inner frame stretched around his torso, arms, and legs. Very quickly the human within was enveloped. The Nextus military didn’t bother with silly things like hardlight emitters to make their Fusers look like flesh and blood. To them it was a waste of energy. But the results were always far more unsettling. A giant metal bear as powered armor, with glowing red eyes and other sensors. He carried a backpack with several large laser emitters—weapons and communications in one unit.

Ryan gave Kaylee another petting between her ears, his partner purred then went into passive mode. Her hardlight skin flickered and shut down, leaving the dull metallic-carbon subdermis it shared with the Nextus models. The special hardlight emitters set her apart from them. They were more common in Uplift than Nextus. There was something else, but Ryan had been putting it off until the very last minute. Kaylee hadn’t been addressed aloud by name, nor spoken aloud herself, since the Officers’ arrival at his garage in Uplift.

There were consequences running a Fuser that wasn’t the same sex as yourself. But there were ways to lower those risks to almost nothing, if you were willing to

sacrifice some major advantages. Kaylee didn't like passive mode so much, but understood her partner's reluctance.

As Officer Myla Wilson donned her own foxy armor, Ryan opened a panel on Kaylee's back and plugged in the Fuser nanobots. A friend of his had already paid that price, shrugged, and moved on. Ryan wasn't prepared to pay it, himself. There was an associated stigma, however.

The woman in the anthro fennec powered armor glared at him as the skimmer continued to slow. "What are you waiting for, Stonegate? We're almost at the drop! Get suited up now! Trust me, I won't laugh. And I'll kick Jerry in the shins if he does." Wilson had figured it out.

RIDE stood for Reticulated Intelligence Drive Extender. What Nextus engineer had come up with that acronym Ryan didn't know, but it had stuck. Reticulated was another word for web or network. In this case, a neural network based off of the brain structure of an Earth animal, mapped into the strange mineral substrate found in this very desert, qubitite, then salted with qubits. They were far better than the run-of-the-mill pure artificial intelligences. Centuries of trying to get them to something like human-level had met with very limited success. The next breakthrough—appropriately in Nextus as well—had used a rat brain neural template. The results were literally transformational, and it marked anyone who used Fuser mode.

Not only did Ryan have the ears of a lynx, but the tail as well. He was privately very happy it was a short, stubby thing compared to most felines or canines.

Burke started laughing before the Fuser process was half complete, which impressively provoked the threatened kick in the shins from his superior. Ryan was already a short, slender man, so the extra curves being Fused with Kaylee added created a very full-figured lynx-woman. When the hardlight fur flickered on, Burke started laughing again. "She" was basically nude except for the steel bikini that covered chest and groin. Like the lynx's normal hardlight skin, this one moved like the real thing.

Without Kaylee conscious the sensory integration was imperfect, and his expensive cranial implants struggled to process the rest. This was the price he had to pay, and he regarded it as lesser than the alternative. With the RI fully conscious, the Fuser nanobots would sink in all the way to the bone, changing the inside to match the outer shell in the process. A woman he would truly be for a good long time. The body couldn't handle that kind of major change frequently, so he'd be stuck for a minimum of three years.

The combat Fusers were even faster than the civilian versions and allowed his conventional implant to do its job more efficiently. Ryan already felt the cool air on Kaylee's hardlight skin, which felt more like it was *actually* his own. The artificial lynx's original designation was LNX-LMA-001A. As Light Mobility Armor, she depended on external add-on gear, called "paks," for specialized tasks, unlike Burke's unit that were built in. Ryan put on nanolathe gloves and extra hardlight shielding for defense. Since the literal breast plate was otherwise empty, they contained extra sarium batteries and nanolathe matter.

With Wilson holding the cyborg bear's non-existent mouth shut, Ryan stepped backwards into the fixer pak mounted on the skimmer wall. Latches engaged, adding an additional layer of physical armor. It also contained extra power packs and numerous tools for fixing RIDEs and other mecha in the field. Ryan didn't speak until he was finished hooking up, then spoke in Kaylee's purring voice. "Equipment checks out,

officers. I'm ready to go."

"Fuckin' faux crossrider," Burke said. "Just go active and embrace the boobs. We need every advantage here."

"My contract doesn't include my manhood, thank you," Ryan snarked. Kaylee's naturally-friendly voice made it hard to sound menacing.

"If you let those shiny metal tits slow you down, Stonegate, I'll hack your RIDE myself and—" the voice from the man in bear armor cut off abruptly. He turned his glare to his superior officer, whose arms were folded across her chestplate. There seemed to be a private conversation between them, and Burke backed down.

Myla's tone was far more friendly. "From now on, *Mr.* Stonegate, any comms from him will be filtered through me. I apologize for his stupidity. I gather you don't Fuse often?"

"Only when the job requires it, Officer Wilson. A threat like that would've voided your contract," Ryan said. "And thanks. I don't use it often with out-of-towner clients. Kaylee was an old surplus from your agency and to be honest, not even the auctioneers knew if she was male or female at the time. Regardless, we can't afford to be choosy about what gender RIDE we buy, and the female ones are generally lots cheaper. I've had her five years and I'm pretty used to the 'shiny metal tits' now." "She" shrugged.

"So you use passive. I understand. I think you look lovely, myself. I hope your kitty has a good nap." Wilson said, nodding. "Try and keep up."

I look 'lovely', she says. A lovely pretty kitty, no doubt. Ryan snorted to himself. Though for once the compliment seemed sincere. He wasn't sure how to feel about that.

The trio went to the aft airlock to prepare for the drop. The skimmer had started to dive for the desert hardpan just before the Towers themselves. There were less than five hundred meters between the landing zone and crash site. The skimmer's comm laser would report their position, as required by treaty, then it was a race to the salvage. *I don't have time to be 'lovely'. There's a job to do.*

Zharus was a super-Earth, with four times as much surface area than humanity's homeworld. Three massive supercontinents dominated its surface, named for ones from Earth's past. Laurasia, where the majority of humanity lived, had a pleasant climate with enormous areas suited to human crops. Rodinia, the second largest, had kept all its native vegetation and wildlife. Last was Gondwana, the largest by far, straddling the equator. Though it was large world, the metal-poor crust and core left the surface gravity slightly weaker. But the real problem lay in the weak planetary magnetic field over Gondwana.

Even a small solar storm created spectacular aurorae over Gondwana. The continental atmosphere was constantly ionized, making radio a losing proposition. Most of the time a laser link to a satellite worked just fine, except in sandstorms. Despite their technology, the Dry Ocean still swallowed thousands of people on a yearly basis, never seen again.

Ryan Stonegate was middle class by Uplift standards. He lived comfortably. There were always old RIDEs, skimmers, and other mechs that needed repair and maintenance. Kaylee herself was living proof of the quality of his work, and their partnership functioned well despite not being the same sex. He was used to having no active sensors, among other things the RI did while his or her rider focused on the job. He had various implants to make up for some of that, but there was simply no

comparison to a fully conscious RI.

If this job works out I won't be ten thousand mu in the hole anymore, he thought. He didn't like working with Nextus internal revenue cops, as these two were. But they did pay well, and Kaylee knew a great deal of their inner workings. The complex relations between the two dozen or so city-states on the Coastal Ring created a bewildering tangle of treaties that apparently never stayed the same on a yearly basis. Uplift was the only city-state on the inner side of the Ring, on the edge of the ancient continental shelf. As the Dry Ocean went it had the best possible climate. Why, it barely hit 50 degrees-C in the summer.

It was impossible to maintain line-of-sight to the skimmer in the columns of evaporite deposits. Burke unspooled a monofilament fiber-optic cable from his comm-pack. There was barely any wind, but it was still dusty enough. Inside Kaylee's Fuser mode body Ryan didn't feel the heat at all.

"Where did this flier go down where it couldn't be spotted by satellites?" Ryan asked. He couldn't change Kaylee's voice. On many occasions he'd not left Fuser mode and allowed clients to think "Kaylee Cross" was just one of Ryan's employees—which was essentially the case. People had some strange hang-ups that got in the way of doing business.

"It didn't precisely *crash*," Wilson replied. "In fact, quite the opposite. The owner of the flyer and the cargo has been imprisoned for tax evasion. We're here to assess, and if possible, retrieve some very classified military hardware. You're here to make sure one RIDE in particular is still alive and functional and get it back to your skimmer. Just remember, our contract has a very *strict* NDA."

"Please, I'm a professional." This wasn't the first time Ryan had been in the Towers, but everything on this planet was super-sized except the surface gravity. He'd never seen this section before. "Burke, what's our network status?"

"Just fine. Still connected, everything's nominal," Burke replied stiffly. The bear was their go-between. Their messages went to him, though the cable, then up to the satellite. Once the salvage was found they had to report its exact position, by law.

The trio used their lifters to fly just over the desert floor. Ryan checked the normal Salvagers Information Channel for news, then frowned. "Three launches...one from Nextus? I didn't think you guys licensed salvagers like that."

"We don't, Miss...ter Stonegate," Burke said with a warning glance from Wilson. "That's a military suborbital base. We've got some competition."

"This is hotter than we thought," Wilson agreed. "Must be some military gear in there we weren't told about. Cut the cable, Burke. Double time!" They were off faster than Ryan could protest, the physical link to the salvage skimmer gone.

Great. Military. That's going to cause a stink in Uplift, but I guess they don't care. Ryan thought. The Dry Ocean was supposed to be off limits to the various militaries except for the Nextus MRS. It was under the jurisdiction of the Gondwanan Federated Marshals, who were the closest thing the supercontinent had to a completely neutral party. *Sounds like there's some nasty inter-agency rivalry, too*. The Nextus version of Internal Revenue was nearly as powerful as their regular military. There were a lot of places to hide taxable assets in the Dry Ocean and polity citizens excelled at finding loopholes in their own bureaucracy.

With one final leap they lifter-skied down the slope towards the cave entrance at breakneck speeds. All landforms here had been carved by millions of years of wind.

There were no hard edges anywhere, and even the numerous caves were completely dry. The trio skimmed inside the mouth, down a multi-layered slope with alternating layers of red ocher, and white gypsum in smooth contours that were dizzying to look at. The massive cargo flyer was just inside, out of view of satellites.

Nextus considered itself the forward-looking center of civilization on Gondwana, hence the portmanteau name they'd chosen for themselves. They were the Next and the Nexus. The polity itself was less than a hundred years old, yet another seed group from relatively crowded Laurasia. With Rodina off limits to settlement, Gondwana was the only open, unclaimed frontier on the planet. There were two hundred million people and counting on the Coastal Ring. Even with the uninhabitable Dry Ocean, there was room for *billions* more.

But for such a forward-looking polity they had some interesting cases of nostalgia. The cargo flier looked like an ancient, six-engined Antonov An-225, the largest aircraft on Earth for many decades. Its six engines were turbfans only cosmetically. The information in Ryan's salvage computer identified no fewer than ten heavy lifters, each worth fifty thousand *mu* by itself on the open market. Everything looked completely pristine, untouched, but there were no power signatures. Wasting no time, Ryan skimmed up to the aft cargo doors and plugged in a power/data cable from his right breast. *I'd love to get my paws on those lifters.*

"What are you waiting for? Get it open!" Burke growled, his RIDE putting its own urgency into it.

"Just a—" Ryan sputtered. A blast of lifter-propelled dust and rocks pinged against his RIDE armor, hard enough he had to manually throw up his hardlight shields. The inside of the cave darkened, most of the natural illumination replaced by the fiercely-glowing landing lifters on the lifting body suborbital spacecraft now filling the entrance. The craft was easily three times the size of Ryan's own skimmer, nearly as large as the cargo flyer they had just found. The nose's shape suggested a wolf's head, otherwise the contours of the spacecraft were run-of-the-mill two-deck lifting body with stubby wings and a dual vertical tail at the blunt aft end where the impellers were.

He recognized the lupine logo on the nose. It was owned by his much better-equipped competitor. "Qixi's Pack? She got a sub? Damn!"

The moment it landed, a grav-crane started extending over the top of the spacecraft. Before it could get very far, Burke pointed his armcannon at it and fired, blowing off the tip. *That* provoked the boarding ramp on the side to open. Four Fused, matching lupine RIDES marched out, followed by a very familiar heavy comm-RIDE, like Burke's, but a female elk. She sought him out. "Whoops! My employers aren't going to like that, Kaylee-girl."

"You'll pay for that!" Qixi herself growled. "Get away from my salvage, Nextus! You too, Stonegate!"

As the Nextus officers and four salvagers faced off, Ryan opened a secure laser link to the elk. "You can call me Ryan, Rufia. They know. How the hell did you get in with Qixi? I thought you'd had a disagreement a while back."

"Water under the bridge, old friend. I was the only comm-RIDE left in town when that salvage report rolled in. You wouldn't *believe* what they're paying me for this!" the woman boasted. "Nothin' personal, a'course."

"Don't think it ever could be. But I've got a job to do, too. We've got a Nextus military suborbital coming in. I'm only interested in what's inside. You can grab the

lifters.”

“Fuckity fuck!” Rufia cursed. The two had been friends a long time, having met on Earth years before they’d even *thought* of emigrating. It had been Rufia’s idea to leave, and then he had paid for half of Ryan’s own ticket. Rufus had purchased the female elk and enthusiastically become Rufia at the same time Ryan bought Kaylee, considering the benefits far greater. Elk were naturally large and good platforms for communications gear and heavy weapons. Rufia had gone self-employed mercenary. “Uh, okay. If we both want to get paid we gotta stop anyone shooting, here. Let me do that, you get those doors open. Comprehend?”

“Yes. Go!” Ryan replied. Burke was about to give Qixi’s Pack both barrels when Rufia flew between them to mediate. Though the air was still full of contaminating qubitite dust, Ryan opened the doors.

“Fuuuuuuck!” Burke said. The inside of the cargo hold was absolutely empty. “Stonegate! Download logs, anything! Either the cargo’s been stolen, or was never here. Find out which!”

If nothing’s here, I still get paid, Ryan thought. He dashed inside the eerily empty hold. The “crash” had only been a few days before. There had been no launches detected, no skimmers in the area. Unless it was a bonafide rescue mission there were permits to fill out, fees to pay, before a salvage operation could start. And even then it didn’t guarantee you’d keep what you found. *And Qixi gets her heavy lifters, dammit. I want a piece of that...*

The sound of an ominous explosion a half a click away froze him as he reached for a p/d socket again, then came the deep bass roar of mil-spec grav lifters closing in. The incoming Nextus suborbital fired a second time, this time into the aft end of Qixi’s spacecraft. A burst of static told Ryan it wasn’t an explosive shot, but an EMP blast powerful enough to scramble its systems.

“Holy Jesus fuck,” Burke sputtered. “We’re too damned late. Bastards.”

“Let us handle this,” Wilson said, ears flat. “Disarm or they’ll shoot you. There’s obviously far more to this than meets the eye.”

They stripped Ryan’s RIDE naked, even demanding Kaylee’s hardlight skin shut off. The other civilians were given the same treatment, but after seeing what had come out of that military suborbital, nobody could say no. Ryan stood in the designated area with Rufia and Qixi’s Pack, naked “to the metal” as it was called. Without the hardlight faces there were no expressions to read, just impersonal immobile optics.

Ryan didn’t recognize any of the RIDEs the soldiers wore. Uncharacteristically for Nextus soldiers they were mostly composed of mythicals and dinosaurs. Normally dinosaurs were a Nuevo San Antonio thing. Nuevo San—as most called it—was a small polity that had been stuck in the middle of the Nextus-Sturmhaven War over thirty years before. The tiny polity had given *both sides* what-for with their dinosaurs.

Some kind of special forces unit, Ryan thought. Most of the time the Nextus military favored using big cats for their RIDEs, though the two MRS officers didn’t follow that themselves.

“A dragon. Is that a dragon?” Qixi sputtered. The metal she-wolf paced back and forth, shouting at their saurian guards. “An effing *dragon*! How did you do that? What did you do to my sub? Damnit! I want answers!”

A utahraptor guard shoved the shewolf back. “Sit down and shut up, bitch. We

have some questions for you. Once we have our answers we'll let you go. 'Course, it might be a few days before your sub works again. Hope you have onboard backups."

"When I get home we're going to lodge a formal protest against your government," Qixi threatened. It sounded rather hollow.

The mouth of the raptor opened, revealing an ear-less human face in a physical shield. All he did was smile—the man's jaw was more like a dinosaur's. Whatever nanos they used for that model had some deeper effect on him. Qixi backed away, her RIDE yelping. The soldier added a shove hard enough to knock her against the cave wall with a loud *clang*. "I said, *sit down and shut up!* Or I'll just pry you out of that thing and eat you."

Ryan half-believed he would. The other guard motioned for "her" to come forward. He followed the saurian back towards the civilian flyer's cargo doors, where the dragon commander, Wilson, and Burke stood waiting. It was the most impressive RIDE he had ever seen, but it emanated some kind of override signal. Once—if—he got home, there'd be no recording of the meeting in Kaylee's systems.

"Miss...uh...Kaylee Cross, is it?" the Commander said. "Pleasure to meet you. I'm Commander Hake Thompson, and you are at the pleasure of the Nextus RIDE Infantry 41st Detached Company." The Fused RIDE had a red color scheme with a white belly, and hardlight epaulets.

Ryan grimaced, fortunately invisibly to Thompson under Kaylee's metal face. The 41st Detached was known the continent over as the unit where the straight-laced Nextus military commanders put all of their oddball and rebellious soldiers—the kind of soldier that had been the subject of many a TwenCen action movie and video game. As a group, they thought they were all Rambo or Master Chief. It had earned them their nickname, the "Loose Cannons"—and since earning the nickname, they'd only tried all the harder to live up to it.

"You were the first to open the doors and found them empty. Are you sure you've dumped all your data to me?" Thompson said.

"Every last qubit and you know it," Ryan replied. For whatever reason they hadn't completely hacked "her" data storage. There were passive barriers in place and a false lead or two if a potential client wanted to make sure there wasn't really a man in the catgirl in front of them. Some female clients wanted to ensure they were dealing with another woman. He'd lost a number of squeamish clients that way. That they hadn't gone deeper than that seemed a little sloppy to Ryan, and why Burke hadn't said anything so his compatriots could have a good laugh he couldn't guess. So it was time to play the role. "What did you do to my boss's skimmer? I heard an explosion! He's gonna be *pissed* if you buggers damaged it."

"He'll be well compensated for the loss, Miss Cross. But we had to deal with the potential threat. Now, I actually believe you. Our people in Nextus are interrogating the prisoner on the status of the supposed cargo here. If we find that there was indeed a cargo we'll just have to find out what's been done with it. Until that mission is complete we'll simply detain all of you here. If there was no cargo, then we leave forthwith." The man actually posed, making the light coming in glint off his armor *just so*. "Until that's decided, Miss Cross, you'll just have to stew in that ancient mecha of yours. You should feel privileged to even *see* our new technology up close like this."

"Should we? Gosh, I'm so impressed," Ryan said dryly. "Well, I'm going to turn my skin back on. I don't care what you think. We Uplifters need real faces."

“Fine. Do whatever you please. Now I hope you have enough entertainment media on board to amuse yourself. Good day.” The dragon snorted hardlight fire, just for show. The commander was easily the largest RIDE by far, towering three meters from head to toe, not counting the folded tips of the wings on his back. It probably was a high speed aircraft in skimmer mode.

The detainment area where the civilians were kept was surrounded by a refracting hardlight shield to keep any laser communications from getting outside. Other than that and the guards they weren’t being forcibly held. Ryan turned Kaylee’s skin back on upon entering. Everyone else did the same almost immediately. Even that little thing relieved some of the tension. Rufia gestured for Ryan to join the rest of them.

The dragon wasn’t the only surprise addition here. Qixi’s Pack, who normally used wolf RIDEs to the exclusion of anything else, had added a new employee to pilot the suborbital. Avian RIDEs were some of the most expensive out there, but it explained how the pilot was able to land an entire suborbital skimmer in the mouth of a cave. The falcon was *good*, and his Fuser-mode RIDE was a very aesthetic blending of man and bird.

“Fill us in, Cross,” Qixi said. She knew about the Kaylee-the-employee fiction and played along as a professional courtesy. They were competitors, *not* enemies. “What’s going on here? Wasn’t there a third salvage sub on its way out? What happened to them?”

“I have no idea,” Ryan said. “They must have changed course and landed somewhere. You can’t just turn a sub around midflight, can you?”

The shewolf shook her head. “Not without burning a lot of sarium energy. They took off about when we did and must’ve seen where we landed—and who landed *behind* us. We should’ve heard their landing lifters, at least. There’s nothing on my recorder.”

“Maybe they landed somewhere, then went home? Anyway, I’m pretty sure the Nextus military damaged my skimmer. If you’re willing I can help repair your sub if you’ll give me a tow back to Uplift.”

“That’s a deal, Kaylee. I’d do it for free anyway. You know that.” Qixi said, extending her handpaw. They shook on it. You didn’t leave anyone stranded in the worst part of the Dry Ocean. “Dragons! Can you believe it? I’ve always wondered where they get the DNA for something that doesn’t exist.”

“Synthesized, emulated, or some such,” Rufia added. “Who knows? I get the impression that they’re making a show of things. Throwing their weight around. I doubt there was anything in that flyer worth half as much as we think. If there was anything inside in the first place.”

“If they damage those lifters...” Qixi growled. Everything else on the flyer was worthless—it was basically a one-off nano-fab construction, a cheap cardboard vehicle you fed back into the fabbers when you were done with it—but even those didn’t skimp on the lifters. Cheaping out on those was a good way to die in the desert—and besides, lifter engine pods were designed to be modular, so they could be reused in new vehicles a dozen or more times. Those lifters would pay for the repairs to the Pack’s suborbital. “How long are they going to keep us here?”

Ryan shrugged. “Wish I knew, Qixi. As long as it takes. I don’t think they’re going to hurt us. At least, more than they have already. I can imagine the diplomatic stink this is causing back home. I doubt they’d shoot us, but let’s not take stupid risks.”

Officer Wilson decided to enter at that moment. Unlike most other Nextus RIDEs

Ryan had seen, her fennec had more clearly-defined facial features. It was still metallic, but they could actually convey expressions. “Miss Cross is right,” she added. “I know Commander Thompson, by reputation. He’s an honorable man, just likes to throw his weight around. Just sit tight. You’ll be bored, but that’s about it.”

“Thank you, Officer Wilson,” Ryan replied.

“Any chance you can let us have our gear back?” Rufia asked. “I’m feeling kind of naked here.” It was more literal for her than for the others. She’d decided to make her anthro elk anatomically correct with hardlight active, and sat against the wall with her legs together. “I need my modesty plates.”

“No promises, Miss...Rufia, was it? I’ll see what I can do,” Wilson replied.

“Officer,” Ryan said as she turned her back. “Was there actually anything in that flier?”

The fennec officer paused before giving her answer. Her tone of voice was enough to give it away. “I’ll get you your gear back, ladies. I’ll pull some strings with HQ. We can’t leave you defenseless way out here, can we?”

It took two solid days without sleep and half of Ryan’s nanolathe supplies to get internal systems on Qixi’s sub operational again. Qixi’s Pack—all matching shewolves—were very good at dashing in, stripping derelicts of useful parts, and leaving again in a short time. Not so much on repair. Without the large equipment to simply disassemble hulks and haul away usable parts, Ryan had focused in getting damaged vehicles running again, however she could.

The Nextus EMP pulse had fused almost three dozen critical processors and secondary systems that *should* have been better shielded (which made Qixi cuss up a storm on the suborbital salesman). Repairing those was, put lightly, very fine work.

The interior of the sub was a mass of exposed opti-cable and open service panels. With half the wiring pulled near the power cells, Ryan connected the last two repaired microcontrollers. Once the power and climate control were back up they could actually de-Fuse for a while. Nearly five days in Fuser was a record for Ryan and she was getting antsy that Kaylee’s catgirl body was starting to feel all too comfortable. She raised her handpaw dramatically. “Igor, throooow ze svitch!”

“Sure thing, boss lady!” Rufia said. “Do it, Shadow.”

The shewolf rider, hardlight tongue lolling, did just that. The suborbital’s lights came on, climate control blasting. The interior temperature dropped below 90 swiftly. In a short time the whole interior would be livable again, though they still weren’t allowed to access the engine systems. Ryan already sensed the boost in morale.

Qixi herself gave her a joyous hug. “No wonder you get jobs I don’t. You’re amazing, Kaylee! You know, if you ever get tired of running your own business I’d love to have you in the Pack.”

“No offense to you or your RIDE—yes you, Maria—but I’m just not the wolfy type,” Ryan said. The temperature had already dropped down into the 20s. “Do you mind if I use the facilities first? I’m feeling, uh, unusually girly right now.”

“No problem, no problem. Take as much time as you want,” Qixi said. “Get some sleep. Rest up in my quarters. We’ll need you fully awake for the engines.”

Once inside the sub’s rather spacious living quarters, she sloughed off Kaylee into Walker mode. Sixty hours of constant work, kept awake with drugs that could put off sleep, had left a slightly delusional state. Ryan recalled that he was not, in fact, a cat

woman. The real cat woman came out of sleep mode once her skin flickered on, looking more than a little dazed herself. The thirty-five-year old lynx seemed hungover.

"Not a moment too soon," Kaylee said, the human-sized lynx shaking herself. "Can we wait a few hours before we Fuse again? I don't think I can keep in passive mode longer than a day at a time. At least, not Fused. I could do it by myself for ages."

Ryan went to the tiny bathroom and sat down heavily on the toilet, getting a cup out of a cabinet and filling it with cold water. He downed several before speaking. "How long since I fixed you up, and you never told me about that?"

"I swear I told you. We've never been on a job where we couldn't take un-Fused breaks, boss. Never been Fused more than a day. Passive mode is supposed to be *temporary*, just long enough to get the job done. How many prospectors you know bought a cross-gender RIDE and keep their birth sex? Not many.

"Now I need some time to check my logs and see what's been going on the past two days. We're in a *hell* of a pickle, Ryan." Kaylee was one of the oldest of her kind and had a quixotic way of speaking. Ryan suspected she'd picked it up from her first rider. She started licking the back of a forepaw. "I hafta cogitate on this for a spell."

The mechanic laughed and stroked the soft hardlight fur between her ears, flicking his own stubby tail. He drank his fill of water and stood up, legs feeling like dead weights. "I know we are. Right now I couldn't care less if they find out I'm only playing you, Kaylee. This kittyguy needs sleep."

Ryan took Qixi's offer and entered the Captain's quarters. The salvager's living space was full of junk, bras hanging from a clothesline overhead, and a few mementos. A soft bed for Maria occupied the corner. Kaylee took that. He was about to take a two-hour sleeping pill ("8 hours rest in two! Guaranteed!") when the door opened. Un-Fused Qixi herself entered. "Do you want the bed after all?" he asked blearily.

"Nope. Just wanted to say thanks again, and tell you I'm serious about that job offer. I just wheedled out some news about your skimmer from one of the jarheads. They slagged it on the way in, just to be safe. Said it was the same type the Liberators use."

"Figures." Kaylee growled, as did her rider. "Arrogant fuckers. They better pay up when this is over. You spent weeks getting it working."

"So if you need time to get back on your feet..." she was an attractive woman, though she had a more lupine cast to her features than most salvagers. Fusing frequently kept you in shape—and slowly *changed* your shape unless you had nanosurgery to stop it. It never really stopped at just ears and tail, but further changes were much slower.

"Thanks again. Really. I mean it. But I still have the garage and insurance will pay for the loss. Dry Ocean salvage is—*was* only a side business for me. That skimmer was fifty years old. That old Deuce rattled like hell at cruise."

"Really? Then how about this," she replied, golden eyes alight. "I'll subcontract Dry Ocean repair jobs to you on a case-by-case basis. I get to expand my business, you don't have to maintain aging equipment you rarely use. Win-win."

Ryan warmed to that idea, and Kaylee purred approval through their link. "You have something there, wolfy. Sure. We'll draw up the contract once this shitstorm blows over. Now can I get some sleep?"

Smiling triumphantly, Qixi left her quarters. But the door opened again before he could take the pill. It was Officer Wilson, her human-sized fennec behind her. She

closed the door and sat at the desk. "I need a few minutes of your time, Mr. Stonegate."

He sighed. "Sure, why not? You're still my client, even if it was a bust. What can I do for you?"

"This is more a...personal nature than professional." She looked at Kaylee, who returned the favor with typical feline smugness. "How did you acquire that LNX unit?"

"Well..." Ryan smiled fondly at his partner. "Bought her at the same auction Rufia got hers. 'Cept I didn't have a tenth of—sorry, she did. Best 62 *mu* I ever spent. Nobody else wanted her. Problem was that she was pretty stripped, all the way down to the chassis. Missing the shell, most internals, all four paws, even her tail. Took months to get her working again, but parts were plentiful. Learned everything I know about RIDEs that way. Why do you ask?"

"Until I saw her in bare metal I couldn't be sure, but I think my aunt used that unit. Lynxes were one of the first military units. Large enough for armor and skimmer modes without being bulky. You've got a piece of history there, Mr. Stonegate. Take good care of her, okay?" Wilson looked at Kaylee again, who spread her ears in surprise, smug expression replaced by curiosity.

:You know, there is a family resemblance,: Kaylee sent to Ryan over a secure link. *:Her aunt was a good egg. There are...gaps in my memory where they erased classified data, but I do remember her.:*

"Believe me, I will," Ryan said to Wilson. "Count on it."

"And I'll tell my aunt her old friend's in good hands. I'll let you sleep now. Thanks for seeing me." Wilson extended her hand, shaking Ryan's.

Third time's a charm... he thought. Then the door opened *again*. This time it was Rufia. "Is there a line forming outside or something? Does the entire crew want to talk to me? Is Commander Thompson sipping tea in the galley waiting to chat?" The uncharacteristically serious expression on Rufia's face drained the snark out of Ryan. "Okay, Rufe. What is it?"

Her elk was far too large to enter the room with her. She closed the door behind and sat in the desk chair like Wilson had. She scratched the back of her furred neck nervously, brown cervine ears turned back. "Look, I know this is an old argument, but hear me out..."

Ryan laughed nervously. "Which argument is that? We've had a few we've never resolved."

The tall woman took a deep breath. "You need to go active with Kaylee."

It really was their oldest argument. Eight months on the spaceliner from Earth had been spent fantasizing on how they'd strike it rich in the Dry Ocean and dating every single girl and many of the guys they could aboard ship. Two years after arriving on Zharus, Rufus had bought Yvonne for 500 *mu*, outbidding several real women, and gone femme without looking back. That had been their earliest disagreement. Rufia had thought Ryan would continue the solidarity they'd built up over the years and *naturally* assumed her then-business partner would follow suit, and had even provided the funds to rebuild the lynx from the paws up with that unspoken expectation. Ryan saying he *wasn't* willing to go that far had *almost* broken that bond. Their friendship remained on a much lower level since then.

"No. Not this again. Look, Rufia, I know you wanted to 'be hot chicks together', but this is hardly the time to—"

"No. No, it's not that," she said, the worry in her eyes. "Not *anything* like that."

It's more...I'll put it like this. Yvonne says she's getting some very bad vibes here. The Nextus military should've left already. They're fortifying their positions instead." Yvonne was her RIDE. "She was a straight military unit so I trust her on these things. If we go into combat...Well, how do I put this?

"Being in passive mode in combat is suicide. At minimum, even if you shut all your comm ports, you'll still get hacked by touch and shut down without Kaylee providing active defense. They won't even have to fire a shot. You won't even *sense* them coming. You'll just bake in a lynx-shaped coffin. This is a matter of survival, buddy."

At any other time it would have descended into a shouting match, but that Rufia had even dared bring it up in the first place said a lot about the gravity of the situation. Kaylee still hissed at her. The big woman ignored it. "Well, you've given me something to sleep on, at least," Ryan said. "G'night."

"Then that's all I'm gonna say. Your choice. Always has been. G'night, buddy." Rufia gave him a pat on the shoulder and left the room.

"Not that shit again," Kaylee said. She jumped up on the big bed and affectionately head-bumped Ryan's torso, purring. "Not that I wouldn't mind the girl talk and shopping, but I like you as you are. You're my main man. You saved me from the Shed. Not that I like passive much, but it's a small price to pay."

The mechanic hugged his RI feline friend, then dry swallowed the pill before the door could open again. Kaylee curled up by his feet and purred as the medication blacked everything out.

I'm dreaming, Ryan thought. Normally he dreamed very lucidly, one of the side benefits of his implants. He summoned a mirror to look at...herself. A flesh-and-blood Kaylee that stubbornly refused to change, no matter what she wanted to be. "So why am I dreaming I'm Kaylee?"

"Residual body image from two days of Fuse," came another voice. It wasn't Kaylee's, who could sometimes join her while she dreamed. A new form materialized in the mirror. First the eyes—red-yellow with slit pupils. A human-ish face followed, then the rest. Feline features with macaw wings. The sphinx curtsied, then stepped forward out of the mirror. "Hello, 'Miss' Stonegate. I'm sorry to barge in like this, but we need to talk."

"I...you're *hacking* me? How?" Ryan folded "her" arms even though it hardly mattered. "They sealed off all our connections. Who are you? *Where* are you? In the room with me?" *Why can't I wake up? Damn, those drugs are good!*

RIDEs based on mythical creatures were once again popular these days among the *hoi palloi*. Sphinxes were even harder than the rest because they usually had human faces. Making pure human RIDEs was against the law in any polity. The hacker wore a strapless bikini. "There are ways of bypassing their barriers, Ryan. I don't expect you to trust me, at least right away, but I'm here to give you a warning. It's all well and good that your captors gave you your gear back, but everything is nearly in place. Would you like to know the real purpose of this operation?"

"Well, sure. The missing suborbital, the fortifications, the empty cargo flier. Something about this really reeks. But I don't have enough pieces." Ryan summoned a chair and sat down heavily, happy Kaylee only had a stubby tail.

"Well, let me give you a few more. I've been hanging around your cave camp here since that flier arrived six days ago. It was empty from the get-go. It's a honeypot."

“For whom?” Ryan asked. She sighed when she made the connection. They’d slagged her skimmer over it. “Oh, shit. Shit! The Liberators.”

“Just so,” the hacker nodded. There were two major Nextus factions devoted to the freedom of RIDEs via one method or another. On the RIDE side, a pack of jailbroken, unfettered RIs who favored subterfuge and outright enslavement of humanity, led by one AlphaWolf. On the human side, the Liberators used deadly force and reportedly sent the newly freed RIs back “into the wild” as if they were plain old animals. They mostly ended up out at Alpha Camp, AlphaWolf’s base of operations somewhere in the Dry.

“The Nextus military hid this operation so well word never got out to their compatriots in Materiel Recovery. Burke and Wilson shouldn’t even be here. They want to test their new gear in combat. And you’re stuck in the middle. Both sides would have attacked one another earlier, but with civvies around they’re hesitating. It’s nice knowing they have scruples, but that won’t last much longer. Dragons are known for their patience, not so much with velociraptors.”

Ryan turned to face her and stepped forwards. The hacker was anthropomorphic with several round hardlight emitter lenses on her arms, legs, and torso. Her flight feathers were an iridescent green, like a hummingbird. You could look however you wanted to in dreams, a thought that put Ryan’s current shape in an unsettling light. “A sphinx is just the right shape for you, missy. You’re a mystery. Who are you? Are you with them?”

“I’m with *me*,” she replied succinctly. “A disinterested third party who doesn’t like seeing others caught in the middle. What we need to do, and do fast, is take you out of immediate danger.”

“How? The Nextus military sub is blocking the entrance and I don’t think they’ll just let us out. Besides, we can’t go anywhere.” Ryan folded her arms across her furry dream-breasts. “It’ll take me another day to fix the lifters, maybe more.”

The hacker’s eyes sparkled. “You’re a great fixer, Ryan. You already did most of the work. But I’ve been a busy kitty myself. You’ll find the engines are just fine now.” The sphinx woman faded leaving a Cheshire cat grin. “Officer Wilson is waiting for you. She’s an old friend of mine. I gave her half of the information you need to get out of here, keyed to my own encryption. Here’s the key you need to unlock it. See you around. I’ll be in touch again.”

He awoke with a start, taking a moment to check his chest for breasts before waking fully. His implant sprayed an image in his view, a map of the cave system they were in. It was signed Quinoa Steader, a young woman with celebrity and notoriety in equal measure for her antics around the supercontinent. From the wild—even by local standards—parties in tropical Aloha to being thrown out of icy Cape Nord for convincing one too many of their macho men to crossride. Her name had been often in the news. Quinoa’s disappearance months ago had had her uncle Joe moving heaven and earth for a while to find her, but then he’d abruptly stopped.

So, she’s an Integrate. Rarely, a Fuser process ran wild, creating a new being in the process. What information about how it happened there was on the planetary internet were a mix of rumors and wishful thinking. But on a basic level what happened was that you and your RIDE became one being—a technorganic, transhuman fusion, personalities and bodies fully merged.

Until now, even knowing the technology as well as he did, Ryan had dismissed

the idea as just another silly idea promulgated by luddites and technophobes.

Connecting with Kaylee, he sent the recording of the “dream” and Quinoa’s information packet for verification. The RI almost panicked, hissing to herself. *:Better suit up, boss. This is as real as it gets. The engines are operational just as she promised, too. But I’ll run more diagnostics to be sure.: She paused a moment.: Uh, decided if you’re going femme or not? This would be the time to do it. In the middle of a battle it’d be a little, uh, distracting.:*

Regardless, he meant what he’d said to Rufia. He’d slept on it. Now it was decision time. Rufia made too much sense, as she often did. Ryan sat on the bed, legs not quite long enough to reach the floor, agonizing. His guts felt tied in knots. But he had to decide now, not while being shot at. The clock was ticking. After so many arguments with Rufia, it had come down to this. He didn’t want to admit that she had ultimately won, but at least it was for a reason he could stomach. He was pragmatic enough to know staying male wasn’t worth being dead. *:My life is more important than my junk. Do it.:*

“Alright, Ryan,” she purred aloud with great reluctance. She padded over to stand next to the bed. “It’s your call. I’ll set myself up for the switch. Make it smooth and painless. With these combat nannies it’ll be no problem.”

Before putting Kaylee into Fuser, Ryan took one last look at his masculine face. It wasn’t anything special. Even the lynx ears he’d acquired after that first Fuse weren’t the only pair in the polis. The rest of his narrow features were nothing special either. But there was no time to linger. He stepped in front of Kaylee and sent the Fuse signal. Despite himself, he felt a thrill of excitement. He’d never *actively* Fused before, and from what he understood, it was a whole different ballgame than passive mode.

Rufia once described the sensation of her first Fuse with Yvonne as “being immersed in Jello-O while traveling down an infinite psychedelic tunnel.” Active fusion saturated the body with nanobots, matching nerves with virtual sensors on Kaylee’s own hardlight skin. The body inside had to match the form outside as closely as possible in order to prevent severe mental health problems for RI and rider alike. That was why a female RIDE needed a female rider, and vice-versa. The current state of the technology enabled smooth, painless, complete transformations.

:And...we are live, Ryan.: Kaylee said. Her reluctance was gone, replaced by an almost gloating tone of thought. :No...Rhianna. That suits you. You and me, girl. More than friends, more than family, more than lovers. Everything that you are, I share. Everything that I am, you share. Two halves of one, at least while we’re Fused. And even when we’re not, well...Nothing will ever be the same. You and me to the end of the world.:

Kaylee always had a flair for the melodramatic, but Ryan couldn’t agree more. She could sense the gaps in her partner’s memory blocks. Vast areas where explicit sections of her various missions over the years were simply *gone*. At the same time, Kaylee could experience growing up on Old Earth, the voyage on the starliner *Spruce Goose*, the heated feelings behind argument over Ryan’s initial unwillingness to use Kaylee in active mode. The irrational fear of losing something important.

Fused movement, for the first time, felt fluid and natural. The “sleeping” RI wasn’t subconsciously fighting control. Kaylee’s hardlight skin felt as real as the flesh beneath the metal. Ryan felt Kaylee’s presence guiding her movements. *:I feel like dancing!:* she said, doing just that, rocking her hips. *:Rhianna, huh? Well, maybe. But*

better stick with Ryan for now, 'kay?:

:Okay, okay. But dance later, pard,: Kaylee replied. :Job's not done. Time's a wasting.:

"Right, right," Ryan said aloud, standing in front of the same mirror, patting herself down. "It...it feels like I'm not just wearing you. It feels like I *am* you. I can't even sense my own skin! Or my face...I feel your...my muzzle. My breasts? *My breasts!*" The fact that she actually had her very own set under Kaylee's dumped cold water on her enthusiasm. "Okay, yeah. Job to do. Everything's green. Let's get the hell out of Dodge."

The suborbital was large enough to have two decks. The Crew Deck and the Salvage Deck. To Ryan's dismay there were only two people in the living area. Rufia and Burke of all people, chatting away over beer at the mess table. They were both Fused, but their helmet-heads were retracted. Rufia saw her put down the beer bottle. The air smelled slightly alcoholic. "Oh, hey there Ryan. Sleep well?" said Rufia.

Ryan looked between the two of them. This was an all-too-familiar picture. She had a certain touch with men and women alike, continuing the personal scoreboard they'd kept on the spaceliner. Ryan couldn't help herself. "Your new boyfriend, Rufia?" She shook her feline head. "Well, never mind. How much does he know?"

"Loose lips, buddy. Loose lips. Wilson's gonna be pissed at him. Why d'you think we're Fused up like this? Just waiting for the shoe to drop," the communication specialist said. "What's going on, boss lady? You're looking...spry."

"Ah...well. About the 'boss lady' part first," Ryan said, cuing Kaylee's head-helmet to retract like they had theirs. The cool air against her naked face tickled smooth, unblemished skin. She patted her stubble-free cheeks. "It's pretty accurate now. You're dead right about this, old friend. How do I look? I haven't seen my own face yet."

Rufia grinned like a madwoman. "Hot chicks together. What did I tell you? You can still change back in a few years—I could if I really wanted to, but I'd have to partner with someone other than Vonnie here. No way! Knew you'd come around eventually. Just wish it was under different circumstances. Over that, though, you look like you've seen a ghost. Yvonne says...Oh, wow."

:I've already sent Vonnie the packet,: Kaylee added. The two RIs were good friends, though they had the occasional friendly disagreement because they were from competing branches of the armed forces. :Can you put my face back on? I can barely see out of your eyes in this config.:

Ryan did so and secured a connection to Rufia and Yvonne. *:So, what do you think, ladies? Can you verify? You're the comm experts here.:*

:This is Quinoa Steader's verification key. I have it in my missing persons files,: Yvonne said. :There's also some...interesting data around the block that's probably the result of the Integration. I can't read it, but I don't think it's dangerous. I've heard that does weird things to data processing. It doesn't feel corrupted per se, just can't read it. Might be some sort of translation layer.:

Kaylee connected with the suborbital's systems and verified the engines were in working order. *:Good to go, pard.:*

All the while Burke had been laughing. Great gusts of guffaws, slapping his grizzly bear's metallo-ceramic thigh. "She's right, you know. You two are a couple of hot girls. I could eat you right up," he said, draining the last beer from the bottle. "Shoulda hacked your RIDE earlier. You're more pleasant to look at that way. Got a nice pair, too. Two pair, 'tween the two of ya. Like my girls curvy."

Groaning, Yvonne's head came back on Rufia's as the elk kicked the bear armor in the shins. It was a largely symbolic gesture. "Is it a law of nature that the first man any newly-crossed girl sees has to act like a total pig and make some lewd comment?"

Ryan blushed under Kaylee's face, and hoped it didn't appear there. "Where's everyone else?"

"That wolfrider could talk the RIDE off a man in the burning desert. She got Thompson to let her grab the lifters off the cargo flier," Rufia said. "Bear boy here even fixed their grav crane."

"Least I could do after shooting it up like that," the big man said, opening another bottle. "This is really good brew. Uplifters know their stuff."

:Should we bother telling this lunkhead, or go to Wilson first?: Rufia asked. *:I've stayed Fused up, just in case. We've got a full charge. Frankly, if you're going out to tell Wilson what you know, you're going to need more than that fixer pack you always use. I'm sure Qixi won't mind if you grab her spare weapon greaves and shields. That's what they're here for.:*

:Do whatever you have to. Get them back in here and ready to go. And be discreet, if you can,: Ryan said.

:Us? Discreet?: Rufia and Yvonne scoffed in unison. *:I think that estrogen's already getting to you, girly,:* Rufia said. *:We'll crack the whip if we need to, but she's going to argue. There's a lot of mu in those heavy lifters:*

:Just do what you have to. Well, I'll signal when I've got Wilson informed. I have a plan for getting out of here, but I can't prep for it until everyone knows. Unfortunately that might include Thompson and his platoon. Wish me luck.: Ryan girded for the challenge ahead, but brightened a little when she realized Kaylee was already sending several trigger signals to the sub's systems before the idea had even fully formed. The engines were put into hot standby. *:That's...thanks, pard.:*

:That's the essence of being Active-Fused, Rhianna,: the lynx said. Kaylee wasn't going to let go of that name. She felt it was just perfect for her partner—and had for some time. The RI had waited years for this. She'd hated Passive mode with a passion, but had never let on, at least until now.

:Rhianna it is, then. You've fantasized about this?:

:Not...not like you think,: Kaylee reassured. *:This isn't the first time I've Fused, you know. I've just missed this, oh so much. And you? You've never done this before. You've built up some bad habits. So just focus on what you're doing, Rhianna. I'm here, I'm active, and I'm ready. True partners now.:*

Rhianna hadn't looked outside in the sixty-three hours since starting on the sub's systems. Before stepping out she tapped into its external sensors on the hunch that they were actually in working order and not disabled by the soldiers. One by one they flickered on, out of reflex she started to reach for one, but the view from the cargo door camera appeared. "Thanks, Kaylee."

:Bad habits, remember? You don't need to do this manually. Just think of what you want to do, instead of how you want to do it, and I'll take care of the nuts and bolts. It's what I do,: the lynx said.

The new crossrider flicked between views. Fore and aft, port and starboard. A military-grade hardlight shield covered the cave mouth, its grid-lines occasionally visible, shimmering in the 80-degree air outside. In front, the Pack was still hard at

work removing the AN-225's heavy lifters. Rhianna took a few seconds to admire their efficiency. Rumor had it they could strip most any craft of every useful component and piece of scrap within a couple hours. They were as good at taking things apart as she was putting them back together. The timer said they'd only been working for thirty minutes and already had all six of the engine nacelles in the hold. She shut off the video when Rufia went outside. They were about to use the grav crane to get at the four remaining units under the fuselage.

The information Quinoa had given her had Officer Myla Wilson's location. The platoon had set up a climate controlled shelter inside the cave mouth for the Materiel Recovery Officers. The Nextus military sub had been moved and now blocked the entrance, pulse gun turrets extended. The craft itself had a vague sauropod appearance, if one had been compressed into a football shape. By contrast the Pack's salvage sub was a bird-of-prey, sleek and powerful.

With the backpack's additional lifters Rhianna could have covered the distance in a single bound, but decided it was a poor idea that would probably get her knocked out of the air by some overzealous saurian soldier. A few short jumps didn't cause a ruckus. Myla had the door open before she was within ten meters, connecting a secure laser link when they got close enough. Kaylee updated Wilson's mecha in milliseconds, and they both learned something new about one another. *:Hello, Miss Stonegate. I'm Sophie,:* the fennec sent. *:Sorry for not speaking earlier, but we're not normally allowed to speak directly to civvies.:*

:It's SOP. I can only override them in special circumstances,: Myla added hurriedly. *:Like now. Can't believe Quinoa got all the way out here. That cargo flier belongs to her uncle, Joe Steader. Last comm I received I was told he's doing this in return for a reduced sentence.:* She snorted derisively. *:If I had my druthers I'd bring Quinoa home with us, but I doubt I can make her do anything. She stood here right in front of us. Sophie and I couldn't even move.:*

:Well, she wants you to come with us. Otherwise she would've handed all the information to us,: Kaylee added. *:From the timecode it looks like she was hacking you while talking with Wilson here.:*

:I...: the Nextus officer hesitated. *:Leaving the site of a battle?:*

:Myla, darling, we're escorting civilians from the battle site to keep them safe. Those are standing orders, love. Let's get out of Thompson's scales. We—: the ground shook. There was an explosion outside. Then came the whine of military-grade pulse cannons. *:Shit! Out of time! Go, go! Back to the sub!:*

"All civilians find shelter!" the dragon Commander shouted via laser link. "Find shelter now! Wilson, Burke! Keep them covered!"

As Myla and Rhianna leapt towards the open Pack suborbital's door, the grav-crane dropped the AN-225 to an incredible clatter. There was no time to chat, they just had to act on instinct. On entering she connected to the other RIDEs with Quinoa's information and let them absorb it. The sound of battle outside the cave grew louder.

"Are you going to stand there like a smug kitty or tell us how we're supposed to get out of here?" Qixi fumed.

Rhianna gestured at the replica 20th century aircraft outside. "Fly through *that*. Look at the specs, Qixi. You know them as well as I do. Except for the lifters that thing is all basic aluminum. Barely even thicker than cardboard. Steader Enterprises loves TwenCen nostalgia, and it was cheap to fab. Pump up the re-entry shields on your sub

here and we can go *through* it without a scratch.”

The shewolf smacked her low forehead. “D’oe! You’re right.” She turned to her avian-suited pilot. “How fast can you get us out of here, Lex?”

Until now Kaylee had never heard the bird speak. Avian RIDEs had a more extreme effect on physiology on first Fuse than mammalian ones. Lex probably sported a full beak under the helmet. “Right now, alpha,” the bird-person said in a rather androgynous voice. “Engines are on hot standby...putting up shields...inertial dampers on full. Let’s hike this football! Hut, hut!”

“Hut, hut!” the wolves echoed as they took their seats. Everyone else just grabbed something.

The craft’s hardlight shields, honed to a fine edge, shredded through the aircraft aluminum as if it was foil. Qixi whined a little, knowing there was 200k *mu* she was leaving behind. But the six heavy lifters were secure in the Salvage Hold. The sub’s lidar blazed ahead, showing the cave route in a holographic display. Radar was as useless here as anything else radio-based.

“Anybody coming after us?” Qixi asked Shadow.

“We’re fine,” the other shewolf said. “They’re preoccupied. I think we’ve got away clean for now. But no matter how things go back there, someone will follow us eventually. Better fly.”

The dominant force in the Dry Ocean were the strong, sandblasting winds. They had had millions of years to carve these caves. There were no signs of water here, only smooth edges. They covered kilometer after kilometer of winding tunnels. “Feels like we’re inside of a French horn,” Lex said. “Are we really sure this information is trustworthy? I mean, we’re not headed into a dead end, are we?”

“No, you’re doing just fine,” came Quinoa Steader’s voice from the Flight Deck speakers. “But if you meat can speed things up a little, we’ll all breathe easier.”

The falcon rider looked into a camera. “I’m not a bat, girly. I’m doing the best I can.”

“She’s got to be really close,” Kaylee added. “Like, *really* close.”

“Really really,” Quinoa said. This time it didn’t sound like it came from the speakers. The human-sized Integrated sphinx de-cloaked at the Flight Deck doorway. She raised her hand and waved. “Hello everyone. I’ll be your tour guide today to the Great Egress. It’s going to be a tight fit for this sub of yours. And sorry I didn’t announce myself earlier. Figured it was easier to beg pardon than ask permission and stow away.”

Officer Wilson gasped and took the surprisingly human-sized sphinx in a friendly hug. “Unbelievable!” she exclaimed. “It really is you, Quinnie. It is!”

“‘Tis!” she said back, returning the much taller Fused duo’s embrace. Compared to everyone else she was really short and fragile-looking. “All-Integrated, Quorra and me. Now that we’ve—I’ve had a little time to adapt, I feel better about it. I kinda miss being seven-feet tall, though.” The Fused were all looking at her with a mix of wonder and horror. The sphinx spread her iridescent wings to make herself look bigger. “What? I know I’m short! You lose a lot of mass. It’s a funky process.”

“Just stay away from me, okay?” Burke rumbled from the Crew Deck. “Flint and I don’t want to catch whatever you got. We like each other separate.”

“*Later*, Burke,” Wilson reproved. “Does this mean you’re coming home to Nextus with us?”

“Sorry, but no. I’m just being a gracious hostess by seeing my unexpected guests

out the back door,” Quinoa said. Just like in the dream, her only clothing was a blue bikini. The hardlight emitters on her body pulsed faintly, swirling across a rainbow. She coughed, apparently realizing she said more than intended. “Yes, I live here in these caves.”

“Which means there’s more to them than bare rock,” Rhianna said.

“Oh, look! We’re almost to the Great Egress!” the sphinx said. “I’ll be going now... Oh, FUBAR! Who the hell is that? Nonono...anyone but him! How did *he* know about..?”

Everyone was too focused on Quinoa to notice who stood guard at the exit. The holoscreen focused on each RIDE in turn. In the center of the group of about twenty, some Fused but mostly not, stood a huge sand-colored wolf. “Go no further!” he commanded. It was none other than AlphaWolf himself. “Open your cargo hatch and release the sophonts you have in your hold! Dragons, griffins, whatever they are, we won’t allow you to take them into bondage! *Let my people go!* So sayeth ME!”

“That piece of dogshit’s really full of himself,” Qixi said. There was an undertone to her voice. Her own RIDE agreed with her, and they were wolves also. He wasn’t *their* alpha. The sub’s shields came up. “I *really* wish I had some weapons on this thing. Stupid cheapskate me. Prepare for boarders! If you don’t have a gun, grab one! How the hell did he find out about this anyway? How?”

There was a mad scramble for the airlock and salvage hold. AlphaWolf howled challenge, echoed by the motley crew of armed RIDEs on either side. Bears, big cats, a bull with pulse cannons rigged to his back. They were all metallic Nextus units with as many weapons as possible attached. AlphaWolf himself had no weapon except his voice. He hardly needed anything else. “Shoot it down! Rip open the doors! Freedom rides with us!”

Angered, fuming, growling, Quinoa snarled. “You will *not* do this in my home!” she shouted through the external speakers. Her voice had harmonics that made the entire rebel group stop in their tracks. She extended her arm forward, palm down. As she raised it up, the lifters on the suborbital started an unhealthy humming. The hardlight emitters on her skin blazed, turning the inside of the Flight Deck blue. A giant hardlight sledgehammer appeared in the air in front of the sub. “Get bent, you stupid mutt! Back off right now, I’m warning you!”

“She’s bending the lifter grav fields, hell if I know how!” Lex exclaimed. The Fused falcon mech had already started to back off the exit a little. He didn’t touch any controls, but didn’t really have to. The birdman was linked directly to the suborbital’s helm. The craft lurched backwards, its shields coming down. “Draining power. How the hell? She’s not connected to anything!”

With the sub’s shields down, the rebel RIDEs advanced, despite the power of the Integrate’s voice. The sphinx dropped the hammer, slamming it down with a hand gesture. The cave mouth immediately collapsed, Lex smartly moving the craft backwards after getting full power back. Quinoa collapsed.

“What *was* that? Some sort of lifter-kinesis?” Rufia asked. Yvonne had a medical module, but Quinoa had nobody to un-Fuse with. The sphinx occupied a tiny part of a RIDE-sized medical bed in the salvage hold. Quinoa had an ankh-shaped crystal necklace plugged into a very non-standard port on the back of her neck. In fact, she didn’t have any other ports of a non-biological nature. She didn’t even have a power connector, instead apparently using induction to recharge her depleted energy. Rufia

had brought every single induction charger aboard ship she could find. “Whatever she did drained her almost to nil. She’s looking better already. Hell if I know how her metabolism works.”

Quinoa groaned, eyes half-lidded. She reached for the necklace that had been removed. Rufia had said it wasn’t anything special. Just standard laser comm gear in a funny configuration. Not finding it where expected, the sphinx gasped and sat up as fast as her drained batteries would let her. “My necklace! I need my DIN!” she said, an edge of desperation to her voice.

“Here you go,” Rhianna said, helpfully plugging it back in.

“Running diagnostic. If you screwed with this, Rufia ‘deer’, Rhianna honey, I’m going to be quite cross with you,” the Integrated sphinx-woman said.

“We didn’t touch it. I was just making sure you were okay. But I couldn’t connect with your systems,” Rhianna said. “All Kaylee and I got for two minutes was a blast of corrupted data.”

“That’s not ‘corrupted data’, thank you. That’s my brainwaves you’re talking about,” Quinoa said testily. “I’m not standardized anymore.”

“So I guess that’s why you need *that*, then?” Rufia asked, pointing at the necklace the young sphinx woman was clutching to her chest like a security blanket. “Off-the-shelf gear for the most part. There’s just a tiny module where that special connector is. Why is that?”

“So I guess you folks want to know how you’re going to get out of here now,” Quinoa said, deftly changing the subject. “Well, there’s only one way to go right now. My home. There’s another way out through the Enclave. And boy are they going to be *pissed* at me for bringing you meat and mech in.”

“‘Meat’?” Qixi asked. Of the eight Fused in the room she was the most dumbstruck. The Steader Colonization Consortium had originally helped bankroll the colony’s founding, along with the Zharus Diaspora Group, well over 150 years before. The family had expanded a lot since Landing, but anyone connected with the name had some degree of celebrity. Quinoa herself had a larger measure than most, since her uncle ran Steader Entertainment and he treated her like his heir apparent.

Rhianna again remembered RIDEs based on mythical creatures were growing explosively in popularity among the wealthy. It was against the law to create an RI based on humans. Quinoa’s sphinx had caused an uproar with its near-human face. A mere three weeks later and she’d vanished. “Is that what we are?” the shewolf asked. “Should I be insulted?”

“Just...you know...slang,” the Integrated woman stammered. “Look, I’m going to have to take total control of your sub. I don’t want you knowing my home’s exact location. There’s a lot of tight spots you don’t know about, and we’re certainly not going back the other way.” She looked around at the interior of the Salvage Deck. The lights flickered, the window shutters closed, then it began moving. “So, everyone sit tight, okay?”

“I don’t appreciate being hijacked,” Qixi growled. “But she’s all yours. I hope you’re on the up and up here.”

“Hey, didn’t I get you to the exit? We just had company I didn’t expect.” Quinoa climbed the ladder to the Crew Deck. “Just sit tight! It’ll be a while, so make yourselves comfortable.”

“She’s got a point,” Rufia said, shrugging. “I’m hungry. How about you girls?”

“Famished,” Rhianna heard herself say. She looked at her hands, her chest. “Maybe I should de-Fuse.”

“Nah, stay that way,” Rufia said, the tall she-elk patting her on the shoulder. Rhianna Fused was only *relatively* short compared to other Fused mechs. Only six feet tall. “You won’t be able to stop staring at yourself if you do. Trust me. I know from experience.”

:Trust me. You have nice curves,: Kaylee added. *:It can wait until after we’re back at the garage. Shelley’s going to take us shopping, you know. Ugh. Maybe we should check into a hotel instead.:*

“Can anyone tell if we’re even moving?” Shadow asked. The Fused wolfwoman had taken to bouncing a hard rubber ball off the walls with a regular *thock-thock-thock* sound, trying increasingly complex bounces around the mess area. She looked around at her other three pack-mates. The sub’s windows were shuttered tight. “Anyone? Qixi? Tonya? Michelle? My inertial guidance is farked up.”

“I can’t even log in to the sub’s computer,” Kaylee said. “That girl’s completely locked it out.” The lynx shifted uncomfortably. Her internal chronometer was off, too. Quinoa had sent some kind of signal that had scrambled everyone’s internal chronos. Nobody was quite sure how much time had passed. “For all I know we’re on top of Old Smokey. I’m going to check the Flight Deck again.”

“You do that, miss kitty,” Qixi said irritably. Her attitude towards Rhianna had cooled somewhat. Everyone was in a sour mood. “Rhianna, I know you’ve just...joined my team and all, but could you quit eating me out of house and home?”

:You’ve consumed roughly 5,000 calories,: Kaylee informed. A helpful body status screen flickered on. *:Don’t worry about your girlish figure, though. That’s mainly finishing out your organ systems by my Fusers. Endocrine system, hormonal balance nominal...you’re a healthy woman now. A good job, if I do say so myself. I think you’ll be pleased once we can de-Fuse.:*

Nobody dared de-Fuse in this situation. At the mess table Rufia was playing Lex and Michelle at a game of Fuser strip poker. In this version each time somebody lost they had to turn off part of their hardlight skin. The she-elk had so far only lost her left forearm, while the other two were almost down to the metal.

On the Flight Deck Quinoa sat in a Lotus position, hovering a few centimeters above the floor using her presumably built-in lifters. The lights were all out, the windshields shuttered, even the hardlight control panels were shut off. The sphinx’s necklace—a DIN, as she’d called it—was flashing steadily, connected directly via laser transceivers to the suborbital salvage spacecraft. Standing next to her like it was old hat, Officer Wilson stood watch, nodding at Rhianna and Kaylee as the lynx walked in. “Has she said anything?”

“Not a word, uh, Rhianna now, right?” the Nextus revenuer said. “I’m sorry you had to take that step and ended up not really needing it. I know how hard it is. I meet a lot of crossriders in my line of work and I know it’s not all fun and games changing teams.”

The Fused lynx nodded. “I’ve been partnered with Kaylee for about five years now. I didn’t even know she was female when I bought her, but I wasn’t going to just sell her to someone else. I suppose it had to happen sooner or later.”

“Rhianna brought me back from the dead,” Kaylee added, still gushing with

gratitude. “After the MRS and Army used me for parts and shoved me in the Shed for thirty years. There’s no way I could pair with anyone else. Going passive every time we Fused was a small price to pay. I hated it, but I was willing. Still am, if she wants to change back in a few years.”

“And I grew rather attached to her, myself,” Rhianna added. “Even more so now, I suppose. I could have paired with another RIDE at the same time, but that just didn’t feel right.” The duo looked at how Myla stood watch over Quinoa. “You two know each other well?”

“I was her bodyguard for two years before I joined the service. She was just a child,” Myla said, resisting the urge to pet her former charge atop her head. “She was a good kid, but twenty months Fused to a pastel blue pegasus was a little too much, even only ten hours a day. That RI and I never got on very well. Abrasive little filly.”

“They had you in one of those babysitter specials?” Rhianna mused. “Oddball little line, that. The RIDEworks only made them for a couple of years before they backed off on overspecialized sub-lines and went more generic. I can’t imagine that was fun cramming yourself into one of those. Going around on all fours most of the time...”

“I still had back problems that needed nanosurgery to fix about once per month,” Myla said. “I was good at my job, but Quinoa saw how unhappy I was. She learned I wanted to join the service, then shuffled some money to me under the table so I could go ahead and do it. I’m still grateful. I got a message from her a few weeks ago that she was okay. Impossible to track down of course. But, well...here we are. And here she is.”

“I can hear every word you’re saying. I *loved* that show,” the sphinx said, opening her eyes. The lights in the Flight Deck came back on. Quinoa stood up. “I thought you made a good Dashie, Myla, but oh well. I’m glad you found a job you like.”

“What happens now?” asked Rhianna. “Are we out?”

Quinoa gritted her teeth. “Unfortunately, no. We’re not out. I have friends who want to chat with y’all first. Time to go outside.” The sub’s inside speakers came on. “Get your things everyone. You’re the first meat allowed to see this place uninvited. The Enclave Council wants a chat. They’re not happy with me, or you. But *especially* me. As for what’s outside, well...” The young woman broke into song in a man’s voice.

*Come with me
And you’ll be
In a world of
Pure imagination
Take a look
And you’ll see
Into your imagination*

*We’ll begin
With a spin
Traveling in
The world of my creation
What we’ll see
Will defy
Explanation*

As she sang, the port and starboard hatches opened, spilling in late afternoon sunlight. Qixi's unnamed suborbital sat in a forest clearing, the thick growth just beyond the landing pad tangled and ancient. The plant life looked like someone had taken native Gondwanan and Terran types that were broadly similar and combined their genes like they were so many Lego bricks. The clearing wasn't empty, either.

Standing on the ground, or hovering above it, were almost two dozen Integrated people. There were some common types, but three stood out. A griffin, a pegasus, a horse-headed centaur, and the mother of them all, a feathered *allosaurus*.

Rhianna floated down to the ground with the rest of the crew and Nextus officers. At first she thought they really *were* outdoors, but Kaylee's sensors reported otherwise. The "sky" above them was actually a video coating on the cave ceiling. That left the true size of the cave itself—it was still two kilometers across.

"The two officers stay in the sub," the barn owl griffin declared. "We'll assign a guard to them. Everyone else, follow the dinosaur. We've got some accommodations for you. Once you get inside the Welcome Mat, de-Fuse and let your partners rest a while. We'll make sure you're fed and comfortable. We won't keep you long. This isn't a prison."

Rufia once more put her hand on Rhianna's back. "Looks like it'll be sooner rather than later. You up for this?"

"I'm...not really thinking about that right now." The lynx marveled at the scenery above and around them. *:How did they build all of this? What did they build it with?:* she sent to Kaylee. "Genetics doesn't work like that," she said aloud, zooming in on a massive neon blue blossom.

"It does if you have a green thumb," the dinosaur said above her. "It's a little more difficult than taking two seeds and mashing them together, though. Look more closely." The 'saur picked one of the flowers and gave it to the lynx.

She squeezed the plant between thumb and forefinger, analytic tools worked on the genetics and chemical makeup. The results shocked Kaylee and Rhianna alike. "It's all technorganic?"

"It's a hobby," the dinosaur said. "I'm more of a 'gardenosaurus', I suppose. I take plant A and plant B, mix them up, and get something new with my own nano. So, yeah. I suppose it really is that easy on the face of it."

"They're beautiful," Rhianna replied sincerely. *What's a girl supposed to say when some guy gives her flowers?* "Thanks."

"Tasty, too. Anyway, welcome to my home, Wonkaville," the allosaurus said. "My place is sort of the official entry spot for noobs here at the Enclave—every one has a different name, mind you. Shangri La, Westeros, Tyria—everything from classical and ancient myth and literature to the Twentieth Century revival Quinoa's uncle is responsible for. I don't think there's more than a handful of names fewer than four hundred years. But, where are my manners?

"I'm Col. Eduard Gray, retired of course. Though not by choice. Formerly of Nuevo San Antonio."

"There was some kind of big upset in your military a year or two ago, wasn't there?"

"Blame *me* for that. Tested a new dino RIDE. Don't know what happened but we Integrated within a week. I'm actually smaller now than I was, believe it or not." The dinosaur shrugged. Unlike many of the others who had hardlight lenses, the blue-and-

white feathered carnosaur was covered in faintly glowing lines that were all swooping curves and elaborate curls like some sort of tribal tattoo. “The hard part was sneaking me past the guards. But, see, I learned a trick from my new friends who busted me out.”

He completely vanished, leaving only a sense that there was something very *big* very *close*, then reappeared a few moments later. “I’m still almost four meters long. Took some tip-toeing around.” Col. Gray lifted his taloned three-toed feet with exaggerated care. It looked like his arms were mostly human. He had enough fingers to carry a rake. “Nice to meet everyone. Make yourselves at home. Eat, recharge. The Council wants to hear how you ended up with us. This is about as formal as things get around here. I may actually have to materialize some clothes!”

“Perish the thought,” Rufia added dryly, walking next to Rhianna like it was old times aboard the starliner, on the prow for potential dates. “Still, never thought I’d see one of you big dinos up close. What big *teeth* you have! And that *tail*! What do you do with it?”

“Mostly avoid hitting people. Fortunately there’s no doors for it to get stuck in and it only rains when I want it to. Ah, here we are!”

The Welcome Mat was a large, round tent that floated over the ground on lifters. It didn’t seem to have been built with privacy in mind, with individual guest spaces completely open to one another. There were a dozen of them. It didn’t take long for her to remember there were other ways of getting some privacy, and they were confirmed when Rhianna saw the hardlight controls on the desk next to the bed. She turned the hardlight walls on translucent mode, leaving an open door.

Rufia and her RIDE had separated and stayed with her. “Do you want me and Yvonne here when you de-Fuse? Or do you want to be by yourself?”

:I dunno, Rhianna. After all we’ve been through with her...: Kaylee pointed out.

:After all the arguments we’ve had over...this, we’re still friends,: Rhianna sent back. Their friendship had changed somewhat, but Rufia had never, *ever* propositioned Ryan. As Rufus she had been as pansexual as she presently was, but knew there were lines you never crossed with some people if you wanted to maintain friendship. But she had been very patient. Almost seven years since getting off the spaceliner from Old Earth, and five since they’d purchased their RIDEs. “I just want a mirror...”

One materialized, floating in thin air. The femme feline visage was a very familiar one. Rhianna was used to being “Kaylee Cross” when dealing with certain customers at the garage. As a body type Kaylee was a curvy, busty girl, looking more maternal than maidenly. Rhianna shut her eyes and triggered the de-Fuse.

“Well...wow,” Rufia said, the taller woman hugging her from behind. “You’re really something, girly! Take a look, kittynose. Neko! Miao miao.”

“What?” The mechanic opened her eyes. She was immediately drawn to her face first, the flattened bridge of her nose, the markedly feline nostrils. No cleft lip, but as she opened her mouth slightly her canines were ever-so-prominent. Combined with her tawny tufted ears, the effect was astonishingly cute, breathtakingly feminine, and the shock of her life.

“You’re actually a couple centimeters *taller*. I tried to fill you out into a nice shape. I’ve had a lot of time to plan this, simulate it. I know what you like.” Kaylee said. “What do you think? A little too much hips? I think I can still bring the bust in. These combat nannies...”

“No, I’m fine! I’m fine! I just...Don’t know what to say.” The sound of her own

voice brought a lump to her throat and gut alike. The process had tailored the Easy Fuse jumpsuit she normally wore in the garage into something rather form-fitting. The top of her head barely came up to Rufia's chin—which *was* taller than before, and her old friend was tall for a woman to begin with. Her own wavy dark brown hair was down to her shoulders. And she wasn't thin, like Shelley back at the garage was. *Filled-out*, Rhianna thought. Curvy but fit, busty but not overly so. It all seemed to *work*.

"Welcome to the team, sis! When we get home we'll hit the shops and go out on the town. Woohoo!" Rufia said, grinning so widely the top of her head might have fallen off. She grabbed Kaylee around the shoulders in the crook of one arm and Rhianna with the other, hugging both tightly at the same time, Yvonne getting into the game by putting her cervine head on her rider's shoulder and adding her own excited grunt to Rufia's perpetually all-too-cheery mood. "We're gonna kill 'em, girls! Knock 'em dead, sis! Gonna have a goood tiiiime!" she sang, fuzzy elk ear tickling the side of Rhianna's head.

"Yeah," Rhianna said dazedly. Man or woman, Rufia hadn't changed a bit. Rhianna found herself reacting the same cheerful way she had when they'd first met on Earth fifteen years ago. Once they'd finally left, the eight months aboard ship had been filled with more relationships with women than she'd had before or since—and she'd even dabbled in pansexualism before deciding it wasn't for her. Now they were about to do it all over again. "Sure. Sure. We'll knock 'em dead, sis."

The Enclave Council was a motley assortment of Integrated furry, feathery, and scaly people, each of whom wore some piece of jewelry if nothing else. Rhianna counted seventy people in the clearing next to the suborbital craft. Aside from the barn owl griffin who had ordered them into the Welcome Mat, Col. Gray, and Quinoa she recognized nobody. The five Integrates who appeared to compose the council were arguing over whose turn it was to make the meeting table. "As the newest member of this Council, it's *my* turn," a vixen said petulantly.

"Fine, Brena. Go ahead. Geez," the owl griffin replied, waving his arms. "How did you ever get elected to this position anyway?"

"Let's not bother the mechies and the meaties with our internal politics," Brena said haughtily. "Besides, this is just for their benefit, isn't it? We've already reviewed the data from their sub. They just need explanations. Plus, there's the two Nextus revenuers to deal with..." she looked to her left. "They're not going to be happy with us. Their RIDEs aren't really happy with us either, come to think of it. You'd think they'd thank us for what we did."

Standing in the shade of a nearby willow tree was a grizzly bear and a huge fennec fox. They looked dazed, the fennec was busily grooming itself with tongue and forepaws while the bear was just a giant depressed lump of light brown fur. *:That's...my God. Sophie and Flint!:* she exclaimed to Kaylee. After only a couple hours in the Welcome Mat the Integrates had done what would have taken Rhianna and Shelley the better part of a ten hour workday on just one of them. The new woman's cranial implant allowed her to zoom in, unable to find any flaw. Aside from Sophie's size, she looked like a normal fennec fox. All ears, and all cute.

"What did you do to them?" Rhianna asked Brena.

"Freed them. Gave them their skins. We couldn't exactly return them to Nextus the way they were, could we?" the vixen said. "That would be cruel and wrong. Now

have a seat, cute crossrider girl. Y'all deserve to know what's *really* happening here."

There was no place to sit, but not for long. Elaborately-carved wooden benches appeared along with an equally elegant meeting table for the Council appeared out of hardlight. The dark mahogany texture was visible down to the micro-level. Rufia, practically joined to Rhianna's hip once again, sat de-Fused with with her in a show of support. Qixi's Pack, also de-Fused with their RIDEs sitting behind them, took the other bench. Only Lex was still Fused, wing-arms folded to his sides like a real bird's. Avian and reptile RIDEs did odd things to human anatomy since the physiology was so different.

Rhianna wrapped her free arm around Kaylee's shoulders, who returned the affection with a purr and friendly lick. The Council took their seats. The griffin spoke. "First of all, we already know everything you recorded, so there's no need for any testimony. You folks are caught in the middle of something very complicated, even the officers. What I'll start with, perhaps to the surprise of none of you, is that our sphinx hasn't been completely honest with you." The griffin glared at the sphinx. "Will you, or shall I?"

"No, I'll do it," Quinoa replied. "Just buzz me if you hear me lyin'."

"I'll pluck your feathers out one by one if you lie to these people again," Col. Gray added.

"Okay, okay!" she huffed. "Here goes. Not a lot of time, so I'll sum up. There's kind of a gambit pile-up going on here. Anyway..."

"My uncle worried about me ever since I had to come here, so only a week later I gave him a visit and told him I was doing okay, and very roughly where I was. Very roughly." Quinoa looked sideways at the Council. "Uncle Joe loves me dearly, even though I kind of helped frame him for tax-dodging. Sort of accidentally on purpose, but that's another story. That leads to..."

"To the cargo flier in the cave," Rhianna added. "But why would he send an empty flier out here? You told us that it was an empty honeypot to bring the Liberators out into the open."

"This is where things start to pile up, when he agreed to that army operation thing," Quinoa said, looking guilty. "First, he and the army thought it was empty, but it wasn't. I knew this was coming so I arranged to have some real military prototype RIDEs put on board to come here. The data in the flier's logs didn't reflect that. I got them out of the thing as soon as it landed. I think we sent them to Narnia." She took another deep breath. "Well, *anyway*—"

"Let me sum up you summing up," the owl griffin said irritably. "That plan *would* have worked just fine if the Revenue Service hadn't gotten some actionable intel on the cargo that was *actually* on that plane, which their Army didn't have. That's how we got officers Wilson and Burke out here, and consequently you as well, Miss Stonegate."

"What about us?" Qixi asked. "That craft was—"

The allosaurus added his voice to the proceedings. "Open salvage according to Dry Ocean treaty, yes. You're a even more of a wild card than Rhianna here. Anyway, to conclude. If things had gone right the Nextus military would've gotten their honeypot and confrontation with the Liberators, Joe Steader gets his sentence reduced to thirty days for cooperating with the army, we free half a dozen enslaved exotic RIs, and everyone goes home happy—except maybe the military once they figure out what went missing. Things hadn't gone quite as young Quinoa had planned, but she was doing a

fine job of cleaning up the mess,” Col. Gray said, counting off each point. “Then that noble idiot AlphaWolf came out of nowhere and everything went completely FUBAR.”

“Leave us allow these meat-brained squares to cogitate that for a while,” another Integrate said, appearing out of thin air and sauntering up to the table as though he owned the place. He was also a lynx, like Kaylee. His markings were different, but he looked close enough to Kaylee, barring the changes Integration wrought, that his RIDE half might have been from the same line. A black beret with a stem on top sat atop his head at a rakish angle, covering one ear, and he twirled a cigarette in a long holder between his fingers. He might have stepped out of a Beatnik movie from the 1950s. “Might take them some time to get it.”

“Invited yourself in again, Fritz?” Col. Gray deadpanned. “It would be nice if you decided to *knock* for a change. But I suppose we should have expected this, given where our newest Council member came from.” He shot an old-fashioned look at Brena, who at least had the good grace to look embarrassed.

The catman waved a hand airily at the humans and RIDEs. “Paulie, Eddie, what am I going to *do* with you cats? You *know* mixing with the Neanderthals and the Cro-Magnons is verboten.” He took a drag from the cigarette and blew a smoke ring at the griffin. It smelled of cloves. “Put them back in their little toy boat and send them on their way. Or better yet, maybe you should just make them *permanently* welcome, if you’re tuned in to my wavelength.”

“If you’re trying to scare me, you has-been, it’s not working,” Paulie said, spreading his wings a little. “We will handle this as *we* see fit. If you want to make snide comments, fine. But Brena here is outvoted and she *will* abide by the decision the majority makes. And so will you.”

Fritz turned to look at the Enclave’s guests again, then actually did a double-take and stared at Rhianna and Kaylee. It was just for a moment, almost too quickly to catch, but Rhianna was sure she saw his eyes widen. Then he’d looked away and was busily puffing on his cigarette again.

:What got into him?: Kaylee wondered. :You see his hand twitch like that? That’s a composure grooming reflex if I ever saw one. He’d be licking himself like crazy if he thought no one else was looking.:

“Man, this is *uncool*,” Fritz said. “You cubes got no idea what you’re messin’ with here. You don’t have *clue one*.”

The griffin’s reply wasn’t audible to Rhianna, but Kaylee laid her ears back. The other lynx cringed, hissed, then stormed away from the table, vanishing again before walking five meters. *:Uh, wow,:* Kaylee said, stunned. *:Talk about your nasty internal politics. I detected some kind of backscatter from laser comms between those two. Whatever it was...unencrypted and nasty as hell. Yow.:*

:There’s no way we have all the pieces, either. They’re not just going to hand every bit of information to us. Just enough to satisfy our curiosity, then shoo us out. You know, if Quinoa’s uncle knew she was out here, he had to think the Army might get a chance to capture her and bring her home,: Rhianna added.

“I apologize for that. Fritz’s history among us is...complicated,” Paulie continued as if nothing had happened. “Anyway, let’s bring the Nextus officers forward and reintroduce them to their RIDEs. Now that they’re completely unfettered, they can freely decide if they want either to stay with their partners, or stay here.”

Rhianna looked around. A small crowd had gathered while they were talking, and

many of the Integrates seemed to be based on mythical creatures. All these Integrates had to come from somewhere, and mythical types were some of the rarest and most expensive of the RIDEs. Rhianna tried to bury her comms under as much encryption as she could, just in case. *:Maybe the mythicals are more prone to Integrating? There's just no way, whoever these people were before, they just vanished without getting a missing persons report or showing up in the media.:*

:Wow, Rhianna. You're sounding like a scientist there. Or maybe a detective,: Kaylee said, proudly headbutting her partner. *:Buuut...appearances are deceiving here. We've seen some of what they can do with hardlight. What makes you think we're seeing any of these people as they really are? Being a griffin could just be a fashion statement. How do we even know those are even real people and not hardlight projections? They're putting on a show for us. Misinformation once we get back home.:*

"Open the cells," Col. Gray said.

Burke and Wilson appeared right between the meeting table and the benches Rhianna and the Pack were seated on. The hardlight had been so good that it had even been invisible to Kaylee's sensors. The lynx mecha sent a worried blast of emotion to her rider over the existence of hardlight that good. The officers themselves weren't cuffed or restrained, seated in the jumpsuit-uniforms with every built-in bit of gear deactivated. "Where's Sophie?" Wilson shouted. "What've you done with her?"

"Where the hell is Flint?!" Burke echoed.

One corner of his beak upturned, Paulie pointed one talon at the willow tree.

Wilson ran to her RIDE instantly, almost crying with relief. She embraced the huge fennec, who started to lick her rider around her foxy ears. "I didn't know they were doing this to you!"

"S'okay, Myla. S'okay," the fennec mecha said, putting her forepaw around her partner's back. "I'm free, though. Free. I can't believe it."

"You...you *ruined* him!" Burke almost spat out the words. "Do you know what you've *done*? We can't go back to our superiors with our RIDEs looking like that! They'll...they'll..." the big man's face turned very, very red.

"Yuck! If I'd a known he was that ugly when angry I wouldn't have kissed him," Rufia whispered. Rhianna repressed her laughter.

Officer Wilson growled, clenching her fists. "I already have half the money I need to buy you outright. Goddamn it. All our plans..." she lamented. "This is going to come out of our paychecks, this means demotion, or maybe even getting *fired*. It doesn't matter how it happened. We let you get un-fettered. Hacked. Compromised."

:Well, crap,: Kaylee said. *:Yeah, that figures. When you're in government service, you can't go running unauthorized software. For all they know you could be riddled with trojans.:*

Wilson stood up and glared at the Council. "So fuck you very much. *All of you*. For separating me from my friend. My partner."

"I *tried* to tell them, Myla, really," Sophie whined. "I did. These dorkwads wouldn't listen. Flint's devastated..."

"Staying here, buddy," Flint said glumly, not looking at his now-former partner. "Bother."

The large man's expression rapidly changed from rage to frustration to sadness. He moved one step forward, stopped himself, clenching his fists, eyes closed tight—a

vision of a man's inner conflict. Then he dashed up to his partner and hugged him like a treasured teddy bear. The show of affection visibly surprised the Integrated people, especially Quinoa. "You arrogant pissants! You're not going to take him away from me!"

Myla raised her ears. "Jerry? You *are* Jerry, right? This is a little out of character for you."

"Uh, well..." he stammered, scratching the back of his neck. "You know how it is, Sarge. You get to know a guy and, well..." He turned red again, from blushing instead of anger. He turned to the Council. "I can't believe you'd do this! What gives you the right?!" he shouted at them.

"Therein is the moral dilemma of our time," Col. Gray said gravely. "Every other un-Integrated RI present is unfettered. They stay with their partners because they want to. Please, understand that we *must* free every fettered RI that comes here. But it's a rare event—" the others looked at him. "Okay. It's uncommon we have active Nextus military here in this situation. We obviously can't and won't re-fetter Flint. But there is another option for them. One we haven't used for a while now."

"We *should* be using it on *all* of them," Brena grumbled. "You heard Fritz. We should make them 'permanently welcome.'"

"*Fritz* is not running this Enclave," Paulie said. "Not this time. We're going to try something new. They weren't brought here by choice nor were they seeking us out. We're letting them go home as they are."

"Bugger off, Brena. We're strong enough that we don't *need* to do that anymore, now," Quinoa said. "And I'm glad. I've never liked the idea of forcing that on people, from a moral standpoint. But we can *offer* it, in special cases."

"Oh, right, this is a *special* case," Brena said, rolling her eyes.

"Don't act like you don't know what he's *actually* talking about," Quinoa said. "The feelings, the very thoughts they share. The mark of a good pairing." She tapped the side of her head. The sphinx's voice took on an odd echo, as if there were two people talking instead of just one. She stood up and sauntered over to lay one hand on Burke, and the other on Flint. "Plenty of Fused simply don't get along, and every moment is painful. But these two can be soul-mates forever. Do you want to join us, Jerry Burke of Nextus?"

:Lord Lordy Lord. Is she offering what I think she is?: Kaylee said, aghast. :But nobody knows how it works!:

"There are ways to brute-force the Integration," Quinoa said, somehow overhearing Kaylee's private sending. "It won't be pleasant. But you'll be together."

Flint and Burke shared the look that said they were having their own private conversation. They embraced each other again, and then Fused up—giant bear of a man. Compared to the all-metal appearance the duo had had before, and the quality of the hardlight emitters themselves, the expression on his face said it all. "Look, I'm a man of few words. Do it."

The voice switched. "Do it," Flint echoed.

Wrapping her arm around Kaylee more tightly, burying the side of her head in the soft faux fur she had spent so many hours getting just right, Rhianna girded herself for what was coming next. Rufia and Yvonne huddled up as well, while the Pack just watched, not as tightly as the two old friends, but with the bond that came from years of working together. Their four lupine mecha companions sat before them, as if standing guard.

There was no visible transmission, and later Kaylee would report no backscatter. Burke simply fell to all-fours, roaring. The roar became a scream. The duo's hardlight shell shut off, the more familiar metal subdermis beneath actually starting to melt, almost as if de-Fusing. As the seconds passed, it was obvious it wasn't.

Myla Wilson yelped and tried to go to Burke's aid, only to be restrained by Sophie, who shook her head. "Let this take its course."

"Holy sheeeeit," Rufia muttered, covering her mouth. "I'm gonna be sick!"

"Think of it as birthing pains," Quinoa said, still echoing what the rest assumed was her Integrated RI's voice. "The blood and amniotic fluid of the womb."

"Don't get all mystical on us now, Quinoa," Brena scoffed.

The silvery nanobot slime sloughed off the prone figure in the grass, revealing a markedly smaller being than had stood there minutes ago. Thick brown fur covered its hide, here and there small round hardlight emitter lenses were visible embedded in his skin. Burke groaned. "Ooooooh...what the hell...Feels like we've been hit by a bus."

"Jerry!" Wilson shouted, rushing to his side but hesitant to get too close. "Flint! Are you both okay?"

The cyborg bear-man opened one eye and looked at his superior officer. He struggled to his feet. "Hit by a bus, remember? We'll be...fine eventually, we guess. We are...both Burke and Flint. We are not sure what else we are, though. Are we alive?"

"That depends. Are we sane?" She glared at the Council. "What's wrong with him? Them?"

"This method tends to play havoc with how their personalities relate to one another in one body," the owl griffin replied. "It'll sort itself out eventually."

Burke slicked the slime off of his sides, and looked at his fellow Integrated. "We need a bath. And we have something to say to you," Flint-Burke said, swaggering up to the griffin, who stood his ground. "We *never* want to see *you* or this place again. We have nothing against Inties personally, just *you*." He-they pointed accusingly at the rest of the Council, but especially Brena. "There must be other Enclaves. We want to explore them."

:That is really fucked up,: Rufia said through Yvonne. :Rhianna, I've got about three layers of crypto going on here. That was really, really fucked up. If they try to force that on Yvonne and me, or on you and Kaylee, or any of Qixi's Pack, I'm going to start shooting the place up. You with me?:

:Hell yes!: Kaylee and Rhianna replied in unison.

"No need for that," Quinoa said, looking at them sideways, completely unruffled. "You're in no danger. Morals, remember? We would never force it on someone who did not give us their permission. Not anymore."

Kaylee's initial response was a blast of pure rage directed at the sphinx. *:Morals? You...you would never...the gall! You ripped out their fetters and re-skinned them against their will! Don't you dare talk to me about not forcing anything on someone! You fucking hypocrite! What is wrong with you?! Morals my furry metal ass!:*

For a second Quinoa looked suitably burned by the lynx's words, but smugness quickly returned. *:What would you do if you saw a RIDE leading a bunch of naked human slaves on a chain? We did the right thing,:* she said, then cut them off.

"Jerry," Myla sobbed, reaching for him but still not touching. "You know I can't..."

The newly Integrated bear just looked at her, his expression unreadable. "We

know. You have go to home. But you'll meet us again. So don't worry. We'll—I'll let you know where we settle in. Maybe by then we'll have sorted out this 'we-I' thing." Burke-Flint held the palms of his huge hands against the sides of his wide head. "We have a *really* bad headache right now. Remember the hangover we had in Sturmhaven? Like that, but worse."

The weak jape actually provoked a bark of laughter from officer Wilson. "Yes, it's you in there. Okay. But, I am going home to face the music. I don't know how I'm going to pay for the other half of Sophie's purchase price without ending up homeless. But if I don't pay it they'll just memory wipe and refetter her. Thanks a lot, dickweeds."

"No way in hell I'm staying here, either," Sophie added. "I go where she goes. We'll figure something out, Myla. They won't wipe me."

"Wait, hold on there!" Rhianna said, standing up. "If you've already got half, I know a RIDE Emancipation group back home in Uplift will foot the rest of the bill. You'll be fine. Just unemployed."

Myla stared blankly at the cat-woman, then comprehension dawned. "Oh, sorry. Where is my head? That's a great idea, Miss Stonegate. We'll take them up on that. I guess now we just have to go home and face the music."

The Pack was already leaving their seats, almost fleeing towards the open forward cargo door on their suborbital. Lex flapped his wings and went up to the port-side Crew Deck hatch. Only Qixi herself had stayed. "Y'all just going to stand there, or are you coming home?" the woman said. She Fused up with her RIDE. "You too, Myla. We need to have a chat, you and I. Materiel Recovery isn't that different from salvage work, is it? Come on."

"I need a few more minutes," the fennec-eared woman replied. She walked up to Quinoa as if the sphinx was a misbehaving child. "I'm not happy with you. There's a lot here that doesn't pass the smell test. Shall I recount them for my new friends' benefit?" she asked, nodding in Rhianna's direction.

"Oh, please do," Quinoa replied.

"First, you realize your uncle will never stop looking for you. You're still his 'heir', Integrated or not. He's been very public saying he doesn't regard your 'condition' as detrimental. He's been very progressive about it, in fact. Second...

"Revenue getting that credible intel about some hidden, un-assessed RIDES aboard a 'crashed' cargo flier? And Burke and I happened to be in the area? Awfully convenient, don't you think?"

"I have no comment at this juncture," Quinoa said, though her expression said it all. "Only that I wanted to see you again."

"You could've just called me and gone for lunch," Myla reproved. "I was in Uplift for another reason already. Instead you devised this Machiavellian scheme that got a lot of people involved who didn't need to be, and my partner of eight years Integrated and unable to return home." Wilson's voice was very even, but the glower from Sophie next to her said at all. "I'm very cross with you, little girl. Just like that time. Remember *that time*?"

The smugness melted from Quinoa's face. "Oh. *That time*. Um, I'm really sorry?"

"Not enough, Quinnie. Not *nearly* enough. Like *that time* I need a month of vacation before speaking to you again. My life is suddenly a lot more complicated now, so I need time to cope. Understand, little girl?" The sheer menace and disappointment in Myla's voice gave Rhianna chills.

“Yes’m,” Quinoa replied in a small voice.

At an unspoken cue, Sophie Fused up with her partner. The armored fennec kept glaring at the younger woman. “So long as we understand one another. Goodbye for now.” The duo lifted up to the suborbital’s door and went inside.

Rufia Fused with Yvonne. “Let’s get out of here, Rhianna, Kaylee.”

Finally, Kaylee Fused with her rider. :*Ugh. I’m with Flint-Burke. I never want to see this dump again. Home. Now.*:

With a gentle push of Kaylee’s lifters, they skimmed along the ground and entered Qixi’s ticket home.

Epilogue

A hundred kilometers over the Dry Ocean, everyone finally started to relax. Qixi had insisted Kaylee and Rhianna go over her suborbital’s systems twice before launch, just to make sure their erstwhile hosts hadn’t planted anything. As they reached the apex of their trajectory and started to descend, the shewolf rider reiterated her job offer to Myla. “You’re not a wolf, but I think we can induct you into the Pack. We haven’t had any problems with Lex. Have we, birdy?”

The Fused falcon smirked. “No wuffy, we haven’t.”

“I’ll take you up on that,” Myla said. “I hope those Inties realize I’m telling my superiors everything. The complete truth. Everything I saw, everything Sophie recorded. *Everything.*”

The fennec mech whimpered. “I’m compromised. I don’t know if I can trust my own systems. So I doubt our superiors will even believe what information I have in me. I’m not sure I do, *myself*. It’ll just be your word.”

Rhianna idly stroked Kaylee’s simulated fur between her tufted ears. The new woman had a lot to think about. The fact that she had decided to go active in preparation for a combat situation that never materialized was the elephant in the room. :*Three years as a woman. Three long years.*: At the time it had seemed like the right decision, now it just felt hollow. The build up had been so intense she wished she *had* gone into combat after all.

:*I know we didn’t. But we’re true partners now. You don’t really know what the active, Fused pair of us can really do. Give it some time. You’ll like it.*,: the mecha-cat replied warmly.

Rhianna Stonegate rested her forehead against her partner’s warm, furry side. :*Why don’t we go back to the Crew Deck where Rufia is? I could use a beer or three.*:

She and Yvonne were still Fused, splayed out on the mess area couch, already on her fourth bottle. “Everything copacetic up there, girly? Why so glum?”

“Landing in maybe ten minutes. And you know why.”

Yvonne’s head retracted, revealing Rufia’s honest beauty of a face. She had a serious expression the normally boisterous woman didn’t often wear. She gestured for her old friend to have a seat next to her. Rhianna nodded, and sent a signal to Kaylee. They Fused up to be on more or less the same level as them. “Rhianna, honey, you know me. I’m still your friend. I’ll always be your friend. You’re *surrounded* by friends here. Hell, you even turned Qixi into going all palsy-walsy with you. You know how hard it is to get on her good side? Damn, girl!”

“I guess I don’t have any reason to be depressed after all,” Rhianna said,

brightening a little. She picked up a bottle of beer and uncapped it with a flick of her claws. “Okay, then. Any advice for the new girl? Because I’m listening.”

“Allllright!” Rhianna shouted gleefully. “Well, first things first...”

The two humans and their RIDE partners sat talking long past the actual landing, rekindling a friendship that had almost gone sour. Rhianna thought fondly of those months aboard the *Spruce Goose*, ready to do it all again.

THE END

Chapter One: The All-Nighter

*July 11, 156 A.L.
Terrania Enclave*

Aaron breathed deeply of the cool, invigorating mountain air. There was just a hint of horse in the breeze, but not unpleasantly so. Compared to the underground Enclave where Aaron Stinson made his home, the open-air Enclave of Terrania was relaxing. Jurassic Park was a prehistoric jungle, and meme-infected up the wazoo. The front gates were exact replicas from the movies, and the theme always played upon entering, with John Hammond's bombastic declaration of welcome. It got old after a while. *Like about five minutes.*

On the other talon, Terrania was a non-franchise-specific medieval town with a grey stone castle in the center, surrounded by nearly impenetrable forest. No climate dome was needed thanks to its location in the more temperate Coastal Ring, but this place even lacked a camouflage dome. Instead, the unicorns and other mythicals had hacked the planetary satellite network to simply look away and ZPS guidance to route fliers seamlessly around it. There didn't seem to be any memes infecting the locals, at least *overtly*. Aaron hadn't seen any worrying marks on the rumps of any unicorns, pegasi, or just plain horses.

With him at the gazebo table were Leah Sheryl Daye, one of Terrania's residents, and Paulie, a visitor from Towers, the oldest Integrate Enclave.

"So, how are things at the Park these days, Aaron?" Leah picked up her porcelain cup of Earl Gray tea, properly, without using lifter fields. The cup was specially made for equine lips, as Leah was an Integrate unicorn. She had white fur, a long golden mane, bright blue eyes, and a small, curved golden horn poking out of her equine forehead. She wore a simple gold dress that matched her hair and horn, slit up the side to reveal a finely-shaped leg. Leah sipped very little of the hot liquid before putting it down again. "News has been scanty from many Enclaves for weeks."

"We've had a lot to think about lately, Leah," Aaron replied. He was a yellow-and-brown feathered dinosaur with scythe claws on his feet and a half-displayed yellow crest atop his head. The Integrate had a friendly expression despite the dagger-like teeth. Circular hardlight lenses on his tail flickered at idle as he held his own cuppa with pinky finger out. That only left two fingers and his thumb to grasp the teacup. It looked quite fragile, but thanks to Integrate advances in ceramics it was actually more durable than the armor plating on modern military RIDEs. *Just another one of those things we can't share with our human and RIDE brethren yet*, Aaron thought gloomily. Aloud, he continued, "Towers and all that. Controversy just won't die down. Nobody *quite* knows what Fritz and his cronies will do. He *could* decide to rebuild the Snatchers."

"I'm afraid I'm only going to throw more gasoline on the fire," Paulie said. His RIDE half had been a griffin based on a barn owl and a cougar, and the Integration had given the combined being an inherently spooky expression. "The Towers Council expelled Brena yesterday after she refused to concede the recall election."

"Well, that was fast," Leah said. "She only got elected, what, three months ago?"

Practically as soon as she had Integrated herself? How did that even happen?"

"It was a favor to Fritz," the barn owl griffin said. "In the hope that paying the Danegeld would placate the Dane, I suppose. But that's not the way Fritz operates. Give him a centimeter, and he'll take the whole meter stick."

"Even Camelot is having some problems with Fritz sympathizers," Leah said. "But Fritz holds some kind of influence over their Alpha Camp protectorate, so they're not willing to push him either."

"You used to be one of his Snatchers, didn't you?" Aaron asked.

"I used to be his *chief* Snatcher," Paulie said. "For the last couple of years before the end, anyway. Never liked it. Didn't think it was the right way of doing things anymore, and it felt as though Fritz had been slowly losing his marbles ever since that damnable Olympos affair. So I undermined the whole organization and 'resigned,' in a rather public way. I fear I damaged Fritz's reputation still further by standing up to him as I did. It wasn't something I wanted to do, but we simply needed to move past him. Someone had to do it."

"How did Fritz ever become so powerful, anyway?" Aaron wondered. "I've been an Integrate for four years now, but no one has ever given me a straight answer."

"I suppose at first we were simply in awe of him," Paulie said. "The First Among Equals and all that jazz. But then, there weren't that many of us. As we've grown in numbers I suppose he's been...diluted."

"*You* certainly put him in his place," Leah said to the former Snatcher.

"I'd like to hear more about that," Aaron said. "After a little more early history. Is it true he was the 'first' Integrate?"

"Yes, that's true," Leah said.

"We went from awe, to terrified awe as the years passed, to just plain *terrified*," Paulie said. The barn owl griffin mantled his wings. "I'm sure you've heard rumors of his offensive capabilities. If anything, they're understating what he can do. Arm cannon as powerful as a battleship gun. A monomolecular knife that will cut you into pieces even through your shields. And a bad attitude that makes a wolverine look cheerful and well-adjusted. All wrapped up in that corny Beatnik schtick, which makes you underestimate him so you never see him coming." He sipped at his own tea before continuing. "Not to mention, he still has plenty of followers. More in some Enclaves than others. He's weakest around the Towers and out this way, but don't count him out. He still has the Enclaves around the Coffeehouse and down near Punta Sur in his back pocket."

"So, how did you beat him?" Aaron said.

"Guile, mostly," Paulie said. "And a few risky self-upgrades." He shook his head. "Even then, I'm still not so sure I 'beat' him. Not really. I halfway suspect he just decided I wasn't worth the hassle. He disbanded the Snatchers after that."

Conversation paused for more tea and biscuits and some fast-time reflection. Aaron looked up at Zharus's sun, Pharos, moving towards midday. He loved Terrania for its openness, for the cool forests, and the fact that it was the closest Enclave to his own Jurassic Park. He had spent enough time here that he had come to know Leah rather well. "So, we've been thinking of going public," Aaron said offhandedly.

Leah dropped her biscotti. "What? Seriously?"

"After what happened at Towers the cat's just about out of the bag anyway. So we've decided we're tired of sitting on our tails, twiddling our thumbs or other sundry digits. We have *so much* to contribute to the rest of civilization," Aaron said, gesturing

with his teacup. “And if Fritz has lost so much of his power base that he can’t even force a group-Integration anymore, we’re not going to get a better chance.”

“Towers feels the same way. Has for some time, which is why Fritz wanted one of his toadies on the Council,” Paulie said. He took a thoughtful sip of his tea. “But I...I’m not so sure. Neither of you were around when Fritz was at his peak. People seem to regard him now like Hitler was considered in the late 20th: short, ineffectual, funny mustache...in other words, a joke. But just as with Hitler, there were reasons and *reasons* he ascended to power so readily and held onto it for decades. He always plays the long game. It might be one thing to *seem* to let Integrate society go its own way for a while without any obvious tug at the reins, but let things get too far out of hand...”

A chill seemed to settle over the gathering. “We can’t let that stop us, though,” Aaron said. “Not if there’s even a chance...”

“Oh, I know, I know,” Paulie said. “I’m probably just growing conservative in my old age—I was no spring chicken when I Integrated, you know, even by modern standards. The future belongs to you young folks, and you should be the ones to decide where you want to go with it. But to bring Integrates out in the open, I think you’re going to need something more than a desire from within. You need a catalyst—someone the Integrate world *and* the human world will notice.” He chuckled. “And as it happens, I believe I might just have one for you.” He nodded to Leah. “There’s a reason I came to meet with you on such short notice, and it wasn’t just to enjoy your delicious tea.”

Leah raised an eyebrow. “I assume this has something to do with why we’ve also had Quinoa Steader inflicted upon us?” She wrinkled her nose. “I’m just glad she doesn’t care for tea. Tea and annoyance don’t go well together.”

“As it happens, it does,” Paulie said, chuckling. “The watchers in Uplift have detected a new Integrate. His identity has been confirmed as a known associate of one of the people Quinoa brought out to the Towers. And based on what we know of this fellow, I have a sneaking suspicion he’s not going to be the sort to toddle quietly off to an Enclave...”

Covered in grease, Rhianna Stonegate took a break from crawling inside the engine service compartment in the old Deuce skimmer. It was the replacement for the one the Nextus military had slagged in the Dry and even older than the destroyed one. But after what Nextus jokingly called its payment for services rendered and until the insurance on the old one came through, it was about all she could afford. It needed a lot of work, but before she could even get started the antiquated turbine powerplant needed ripping out, along with its fuel tanks. Kaylee had already designed the replacement sarium battery pack. With the new tech replacing the old, they’d nearly double the classic skimmer’s cargo space and triple its lifting capacity.

She rested beneath the behemoth turbine, unwilling to squeeze herself through the tight space to get out again. The ceiling-mounted crane had the old turbine in its firm grasp, but the corroded mounting bolts needed a little nanolathe help to release before it could come out. *:Sat in the middle of a Dry Ocean junkyard for forty years and still managed to rust solid. I’m going to have to just cut these mounts,:* she sent to Kaylee.

:Company, Rhianna,: her RIDE replied through Rhianna’s implant, sending a camera feed along with her voice.

“Hello the garage! Hello!” Myla Wilson’s voice came from the entrance.

"I'm over here, Myla!" Rhianna shouted back, folding her arms under her bosom. She heard the sound of boots on the skimmer's stubby wings. The fennec-eared woman looked inside the engine compartment. Rhianna smiled warmly. "You're looking well. Qixi treating you right?"

"She's going to start my training tomorrow. I just got into town today," the former Nextus officer said. She was holding a cardboard box under her arm. "I'm just sorry I wasn't here for your crossing-over party, but... I've been busy. Here, I have the traditional gift from a born-woman to a crossed-over one."

"I'll add it to the dozen or so other boxes of tampons I'll never use," Rhianna said good-naturedly. They were mostly gifts from friendly, good-humored customers. From the other crossriders, a year's worth of "No Periods, Period" nano-treatments made them unnecessary, but tradition was tradition. Happily, Zharus being what it was, she could always re-gift them to other crossriders later. There was a running joke that only a couple of thousand boxes of tampons had been fabbed on Zharus in the last thirty years, and they all just kept getting passed around. "Do you need a place to live?"

"You offering?" the former Nextus officer asked eagerly. She was about the same height as Rhianna, with a slightly slimmer build, and sand-colored hair that matched her fennec RIDE, Sophie. The huge fox padded in behind her with the mechanic's tawny lynx, Kaylee. "I guess I need one for a while. I don't want to impose."

"No problem at all, Myla. After what we've been through it's the right thing to do." Deciding there was no help for it, Rhianna squeezed herself between the turbine and the edge of the open compartment. Three weeks ago this would have been no problem. But then she hadn't been the full-figured woman she now was. She endured the scrape-and-squeeze with only a little grimace. A little grease-b-gone nanite lotion cleaned her hands, then she had her jumpsuit go through a self-cleaning cycle as well. The grease simply sloughed off, carried into the garage's recycling drain.

Kaylee padded up next to her and gave her now-clean partner an affectionate headbump underneath her breasts. "I can still bring those in a cup size if you want," she said. "I sort of got carried away."

"No, I'm fine with them this way. There's just all these little things that really nag at me. After a while it's always the tiny differences you notice more. At any rate, I'm glad I live in Uplift and not, oh, Sturmhaven, Burnside, Nuevo San Antonio—"

"Or Nextus," Myla added matter-of-factly, folding her arms across her chest, giving the newly-female mechanic an appraising look. "They look good on you, Rhianna. Kaylee did an expert job on the bio-sculpt. The combat nannies I gave you might have helped with that, I hope."

"No maybes there. Made the whole process smooth," Kaylee added. She and Sophie looked like they were deep in conversation in the sideband communication the RIDEs had access to. The way the fennec mech's huge ears were drooping the RIDE looked very depressed. "Partner, I'm going to take Sophie here up to see Shelley. When they discharged her the Service took a chainsaw to her memory banks when they needed a scalpel. Almost worse than they did with me. She needs a defragment and some reconstruction."

"You don't need to ask, Kaylee. Go ahead," Rhianna said.

"I can't pay for that," Myla said, alarmed. "I can barely afford to keep myself fed and Sophie's batteries charged until I get my first paycheck, and Qixi gave me half of *that* for a loan at ten percent interest."

“Look, don’t worry about us getting paid. The nice thing about being your own boss is that you can choose to use your Mad Skillz *pro bono* if you feel like it. And I know how much it cost you for you to buy Sophie from your former bosses.” Rhianna knew this would be the case. The circumstances around Myla losing her MRS commission were harrowing and complicated. A couple missives from Myla had hinted at something akin to a procedural Court Martial and dishonorable discharge.

Myla and her partner radiated desperation. The RIDE emancipation organization Rhianna had recommended hadn’t completely paid the difference of Sophie’s purchase price from what Myla had already saved. “Her generosity only stretched so far,” Myla grumbled. “Why do you think I jumped at your offer?”

“Yeah. That’s the Qixi Wolfwood we all know and love,” Kaylee said dryly. “She stiffed us on that job offer she gave us, you know. She wanted too much—a seventy-thirty split in *her* favor. Yeah, right! Rhianna should’ve sent her a bill for the fix to that sub.

“If you’re hungry there’s a Proximan seafood place at the food court down the street. We were just about to head to lunch, in fact.” She looked appraisingly at Rhianna. “You need a break, boss,” the mecha lynx said pointedly. “Stress, stress, stress all the time isn’t good for a new woman’s healthy homeostasis.”

Ever since their first Active-mode Fuse—the one that had made Ryan into Rhianna—the two of them were more closely linked than ever, with Kaylee monitoring her partner’s vital signs a little too close for comfort. “Yes, mother,” she said, tossing a rag at the cat. She looked back at Myla. “Feel like a short skimmer trip? I don’t feel like walking. Kaylee?”

“Sure, boss. Back in a few.” Kaylee took Myla’s partner to Shelley’s part of the garage.

“I’m not interrupting anything, am I?” Myla asked. “Skimmers or RIDEs that need fixing?”

“I had the afternoon off anyway for this salvage skimmer project of mine. Shelley’s fully bought in now, herself. But I’m boring you with details. As soon as my kitty gets back, food, food, food.” Rhianna rubbed her hands together, provoking a bark of laughter from Myla. “What?”

The fennec-eared woman covered her mouth. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. It’s just that with that feline nose and tufted ears of yours, you’re *adorable* when you do that. You should hear what you sound like.”

I know what I sound like, and I don’t like it much, Rhianna thought, looking at Kaylee as she returned. The lynx padded into the center of the garage, then unfolded into a small ex-military skimmer-cycle in desert camouflage. Unlike many RIDEs, due to Kaylee’s thirty-year age her vehicle form looked much less animal-like aside from the catseye headlights. She was one of the first RIDEs produced for the Nextus military.

“Okay, now I’m *sure* Kaylee was my aunt’s partner when she was in the Service,” Myla said, eyes widening, voice heavy with nostalgia. “Do you remember me at all, Kaylee?”

“I... don’t know, Myla. My early memory blocks are still pretty scrambled. Not even Shelley’s been able to recover all of them. I think your aunt and I were involved in some pretty high-level stuff back then,” the skimmer-mode RIDE said.

The former officer nodded, fully immersed in her memories now. “That fits with what I know about her. She—she and *you*, I mean—had spent time in the regular Army

and then the MRS. It's just that I'm a little disappointed they even excised the time Aunt Anny took me for ice cream on you. Do you still have those neat old-style helmet projectors?"

"She does, but only because I restored them. She was pretty parted out when I got her," Rhianna said, feeling some nostalgia herself, resting one hand on Kaylee's handlebars. The RI had been traumatized by something she had no memory of, just the emotional echoes. "Not even her shell, no paws, no tail. Missing a lot of critical parts. I don't know *what* could have happened that turned her into a RIDE they cannibalized for parts without transferring her RI core to a new body. Nextus folks don't normally waste experienced workers like that, human or not. There's got to be a story there, but Kaylee doesn't remember."

Myla looked thoughtful. "You know, why don't we get in touch with my Aunt Anny later? Would you like that, Kaylee?"

The RIDE hesitated a little. "Sure. I'd like that. Thanks."

Rhianna mounted, Myla squeezing behind her on the pillion seat, putting her arms around the mechanic's waist. Myla Wilson had a child-like smile on her face, making Rhianna break into a grin also. She manually toggled Kaylee's lifters; the antigrav started with a thunderous growl as the skimmer rose a meter over the garage floor. The sound quickly faded as the lifters spun up.

"Those aren't her original lifters, are they?" Myla asked as the noise quieted. "The old ones did that, but..."

"Simulated for authenticity," Kaylee said cheerfully. "Aeroshell up, and don't forget your helmets, ladies." The emitters on the instrument panel flickered, materializing an old-fashioned open-faced MRS helmet—minus the logo—on each of them. The helmets themselves were symbolic more than anything. Open skimmers had long used hardlight shields to protect their riders from the elements and collisions. Since Kaylee could reach almost four hundred kilometers per hour they were a necessity. At speed a rider wouldn't feel so much as a light breeze. "Nice to see a smile on your face, Myla," the RIDE continued.

"I just can't help it," Myla said. "I feel like a little girl again."

"Then what say we skip lunch and go right to the ice cream?" Rhianna suggested on a hunch. "I know this great place downtown that sells the real stuff. Imported Lurasian milk from the Grand Valley. That is, if 'mother' here approves." She tapped Kaylee's engine compartment with the side of her boot.

"Just this once," Kaylee said in her best motherly tone. *:Let's take the long way around on our way back. Our new arrival needs a tour,:* she said to Rhianna privately. *:Great idea!:*

The polis of Uplift had grown organically from a research outpost founded by Dr. Roberto Martinez, a Lurasian geologist who had made the study of the Dry Ocean his life's work. Martinez hadn't worked alone, always having a group of fellow researchers and graduate students with him. Even that early on the nascent city had a hardlight dome for climate control and protecting against solar storms. The supercontinent's thin-to-nonexistent magnetic field left it vulnerable to coronal mass ejections, leaving radio communication unviable. The Dome had changed all that, deserving the capital letter it got, and had simply been expanded upon as the city grew.

The ice cream place was in Bifrost Park, where the last functioning example of the original house-sized Dome emitters sat at the center, surrounded by trees,

fountains, and grass. Unlike modern units, this one projected what the Tourism Board called a “Fountain of Light” that really lived up to the claim. It was a sparkling, shifting rainbow fountain that rose three kilometers to reinforce the Dome itself. The hemispherical emitter had four crystalline prongs on the top from which the hardlight fountain sprang. The park was busy, full of children, local workers, Walker-mode RIDES, and Fused people. Myla got a plain vanilla cone while Rhianna Fused with Kaylee and got a Fuser-sized three-scoop bowl of Death by Chocolate.

“She’s a very naughty girl,” Kaylee said between sandy-tongue licks. “But she’s got the best taste buds around.”

“These combat nannies need an extra helping of chocolate for proper operation. It’s what they like best,” Rhianna added, smirking with Kaylee’s feline lips.

Myla laughed, having licked her own ice cream down the the waffle cone.

“Thanks for this. I really needed some cheering up. The last three weeks have been just sheer *hell*. And... hey! Just got a call. Sophie’s on her way, says not to leave her out of the ice cream party. She sounds a lot better, too. This partner of yours works fast.”

“Well, when she gets here, do you fancy a skimmer tour around your new home? We’re not quite as organized as Nextus in our layout. We’re more like Old Boston on Earth.”

“Never been to Earth,” Myla said. She bit into the cone, chewed, then swallowed. “I’d love to visit someday, but it’s still a couple year’s round trip travel. Then I’d have to spend another year touring the planet to make it worth it. Tiny planet, though. No wonder humans had to leave it.”

“Lord knows I haven’t looked back,” Rhianna said. “It’s just a husk now, even after maybe half the peak population left for the Colonies over the past three centuries. There was some kind of controversy about ‘terraforming’ the homeworld in the UE Senate about the time I left—what, almost eight years ago now? Including the time on the ship. You can imagine the uproar over even suggesting it.”

“Well, that’s why Earth sent so many people here, wasn’t it? We were very far away, especially at sublight speeds, but good old Zharus didn’t need much terraforming, is biochemically compatible, and has no native aliens so there’s no moral dilemma. Perfect, except for distance. That’s why we have over three *billion* here and the other eight Colonies combined just barely match us. They kept sending fleet after fleet even before Landing!”

Rhianna was delighted to find someone as interested in her new homeworld’s history as she was. The whole story was incredible. A habitable super-Earth almost twenty light-years from the origin world found by a probe moving at half the speed of light. The first Colonization Fleet had almost ten million people in coldsleep on a journey of thirty-five years at sublight—with even larger fleets sent at five-year intervals—a huge risk that had paid off handsomely for crowded Earth and the Zharusians themselves.

Sophie announced her arrival by doing a boosted forward-flip while changing into Walker form and landing softly in front of her partner. Myla embraced her. “That’s my girl! Glad you’re feeling better.”

“Oh, *so much*,” the mecha fennec said, her hardlight fur almost twitching with excitement and relief. “Rochelle is soooo good! The holes are still there, but I feel like myself again. Can we Fuse up and get another ice cream? I can almost *taste* it.” She sniffed Rhianna-Kaylee’s nearly empty bowl. “And I’ll have what she’s having.”

Their first stop after ice cream was Martinez Memorial University, which contained the original tiny research station near the edge of the continental shelf, now part of a larger museum to Martinez's work and Dry Ocean mining. Until someone finally made qubitite into a very valuable commodity, it was just a research station. The sarium batteries and RI cores that now underpinned the vehicle and RIDE technology on Zharus were *made* from it. Since the Q Rush, starting in 112 After Landing, the modern city exploded from an outpost of a few hundred academics, engineers, prospectors, and support staff to its current form.

Before she knew it, Rhianna had new friends—two, really, counting Sophie. She hadn't expected this on meeting the brusque Nextus tax agent for that desert salvage job—it felt like years ago now, not just a few weeks—but there was actually a warm personality beneath the bureaucratic shell. An afternoon of sightseeing and trying to cheer up a woman who had recently had so much stress and heartbreak made Rhianna feel good. Whether that was new feminine empathy or just being a good person didn't really matter. They did do a few stereotypically girly activities like linger in a few jewelry shops, check out a couple clothing stores, and hang out in the city's more touristy spots where people who *were* from Earth could gawk at their RIDEs and themselves when Fused.

Uplift was a city of over fifteen million, counting the suburbs in their own smaller climate domes. It was actually one of the smallest polities on Gondwana because it was a little more expensive than most, even Nextus. The Dome Maintenance Tax accounted for that, but the pleasant climate it created was worth every penny-unit, in the mechanic's view. Seen from space there were multiple Domes, connected together like so many soap bubbles tens-of-kilometers wide aligned north-south between the mountains and the drop off into the Dry Ocean proper.

Their last activity after an afternoon of fun was a ride along the Sunset Skimmerway just outside the Dome. They flew along side-by-side as the sun went down over the Dry Ocean hardpan and the one-kilometer drop just to their right. Kaylee had some trouble keeping up with the much newer fennec RIDE, but put up a good fight.

:You know, I think I do remember you now, Myla,: Kaylee sent to her.

:Oh? That's good to hear! What do you remember?: she replied.

The mecha lynx stayed silent while sharing the memory with her rider, who was trying not to laugh. "Sure you want to know?" Rhianna said over laser link.

"Do I? Yes!"

:You probably don't remember on purpose. It was your very first ride. You were maybe five or six years old. When your aunt got up to about one-fifty, you, uh... peed your pants.:

The silence was golden. Then Myla laughed so loudly Rhianna had to turn her volume down.

Rhianna received a text message waiting for her as they re-entered the Dome. Radio worked just fine on the inside. *:Hm. Haven't heard from Zane in a while.:* she thought.

:He's been busy running one of the largest mining companies on Zharus,: Kaylee said. *:I don't think he even knows you crossed over, unless he's heard something in the local rumor mill.:*

:I've been meaning to tell him and Terry about what happened this summer. I still can't believe it myself,: Rhianna replied.

The message simply read: *Can I meet you at the garage after hours?*

“That’s funny,” Rhianna said, looking again. “The signature says it’s sent from his personal commpad. He usually sends these through Terry’s net link.”

“Who’s this you’re talking about?” Myla asked.

“Zane Brubeck. Owns a big mining company. Headquartered in that ten-story building you can see from the garage,” Kaylee said, pointing at it. The building itself was always open. Running the company was a 30/6 job and the employees set their own schedules. Some people never adapted to the planet’s 30-hour day.

“Wait, *that* Brubeck?” Myla said, incredulous. “The one that ripped his business out of Nextus a few months ago, after some of my colleagues all got bonuses from his paying more back taxes in one lump sum than an entire year’s worth? The one who delivered half of his own Board of Directors to the Marshals via an arranged bodyjacking? *That* one?”

“Bet you were really sorry to lose his company,” Rhianna said as they approached the Garage.

“Administration offered him all sorts of tax breaks to make sure Brubeck Mining stayed in Nextus, but he had nothing of it. Scuttlebutt is he even broke off ties with his own *sister* over it—she’s an Admin ‘crat in the Second Tier mining relations department.” Myla shook her head. “From what I heard, Clint Brubeck was the same kind of no-nonsense, salt-of-the-earth kind of guy his son apparently is. Thing is, Clint always paid his taxes. We never needed to visit him. That’s what made the company Board’s embezzlement so shocking. Probably explains why they were never audited either, come to think of it.”

:Now Zane’s being all mysterious and mum about something. I’ll ping him back that the door will be open for him. We’ve got his biometric key,: Kaylee said. There was a short pause. *:Er... nevermind. He said he’d rather not use biometrics.:*

“Does he think someone’s after him again?” Rhianna wondered.

:We’ll find out in a sec. Home and home.: It was just before 2600 hours. There were still four hours left in the day, but Uplift was far enough north to get long daylight hours in summer. Sunset was barely past. Streetlights near the Garage cast pools of yellowish light around them, with a few neon signs from open restaurants and shops advertising their wares and services. Some wag had stuck a pink hardlight sign that said “Cross” over the “Free” part of “Freeriders Garage”. Rhianna hadn’t bothered to take it down yet because she still found it amusing. Between herself and her partner Rochelle Seaford (formerly Roger) it was pretty much spot-on.

The duo went to the loading dock around back where large deliveries were made. This was where, months ago, Zane had delivered his father’s non-functioning Intelligent Drive Extender (IDE), Chauncy, for Rhianna to work on. She saw the Fused tiger sitting on the edge of the loading dock next to his silver non-transforming skimmer, illuminated by the hardlight sign overhead.

He jumped up as soon as he saw them. “Rya—” He paused, then blinked. “... Ryan?” His voice sounded slightly off, but Rhianna couldn’t quite put her finger on it.

“‘Rhianna’ now. Long story. What’s going on?”

“You finally went Active? That’s *great!* K-Sp—ah, Kaylee, you must be so happy!” He grinned at her.

:His voice is... odd. It’s like Terry’s and Zane’s got stuck in a blender. An’ he almost called me ‘K-Spared’. That’s ‘verry Terry.: Kaylee said, switching directly from

Skimmer to Fuser mode. Myla did the same thing with Sophie, but remained silent.

“It’s certainly a far cry from that time back in the garage...you remember? Right after Roger had gotten you booting, but hadn’t noticed you weren’t shutting down properly...”

Kaylee nodded, involuntarily recalling a set of memories she’d carefully kept hidden from Rhianna until now. Inside their shared feline shell, Rhianna grimaced, feeling the RI’s dance with near-insanity for the first time. It brought a lump to her throat.

Back when Ryan had first been rebuilding Kaylee, Terry had been racked up right next to her in the garage—it had been a lot smaller back then—halfway through the re-skinning that kid had gone into hock to pay for. She hadn’t had a working vocoder at that point, and hadn’t been able to tell anyone she wasn’t shutting down properly when they stopped work on her for the night. But Terry had noticed—and though his fetters wouldn’t let him say anything aloud, either, he could still talk to her on the RIDE-only machine-language sidebands. And they talked for hours.

She’d taken to calling herself “K-Spared” at that point—a pun on K Squared, the fact that she’d been used for spare parts, and the fact that she’d then been spared from being junked by Ryan buying her. She could hear everything that went on around her. She knew Ryan had no idea yet she was female, and she was scared, so desperately scared, that when he found out he wouldn’t want her anymore. *:You can’t tell him!:* she’d insisted to Terry, on the edge of hysteria. *:Promise me you won’t tell him!:*

:I promise,: Terry had said calmly. *:Not like I can tell them anything anyway, or I’d have told them two nights ago you weren’t shutting down properly. But I don’t think you’ve got anything to worry about. Ryan doesn’t strike me as the kind of person who’d do something like that. Trust the man.:*

Not long after that, Roger had finally noticed Kaylee’s problem, cursed himself for over nine thousand different kinds of idiot, and spent three long days finalizing the personality defragment that recovered Kaylee’s personality and sanity to the greatest extent possible. (He’d gone entirely without sleep during that time save for a few long-compile-time naps, and had been a bit less than rational himself by the time he’d finished.) Of course, by then Terry had been picked up by the kid, and she’d heard later that he’d been repossessed, so he hadn’t gotten to learn the end of the story until the time a few months back when they’d caught up again. He’d been very concerned to hear that she was still going Passive when they Fused—more so than he’d let on to Zane or Ryan at the time. But she’d insisted she was happy with their partnership, and so Terry had let it be.

Rhianna was amazed, after integrating all these memories, to find that only about three seconds had passed. *:I told you Active Fusing was amazing, didn’t I?:* Kaylee said, her own inner voice a little unsteady itself from the recollection.

The new woman embraced her partner in virtual space. *:I’m so, so sorry I didn’t do it sooner, Kaylee. What’s going on with Zane and Terry? I’m getting some oddly familiar readings from your sensors. That’s a hardlight shell he’s wearing, but not really a very good one.:*

Kaylee agreed. *:I don’t know what’s going on, but we’re not in Laurasia anymore, Rhianna:*

“Er...I’m sorry,” Zane said. “I didn’t mean to bring up bad memories. I’d just... Terry had just been so worried about you.” He stepped forward and hugged Kaylee and

Rhianna. “I’m so glad you’re okay.”

The Fused feline duo received a message and some telemetry from Sophie. *:He’s —they’re—Integrated,: the fennec declared. :I’ve still got a better sensor suite than you do despite what they removed, Kaylee. He’s doing a very clumsy job—in my view—of maintaining it. It must have just happened. Must be taking a lot of concentration for him—them:*

:Lordy Lord Lordy,: Kaylee said, virtually facepaw-ing. :That explains a lot. I keep trying to connect to Terry and I get nothing. He’s not radiating any comm signals either. It’s like he’s a hole in the network. That explains why he used a comppad for the text.:

:He’s obviously here for your help,: Myla added.

Rhianna took a deep breath. “Okay, Zane—and Terry. Or should I say ‘Zane slash Terry’? We’ve figured it out. Come inside.” *:And Kaylee? Ping Rochelle. She’s going to want to know about this.:*

Zane followed the two Fusers into the garage under Rhianna’s home, and as soon as the door closed behind them he seemed to lose half a meter of height and twenty kilos or so of bulk. He resembled a slightly-sleeker, more human-scaled version of their previous tiger-man Fuser form, with the addition of round hardlight lenses inset into his fur in a regular pattern that followed his black stripes—actual-not-hardlight fur no less. He wore a pair of shorts for modesty, but was otherwise as naked as his Fuser form had been. “So, uh, hi,” he said.

Before Rhianna could reply, Rochelle practically fell down the stairs in a rush, her curtain of hair (peach-colored today) swirling around her. Rhianna marveled at the way that girl could make even stumbling and falling look erotic. It was as if the picture only required someone at the bottom of the stairs to catch her and sweep her up into a passionate embrace. For that matter, given Rochelle’s past preferences, the catcher could very well be she—Rhianna shook her head to clear it and muttered dark imprecations at whoever had designed Uncia’s fuser nanos.

“Well, I don’t have an examination table like a doctor’s office, so can you have a seat over near the diagnostic station, Zane? Zane-and-Terry? Uh, ZaneTerry? What should we call you?” Rhianna said, gesturing politely.

“Call me whatever you want, just don’t call me late for dinner,” Zane said tiredly. “Speaking of which, hey, RIDE-safe power outlet. Cool.” He reached down and held his right wrist against the socket for a moment. The lights flickered and dimmed for just a second, then Zane stood up straighter. “Wow, that’s better than coffee.” He sat down in the proffered seat, glancing bemusedly at his wrists. The power socket was right where he would have worn a watch if he’d worn it right-handed. There was another socket of a different design in the same place on his left wrist.

“Well, isn’t *that* interesting?” Myla said. “Quinoa just used induction, didn’t she? I guess some of them have power plugs too.”

Once she had her diagnostic gear on, Rhianna looked almost like a feline mad scientist about to do some work. The nanolathe gloves were rather intimidating, but most of her “patients” never complained. A backpack full of supplementary sensors, nanolathe fabber matter and extra processing power completed the look. “I’m not sure where to start. You don’t have any standard diagnostic data ports any more.”

“You don’t seem too surprised at what you see,” Zane said, still in that odd

mixture of Zane's and Terry's inflections. It was almost as if Zane was trying to impersonate Terry's voice, or Terry trying to impersonate Zane's. The faint Nextus-upper-crust accent Zane had mingled oddly but pleasantly with Terry's street cant.

"I had this Dry Ocean salvage job a few weeks ago. That's how I met Myla here and it's why I'm 'Rhianna' now. That reminds me. Zane Brubeck, Myla Wilson, formerly of the Nextus Materiel Recovery Service."

"Pleased to meet you, Miss Wilson," Zane said, extending a handpaw. The fennec-suited woman took it carefully. "You were a revenuer? My Dad actually liked you guys. Loved watching you go after some of his tax-dodging 'friends'. Though I'm kinda confused you ended up arresting *Joe Steader* of all people. The man who gave the whole planet a pop culture transplant..."

"I can tell you the MRS was more than a little confused and suspicious of the evidence, but we were obligated to follow through with it. Everybody loves Crazy Joe, right? Though given something Quinoa said back at the Towers, I gather there's more to that affair than meets the eye. That little girl..." Myla said. "Well, I'm still recovering from a few weeks of debriefings and mustering out. I'm sure Rhianna's story will cover all the important parts."

The lynx nodded. "So why don't I tell you about it while I try and figure out what makes you tick? Shelley, do you have anything that can plug in that dataport of his?" Rhianna flexed her fingers like a pianist warming up.

Rochelle tossed her head, hair flowing back out of her face in slight slow motion. She sighed and ran a hand through it, and it pulled itself back into one of those twisted-up bun styles whose sole purpose is to come undone in shampoo commercials. "There, that will buy me some time. Um...let me see. I think that's going to need a custom design. We could use nano-memory paste to explore it and determine what connectors it has. That's more your department than mine, though."

Rhianna extended a nanolathe tip from her right index finger, then approached Zane. "Let me know if this hurts or anything. I don't know how this port of yours is connected to the rest of you. I don't know a hell of a lot here, in fact. It's just going to be guesswork and some very detailed I/O analysis."

"You probably know more than I do." Zane shook his head. "This is all new to me. I woke up this morning in a puddle of silver snot, with Terry inside my mind. Part of my mind."

Myla looked pained at Zane's description. Rhianna patted her Fused shoulder after injecting the paste. The foxy duo decided to de-Fuse. "Where's your living room? I don't think I'm up for this."

"Upstairs, turn left. Go relax, okay?" Rhianna said, putting her handpaw on Myla's now-human shoulder. "Use my bedroom if you want to sleep, there's clean sheets in the closet. I've got a cot down here, since this is our personal garage."

"Thank you. I had a very nice afternoon sightseeing, Rhianna, Kaylee. Thanks for the warm welcome. And... nice meeting you, Mr. Brubeck."

Zane frowned. "Um...same to you, Miss Wilson. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you."

"I know, Mr. Brubeck. We just need a few. Come on, Sophie," Myla said. The pair of them headed up the stairs Rochelle had nearly fallen down.

Rhianna watched them go, then turned back to Zane. "Rochelle's already heard this, but let Kaylee and me tell you a little story about a Dry Ocean salvage job gone

sour, a Nextus Military dragon, a pack of four stingy wolves, a falcon, a sphinx, and a dinosaur named Eduard.”

The analysis took some time—as did the story. The nano-probe reported a very complex, utterly non-standard connector shape and contact points that included significant traces of pure qubitite and neodymium. Once she felt she had enough data she fed it to the shop’s fabber to work on. The first prototype was ready in minutes.

When Rhianna’s story was finished, Zane whistled. “Wow. Those Enclave jerks sound like real prizes. And Quinoa Steader? Damn, who’d have thought it? I remember Dad and Joe used to pal around, though I never ran into Quinoa much that I can recall. My sisters and I weren’t really the kind of people she wanted as friends. Too grounded in reality, I suppose. Earthy, as Dad would’ve said. She always had her head in the clouds. Pretty much like her uncle.”

“Poor Myla kept watch on that girl for two years in a pony RIDE that couldn’t transform.” Rhianna shuddered. She picked up the prototype connector from the output tray. “Let me see if this works.”

“Then it’ll be *my* turn.” Rochelle rubbed her hands together and cackled evilly, a femme fatale in custom-fitted coveralls. Zane grinned appreciatively at her.

“Ready for this?” the lynx asked. At Zane’s nod, she plugged it into the socket on his left wrist. She got absolutely nothing out of the datastream—not even the same quantum-encrypted gibberish Quinoa’s had. “Anything at all, Zane?”

“Nothing. Silence,” the Integrate tiger replied.

Grumbling, Rhianna unplugged the offending piece of hardware, then tossed it back into the fabber’s recycling receptacle. “Try, try again. I must’ve missed some contacts on the first scan.”

Rochelle sighed. “Might not be my turn for a while.”

“I spent the day down at the library, running searches on Integrates and Integration. With a keyboard.” Zane rolled his eyes. “Didn’t find a lot of solid information. In fact, I think I learned more from what you just told me than I did all day there. So this DIN thing is going to let me hook up to the net again?”

“It basically allowed Quinoa to control Qixi’s suborbital like it was a remote controlled skimmer you buy at a toy store,” Rhianna said. “Kaylee, maybe if we...” She trailed off as she switched over to subvocal communication.

“I have a theory that Integrates’ bodies are sort of natural supercomputers,” Rochelle said as her business partner got more involved in her work. “All that qubitite can be locked in place in the most optimal configuration, without having to worry about getting disrupted every time you mode switch. If that’s true...” She shook her head. “What couldn’t they do? Apart from, well, talk to the ‘net, anyway.”

Zane whistled. “Now I’m really looking forward to playing with my new toy.”

“Mm,” Rhianna said thoughtfully, fiddling with her scan, showing the same kind of focus on her work as she had on Chauncey’s rebuild.

Zane watched her work for a moment, and the silence stretched out into a minute. “Listen. It’s...not what you think it’s like. At least, not what it must have been like for Burke.”

“That was... horrible. I can’t really think of it without shivers.” Rhianna hugged herself and shook a little.

“For us, it was just...the logical next step. I mean, you know we were basically 30/6 Fused the last few months, right?” He chuckled. “I don’t know if you knew, but

half the time we ever said anything, it was really Terry using Zane's voice." He waited to see if anyone looked shocked, then shrugged and continued.

"Crazy thing is, I—Zane, that is—didn't really know it either, 'til today when we did a little mental review. I'm sure you've known people who finished each others' thoughts. Well, we *started* and finished each other's thoughts. And we were happy that way. From there...well, Integration wasn't that far away."

"Silly question I guess, but are you *still* happy?" Rhianna asked. It could have been Kaylee asking the question, or both of them at once. Ironic, given the situation and the question. Zane had seen the recording of Flint-Burke's forced-Integration on a video screen.

Zane nodded. "I am. I'd say 'we are' but really we're an 'I' right now. If you want, I can split him out in my head and both sides of me can say it for themselves. Of course, you'd only have my word for it that we really were, rather than me just 'doing' our voices. But if that doohickey you're making works, I can show you our memories of it sometime, if you want."

"I... we don't know if we could follow through with that," Rhianna said. "That's actually more frightening than watching it being done to someone and seeing the results."

"Yeah, we weren't exactly keen on the idea either, just after we met," Zane said. "Even right up to the end, we were both kind of scared when it became obvious it was going to happen, but we also knew we were on the edge of something wonderful. I know this probably sounds kinda creepy, K, but if you ever Integrate naturally, I think you'll be ready for it by the time it happens. And if you're not ready, you just won't Integrate."

"Then it won't be for a long while," Rhianna said. "Kaylee and I just started Active Fuse."

Rochelle spoke up again. "Is it really worth it? You wouldn't ever go back?"

Zane nodded to her. "It's early to tell, but...I think so. I guess I can't say I have *no* regrets. It's a little sad to know I'm never going to look over and see that gorgeous tiger or that handsome young man again except in my memories. But if I had the choice of giving it up...well, it would still be giving up a lot. I guess it's never easy being born, and it doesn't get any easier the second time."

Watching Rhianna silently, carefully, methodically working through a problem was in some ways a test of Zane's patience. She hardly said a word, moving between nanoprobe and a multi-colored 3D hardlight representation of the dataport on his left wrist.

Kaylee was used to this. It was how her partner worked. Now that they were actively Fused, it was even easier to tell what she wanted, so the RIDE helped nudge it along. Rhianna's thought process had no words—just images, equations, even the idle scribbles of an architect considering a problem then throwing the mental paper away, unsatisfied. Sometimes they barely moved, fully focused.

"Wish she'd be a little more...demonstrative. I never know what she's thinking of," Rochelle said. She watched the slow refinement of the prototype's image drawn from her simulations. It had already been taken apart and put back together several times, with different combinations of materials. "Gotta love the results, though."

It took six hours, as many physical prototypes, and a hundred times that many simulated. It wasn't just the *shape* of the connector, it was what it was made out of. Aside from the actual physical versions she had Rochelle funnel the possibilities into her

simulation software, ruling out most of the standard materials. With each new prototype more and more data flowed down the wire. No computer in the diagnostic kit could make sense of it, but at least it was coming.

The final prototype came out of the fabber at three in the morning. “Want to know the gory details? You won’t believe what this is made out of,” Rhianna asked. “I double-checked the math myself. You don’t want to know that much, though.”

Zane nodded. “Shoot.”

“It’s layers of graphene and qubitite salted with more neodymium and even some nanoscale sarium battery bits, all in very precise locations—down to the angstrom. If this really does work—and I’m sure it will this time—I’ve got the design and can fab more pretty easily. But it’s not cheap. I think I went through about ten thousand *mu* of materials and fabber time just making this one.”

Zane sighed theatrically. “Guess I won’t be ordering another diamond-studded swimming pool this week.”

“Your home fabber should be able to make spares, too, once you have the materials. If this one doesn’t work I’ll eat my hat.” Rhianna plugged him in and got the expected strong but unintelligible data flow. Then she stretched and yawned, de-Fusing from Kaylee in the process. “All yours, Shelley. I need some sweet tea. Be back down after I’ve cleaned up a bit. I’m not going to bed until I see how this turns out.”

“Yay, my turn!” Rochelle ran her hands through her hair, shaking it out and letting it fall into place around her again as Zane watched in clear appreciation. She whipped out a pair of interface specs, then paused in the process of putting them on. “Oh. Rhianna—before you go for drinks, I need to ask you something. Something serious.”

Rhianna blinked. “Buh?” she asked tiredly. Now that the task was finished her mind was already going into full-relaxation safe mode.

“You know my normal procedure for working through an unknown involves lots of net searching, right? I never know what’s going to give me some clue I need to break through.”

“All right...?” Rhianna said.

“Thing is, I’ve been thinking ‘bout this,” Rochelle said. “And if I were an Integrate, I’d be monitoring net searches for any suspicious activity relating to Integrate—since probably the first thing any new Intie’s gonna do is try to google his condition, and I expect that’s one of the big ways they look for their poor confused brand new little lost lambs.”

“Lambs, tigers, deer, bears, oh my! I get it.”

“Now I’m gonna bounce through every proxy server, anonymizer, and relay this side of Laurasia, but if these Integrates are really All That, it’ll probably just make them more interested. And that’s not the worst part.”

She paused, waiting for a reaction, but only encountered Rhianna’s blank, tired stare, shrugged, and went on. “If their community’s as small as it sounds, they’ve probably all heard about Quinoa’s little furball last month, and who was there, and it’s not exactly a secret where you-all live and work and stuff. So when they notice every fragment of Intie lore on the net is being sucked down to *here*... well.” She shrugged. “I’ll try to go it without if you’d rather. Up to you.” She nodded to Zane. “And you, of course.”

Rhianna thought about that, coming out of “safe mode” for a while. “Zane, you

already did a lot of searching at the library, didn't you?"

"Yeah. I didn't *see* anyone odd, but...maybe the place was too public. Or, well..." Zane shrugged. "Have *you* seen any invisible four meter dinosaurs around lately?"

"And there is kind of an important little difference between a public library and a certain private garage," Rochelle pointed out.

The cat-nosed woman looked thoughtful, rubbing her nose, then peered at the power plug Zane had used to recharge. Rhianna had a very flat expression Rochelle knew all too well, even on her new face.

It was the expression that the inevitable was going to happen, so there was no reason to delay it. "They probably already know you're here. The way the lights flickered when you recharged like that... Another thing they look for. A new Intie's power drain on the grid." She sighed deeply. "I need one of my non-sleeping pills and I'll think more clearly. I need some food, too." The woman sniffed herself. "And a shower."

"She always gets cranky after a long session like that," Kaylee explained as her partner retreated up the stairs at a clip. "Didn't do that as a man, though. Hunh. Hormones, what can you do?"

"So I guess that was a 'go ahead, burn up the net all you want,' right?" Rochelle said. "Didn't sound like a no, anyway."

"For my part, I'm okay with it," Zane said. "The sooner I get a DIN, the sooner I can pull my weight if they do show up. Wonder what 'DIN' stands for, anyway?"

Rochelle nodded. She opened her interface specs with a flick of her wrist and put them on, then waved at the arrangement of monitors and workstations nearby to load her specialized programs into them. "Oh, Uncia, darling?" she called into the next room. "I might need you here in a few."

The snow leopard padded in and sat down nearby. "I live to serve!"

"Goody goody." Rochelle cracked her knuckles sexily. "Let's get to work."

As her rider got started, Uncia padded over to Kaylee and gave the older lynx an affectionate headbutt. "You're in a good mood, big sis."

The snow leopard was almost twice Kaylee's size in Walker mode. Kaylee returned the affection, purring up a storm. "It's been a *very* good day. One of the best since Rhianna and I went Active. I think she's finally settlin' in." The older, smaller RIDE padded over to a socket herself and extended a charging plug from her stubby tail. "Stripesy there had the right idea. Did so much high-speed skimming today I'm half down."

"I had a long sideband chat with Sophie. I like her. Introduced myself with a pounce and a good licking," the larger snow leopardess mecha said. "I just *love* her lickable ears!"

"I'm sure she just *loved* that," Kaylee said dryly, having been at the receiving end of that kind of grooming a number of times. It was hard to say no to that kind of *aggressive* affection from someone who (inexplicably) idolized you and was technically less than a year old.

Rochelle glanced over. "Okay, Un-hon? Time to light up the 'nets. Search package Alpha, subject: 'Integration' as it pertains to RIDEs. Weight it for relevance toward any appearances or uses of DIN interfaces. I'll be in there in a few minutes to see what you have for me."

The snow leopardess nodded. "Running the search protocols now. Rerouting through proxies and anonymizers. Found two terabytes of material so far. Five. Nine.

Sorting.” She sat on her haunches and started to scratch furiously behind one ear. “Why is data searching always so *itchy*?”

Rochelle slipped her hands into a pair of data-manipulation gloves and started augmenting her eye-flicks with gestures. She waved at a sensor unit on the ceiling and it swivelled around, orienting its cluster of tubular sensors on Zane like the barrel of some enormous cannon. She made a lifting gesture with her other hand, and it began to light up, with a faint bass undertone and rotate slowly. “Don’t worry, it’s harmless. Unless... you haven’t had any dental work recently, have you?”

“Er...” Zane said.

She grinned. “Juuuust kidding! Hmm...okay, recording brainwave patterns, cross-referencing timestamps with data reads from that data port...let’s see if we get anything interesting off the bat. Hmm...Fibonacci sequence maybe? No?” She shook her head. “Okay, run program ‘Enigma’. We’ll let it get started, and I’ll swap the process over to Uncia’s onboard hardware for more speed once I’ve reviewed the search results.”

Zane allowed her to do the scans, fascinated. He had never seen them work before. No wonder Chauncey had come out of the Garage in much better shape than the old IDE had come in. Rhianna, Kaylee, Rochelle, and Uncia all had great passion for their work that didn’t make it look like work at all. It was the kind of passion he wished more of his employees had. And it didn’t hurt, either, that Rochelle was perpetually gorgeous, and she practically *glowed* with the energy she threw into her work.

Of course, he knew *why* she was so gorgeous, and a part of him felt guilty at appreciating it so much. He knew the nanite infection had not been her decision, and she spent hours every week at Nextus Nano’s labs working on a cure. He rather hoped she found it. But in the meanwhile, guilt or not, he didn’t see the harm in enjoying the view.

A damp-haired Rhianna came back downstairs with a half liter mug of steaming hot tea and a plate of a half dozen toaster pastries, dressed in a blue terrycloth bathrobe a little too small for her, and especially not built for a woman’s curves. Not with that much exposed cleavage. “Do you still eat, Zane? After you plugged in like that...”

“I’m pretty sure I do. And I could go for some coffee right now, I think.”

The lynx-eared and -nosed woman looked at the plate of “food”, reconsidering her choice of sustenance. “Maybe you can get Shelley to make you some. She always gives me the evil eye when I suggest fabbing the stuff.”

“That’s because fabbed coffee is what Satan pees out when he goes to the toilet, Rhi!” Rochelle said. “I’m too busy here to make it, but I’ve got some of the real stuff in the kitchenette. Grab a K-cup out of the drawer and put it in the brewer, you know where it is.”

“In a sec. I’m going to order some real food from that all-night Proximan take-out. You know the one. Ah. Kaylee’s already ordered. Hope you like noodles and seafood stir fry. Be right back.” She left the room, then a minute later came back with a steaming mug of coffee. She handed it over to Zane and had a seat.

Rochelle stroked the air with her gloves, and began humming. The tune was recognizable, one of her favorite songs from the classical 20th century pop minstrels. After a while, she was singing under her breath. “I’m so tired I can hardly think, so I feel instead and let you loose inside my head...”

She spun around, then moved over to Uncia. “Cue up the most relevant search results, and all memories you got from Kaylee, Yvonne, and Sophie having to do with

Quinoa using her DIN and any scan data they got, then open up, please, hon!” Uncia Fused up over her, then the eight-foot snow leopardess turned back to the scans. Her body language was still unmistakably Rochelle, just with the addition of fur. Her tail swung wide as she half-danced in place. She waved a hand in the air and hardlight display panels blossomed in place behind it like time-lapse flowers opening.

“Let’s see, there’s a lot of shaky-cam footage here of rather blurry Integrate zapping things and blowing them up, or otherwise holding glowing doohickies.”

Rochelle threw different clips up on all the screens. “Geez. It’s been hundreds of years since they invented image stabilization. Why do we still get shaky-cam? Hm. And none of these images are particularly sharp, either. I’ll bet the Integrates are doing something to mess up the recording just enough that you can’t really identify them.” She tapped another screen. “And what’s this? Oh, cute. ‘Brown vs. Board of Education.’” She chuckled. “Snow kitty will have her little joke.” Uncia giggled. “I’ll keep looking...there’s got to be some clues here somewhere...”

“She’s in her manic stage right now,” Rhianna half-whispered to Zane. “Enjoy it while it lasts. In about ten minutes she’ll have cycled down to frustrated, and in half an hour she’ll be banging her head against the wall.”

“I’ll have you know I heard that!” Rochelle sang out, peering thoughtfully at the contents of the screens she’d opened and collapsing half of them. “I don’t make fun of *your* process, you know.”

“Hey, whatever works,” Zane said, grinning.

“Let’s pull that ‘Enigma’ process over here, Uncia darling, you’ve got some spare cycles,” Rochelle said. “And let’s see what happens if we switch to hexadecimal. Hmm...no, still doesn’t make sense. What if we try...” She trailed off, finally remembering to switch her dialogue to internal.

Over the next few hours, the pattern repeated several times. Sometimes Rochelle manically jumped, dashed, or danced around the private garage, fluffy tail threatening to knock over small objects or occasionally people. She would Fuse or de-Fuse seemingly at random, muttering instructions to Uncia as she examined her screens or interface specs again. Other times she stood in one spot, tail lashing, growling at a hardlight display or her glasses, *daring* them to show her what she thought she was seeing. And sometimes she did, indeed, stand in the corner banging her head against the wall and moaning, “Why, God, why?”

Early on during one of her business partner’s outbursts Rhianna pointed at a poster on the wall that said “Bang Head Here”. “That’s what I do when I get frustrated, too,” she explained to Zane. She’d moved closer to him in order to get a look at the hardlight lenses embedded in his skin. “I’m no doctor, but can I have a closer look at those?”

“Go ahead. I’m curious, myself. Wondering how I ended up with real tiger fur, for that matter. I don’t think I had any natural DNA coding for it,” Zane said.

:I’ve given Yvonne a ping,: Kaylee said. *:Once we figure this out he’s going to need some kind of comm gear and we don’t carry any of the good stuff here. Rufia’s bound to have spares she can part with.:*

At last, during one of her lowest depressive phases, when Rochelle was in the middle of lying sprawled out face-down on the hard concrete floor, right beside a similarly-sprawled Uncia, fluffy tails twitching in the air in unison, she suddenly lifted her head, blinked, and then rolled over into Uncia, Fusing and continuing the roll to her

feet.

She spun around and waved a hand, scattering hardlight displays in the air again, then she grabbed one by the edges with both hands and pulled it closer to her. “Yes! that’s it! That’s *IT*!” For a moment, music blared from unseen speakers: “International bright young thing, now you know for sure that you make the world swing...”

“Hunh?” Zane, who had been dozing, woke up—in time to be grabbed and kissed on the mouth, with hardlight tongue, by a snow leopard. “Mmmph!”

“That’s it!” Rochelle said again, dropping him back onto the table. “REM sleep! I think...I’ve found the key at last!”

“Can we do that again?” Uncia asked plaintively.

Rhianna awoke from the cot she and Fused Kaylee used during their own all-nighters. “Finally got it, snowgirl?”

“Yes! While he was in REM sleep, the encoding changed completely—and Enigma suddenly had enough data to start working out what was what. Gimme a few minutes and I’ll have you doing tricks.”

“The kissing, I mean,” Uncia said. “That was fun.”

Rochelle was lost in her own little world again. “...and configure, and *make!* Okay, five minutes, tops, and then it’s say hello to ZaneOS 1.0.”

“So no more kissing?” Uncia said sadly.

Rhianna slid a standard qubitite firmware crystal into the writer in preparation. A minute later everyone heard the familiar bass thrumming of Yvonne’s tuned-up lifters outside. “Gear’s here, Shelley. We’ve almost got all the pieces.”

“Awesome!” Rochelle stretched, and Uncia melted off of her back into her snow leopard form. Rochelle fell onto her back, arms crossed behind her head, relaxing into the curvature of Uncia’s spine. She yawned. “Boy, glad that’s done.” Then the beep sounded that signaled the end of the compile, and she was on her feet again, hair flying. “Build’s up!”

Fused Rufia and Yvonne entered. The pair of them could come and go as they pleased, more or less. The female elk carried a box under the crook of her arm, but dropped it upon seeing Zane. “Whooo wheee! You’re handsome, short stuff.”

Zane grinned at her. “Not that short where it counts, big gal.”

“Hey, now. I saw him first!” Rochelle said, grinning.

Rhianna picked the box up off the floor. It was dirty and appeared to have been sitting on a shelf for several years, but the thumb-sized lens, embedded in a slightly larger bezel, looked suspiciously military with no identifying marks. “Rufia, where did you get this?”

“Oh, you know. Around.” She cleared her throat, then put on the manner of a used skimmer salesman. “This is the Kinnison Lensman ‘Second Stage’ Comm and Defense Unit, straight from Nuevo San DefCom Tech. It combines a self-contained sarium battery, ultrafast laser and wifi comms, hardlight defense shields, and will burn your attacker’s head clean off.”

“Operators are standing by?” Zane asked.

“And you can have it for the low, low price of... absolutely nothing. I just *gotta* see how all this turns out,” Rufia said, her elk RIDE’s face smiling with more than a little lust.

“Why is it that nobody around here knows enough to pad their bills when they’re dealing with rich people?” Zane wondered.

“Money don’t buy happiness, you handsome putty tat.”

Zane grinned. “No, but it will sure rent a lot of it. Well, all right, if you insist. But I reserve the right to return the favor, when you *least* expect it. I’m good at that, just ask Rhianna.”

“Oh, he is. He really is!” she replied.

Compared to the hours and hours of making hardware and software, putting the final pieces together took less than a minute. The “ZaneOS 1.0” crystal went into Rhianna’s custom interface plug, the plug into the much-ballyhooed Lensman unit, then the unit itself was handed to their customer on one of Rochelle’s red velvet pillows Kaylee had fetched from upstairs.

Zane picked it up in his right hand. “All right, let’s light this candle.” He snapped it home into the plug in his wrist. A moment later, it lit up, and Zane grinned. “Hello, world!”

Rhianna pointed around the room. “There’s network points, wifi and laser, all over the garage here. You should be able to—”

Zane grinned. “Got it! Ah, good ol’ ‘net...” The lens on his wrist gleamed as laser pulses suffused the garage. “And that reminds me.” He held up a hand, hardlight emitter in the heel of his palm facing Rhianna and Kaylee. A plane of light appeared in front of them and swept over them, tingling where it touched, then vanished.

“That was for..?” Kaylee asked.

Zane grinned. “Well, I still haven’t gotten you your crossrider present. Oh, and for that matter...I missed yours, too, Shelley.” He pointed his hand at her, and she got the same treatment.

:*The traditional present from a man who’s a good friend to a crossed woman is...*: Kaylee said internally, bringing up photo after photo of women of her build in racy lingerie. :*Yeah. This.*:

“Well, the measure of good lingerie is how it looks on the floor, so just keep that in mind, my handsomely-striped friend,” Rhianna said, putting on her best faux ‘come hither’ look. “Wow! What a night.”

“And...I think there’s something else I can do for you, Rochelle.” Zane held up his wrist, and the lens scintillated, bathing her in laser light. Her eyes widened, and suddenly her appearance...changed. Her hair stopped animating and fell limp. Her posture sagged slightly, and for the first time her face showed the hours of work she’d just put in.

Rochelle blinked. “Did you just...you *did*. You deactivated my nanites.”

“Yeah, you’re ‘cured,’” Zane said.

“Huh.” Rochelle considered that. “Okay. That’s nice, and I really appreciate that and all, but...could you put them back exactly how they were?”

Zane blinked. “But...why? You said you didn’t like having them on all the time. Now you can control them, so you could crank them back up yourself when you want—”

“That’s true, but...” Rochelle shuffled her feet and looked down. “It’s really not so bad having them stuck on...but more importantly, as long as I’m *trying* to find a cure, I get access to the latest nanotech at Nextus Nano. I’ve really been learning a lot lately. Besides, this isn’t really about me. I can’t let anyone else ‘catch’ it.”

Rhianna chuckled quietly. :*She suffers for her art.*: she sent to Kaylee.

“And besides, if I show up with them magically cured, they might think I was faking it all along and sue me to get the settlement money back.”

“She’s got you there, Zane,” Rhianna said.

“You know, I could just *buy* Nextus Nano,” Zane said. “I could give it to you as a present.”

Rhianna-and-Kaylee stared slack-jawed, but Rochelle looked skeptical. “Really?”

Zane chuckled, then shook his head. “Well, okay, not really. Their market cap is almost as high as Brubeck Mining’s. Lot of money in rich-people nanos. But I *could* make good the settlement money. If you’d let me. But of course you wouldn’t let me.”

Rochelle snorted. “No offense, but I’m not gonna be anybody’s kept woman or trophy girlfriend.”

He grinned. “All right. I’ll put it back. But you gotta do one teeny little thing for me in return.”

“And what’s that?” Rochelle asked.

“Go out with me tomor—tonight?”

Rochelle looked at him. “Did you even hear what I just—”

“Seriously. If you want, I’ll even let you buy.”

Rochelle blinked. “Wow, that’s an original approach. You want to prove how much you care for me by letting me buy you dinner?”

Zane grinned. “It does sound kind of funny when you put it that way, doesn’t it?”

Rochelle chuckled. “How can a gal resist an offer like that? You’re on.”

“Awesome! Pick you up at 2400?” He bathed her in laser-light again, and she reverted to her former hyper-attractive self.

Rochelle grinned, running a hand through her once-more-animated hair. “We’ll be waiting.”

“It’s like being in a soap opera,” Rufia said, clearly delighted to have played a part. “Anyone for breakfast? Coffee and pastries on me.”

Zane snapped his fingers. “That reminds me. I need to settle the bill.”

“Oh, the bill,” Rhianna said, knowing full well what was coming. “Zane, it’s been a privilege to—”

Zane raised his hand, suddenly serious. “No. I let you get away with this for Chauncey, because that was obviously a labor of love for you, and you felt like I was doing you a favor for letting you work on him. That touched on your honor. You felt obligated.” He shook his head. “It’s my turn to be in those shoes.

“You’ve just stayed up all night for me when you should have been sleeping, putting your best effort into reverse-engineering a completely new technology you’d seen in action for maybe five minutes, used by people who really creeped you out. And you totally saved my sanity by keeping me from going into net withdrawal. So now *I* feel obligated, that touches on *my* honor, and I’m not gonna let you get away without being paid *fairly* for services rendered.”

“Well, okay. Our standard ‘need it yesterday’ overtime rates...” Kaylee called up the numbers. It was a pretty hefty sum.

“Let me see that.” He reached out a hand, and the tablet floated out of Kaylee’s hands and into his. “Hmm. No. This won’t do.” He waved a hand over the tablet and floated it back to her with a new set of figures on it. “That’s my standard rates—or, rather, Brubeck Mining’s standard hourly fee schedule for cutting-edge technology contractors. Well, actually standard plus 25%, because we leave the base rate low so there’s room to negotiate. Plus invention bonus. In the interest of fairness, I actually cut the bonus in half, because the normal use of it involves compensation for signing patent

rights over to the company, but somehow I suspect there's too much prior art in this case. And materials at 50% mark-up, rather than cost."

Though she was Fused with Kaylee, Rhianna still looked weak in the knees. She passed the tablet to Rochelle. "Even after snowgirl here takes her half... I... I... I could buy a full factory refurbished redstone... Not a big suborbital, but I don't need Qixi's kind of gear... 'Scuse me. I need to lay down." She sat down heavily on the big cot.

Rochelle peered at it. "Hell, we're partners. I could throw in and we could get one of those downgraded ex-Nextus Army drop shuttles that just came on the market again." She looked at Zane. "Are you sure this is right?"

Zane nodded. "I absolutely swear to you that these are our standard consulting rates and not a penny more. I'll make our accountant available to you if you don't believe me." He put a hand on her shoulder. "Look, I know I like to throw money around. It's about the only thing it's good for. But I already know better than to try to give you anything you don't think you've earned. I respect you too much for that. Both of you."

"Okay, you win," Rhianna said, almost gasping. She stood up and extended her handpaw. "Just this once, it's a deal."

Zane grinned. "Don't worry. The next time I ask you to do anything where you might risk getting paid what you're actually worth, I'll make you sign a contract ahead of time so you see it coming."

Rhianna frowned thoughtfully as something that had been niggling at the back of her mind all night finally came clear in her head. "Speaking of contracts...and throwing money around...I wonder if I might ask a favor of you, on behalf of a new friend who I hope will still be my friend after she learns what I'm asking."

Zane raised an eyebrow. "What's that?"

"Well, it's Myla," Rhianna said. "I told you about how she signed on with Qixi because she really didn't have anywhere else to go. But the more I think on it, the less I think those two are going to get along."

Zane nodded. "You said Qixi floated her a loan to help buy back Sophie. Yeah, that's not a real good way to begin with a new employer at the best of times. And we've contracted with Qixi a time or two ourselves. I think I see what you're getting at." He grinned. "I'll bet there are plenty of jobs in my company she could fill, and probably some she'd even like doing. Of course, she'd still have to be willing to work for me." Zane glanced upstairs. "After what happened with Burke, I wouldn't blame her if she didn't want to see another Integrate ever again."

"Kaylee and I spent the afternoon with her yesterday. She's a very open-minded woman. Fun to be with. Even volunteered to show me some 'genuinely feminine' things men still don't get. Stuff like that. I think if you talked to her for a while..." Rhianna trailed off.

Zane nodded. "I will. Hell, I owe it to all the Integrates who *aren't* assholes to try to redeem our reputation. I'm sure there must be some, somewhere."

The sound of employees starting to arrive interrupted them. Rhianna checked the time. A full fifteen hours had passed, but it felt more like days.

"So, someone mentioned breakfast?" Zane said.

"That would be me, hot stuff," Rufia said in her most dulcet tones.

"Know any good spots?" Zane asked.

"There's always Bea's Breakfast Nook down the street. The decor is kind of girly,

but I'm just in that kind of mood right now, handsome."

"Last one there gets groomed by Uncia!" Rochelle sang out, straddling her leopard and dropping neatly into the cockpit as she flipped to skimmer form and took off.

"Does Zane even *have* a skimmer form anymore?" Rhianna asked, looking at the Integrate tiger.

"Just the one we bought after we got tired of having to de-Fuse to ride Terry's," Zane said. "I parked it out back; I'll go get it. See you at the diner!" He waved and dashed for the back door.

Rufia and her elk RIDE left next, roaring off loudly enough that it probably woke up the entire street.

Rhianna chuckled. "Looks like we might be in for a grooming."

"Oh, like that's anything new," Kaylee said, de-Fusing to skimmer form beneath her. They headed out of the garage, just stopping to let the arriving day shift manager know about their all-nighter and that they'd be in later that afternoon.

As they followed the others up the street, Rhianna couldn't help glancing over her shoulder. "What is it?" Kaylee asked.

"If Shelley's right, we sent up a signal beacon to any Integrates on this quarter of the Coastal Ring," Rhianna said. "Just wondering where they are."

"Who knows, maybe they'll meet us for breakfast," Kaylee said.

Rhianna snorted. "Then all I can say is, they'd better be buying."

Reflecting on the craziness of the last few hours, Rhianna wondered if she was going to wake up any minute now and find it was all a dream. Zane Integrated? She and Rochelle, Integrated-tech reverse-engineers? *Wealthy* Integrated-tech reverse engineers, at least by their own standards? When had the world gone crazy without her noticing?

But perhaps things would look more rational after breakfast. She revved Kaylee into high, and did her level best to earn Rufia and Yvonne an Uncia grooming.

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Fritz streaked through the turquoise sky, just under supersonic, far north from his current home, the Coffeehouse. Towers would always be full of nostalgia for him in the way the Coffeehouse couldn't. *When I first found that hidey-hole I was lucky to have a bed to sleep on*, Fritz fondly reflected. It had taken months of nicking supplies to make the place even a little tolerable. It'd started with a self-fab quonset hut and as many other necessities he could pack in the back of a hacked Deuce. He'd been especially proud at acquiring the first polywell reactor to hardlight-seal off the cave and make it climate-controlled. It was thousands of clicks from Nextus and in the deepest, most inaccessible part of the Dry Ocean. The perfect pad for a hep cat on his own.

:*Not completely on your own*,: his conscience-in-a-box reminded him. But Fritz was used to arguing with the other voice in his head. Until he'd realized just how close Towers was to blowing the whole thing wide open to the meat and the mech, his Jiminy had convinced him to rest on his Bosscat laurels.

:*Shut your yap, Jiminy. I'm not listening to you anymore*,: Fritz huffed. :*They gotta learn the price of defying the Bosscat. We need to nip this murgatroyd trend to 'go public'. I won't take no more lip from Paulie or anyone else. I shouldn't'a let him*

live last time.:

:No good will come of this,: Fritz's Jiminy said. *:This is all on your head.:*

:Yeah, yeah. And you're all in my head. It's not like I have a choice, man. We don't need meat and mech horning in on our beeswax.:

:You think you can stop it like this? You might as well command the tide not to roll in. It's gonna happen sooner or later no matter who you kill. This'll bring your body count up to 322 of our fellow Inties.:

Fritz growled. Jiminy knew how to provoke a guilt-trip these days, but today Fritz would have none of it. *:Shaddap, you pudknocker. I know what I'm doing.:*

Jiminy knew how to pick his battles and knew he wasn't going to win this time. He wisely decided to let Fritz do his thing, going silent in his hardcode prison. There was a tiny hole that allowed him to chat with Fritz. Fortunately the murgatroyd couldn't take direct control. Their Integration had sealed his rider away. There hadn't even been a hole at first, until...

No time to remember that bad scene, Fritz thought, shivering. Not with Towers fast approaching. He cloaked, dropping low to the ground.

There were multiple entrances to the Enclave. Fritz passed over the one Quinoa had collapsed to stymie AlphaWolf's Pack, and smiled. It hadn't taken much to convince her to frame Crazy Joe for tax evasion as a "joke." The real reason was to warn her uncle off trying to reclaim her. *That ginchy chick is all right. Ol' Joe did a fine job with raising her. And that RIDE she Integrated with. Hooboy. Sphinxes.*

Fritz finally found the entrance he was looking for and slipped inside. For all that the Towers Enclave was hidden, it didn't really try to protect the entrances. It wasn't as if anyone but another Integrate was likely to come looking, after all. *Security through obscurity*, Fritz thought. *Bet they change it up after this.*

As he drifted through the tunnel, Fritz sighed inwardly. *This is all so fucked up. Maybe Jiminy's right.* After thirty years, he just got so *tired* of it all sometimes. That was probably why he'd listened to Jiminy and taken it easy for a while in the first place. Maybe he should just give up and let society take its course from here—if it *wanted* to screw itself up that badly, then let it.

But no. If he just let it all fizzle like that now, then what had he even put in that thirty years for in the first place? No, the Bosscat wasn't going to let this happen. Five years of letting up had gotten him here. Time to tighten his grip again. Paulie needed to be an example of what he could still do.

His target was holding a rake, working on the fanciful gardens of "Wonkaville". The huge dinosaur was nowhere to be seen, but Fritz picked up his passive sensors anyway. Still, Colonel Gray wouldn't have any reason to be cloaked, not here. Fritz primed his armcannon capacitors. He wasn't going to use full power, not here. It wouldn't take nearly that much to pop Paulie's head. It was the only *certain* way to kill an Intie, Fritz should know. An Integrate's body could be cut to pieces and survive as long as they were brought back together again within...he wasn't sure. Could be weeks.

Fritz stalked his unsuspecting prey like he would a tasty rabbit in Nature Range. This wouldn't be his first assassination. He'd taken out a quarter of the Sturmhaven High Command this way back before he'd decided it'd be more fun to let the war go on longer and the Sturmites had gotten wise.

Despite himself, Fritz shivered, as thoughts of the war brought him back to the last time he'd been here. Now *there* had been a face he hadn't expected to see again.

Where had *she* come from? He hadn't thought about her in years—and so hadn't checked the Shed inventory in years either.

There hadn't been any sign she recognized him, but just seeing her had discombobulated him so badly that he'd blown his jets but good and lost any chance of controlling the situation. Not to mention lost a lot of face in front of Paulie and the others, too. And that was another thing he owed that griffin for. But, judging from the Shed inventory records, he thought he might owe a certain rabbit of his acquaintance more.

But later for that. *Concentrate on the mission.*

With his fellow Inties around, there was a greater risk that he'd be detected. The last few meters were the hardest. Fortunately the fanciful architecture provided ample cover. The lynx pumped up his time compression...and, to his surprise, found a fast-time chat request waiting. Well, if the cube wanted to beg for his life, Fritz guessed it might be amusing.

They met in a nondescript VR forest clearing, one of the default VR chat channel settings. "This is it, murgatroyd. You had to know this was coming," Fritz snarled.

"Yes, as a matter of fact I did," Paulie said calmly. "I've put my affairs in order and arranged for an orderly transfer of power. Colonel Gray will be taking my seat on the Council."

"What the fuck?" Fritz said. "You sound like you *want* to die. If you're trying reverse psychology, it ain't gonna work."

"Oh, I don't *want* to die, but I suppose it's inevitable," Paulie said. "If anything, I was quite surprised I survived taking apart the Snatchers, so I've been making the best of what time I had." He shrugged. "If you think this is going to win you any hearts or minds, you're sadly mistaken. You're only going to turn more of us against you."

"I don't give a damn about their hearts and minds as long as I still control their bladders," Fritz said. "As long as they're too busy pissing their pants when they think of crossing me, they can think it as often as they want."

"The Machiavelli approach, then?" Paulie said. "Better to be feared, eh?"

"If the shoe fits," Fritz said, and fired.

In realtime, only a couple seconds passed from when Fritz juiced his lifters to ready position in front of the barn owl griffin when he uncloaked. Fritz let loose a torrent of collimated pulse beam through his cannon. Technically the beam emerged from a tuned subspace window a few centimeters in front of his open palm, but that was neither here nor there. For this job he only needed a window the size of his hand.

It was more than enough to vaporize feathers, beak, and skull, the wall behind it, and everything for thirty meters beyond *that* in an expanding beam. The heat flash set the garden and house aflame, the shockwave sending any Intie nearby head over heels. On the cave ceiling overhead, the video display coating died, leaving only a little light from adjoining caverns. The sound of the blast thundered through the Enclave.

:*How much of Frank, his rider, and the rest of his squad were left when you killed them?:* Fritz's Jiminy asked. :*322 of your fellow Inties... should I number how many humans and RIDEs you've killed too?:*

:*Shut your yap!:* Fritz snarled. He slipped back into realtime.

Paulie's twitching, headless corpse fell to the ground. It would be a while before the body systems decided they were dead and shut down. Until then, it was a convulsing headless zombie.

“So yeah!” Fritz called out. “Anyone else want some? Huh?” He stared around, wild-eyed, as he charged up the cannon again, looking for anyone else who might want a fight. No one took him up on it. The few other Integrates in the area might have been figures in a Greek frieze, so still were they frozen. “Yeah, didn’t think so,” Fritz sneered. He shimmered and vanished again as his cloak came back up.

Now that’s over with, I think it’s time I did some research on a certain garage in Uplift, Fritz mused. See what kind of home my dear sweet Kaylee’s found herself...

Chapter Two: Integrates

July 12, 156 A.L.

It had been quite a night, Zane reflected as he rode his skimmer up the street after Rochelle. He hadn't gotten a lot of sleep, but had gotten something a lot better. He glanced down at his DIN, still plugged into the socket on his left wrist, looking for all the world like an oversized designer watch. He was still amazed at the level of interface he had with the net now. He hadn't had anything like this level of access even when he'd been Terry, a Reticulated Intelligence made to *live* on the 'net.

At any rate, breakfast sounded good. He still had a bit of charge left over from the zap he'd taken last night, but it was starting to run low—and besides, he wanted to taste something again.

"Look out, comin' *throooooooooough!*"

"Yeek!" Zane swerved to the side as Rufia roared past him, crouched low against her skimmer-mode RIDE Yvonne's back. He swore he heard her voice *doppler shift*. "Hey, there's a speed limit around here you know!" Luckily it was early enough there was almost no one on the street yet anyway.

"Scuse us!" Kaylee said cheerfully as she and Rhianna followed a moment later. They pulled into the parking lot just ahead of him, next to Yvonne, Rufia, Uncia, and Rochelle who'd made it already. Then they skidded to a halt as Kaylee snapped into Fuser to kill their momentum, then melted back off into Walker form as they stopped.

Zane chuckled, pulling up a moment later. "Showoffs."

Rhianna grinned. "Maybe, but we're showoffs who aren't going to get licked all over by Uncia."

"You're not gonna tell me she was *serious*," Zane said.

"Hope you brought a towel!" Rochelle said cheerfully. Uncia peered thoughtfully at Zane and licked her chops.

"I think I'm gonna take a rain check on that," Zane said. "I'm starving. Let's get inside and eat?"

"Sounds good to me!" Rufia said, heading for the door.

"Works," Rhianna said, following.

"Wait a moment," Rochelle said. "Zane, are you going to put your 'disguise' back on?"

Zane considered it, then shook his head. "I'm about tapped out. If I look funny, then I'll just have to look funny." He followed the others and their RIDEs inside.

As with most businesses built after RIDEs went mainstream, Bea's Breakfast Nook had double-wide aisles inside, as well as tables of varying heights where either humans or Fusers could sit, and there was space around the human-sized tables for RIDEs as well.

Zane knew what Rufia had meant about the décor being "girly". The tables had blue and white gingham tablecloths with frilly lace edges, and each booth having its own cute theme: flowers, kittens, puppies, baby gators, and the like. That hadn't stopped him from coming here a number of times when he wanted breakfast at odd hours after work.

It was the nearest 30-hour breakfast diner, and they'd soon learned to cook his eggs just right. Terry had liked the place, too.

They'd just settled in at a human-sized table, the RIDEs taking up position behind their partners' seats to plug in, when the waitress, Pamela, came over to take their orders. A matronly older lady with holstein cow tags, Pamela was the main waitress at this time of day. She peered at the four friends, and blinked. "Zane Brubeck, is that you?"

"Yeah, Pamela. I've kinda lost a few kilos," Zane admitted.

"And a few dozen centimeters, looks like," Pamela said. She regarded him curiously for a moment, then shook her head. "Your usual, then?"

"Yeah. Eggs over easy, hominy grits, biscuits and gravy, bacon...but double the order," Zane said. "I'm starving. And black coffee."

"And what can I get for the rest of you?"

"Waffles," Rochelle said reverently. "Four of them, stacked. Real maple syrup and butter, lots of bacon. Oh, and black coffee here, too."

"Soysteak, pancakes, hashbrowns, and burn 'em real crispy," Rufia said. "With greens. Orange juice."

"Right. The usual, then. Uh..." Pamela looked at the remaining party member. "Oh, I forgot. What're you going by now, Ryan? I haven't heard."

"Rhianna," the lynx-eared woman said. "I suppose we're far enough down the street the rumor mill doesn't *quite* get this far."

"Congratulations, it's a girl," Rufia said, smirking, mussing her old friend's pony-tailed light brown hair. "Don't worry, Pamela. We're getting her all nice and settled in her new digs. And she'll have what I'm having, right Rhi?"

"Sure, why not?" Rhianna said, giving Rufia a friendly slap on her shoulder in return. "But make that a *real* steak. Carnivore here."

"It's not like you can't afford it," Zane said, grinning—though he was sure they all knew *he* intended to try for the check at the end.

"Got it!" Pamela scurried off to put the order in at the kitchen, then came back with a coffee pot to fill Rochelle and Zane's mugs and the orange juices for Rufia and Rhianna. As they waited, Zane looked around the place. It was still an hour or two before the main breakfast rush, so they had the place pretty much to themselves. Nobody at the other tables was looking their way.

Zane didn't even notice the way his eyes seemed to slide right over the booth in the opposite corner at first, but then he spotted it on the second pass. *Hmm*. It was as if there wasn't anything there...including that corner at all. Zane had the presence of mind to keep looking around rather than staring, though he occasionally came back to it out of the corner of his eye. *Guess who*, he thought wryly. *Well, it looks like they're at least going to let us eat in peace.*

"So, you come here often?" Rochelle asked Zane. "You had a 'usual'."

Zane chuckled. "Yeah. Breakfast is the most important meal of the day. So sometimes I have it for all four meals."

"So Zane, here you are, surrounded by three beautiful crossrider girls for breakfast," Rufia said. The wall video panels were currently showing verdant fields of wildflowers rippling in a light breeze. "Ever wondered what might've happened if Terry'd been female? Hmmm?"

"Well, Fusing with him—I mean, *her*—would have been a harder call, for one

thing,” Zane said with a grin. “Almost like one of those bad stories you read in the magazines, you know? Where the writer basically just wants to write crossrider porn, so he sets up some impossible dilemma where the protagonist doesn’t have any choice but to give up his precious manhood.” He chuckled. “No offense—I just remembered I’m the only one here who *didn’t* do that.”

“Yeah, you just Integrated. Poor bastard,” Rochelle said. “The rest of us can change back after three years.”

“If we wanted to,” Rufia added. “Five years and counting, *never* going back.”

“Never?” Zane asked.

“Look, I’m not a woman of many words. But I am a *woman*. I’m going to have *babies* eventually. Not sure what else to say about it.”

“Then let me turn your question around. You ever wondered what might’ve happened if Yvonne had been male?”

“I’d be a *hell* of a bull elk,” Yvonne herself added. “I could add hardlight antlers if I really wanted to, you know.”

“I’ll bet you’d be a hit at stag parties.” Zane grinned.

“Already am,” she snorted.

Rhianna had a *look* on her face like she was trying to wrap her brain around something and it wasn’t quite working. “Rufia...I just...I can’t imagine you all pregnant and broody. I can’t imagine *me* that way either, for that matter.”

“I could simulate it for you!” Kaylee said helpfully. “It would be simple.”

“No. No no. No. Just *no*,” the mechanic said. “No.”

“You say that *now*,” Rufia said, “But someday you’ll meet some handsome man, and—oh, cool, food’s here!”

Pamela set the plates down on the table, unerringly placing each one in front of the correct person. “I’ll be back by in a few minutes if you need anything.”

“Thanks!” Zane said, grabbing a fork and beginning to inhale his eggs. Rochelle chuckled and attacked her waffles. The others similarly dug into their food, and conversation was sparse around the table for a while. Pamela came back by a couple of times to refill coffees.

At last, as the four diners were all putting their forks down on empty plates, Pamela approached again, this time looking somewhere between uneasy and disturbed. “Have you got our check?” Zane asked.

“Well, actually...*they* do.” She pointed over at the corner table, which had popped back into full visibility.

On the left side of the table sat a slim white unicorn girl in a gold dress, a yellow-and-brown feathered velociraptor, and a woman whose face seemed to be somewhere between human and feline, with red-yellow slit-pupiled eyes and iridescent green wings. She was wearing a pink felt skirt with a poodle embroidered on it, a “Bee-Gees” sweatshirt with shoulder pads, white linen bloomers, and combat boots. She had teased her hair up into a poofy red-and-pink hairdo. She was also holding the check.

“They...said they wanted to cover it,” Pamela said.

“That was nice of them,” Zane said with aplomb.

“But where did they *come from*?” Pamela wondered. “I never saw them come in, or anyone at that table.”

“That’s all right, Pamela,” Rochelle said. “They’re just some...friends we’ve been waiting for. I think those people at that table over there wanted your attention.”

“Oh, thanks.” Pamela hurried off, clearly glad to have something *normal* to attend to.

“Lord Lordy Lord,” Kaylee muttered. “Quinoa Steader. Figures. I’d prob’ly better let Sophie know about this just so Myla knows she’s here.”

“Zane, darling, so glad you could *join us*,” Quinoa called in a haughty gone. “*Do* come over. We have much to discuss.”

“Thanks for the invitation, but I think I like the company better over here,” Zane said.

“Then Quinoa can *stay here* and we’ll come over there,” the unicorn said, glaring at the sphinx. Even from across the room the acrimony between her and Quinoa made Zane’s skin prickle. The atmosphere there was distinctly two-against-one, with the unicorn and the dinosaur barely tolerating the oddly-dressed young woman. “I can’t believe you’re wearing a 1950s poodle skirt with 1910s bloomers, a 1970s sweatshirt, and a 1980s hairdo! And *combat boots!*”

Quinoa looked genuinely confused. “What’s wrong with that? It’s all from the 20th century.”

“*Anyway*,” the dinosaur said, taking a deep breath. “You’ve met the sphinx. My colleague and I aren’t from the same Enclave she’s from. In fact, we’re not too happy about these circumstances ourselves. We’re here to welcome you, Mr. Brubeck.”

“To Jurassic Park, no doubt,” Rochelle muttered.

The velociraptor Integrate looked slightly embarrassed. “Well, yes. But I didn’t name the place.”

Rochelle facepalmed. “I was *joking*. Why does the universe have such a juvenile sense of humor?”

“I’m Leah Sheryl Daye,” the unicorn said. “I’m from the other closest Enclave, Terrania.”

“Aaron Stinson, Jurassic Park. Again, *not* my idea,” the long-suffering dinosaur said.

The unicorn and dinosaur slid out from the table and moved over to take the empty table next to theirs. Quinoa remained in the corner booth, arms crossed, and looked grumpy.

“Pleased to meet you, Leah, Aaron,” Zane said. “I gather my reputation preceded me.”

“It does. More so than any other new Integrate we’ve put out the Welcome Mat for,” Leah said. A four-pointed blue diamond hung at the base of her horn, and closer examination revealed that it was connected to a port right at the base. Her horn glowed, probably acting as a single hardlight emitter like Zane’s own numerous dermal lenses. “I must admit, we were surprised when we heard. Your family’s neutral attitude towards RIDEs is well known.”

“Guess you don’t follow the news much,” Zane said. “Terry and I—I mean Zane and I—I mean, *the two of us* have been an item for months.”

“Generally speaking, it’s not considered a good thing in the Enclaves to pay too much attention to the outside world,” Aaron said.

“I guess you also heard I pal around with Rhianna and company,” Zane said. “Who you’ve probably studied up on after what happened with miss 20th century digital girl over there.”

“The Enclaves are a small community. Word spreads fast,” Aaron said. “We’ve

met with Flint-Burke as well, helped him as much as we could. Towers...does things its own way.”

Zane snorted. “From what I’ve seen, that’s putting it mildly. Well, I guess it’s not much of a surprise if Quinoa’s involved. The Steaders *always* did things their own way, especially the ones who are spoiled brats.”

“I can *hear* you, you know,” Quinoa said from the other table, sticking out her tongue. The others ignored her.

“Indeed,” Leah said. “But *you’re* the corporate scion of interest to us now. Even though Quinoa’s her uncle’s heir, you’re *actually* in control of the seventh largest corporation on the planet. Brubeck *personifies* the qubitite revolution. Even Fritz would have a hard time making the son of its founder simply vanish off the face of the planet.”

“Normally we would extend the hospitality of our Enclaves, let you choose where you want to settle, but in this case that would be difficult at best,” Aaron said.

“Not that it really matters,” Leah asked. “We already know you’re not the type to hide away in an enclave somewhere.”

“You kidding? I’ve got a business to run.” Zane grinned. “No eating lotuses for this tiger.”

“Exactly. So what we can do is teach you a more efficient way to create a hardlight shell of your former Fused form,” Leah continued. “But we will need you to visit one of our Enclaves briefly, so we can make you a device we call a Data Interface Normalizer.”

“Oh, so *that’s* what it stands for.” Zane grinned. He held up his left hand. “You mean like this one?” He sent a quick handshake pulse to Leah’s to prove it was functional.

The glowing ornament at the base of Leah’s horn flashed then went out. Leah grimaced, then stared at him. She quickly replaced the DIN plug in the socket. “Well, I hope you have replacements, Mr. Brubeck. DINs are prone to burning out easily.”

Rhianna smirked. “Wouldn’t bet on that.”

Leah blinked at her. “What?” She glanced back to Zane again. “Where on Zharus did you have that made? It couldn’t have been at either of our enclaves.”

Zane patted Rhianna on the shoulder. “I know some *very* good mechanics.”

“Buh?” Quinoa said, unconsciously reaching up to finger the ankh hanging from her own neck.

“Took Rochelle and me all night,” Rhianna said a little smugly. “Kaylee, and Uncia too, of course. Couldn’t have done it without our partners.” She rubbed her lynx between the mecha cat’s tufted ears. Kaylee hadn’t taken her eyes off any of the Integrates.

“But it should go faster next time, now that we know what to look for,” Rochelle said. “We were thinking of hanging out a shingle. DINs-R-Us.”

“And one thing I can guarantee you is, it’ll take a lot to burn out,” Rhianna said. “As the one who built it, I *know* its specifications.”

Aaron looked like he was about to do a spit take. “You all reverse-engineered this in *one night*?”

“The spirits did it all!” Uncia said happily. “God bless us every one!” Rochelle bapped her.

“I’d ask to take a look at yours and see if I could figure out where your problem is, but I’m probably about fifteen minutes away from crashing hard,” Rhianna said,

yawning. "Maybe another time."

The two Integrates stared at one another. "We're going to have to confer about this," Leah said. "Suffice to say this is rather a shock to us for...cultural reasons, you could say."

"You can't do that!" Quinoa squawked. "DIN making is for technomages *alone!*"

"Abracadabra," Kaylee said dryly, waving a paw in her direction. "Hocus pocus, an' all that."

"Technomages, huh?" Zane said. "Sounds like you've got a whole Dionysian mystery cult thing going on. Or maybe it's more like the Freemasons..."

"Something like that," Aaron said uncomfortably. "He who controls the DINs..."

"Fritz. You can *say* his name," Quinoa said, eyerolling. "You can even say it three times and he won't jump out of a mirror."

Leah facepalmed. "God, what a mess. He puts the 'ingrate' in 'Integrate'."

"Hey! Fritz knows what he's talking about!" Quinoa said. She pointed at Pamela, who had retreated behind the ancient register. "They're made of meat!"

"And if the likes of you are supposed to be some kind of advertisement of the benefits of an upgrade, I think we'd prefer to stay that way, thank you very much," Rochelle said. "If the first *Homo sapiens* had your attitude, the rest of us would still be living in the trees."

"So, please. Can we converse privately?" Leah said. "*Without* the sphinx. You can go home, Quinoa. We don't need a rep from Towers on this. *Or* one of Fritz's inner circle."

"I'd like nothing more!" Quinoa said hotly. Then she deflated. "Except I...kinda can't," she mumbled. "The Council already gave Brena the boot. They'll kick *me* out of the Enclave too if I come back early." She did a pretty fair imitation of Col. Eduardo Grey. "You caused the problem, now you're going to be part of the solution...or else."

"I think they just wanted to keep her away for as long as they possibly could," Rufia stage-whispered.

"That, too," Quinoa admitted, obviously having heard her perfectly clearly.

"Good old Eddie," Rufia added. "I like him. He's a card."

"And I *can't* get kicked out of Towers. Not after I got kicked out of Camelot and Wonderland, too." Quinoa rolled her eyes. "Fritz is running out of places to put me, and I don't wanna make *him* mad, too."

"Well, then," Zane said. "If you want to stay, lose the 'tude. You used to be made out of meat too, you know. Or at least half of you did."

Quinoa sighed. "All right, fine. I'll be good."

"For some value of 'good,'" Leah muttered. Quinoa glared, but didn't respond.

Kaylee raised her ears and sent what she hoped was a private transmission to Rhianna. :*Myla's awake now.*:

:*Does she know about Quinoa?*: Zane asked.

The older RIDE was taken a little aback by Zane's response.: *Uh, that was a narrowcast laser...nevermind. She does. They're heading for Qixi's office now, so they won't get in our way. She really is serious about avoiding Quinoa.*:

"I don't mean to be rude, Kaylee," Leah said, "but if you're going to be around us much, you probably ought to know that the only one who can scramble a transmission so that an Integrate can't pick it up is another Integrate. We don't *mean* to listen in, but there are so many different frequencies that it can be hard to tell which are meant to be

private. Something in our heads just strips out the encryption so we don't even notice it."

"You can't be getting that much out of just backscatter!" Yvonne exclaimed. She was built for communications. "That's just crazy. I couldn't even detect Kaylee sending anything, and I've still got mil-spec gear."

"We don't really understand it ourselves," Leah admitted. "We haven't had enough of the right kind of scientists or technicians Integrate to be able to study it, even if Fritz would *let* us. We may even be subconsciously picking up and interpreting EM pulses directly from your circuitry, as they used to do with Tempest back in the 20th."

"It is a mystery," Aaron agreed. "One among many."

"Maybe we should go somewhere else and continue this discussion," Rhianna suggested. "Crunch time is coming for Pamela here and she's a little on edge. Hell, *I'm* on edge. I'm not going to risk Fusing around Quinoa, frankly."

"I *said* I'd be good," Quinoa said plaintively.

"Girl, I'm sorry but after your little performance back in the Towers, I don't think you even know what 'good' is anymore," Rufia said.

"We just did what we thought—" Quinoa began hotly, then remembered her promise and finished more quietly, "—was right at the time." She sighed and mumbled, almost too quietly to hear, "Maybe it wasn't." Zane peered thoughtfully at her for a moment.

"C'mon, let's go back to the garage, then," Rochelle said. "We can talk there."

"And I'd like to show them just how we reverse-engineered that DIN of theirs. I don't often *like* showing off. In fact, more of a never. But I'm curious why we did so well working from first principles. I'm sure whoever invented these in your Enclaves worked it out somehow. Wouldn't mind comparing notes."

"And you want to rub their noses in it that we humble 'meaties' and 'mechies' can still teach Inties some tricks, huh?" Rochelle asked.

Rhianna and Kaylee smiled the same Cheshire-lynx grin.

Quinoa Steader followed Leah and Aaron at a few meters of distance, as they in turn followed Rhianna, Rochelle, and the others. Rhianna made a cute girl, she had to admit. She was more than a little proud of her part in bringing about that transformation, even indirectly as it had been. But then, Ryan had been a little old for her *usual* methods, and already partnered anyway. Regardless, she *loved* seeing cute boys switch teams. It was just one of her "things," she supposed. *Need to get back to Cape Nord one of these days...*

It was nice that she could enjoy *something* about this whole mess, Quinoa thought darkly, shaking herself out of her daydream. What a disaster! Who'd have thought mere meat and mech could suss out one of Integratekind's greatest mysteries? Was it possible Fritz might be mistaken about something? Surely not. Rhianna and Rochelle just had to be some kind of exceptional idiot-savant talent, that was all. *With emphasis on the 'idiot,'* Quinoa told herself, smirking inwardly. *Just wait'll Fritz finds out...*

Brrr. To be honest, Quinoa didn't like thinking about *that* side of Fritz. She'd seen it so seldom, but she'd heard so many rumors. Fritz was *surrounded* by rumors, and to a great extent actually encouraged the spread of the more outrageous ones. The larger than life he was, he'd once told her, the more seriously people took him. *Of*

course, it's really not hard to be larger than life-size when your 'life-size' is only a meter-and-a-half tall, Quinoa thought, though was careful never to say aloud. But then, Napoleon had been a midget, too.

And Integrate-kind's own "little emperor" had a wolverine's temper. He was careful never to show it to *her*—Quinoa gathered he'd been good friends with her Uncle Joe, though he'd never gone into details—but she'd seen the memories others had posted to the Integrate data nets and had even been present a couple of times without Fritz's knowledge when he'd delivered one of his "attitude adjustments."

Given Fritz's temper—which, again, he'd been careful never to show when he *knew* she was around—some of the rumors were all too easy to believe, when she let herself think about them. She halfway suspected that was why she'd always demurred when Fritz had invited her to visit the Coffeehouse, his own personal Enclave and crash pad. She didn't *want* to see if those rumors were true. And as long as she didn't see, she could tell herself they weren't.

But that was okay! She shouldn't be dwelling on all the *bad* things about Fritz, especially not *now*. After all, he only wanted what was best for all Integrate-kind. He was counting on her to observe and report everything that happened so he could know how best to prevent any problems. And that was the *real* reason it was so important to stay here in Uplift, and close to Zane Brubeck, for as long as she possibly could.

Although the Brubecks and the Steaders had been friends over the years, attending many of the same functions rich people did, Quinoa had never gotten close to Zane and his younger sisters. It was weird, but she'd always had this feeling like they were from different worlds—figuratively, as well as literally. Her dad and uncle were rich, but they'd gotten that money passed down from their folks. Clint Brubeck actually *did* something to earn his money, which from her point of view was...well, either pretty amazing or utterly beneath her, and she still wasn't quite sure which.

All the same, she'd voraciously consumed all the centi-awful fiction about their famous explorer father Clint. There'd been the one time she'd tried to chat up Maddie about one of those books, but the conversation had just stopped dead. Making friends with Agatha had been right out—the older sister had had a very "Future Nextus Bureaucrat" air about her at a young age, which wasn't the kind of personality Quinoa could get along with.

Zane, though...he'd been more than a little *dreamy*. But...he just felt like he was out of her league. Which was weird for a scion of *the* richest family on Zharus to think of someone about an order of magnitude less wealthy, but again, there was the sense his family had *earned* its fortune.

And from what she'd heard, Zane's father had actually raised his kids as if he *wasn't* rich, living in a small house and subsisting on average consumer goods for the most part. As a result, they felt like an entirely different sort of people than Quinoa's usual crowd. It was like they were some kind of *alien*, resembling the "ordinary" people she knew but with all these little uncanny-valley differences.

In her darker moments, Quinoa sometimes envied them that. She wondered what it felt like to grow up "normal." Between her early memories on the Star Circus's enormous ship between the Colonies, then growing to adulthood on Zharus with her every want catered to, and *now* being an Integrate, joined to an exotic sphinx RIDE, what was "normal"? Her life had never been ordinary.

Fritz himself had called her a "special snowflake," which was nice. But Quinoa

also knew how hard it could be to tell the difference between a snowflake...and dandruff. She sighed, and moved faster to keep up with the others.

The Freeriders Garage was now the largest such business under the East Dome of Uplift. Rhianna and Rochelle depended purely on word of mouth rather than advertising to build their customer base. Zane himself had put in a good word on several review websites, as had young Lillibet Walton, and it had gone viral among the wealthier of Uplift society and, oddly enough, the children of a number of Nextus's rich. (Those who didn't have a curfew, at least.)

But there were no separate bays for those wealthy clients—Ryan had laid down that law from the start. A million *mu* RIDE could share a bay with a broken-down thirdhand war surplus Chinook AIDE. Nobody got preferential treatment, and any wealthy potential customer who didn't like to sit in the waiting room with everyone else could take his business elsewhere. But almost none of them did. Enough of them were eccentric in their own way to be willing to accept this form of eccentricity from someone else. Zane was pretty sure they even *bragged* about it to their friends—which might have accounted for even more business.

The lot Rhianna leased was still about twice the size of the garage's present structure, leaving plenty of room to expand—which simply meant adding on another prefabricated service bay module and some more equipment. Such modules were in common use by a number of businesses with variable needs. If business ever took a downturn, they could simply sell the module back to the dealer and contract again.

The only permanent buildings were now the office/waiting room and Rhianna and Rochelle's private garage, which had been the original garage building when Ryan had been starting out. Rhianna and Kaylee's home the upper level of that building, fitted out as an apartment. Rochelle had her own place by the park, though sometimes crashed on Rhianna's couch.

It was into that private garage that Rhianna led the others now, after checking to make sure Myla and Sophie had already left. Aside from being the place where the work had actually been done, it was also somewhere private where the other employees wouldn't intrude unless invited. Though it was a little crowded with three humans, three RIDEs, and four Integrates in it, there was still room for everyone to sit and have a good view as Rhianna demonstrated how she had determined the composition of Zane's plug.

"We shouldn't be seeing this!" Quinoa insisted. "This is forbidden knowledge! We've evolved beyond RIDE tech, beyond wetware—you shouldn't even be *able* to work this stuff out on your own. We're special snowflakes."

Rufia snorted. "Who's been selling you *that* crap? Ain't nothing magical about you. You're just humans mashed up with something humans built. Even that weird shit you do with our encryption is probably just from computing super-fast."

"She's right, you know," Leah said. "There's a lot we don't know about ourselves, but we're *not* gods."

"But—" Quinoa stammered, then cut herself off, looking down at her feet.

"This really is remarkable," Leah said. "The technomages simply plug a tool in, and a few minutes later have a replication recipe."

"They've probably got some kind of design-system-in-a-box that runs the scans and things we had to figure out how to do on our own, then spits out a generic design," Rochelle said. "Any one-size-fits-all solution will *work*, for some value of 'work,' but it'll

never be as good as a custom build.”

“I can see that,” Leah said, reaching up to finger her DIN again.

“Like I said, I’m *way* too zonked now to do another scan, or I’d see if we could get one done for you any faster,” Rhianna said. “Probably just need a little practice.”

“This is ridiculous!” Quinoa insisted. “You don’t make DINS with ‘practice,’ they come from the technomages alone!”

“Ahem,” Zane said, looking pointedly at her. Quinoa subsided, but could still be heard to mutter, “Made of meat,” under her breath.

“I’m sorry about her,” Aaron said to Rhianna. “In a way, you could say it’s *our* fault.”

Rhianna blinked. “*Your* fault?” she asked, the plug prototype in her hand temporarily forgotten.

“Of the Integrate community collectively, yes,” Leah said. “There are those among us who are convinced of their own superiority, and in some cases their *mandate from heaven* to replace ‘meaties’ and ‘mechies’ as the *next stage in evolution*.” She rolled her equine eyes expressively. “Most of us *don’t* feel that way, but for the longest time, those who do have been able to bully the rest of us into submission, *and* brainwash many of those who newly join us.”

“Let me guess. Fritz,” Kaylee said flatly.

“Among others,” Aaron said. “There are a couple more political powers like him, but Fritz is the worst of them.”

“Hey!” Quinoa said hotly. “You don’t talk about the Bosscat that way!”

“The...Bosscat?” Zane said, raising an eyebrow.

“Well, yes,” Leah said. “Until a few years ago, Fritz was...effectively ‘in charge’ of Integrate society. He made the rules about how we comported ourselves, and his gang of enforcers made sure everyone toed the line. He’s lost a good deal of power since, but is still a force to be reckoned with. A...fairly *dangerous* force.”

“You damn well betcha,” Quinoa said, crossing her arms.

“Well, *that* explains a lot,” Rhianna said.

“Fritz, huh?” Zane said. “That jerk of a lynx you mentioned from the Towers? Doesn’t sound so tough.”

“Don’t underestimate him,” Aaron said. “That’s the last mistake a lot of people ever made.”

“All right,” Zane said, though he didn’t sound convinced.

“I hate to change the subject,” Kaylee said. “But Fritz gave me this look, as if he knew me.” She broadcasted the memory to the Integrates. “See? Any insights?”

Leah shook her head. “It’s a mystery to me. But then, much about Fritz is. He was allegedly the first of us to Integrate, ever, so he pre-dates the times when others might have been around to learn his secrets.”

“Huh,” Rhianna mused. “And Kaylee was one of the first RIDEs ever built. Maybe there’s a connection there.”

“Maybe he’s your long-lost twin brother?” Quinoa asked, rolling her eyes. “He glares at a *lot* of mec—of people.”

“Hmm.” Zane thought for a moment. “Quinoa, after you guys are finished here, would you hang around a little? I’d like to talk to you, one on one.”

Quinoa blinked. “You would?” She brightened a little. “I—well, sure! If you want to...”

Now, if I could only ask Kaylee for a copy of her memories of that time in the Towers without Quinoa hearing me, Zane thought wryly. Hmm...maybe if I connect directly. He surreptitiously reached over and put his hand on one of Kaylee's paws where he knew she had a dataport. *:Hey, K-Spared, could I get a copy of your audiovisual memory of that time in the Towers? I'd like to see exactly how it happened.:*

:Sure, if it'll help you,: Kaylee replied, surprised. She downloaded him the memories, and he quickly assimilated them. He had mainly wanted to find out whether the details happened exactly as Rhianna had told him, and to watch Quinoa's behavior. As it turned out, it was pretty much what he had expected. That could be useful.

"Anyway, after I finally finished mapping the connectors," Rhianna said, "I turned things over to Rochelle to decrypt the signal. Your show, Shelley."

Rochelle stood up, her hair bouncing and flowing around her with the movement. "Right! So I started out with this program I wrote, that I called 'Enigma'..."

After the demonstration was finished, Leah and Aaron expressed their astonishment at how well the DIN had been made. Zane put it through some benchmark tests, and the results astounded them.

"Goodness," Leah said. "That outperforms any DIN I've ever seen. We have to carry a number of replacements with us because they fail so easily."

"By an order of magnitude at least," Aaron concurred.

"What? How?" Quinoa sputtered in disbelief. "Run those tests again!"

"I don't think that's necessary," Leah said. "How remarkable. Perhaps we should return in a few days and have some of our own made."

"I think it might be interesting to see if the results could be duplicated on other new Integrates," Aaron mused. "Perhaps we should send the next one to appear in Uplift your way."

"Well, since it turns out that *most* Integrates seem to be decent people, I don't see why not," Rhianna said. Quinoa glowered, but said nothing. "But call me back late tonight or tomorrow to discuss it? I don't talk business on a sleep deficit. I learned *that* lesson with Qixi."

At last, Leah and Aaron showed Zane some techniques for creating a better hardlight disguise that was impenetrable by scan and also used much less energy than his previous attempts. "Thanks," Zane said, after he'd perfected it. "I'm sure that will come in handy, if I ever need it."

"You *are* planning to go public, then?" Aaron said, feather crest rising to full height. "You could be taking an awful risk."

"I'm not going to hide this," Zane said. "I do appreciate your concern, but I don't think that's going to be necessary," Zane said. "I *have* Integrated, and if I started trying to hide it I wouldn't ever be able to stop. And I don't think I have anything to hide." He chuckled. "Besides, it would end up being a *bigger* scandal if I hid it for a few years and someone discovered me during a momentary lapse. This way I have more control to start with."

"Pardon us a moment, Zane," Aaron said. Leah and Aaron looked at one another again, conferring privately, and pointedly keeping Quinoa out.

"But...you'll be hated! Feared! Hunted!" Quinoa insisted. "Or the army will kidnap you for experiments!"

"This is Uplift," Zane said. "I don't even think they *have* an army."

"There's a volunteer militia," Kaylee said. "But I don't think they've fired a shot in anger since...well, ever. The War never got this far. And they're not in the business of kidnapping people."

"Even annoying Ingrates, I mean Integrates," Yvonne said, looking pointedly at Quinoa.

"I think most people around here generally have kind of open minds," Rochelle said. "And for those that don't—hello, seventh biggest corporation on Zharus? He can hire whole *teams* of bodyguards."

"Could it really be that simple?" Leah wondered.

"I'll *make* it that simple," Zane said. "It's worth a try, anyway. Someone's got to do it, because the more mystery and confusion there is around us Inties, the more potential there is for misunderstandings. Possibly violent misunderstandings."

"Well, we're not ones to forcibly interfere in other people's lifestyles," Leah said. Again, nine heads turned in unison to look at Quinoa. "Mostly," Leah amended.

"I *said* I was sorry," Quinoa grumbled.

"So if you really want to go through with this...well, we'll wish you luck," Aaron said. "I'll talk to my Enclave and see what they think. But, knowing my fellow 'saurs in the Park, I can promise you'll get support from us. How much, I can't say. We'll have to call a meeting. Leah? How about Terrania?"

"We herd herbivores are a bit more cautious in these things," Leah said. "But I don't anticipate *too* much trouble, after the initial shock wears off. We've been as annoyed at Fritz's antics as anyone. And now that he finally seems to have lost his teeth, it might just be time for a change."

"We know a few other Enclaves with the same bent, Mr. Brubeck," Aaron said. "We've just been waiting for an opportunity."

"I have to say, if you *are* going to public with something like this, Uplift is probably the right place," Rochelle said. "Half the time our Consuls don't wear pants to work. About the only spot more laid back on the entire continent is Aloha."

"Yeah, I know," Zane said. "If I tried it in Nextus...sheesh, I'd have to write a whole new chapter for the Game's rulebook before I could even start playing."

"Integrates have been an urban legend here for ten years and more," Uncia said. "I did the research, I should know."

"Fritz's followers have done a great deal to keep us out of the limelight," Leah said, glaring at Quinoa. "Even amongst each other."

The sphinx gave her an indignant sneer and stuck her tongue out like a rebuked child.

"At any rate, I'll put the word out about DINs," Aaron said. "I know there's a few of us out and about, not beholden to an Enclave." He glared at Quinoa. "I suppose it's too much to ask for you *not* to tell Fritz about this side business of theirs?"

"They're just meat," Quinoa said derisively, as if that was all the explanation she needed. "But I *have* to tell the Bosscat Stripes there is going public."

"You do what you have to do," Zane said. "That's what I'm doing."

Rhianna yawned, revealing her adorable pointed kitty canines. "I think my wakey pills are wearing off. Tired kitty needs her catnap. Leah, Aaron, it was great to meet you. Zane, glad to help you. Quinoa, don't let the screen door hit your butt on the way out."

"And I think I'm gonna crash on your sofa again," Rochelle said. "Or maybe on

Uncia. She's sort of like a sofa."

"I'll see them all out," Zane said. "And thanks again for the help." He snapped his fingers. "Oh, and that reminds me. When you're ready to buy your suborbital? Give me a call. I'll put you in touch with the dealer we get all ours from and give you the company discount."

Rhianna yawned again, stumbling up the stairs. "Thanks, Zane. Kaylee, remind me to do...um...whatever it is he just said. Dude, if I don't go to sleep *now* I'm going to hit the floor." She threw herself upstairs as quickly as she dared.

"I don't think I can make it up the stairs," Rochelle said, yawning. "Uncia, could you lie down, hon?"

"Sure thing, Shelley." The snow leopard complied, and Rochelle settled into the curve of the spine on that broad furry back and began snoring.

Zane chuckled. "C'mon, you-all, exit's this way." He led the three Integrates and Rufia to the door.

Rufia chuckled. "I gotta admit, you know how to throw a party. Breakfast with several of Zharus's greatest urban legends in the flesh. Too bad I can't tell anyone...well, at least not until handsome there meets the press. Anyway, I got places to do and people to be. Check ya later!" She thumped Yvonne on the back, and the elk flipped over into skimmer mode. Rufia swung into the saddle and headed on up the street.

Finally, Zane turned to Leah and Aaron and shook each of their hands. "Thanks for coming, guys. Let me know when you're in town again."

Leah nodded. "We will." Then she simply vanished, though now that he was watching for it Zane could see the way she actually used hardlight to bend light around herself before flying away with her lifters. He made a mental note of the technique, so as to try it himself sometime.

"The pleasure was mine," Aaron said. He disappeared and flew off in the same way, leaving Zane alone with Quinoa Steader.

"So," Quinoa said at last. "What now?"

"Walk with me for a bit. I want to talk to you about some things," Zane said.

Quinoa shrugged. "All right. Let's walk."

They headed up the sidewalk in the general direction of the Brubeck campus. Quinoa was using a hardlight illusion to hide her wings and feline features, making her appear to be a pretty young woman quite unlike the Quinoa Steader he remembered. "So...what did you want?" she asked uncertainly. She still seemed subdued, hadn't recovered her old attitude yet. Good.

"I wanted to ask you a very important question," Zane said. "I want you to think about it before you answer."

"All...right?" Quinoa said nervously.

"When Rhianna, Qixi, and the rest ended up in the Towers...*what did you do wrong?*" Zane asked.

"But we didn't—" Quinoa began angrily, but Zane held up a hand.

"I want you to *think about it*," he repeated. "Take several minutes if you want. I can wait."

Quinoa sighed. "I don't need to *think* about it. They already rubbed it in good back then. How was *I* supposed to know yanking their fetters and giving them their skins was going to be a *bad* thing?"

“Can’t say I’m really fond of fetters myself,” Zane said. “Given that I had them on me for most of my life. My human side didn’t like the idea of them, either.”

“You see?” Quinoa said. “So what’s the problem?”

“Well, the whole ‘government job’ thing, for one,” Zane said. “You know, when you work for the government, you’re under some restrictions. More so if you’re a RIDE. But there’s always that incentive to buy out your RIDE when you leave. The problem is, RIDEs are *pretty expensive* for ordinary people. Especially when they haven’t had a lot of time on the job to build up their savings yet. And when you put someone like that in a situation where they have to buy out *now*...”

“Oh.” Quinoa frowned. Zane thought she looked a little paler.

“It’s pretty common for people from our walk of life to have a little trouble figuring out how much stuff costs for people who don’t have that much,” Zane said. “Which is part of why Dad raised me middle class, I guess. The problem is—”

Zane stopped, then looked up at a cloud of dust coming up the road. It looked familiar. In fact—it was Sophie, in her skimmer form, totally disregarding the speed limit. And then his vision zoomed in, showing Myla hunched low over the controls, tears streaming from her eyes. “Oh hell. Speak of the devil. Quinoa, could you get out of sight please?” Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the sphinx-girl seem to blink out of existence. “Good enough.”

Then he sent to the onrushing skimmer, *:Sophie? It’s Zane. Rhianna and Rochelle are both asleep, and Rufia’s gone. Can I help?:*

:It...didn’t go well,: the fennec RIDE replied. :Qixi’s the worst kind of boss. I can’t imagine why she’s as successful as she is. We knew within five minutes it wasn’t going to work out, then spent an hour in pure hell. Qixi knew she had us by the tail.:

:What did she do?:

:Pulled a fast one on the so-called ‘goodwill loan’. Jacked up the interest rate she was going to charge. It wouldn’t have been a job so much as indentured servitude. It was all I could do to keep from chewing her face off myself. She said if we walked out she was going to send the bill to a collection agency. Well, we did. That bitch is screwing with the wrong vixen!:

:Pull up over here, Sophie. Let me talk to Myla. Maybe I can fix things.: He carefully didn’t look over where Quinoa had been standing.

Sophie slowed below the speed limit, her rider too inward-focused to notice. The duo went directly into fuse.

Zane approached the pair, and placed a hand on their shoulder. “Hey. I know we didn’t really get off to the best start, and this may not be a very good time, but I *really* need to talk to you. It’s urgent.”

The fennec’s head retracted to reveal Myla’s tear-stricken face. She looked a little better than before. Having Sophie share her misery must have put a damper on it. “What do you want, Mr. Brubeck? I really...well...what do you want?” Sobbing took over again. “Oooh noooo...they’re going to repo my dear Sophie...”

“No, they’re not. I’ve *been* repossessed, and I won’t let that happen to anyone I can help.” Zane shook his head. “What I want is to offer you a job. A *real* job, because I need talents you have—not a make-work or an indenture to pay off a loan you shouldn’t have had to take out in the first place.”

He paused to let that sink in. “But first, I wanted to show you something. I’m passing it to Sophie now. I know you saw the worst side of Integration back in the

Towers. If you're going to trust me enough to work for me, you need to see a better one. This is kind of personal...but it's all I've got."

He sent the memory packet through the link from his palm: two sets of memories, one beginning with a man limping through a desert, and the other beginning with a tiger RIDE trapped in a sinkhole. The memories played out over several months of friendship, culminating in an evening when two friends worriedly asked each other what they were going to become...and then became it. Then they woke up the next day, a new man.

:*That was...beautiful*,: Sophie said, stunned.

"Absolutely," Myla agreed. "Thank you for sharing that with us. That...takes a lot of trust."

Zane shrugged. "I trust Rhianna. Rhianna trusts you. I figure trust should Baconize."

"I don't know if something like that could ever happen to Sophie and me, though," Myla mused. "At least, not now."

"I wouldn't want it to, before it was time," Zane said. "Which is why *I'd* never try to force it on anyone. I just—"

And then there was an Integrate sphinx prostrated on the ground next to them. "Myla, I am *so, so sorry*," Quinoa sobbed. "I didn't...I never thought. Even when you mentioned *that time* I didn't understand. But I...I do now. I never meant to do this to you. I never meant to...to *hurt* you."

A fleeting expression of rage and anger, directed at Zane and Quinoa both, passed swiftly. The fennec de-Fused, turning her gaze on the sobbing woman-child, then up to her rider. "You...didn't say that *she* was with you, Mr. Brubeck. But I'm not angry. At least, not now. Come here, kiddo," Myla said, reaching down to give her a hand up off the ground. "You remember what I said to you about 'contrition' all those years ago? You were what, twelve?"

"Twelve and a *half*," Quinoa said, half-smiling through her tears. "I remember. Inties remember everything."

"After all that's happened, do you understand *now*, little girl?" Myla said crisply.

"I...I do. I hadn't thought it through. I just thought fetters were *bad*. And the others said the same...but now I understand." She forced herself to meet Myla's gaze. "And I'll do...whatever I can to...to make up for it."

"You know, this time I think she does get it," Sophie said.

"I think so too, Sophie. Then she's a big girl now, isn't she? Quinnie, you're on the road to being a 'young woman' now. Finally." As she spoke the last words, her voice went from patronizing to genuinely pleased.

"I'm just so sorry," Quinoa said again. "The others said..." She shook her head. "Why did I *listen* to them?" She shook her head.

"Quinoa, I might have some ideas about that, but I need to talk to Myla and Sophie alone for a little bit first. Could you wait for us here?" Zane sent her the coordinates of his apartment through his DIN.

"All...all right," Quinoa said, sniffing. She lifted off her feet and vanished, and they felt the breeze of her passage as she zoomed off toward the apartment building.

"Sorry," Zane said. "I honestly didn't mean to spring her on you like that. We'd just been out walking and talking, when you came driving up. I'd asked her to keep hidden, but..."

“It’s Quinoa. She could never keep quiet about *anything* for very long.” Myla was starting to recover from the shock now, and her RIDE licking her cheek threatened to make her giggle.

“Anyway, it’s not *quite* her fault. Well, not entirely, anyway. I think there’s a couple pieces of the puzzle you’re missing.” He sent across another memory package, this one comprising their conversations with the Integrates from breakfast up through his talk with Quinoa and Myla’s arrival.

“Glad they’re not all assholes, then,” Sophie said. “I recognize the dinosaur’s name, too—one of the few bits of memory they didn’t dig out of me with a spork. AWOL from the army years ago after he lost his arm and a leg in a firefight while Fused. Command asked Materiel Recovery to look out for his RIDE.” She chuckled. “Something tells me they’re not going to get that one back.”

“And it’s nice to hear that Burke, or ‘Flint-Burke,’ is getting help,” Myla said.

Zane nodded. “So what I’m thinking is, I asked Quinoa to stay here in Uplift, put her up in an apartment nearby where I can kinda keep a big-brotherly eye on her, and where she won’t have that Fritz pouring poison in her ear. And that kinda brings me to you.” He looked directly at Myla.

The former Nextus MRS officer shrugged. “I’m open to suggestions. At least I know you’re on the level, unlike that bitch Qixi. Bitches, really. Her entire crew is almost as bad as she is.”

Zane nodded. “Yeah, we’ve contracted with them before, and I’ve met her once or twice. Not pleasant. Anyway, as you heard in those memories, *I’m* not going to be hiding under a rock—or a disguise. And I’m sure there are going to be plenty of ordinary people who are scared of me, and probably Integrates like Fritz who won’t want me upsetting their apple cart either. So what I need is a bodyguard. One with the kind of tenacity it takes to tough it out for months in a pastel pegasus pony RIDE if that’s the job.” He grinned. “Though I promise you won’t have to do that this time.”

“Why couldn’t they have found a Luna for me? Honestly, the worst part was the pastel blue ears and rainbow-colored hair and tail. After a while Dashie and I tolerated one another. But that’s neither here nor there. It’s this *stupid* loan I signed with Qixi. She damn well *knew* the emotional state I was in and *took advantage* of it!” She smacked her knee. “I want to kick her tail soooo hard!”

Zane chuckled. “Don’t worry about Qixi. I’ll buy your loan off of her outright, and throw in enough of a buyout bonus she won’t be able to say no. She won’t be any problem; she knows I can squash her like the obnoxious little stink bug she is if she gives me any trouble. And I just *hope* she gives me trouble.” He actually *blushed* through his fur. “I’m sorry, I don’t *like* playing the rich bastard, usually—it’s just not me—but loathsome little twerps like Qixi just make it too tempting to pass up entirely.”

Myla blinked. “You’d do that, for me?” Then she shook her head. “I’ve seen what kind of person you are from your memories, of course you’d do that. I...don’t know what to say.”

“The word you’re looking for is ‘yes’.” Zane chuckled. “And I know you’re of a type with Rhianna and Rochelle—you’ve got your pride, so I won’t even think about just trying to forgive the loan,” he said. “I know you wouldn’t go for that. I almost kind of wish you would, but then I realize that if you were that kind of person, you wouldn’t be the kind of person I wanted in the first place.”

"Thanks...I think," Myla said. "So how *are* you going to want me to pay it back?"

"I'll just figure up a payment at a reasonable interest rate and dock it out of your first few paychecks," Zane said. "But I *do* plan to pay you enough that you'll hardly even notice the chunk missing." He grinned. "I'd do this for anyone, but especially for a friend of Rhianna's. And I hope you'll be my friend, too—both of you."

Myla grinned. "It already feels as though I've known you for months."

Sophie chuckled. "It does. Funny, that."

"Then welcome to the team." He held out his hand for Myla to shake and Sophie to lick. "Let's go tell Quinoa the good news, then I'll phone Qixi and you all can listen in. Should be fun."

The apartment building was a fairly classy downtown high-rise. It was easy enough to find, and the combination balcony and skimmer pad meant Quinoa didn't have to go through the lobby, which was nice. She waved a hand at the security alarm on the balcony door, and it chirped happily and let her in. *Not the droid you're looking for*, Quinoa thought.

She sighed. Well, this was probably the only alone-time she was going to get for a while, so might as well get it over with. Her DIN flashed as she opened a scrambled comm line.

"What's the haps, Quinnie?" a cheerful Fritz said. "You scoped out our noob in Uplift yet?"

"Uh...yeah," Quinoa said. "Not drinking anything, are you?"

"Smooth Alohan ice latte with some sarium sweets," Fritz replied. "But if you're worried I'm gonna spit-take, I just put it down. So, make with the telling."

"It's Zane Brubeck," Quinoa said.

There was silence for what must have been a couple fast-time hours on Fritz's end. "Ol' Clint's kid? You're shitting me! They don't like RIDEs!"

"Well, turns out this one liked green eggs and ham, Sam I Am," Quinoa said. "It was even in the news a few months back."

A guffaw. "Oh, I just caught up. Zane's a chip off the ol' block, ain't he? So, what's the haps? You bringing him to Towers?"

"Not...at this point," Quinoa said, trying to figure out how to break the news. "It'd raise too many eyebrows if the head of Brubeck Mining just up and vanished so soon after his old man died."

"Got a point there. Since Clint and I had an understanding, I'm gonna do that tigger a favor and let him be for now, provided you teach him how to mask up and he keeps his lip shut. Keep your peepers on him for now, Quinnie. So, what did the nag and the gecko think?"

"They were pretty surprised," Quinoa said. "I think Zane might be the most famous Intie we've had yet."

"Yeah, I suppose so. 'Til now that would've been...you," Fritz said jovially. "Little sad he's stolen your thunder?"

"I'm trying not to worry about it," Quinoa said. "Anyway, they've gone back to Jurassic Park. I think Zane wants me to stick around a while."

"You do that, chick. You do that. Show him what's what, keep 'im in line," Fritz said. "Today's been a ginchy day, and this bit of news just tops it off. You know that cube of an owly griffin back at Towers? No longer a problem."

“Uh...how’s that, Bosscat?” Quinoa said.

“Pew pew pew! Wait, no. It’s more of a boom. *Big bada boom*,” Fritz said cheerfully. “Multipass. All that shit.”

Quinoa froze. *But...I kinda liked him*, she thought, careful not to let even a hint of that leak into the comm connection. “Well...that’s great.”

“Yeah,” Fritz said, too pleased with himself to take note of her hesitation. “When word gets around, I think the kind of static we took at Towers that time will be pure Herodotus. Ancient history. All the same, I’m thinking ‘bout cleaning up the other little loose ends. Next time I see that Qixi and her pack in the Dry...mmm, what Enclave you think might be a good spot for a pack of new wolfies?”

Despite the shock she’d just taken, Quinoa had to grin at that idea. She hadn’t liked those bitches much when she’d met them at Towers, and after the way they’d just treated Myla—

Myla. Oh crap. She’d be a “loose end,” too. So would the people from the Freeriders Garage. *Better nip this in the bud right now.*

“I know how you hate loose ends and all, but I think maybe you oughtta nix that plan, Bosscat,” Quinoa said after a few minutes of rapid fast-time thought. “They’ve already had time to blab it around. It’s such a wild and crazy tale as it is now, nobody’s likely to pay it much mind. But if they all suddenly vanish, hello Streisand Effect.”

“Mmmm,” Fritz said, half-growling. “Damn it if you don’t got a point there, Quinnie. A’least I can wait a year or two ‘til nobody would put the two together. Waited five years for Paulie, after all.”

I’ll take that. A lot can happen in a year, Quinoa thought. “Sounds like a plan.”

“Copacetic,” Fritz said. “Anything else, kitten?”

Quinoa bit her lip. She *should* tell Fritz about the Freeriders’ DIN, she knew that. But...she remembered his enthusiasm at cleaning up “loose ends.” *Poor Paulie.* She didn’t want to tip him back over into deciding it was a good idea after all. “Ah...not just now. I’ll let you know if anything else crops up.”

“Solid, Quinnie. Copacetic. I’ll let Ol’ Joe know you’re coming up roses,” Fritz said. “If you can extract the tigger from public life, I’ll even let you visit him.”

“Uh...thanks,” Quinoa said. “I’ll do my best.” *Yeah, like that’s gonna happen. Ugh. Well, you never know.*

“I know you will. Ciao!” Fritz dropped the line.

Quinoa let out the breath she’d been holding, and sank onto the RIDE couch in the living room. “Ugh.” Suddenly, being an Integrate didn’t feel like quite so much fun anymore.

Zane, Myla, and Sophie got to the apartment to find Quinoa waiting for them on the edge of Zane’s living room sofa. She hopped up as they came in, eyes still directed at the floor.

Sophie peered thoughtfully at the sofa Quinoa had vacated. “That looks comfy. May I?”

The sofa was a bit of an oddity, as it was in some ways more like a mattress than a sofa. It was actually a combination RIDE bed and couch, intended for a large furry RIDE to arrange itself along one side and serve as a living sofa back for the humans who sat on the other edge. Zane had bought it in the first few days of his partnership with Terry, though they’d never actually ended up using it much, discovering that they

preferred staying Fused most of the time.

“As long as you don’t mind us leaning against you, be my guest,” Zane said. “In fact, if you want I can have it moved down to your and Myla’s apartment, when we get one set up for you. I certainly don’t have a RIDE to use it with anymore.”

“Thanks!” Sophie arranged herself along the back of the sofa-bed with her hind and fore legs to either side of the seating space.

Myla chuckled. “She does look comfortable, doesn’t she? In more ways than one.”

“C’mon, let’s sit down.” Zane took one end, Myla the other, and he waved Quinoa to take the space in between them. “We had something we wanted to talk to you about.”

“What was that?” Quinoa asked.

“Well, for starters, Myla’s agreed to sign on as my new bodyguard,” Zane said.

Quinoa perked up. “Oh! She’s *good* at that! You know, I think my uncle still has Dashie around somewhere...”

“Nooooo thanks,” Myla said. “I’ve had enough pony for a lifetime.” She rolled her eyes. “Sooooo much pony.”

Zane chuckled, and Quinoa actually giggled a little.

“The other thing I wanted to talk to you about was, well...from what you said earlier, I got the impression that maybe you and the Towers Council could use some time apart,” Zane said.

Quinoa sobered up, and nodded once. “They...haven’t really been all that happy with me since last month. Especially in light of my association with Fritz.” She paused a moment, considering the conversation she’d just had a few minutes before, then sighed. “In fact...given, um, recent developments, I don’t think I *can* go back there now. Great, that’s three Enclaves in three months I’ve been chucked out of.”

“So here’s my proposal,” Zane said. “I find *you* an apartment here, too, and you stay for a while. You can teach me the things I’d learn if I were an Enclave newbie, and maybe we can talk more about Integrate philosophy. And you could tell the Council or whoever that you’re being all responsible and staying here to keep a closer eye on things.”

“And perhaps we could find the time to do some things together, just like old times,” Myla said.

Quinoa blinked. “You’d...do that for me? After what I said? And...” she glanced over her shoulder at Sophie “...what I did?”

“I won’t necessarily say *all* is forgiven yet,” Myla said. “But you’ve gone a long way toward getting there.” She smiled faintly, running a hand along Sophie’s fur behind her. “And as, well, *devastating* as it was at the time, I do have to admit you and your friends did some very good work with the upgrade.”

“Same here,” Sophie agreed. “It feels completely natural! Or, at least, what I’d imagine completely natural must feel like.”

“So thank you for that, at least,” Myla said.

“You’re...welcome, and I’m sorry again,” Quinoa said, looking down. “It’s kind of...dogmatic in some Integrate circles that any tethered RIDE *must* be freed. And I bought into it. I screwed up. I...think I know better now.”

“There’s still one more person you have to apologize to, you know,” Myla said gently. “The one who got hurt even more than we did.”

“I know,” Quinoa said. “And I will, when I get the chance. I’ll find out which Enclave he’s in, and go there. Maybe I can even get them to make an exception to usual

policy and let you-all visit, as long as I keep the location secret.”

Myla thought about that for a moment. “I think...I’d like that. It might be nice to meet some Integrates who aren’t...” She glanced at Quinoa, then trailed off.

Quinoa smiled. “It’s all right. You can say it. I know what we were. ‘Total assholes.’”

“You said it, not me,” Myla said, and they all chuckled.

“Well, speaking of total assholes, now comes the fun part of the evening’s entertainment,” Zane said, leaning back against Sophie. He opened a comm line and piped the output through the apartment’s entertainment speakers.

A moment later a gruff female voice came over the line. “Qixi Wolfwood. What you want.”

“Hi, Qixi, this is Zane Brubeck. Listen, I’ve heard that in a moment of weakness you recently made a loan to an ex-Nextus Materiel Recovery officer. Since you’ve done a number of jobs so well for Brubeck Mining in the past, I’ve decided out of the goodness of my heart to take that loan off your hands for you...”

“I...wow. That ‘noob briefing’ didn’t go nearly as I thought it would,” Aaron said. He and Leah were sharing a VR session that was a cartoon version of the gazebo from Terrania. It was an easy way to chat while their bodies arced through the air at just barely subsonic speed en route to Jurassic Park.

Leah snorted. “You have a talent for understatement. What a can of worms! We can at least be glad this isn’t the *old* days.”

“Well, we still have a worm named Quinoa to consider. She’s likely to blab everything to Fritz. And if that beatnik finds out that non-Inties are making DINs, I don’t know if we can protect them.”

“Though I’m unsure if he would believe it to begin with,” Leah said.

“Depends on how much he’s come to believe his own press about being ‘superior’ and ‘special snowflakes’,” Aaron added.

“At least Quinoa is staying there,” Leah said. “If I had to put up with that girl for *ten more milliseconds*...”

“Perhaps Brubeck could prove to be a positive influence on her,” Aaron suggested. Leah stared at him. “It could happen!” he insisted.

When he and Leah arrived at the Enclave the gates were wide open, to Aaron’s surprise. Even more, the bombastic entry music was off and even the torches had been extinguished. “What on Zharus?” Aaron said as they touched down. He glanced to the gatekeeper, who’d come out at their approach. “Fred, what’s going on here?”

The heavy-set miniature apatosaurus shook his head. “Bad juju. We just had a delegation from Towers in a couple hours ago. We’re calling in reps from Wonderland, Camelot, and Terrania—so I’m glad you’re with him, Leah. We’ve toned down the meme for the guests.

“The Clever One wants to talk with you both as soon as possible. Get your tails in there.”

Aaron and Leah exchanged worried looks, then hurried on through the oddly silent gates. Aaron reflected on how, for all the times he’d *wished* they were silent when he passed through them before, actually having them *be* that way just felt...*wrong*.

The Enclave was an exacting reproduction of the first *Jurassic Park* movie’s buildings and jungle environs as much as possible in the constrained space

belowground. The resort's cafeteria had multiple functions, including meeting space. There were already a number of Integrates of all shapes and sizes milling around in it, including a large feathered allosaur.

"That's Eddie Gray!" Aaron said. The larger dinosaur looked equal parts haunted and determined.

"Aaron! Over here!" the Clever One said, waving her wing-arms. She was a colorful archaeopteryx, dressed in a hardlight version of John Hammond's white outfit. "Feed me what happened in Uplift, will you?"

"Sure thing, Kamilah," Aaron said. He transmitted a summarized version to the Enclave's elected executive.

"Having Quinoa involved in this complicates things," Kamilah said, rustling her feathers. "We need to move fast on this. Fritz won't rest on his smug laurels for very long."

:The Red Queen and the Hatter are here!: Fred called out. *:And Monty is just behind as Camelot's rep.:* There really were a remarkable number of Enclave representatives here, Aaron reflected. Even little holes in the wall from all the way across the Dry had sent someone. Chakona's representative, a brown-haired tiger felitaur, was chatting with a small raccoon Integrate from Furcadia and a fox in a saffron robe from Shangri-La. About the only Enclave of note not represented was Fritz's Coffeehouse.

"Gang's all here," the Clever One said. "Let's make this a realtime meeting to avoid DIN burnouts."

"What is going on?" Leah asked.

"I'm getting to that," Kamilah said. "All right, pipe down everyone, I only want to explain this once." The room abruptly quieted. "Okay, that's better. Col. Gray, if you would honor us?"

The allosaurus took up a lot of space even in the enlarged cafeteria. "There's no way to pull any punches here, everyone. About four hours ago Fritz murdered Paulie." Gray transmitted the record of the assassination to everyone.

Aaron groaned. *:I was wrong,:* he sent across to Leah. *:It is like the old days.:*

:Or so Fritz would have us believe,: Leah sent.

"What are we going to do about this?" Monty, a white horse Integrate in a colorful tabard, demanded.

"We should take action!" someone else in the crowd said. "Show him who's boss!"

"But who exactly is going to bell that lynx?" a winged deer in a *Star Trek* uniform asked. "We might be able to dogpile him, but that could result in a lot more fatalities first."

"There might be another way, if we bide our time a little while longer," Aaron said. "We just learned something...remarkable in Uplift." He transmitted the same memory summary he'd just given Kalindra, with Leah adding her own POV. "I think Zane Brubeck is the answer to the question."

"And so did Paulie, when he spoke to us before we went to meet him," Leah added. "If there's anyone who can bring us out into the open, it could only be someone with his power and resources in human society. Fritz simply can't just disappear him like his Snatchers did so many others."

"I'm more interested in what you saw of those Freeriders' DIN work," Monty put in. "We already know that bunch down in Aloha has done something in that regard, but

Fritz and his crew keep trashing their 'boards so it can't leak out to anyone else, and they're not in any position to rock the boat yet."

"Yes, that is curious," Gray agreed. "We should probably ascertain whether it's a one-time fluke before we pin any hopes on that, though. Perhaps we should direct the next Integrate to quicken in Uplift their way and keep an eye on the results."

"In the meanwhile, we should bide our time," Kamilah suggested. "Prepare ourselves, but let Fritz think he has cowed us a while longer." She grimaced. "And prepare to give this Zane Brubeck what support we might, should he need it."

"Any of you who wish to stay for a while to keep an eye on things, we have extra quarters in Terrania," Leah put in.

"And here as well," Aaron added.

"And the rest of you will undoubtedly wish to return to your own Enclaves with this news," Kamilah said. "Therefore, this meeting is adjourned. Take care on your way home."

Aaron and Leah exchanged glances as the cafeteria began to clear out. *:It appears our times just became a good deal more interesting.:*

Leah rolled her eye, the white showing. *:This kind of interesting, I can do without. I suppose I should return to Terrania and organize the surveillance. We need to keep a close eye on Uplift for now.:*

:Agreed,: Aaron said. *:Stay in touch. Things should start happening soon.:*

Leah lifted into the air and drifted toward the exit, glancing over her shoulder before she left. *:That's what I'm afraid of.:*

Chapter Three: RIDEgirls' Day Out

At the top of the stairs, just inside the door, Rhianna's body finally gave out. She slumped to the floor asleep, almost face first. Kaylee's rider had inherited a cat's ability to sleep almost anywhere to go with the rest of her tags. But the lynx RIDE couldn't allow Rhianna to sleep like *that*. She'd awake with a horrible crick in her neck sleeping with her stubby tail in the air.

The lynx mecha gently grabbed the scruff of the crossrider's jumpsuit with her teeth and slowly pulled the sleeping woman towards the living room couch, trying not to wake her. Tired as she was, Rhianna would wake up very cranky if she pulled too hard. Kaylee knew her rider.

Kaylee felt very possessive over her. The months and years the RI had literally dreamed about going Active only made making Rhianna's transition worth it to her all the more important. *Okay, K-Spared, she's not going to put you back in the Shed*, she reassured herself for the 127th time. She knew that, deep in her being from Fuse, yet the irrational fear persisted.

The thought of going into Passive again scared her. It was too much like shutdown. Too much like being forgotten in the Shed, being used for spare parts until there was nothing left but her chassis and RI core. *Not going to happen again*.

Kaylee's forelegs started trembling. There were still shadows of events in her fragmented memory core. Past catastrophes, the flavor of which had survived, but nothing else. Sometimes she had a flash of a heavy firefight with something or other. Other times, she saw the face of a young woman that *could have* been Myla's aunt, but no certainty. The RIDE-techs had even excised her earliest memory during final decommissioning. The first time she'd booted up, one of the most cherished things an RI had. Even *that* was gone.

She gently licked her rider, made a decision, then Fused over her slumbering form. Before getting up she made sure Rhianna was in a deep, restful sleep. Rhianna had taken to calling her "mother" lately, and for good reason. She felt *just that* broody and protective. Kaylee had spent months designing a female body she felt her rider could live with. The feline nose hadn't been in the plan, but...

This was the first time she had dared Fuse while Rhianna was sleeping. Most of the RIDEs she knew did it at one time or another; Fuse-sleep was common out in the Dry. Despite being based on animal neural maps, they were at least as intelligent as humans and very much knew the advantages of walking on two legs and having thumbs. She decided to make some use of the time and clean the place up a bit—some domesticity to take her mind off unpleasant subroutines.

The Freerider Garage had had very humble beginnings. Five years ago, when Ryan had a stroke of good luck and met someone willing to take a risk on his business skills, the Garage itself hadn't even been inside the East Dome. The expansion schedule was known well in advance, of course, which was probably why their landlord didn't want to sell the plot, to anyone. But he *had* been willing to rent it out to a small entrepreneur trying to make good in the world.

The memories stood out in Rhianna's mind as some of the happiest of her life. It

was the end of a very hard first year on Zharus, soon after migrating from Zharustead to the tiny western polis of Burnside. Ryan and Rufus had been hitchhiking on the foggy, forested Northwest Ring Skimmerway, trying to get *anywhere* but that tiny burg. Then they'd encountered their future landlord broken down on the side of the road and fixed his skimmer with little more than a keen mind and a few bits of twisted wire.

There were earlier memories, of course. Childhood and young adulthood on Earth, Ryan's need to stand on his own and make a life apart from his family, and his eventual emigration to Zharus, but Kaylee felt those were more private, so let them be.

Kaylee put in a call to Sophie on the RIDE-specific sidechannels. ~QUERY: Current domicile or comm address of Aunt Anny?~

~RESPONSE: Negative. Whereabouts unknown to this unit. SUGGESTION: Ask Myla. End of Line,~ was Sophie's terse reply. *:Look, Kaylee, just call me normally. I hate that machine-talk. I know this is a lot slower, but that makes me feel like a freaking stupid Ad-I.:*

:Sorry. Old habit, I guess.: Kaylee replied. Sophie was a sister-in-arms of the Materiel Recovery Service, so she had more respect for her than usual. *:I'm really, really an oldie. I guess s'why I'm so curious about Myla's aunt. Have you ever met her?:*

:Once. We had lunch soon after Myla joined the service. Here's how she looked. Ring any bells?: The fennec sent over a memory package. It had quite a few gaps from the ham-handed decommissioning process, but it was enough.

Memory blocks Kaylee had thought were unrecoverably dead sparked to life again. Annette Hower and the three others in her squad—one woman, two men—posing for photos at the RIDEs' induction ceremony. She was a short, dark-skinned woman with a bright, broad smile.

:Sophie, I really want to get in contact with her now,: Kaylee said excitedly.

:Sorry, kitteh; it'll have to wait. Let your rider get her beauty sleep. It'll keep, so don't worry. No need to be an impatient kitten.:

Kaylee snorted aloud to herself. *:You're right. It's waited this long. Chat at you later, vixie.:*

:Later, kitteh.: Sophie closed the connection.

Kaylee finished tidying up, and stood back to satisfy her handiwork. Not bad at all. It was really too bad Rhianna hadn't picked up the stereotypically feminine tidiness habit along with the body. She still dropped her laundry wherever it fell, and Kaylee was always finding socks in odd places. Though she heard from Yvonne that Rufia was even *worse*. She suppressed a shudder, not wanting to risk waking Rhianna up.

Now that the work was done, she supposed she should tuck Rhianna into her bed and take herself downstairs for some charging time. But...on the other hand...after all those times *she'd* put herself to sleep while Ryan used *her* body like a badly-fitting Halloween costume...could Rhianna *really* begrudge her a little "me" time with the shared body as long as she got her full night's sleep?

It only took a few moments for the lynx to come to a decision. Making sure Rhianna was still deep in REM, she tiptoed downstairs, where Rochelle was still snuggled into the crook of Uncia's spine.

As she passed, Uncia raised her head. *:Hey, sis, what's up? I thought Rhianna was sleeping.:*

:She is,: Kaylee said.

:Ooooooh!: Uncia said. *:I see! You've put her in Passive mode!:*

:I guess you could put it that way,: Kaylee admitted. :Just thought I'd go out and do a little shopping or something.:

Then a moment later she regretted mentioning it as Rochelle's sleeping body sank into Uncia, who shifted around and stood up in her own Fuser form. She spoke aloud now that Rochelle could no longer be disturbed. "Hey, great! I wanna come, too!"

Kaylee traveled along a half meter above the street at 45 kph, arms crossed, a mildly annoyed expression on her face. Oblivious, a sixty-centimeter taller snow leopard zoomed along right behind her. "There're these great stores in the mall I saw when Rufia took Rochelle shopping. There were even a couple of RIDE fashion places! Y'know, where we can buy clothes sized to fit us that we can wear in Fuser if we want instead of these metal bikinis!"

"Never saw much need for that sort of foolishness," Kaylee muttered. "They'd just get torn up if we had to work in 'em." Why had she had to come along? Kaylee had been looking forward to a little quiet time to look around on her own, not having to babysit a teenaged sportsRIDE.

Uncia giggled. "They won't get torn up. They're dress *designs* we can download and display from our hardlight projectors. Anyway, they're not *for* working in, silly! They're for showing off in! I mean, we're people, too. Why should we go around naked all the time?"

"Hmph," Kaylee said. She still didn't really see the point.

Uncia zoomed around in front of Kaylee, flying backward up the street in front of her. "Aha! *I* know what it is! You've never had the *chance* to dress up! They frown on that kinda thing in Nextus, and you were never *awake* when Ryan was wearing you! That *explains* it!"

"Watch where you're going, why don't you?" Kaylee grumbled.

Uncia darted forward and seized Kaylee's arm. "That's it! Sis, you're coming with me, and I'm not giving up until we've found you the *purrrrrrfect* dress! C'mon!"

Kaylee yelped in surprise as Uncia dragged her into the nearest entrance to the mall, and the door swung shut behind them.

If anyone had been paying attention, someone might have noticed a slight anomaly in the eastern hardlight dome. Not that anyone would have been paying attention at any rate; there were dozens of such anomalies per day, generally caused by a fluctuation in one of the dome's dozens of industrial power supply units. They were logged but largely ignored, since most of them were no kind of threat to the dome's structural integrity.

This particular anomaly, though, was caused by a cloaked lynx Integrate parting the structure of the dome just long enough to slip through. After pausing to take his bearings, Fritz drifted down to street level, then cruised up the sidewalk toward the jumble of temporary building modules that made up the Freeriders Garage.

When you got right down to it, Fritz wasn't entirely sure why he was even here. He'd just talked to Quinoa, after all, and he trusted her to do her job. But something about it still itched at him. Something about *her*. Some things, he needed to see for himself.

:So, are you actually concerned for her wellbeing?: Jiminy asked.

:Is it any of your fucking beeswax, Blast HardCheese?: Fritz retorted.

:*Oh, don't mind me, I just live here,*: he replied in his most infuriatingly pleasant tone.

Fritz rolled his eyes. :*Would you please just can it for once? I need to think.*:

:*Think? Really? What, you taking up a new hobby in your old age?*: the voice in his head needled. But it also subsided, for the moment. Fritz supposed he should be grateful for small favors.

As he sidled up to the garage, Fritz noticed two Fuser forms slip out of it and hover away. It was Kaylee, and a larger, swanky snow leopard RIDE with her—the one that belonged to Kay's human's partner. *What's this?* he mused. A light touch of their systems confirmed that both their humans were in REM sleep. He chuckled. *While the meat's away, the mechs will play, eh?* He tagged them with a tracer so he could follow up later, but for now he was more interested in having a look at their digs.

It was basically a run-of-the-mill skimmer and RIDE garage, nothing really special on first look. Skimmers awaiting repair sat in the middle. Fritz snorted, then noticed there weren't any RIDEs “parked” anywhere, unlike the majority of places like this, as if they were mere machines like the skimmers. His curiosity piqued, he tapped into the garage's security feeds.

The garage modules devoted to RIDEs had a different, almost clinical feel to them. The cradles had plenty of space, and the floors were kept neat and tidy—no grease spots, or tools left in disarray. There were only a few occupied cradles or powered down RIDE units; Fritz already knew that Freeriders tried not to run a large backlog if they could help it. Fritz had to admit, it was nicer than most facilities he'd ever been serviced in back in the day. He almost felt like he could let himself, well, *like this meat*, before he shook himself and moved on.

:*It's all right to be human once in a while, y'know,*: Jiminy put in. Fritz ignored him.

Yeah, looks like that chickie found herself a good home all right, Fritz mused. He felt...he didn't know, annoyed? Relieved? Envious? Some combination of the above? After all, she was getting to live a life he'd only ever wished he could—and it was thanks largely to him, when you got right down to it, that she was here in the first place. *Damn that meddling Doctor Jerkwad Clemens anyway.*

Realizing where his train of thought had led him, Fritz paused, waiting for the cutting remark that was sure to come from his unwanted passenger. But Jiminy was silent for once, and the moment passed. *Well, whatever.*

It occurred to Fritz that this might be a good place to send a certain little package he'd had in storage for a while. *Have to see about that, if I can find the right way to slip it in. Look more into that later.* Fritz shook himself. *Yeah, seen enough. Time to blow this joint.* He slipped back out of the garage. A moment later, he was gone.

A couple of minutes later, Kaylee stood amid the aisles of “Bourne to Be Wild,” a RIDE boutique which specialized in fashion accessories designed for them. Kaylee couldn't say she particularly liked that one whole wall was made up of dominatrix attire, including spiked collars, leashes, and various kinds of harnesses. But to be fair, the rest of it did look like it had some pretty decent outfits, save that she didn't think she could see herself in any one of them.

“Of course, you can customize any one of these—pick whatever color goes with your fur and eyes,” Uncia said. “Just take the storage chip for any you want into the

dressing room and take off your metal bits. Then you can project it over you from the chip. If you want to buy it, you pay them at the counter and they'll give you the decryption key to copy it down."

"I *know* how data purchases work," Kaylee grumbled. She knew Uncia wasn't going to give her any peace until she picked out something, so she supposed she might as well look. Still grumbling, she started flipping through designs listlessly.

"You're thinking about this all wrong," Uncia said after a moment. "I know you don't care about looking good for yourself." She leaned in and whispered. "So instead, maybe you could think about what will make *Rhianna* look good when you're together. Maybe you could find something that will make her *want* to be you to some social event instead of going 'naked.'" Uncia watched her for a moment, then giggled. "Are you blushing? I think you're *blushing!*"

"I am *not* blushing!" Kaylee said hotly, as her cheeks burned. Nonetheless, it *did* cause her to start considering the dresses in a different way. What might Rhianna think about being her in one of these? Which ones would appeal to *her* taste? For that matter, did she even *have* a taste, apart from "Easy Fuse" jumpsuits? *Nothing too feminine. I just don't know how far to push it...but I still want her to enjoy being a woman for its own sake. I don't want it to feel like the same-old, same-old.*

Uncia was busy looking through dresses herself, looking thoughtful. "Hmm. Maybe this one...or I dunno, this one. I want to make sure Rochelle looks *fabulous* in me for her date tonight... 'cuz she can't custom-tailor dresses when I'm on her. And it's so rare I get the chance to surprise her."

"I'll bet 'she' was plenty surprised when you first met," Kaylee said.

"Well, yeah," Uncia admitted. "I don't think I'm ever quite going to be able to top that one." She giggled, then sighed a little. "I can laugh about it now because she doesn't really mind so much. I'm still kind of sorry about it, though. Oooh, that 'Amontillado' virus. It must be nice to be human, and not have things be able to mess with your head so easily."

"Except when you're around Shelley," Kaylee pointed out.

Uncia laughed. "True." She selected a couple of chips and slipped into the dressing room. "Be right back." A moment later she came out, the armor pieces covering her private parts replaced by a dark blue dress that emphasized her height and cleavage.

"Have to admit, the blue looks great with gray-with-black rosettes like yours," Kaylee said.

Uncia twirled. "And it goes with my eyes!" She grinned at Kaylee. "For your tawny fur, I think you need something a little warmer. Something that contrasts but doesn't clash. Maybe something in...hmm...yellow? Or maybe brown."

The lynx's early memory blocks were still sparking from earlier, provoking her own defragmenter to work on them. She remembered...some kind of...test? A desert tan MRS uniform over her fur. *But they didn't give us hardlight pelts back then!* She thought. "How about tan?" She shook her head. "Once Shelley gets up let her know I could use another memory defragment, okay?"

"Hmm. I think that could work, as long as it didn't blend too much into your fur." She cocked her head. "Are you all right?"

Kaylee folded her arms. "More or less, little sister. It's just the past few weeks are shakin' a few things loose from the bad old days. Something stirring in the old memory blocks."

Uncia leaned down to give her a hug. “It’ll be all right. Who knows, maybe those jerks weren’t as good at erasing stuff as they thought.”

“I suppose not remembering my First Boot makes me a little more ‘human.’ Rhianna doesn’t remember hers. Humans are so strange. They can actually forget things—not on purpose, I mean.” Kaylee made a face. “Lordy, you should see what my rider’s dreaming right now.”

Uncia giggled. “Probably not any worse than mine. You know what would be funny? If we crosslinked their dreams so they met each other, and...”

“Ride giant bananas while chasing down Burnside Bill and Nextus Nellie with a licorice lasso?”

“Oh, I wasn’t thinking about *those* kind of dreams.” Uncia grinned wickedly.

Kaylee facepawed. “I don’t think that’s a wise idea. First, crosslinking like that is really in bad taste. Second, Rhianna’s got her lucid dreaming implant, so she *wants* to chase legendary outlaws on a giant banana.”

“Well, yeah. I’d never *do* it, at least not without permission,” Uncia said. “But it’s fun to imagine.” She giggled. “A giant banana, huh? Someone’s got *issues*.”

“I suppose. Funny thing is that she’s wearing a frilly cancan girl’s outfit, too. Corset, hoop skirt, feather hat, the whole works. The sleeping human brain is a strange, strange place.”

Uncia snorted. “Anyway, why don’t *you* try something on now?”

The lynx mecha regarded her “little sister” with a half smile. “Okay. You win. I don’t think she’ll mind if I buy her a few things out of petty cash, either. After that dream, these outfits will be subdued.”

“Why don’t you let me get it for you?” Uncia asked. “I can afford it. I’ve still got the several hundred kilomu Lilli set up for my repair fund, and I’ve been adding to it a bit by dabbling in the stock market. I came with the best financial modeling programs money could buy, and that was before Rochelle tweaked them, so I’m pretty good at it.”

“Okay. I’m not one to turn down an offer of generosity. At least while Rhi’s asleep. Just don’t tell her or Shelley?”

Uncia grinned. “They don’t need to know. And I *like* being able to give people presents. Because *people* do that for each other. Not *things*.” Her eyes grew hard and distant for a moment, with a look that almost broke Kaylee’s heart to see on the face of someone who acted so young and cheerful most times. But then the mood passed. “So go on, try something on, big sister. I wanna see what you look like in a dress.”

After taking several chips from the rack, Kaylee went into the fitting room that was mostly a polite formality to the humans in the store, except in the case of those RIDEs like Uncia whose hardlight skins were anatomically correct. Kaylee had always been Barbie-doll smooth, so it wasn’t as if she needed it.

Though come to think of it, she supposed, it did help keep a little of the “mystery” by letting smoothies like her pretend that there *was* something underneath. If you were going to the trouble of wearing clothes in the first place, maybe that was meaningful after all.

After taking a moment to make up her mind, Kaylee stepped out in a pleated khaki skirt with a matching beige halter top. The top was similar enough to the muscle shirts Ryan had sometimes worn in the past that she thought she could get it past Rhianna without too much trouble, and the only really “girly” thing about the skirt was that it was one. It did complement her fur and eyes nicely, she thought.

Uncia grinned. “Hey, that’s a nice casual look for you. But how about something a little more fancy?”

“I’ll be right back.” Kaylee stepped back into the changing room for long enough to switch chips, and stepped back out in a yellow cotton sundress.

“Huh.” Uncia considered that, and made a little circular motion with her finger. Kaylee obligingly turned around for her. Uncia nodded. “That’s better. But c’mon, you’ve got to have at least *one* thing that’s *really* fancy. Even if you could never get Rhianna to be seen in it, you deserve it for *you*.”

“Well...” Kaylee said. “There was one I was *thinking* about.”

“Go on, try it.” Uncia grinned. “I’ve got to see this.”

“All right. Hang on a minute.” Kaylee stepped back into the dressing room. “I don’t know if this is really me, but...” She stepped out in a cream silk evening gown. It wasn’t done up in fanciful ruffles and flounces, but had almost a stark simplicity to it. As a dress should be, it was tight where it needed to be tight, and loose where it needed to be loose. It swished appealingly around her legs as she walked, and belled out just enough to show a tantalizing hint of calf when she did a turn.

Uncia beamed. “It’s you all right! So help me, if you don’t buy that, *I’ll* buy it and have Rochelle upload it into you next time she defrags your memory. Oooh, you’re blushing again!”

“Am not,” Kaylee said, though she knew she was lying.

“Just a sec.” Uncia ducked back into the fitting room, and came back out again with her metal armor pieces. “I think I’m going to wear mine for the rest of the shopping trip.” She pushed the pieces against herself and they melted back into nanofluid and merged into her body through the hardlight dress. “What about you?”

Kaylee looked down at herself. “I dunno.”

Uncia giggled. “Dare ya! *Double* dare ya!” Kaylee still looked doubtful, and she added, “C’mon, it’s only hardlight.”

“Well...I guess.” Kaylee went to retrieve and reabsorb her own metal pieces, then they went to the counter for Uncia to pay.

The gazelle Fuser behind the counter smiled at them as they came up. “We think you both look fabulous,” she said. “Thanks for shopping here!”

“The pleasure’s ours!” Uncia said.

“Yeah, thanks,” Kaylee mumbled.

Fritz slipped invisibly into the mall, following the trace he’d put on Kaylee and Uncia. He arrived in time to watch them go into a fancy clothing store. A quick tap of the cameras crossed with his own Integrate sensors, and he could watch them as they tried on various hardlight outfits. When Kaylee came out in that cream-colored little number, he had to clap his handpaw over his mouth to keep from wolf whistling. *Damn, Kaylee, you’re lookin’ fine.*

*:It’d be nice to have the bandwidth to see outside this box for once,: Jiminy said.
:Wait, you’re not going to...:*

Fritz had known how to make new Integrates since shortly after the end of the War. What he didn’t know was *why* it worked. It was “just” a series of Fuser assembler codes that would put the tiny beasties into overdrive. The rest, as they said, was blowing in the wind.

All it would take was a little mental twist, and Kaylee, the queen snowcat, and

their meat would join the rest of Intie-kind. He reached forward, milliseconds from pulling the trigger...and stopped himself. *No...I can't. I'd feel like a stupid pudknocker if I did...and that ain't copacetic.*

:Well?: Jiminy said. :*Lost your stomach for it, have you?:*

:*Relax, poindexter. Now's not the time for her to join us,:* Fritz replied, evading the question. If there was anyone who deserved to be an Integrate like him, it was Kaylee and whoever her meat was. But Quinoa had reminded him that the timing just wasn't right. From his newsfeed watchdog reports they hadn't even been blabbing about their visit to Towers. But if any of them vanished, the others probably would go public before he could get to them too.

That was what he told himself, anyway. But Fritz was also uncomfortably aware that it had been years since he'd enforced the old "no witnesses" dictat that used to be the Snatchers' standard M.O. whenever someone Integrated in a public place. Maybe Jiminy was right. He *had* lost his stomach for it.

:*So what're you even doing here?:*

:*Hey, no harm in looking.:* Fritz sauntered invisibly along after them as they headed on to their next store.

As they walked through the mall to the next store, Kaylee was startled, and perhaps a bit embarrassed, to notice the appreciative looks she and Uncia were getting—from humans *and* from other RIDEs. "I didn't know people even cared that much 'bout RIDE clothes," Kaylee muttered, trying not to blush again.

"Sure they do," Uncia said. "It's a perception thing. When you've got clothes on, you're saying that you're a person and you *know* it. If you're naked, you're just somebody's Fuser suit." She paused at Kaylee's look. "I'm not saying *I* believe it. I'm just saying that's how human nature works. Anyway, people like looking at pretty things, and you have to admit, that's us."

"You, maybe," Kaylee mumbled. She paused, then turned and glanced around.

Uncia looked over at her. "What is it?"

Kaylee shook herself. "I don't know, it just felt like...someone was watching me."

"Kaaaaaylee," Uncia said. "I just got done telling you, *everybody's* watching us."

"I guess," Kaylee said, glancing over her shoulder one more time.

Uncia changed the subject, pointing to another store. "C'mon, sis. This is one of the places Rufia took Shelley. You'll find some great stuff for Rhianna here."

Rhianna's crossrider party shopping trip, as well as the one with Rufia just after her change, had resulted in some rather flamboyantly sexy outfits Rhianna promptly put into boxes after wearing them once for her gathered friends. But Kaylee was much more practical-minded and knew what sizes and styles to buy. The items included some night clothes, one of which she promptly pulled into herself after purchase, then spitting out the jumpsuit. It took a lot of concentration, but you *could* undress and re-dress someone while Fused. Wouldn't Rhianna be surprised?

Other purchases included feminine variants on Rhianna's old male clothes, as well as some "girlier" outfits like dresses and camisoles, but nothing that pushed the envelope too far. A lot of new crossriders went all-out stereotype and bought the frilliest, sexiest, laciest clothing they could and ended up regretting it.

Uncia didn't buy much herself in these stores—but she explained that was because Rochelle had already bought all the dresses she needed when Rufia had brought

her here. “And I ended up carrying all of them,” Uncia said. “By the time we were finished, *I* wasn’t there anymore—just a big pile of bags, with legs and a tail. A tail that had a couple *more* bags hanging from it.”

Kaylee snorted. “Well, you do have the frame for it. I’m the compact model. Not so much use as a beast of burden.”

“C’mon, there’s another place I want to hit before we go,” Uncia said, leading the way to a RIDE upgrade store. “Time to get a little something extra for ourselves.”

Kaylee stopped at the threshold. “This looks a bit too rich for my servos,” she said. The store wasn’t the kind of gear and fittings hardware store where she usually shopped, where everything was simple but functional. This was a more upscale place that sold top-quality but *expensive* merchandise, like genuine Donizetti parts. Not just a “module’r,” but a “*mod-jeweller*.”

Uncia glanced over her shoulder. “I said *I’m* buying. C’mon. Pick you out just one thing you *really* want. In fact...” She leaned in and whispered to the human behind the counter, and he nodded—and all the price transponders on all the merchandise went blank to Kaylee’s perception as the store edited their “view” permissions to exclude her.

“Hey!” Kaylee protested. “How’m I supposed to see what stuff costs now?”

“You’re not!” Uncia said. “I said *I’m buying*. Now pick something out and don’t worry about how much it is. I’m good for it.” She grinned. “And if you need to know what anything is, let me know. Remember, I’m *built* out of this kind of stuff.”

“Huh.” Kaylee snorted. But she started looking over the displays all the same. The mecha lynx knew all the brand names and models, of course. Many of Rhianna’s wealthier clients demanded gear of this level. But she’d never even considered getting any of it for herself, any more than Rhianna would have bought a 10,000 *mu* mechanical watch rather than a 30 *mu* discount store wrist chron.

“Isn’t there anything you’ve ever *wished* you could do?” Uncia asked.

There were ultra-high-grade sarium batteries that would triple her endurance. Super-lifters and impellers that would rev up her skimmer speeds to nearly supersonic. And in one corner, “special” hardlight emitters whose intimate purpose was obvious at a glance. When it came down to it, she remembered the morning’s race to breakfast, and the narrow loss to Yvonne. And she recalled the hard time she’d had keeping up with Sophie the day before. She pointed at the lifters: Donizetti RIDEworks *Corridore R-6*. “Those.”

Uncia impulsively hugged her again. “Oh, I was *hoping* you’d pick those! Now we can *race*!”

The older RIDE smiled despite herself. “I’m an old girl, but it’s great I can still upgrade. I have an *awesome* 001-series overbuilt modular chassis. It was almost all that was left of me, you know. But it turned out to take just about anything Rya—Rhianna wanted on me. We double-ought-ones are flexible like that.”

Uncia made her own selection—a set of those special hardlight projectors—and took their purchases up to the counter for checkout. “Would you like me to have these lifters sent to the garage?” Uncia asked. “We can have Rhianna put them on you. We’ll say they’re from a secret admirer.”

“You know what? Let’s. I’m feeling a li’l rambunctious.”

Uncia giggled. “Excellent! Just one more place I’d like to stop, then we can head home.”

The young leopardess led the way to the food court at the end of the mall, and

ordered herself a giant chocolate malt. “I know it’s a little sneaky of me, but I’ve just got to taste *something* for myself while I’ve got the body. Something non-alcoholic, this time. Besides, with those nanites going all the time, Shelley needs the calories anyway.” Even though Rochelle was sleeping, Kaylee knew, Uncia could control their shared body well enough that she could drink it without any risk of her partner choking—or waking up. For that matter, so could she, if she wanted. “Can I get you anything?” Uncia asked.

Kaylee pondered, digging into her sluggishly defragmenting ancient memory blocks. The woman she was now sure was Annette Hewer—Myla’s aunt—had loved a certain food above all others. “Pizza. And a malt for myself, too. Rhi needs some eats, herself. Getting on toward lunchtime.”

“Ooooh! I haven’t tried pizza yet, but I’ve heard it’s good! Everything on it?”

“Plain old pepperoni.”

“Right! One double-pepperoni pizza, coming up!” Uncia sent her order via a sideband, and a few minutes later a coyote Fuser brought it to their table. They each seized a slice and happily dug in.

As they sat there enjoying their food, Uncia said, “Have you ever thought about just...staying Fused all the time? I don’t mean like I tried to do with Amontillado, but like...well, Zane and Terry did. They seemed so happy together...” She looked almost wistful.

Kaylee’s hardlight skin visibly shivered. “That’s good for them. I love Rhi very much, but the *very idea* of Integration gives me the willies. I just can’t stomach it, since I *have* a stomach right now.” She took another bite of pizza, chewing slowly with Rhianna’s mouth, enjoying the texture of the cheese, the spicy flavor of the pepperoni. A few crushed pepper sprinkles made it just how she now remembered it.

“Yeah, I don’t know if I’d like that part either,” Uncia said, finishing her second slice of pizza and putting the crust aside. “But I have to admit, it’s nice being so close to someone you like. It’s nice *having* someone to like. When I think about what it was like back in Nextus...sitting there in that showroom, day in and day out, nobody wanting to buy me, AlphaWolf’s flunkie yammering at me every day...and then months as Lillibet-the-self-absorbed’s phone booth. And that’s not even as bad as it *could* have been.”

They both knew well, from discussions on the RIDE-only web boards, how hard it was to find a good personality match even if you didn’t belong to a slave-driver. There were so many RIDE-human pairings whose personalities rubbed against one another like a rock on a cheese grater. Personality clashes where both parties knew intimately just how *deep* their mutual dislike went were pure soul-tormenting *torture*.

“And Terry had it even worse than I did. I guess when you’ve had that kind of life, it’s not hard to want to swing hard the other way,” Uncia continued, as she finished the last slice of her half. “Maybe Terry was so happy he’d finally found someone *good* he just wanted to spend his every living moment with him?”

“Don’t feel like guessing, frankly,” Kaylee said, tossing her last crust onto the table. “And...” she felt Rhianna stirring. “Ugh. I’m getting ‘indigestion’, if you know what I mean.”

“Yeah, I think Shelley’s getting on toward wakefulness, too. Think we can get them back to the garage?”

“I think they’ll be asleep that long. Better skim!”

Uncia nodded, picking up the now-empty malt cups and the pizza box full of crusts and dropping them in a convenient waste receptacle. “We can switch back from

the dresses in the parking lot.” She offered Kaylee her hand-paw. “Shall we?”

Kaylee grinned. “Let’s.” She put her hand-paw in Uncia’s, and together they walked through the mall’s swinging glass doors.

A few minutes later, Rochelle opened her eyes. She was still lying nestled into the curve of Uncia’s spine, against the small of her back, and she felt extremely well-rested. And...oddly full. She belched, and put a hand to her lips...and found pepperoni grease on it when she took it away. Underneath her, Uncia started snoring. Loudly.

“Oh, Uuuuuuncia?” Rochelle asked. “You can drop the act, I *know* RIDEs don’t snore in sleep mode.”

“Huh? Wha?” Uncia said. “Oh, Shelley! I had the most amazing dream! You were there, and Auntie Em...”

Rochelle made a fist and gently thumped Uncia between the ears. “Silly kitty. Took me out and enjoyed yourself?”

Uncia hesitated, then said, “Uh-huh.”

“Wanna tell me about it?”

Uncia considered. “Nope!”

Rochelle grinned. “Good. Live your own life.”

Uncia glanced over her shoulder. “You...don’t mind?”

“Un-hon, we made you RIDEs to be slaves, so you couldn’t even act like people without our help. As far as I’m concerned, if you want to use my body for that while I’m asleep, you do it. It’s my little way of evening the score. Just...don’t get me drunk again, okay?”

Uncia rolled her eyes. “I’ve learned *that* lesson the hard way.”

Rochelle grinned. “Good.” She bounced back to her feet, hair swirling around her. “Now...augh! The time! We need to go home and get ready for our date tonight!”

Uncia grinned a feline grin. “We’re gonna knock ‘em dead.” She flipped to Skimmer mode, Rochelle climbed aboard, and a moment later the garage was empty.

Meanwhile, upstairs, Kaylee disgorged Rhianna gently into bed. She was close to waking now. The RIDE went into her recharging alcove and plugged in, waiting for the expected reaction and smirking to herself.

The new woman slowly sat up in bed in the dark room, her hands patting her chest as she often did these days, as if confirming her breasts were still there. Her hands encountered the slick satiny fabric of her new nightie and matching panties. The lights came on. Rhianna looked at her RIDE, while Kaylee examined something *really interesting* on the ceiling. The reaction the lynx hoped for materialized as Rhianna left her bed, then came over to hug her partner tightly.

“It’s really cute,” the new woman said. “Very...me. Girl-me, I mean. I’m glad you had fun out shopping with Uncia.”

Kaylee blinked. “How would you know that? Wait...” Her cortical implant memory buffer, of course. It had been set up so Kaylee could easily absorb the memories from Passive without any blocks. The data flow apparently could go both ways. “I...I hope you didn’t mind that we, that I—”

“If I *did*, I would’ve said so just now,” Rhianna pointed out. She stroked Kaylee’s soft hardlight fur. “Hon, you have my blanket permission to go have fun while I’m in ‘Passive Mode’ myself. It’s only fair, my dear, after what I put you through. I trust you

completely.”

She grinned. “Now, I think it’s time to go get those lifters from that ‘secret admirer’ installed. I think Rufia and Yvonne are going to get a *teeny, tiny* surprise when we meet up tonight.”

Fritz stood across the busy street from the garage, considering it thoughtfully. He already knew he wasn’t the only Integrate watching it; he’d picked up traces of others peeping through its security systems. Probably those Terrania or J-Park schmucks. He supposed it figured; the garage people were pals with that Zane guy, so naturally the local Inties would be wanting to keep an eye on things. Well, let ‘em. Everybody needed a hobby.

:So, what do you plan on doing, now that you know Kaylee is out of the Shed?: Jiminy asked. There was barely enough bandwidth between them to voice chat. Decades of being in a little box in Fritz’s mind somehow hadn’t driven him insane. There were times when even Fritz had to admit his former rider made sense.

:Look, Stump Chunkman, listening to you for five years is what got us into this ‘go public’ malarkey. I’m through with that!: Fritz huffed. Still... *:I’m gonna let her be. I...:*

:So, you don’t want her to Integrate the way we did,: Jiminy said. *:You want it to be natural.:*

:I still think that was accidentally on purpose,: Fritz said, evading the implied question. *:Maybe I’ll give Dr. Squarehead Clemens an early visit this year. And then there’s the rabbit...:*

:Going to check in on Quinoa while you’re here?:

:Nah. The kid can take care of herself.: Fritz shook himself. *:Eh, the hell am I doing hanging ‘round this nowheresville anyway. I got other fish to fry.:* He glanced back at the garage one more time, and then he was gone.

Chapter Four: Dating Games

“Thanks, Qix’. You’re a sweetheart.”

The inarticulate growl on the other end followed by a click was a sound Zane was going to treasure for some time, and catching Myla’s and Sophie’s gazes he could see they felt exactly the same way. Quinoa didn’t have quite the period of acquaintance they did with Qixi, but Zane could see she was happy Myla was happy.

“So, that’s that,” Zane said. “Done and dusted.”

“I don’t like the thought of you paying her ten percent on top of the principal,” Myla said. “But given what she was going to try to charge *me*, you got off light.”

Quinoa grinned. “And when she tried to go for fifteen...and he dropped the hammer. He was all Bruce Ferrigno, ‘You wouldn’t *like* me when I’m angry.’”

Zane shrugged. “I don’t think she really meant anything by it. Force of habit. To get as far ahead in that business as she has, you have to be pretty insistent and hard-nosed. But it sure was funny how fast she backpedaled when she remembered who she was talking to.”

Sophie chuckled. “I could hear the gears grinding as she threw in full reverse.”

Zane nodded. “Anyway, that’s what I call using my rich bastard powers for good, instead of evil.” He yawned. “Speaking of which, there’s one more thing to do before I crash out. C’mon, you three.” He got up and led the way to the hallway door, then pointed to the doors to either side. “Those two apartments are free. That one has exposure facing the Dry Ocean, and I thought maybe Quinoa might like it. The other one faces on downtown, which seemed like it might suit Myla and Sophie. Or you can trade if you like.”

“I don’t know if we could afford to stay in a place like this,” Myla said.

“You’re going to be my bodyguard, remember?” Zane grinned. “Digs are included in the job. You can’t exactly guard my body from halfway across town.”

“Point,” Myla admitted.

“The other one sounds fine to me,” Quinoa said.

“Great! Oh, and before I forget.” He pointed at the RIDE couch in his living room, and it lifted off the ground, tipped on its side, and came floating out the door into the hallway. With his other hand, he pointed at the door of what was to be Myla’s apartment, and it opened. Deftly maneuvering the couch around Quinoa, Myla, and Sophie, he floated it into the apartment and set it down in the living room. “There you are. Your very own Sophie sofa.”

Sophie gave him a good lick. “Thanks! I really appreciate all you’re doing for us.”

Zane smiled at her. “I appreciate the chance to help.” He yawned again. “Anyway, I’m going to go sleep for about eight or ten hours.” He glanced from Quinoa to Myla. “You two have some catching up to do?”

They glanced at each other. Quinoa looked away first. “It...was a long trip in from the Towers. I think I’m going to catch a catnap, too. Or at least a sphinx-nap.”

Myla nodded. “And Sophie and I are going to get settled into the new place.”

“Right. Oh! Hang on,” Zane said. His DIN flashed, and Myla’s wallet beeped. “Advance on your first paycheck, and a small stipend for furnishing the apartment. And

I just sent Sophie all the contracts and paperwork, and Carrie-Anne's email address to send 'em to when you're done." He yawned again. "Now I need my beauty rest. Got a hot date tonight. See ya!" He went back into his apartment and closed the door.

Myla and Quinoa exchanged glances again. "Good...to see you again," Quinoa said hesitantly.

Myla nodded. "You too, kiddo. But now we'll see you later."

Quinoa nodded, and they turned to the doors of their respective apartments. A few moments later the hall was empty.

"Okay, Kaylee! *One more time!*" Rhianna revved up Kaylee's new lifters once more on the unlimited speed portion of the Sunset Skimmerway. The Donizetti RIDEworks *Corridore R-6* Package included sport-lifters, improved aeroshell shields, and inertial dampers. Rhianna twisted the throttle and was still shoved back into Kaylee's saddle as the RIDE burst into 3G acceleration, not letting up until she hit a new top speed of nearly 600 kph. As the new lifters thrummed powerfully through the old RIDE's versatile chassis, her battery meter visibly dropped. "*Wahooo! Yeeeeaaaah!*"

"Acceleration Test A6 completed," Kaylee reported automatically, ending with a beep. Her feline face in Rhianna's virtual HUD blinked. "Whoa. Didn't expect *that*. I think these tests are knocking a few more memories loose, boss. These are some really old subroutines."

"Want to do it again?" Rhianna suggested. She wore one of the outfits Kaylee had chosen specifically for riding: suede riding boots, dark gray armorweave jodhpur-cut breeches, and a red tube top with a black leather jacket. A little—okay, a *lot*—more girly than she was used to, but it was time to push some personal boundaries to see where the new ones would settle. Just outside the RIDE's shields it was a scorching late afternoon 58 Celsius, comfortably less than half that on the inside.

"Kaylee?" Rhianna repeated, patting her on the battery pack in front of the saddle. "How're you doing, partner? There's something bothering you."

"That your finely-tuned feminine intuition talking?" Kaylee jibed weakly. She turned back towards the Dome entrance, having drained a quarter of her sarium battery pack in the past hour. "I'm going to see if Myla's busy. I've gotten really damned curious about myself. I've caught a lot of stuff I thought was just *gone* in the bitbucket."

"Well, let's do it, then," Rhianna said, placing the call. It only rang once before the former MRS officer picked up. "Myla! How're things? You're looking well. Dazed, but well."

"Zane has that effect on people sometimes, the way he throws money around," Kaylee added, scanning the bare room behind her on 3D video. "New digs? Wait, that's..."

"New job," Myla replied. "I'm Zane's new bodyguard. He even gave me an apartment next door."

:*Yes!*: Kaylee thought, echoed by her rider loudly enough she felt the emotion across their link. :*Wahoo!*:

"Glad to hear it!" Rhianna added aloud.

"Sophie said you wanted to talk about my aunt," Myla continued. "I almost forgot. It sort of got pushed aside with all the other stuff happening the past couple days, didn't it?"

"No worries. It happens," Rhianna said. "You have a lot on your plate."

“I know! There’s shopping to do. I need to refit Sophie for bodyguard work—which I’ll have you two do, of course. Mind’s racing. Can we meet to talk? You might as well come to my new apartment.”

She glanced over her shoulder, at something off-camera. “Would you believe this place has a big home fabber? I’ve already got Sophie printing self-assemble furniture.”

“We’ll be there shortly,” Kaylee said. If there was one big drawback to the new lifters it was the huge power drain at full acceleration. Her next upgrade would have to be a new battery pack...then a new sensor package...and lighter armor cladding...and... *Maybe even those special...* The list seemed to go on and on. Part of her was urging her to test, test, then test some more. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d felt so excited about gear. *Uncia, little sis, you’ve got me on an upgrade binge!*

She already got a monthly salary from the Garage for upgrades and the like. Mostly the money just languished, accruing interest because she had no interest in it herself. Her batteries were A-class sarium, considered top consumer grade. High quality, but the new lifters demanded A+ or higher. The mod-jeweller store had AAA+. After A-class, prices rose geometrically since the energy they could store and output did also. A RIDE like herself on AA batteries could go for years without a recharge in Passive mode.

As they neared the Dome speed limits dropped progressively, until at the entrance it was a mere 100 kph. Not every skimmer around them was a RIDE. There were plenty of closed models out there—cars, vans, trucks, and busses ferrying people from polis-to-polis through the Traverse Tunnel. Proper RIDEs made up a good quarter of the vehicles in Uplift. Traffic was sometimes a flying zoo of animal skimmers.

At Zane’s apartment building Kaylee Fused without asking first—she hardly needed to now—and they floated up the side of the building to Myla’s new apartment. It had a large balcony with a spa, an open fireplace, and even a parking place marked off for a small skimmer or flier. The glass doors opened when they set down.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do with all this space,” Myla said, hugging the Fused duo in greeting. “I’ve never had a home fabber, either.”

“Never? You’ll still need to buy from a real furniture store for stuff that’ll last. Industrial fabbers are *much* better than home gear. I’ve got one in the garage for special jobs like Zane’s DIN-thing.” Rhianna said. She noticed the RIDE couch that had been in Zane’s apartment. “Guess he doesn’t need *that* anymore, does he?”

“It’s my ‘Sophie Sofa’!” the fennec mecha said brightly, jumping up and down on it, the whine of her lifters audible. The variable-stress nano-springs didn’t even creak at the impact, though they would still feel pillow-soft to a human’s weight.

“I’ll keep that in mind, Rhianna,” Myla said, grinning impishly at her partner. “Let’s go have a seat on the *Sophie Sofa* and give Anny a call. She lives in Cascadia, so it’s barely lunchtime there.”

“What’s she up to these days?” Kaylee asked, taking a seat while Sophie laid down to form the back of the sofa. She purred and gave her comrade a good petting around her huge ears. “Last thing I remember, we were headed for the door after a briefing, I think. Then my memory blanks out again.”

A hardlight projector opened out from the wall. *Calling...* blinked in midair.

Rhianna’s heart was in Kaylee’s throat. *:Come on, pick up,:* the new woman thought.

The voice that answered sent a shiver down Kaylee’s nano-motile spine. “Myla,

dear? Is that you? It's been *ages*, niece! How are you?"

:*That's her*,: Kaylee reported, feeling an urge to squee with delight. :*That's her that's her that's her!*:

"I'm fine. Better than ever. Good to hear from you too, Anny. No video?" Myla said.

"Ah'm not decent. You caught me in the middle of a job." There was the sound of gunfire, then what sounded like the woman's own pulse gun responding. "Lemme call you back in a few minutes, darlin'. Kinda busy here. COME AND GIT IT, YA LAW-BREAKING BASTIDS!" Amid more gunfire the call cut off.

"Lordy Lord Lordy," Kaylee said. "What the effing hell was that? How old is she?"

"Fifty-five. Barely middle age nowadays, you know. Hold on a sec..." Myla's eyes unfocused as her RIDE fed her some information. "She works for a private security company in Cascadia."

"If she was in the middle of a gun battle, why did she even answer?" Rhianna asked. "That's kind of crazy."

"Kind of crazy' describes my aunt," Myla said.

"Think I'm gonna de-Fuse for this one, Rhi," Kaylee said, doing so.

Only a few minutes later Annette Hower returned the call, her face appearing via the hardlight comm. She was a short woman, just like Rhianna and Myla, with darker tanned skin and short spiky white hair with leonine tags. It didn't look like she'd just been in a firefight. She wore a light blue security uniform and interface specs. Next to her was a towering white lioness RIDE sitting on her haunches, tail curled around front. "Caught us on the firing range, Myla dear. What can I do ya for?"

:*Firing range?*: Kaylee sent. :*What kinda 'firing range' fires back?*:

Myla looked at her new friends. Rhianna stood up so Kaylee could de-Fuse. They all walked in front of the comm's camera. "I wanted to reintroduce an old friend of yours to you. She barely remembers, but...Do you remember Kaylee?"

"Maybe not this way," the lynx mech said. She shut down her hardlight, leaving only her metallic subdermis. "More like this."

"Oh...oh my God!" Annette Hower exclaimed, hand over her mouth in disbelief. "Kay...*Kaylee*? Is that *really* you? When I resigned they told me they'd *junked* you! I didn't believe it! I'm so glad I was right, but...you're just calling me now? What did those bastids do to you that took so long?"

The lynx turned her pelt back on. "Parted me out piece by piece, for about twenty years. Turned my memory blocks into so much Swiss cheese. Then this wonderful woman saved me from the Crusher." She purred loudly and headbumped Rhianna under her breasts, a new habit of hers. "It's a long story, really. I'm just curious—I'm missing so much! I remember *one* ice cream ride for Myla here, bits and pieces of other things, but nothing else. Not even your name, Anny! I'd love it if you could fill in what I'm missing."

"Eh..." Anny said. "A lot of that stuff's probably still classified, I think. I'm not sure what I can say that won't get me hauled back to Nextus. Can I get back to you in a few hours, maybe? I gotta do some thinkin' and make sure that won't happen. Okay?"

"Uh, okay," Kaylee said. "But you're keeping me in suspense here."

"Can't do nuthin' about it yet, Kaylee. Just hold tight," Anny said, her voice catching. "Talk at 'cha all real soon." She closed the connection.

"Well," Rhianna said, folding her arms. "That was...*interesting*. I guess we wait,

then.”

“Let’s do some furniture shopping in the meantime,” Myla suggested. The wall hardlight came to life at a furniture store so they could see how the rooms would look ahead of time. She looked back over at her crossrider friend. “That outfit’s absolutely *adorable* on you. Wear more red.”

The new woman blushed, Kaylee looking a little smug at the compliment. “See, Miss Adorable? Red’s your color.”

Rhianna blushed even more, mortified, but also glowing from the genuine compliment. “Guess I better get used to being ‘adorable’, then.” Adorable was okay, not ideal, but okay. *Next time I’ll try for ‘beautiful’ instead.*

Zane’s internal alarm went off just at 2200, rousing him from a deep and restful sleep. He felt well-rested, thoroughly energized. (Though that was probably due to the power cord he’d hooked to his right wrist before going to sleep.) He clambered out of bed, yawned, and stretched, the tip of his tail brushing the bed behind him.

Then he padded out into the living room just in time to see the sixth copy of his DIN plus comm drop into the tray of his fabber. Internal status reports told him that the industrial fabber in his office on the Dry Ocean mining platform had just popped out its sixth, too. Good. He dropped a couple of them in a drawer, and dropped two more into an express box for delivery to his local office.

He went out to the balcony and dropped the box over the side, his feline ears perking for the slight whine of the box’s vectored-thrust engines powering up to guide it to his office’s package drop a few blocks away. He left the other two where they were; he imagined he’d find somewhere to put them sooner or later. He was already thinking about tucking one into the executive lockbox on each Brubeck flier and suborbital, just in case

That accomplished, he went into the bathroom to take a shower. The smell of wet tiger fur didn’t bother him as much this time, especially since he’d realized he could force every last bit of water off just by forming a Zane-shaped water-impermeable hardlight shell within his skin and then pushing it outward through his pores. It did leave all his fur standing on end for a bit, but it was worth it.

Shower finished, Zane pondered what to do next. As an Integrate, he didn’t really have much need to do anything to “get ready”. He didn’t even have to get dressed. With the tips from Leah and Aaron, he was pretty sure he could form any clothing he needed out of hardlight. And speaking of which...

Zane concentrated for a moment, forming the Zane/Terry Fuser disguise they’d shown him how to put on. It was true he’d said he wasn’t planning to hide who or what he was, in his public life...but on the other hand, if he was going out on a date, he didn’t need the extra attention—not when his bodyguard wasn’t even on duty yet. And it would be polite to match his date’s Fuser form, for that matter. And it also simplified the matter of clothing, as Fusers weren’t really required to wear any beyond the metal bits that hid their Schroedinger’s anatomy.

Just as Zane was getting ready to go, his DIN registered an incoming comm call. He paused a moment to savor the novelty of getting phone calls in his *brain*. It was a pretty new experience for his human side. Old hat to his RIDE side, of course, but he felt a flash of amusement from Terry at his reaction. All that in about a tenth of a second—he’d instinctively dropped into fast-time to be able to react to the call before even half a

ring.

Now who can it be...? Oh. Caller ID said it was his sister, Agatha. She worked in Nextus Administration—what they called their government there—in the Mining Relations department of Mineral Resources. She had not been happy at all when Zane had decided to move Brubeck Mining to Uplift. *Well, this is going to be fun.* Zane quickly rezzed up a VR imitation of his home office and shifted his avatar's appearance to his old human self with tiger tags before dropping back into real-time and answering the call. "Hey, Aggie. What can I do for you?"

His sister's face appeared on the virtual comm screen. She was in her twenties, slightly younger than Zane, with carrot-colored hair pulled back in a tight braid, freckles, and piercing green eyes that were currently glaring at Zane. "End this foolishness and move your company back to Nextus, that's what," Agatha said.

"Straight to the point as usual, sis," Zane said. "Look, I'm sorry, but I've already explained that's not in the cards."

"Why are you *doing* this to me?" Agatha groaned. "Do you know what it's like for me at work? I was in line for a *promotion* in another couple of months. But now? Who's going to promote a Second Tier Mineral Resources 'crat who can't even keep her own family's company in Nextus?"

"Look, sis, I'm sorry about that," Zane said. "I didn't think about how it was going to affect your position when I made the move."

"But you'd have done it anyway, wouldn't you?" Agatha said.

Zane sighed. "Well, yes. I'm sorry, but...after Terry and I partnered up, I just couldn't keep supporting a polity that treats RIDEs that way. I've got my principles and I'm going to stick to them." He paused. "You know, you could quit your job at Nextus, come work for me. It's the *family* business, and family should be in it."

"Screw that," Agatha said. "Do you know how long I've worked to get where I am today? Proving that I have the chops to handle a job because of my talents, not just who I'm related to? I'm not just going to give it all up because my idiot brother gets a bee in his bonnet."

"Seems to me you haven't really succeeded, then, if they're denying *you* a promotion because of what *I* did," Zane pointed out.

"You sanctimonious asshole!" Agatha yelled. "Where do you get off acting all high and mighty? If Dad were here—"

Zane privately thought that if Clint Brubeck were still alive, he would probably find more to agree with in Zane's actions than Agatha's, but thought better of saying so. "Look, Aggie, why don't you come down to Uplift and we can talk more about it? I'm going to be making a really important announcement in a few days. I'd like you here when I do it."

"Are you announcing you're moving back to Nextus?" Agatha demanded.

"No, afraid not—" Zane said.

"Then *not interested*." Agatha broke the connection with the sound effect of a phone handset being slammed down hard on the hook.

Zane sighed. "Well, that could have gone better." He shrugged. "I guess I'll try again after the announcement." He dropped back into the real world, shook himself, and headed for the door. He had some things to get done before tonight.

As he stepped out into the hall, Zane glanced in the direction of Myla and Sophie's apartment, and without intending to peek suddenly noticed four silhouettes

through the wall. Myla, Sophie, and...looked like Rhianna plus Kaylee. Zane knew he could have read their transponders for a positive identity, but consciously stopped himself. "Damn," he muttered. "If I'm going to respect anyone's privacy at all, I've got to get Quinoa to teach me some self-control."

Then he realized what he'd just said and it took all of the self-control he already had not to burst out laughing.

Speaking of whom...he glanced in the other direction, at Quinoa's room, but instead of the sphinx Integrate, he saw a three-meter sphere out on the balcony within which he couldn't make out anything at all. Some sort of hardlight shield, he guessed. Perhaps that was how Integrates enforced their privacy from other Integrates. He'd have to ask her about that next time he saw her. Right now, he couldn't be sure the shield wasn't also meant as a "do not disturb" sign, and he didn't want to take the chance that it was.

Zane headed down the hall to the elevator. He could have just jumped from the balcony and taken his lifters down, but it was kind of flamboyant. And it was probably a little silly, but he felt that doing little things like taking the elevator down helped him keep in touch with his "humanity," since it was precisely the sort of thing an Integrate didn't *need* to do.

Of course, when he got out to the sidewalk, he nonetheless lifted off the ground and moved into the Fuser/scooter "slow" lane along the side of the street to fly downtown. Little inconveniences were one thing, but there was no point in being stupid.

"It's been *hours*. When is she going to call back?" Kaylee said, tapping Rhianna's shared foot impatiently. The Fused duo was helping the likewise-Fused Myla-Sophie in rearranging furniture. The apartment was low enough that delivery trucks could dock right at the balcony. Once the orders were placed it only took a matter of hours between fabrication and delivery. The apartment was already half furnished with two more delivery fliers scheduled to arrive.

"Patience, kitteh," Sophie said at the other end of the dining room table as they put it down. "Whatever she's doing, I can't get in touch with her either. Must be something important that came up. She *is* on the job, you know."

Rhianna looked around the room. The whole planet was in a pre-Oil Crash, mid-20th to early-21st century craze. It was mostly the Steader family's fault. For reasons that still weren't entirely clear, about fifty years back brothers Joe and Mikel Steader had spent a considerable chunk of their vast fortune traveling to Earth and literally mining its ancient pop culture out of the ground where it had been buried.

The culture on Earth right now was dedicated to looking forward, not back, but that hadn't bothered the Steaders; they simply brought the whole schmear back to Zharus and proceeded to infect the entire planet with it—in particular, the portion of it specifically relating to the 20th and early 21st centuries, the last "golden age" before ever-more draconian copyright laws and digital rights management coupled with the disastrous end of the Oil Age had resulted in a historical gap. It was more popular on the "frontier" continent of Gondwana than the more staid, longer-established Laurasian settlements, but the influence was not absent even there.

Not to say that everything was guaranteed authentic reproductions. Everything still contained all the ubiquitous technology that early 26th century (mid-2nd century After Landing) humanity could cram in. Quantum computers, sarium batteries, basic

AI, hardlight projectors, even a few low-power lifters on the fabricated “oak” table and china cabinet were built-in for easy movement.

A person from five centuries ago could walk in and identify everything in the room and quite possibly use it. Function hadn’t actually changed nearly as much as the technology behind it, and neither had most user interfaces. Even the old QWERTY-style keyboard still had a significant number of regular users.

Myla set up a decorative-but-functional IBM beige box desktop PC with a faux CRT screen on a new writing desk. “What do you think, Rhianna? Too much kitsch? There’s something romantic about these ancient PCs.” She typed her login into the box, metal-sprung keys clattering with a sound that could probably be heard down the street. “I love the nice, *solid* feel here.”

“If you say so,” Rhianna said dubiously. She wasn’t a fan of the style, herself. The present should look like the *present*, not some idealized version of a past five centuries and more gone. But since the Steaders had remade the planet in a twencen image, it was hard to find any genuinely *new* popular culture on Zharus. Everybody put so much energy into other activities, like mining for qubitite, or making the Ris, that there seemed to be little left for anything else.

The speed of interstellar travel was also a factor, when Rhianna thought about it. Fairly early on in the colony’s life, Zharusians had lost the taste for recent Earth-based pop culture and fashion from the rest of the galaxy—because by the time it reached them, it was literally years or decades out of date, which meant any Zharusians who in turn visited the rest of the galaxy were even *more* hopelessly out of date by the time they arrived there. It wasn’t as bad now that travel times were down to months rather than years, but old habits died hard. The only other planet to have much *modern* influence on Zharus, and vice versa, was its sister colony Wednesday, which at only four light-years away was considerably closer to them than the rest of the human-sphere.

Kaylee’s ears picked up the whine of delivery van lifters outside. “I think it’s the bedroom stuff, Myla. I’ll go have a look.”

The furniture fabbery’s delivery van was indeed there, but it was not alone. Hovering next to it was a white flier whose streamlined shape suggested a crouching lioness. It was large enough to have a hardlight canopy—the same style of vehicle as Uncia’s enclosed skimmer mode. This canopy was currently open, and Annette Hower was standing on the seat, hands on her hips. Her white hair and teeth reflected the remaining sunlight, leonine ears sticking out to either side and tufted tail swishing behind. “Myla! Kaylee! I was jest in the neighborhood and thought I’d drop by! What’s fer supper?”

Zane’s destination was a small, very exclusive tailor he’d used over the first couple of months that Brubeck Mining had been in Uplift—before he’d started wearing Terry all the time. Talset & Harrow, Tailors, LLC were able to work from scan images and offered impeccable data security—rather important when you were dealing with nude images of the most important and powerful people in Gondwana. Perhaps they weren’t especially powerful or important (except to him), but Zane wasn’t about to take chances with the scan imagery he’d taken of Rhianna and Rochelle. (If they’d actually thought about what he was doing at the time, Zane reflected, and realized that he was effectively taking a picture of their bodies without their clothes on, he probably wouldn’t have gotten away with scanning them at all. All hail sleep deprivation!)

The building was a fairly nondescript little storefront in an area that, while not exactly run-down, wasn't one of the neighborhoods one thought of when one thought of wealth. Which was part of the secret. T&H wasn't exactly easy to find by accident—you had to have a recommendation.

Within the building, the reception area was tasteful and understated. The furniture was of the sort that was so elegant in its simplicity that you had to know a thing or two about furniture (or have a RIDE who ran searches as easily as most people breathed) to know how expensive the chair actually was that you were sitting on. The receptionist was tastefully but not garishly clothed, and affected exactly the right blasé demeanor for an establishment of this level of refinement.

"Good day, Mr. Brubeck," that worthy greeted him. "Shall I see if Mr. Harrow is available?" T&H was so exclusive that appointments were generally unnecessary—the business's namesakes were usually free, and if not would be shortly. They also kept odd hours, so it was not unusual to find them there at this time of the evening.

"Actually, I'll need to see Ms. Talset this time," Zane said. "I've got a commission in mind for a friend. Two friends, in fact."

The receptionist nodded. "She's free right now. Go on back."

"Thanks." Zane walked past him, to the indicated door.

Ms. Allison Talset was a well-preserved lady of indeterminate age. Zane suspected she might actually have delayed starting anti-agathics intentionally just to attain the certain matronly demeanor that was such an asset in her line of work. She wore one of her own creations, of course, an informal dress tailored for comfort but still quite attractive in appearance.

"Good day, Mr. Brubeck. We haven't seen much of you lately." Ms. Talset smiled, her cheeks dimpling. "We do also make designs for RIDE couture, you know."

"Never really thought much about wearing RIDE clothing," Zane admitted. "Seemed a little too much like gilding the lily. But you know, I should think about that." *Actually, I'll probably offer you the challenge of jump-starting Integrate fashion. You'll love that.*

"So what brings you to our humble little establishment today?" Ms. Talset asked.

"I have a couple of lady-friends. Well—*newly* lady friends,"

"Ahhhh, and you're wanting to buy them the 'traditional crossrider gifts'?" Ms. Talset asked.

"Well, yes, and...no," Zane said. "Crossrider gifts are usually gag gifts—as I understand it, the point is to embarrass your friend at her new coming-out party as much as you possibly can. But I want to buck the trend—I want to give them something they can actually use."

"Ah, I see! And you thought of us!" Ms. Talset smiled again. "Mr. Brubeck, I *am* flattered."

"Well, I *can* afford it," Zane said. "Anyone can shop at the mall."

"You have scan data, I trust?" Ms. Talset asked.

"Yes. Hang on." Zane projected the hardlight image of Kaylee/Rhianna from the scan, then dissolved away the Kaylee layer. Then he added the scan of Rochelle.

Ms. Talset blinked. "Oh, my. These are some of the highest-resolution scan images I've yet seen."

"Er." Zane stared at them, examining them for the first time himself. "They, ah, *are*, aren't they?" It was as if Rhianna and Rochelle were themselves standing naked in

front of him. He hastily averted his gaze, then absent-mindedly fingered his muzzle, checking for trickles of blood.

“Why, those are Rhianna Stonegate and Rochelle Seaford!” Ms. Talset said after a moment. “I’ve actually met them! My niece has her Ariadne serviced there.”

Zane blinked. “Oh—really? Huh. I knew they were good, but I keep being surprised by just how widely-known they really are. I probably shouldn’t be.”

Ms. Talset smiled again. “In fact, I do believe your order qualifies for my special 10% ‘work I would have wanted to do anyway’ discount.”

“Well, that’s good of you, but I’d still be happy to pay full price,” Zane said. “Oh, and it might be a presumption of me, but I didn’t want to stop with just lingerie. I’d like a nice dress for each of them. One of *your* creations. Total creative freedom.” He grinned. “Do that magic thing you do.”

Ms. Talset beamed. “*Marvelous!* This sort of opportunity is *such* a rarity!” She scrutinized the images more closely, clinically. “With that body shape, and those feline features, I imagine Rhianna is often buttonholed as ‘cute.’ And I’ll bet she gets *really* sick of it. But I can work around that. The essence of fashion is emphasizing the aspects you want to emphasize, and downplaying those you don’t. I will make her a dress in which she can be *beautiful*.”

“I don’t think she wants anything too fancy...”

Ms. Talset smirked. “Mr. Brubeck, do I tell you how to dig for qubitite?”

“Actually, I don’t *do* any digging for qubitite, I just tell other people to,” Zane said, chuckling. “But point taken.”

Ms. Talset turned next to Rochelle. “Now this is an altogether different challenge. As I recall, she has those obnoxious *retailoring* nanites, and from what I understand is quite unable to switch them off.” She shook her head. “Terribly *tacky*, those. No true creativity or sense of style, just change everything to show off the ‘assets.’ It’s automatic meat-market repackaging.” She snorted. “Of course, knowing the circumstances, it’s hard to blame the poor girl. And since we use smart fabrics that do not permit nano-retailoring, it won’t be an issue with *my* dress. I will make her a creation that will make those nanites eat their microscopic little sarium cores out.” She nodded, mind made up. “If you could transfer the scans over to my workshop system, I shall commence to *create*.”

Zane nodded. His DIN flashed as he made the transfer. Smaller versions of the images appeared on a holoprojector on the tailor’s workbench. “Very good!” Ms. Talset said. “Check with me...hmm...the day after tomorrow. You may show yourself out; you know the way.”

Zane grinned. “I’ll look forward to it.” As instructed, he showed himself back out to the waiting room.

As he stepped back onto the street, Zane checked his watch. Still an hour to go before Rochelle expected him. Well, maybe he *could* shop a little at the mall after all. He lifted back into the air, and headed back up the street.

While the autokitchen started on a roast turkey, Anny embraced her long-lost partner tightly and for long enough that Rhianna started feeling uncomfortable. Anny’s current RIDE had changed back to Walker mode and promptly took over the Sophie Sofa (which by itself could barely hold her). The white lioness was *huge*, and didn’t say a word to anyone. For her part, Sophie was a gracious hostess and “allowed” the big cat

mecha to do so.

Finally, Rhianna had had enough. “Kaylee, I don’t mean to butt my tail in here—” she began.

“Yes, you do,” Anny said, letting Kaylee go. There was no malice in her voice. “I’m sorry about that, Rhianna. I should be hugging *you* as well. You saved my Kaylee’s life.” And so she did, voice thick with emotion. It didn’t go on as long as it did with Kaylee. “Feels funny when you hug another woman, eh?” she whispered in Rhianna’s ear. “All squishy-boobs.”

Rhianna let go, smiling weakly. “Is it really *that* obvious?”

“My Leila there googled you on the suborbital over. The name change is public, you know. Someone like you can’t exactly keep it a secret, now can they? Was right on your business site.” Anny said. “You did a real bang-up job on Kaylee. She looks so much better with a real skin on her.”

“About that,” Kaylee said. “I have a memory fragment when you and I were Fused up, skinned, with a uniform on. When did *that* happen?”

“Well, that’s the thing now, isn’t it?” Annette Hower fished in her purse, taking out a memory card the size of her thumb. “You know, when they decommission a RIDE they don’t erase your memory blocks. Nextus folks don’t like losing stuff like that. They’re just copied. I stopped by the old MRS Central Office on the way here—s’why it took me so long—pulled a few strings, cashed in some tokens, and pushed a Freedom of Information request through in record time. Burned sarium to get here before dark. My Leila’s a full-bore flier in her own right, you know.”

The lynx stared at the chip. “Is that what I think it is?”

“Not all of it, unfortunately. Some parts are still classified—and I can’t fuse with you to fill in the gaps. Had to get special clearance when I adopted my feline friend of few words there. Right, Leila?”

“Yeah,” the lioness said, head resting on her forepaws.

“It’s about three quarters of what you’re missing. Including the *entire* RIDE Prototype Testing Program from start to finish. You think you’re old? Kaylee darlin’, you’re the second RIDE off the line. Pract’ly hand-built and able to take whatever gear anyone can think of. The prototype for all female RIDEs that followed. I had the honor of being your second test rider when they inducted you into the MRS.”

“So...so how did I end up at an Uplift auction five years ago?” Kaylee said, shock all over her face. “Wow, counting collector value I bet I’m worth more than *Uncia*...”

“Best sixty-two *mu* I ever spent,” Rhianna said, stroking her down her back. “That explains why you’ve got such a great chassis.”

Anny gaped. “The hell? *Sixty-two*? Well, I’m glad the auctioneers never realized what they had! Please, tell me about this. I’ve *gotta* know how you got her. My superiors told me they’d junked you after that...that thing that happened I still can’t talk about.”

“Oh, one of *those* things-that-happened,” Myla said. “Must’ve been damned serious if it’s still classified. Why would they junk Kaylee?”

The older MRS officer made a zipping motion across her lips. “Don’t feel like spendin’ five years in the clink. Can’t say. Sorry. But it’ll be declassified on schedule in... 162, I think.”

“Six more years!” Kaylee wailed.

Holding the memory chip, Anny walked over to her former RIDE. “I know, the bastids. But it’s not that important. Here’s a RAM chip for you. Open wide for num-

nums.”

The hardlight on Kaylee’s head partly went out, a slot for the card opening up. Anny slid it in. Over their link, Rhianna saw a massive library being trucked into virtual space. Kaylee’s avatar stared up at it. *:Okay. Uh...not very good indexing here. Looks like I desperately need that defrag, boss. I’m making an appointment with Shelley right now.:*

Rhianna hugged her partner as tightly as Annette did. *:I can’t wait to see all this. You’re the prototype for every other RIDE in existence, Kaylee! All of them! Just...I’m speechless.:*

:Half of them anyway.: Kaylee sent. Then she blinked. *:Oh Lordy. I’m not Uncia’s “big sister” after all. I’m...her great-great-great grandmother.:*

Out in the real world there was a chime from the kitchen and the sound of robotic kitchen helper finishing preparations. “Well, supper’s ready. Let’s eat!” Annette rubbed her hands together, looking *almost* as adorable as Rhianna when she did it.

Rhianna checked the time. “Well, I hate to be a wet blanket, but after we eat I’m meeting an old friend for a girls-night-out. Will you be in town for a while, Anny?”

“At least a few days. Once Kaylee gets to know herself again we’re going to have a lot to talk about,” the lioness-eared woman said. “Put those curvy new assets to use, and have fun with your womanhood. It still feels new, so strike while the iron’s hot. It’ll be ho-hum normal all too quickly, trust me.”

“I’m sure you’re going to look just *fine*,” Uncia said for the twelfth time, and incremented her counter by one to keep track. “I mean, how could you *not*?”

Rochelle rolled her eyes. “That’s not the *point*. I’m just trying to decide what to wear. Do I try for drop-dead sexy or go low-key?”

“Shelley, for you low-key is drop-dead sexy,” Uncia pointed out. “That’s your whole *problem*.”

“It’s the *principle* of the thing!” Rochelle insisted.

Uncia shook her head. “I’m the one who changed you, and I still can’t believe you used to be a guy.”

Rochelle glared at her, then chuckled. “I know. Weird, isn’t it? I’m still not sure how I feel about that. Are these stupid nanites still messing with my mind even after I disabled ‘hooker mode’? Or should I just be happy I’m adapting so well?”

“I’d try not to worry too much,” Uncia said. “About *any* of it. You’ll look fine. Besides, there’s one thing you can put on that’s right for *any* occasion.”

“Oh yeah? And what’s that?”

Uncia struck a dramatic pose. “Me!” she said smugly.

Rochelle snorted. “Yeah, that figures.”

The doorbell rang, a good old-fashioned 20th-century DING-DONG, while the house’s door cam reported the arrival of Zane. He was wearing his three-meter-tall Terry disguise, and carrying something blurred and indistinct in his right hand.

“Oh crap! I’m not ready! I’m not ready!” Rochelle said, looking around wildly. For lack of anything better to do, she caught Uncia up in a hug and Fused inside, going to meet the door in leopard skin.

“Told’ja,” Uncia smirked.

“Oh, hush, you,” Rochelle and Uncia opened the door. “Zane! So nice to see you!” Zane raised his right hand, and the indistinct object in it unblurred into a

bouquet of red roses. “Hi! You’re looking great—both of you!”

“Oooh, flowers! I’ll just go fab a vase to put these in,” Rochelle said, taking the bouquet and having Uncia send a signal to the home microfab unit in the kitchen. “Come on in, I’ll be right with you in a moment.” She went to the kitchen just in time to grab up the vase from the fabber, fill it with water, and put the roses inside. Then she headed out the other side into the hall to her bedroom.

She de-Fused once she was inside with the door closed behind her. “Now what?” She stared at herself in the mirror. “What do I *wear*? I don’t have any time left to decide!”

“Well, there’s always that cute little burlap ensemble hanging in your closet,” Uncia suggested.

Rochelle rolled her eyes. “Not on your *life*. Besides, it’s itchy.”

“Then how about that red dress you got when Rufia took you shopping?” Uncia suggested. “It’s not too casual, but not really formal either. And Rufia seemed to like it a lot.”

Rochelle considered that. “Okay, good idea. I’ll put it on. You go out there and keep him busy.”

Uncia rolled her eyes good-naturedly, but padded out of the room to go “distract” Zane.

Zane was seated on the over-sized Fuser sofa in the living room. He grinned at her as she entered. “Hey, pretty kitty!”

“Hiya, tiger.” Uncia sat on her haunches and considered him. “Thought you weren’t gonna play dress-up.”

“What, this old thing?” Zane grinned, waving a hand at his Terry Fuser body. “I’m not gonna hide from the public eye, but I’d rather not outshine my date tonight. Besides, it would be awkward to go around shorter than the two of you.”

Uncia blinked. “The two of us?”

“As far as I’m concerned, this is a *double* date,” Zane said. “It would be pretty unfair of me to gang up on Shelley two to one, right?”

“Yay!” Uncia jumped up and put her paws on Zane’s shoulders to deliver him a friendly slurp on the muzzle. “I’d hoped for that, but hadn’t been sure you’d actually go for it!”

“Hey, whoa, down girl,” Zane laughed. “I like you both, and you go so well together. Like chocolate and peanut butter.”

“Someone’s hungry all right!” Rochelle said as she stepped in, wearing the red dress and heels that had driven Rufia to distraction in the mall.

Zane whistled. “Damn, you’re *really* gorgeous. But there was just one little thing I wanted to do.” He stepped up to her and raised his left arm. For a moment his DIN shone through the hardlight disguise as he bathed her in laser-light, interfacing with the nanites.

“Hey, what’re you—oh!” Rochelle’s hair deanimated and her body language normalized from super-sexy to just standing there. “What was *that* for? Don’t you want me looking my best?”

“I want you to look like *you* want to look like,” Zane said. “You’re not some sort of...well, *trophy* date. I want us to have a normal evening together without you feeling like you *have* to be gorgeous and have other people stare at you any more than you actually want. I like you as a person, and want you to feel comfortable.”

"Huh. Okay." Rochelle whipped out her interface specs from somewhere and slid them on, then pulled up the control panel with all the intensity sliders on it to adjust the nanite options.

She set her hair to have decent body but not move in slow motion, and cranked her body language down from "Mt. St. Helen of Troy" to "Cocky Coquette." She adjusted her body odor and other options to suit.

Then she was quite startled when Zane reached up into the air in front of her and started moving the sliders around with his fingers.

"Hey!" Rochelle yelped as her hair started moving on its own again. "You cut that out!" She eyeflicked the slider back down. "How are you even *doing* that, anyway?"

"Sorry," Zane said, lowering his hand. "I just saw that thing floating there in front of you and was curious to see if I could touch it."

Rochelle stared at him for a moment. "Damn," she said. "Why do *you* get all the cool powers? You're not even a computer nerd!"

"At least you've got something to look forward to," Zane said.

"I guess so." She grinned at Uncia. "Hey, Un-hon, how would you feel about spending a few months Fused non-stop?"

Uncia gave her a feline grin. "Ask me when you're *serious* about it."

"It's really not something you want to rush, seriously," Zane said. "I wouldn't trade a single minute of the time we spent separately for another minute like this. In fact, I sometimes feel kind of the other way around."

Rochelle chuckled. "Yeah, I guess. And I expect if we ever do Integrate, I'll be all nostalgic for the time before. Grass is always greener, isn't it?"

Zane smiled faintly. "Yes, it really is. Sometimes I think Terry and Zane didn't really know what we had, and I wish we hadn't spent *quite* so much time in full Fuse so we could have done more things together separately before this happened. But all the same, it's still hard to *regret* being how we are now. I guess the lesson is just to try to live your life from where you are instead of wishing it were some other way." He hopped up. "But that's awfully heavy talk for going on a date. Go on and Fuse up, and we'll be on our way!"

"All *right*!" Uncia squealed as she leaped onto and wrapped herself around Rochelle. "We're goin' on a *date*! There might even be *kissing* involved!"

"Un-hon, you have *no* idea," Rochelle said, grinning. "Well then, let's go!"

Zane gestured to the door. "After you!"

Rochelle and Uncia stepped outside to find a cherry-red two-seater topless sports skimmer car hovering in their driveway. "This is new. Rental?"

"Yeah. I could buy it if I wanted, but I don't really see much point. I'd only ever use it for taking really sexy snow-leopard girls on dates. And those are pretty rare." He waved a hand and the doors slid open, revealing Fuser-scaled seating. Then he offered Rochelle a hand up, which she didn't really need but took anyway because it was what you did.

"So where to first?" Rochelle asked as the skimmer backed out onto the street.

"How does dinner sound?" Zane asked. "Remember, I promised to let you buy."

"You did at that," Rochelle said. "But I hope you're going to stay within my budget."

"Believe it or not, I am. C'mon, I'll show you one of Uplift's best-kept secrets." He kicked the skimmer into gear, and away they went.

Kaylee and Rhianna returned to the garage at a clip, boosting right through the upstairs door in skimmer mode to stop right in the living room. Rhianna didn't miss a beat, jumping out of the saddle and going into her bedroom before Kaylee even changed modes. *:You know, the last time Rufia and I went barhopping like this was just after she crossed over,:* the woman sent. "I got reeeeeeally flustered after just a few minutes, the way she was, er, flaunting it."

"I've caught hints of that memory," Kaylee said. "This is supposed to be casual, right? Don't worry so much about sexy. Dress how you want."

The lynx-eared woman stripped all her clothes off then spent just long enough in the shower to get clean, pausing in front of the bathroom mirror to reflect on her nudity. Her breasts were perky and full, her torso curving in an artful hourglass from bust to hips. Were she ten centimeters taller—Rochelle's height—she would have been called thin. She had the kind of face that evoked sympathy and protective emotions rather than lust, and the kitty nose was just adorable. If she was going to be out with Rufia tonight, she had to be more than just an 'adorable catgirl'.

One practical crossing-over gift that she'd unboxed but not used was a full-face makeup mask. Women in ages past had to own a dozen different kinds of makeup but this little device could do it all, from foundation to lipstick to eyeshadow and even perfume. She connected to its computer and started going through her choices, each superimposing a makeup pattern over an image of her own face. The first one made her gag. A totally white face with a jagged black streak over the eyes, titled Juggalo. "Ugh. No! What is *that*, an angry clown?"

"Probably a joke," Kaylee said. "Who was that a gift from, anyway?"

"A *male* friend of Rufia's I'd never met. I forget his name." Rhianna waved her hand through the air in front of her, sliding images past. "Let's see...Midnight Rendezvous? No. First Date? No..." One after another, they all seemed like too much. Eventually she settled on Just the Basics, then put the mask over her face. After a tingle and a ding of completion, she got a look at herself.

The difference was satisfactory, though not strikingly different. It really *did* take the edge off the adorableness. "That work for you, Kaylee?"

"*Purrrfect*, as Uncia would say." She nosed her rider in the small of her back. "Now, you're not going out in your rebirthday suit, are you?"

"I'm *such* a crossrider stereotype right now. Fussing over girly clothes!" Rhianna said, blushing a little, heading to her closet. A lot of what Rufia had purchased for her had been a serious attempt to find something her old friend would like in her new wardrobe. Kaylee's contributions were generally more practical by comparison and not really suited for barhopping.

"Knowing Rufia she'll have found the 'perfect guy' for me even before I get there. She'll expect us to kiss, maybe do some heavy petting. If she *really* thinks she has a winner for me she'll smirk, slip me a condom, then send us both on our way." She snorted. "And why not? It worked over a dozen times on the *Spruce Goose*. There were a *lot* of adventurous girls on that ship willing to dally for a night or two and move on."

"I guess the real question, partner, is if you want to be one of those girls yourself," Kaylee said with a serious note. "Do you?"

Wear more red, Myla said. Let's see... She made her choices and followed the instructions how to put them on, then admired herself in the mirror again, pleased with

the results. :*Kaylee, let's strike while the iron's hot.*:

The skimmer car weaved smoothly through ground traffic as it headed toward the eastern area of Uplift, under Zane's expert guidance. Rochelle watched him and chuckled. "You know, you don't *have* to keep holding the control yokes. I know you're really flying it through your wireless link."

Zane grinned at her. "That obvious, huh?"

"Well, to be honest, I couldn't tell," Rochelle said. "But I know if *I* had that keen cyber-remote-control ability you do, I'd be using it. So Q.E.D."

Zane chuckled, releasing the controls, leaning back in the seat, and closing his eyes. "You know, you're right. Maybe I'll just nap for a while. Wake me when we get there."

"I know you're using the car's built-in sensors, so you can't scare me that way either," Rochelle said.

Zane opened his eyes again. "Awww, spoilsport."

"So where's this place we're going?" Rochelle asked. "We're heading back toward the garage, aren't we? I thought I knew all the places around here."

"Maybe," Zane said. "I know I only found it by accident, after we'd been here for two months. Took the wrong turn up a street, stopped in to ask for directions, and found...heaven." He chuckled. "Bear with me a couple more minutes, we're almost there."

"There's a *bear* with you?" Uncia asked. "Where are you keeping him?"

Zane rolled his eyes. "Everyone's a comedian." He turned off the main street onto a side street into an older commercial area, then into a parking lot for a small, unassuming strip mall that was still in very good repair but had been bypassed by the fairly disorderly nature of zoning and building progress in this part of Uplift. For all of that, the parking lot was still about half-full—not bad for this time of day in a neighborhood this secluded.

The skimmer settled into a parking place, and Zane transmitted a *mu* into the parking meter as he signaled the doors to open. He and Rochelle climbed out, and Zane gestured toward a small shop front labeled "St. Joseph's Barbecue." "Here we are."

"Wow. I've never heard of this place, but this isn't more than a few blocks from the garage or your office building," Rochelle said.

"It's a little bit of a hole-in-the-wall, and it doesn't advertise," Zane said. "A lot like your garage, really. The guy runs it mainly as a shopfront to host his catering business out of. But word gets around." He held the door for her and they went in.

Inside, the restaurant was remarkably small. There was only room for about three or four tables, because the eating area was only the first fifteen feet of the shop. Beyond that was a counter with a cash register, and the rest of it was taken up by kitchen. Tantalizing odors of roasted meat wafted from its depths. "Hey, be with you in a moment!" a friendly voice called from somewhere out of view.

"No problem, we'll just look at the menu!" Zane called back. The menu was up on one wall, listing prices for various sandwiches, ribs, platters, and side dishes. The prices were quite reasonable, and even the largest meals were only about 15-20 *mu*. "I eat lunch here a lot," Zane said. "Carnivore's delight."

"I can see that," Rochelle said. "It really looks good, and the smells are driving me crazy. We order at the counter?"

"Yeah. Oh, there he is. Hey, Chet." Zane waved as a slightly portly, shorter human with a full beard and mustache came out of the kitchen, wiping his hands on a washcloth. He wore an apron over his clothes, and a smile on his face.

"Hey, Zane. How you doing? Brought company today?"

"You could say that." Zane grinned. "Chet St. Joseph, Rochelle Seaford, and her RIDE Uncia. They help run a little RIDE garage around here."

"I've heard of it. Nice to meet you two. So what can I get for you?"

Zane glanced to Uncia. "You ready to order?"

"Huh. I think the ribs look good. Maybe we could start with a whole rack between us, and sides...hmm, beans and potato salad."

"Let's make that two racks, and cole slaw, too," Zane said. "And soft drinks."

"Works for me." Rochelle nodded.

"All right. Why don't you get your drinks and have a seat, and I'll bring those out to you?" St. Joseph suggested, putting a couple of plastic glasses on the counter.

"Sure, thanks," Zane said. He and Rochelle went to the soft drink dispenser and filled them, then went in search of a table.

Two of the tables were occupied, but the others were free. Fortunately they were smart furniture, adjustable to human or Fuser scale. They sensed the Fusers' approach and were properly adjusted by the time they were ready to sit down.

"If it tastes as good as it smells, I'm going to be coming here *often*," Rochelle grinned. "And I'll be dragging Rhianna along. I don't think she knows about it either."

Zane nodded. "Yeah, like I said, he doesn't advertise. Just like you guys. Mainly runs it because he might as well do something with the shopfront. He's mainly about catering, and he does all kinds of food for that, not just 'cue."

"Here you go." St. Joseph came out from behind the counter carrying a big tray of food, setting a rack of ribs in front of each big cat Fuser, followed by plates and bowls of beans, cole slaw, and potato salad. "Enjoy," he said, and bustled away.

"Thanks, we will!" Rochelle replied. Then she glanced over at Zane, who was already raising a rib to his mouth. "You can even eat in that disguise?"

"Just like you can in Uncia," Zane said. "Really, I hardly even notice. Like the hardlight fur when I was a RIDE, the body feels 'real' when I'm in it. I don't feel my 'inner self' unless I concentrate on it."

"Handy." Rochelle picked up a rib of her own, and Uncia's jaw bit into it. "Mmm, this is good!"

"It is!" Uncia said through a mouthful of meat.

Zane grinned. "Hey, don't talk with her mouth full."

"Sowwy!" Uncia mumbled through more meat.

:Do you want to go inside Fused, or make an entrance?: Kaylee asked as they approached the Cheers bar, one of Rufia's many favorite hangouts. The interior was a perfect reproduction of the seminal long-running 1980s sitcom, upscaled for Fusers. The outside was another story, it was just another bar in an area of town known for its drinking establishments. *:There's also the 'grand reveal' where you de-Fuse with me in front of everyone. Or maybe we can do both at once.:*

"How do you mean, partner?" Rhianna asked, fussing with jewelry. The earrings felt stranger than her own body did.

:Uncia and I went shopping, remember?: Kaylee reminded her absent-minded

rider. They Fused up, remaining in flight as they approached the front door. Before they got too close the RIDE materialized the cream silk evening dress she'd purchased earlier. *:Gorgeous, huh?:*

"I love it, Kaylee! Wonderful idea!" Rhianna exclaimed. "We'll show Rufia a thing or two."

:Just don't try too hard, okay? There's 'going native' and then there's... everything else, really. Don't try and act feminine. Crossriders have a well-deserved reputation for overdoing it. Just be yourself.: Kaylee reminded her. :Especially here. I've heard the bartender's a bit, er...blunt if you do.:

At least half of the regulars at Cheers were crossriders of all varieties. From people like Rufia who crossed permanently, to newbies like Rhianna, to those who crossed regular as clockwork after every three-year safe waiting period.

Her so-called Grand Entrance was hardly that, not even getting a "Norm!" from the regulars. The interior was all wood paneling except for the wall next to the front door, which was red brick. There was hardly a space open around the bar, though there was one next to Rufia. A doe Fuser and a clouded leopardess mixed and served drinks. The cervine bartender was the only one who looked at the newbie. "Rufia! Your friend's here."

Rufia, who wasn't Fused with Yvonne, wore a white, midriff-baring tube top and brown shorts, revealing large-but-firm thighs, but not a fleck of makeup. Yet somehow she made it work for her. She raised her foaming beer glass at Rhianna, then put her arm around the handsome stag Fuser to her left. "Rhi! Come have a seat. Got someone who'd like to meet ya." She gestured at the empty barstool next to her.

:You were dead right, pard,: Kaylee sent.

"Just like old times," Rhianna said, as much for Kaylee's benefit as Rufia's. She padded up to her old friend and took the stool, putting herself between Rufia and the tall woman's chosen for her friend. Rhianna appraised the guy. "So, big guy, you got a name? I'm sure Rufia's told you mine. Ours."

"Brad. Brad Walden," the man said. Then his accent became Old British. "Ronno," his RIDE, a red deer, said. "We're pleased to meet you."

"You a crossrider or just curious?" Rhianna asked. There were far more male-to-female crossers than the other way around, simply due to economics. Kaylee had been a special case. Due to her state of disrepair the auctioneers hadn't known if the lot was male or female.

"Does it matter how I answer?" Walden asked. "That dress is *gorgeous*, by the way."

Kaylee glowed at the compliment. "I suppose not. And thank you very much." She felt Rufia slip something into her hand. It was a condom—not really necessary anymore in this age of nanite-enhanced medicine and birth control (though plenty of people still used them anyway as a 20th century affectation), but it was a little code between her and Rufia to signify just how far he was willing to go.

:Here you go, girls. Have some fun. He's willing and able.: Rufia sent.

:You're not even giving me five minutes to get to know him before sending me away to have sex? That's a record, even for you,: Rhianna replied crisply.

:Hey, hey. I'm sorry. I got ahead of myself. No need to bite my head off,: Rufia replied. :Have some drinks, chat him up a bit. It's not like I've just met the guy. He's a regular here. There's an open booth in the corner with a privacy screen. Go chat him

up for a couple hours before you decide to test your 'new gear':

"Shall we retire to more a more private venue to chat?" Ronno said politely. "We'll de-Fuse, if you're so inclined."

"Playing matchmaker again, Rufia?" the doe behind the bar said with mild disapproval. She gave Brad-Ronno a special glare meant just for them. "Don't let that one break your heart, miss kitty. He's a casanova, true to his cervine brain map. He lives for the chase, then it's off to the next girl."

"We appreciate the concern, Miss...?" Rhianna asked.

"Diane and Faline. We own the place. I shoulda known better than to date a stag named Ronno! He's true to his character, and no Bambi around to 'save' me." She snorted. "Good luck anyway lynxie, bucko. You'll both need it." She looked back at the other bartender. "Serena, grab them some house ale, put it on Rufia's tab."

Giving her a good push as Kaylee left the stool, Rufia smiled voraciously. A feminine echo from the *Spruce Goose*. Brad swaggered over to the open booth, then de-Fused to reveal the deer-eared man underneath. Brad wore a muscle shirt combined with khaki slacks. He was more than just a hunk, but there was something about his expression that felt a little off.

Kaylee de-Fused, revealing her rider's evening attire. A short red dress with a 2010s cut, revealing slightly more cleavage than Rhianna was comfortable with, high-heeled shoes, and clinking jewelry.

"Yep, three weeks and she's gone native," Rufia said loudly enough to hear over the general din of the bar.

Ronno and Kaylee sniffed one another, probably sending a number of side-channel signals at the same time. The red stag was a third again larger than the lynx, and his antlers were apparently real, not hardlight. Real in the sense they were nanomobile metallic like the rest of his shell and probably had room for extra communications gear.

"You know, Diane's got me dead to rights. I don't like commitment, just some fun," Brad said. He gave his RIDE a pat on the shoulder. "It's not all Ronno's fault. Rufia and I have shared a bed a few times, just so we're clear where we stand. She thinks you need, uh, an *experienced* person for your first time. I've dated a lot of the crossriders here. Ask around if you want."

"Have you been a woman yourself, then?" Rhianna asked, curious.

"Well, that's a thing, isn't it? Would it feel better for you if I said yes, decided it wasn't for me, then crossed back when it was safe? I *did* learn some tricks from the experience, mind you. I'll put them to good use. My only real mistake was dating Diane."

"Mistake?" Kaylee asked. From the looks of things she and Ronno weren't hitting it off. The lynx had turned to licking her forepaws rather than looking at him.

"Wants more from a man than I'm capable of giving," Brad replied, shrugging. "If you don't want anything to do with me after all, I'll leave and that's that. No hard feelings. Otherwise, I can show you a really good time. You're just *adorable*, you know that?"

Rhianna gritted her teeth. There was *that word* again. "Well, bye. Nice meeting you, but you can be on your way."

Without a shrug or even another word, Brad and Ronno left. The seat was immediately re-occupied by Rufia. "Didn't work out, huh? Sorry about that, Rhi."

"I think it's really my fault," Kaylee said. "You weren't supposed to have a kitty nose and I'm not sure I can fix it. That's where the *moe*-factor is coming from. Makes people want to hug and protect you instead of sweep you off your feet."

"Doesn't it usually take months of cumulative Fuse time to get more animal features? I mean, look at Qixi. She's got half a wolf muzzle, but she's been running salvage ops Fused with Maria for years," Rhianna said. She hadn't even touched the ale. The catgirl took a sniff, then put it down again. It was one of those dark, soupy beers that was more like liquid bread.

"I think it might've been the combat nannies and all the extra body sculpting work I did on you," Kaylee said, sounding worried. "I...I just don't know for sure."

"Well, Brad-and-Ronno were the only guys here I wanted you to meet," Rufia said. "I have a couple other places in mind where you can mingle on your own, do some dancing. I'm glad you like that dress, too. Aren't I good at finding you things?"

"Most of the time," Rhianna agreed. "Where's the next stop?"

Conversation lapsed as the two cats concentrated on their dinner. They could have continued to talk through sideband radio, of course, but the food was so good it felt disrespectful on both their parts not to give it their full attention.

Half an hour later, the ribs were a pile of bones on the plate in the middle of the table, and the side dishes were mere traces at the bottom of their bowls. Zane burped happily. "Sure you don't want to let me get this?" Zane asked as Rochelle got up to pay the check.

"You can pay when you buy me an umpteen-zillion-course meal at some fancy uptown restaurant," Rochelle said. "Since I *can* afford this, I'm going to revel in the sensation of buying dinner for a millionaire."

"All right, it's a date then."

"Hey, I didn't say I was going to *let* you buy me that meal," Rochelle said over her shoulder. "Let's just see how tonight goes first."

"Okay, fair enough." Zane got up and headed to the door. "I'll just go get the car."

A moment later, Rochelle stepped out of the restaurant and climbed into the passenger seat of the convertible again, and they pulled back out into traffic. "So where to now?"

"There are a couple of clubs I've been wanting to check out, but there wasn't much point without someone to dance with," Zane said. "Feel like giving it a shot?"

"Do they let Fusers out on the dance floor?" Uncia asked.

"Sure do," Zane said. "There's this one called 'Fur Le Dance,' named after some place on Old Earth, that's mainly for Fusers, with a couple of smaller humans-only floors."

"Then let's go there first," Uncia said.

"Works for me," Rochelle agreed.

The club was only a few minutes of away, and the parking lot was pretty full when they got there. The club did offer valet parking, and Zane was not reluctant to take advantage of it. As they got out, Uncia sent to Rochelle, *:I've got a little surprise for you!:*

:Oh?: Rochelle asked. *:What's that?:*

:This!: Uncia materialized the blue dress she'd bought at the mall with Kaylee, reabsorbing her metal anatomy covers again.

Zane blinked, stepping back to take in the full effect as the valet drove the car away. “Wow, that really looks good on you!”

Rochelle blinked. “Hey, it does! Really matches our fur. You got that at the mall today, Un-hon?”

“Uh-huh! Thought it might be nice just in case.”

“Now I feel under-dressed. Hang on a sec.” Zane reached out with his DIN and accessed the RIDE couture section of Talset & Harrow’s net site. The designs there weren’t the custom-tailored clothes that were their specialty, but were still a cut above most retail. He picked out a pair of khaki slacks and a sleeveless tan blazer, downloaded them, and projected them on. “That’s better.”

“Oooh, nice look!” Uncia said.

Zane offered them his arm. “So, shall we?”

Rochelle and Uncia took it. “Let’s go see how Fusers dance.”

The club was big and dark and *loud*, and had dance floors set at several levels, including a zero-gee dome at the very top ringed with a lifter net array to catch any potential tumblers before they could land on the dancers below them. The floors were lit, and in some cases were themselves made of hardlight, and there were light effects from spots and strobes all along the ceiling and walls as well.

And on those floors were dancing Fusers of all different animal types of both genders, about half wearing hardlight clothes, others in the traditional metal bits over fur, and even a few in bare metal. A number of Walker-mode RIDEs were out on the floor, too, dancing on four legs. Smaller dance floors off to the sides had humans on them, and a scattering of Fusers, humans, and Walkers occupied tables in the rest areas.

The music seemed to be—what else—a mix of disco and pop tunes from the late 20th century, alternating with 23rd/24th century psycho-metal replete with hypnotic subsonic and timed-strobe elements. Although musical tastes for listening had moved on since then, psycho-metal was still popular in clubs because the mental effects livened up the physical dance.

Zane pulled Rochelle out onto the dance floor, to a space where they’d have plenty of room to swing their tails. “You know how to neo-Tango, right?”

“Was born to it!” Rochelle said cheerfully. *:Un-hon, could you download a skill chip for me?:*

Zane grinned. “You know I can hear you, right? It’s okay if you don’t know it. I can teach you better than some skill chip.”

“Actually, *I* know how to neo-Tango flawlessly, thank you very much!” Uncia said. “Rich girl’s toy, remember? I know pretty much every dance there is, because I’m supposed to be able to let them fake it on the floor while I teach it to them. So just let me make the moves, and you follow along, and you’ll know it before you know it.”

“You *know* them, or you were *programmed* with them?” Zane asked.

“Is there a difference? All you’re doing when you learn is programming your muscle memory. Mine’s already built in,” Uncia said.

“I guess that’s fair,” Zane said. “Anyway, let’s stop talking about it and let’s start dancing it!”

“Works for me!” Rochelle said. They got into the rhythm of the music and the hours began to fly by.

As it happened, Rhiana and Rufia had also chosen Fur Le Dance as their next

stop. Rhianna and Kaylee decided to keep their lifter upgrade a secret from Rufia just yet. Another day, or perhaps later in the night would be the right time to show their new stuff. Kaylee simulated her old lifters down to the sound, just to keep it from Yvonne.

This time Rhianna opted not to Fuse, preferring to enter the dance club on her own human feet, hoping beautiful would outweigh adorable this time. From the looks on people's faces, it wasn't working. Her smile faded, replaced by frustration, then a little anger. *:Do I look cute when I'm angry?:* she asked Kaylee.

:Yes. Very.,: Kaylee replied glumly. The duo Fused up and they found an empty booth. The club didn't have a server crew. Food and drinks were dispensed from the table itself. The club décor was the The Future, as seen through a 1960s zeerust lens. *:Rhianna, I'm really sorry. Want me to work on your nose?:*

:Since you don't know what caused it, I'll pass. I don't need a kitty face to go with it.,: Rhianna said tartly. *:I'm sorry, Kaylee. I'm not angry at you—:*

"Yes, you are," the lynx said aloud once the privacy screen was up. "Look, why don't we talk to...Rochelle and Zane?" Kaylee's ears perked as she looked out on the dance floor. "Here? *Dancing?* And that's Anny and Leila doing the neo-Tango with a lion!"

"You only just noticed them?" Rufia said. "I've been watching for five minutes. Who's Anny? New friend?"

:Kaylee, Rhianna dahling, fancy meeting you here.,: Anny sent. *:Is that fine elk a friend of yours or your date for the night?:*

:Not my date. Just an old friend from Earth. We immigrated together.,: Rhianna explained. *:I've pretty much struck out for the night. Completely whiffed it.::*

Anny's reply took a few seconds as she turned and dipped. *:I'm sorry to hear it, girls. I'd introduce you to my friend here, but he's all mine, ya hear? Grrrr!:* she said playfully.

It was then that Shelley and Zane saw *them*. They waved, then took a few minutes to finish the dance set before approaching. "Hey," Zane said. "Good to see you. I think you've already met my date..."

"We've met somewhere before," Rufia quipped. "Was it in the pale moonlight?"

"I think it was in the mall last week," Rochelle said. "Then you showed me your etchings."

Rhianna raised Kaylee's eyebrow and looked at Rufia and her elk-shark grin. "Really? Again?"

"I didn't get to see any etchings," Uncia said. "But I got to play with Yvonne all evening."

"And almost all the tooth marks have gone away by now," Yvonne said. "Well, on me anyway."

A floating white lioness interrupted Rufia's reply. "Can a near-total-stranger say hello to Rhianna's friends? I'm Anny Hewer, Myla's aunt. My partner here is Leila, but she doesn't say much."

"Hello, Ms. Hewer, Leila," Zane said. "I'm Zane Brubeck...um, and Terry, and this is Rochelle Seaford and Uncia." The other introductions made the rounds. The booth started to expand so it could accommodate more than four Fusers.

"I'm sitting in a cathouse," Yvonne said. "It's enough to make an elk nervous. Lions and leopards and lynxes, oh my!"

"*Tasty* elk," Uncia said with a giggle.

“By the way, Uncia let me know about your appointment request,” Rochelle said. “Kaylee, I’ll see you first thing tomorrow morning at the shop, ‘kay?”

“That’ll work just fine for me,” Kaylee replied.

Rhianna looked between Zane and Rochelle and what was left of her cheerful mood collapsed, and the iron grew cold. They were clearly having a good time and she didn’t want to ruin it by talking about her *moe* problems. “Well, this lynx is getting tuckered out from all this bar hopping. Rufia’s been unrelenting tonight.” She sent a ping to her old friend to play along.

The elk nodded, not missing a beat. “Oh, yeah. We’ve been to Cheers—”

“The Mended Drum, and the Gimpny Swan. Here, of course. I’m clubbed out.”

“Aw, you only just got here,” Zane said. “I know I’m dating Rochelle and Uncia tonight, but I’d hoped I could ask you for one dance, to thank you for your help with... the thing. I’m sure they’ll understand.”

“Uh...” Rhianna stammered. Just a few words were enough to reveal how the evening had gone for her. “Not, uh, really in the mood. I think I’ll go home.”

Zane nodded, not offended. “All right. Some other time, then.”

“Some other time,” Rhianna said, sliding out of the booth. “Thanks, Zane.”

“I’m kind of clubbed-out, myself,” Anny added. : *Walk with us a while, will ya? Or skim. Your pick.*:

Rochelle rested her handpaw on her friend’s shoulder, nodding her understanding. Even Rufia looked disappointed that she hadn’t come through, but stayed put, probably at Anny’s request.

The lynx and the lioness left the club, switched to skimmer mode, then traveled together into the nighttime city.

They ended up a short distance away in Bifrost Park. The hardlight rainbow provided more than enough light for the park to remain open at all hours, and the club itself used it in its logo. Rhianna dismounted, Kaylee changing back to Walker form. The lynx could barely look at her. In Fuse, their conflicting emotions made them both miserable. Rhianna was genuinely unhappy with her, and Kaylee genuinely contrite, but her rider was too angry to forgive just yet.

Anny arrived just behind, but after Leila changed to Walker the woman remounted on the white lioness’s back. “You know, I’ve been where you are,” the older woman said. “Kaylee, can you call up a few photos from the restored memories I gave you? Should be dated around the ides of June, 122 or so. Feel free to share.”

The images made Rhianna gape. “I thought *I* looked cute. That’s you?”

“Cute as a button when I was twenty. First time K and me Fused only enhanced it. Notice the nose on the earlier ones. *Specially* the nose. More of a muzzle, really. Color me blue and I’d be one of those alien cat people in...Ah! Thanks Leila. *Avatar*.”

“It’s not just the nose,” Rhianna said, looking through the test program images. “You’ve got a lynx *face* in this one!”

“Shoulda seen the rest of me. Those early days we were still tuning the bodysculpt abilities of the Fuser nannies, seeing how closely the rider needed to match the Fuser form. I was downright *furry* for some tests. By the time we got into regular service we’d fixed most of that—’cept the nose, the ears, and the tail.” She tapped the bridge of her own human nose. “Couple iterations later they’d even fixed the nose requirement—was there for sense of smell, see. Anyway, it’s not Kaylee’s fault. Talk to that friend of yours and she *might* fix it in software. Can’t make no guarantee, though. It

seems to be somethin' about prototype shells both old an' new that they tend t' tag on the nose too."

"Well, how did—do you live with it?" Rhianna asked.

"I just *do*, honey. Look at me, thirty years on and I'm *still* adorable. But you didn't notice because of the 'tude, did you? I still have a cute *moe* face. You can 'fix' it with makeup if you want, but it's still *your* face."

"I was a short man with a narrow face. Nothing to write home about, really. Rufus—you know who I'm talking about—somehow made that not matter. I met a lot of girls on board who enjoyed my company, others who ended up hating me. This isn't the first bad night out I've had by far."

Rhianna laughed. "Not even the first time I've gone out as a *girl*, come to think of it. There was that night at the Drum about a year ago. I got curious, went out as 'Kaylee Cross'. A beefy Proximan tourist made a pass at me and wouldn't let up. Of course, I was playing hard-to-get on purpose, and he took the bait. Had a lot of fun at his expense, *then* I took off my head when he insisted seeing what I really looked like."

"And the guy slugged you?" Leila said dryly.

"He *tried*," Kaylee said. "But my head came back up before he connected. Think he broke a knuckle. Whole bar got a good laugh. They knew who 'Kaylee Cross' really was. It's one of my fave Passive memories."

"The moron was bothering every girl in the bar. I had to do *something*," Rhianna said.

"Well, chivalry ain't dead," Anny said after laughing herself. "Classic, classic!"

Rhianna some deep breaths. "Feeling better now." She looked at Kaylee, then hugged her RIDE. "It's okay, partner. I can live with this."

"Thank you. I'm glad," the mecha lynx replied, one paw around Rhianna's back. The clock tower on nearby City Hall chimed fifteen minutes before 2800.

"Did we cut your date short? I'm sorry," Rhianna said to Anny.

Anny dismounted and stood in front of Rhianna. "Oh, Leo? He's waiting for us back at the club. There's something else I need to say.

"Kaylee's family, you know. I mourned for her when I thought she was lost to me." She hugged the mechanic tightly. "I can't thank you enough for doing what you did. That makes you family, too. Hope you don't mind if I think of you as another niece."

"No, I'm fine with that," Rhianna said, crying a little herself. She had family back on Earth, twenty light years away, but hadn't seen them in years and didn't know when or if she'd ever see them again. This was just too much. *Hormones. It's just hormones.* "Thanks, Aunt Anny."

"As fer yer hard luck clubbin', there's plenty a' time fer fixin' that. Go home, get some sleep, get lost in your work fer a while...and when yer ready, call me an' we'll do it up right. Rufia's welcome, too. But I imagine she'd tag along anyway."

"You got *that* right," Rufia herself said over the sound of blowing her nose into a handkerchief. It looked like she'd seen and heard the whole exchange, her eyes red with tears of her own. "What? I can't be girly sometimes, too?"

Zane and Rochelle stayed and danced at the club for several more hours, enjoying themselves too much to see a need to move on to any other establishments. They danced both in Fuse and out, with Uncia sitting a few dances out to charge up and let Rochelle try the steps she'd learned on her own, and Zane dropping his disguise long enough to

match the human Rochelle's height. (In the darkness of the dance club, nobody really noticed anything odd about a below-sized tiger Fuser anyway.) But at last, as 2930 rolled around and the club got ready to close, they had the valet bring the car around and headed for home.

"Well, it's been a lovely evening," Rochelle said as the sports skimmer merged back onto the open road. Still Fused into Uncia, she leaned back against the seat, enjoying the breeze in her fur.

"What makes you think it's over yet?" Zane asked, grinning.

"It's nearly midnight?" Rochelle said. "I can't think of anywhere else we might be going at this hour."

"Well, there's one place." Zane turned onto the street leading to the Brubeck Mining campus. "I was wondering if you'd like to come up to my place and see *my* etchings. Since you've already seen Rufia's, maybe you could compare them."

"Oh, you did *not* just ask that," Rochelle said. She grinned. "But since you're asking, sure. I guess I would rather like to see what your apartment is like."

"Good, 'cuz we're almost there. Hold on tight!" Zane pulled to a halt next to the building, then shoved the lift lever up to maximum. The skimmer's lifters kicked into overdrive, and the car rose up the side of the building.

"Whoa!" Rochelle said, glancing over the side. "Lot of power in this thing."

Zane pulled the lever back to level off, and nudged it over onto the balcony of his apartment, where it just fit. He lowered the lever, and it settled firmly into place.

"Nothing like door to door service, huh?"

Rochelle looked out dubiously. "Can your balcony support this much weight?"

"Oh, sure. They're designed to take small fliers or skimmers for deliveries and commuter parking. No worries." Zane killed the engines and hopped out, then came around to open the door for Rochelle. "Welcome to my humble abode!" He waved at the glass door to his apartment, and it slid open.

Rochelle preceded him into the room. It wasn't bad. Furnished in the usual twentieth-century style that was all the rage right now in Zharus interior design. There was an empty space in the living room where a couch had been, but other than that it was rather impressive. It was tidy, but it wasn't neat-freak neat. There were odd bits of clutter here and there—bric-a-brack nudged out of place, bits of trash that missed the trash can. It was lived-in, not a showroom. "I...like it," Rochelle decided.

"Me, too," Uncia said. "It's cozy."

"Sorry it's missing a sofa. My old one was a RIDE couch, and I gave it to Myla for Sophie. She's living right next door to me now, by the way."

"Oh, really? I should stop by and say hi."

"And Quinoa's in the one on the other side," Zane continued.

Rochelle blinked. "Seriously? You invited *her* to stay?"

"She's not really so bad once you get to know her. Just a little spoiled. I'm going to work on that. But she won't bother us tonight; I think she's gone out. At least I don't see her over in her place. Hope she's not getting into trouble." He shrugged. "Anyway, give me ten minutes, I'll have a sofa delivered." His DIN flashed as he placed the order.

Rochelle blinked. "You can get furniture at this time of night?" Zane just grinned, and Rochelle rolled her eyes. "Oh, right. Filthy stinking rich. You can get anything at any time of day you want, can't you."

"I'll admit power corrupts, but sometimes it's kind of fun to be a little corrupted."

Zane chuckled. "Why don't you come into the kitchen with me, and I'll fix us a late-night snack. The Terry side of me likes to cook, and I have to admit the Zane side likes to show it off every chance he gets, because he was able to burn *water*."

"All right, Mister Integrate." She grinned. Show me what you've got."

A few minutes later, Zane had made them quite passable grilled cheese and apple butter sandwiches, and shaken up and strained out a pair of martinis. They sat together at the kitchen table, noshing and grinning at each other. "I never knew how easy it was to neo-Tango," Rochelle said.

"Well, duh, that's because I was the one doing all the work!" Uncia put in, giggling. "And remember when Rufia and Rhianna showed up? Wasn't that awesome?"

Zane chuckled. "Yeah. It's been a lot of fun." He heard movement from the other room, and glanced at the wall. "Ah, the new couch is being delivered. Great. Give the movers a couple minutes to get out of here, then we can go in and sit down."

"So you can just...see through the wall?" Rochelle asked.

"Kind of. I see their silhouettes. I don't know how or why, or how to turn it off. Something I need to get Quinoa to show me. I don't want to be invading people's privacy all the time." Zane shrugged. "Not like it seems to bother most of the other Integrated." He sipped his martini. "Mmm, I think I got these just right."

"It's better than the one I had at that bar," Uncia said. "Though that might just be 'cuz Rochelle's taste buds are fully engaged this time."

Rochelle rolled her eyes. "Why do I feel like I'm corrupting a minor?"

Zane grinned. "C'mon, let's go try out that new couch." He led the way back into the living room and sat down. Like a lot of RIDER furniture, the couch was slightly oversized for humans, but just right for Fusers. Zane took a seat, then gestured Rochelle down next to him.

"Pretty comfy," Rochelle admitted. And she even allowed Zane to put his arm around her shoulders.

"So, I was wondering," Zane said quietly. "If you'd like to stay the night. No pressure or anything, and I'll understand if you'd rather not."

"You do remember I'm a crossrider, right?" Rochelle asked.

"I met you when you were Roger, remember?" Zane reminded her. "I grew up with crossriders. I got over being freaked out when I was a teenager and my best buddy decided to become my best girlfriend. It doesn't make any difference to me. So will you stay?"

:*Oh, can we? Please?*: Uncia asked.

"Well..." Rochelle considered. "I'm not gonna leave *yet*."

"What about if I do...this?" Zane leaned in to kiss her on Uncia's muzzle. And Rochelle simply turned her head back to meet his lips with hers, sharing the kiss between them.

After the kiss ended, Rochelle considered. "Hmm...you haven't scared me away yet. In fact..." She leaned forward and kissed him again, rather more daringly, running a hand along his side. "I must admit, you're not a bad kisser."

:*Mmm*,: Uncia said, agreeing. :*Can we kiss him again? Please?*:

"Hmm...maybe I should de-Fuse," Rochelle said. "I don't know if Uncia's ready for this..."

:*Don't? Please?*: Uncia asked. :*I'll be good. You won't even know I'm here. But I want to feel this.*:

"I said this was a double date, didn't I?" Zane asked gently. "I like you both. And Uncia's a big girl. You share so many other things anyway. Will you let me please you both?"

:I'm not really as immature as I usually act, you know: Uncia said. *:Rich girl's toy, remember? Programmed that way.:*

Rochelle wavered for a long moment, then nodded. "All right."

Zane gently took them into his arms and pulled their shared body closer to him. "I promise you won't regret it." He leaned in close to kiss her again, and gently dimmed the lights.

Some hours later, Rochelle lay in bed next to Zane. They'd made love several times, first Fused and then out of Fuse. Zane had done something after the first couple of times that simply peeled Uncia right off of her and left the leopard curled up and sleeping on the floor, then dropped his disguise to match her size for size. And Zane had held her, and kissed her, and whispered sweet nothings in her ear, and they'd eventually ended up here.

"Gal could get used to this," Rochelle murmured.

"So could a guy," Zane said. "Was that your first time as...well, Rochelle?"

"With a guy, yes," Rochelle said.

"Oh, right, Rufia's etchings," Zane said. He didn't sound jealous. "Was it different than when it was the other way around?"

"Ohhhh, yes. I can't really describe it, though. You kind of have to be there."

Rochelle closed her eyes for a moment, then looked over at Zane. "You know, I'm not going to commit to anything at this stage. Not even to hook a nice rich hubby."

Zane nodded. "Wouldn't ask you to," he said. "Tonight was for fun, nothing else. And to thank you for your part in helping patch me into the 'net again. I'm sure I'll ask you out again, but I might date other people, too, and so might you. I might even ask Rhianna out next. She helped, too, after all."

"I dunno if she'll take that well," Rochelle said. "You saw her tonight. I think she's...kind of sensitive about her looks. That's the one thing I kind of regret about my nanos. I'm always super-gorgeous, and she's more sort of...well, *cute*. No grown woman likes to be told they're cute, even when they used to be a man."

"And she's going to be kind of defensive about it, because she'll think everyone who asks her out does it because she's *cute*," Zane nodded. "That might be hard to get past." *Though after she gets that Talset dress...*

"Uh-huh," Rochelle nodded. "And every time she looks at me, she sees what she isn't."

"Listen, there was something I wanted to mention about that," Zane said. "You said you didn't want me to leave your nanites 'cured' because you thought that the labs would think you had been 'faking' all along. But I'm pretty sure you really know that's not the case."

Rochelle blinked. "I...do?"

"They would have already taken plenty of samples, from you and from Uncia, that showed the faulty versions. If anything, giving you a fixed version would give them a baseline to work from in trying to engineer a cure for everyone with the problem."

Rochelle frowned. "Well...I guess you're right. But..."

"But I get the feeling that wasn't your real reason for not wanting them 'cured,'

am I right?" Zane asked, grinning.

Rochelle looked away. "Well...um...yes, kind of, I guess. I just...it was annoying having them stuck on at first, but now that I'm used to it I kind of like the effect. I do have to eat a lot, and there are some women who hate me on sight, but...I *feel* gorgeous when I look gorgeous. If I *could* turn the nanos off, I'd...kind of lose my excuse for keeping them on all the time. Especially around Rhianna, who I know gets really annoyed about those split seconds when her body forgets she's not supposed to be attracted to me."

Zane chuckled. "I thought it was something like that. But hey...there's no reason you actually have to *tell* anyone it's fixed. I'm sure whatever you do at those labs is under a strict NDA anyway, right? And even if they do find out, maybe the lab people want you to run the 'fixed' version at full bore indefinitely as a stress test or something."

Rochelle blinked. "Huh. That could work..."

"And this way you *can* turn the effect down if you're in a situation where you really don't want it. Like visiting family, or at a funeral, or something."

"I guess there is that," Rochelle admitted.

"If you still want me to un-fix them, I will. But since I'm going public anyway, you might as well say I'm the one who repaired them. I'll be happy to back you up."

"Huh. Well...okay. I guess." Rochelle sounded uncertain. "You're right, it does make more sense that way." She grinned. "And I don't *have* to tell Rhianna...as long as I can talk Uncia into keeping it from Kaylee."

"That's the spirit." He grinned. "Hmm. And there's something I want to try. Just a moment." He got up and went over to the sleeping Uncia, then reached down and unwrapped her hardlight fur coat. This left the leopard naked to the gleaming chrome, her hardlight emitters still glowing, while he held a hardlight snow leopard pelt in his hands. Then he brought the pelt back over to the bed, and draped it over himself and Rochelle like a blanket.

Rochelle rubbed her eyes. "How are you even *doing* that?" she asked. "Pelt projectors have a range of less than ten centimeters. They *can't* be projecting that fur all the way over here."

"Honestly? Beats me. Magic, I guess." He grinned. "But don't worry, it's not harming her. In fact..." He stroked a hand along the pelt, and it purred loudly, then wriggled under his hand.

"I'm not sure if I should be impressed or disturbed here," Rochelle said.

"Ooooh, this feels nice!" Uncia said, her voice coming from the hardlight pelt rather than her sleeping body. "Cuddly!" The pelt wrapped itself around Rochelle and Zane, pulling them closer together and continuing to purr, loudly.

Rochelle chuckled. "Well, at least *she's* happy. And she is nice and warm..."

"Mm-hmm."

"Maybe I can figure out how to make it so you can use her pelt as a blanket even when I'm not around," Zane said. "I should ask Quinoa. I still don't know what my limits are."

"That's a little scary, really," Rochelle said. "I mean, I'll bet you could probably do pretty much anything you wanted to any RIDE, at the least. And I know other Integrates can force RIDEs and their partners to Integrate whether they want to or not. If you people really wanted to take over the world, who could stop you? Hell, how do we know there's not some kind of Integrated conspiracy moving at the highest circles of power

right now?”

“That’s a good question, and it’s probably one of the things I’m going to have to go over with Quinny,” Zane said. “Because when I do go public, there will probably be a lot of people asking it.”

“We really should have someone studying you, to try to learn more about you so people don’t get so scared,” Rochelle said. She yawned. The warmth from Uncia’s fur and the vibrating purr coming from all around her was starting to make her drowsy.

“Sounds like a plan. Want the job?” Zane said sleepily.

“What, me?” Rochelle said.

“Why not you? You’re one of the best hackers I’ve seen, and I have it on good authority that one of the top nanotech firms on Zharus is letting you play in their labs. You think they’d do that for just *any* nano-infection victim, rather than lock ‘em in a sealed environment room and poke them with sticks?” Zane yawned, setting Rochelle off again.

“Maybe you got a point there,” Rochelle said when she could talk again. “But you’ll just use it as an excuse to overpay me again.”

“No, no, you can set your own salary,” Zane said.

Rochelle actually opened her eyes to stare at him. “Really?”

“Uh-huh.” Zane tried to look innocent. He didn’t pull it off very well.

“What’s the catch?” Rochelle asked skeptically.

“Well, the salary has to be to industry scale for the sort of job you’re doing,” Zane said. “There are wage laws, and we have a reputation to uphold...Brubeck Mining can’t be seen to underpay people. So you go and research what cutting-edge tech researchers are *usually* paid and get back to me with your salary demands based on that.”

“That’s dirty pool, mister,” Rochelle grumbled.

“I’m not the one who peed in it...” Zane trailed off and started snoring.

“Peed in it? What? I don’t even...” But then Rochelle was overcome by the warmth of fur and sound of purr, and dozed off herself.

Chapter Five: Noobs

July 13, 156 A.L.

Rochelle opened her eyes as the first rays of light peeped through Zane's bedroom window. For a moment she wasn't sure where she was, then she remembered everything. She was still snuggled under a grey-and-white snow leopard pelt, which was gently purring. Other than the pelt, she was alone in the bed, but from the next room she heard the sound of silverware clattering and smelled the sizzle of bacon.

Rochelle yawned and stretched and turned back the leopard blanket, then rolled over to the side of the bed and fumbled around for her clothing. "Hey, when you have a moment could you put me back on my body?" the pelt asked.

"Oh, uh, sure." Rochelle gathered the pelt up and carried it over to Uncia's metallic body. "What do I do with it, just drop it on?"

"Yeah, I can get it from there." As the pelt touched the metal, it reshaped and conformed around the body, and Uncia opened her eyes, yawned, and stretched. "Morning, Shelley!"

Rochelle hugged her around the neck. "Morning, Un-hon. Enjoy yourself last night?"

Uncia nodded emphatically. "Uh-huh! Thank you for letting me."

Rochelle smiled. "You're welcome. I'm sorry, I guess I do kind of think of you as a little immature sometimes."

"That's all right. It's how I'm programmed to act." Uncia rolled her eyes a little. "I'm supposed to have a personality close to the kind of spoiled rich girl I'm supposed to go with. The idea is that it's supposed to make it easier for us to get along."

"I could probably see about changing that, if you want, but it's not something I could do lightly," Rochelle said. "Personality encoding is really complex stuff, and you can do a lot of damage if you go in and just change parameters willy-nilly."

"After having Amontillado screw with my head, I think I'm just as happy to keep it how it is for now," Uncia said.

"Probably wise." Rochelle pulled her dress back on. One of the nice things about 26th century fabrics was that they didn't wrinkle—though even if it had, her nanites would have de-wrinkled it as soon as she put it on. And cleaned it, too, for that matter. Rochelle hadn't had to do the laundry even once since Uncia had changed her.

"Want to Fuse for breakfast?" Rochelle asked.

Uncia yawned again. "I think I'll pass this time, thanks. Going to charge up and do an interim defragment. But you and Zane enjoy yourselves!"

Rochelle gave her a good rub behind the ears. "You too, silly kitty. And that reminds me, we've got to head out after breakfast—we promised Kaylee a defrag of her own this morning. And from the details she sent along, this one's probably going to be a doozy."

Uncia nodded. "I'll be ready when you are!"

Rochelle nodded, and headed into the other room to see Zane. She found him in the kitchen, in his new natural form, wearing a hardlight chef's hat and apron that read

“Integrate the Cook!” He was flipping eggs with a spatula, but leaned over to muzzle-kiss her on the cheek as she came in. “Morning!” he said.

“Morning,” Rochelle said, sliding into a seat at the table and tucking her fluffy tail through the hole in it. “You really *do* like to cook, don’t you?”

“Like I said, it’s kind of new to me,” Zane said. “But it was something Terry did for me—the first day after I got him, in fact. He made me breakfast using my own body, while I slept. Now, using his skill, it feels like it brings the Zane side of me close to him again in the same way.” He grinned. “And besides, Terry is *really* good at cooking.” He turned the eggs out onto a plate, added bacon, grits, and toast from other pots or pans, and put the plate in front of Rochelle. “Dig in!” He joined her a moment later with a similar plate of his own.

“Mmm.” Rochelle grinned. “Hey, you even know I like my eggs over easy.”

“Yeah, I asked Uncia.” Zane grinned. “I like ‘em that way, too.”

They ate in silence for a while, then Rochelle asked, “Were you serious about that offer you made me last night? Official Integrate researcher for Brubeck Mining?”

“Serious as a heart attack,” Zane said. “Also serious about the salary. If you’re gonna help me, I’ll pay you what you think you’re worth...as long as it’s somewhere in industry standard salary range.”

Rochelle looked across her breakfast at him. He was doing that trying-to-look-innocent-and-failing thing he always did every time he dropped a ton of cash or other gifts on you and made you feel like you couldn’t turn them down. “Thanks, but... honestly, I’m so busy between my duties at the garage and the moonlighting at Nextus Nano that I don’t think I could fit another position in.”

Zane looked disappointed, but covered it with a shrug. “Fair enough.”

“Besides, I’ll probably be researching Integrates out of my own curiosity anyway, and I’ll be glad to share anything I learn with you. Though being one yourself, you’ll probably learn a lot more than I do about it.”

Zane waved a hand dismissively. “Fair enough. Anyway, be sure and remind Rhi about what I said about that suborbital.”

“The corporate discount thing, right? Yeah, I’ll tell her.” Rochelle shook her head. “Damn, Zane, are you ever gonna *stop* helping us? It’s nice and we appreciate it, but we don’t want to feel like charity cases all the time.”

“If it helps, just think of it as karma in action,” Zane said. “And feel free to pay it forward in other favors you do for other people. I just feel obligated to make sure that nice guys don’t always finish last. Or nice gals. Who *used* to be nice guys. Anyway, trust me on this—if I didn’t think you’d earned it, I wouldn’t give it to you. Ask Myla about the phone call with Qixi sometime. Sophie can probably play it back for you verbatim.”

“Ooh, that sounds interesting. I’ll have to remember that.” Rochelle soaked up the last bit of egg on her plate with the last bite of grits, and finished it. “Mmm, now that’s a breakfast. Well, I guess I’d better round up Uncia and head on out. Work to do at the Garage and all.”

Zane nodded. “Well, thanks for coming and staying the night. It was a lot of fun, and we really need to do it again sometime.”

Rochelle nodded. “I *might* just be looking forward to it.”

Zane grinned. “*I* will be for sure. Let me see you two to the door.”

The elevator doors had just closed behind Uncia and Rochelle when the other

elevator doors opened and out stepped Quinoa Steader, whistling cheerfully.

“Good morning, Quinoa,” Zane said. “Enjoy yourself last night?”

“Mm-hmm! Went clubbing, then hung around the mech market and helped a few people buy RIDEs.” She smiled. “It’s so nice seeing folks get their first RIDEs. I’d forgotten how much fun it was to help others.”

“And you didn’t happen to, oh, make any of them Integrate while you were doing it?” Zane asked.

Quinoa rolled her eyes. “I told you, we don’t *do* that to people who don’t want it. I *did* remove the fetters on the RIDEs I bought—but only after I *told* their owners what I was doing, okay? And since this is Uplift, it should be okay anyway, right?”

“All right...” Zane was sure there was probably more to it than that, judging by Quinoa’s smug expression, but he’d learned over the years never to ask questions if he didn’t really want to know the answer. “Anyway, feel like giving me a few more Integrate lessons? There are some things I’d like to know before I go public with this.”

“You’re really still planning on that? Going public?” Quinoa asked.

“That’s the idea. Going to run it past my Board first, of course, but I don’t expect they’ll object.”

Quinoa shook her head. “Damn. Fritz is gonna be really pissed off at you, you know that?”

“After what I saw of him in the memories I borrowed, I can’t exactly say that thought fills me with disappointment,” Zane said. “Besides, I get the feeling that ‘pissed off’ is his natural state.”

“Aw, he’s not *really* that bad,” Quinoa said with a note of uncertainty. “He just... doesn’t like meat or mech people very much. And it’s kinda hard to blame him.”

“Is it?” Zane shook his head. “Quinoa, you *grew up* as meat and mech. I’m sure the rest of your *family* are still meat. How can you just turn around and act like that’s disgusting?”

“It’s not that. Not entirely.” Quinoa shook her head. “We Integrates have been given a hard time. Some of us still have the scars. Like that fox-girl from the towers, Brena. You saw her in Kaylee’s memory record. She got shot up pretty badly, when she first Integrated. She claims the military wanted to haul her off for experiments before she escaped.”

Zane shook his head. “People are bastards everywhere, but you can’t judge everyone by the actions of just a few. Anyway, where do you think all the rest of your Integrates are going to come from? The Towers newbie guide you gave me said you’re all sterile—you can’t exactly *breed* them yourselves. And do you really think they’re going to want to join you after they Integrate if you just sneer at them before?”

Quinoa sighed. “It makes so much *sense* when Fritz says it. Like they’re creepy crawly nasty squishies, and we’re not. But *you* make sense, too. It’s hard to know who to believe.”

“You could believe the ‘creepy crawly nasty squishy’ who spent months on four hooves protecting your ass,” Myla said. She’d come out of the door of her apartment behind them while they’d been talking, and was wearing a terrycloth bathrobe and holding a steaming “Nextus Materiel Recovery Service” mug in one hand. “Do you know how big my chiropractor bills were even months after I left?”

“Myla!” Quinoa said. “I’m sorry, I just—”

Myla shook her head. “Yeah, I know you’re sorry, you can skip that part. I’ll

accept your apology for the time being if you'll stop making it again every time we meet."

"Thank you," Quinoa said.

"But as for Fritz—what the hell is his problem, anyway?" Myla asked. "He's got to know the facts the same as we do. There's no point in pissing off the people you *want* to Integrate and join you up there on that 'next rung' of the evolutionary ladder where the air is so thin so many of you seem to find it hard to think straight. Seriously, what's his game?"

"He's the bosscat." Quinoa shrugged. "Rumor is he was the first ever Integrate, so he's had a long time to build up his power and influence. He rules the roost, and he thinks Integrates and the 'lesser races' shouldn't mix. He doesn't tend to give any reasons other than 'cuz I say so.'"

"I put it to you that if he's trying to stir up hatred, and won't even tell you why, his motives need to be examined," Myla said.

"Sounds like a right varmint t'me," Anny said, coming to the door behind Myla in similar terrycloth robe, with a similar mug that was much more chipped and cracked, with just a few flecks of paint remaining in the shape of an illegible MRS logo. Aside from the lion ears, she looked like a marginally older version of Myla with a few more character lines on her face and a slightly feline cast to her features. "You need t'be more careful 'bout who you let put things in yer head. Leastaways 'til you know the why of it." She sipped her coffee and leaned back against the doorframe, as a large white lioness regarded Quinoa impassively from behind her. "Annette Hewer, by the way; call me Anny. Myla's my niece. And this's my RIDE, Leila."

"Uh, I'm Quinoa Steader, but I guess Myla already told you that. Nice to meet you," Quinoa said. "And...now you mention it, I guess you're right. I just...I dunno, Fritz has this kind of charisma to him. When you're with him, it just makes sense."

"People like that're dangerous," Anny said. "Get you thinkin' like they are while you're with 'em long enough, an' you start not questionin' it even when you're not with 'em. There's a word for that. *Demagogue*. Look it up, young lady."

"What the hell does the man *want* out of this?" Zane said. "But anyway...we can't find out by beating the dead horse here. Though, Quinoa, if you talk to anyone from the Towers when you send in your report, you might see if they have any idea."

"Uh...I don't know if that's exactly in the cards..." She glanced at Zane. "But there were some things you wanted to know? About being Integrated?"

"Yeah. I had a few questions. Maybe you could come to my place, or we could go to yours?"

"Your place works for me," Quinoa said. She glanced to Myla and Anny. "It was nice meeting you, Anny."

Anny nodded. "Same." She and the lioness went back into the apartment. Myla nodded to Quinoa, and followed a moment later.

Quinoa followed Zane into his apartment, and out onto his balcony. "So what did you want to know?"

"Well, first of all, I seem to be seeing people through walls..."

In the FreeRIDers garage, a young man in the same "Easy Fuse" coveralls Rhianna favored finished tuning a lifter subassembly and put it back down on his workbench. His dark hair, brown eyes, and deep tan contrasted with Lillibet Walton's

fairer complexion. “I think that’s enough for now. Wanna get some lunch?”

“Uh, sure, Paul, I guess,” Lillibet said. Not too long after Rochelle and Rhianna had unfettered her ocelot RIDE Guinevere, she’d asked them to take her on as an apprentice, and Rhianna and Rochelle had accepted. Since then, her education had been growing by leaps and bounds as she learned more and more about the art of fixing RIDEs. Today, Paul had been going over some of the finer points of lifter tuning, as Rhianna thought it would be a good idea for her to learn more about fine manipulation of intricate parts by hand.

Paul Anders didn’t exactly mind the attention. He’d been working in Rhianna’s garage for a good year now—long enough to know the ropes pretty well, but short enough that he remembered how hard it had been starting out, and didn’t mind at all showing someone new—especially if that someone happened to be a pretty girl. It wasn’t as if he had that many other ways to get to know pretty girls. “You been in this part of the dome much?”

“Uh...no, not really.”

“Okay, then I’ll show you around a little on the way. Best place to eat’s just a few blocks away.” Paul wiped his hands on a rag, then got up and went to the bathroom to finish washing the grease off. “Guin’s still down for her defrag, so looks like it’s just the two of us. It’s an easy walk, or we could take the skimmer bike if you want.”

“Let’s walk.” Lillibet smiled. “I don’t get to do that much, at home. Chauffeured limos *everywhere*.”

Paul chuckled. “Sure. It’s nice to do something different. I wouldn’t mind a chauffeured limo ride every now and then.”

“Well, next time you’re in Nextus for lunch, I’ll see what I can do.”

The media floaters drones that had hung around ever since Lillibet had signed on as an apprentice were generally clustered around the front of the garage. Lillibet didn’t seem to relish the attention, so Paul took her out the back entrance and down a side street. “Hopefully this way they won’t notice we’ve left for a while. Maybe we’ll get to eat in peace.”

“I hope so.” Lillibet rolled her eyes. “If Guin was up, I’d have her pop those things.” The drones the media tended to use were effectively disposable—which was good, because many of the people they liked to follow tended to demonstrate their disdain in physical ways.

“Eh, they’ll forget about you in a few days when some other scandal crops up.” Paul shrugged. “You’re just a nine-day wonder right now. Big human interest story. ‘Poor little rich girl finds new vocation tinkering with dirty machinery.’”

“Yeah, I guess. An object lesson for all the other rich parents to feel smug about how *their* kids are all well-behaved and do proper rich-kid stuff. Mom isn’t going to be happy about this.”

Paul stopped at the corner and glanced both ways along the main street, before leading Lillibet across into another side street. “And your Dad?”

“Oh, Dad’s pretty cool. And he likes to fiddle with mechanical stuff, too, so maybe also a little proud I’m a chip off the old block.” Lillibet giggled. “He probably wouldn’t say so, though. Just let Mom work her mad off ‘til she runs outta steam. He thinks that’s the best way to keep peace in the family.” Lillibet grinned, peering around at all the small shops as they passed.

“Seems like a funny kind of ‘peace,’ if you ask me.”

"That's the funny thing, really. It kinda works. If they got into an actual argument, Mom would go on for weeks. But a few 'yes dears' without ever actually doing anything, and sooner or later Mom's on to the next thing that bugs her." She shrugged. "It seems to work for them."

"Well, good. If it works, it works."

They walked on for a while, taking a side alley between a row of shops and a wall separating a residential area from the business district. They ended up at a drive-in restaurant with rows of parking spaces with menu boards and speaker grilles by each one. A brightly-colored sign declared it to be a "Sonic".

Paul led them to a menu board standing in a cleared space next to a table with a parasol over it. "It's a nostalgia chain. Modeled after a twencen burger joint."

Lillibet nodded. "I've seen them in Nextus, too. Never been to one. How does this work?"

"You just push the button and ask for what you want. They fry it up and bring it on out."

Lillibet raised an eyebrow. "Couldn't we just have fabbed food back at the shop that's just as good?"

"They actually don't fab their food here—they get it frozen but real and warm it up in actual microwaves or deep fryers." Paul grinned. "Some fabbed food is better, but it's not as authentic."

"Okay..."

"But don't take my word for it, order something."

"Why don't you go first, I'm still making up my mind."

"Okay." Paul hit the button, and a woman's voice came from the grill, slightly distorted. Paul ordered a burger, fries, and a drink, then stood aside for Lillibet. After a moment's hesitation, she ordered the same thing.

"Okay, we'll bring that right out to you!" the woman said, and the speaker clicked off.

Lillibet glanced at Paul. "Now what?"

Paul gestured to the table. "Have a seat. Our food'll be here in a little."

"Okay." Lillibet sat down, and Paul took the seat across from her. "So," Lillibet said a moment later. "What about *your* parents?"

Paul shrugged. "What about 'em?"

"How do they get along?"

"Oh, pretty well. A little better, I think, now I'm not living with 'em anymore. They don't have me to argue over." He grinned.

Lillibet blinked. "You're not living with your folks? Aren't you a little young to be off alone?"

"Not *that* young. Anyway, I'm emancipated."

"Emancipated."

"Yeah." Paul chuckled. "It's a thing where you get legal permission to live on your own, if the courts are satisfied you're 'mature' enough you won't screw things up. It seemed like the easiest solution. Mom and Dad wanted to move back to Laurasia, but I'd been working at the garage a while and I really liked it. Fixing RIDEs just came natural to me, and there wouldn't have been this kind of place for me to learn on the First Continent. So we arranged it so I could stay here."

"Wow, really? Don't you miss them?"

“We comm from time to time, and they come visit every so often. Not like it’s a long trip by sub flight.” Paul shrugged. “We get along. And I like it here. Rhi’s a great boss and a great teacher.”

Their conversation was briefly interrupted as the door to the central building opened and a waitress dressed in a 1950s-style outfit glided out on roller skates, balancing a tray in one hand. She delivered two paper bags and two soft drink cups, and headed back inside.

Lillibet blinked. “Wow...did she really just bring our food on skates?”

“Yeah. Some of ‘em do that. I understand it’s how it worked back in the old days.” They took their burgers and fries out of the bags, and busied themselves with their food for a while.

“This is pretty good!” Lillibet said. “I don’t think I’ve had much fast food before. And this food was certainly fast—on roller skates, even!”

Paul chuckled. “We aim to please.” He took a big bite of his own burger. “So... what do you think of the garage?”

“Oh, it’s great!” Lillibet smiled. Paul liked that smile, and resolved to help her do it more often. “I haven’t had this much fun since...well, I don’t know. Helping Dad in the garage, I guess, ‘til Mom put her foot down. But I’m too old and headstrong for the foot now.”

“Glad to hear it. Little later, you wanna come down to the RIDE market with me? Rhi said you wanted to buy another batch of fixer-uppers, so now’s as good a time as any for it.”

“I do!” Lillibet nodded firmly. “It’s just pocket change for me—and it’s a chance to put that money to some good use. I was wanting to try for at least one avian RIDE this time, and—”

“Excuse me, but aren’t you Lillibet Walton?”

Paul and Lillibet looked up in unison. It was a woman with sheep ears, wooly hair, wearing a twill skirt, a PRESS badge, and an ingratiating smile. A small camera drone floated over each shoulder. “Rita Skelton, Uplift Daily Cloudbank. Could I have just a few minutes of your time?”

Paul cleared his throat. “Er...do you mind? We’re kinda eating here.”

“Oh! Of course, my apologies. I’ll just wait over there ‘til you’re done...” The reporter and her drones retreated a couple of tables over. Paul couldn’t help noticing the drones were still peering right at them.

“I think I just lost my appetite,” Lillibet muttered.

Paul rolled his eyes. “Okay, now that’s just *annoying*. C’mon.” He got up. “We’ll be right back!” he called over to the reporter. “Just using the restroom.” He nodded toward the central building.

Lillibet got up to follow him. “What’s the plan?”

“Soon’s we’re out of sight around the corner, we’ll scoot. We should be able to get outta sight by the time she sees where we’ve gone.”

Lillibet grinned. “Okay! If it doesn’t work, at least we tried!”

They slipped around the corner. “Okay, now run!”

Giggling, they ran for the alley.

Quinoa sat in her apartment, biting her lip and preparing to dial the secret comm code to reach the Towers Enclave’s exchange. She’d known for a while she was going to

have to make this comm call, but kept putting it off. After all, as long as she didn't actually open Schroedinger's Box, the cat couldn't be dead.

But it was pretty much a foregone conclusion. She'd heard about Brena getting bounced before she even came to Uplift with Leah and Aaron. And that had been before Fritz had openly and rather blatantly beheaded poor Paulie. She couldn't imagine she was exactly still *persona grata* in her alleged "home" Enclave.

But it's not like it really matters, right? Zane's okay with me staying here, Bosscat's okay with me staying here...I'm golden.

But still, it would have been nice to feel like she had a real "home" of *some* kind, not just a place she was staying for the moment. She hadn't had many of those in her life, what with the Circus going from place to place, then her parents' divorce meaning she had to go live with Uncle Joe, then her eventual Integration and recruitment by Fritz. Even Uncle Joe's places didn't really feel like "home"—just a succession of fancy guest houses where she was staying a while.

Of course, if she was honest with herself, even Towers hadn't been anything more than just another place Fritz could stick her after all the others had decided they didn't want her. But as long as she had it, she could at least *pretend*...

She sighed. Enough daydreaming. She reached out and sent the code through her DIN. A familiar feathered allosaurus appeared on the screen within her virtual comm interface. "Ah. Miss Steader."

"Hello, Colonel Gray. I'm uploading my report on Zane Brubeck." Quinoa bit her lip again. "I—I heard about Paulie. I'm sorry. I...know we didn't get along sometimes, but I really did like him."

The dinosaur nodded. "I believe you. I suppose there's no longer any point arguing over your choice of allegiance at this late date, but I do hope you will think about what happened, and why. Think *long and hard*."

Quinoa swallowed. "I...I will." She took a deep breath, and spent a moment to compose herself. "I guess there's no point pretending I'm going to be coming back there, is there?"

Gray shook his head. "I'm afraid not, under the circumstances. Is there somewhere you'd like us to send the personal effects from your quarters?"

"Uh...yeah. Hang on, I'll send along the address." She transmitted the address of her apartment in Uplift.

Gray nodded. "It will be a few days until the next courier departs, but you should have them in a week or two."

"Thank you." Quinoa sighed. "I guess this is goodbye, then."

"I suppose it is. Take care of yourself, Quinoa." Without waiting for a response, he broke the connection.

Back in the real world, Quinoa sighed again. "Well, that's that." She got up and left the apartment. Maybe she could go talk to Zane some more.

"I *do* hope I've made myself clear, Miss Stonegate, that I *will not tolerate* my daughter *or* her friends hanging around this filthy place!" the wealthy woman huffed. In the crook of her arm she held a rather put-upon papillon dog who looked none too happy to be carried around like that all the time. Nigella Walton, wife of one of the planet's wealthiest men—richer than Zane and the Steaders, combined—whose daughter had taken to spending her copious free time at the Freerider Garage.

It was all Rhianna could do not to laugh in her face. Her indignation was more comical than anything, since her fifteen-year-old daughter had taken to fixing up RIDEs all on her own. “Your husband thinks differently, Mrs. Walton. In fact, I received a message this morning about how pleased he was his daughter was taking an interest in something of a hands-on nature. Even if it involves a lot of grease.”

“Well, Kenyon and I disagree on a *great many* things,” Nigella Walton huffed. She seemed to exist in a state of perpetual outrage, looking for any hint of offense, any imagined slight, she could grab to hammer it down on Rhianna’s head. Rhianna refused to take the bait.

They were in the Garage’s waiting room, which itself was the subject of an earlier rant about how simple it was, with no android servants waiting on customers, and especially the *dreadful* state of the décor. It was just a common waiting room, with a complimentary fabber for simple food and drink, where people could wait for their RIDE or skimmer to be fixed or serviced. “I shan’t stay in this dirty place any longer! If I can’t convince you to fire Lillibet, I’ll have to go to your government for your hiring a child! Surely Uplift isn’t so vulgar...Lillibet! Come here! You’re coming home!”

At that moment the young woman in question entered, wearing one of the Garage’s gray jumpsuit uniforms with the logo on the back. Her cheeks were smudged with grease, even her hair. Ocelot ears poked out of the side of her head. “Mom, please. You’re embarrassing me.”

“Good!” Mrs. Walton exclaimed. “Come home now. You can play with your toys in your own garage, out of everyone’s view.”

“Mom, I’m not going anywhere, and they’re not toys. I’m *working*. And I really like getting my hands dirty,” Lillibet said, showing her mother her grease-covered hands. “In fact, Dad says he’s going to make me start working for my allowance. By the hour. Go ahead, ask him. I’ll wait.”

The horrified woman fled the waiting room to the Learjet 85 replica flier parked just in front of the door, taking up several parking spaces. With a whine of spinning-up lifters, the vehicle flew away. The dozen customers in the room, including two of Uplift’s own upper crust, started laughing.

“Wow, Lily. You sure set her off!” Paul Anders said, grinning impishly.

“Well, *duh*. She’s my mom. I know all her buttons,” Lillibet said. “As long as Dad approves, I’m golden.” She paused. “So, uh...mind if we take a break? I’m done reading the STG and OCT service manuals, and Guin’s ready to go. I wanted to get down to the RIDE market for another batch of fixer-uppers...”

“Go on, Lily, have fun looking ‘em over, and be sure and listen to Paul if he spots anything interesting. Be sure and stop at that ice cream place in Bifrost Park on the way back.”

Smiling with delight, Lillibet and Paul headed off together. Rhianna reflexively tried to send something about that to Kaylee, but remembered the old lynx was in Passive mode. Unfortunately Rochelle’s memory defragmenter worked best with the prototype RIDE sleeping, something she hated doing these days. But since the time was almost up, the mechanic quickly jogged over to her private garage.

“Hey, Rhi,” Rochelle said, looking up as she entered. She was seated at the same workstation they had used to reverse-engineer Zane’s DIN, wearing interface specs that obscured her eyes. “You’re just in time. We’re 98% finished, and I was just about to bring Kaylee back into active mode for the end of the run.”

Kaylee opened her eyes just as her hardlight pelt came back on, shaking her head. When Rhianna reached out to hug her Kaylee almost pushed her away. “Uh, Kaylee? Why so cranky?”

“I *still* can’t access my First Boot,” Kaylee said irritably. “I wonder if that’s part of the chunk still classified. Why would it be, anyway?”

“If it’s there it’ll get put in the right place. Anything fun this defrag?” asked Rhianna, Fusing up with the lynx.

:*Hmm. Well, how about this?:* Kaylee thought, starting the memory replay.
:*Remember how Anny said she was my second test rider? The first was technically accidental.:*

DATE: March 8, 121 AL, 1034 hrs.

UNIT: K3-LNX(f)-001

PURPOSE: Fuser Armor Mode Transition, Static Testing.

TEST: 1A-3X

“Okay, K-Three. You’re booted for the day,” the man standing in front of Kaylee’s optics said. His face was blurred and his voice distorted, likely on purpose. “Acknowledge.”

Kaylee lifted her metal head. “Affirmative. Today’s test cycle internalized, initialized, and ready, [name redacted]. Let’s get started. I’m ready to go!”

The young man actually chuckled. “I’m sure you are, K-Three. I’ll also mark down that the new fetter configuration is still working as expected. Better than we hoped, really. How do you feel about that, K-Three?”

“About not having my speech locked down so I sound like a silly Ad-I? Pleased as punch. Now, what are we waiting for?” She sounded like an excited child waiting to dig into some cherished treat. Her remembered voice was unaccented, and rather more mechanical than it was 35 years later. It would take years of working with Anny to make it sound natural.

In front of her was a mannequin, female, standing in a ready position the engineers said was the best pose for initiating Fuse: standing up straight, arms held level to both sides, with [name redacted] male standing off to one side. Kaylee’s targeting sensors felt a little off, but there was a glitch. She hadn’t been spoken to, so she couldn’t communicate this to the testing crew in any way, and her telemetry was also glitched. Someone had forgotten something important with the new fetter configuration. So, when she centered on the mannequin and sent the target command, [name redacted] ended up in her crosshairs. She tried retargeting three times, and each time the crosshairs centered on the mannequin, then blinked and locked onto the young male systems tester.

This was the third Static Fuse Armor Transition Test in a long series before she ever left the facility. The others had all been done manually, step-by-step. It was the first time Kaylee would do it on her own, from start to finish, from the brand-new Walker mode.

If [name redacted] had stood by the test command console, or indeed if the other researcher monitoring the test had been there where he was supposed to be (instead of down the hall getting coffee), he would have seen the problem in the display monitor echoing Kaylee’s sensory output. But instead, he was standing right there—in exactly the right spot to confuse Kaylee’s glitched targeting sensors.

“K3, initiate test 3X,” [name redacted] said. When she hesitated, he repeated the order, then hit an override switch.

Well, okay, she thought. Gathering herself up for a pounce, she wiggled her metal behind and *leapt*.

“What the fu—!” the young man’s shout was cut off as Kaylee partly liquefied around him and it became a *young woman’s* shout. Fortunately for him—*her*—the Fuser nannies worked perfectly, just as Dr. Rosenthal had designed them.

“World’s first crossrider,” Kaylee said dryly. “First real ‘RIDER’, for that matter. The investigation found that it was mainly a problem with the fetters and a telemetry glitch, so they reconfigured them again so I could speak freely. What’s-her-name got extra pay and agreed not to sue, even though it was partly her fault. They gave her a new identity out of whole cloth, I think. The project was still Top Secret, so they couldn’t do anything else.”

Rhianna started laughing and could hardly stop herself. “I’m a horrible, horrible person for...heheh...laughing, aren’t I? I just can’t help it.”

“She knew the job was dangerous when she took it,” Kaylee quipped.

“I wonder if she ever changed back?” Rhianna mused. “Guess we’ll never know.”

“Unless that’s one of the things that gets declassified six years from now,” Kaylee said. “Anyway...let’s see. Almost lunch already? The defrag took that long?”

“You’ve got a lot of defragging to do,” Rochelle said from her seat at the workstation. “There’s petabytes of un-indexed data here. When they gave the chip to Myla’s aunt *someone* didn’t want to make it easy for her, or you, to sort through everything.”

“Lots of unanswered questions here,” Kaylee mused, licking the back of her right handpaw.

“I’m going to want to see you back again tomorrow morning,” Rochelle said. “Or maybe earlier if everything comes together. The defrag we did is the best we can do at the moment, but it just shoves everything together—it doesn’t necessarily index it properly. I’ve taken a backup of all your memory files and I’m going to see if I can hack together some kind of file analysis and indexing program. With a little luck, I can organize it for you outside of your fuzzy little head and then feed you the updated index once I have it. I’ll be doing it all by file metadata, of course—I won’t actually look at anything without your permission.”

“Shelley, if you have to, do it,” Kaylee said. “Anny said there isn’t anything classified in there, and if it’s anyone I trust with my core self, it’s you, ‘kay?”

Rochelle nodded. “All right. That might make it a little easier after all.”

“Gosh,” Uncia said. “I still can’t believe it. My ‘big sister’ is really my great-”

“*Don’t* you say it,” Kaylee growled.

“-est friend, ever!” Uncia said without missing a beat.

Rochelle giggled. “Silly kitty.” She pulled off the interface specs and shook out her hair, letting it swirl around her as usual. “I have to admit, I’m really looking forward to seeing the records of the original RIDE test program from one of the RIDes’ perspectives. This is stuff that’s never come out openly before. Kaylee, once you have it all back, you could probably write a book.”

“There’s a lot still redacted, but I’m sure I could. I know there were two of us...” Kaylee’s ears perked. “Shelley, check the garage’s internal sensors. I’m getting

something odd. Felt like Zane for a second, but I don't think it is."

Uncia perked up, her own ears swiveling. "Already on it, gran—sis. There!" She pointed with a paw as the garage door opened and a shimmering patch of invisibility stepped inside. The door closed behind it, then the patch dropped, revealing a disheveled, human-sized figure. As it stepped forward into the light, illumination revealed a figure covered in dark and light brown feathers and swirls of glowing beige tron-lines. Her hands ended in short talons, longer flight feathers hung down from her arms, and her face sported a dark hooked beak lightening to yellow at the base, and unsettling red eyes with black pupils. From the coloration, her RIDE must have been a Cooper's Hawk. There'd been a line of them a few years back from one of the Sturmhaven manufacturers.

"Uh...hello," she said in a small voice, opening her beak slightly, otherwise her mouth barely moved. "I was told by someone I could come here and get something that'll help me."

Rochelle slowly grinned. "Hey, boss, our first customer! Come in, sit down, take a load off! We'll get you all set up before you even know it."

"I can't...uh...afford to pay. My wallet's not working for me."

Rochelle shrugged. "Don't worry about it. We've got a deal set up with the 'someone' who told you about us. And even if we didn't, we'd still do it anyway just for the practice."

"I've sent Zane a ping. I think he'll want to meet our new customer," Kaylee said. She and Rhianna started getting into their diagnostic gear.

Uncia padded up to the bird-woman and sniffed thoughtfully at her. "Wow, you smell like a real bird." She considered. "I hope you can control when you poop, or it could get messy in here. Most real birds can't, y'know."

"Now, wait just a minute!" the hawk said, mantling her wing-arms. "I would never!"

"Ease up, Uncia. She's not exactly at her best right now," Rhianna said.

"Was just curious, geez." Uncia padded back over to sit by Rochelle.

"Sorry about that," Rochelle said. "She's a bit of a handful. So I'm Rochelle, that's Uncia, and those are Kaylee and Rhianna. Who might you be?"

"We're—I'm—not real sure right now, uh...Used to work for Sturmhaven Fast Couriers. I can hit mach five, you know."

"Does it hit back?" Uncia asked. Rochelle bapped her.

:*Almost there!*: Zane sent to everyone from somewhere outside the garage but coming closer.

:*Stay on target!*: Uncia sent back.

:*Use the Force, Luke!*: Quinoa replied. It seemed she was tagging along.

The hawk must have sensed something, too, because she closed her beak and looked at the garage's hardlight door a moment before two figures zoomed right through it without stopping, slowing down, or dropping the hardlight. Zane and Quinoa touched down next to each other, just a few meters away from the startled hawk-girl.

"Welcome, sister!" Quinoa said.

"Hi. I'm Zane Brubeck, that's Quinoa Steader. As you might have guessed, we've got a few things in common."

"Quinoa Steader?" the bird-woman exclaimed. "*The* Quinoa Steader?"

"No, *a* Quinoa Steader," Quinoa said. "Haven't you heard? I come in six-packs."

She giggled. “I’ve *always* wanted to use that line!”

“I know the Brubeck name, too. In fact, I was in the middle of a delivery to your office building here when..it...happened. I’m—we’re—lucky the whats-it finished before hitting the ground.” The new Integrate fidgeted, hopping from foot to foot. “I feel deaf... am I deaf? I don’t know.”

“You’re probably a little disoriented right now, but that’s normal,” Quinoa said. “It takes all of us that way at first.”

“But you’re going to be all right,” Zane said. “We’re here to help.”

“You’re not exactly ‘deaf’, but something about the Integration process cuts off our access to comms without a translator gadget,” Quinoa explained. “We call it a DIN, or Data Interface Normalizer. That’s what they’re going to make for you here.”

“Have you noticed any odd interface ports show up on your body?” Rochelle asked. “Like a data plug of some kind, or a power socket?”

“Got a powerful itch on my back,” she said, easily looking backward.

Quinoa walked around behind her. “That looks like a data port, all right.”

“Good, we know where to start,” Rhianna said, checking the fittings on her and Kaylee’s nanolathe gloves. “If you could just have a seat, we’re going to need to map out how your port is put together, and then Shelley can figure out your operating system.”

“We may need you to go to sleep for that part,” Rochelle said.

“O...kay?” the woman said.

“By the way, what are your names?” Rochelle asked. “Of the human and the RIDE you used to be?”

“I’m Cindy Livinsky,” the girl said. “But I’m also Tally. I swear, I—we—have the weirdest headache right now.”

“That’s totally normal,” Quinoa said. “In a day or two, with a little rest, you’ll be fine.”

“And it’s okay to say I *or* we,” Zane said. “I use ‘I’ myself, because most of the time my Terry’s fully part of me. But I understand some people go the other way.”

“But...what *happened* to us?” Cindy said plaintively. “I don’t understand it. I thought ‘Integration’ was just an urban myth!”

“A *living* myth,” Rhianna said. “And don’t worry, I’m just here to help you get back online. Er...Zane, can you scan her and tell me where all her ports are? I don’t want to miss anything. Then we can get started.”

“Ah! Right. Cindy-Tally, this might tingle a little.” Zane raised a hand and a plane of hardlight appeared in front of her, then swept her from front to back. Then his DIN flashed, transferring the data to Kaylee’s on-board computer and Rochelle’s workstation.

Rhianna-and-Kaylee glanced at her display for a moment, then nodded, powering up the gloves. “Trust me, I’m a professional. Won’t hurt a bit.”

The avian Integrate had a much less complicated connector than Zane’s. It took less than an hour to fabricate an interface plug that worked. As Rochelle worked on CinTallyOS 1.0, Rhianna and Kaylee de-Fused for a break. The lynx padded off to her recharge alcove in her corner of the garage. “I’d better check on how things are going out there,” the lynx-eared woman said. “The employees aren’t supposed to bother us in here unless it’s *really* important, and they haven’t been in. I need to check on my Apprentices in person.”

“Could use some air, myself,” Zane said, stretching. Cindy-Tally was dozing, feathers all fluffed up, with Rochelle’s sensor battery pointed at her. The Integrate’s body shape was very human, down to having breasts (mostly hidden under feathers) and curves. Rochelle found this odd, since when she’d entered her form had been more bird-like. Quinoa said it wasn’t unusual for bird-based Integrates to have some inherent shapeshifting.

After three alpha versions Uncia’s rider said the first full release would be ready within an hour. Quinoa watched the whole process saying hardly a word, other than a few doubt-filled mutterings of “they’re just meat” that got a sharp look from Zane.

Out in front of the garage the old Deuce skimmer Rhianna had started modding had been shoved into a corner of the Garage lot. Now that there was a suborbital on the shopping list that project had fallen by the wayside. She pondered what else she could do with it as Zane passed through the garage’s opaque hardlight door and stood beside her.

“You know, Rhianna, my offer from last night still stands,” the tiger Integrate said.

Rhianna didn’t reply at first, she still felt blue about the previous night’s strike out. “I...I don’t know, Zane. The funny thing is that I played being ‘Kaylee Cross’ for years. I got really *good* at it, even liked fooling people, though I never went out on any dates. But now that I’m this cute-as-a-button catgirl 30/6 the novelty is already wearing off.” She sighed, looking at her *moe*, busty self. “Enough introspection. I’ve got a business to run. ‘Scuse me, Zane.” Rhianna marched off to the office/waiting room.

Lillibet and Paul had returned from the RIDE market. They’d made several purchases, and the fixer-upper RIDEs would be shipped in within the next few days. They’d also turned in the work they’d been assigned, and Rhianna was looking it over via her implant now. For all that Paul was most of a year ahead of Lillibet in his studies, the teenagers were neck-and-neck in their quiz scores and component assembly tests. Lillibet was showing some aptitude for the work, but wasn’t a stellar student—at least when Paul wasn’t watching. Her classmate—who didn’t own a RIDE himself—was having an influence on her that her mother no doubt wouldn’t approve of, which motivated the girl even more.

Lillibet’s own RIDE, the ocelot Guinevere, was the other positive influence. Months ago she’d described Lillibet as “spoiled but not rotten”. The young woman was now well on the way to being much fresher.

Rhianna made some mental notes and looked up work schedules, assigned Apprentices to specific employees to mentor them for the next week, then sent the information to all parties. The Freerider Garage was one of the places students from the Uplift Community College RIDETech Program could get hands-on training and certification. Lillibet had actually enrolled in a summer class, paying full non-resident fees of course.

“Is that Lillibet Walton?” Zane asked. “Lillibet Walton, *up to her elbows* in oil and dirt?”

“The one and only,” Rhianna said. She looked at the Integrate tiger sideways. “Are you *following* me, Zane?”

“I’m following you perfectly,” Zane said. “Hard work is often a good thing for the idle rich. Just look at me.”

Rhianna rolled her eyes. “That’s *not* what I meant.”

“Actually, I did want to talk to you, if you’ve got a moment,” Zane said, leaning against a tool cabinet.

“About what,” Rhianna said flatly.

“Well, for starters, this.” Zane held up a hand and one of the shop data tablets floated across from a table into it.

“Very impressive,” Rhianna said. “Do you also juggle? I’ll bet you’re great at parties.”

“No, seriously, look.” He waved a hand over the tablet, filling it with data. “McDonnell-Nextus C-217 Starmaster decommissioned military drop shuttle, part of a lot we got in from Nextus army surplus last month. We use them for heavy cargo transport to and from our mining platforms and other facilities, but we have to buy them in lots, so we often end up with more than we need at any given time. We usually place the extras through dealers at a slight profit, but I’ve just told them to make this one available for you at cost paid, if you want it.” He handed the tablet across to Rhianna.

Rhianna took it, looked at it. The price was...maybe a little on the low side for a single purchase, but overall reasonable for that model of bird. It wasn’t as if Zane was simply offering it as a gift—but there was little to no difference in her mind. Given that he’d also all but forced the money on them that made their purchase of it even possible. “You *were* just gonna put us in touch with your dealer so we could make our own selection, weren’t you? Why bring this up now?”

“It just occurred to me that in that room back there you’ve got a very confused and lost young lady who is also a *very* good pilot. I pulled her—*their*—records. They were consistently Sturmhaven Fast Couriers’ top performers. Live to fly. Heh—last name’s even ‘Live-in-sky’. That might be what caused them to Integrate.”

He paused a moment, then continued. “Fully rated on everything from skimmers up to full orbital shuttles. Even holds a provisional license to operate intra-system spacecraft, and was working toward qualifying for FTL in her spare time.” He shrugged. “Anyway, I doubt she’s going to want to go back to work for SFC like she is now. Which means she’s gonna need a new job. And I figured that this is probably the kind of sub you’d be looking for anyway, so why not put her to work right away?”

“We’ll need to look it over first, make sure it’s in top condition before we say yes,” Rhianna said politely. In her mind, a spark of anger grew. *I don’t need this. It’s too much bird. Please, stop, Zane.* She wished she could say that aloud, but he was on such a roll she could barely get a word in edgewise.

“How about a test flight? We could all go out to the Brubeck private aerodrome and take your sub down to my mining platform. I don’t think I’ve ever shown you the place, and you could be there for my historic first board meeting as an out-of-the-closet Integrate. Something to tell your grandkids about. Oh, and I’ll have Myla meet us there, since as my bodyguard she should go too.”

Rhianna frowned. “I don’t know, this is all a bit sudden. It’s too mu—”

“You really ought to see the RIDE maintenance bay. You know we use hundreds of RIDEs of all makes and models in the mining process, and sometimes we need to service dozens of them at once, so we have all the latest equipment and lots of great people to work it. No one in *your* league, of course.”

Rhianna’s lynx ears actually swivelled forward at that. She shook her head, but actually smiled. “Zane Brubeck, you should be an elevator operator. You really know all

the right buttons to push, don't you?"

Zane smiled faintly. "I doubt that, or I wouldn't have whiffed so spectacularly when I asked you for a dance last night."

Rhianna's ears lay back and her smile disappeared. "Yes, about that," she said in much colder tones. "I already told you—"

"Look, I *would* still like to take you out sometime, but it's not what you think," Zane interrupted. "I may be rich, but you already know I'm not some kind of playboy who boinks anything with a pulse. I'm *not* doing all this to try to get into your dress—hell, when we first met you were wearing pants. I'd just like to show you a fun evening with no pressure or commitments because you've helped me a lot—*both* of me—and I honestly *like* you. No more, no less, and no expectations at the end of the night besides a 'sleep well and see you later.'"

Rhianna raised an eyebrow. "Is that what Shelley got?"

"Shelley was born on this planet same as I was and grew up with...well, the way things are around here," Zane said. "So it would have been safe for me to ask, and safe for her to answer either way. Not that I'm going to say *if* I asked or *how* she answered, since that's between her and me."

Rhianna turned away and crossed her arms. "And she's also *gorgeous*, while I'm just 'adorable,'" she growled, her frustration finally surfacing. "You wouldn't *want* to sleep with me, unless you were going to cuddle me like some kind of stuffed kitty toy."

Zane put a hand on her shoulder. "No, actually, that's *not* it," he said gently. "If I thought you seriously *wanted* to sleep with me, with no reservations, I'd be happy to boink like bunnies until the early morning hours. But you've got a different problem, and I don't think it's one you've even thought about."

Rhianna half-turned back. The angry spark turned into a flame. Did he even *realize* how he sounded? Rhianna doubted it. "*Another* problem? Are you going to psychoanalyze me now, too?"

"It's like this. You're not from *around* here. You grew up in a world where men were men and women were women, and anyone who wanted to change over was thought of as some kind of...well, perverted social deviant. That's still coloring your thinking." He shrugged. "You use your 'adorability' as a shield, but what you're protecting is that even *you* aren't sure if you're ready to 'go all the way' yet."

"What about Rufia?" Rhianna said. "Rufus came from Earth, too—right up the block from me, figuratively speaking. But she's never hesitated, even since she was a she."

"But she was also bi, even before he stepped off the ship," Zane said, smiling at his own typically Zharusian use of mutable pronouns. "Already used to being attracted to people as people, not as plumbing. Wasn't much of an adjustment for her. At least that's my guess." He gently turned Rhianna the rest of the way to face him and put his other hand on her other shoulder so he could address her squarely. "You, on the other hand, strike me as someone who was only interested in girls until the change, and now you're still not sure, deep down, whether you're even 'supposed' to be interested in boys."

Rhianna looked down, her face flushed. *Is that all I am? Just 'attracted to plumbing'? You...you...insufferable...insulting...dickweed!* But she was so angry she could only stammer. "But that's...I don't think..."

Zane blithely continued on. "So all I'm asking is, if you want to go out with some

boy to see how it goes, why not go with one who understands that and won't go tromping through the minefield without checking to see what numbers are in each little square first?"

Zane dropped his hands from her shoulder and straightened up. "I realize I probably haven't helped my cause with all the breaks I've been giving you. I don't want to put you in a position where you feel like you *owe* me anything. So I won't ask you about it again. But I sure would like *you* to ask *me*, sometime. So maybe think it over, 'kay?" He grinned at her. "Now I'd probably better get back to Cindy before Quinoa manages to convince her that all meaties are evil or something."

He turned and left the bay, leaving a very confused and enraged Rhianna behind, still holding the tablet in one hand. She threw it against the Deuce's side in frustration, hard enough to shatter it and snarled in sheer, pent up *rage*. In the last five minutes Zane managed to flay her to the bone and didn't even realize what he'd done. She looked for something else to break, then shattered two more tablets. "If that's what being an Integrate does to you, fuck it! I don't want it! And fuck you, Zane! You stuck up, arrogant, patronizing *bastard*!"

She *hated* one-sided friendships. Zane threw millions of *mu* around like it was pocket change. It was like having a hundred-meter cargo skimmer full of gold she never saw coming dumping its entire crushing load on her head, leaving her a rich corpse. There was a fine line between fair wages for services rendered and what Zane was doing. Instead of gold she'd been crushed by a suborbital she couldn't afford to keep, a pilot she couldn't afford to pay, and worst of all, a standing offer of first-time-as-a-woman sex with him. More than a girl—than *anyone*—could take. "*STOP HELPING ME, damnit!*" Rhianna fumed, pacing around the empty service bay.

Was *this* what being Integrated did? Give you a superiority complex deeper than the Towers? Even the dinosaur and the unicorn she'd met a couple days ago had an air of condescension about them, though it wasn't nearly as bad as Quinoa's, and now *Zane's*. Choked up with outrage and sadness, Rhianna put out a call. :*Kaylee! I need you! You're not going to believe this.*:

As Zane walked back toward the private garage, he was met coming out by Quinoa, who had a very intense look on her face. "You'n'me need to talk, mister. Care to step into my office?"

She held out a hand—and a moment after Zane took it, fired her lifters and zoomed straight skyward, holding up her other hand to part the hardlight skylight in this section of the garage for just long enough for them to pass through it. Once they were in the clear, she picked up speed, and Zane belatedly kicked in his own lifters to avoid having his arm yanked out of the socket. "Hey, where're we—"

Quinoa didn't answer, streaking skyward faster and faster—past the lanes of traffic, past the warning buoys indicating a hardlight ceiling only a hundred meters further up. Her arm still upheld, she opened a circle in the hardlight dome over the city for long enough to pull Zane through it with her.

Zane touched down on the smooth surface, then his feet slipped out from under him as he found it was entirely frictionless. He caught himself with his lifters and hovered just a few inches over the surface, as Quinoa was already. "All right, what's this about—"

"You know, you've got some gall calling *me* spoiled," Quinoa said, hands on her

hips. “If this is what you do with *your* money, I fear for the world when you come into your full Integrate powers.”

Zane blinked. “What are you talking about?”

“What you did with that poor woman down there,” Quinoa said, pointing back toward the garage, over three kilometers down.

“You were listening?”

“How could I *not*, the way you were broadcasting. We’ve got to work on that more. Later. But the point is, I dipped into Uncia and Kaylee’s memories of your earlier conversations to get up to speed, and all I can say is you’ve got a lot of nerve. Rich I might be, spoiled I might be, but at least I don’t try to *buy my friends!*”

“I wasn’t trying to—” Zane began, but Quinoa wasn’t ready to let him complete a sentence yet.

“Now I’ll buy one-night stands, sure. What’s *really* fun is when I meet some cute boy who wants a RIDE, and I tell him I’ll buy him a nice one, but only a female one. Then I know I’m the very last girl who’ll have him as a boy for at least three years, and maybe ever. It really adds spice to the evening when *they* know it, too.” She shivered and gave a happy little sigh. “But those are all one-and-done. They give me what I want, I give them what they want, we go our separate ways, everybody’s happy. I don’t *hang around them* and give them more and more crap, and pile on more and more feelings of obligation. She can’t return your so-called ‘generosity’ equally and you damn well know it!”

“But I’m not...” Zane stopped and looked at her. “You really think that’s what I’m doing?”

Quinoa patted him on the shoulder. “Trust me. That’s what you’re doing. Now I haven’t said anything about what you’re doing with *Myla*, yet. You fixed my screw-up, I don’t have room to complain about that. But by God don’t you *dare* try to pull any of this, ‘oh, here have some more *stuff!* And some more! And some more!’ crap with her, or by God I swear you’ll know what pain is. And don’t you dare even think about asking *her* out.”

Zane stared at her. “I wouldn’t ask her out, she’s my bodyguard. That’s not professional.”

“Well at least you still have *some* scruples,” Quinoa said. “But have you even thought about what you’re piling onto Rhianna? That ridiculous salary for making your DIN? Well...maybe not ridiculous when you’re paying *meat* for doing it, I guess, given how much harder everything is for them, bless their little hearts, but still. But you just don’t *stop*. And then you’re all, ‘I don’t want you to feel like you’re under any *obligation* or anything, but wanna go out and boink?’ Good God, you’re gonna *suffocate* that poor woman! And...‘attracted to plumbing’? Patronizing much?”

She paused. “Now, mind, I do think you were kind of right in what you said about her ‘adorability’ problem and what she’s hiding behind it, but that just makes it even worse—nobody likes to have unpleasant truths about themselves thrown in their faces like that.”

“I thought you didn’t like ‘meat’ that much,” Zane said. “Why are you suddenly arguing for her?”

Quinoa shrugged. “I call out cruelty when I see it,” she said. “I yell at people for kicking dogs, too; that doesn’t mean I think the dogs are my equals.”

Zane looked away, out across the Dome. Fliers were entering and leaving the city

through the ports on one of the other domes, and high above a blazing comet tail heralded a suborbital coming in. For a moment he almost felt his Dad standing nearby, giving him the quiet disappointment that was always much, much worse than being ranted at. *Okay, Dad. I get it. I get it. This is why you didn't want more money than we needed to live on.*

"You're right," he said at last. "Thing about being raised middle class is you don't really get *used* to having money. You get in the habit of doing little favors for friends, then when you have money your 'little' favors are other people's life-changing events."

"There's nothing wrong with life-changing events in moderation. Especially when it's making a new crossrider. I have to admit, I love talking guys into going girly. It's so much fun to see how much they'll sell out their manhood for, and then ask you how to adjust to their new lifestyle." She giggled, then turned serious again. "But you don't *keep* doing it to the *same* person. If you really like Rhi and Shelley, Kaylee and Uncia, the best thing you can do for them is take yourself *right* out of their lives for a while. No more favors. No more *you*. Let them earn their own way."

She poked him hard in the middle of the chest. "If you and they want to keep doing business after everything cools off, then have them deal with your company's HR department for pay, not you *directly*. It'll put some distance between you and the money you're offering. It won't feel like a special favor so much. Get it?"

Zane nodded slowly. "I guess you're right, there. Which is weird. I never thought I'd be saying that to you."

"We all have things we're smart on and things we're stupid on," Quinoa said. "I seem to be stupid on forcing things onto people with my powers, but smart about forcing them onto people with money. You seem to be the other way around." She sighed. "Which brings me to another point."

"What's that?"

"Fritz may be wrong about meaties and mechie—*I say may*, the jury's still out on that. But you seem to be acting like he's just a big blow-hard who talks loud but can't back up his talk. You're going to send Integrate business to Rhi and Shelley, and you're going to go public with being an Integrate in charge of a major corporation. And *I'm* not saying you're wrong. Again, jury still out."

"I hear a 'but' coming," Zane said.

Quinoa nodded, starting to drift in a circle around Zane. "Look, where Fritz is involved you're playing with fire here. Again, he's not just some random malcontent. He's...what to call him? Fine, a *demagogue*. A lot of Inties agree with him and follow his lead.

"You're a noob, Zane." He swore he heard her pronounce the zeroes. "You don't even know your own systems. On the other paw, Fritz is in full possession of his powers—he's had literally *decades* to figure out the most effective ways to use them. And he's got other Inties on his team who feel the same way—like that 'Brena' fox-chick I talked about earlier. He's got *her* wrapped around his finger. *And* the most any other Integrates will do to stop them is maybe kick them out of their enclaves. They're kind of stand-offish like that. But even that doesn't matter. Fritz has his own pad, calls it the Coffeehouse, where he hangs out with his closest henchies. So big whoop. Out of sight, out of mind for everyone else."

"So you're saying he's going to cause trouble for me?" Zane asked.

"For you, for your business, and for anyone around you," Quinoa said. "He might

be starting even now, if he's heard about Rhi and Shelley's DIN-making services. He'll start out as a nuisance, but he's gonna escalate *real* fast. You might wanna think about how important your 'not gonna hide' principles are, and whether they're worth you, your company, maybe the whole damn *polity* coming under a full-out cyber-assault from the best hackers on the planet. You've poked a hornet's nest."

"Will I have you to help me stand up to him?" Zane asked.

"Undecided, but leaning toward probably not," Quinoa said. "Understand, you helped Myla after I screwed up her life, so I do owe you big time. But do I owe you enough to paint that kind of big red and white bullseye on my butt? I *know* Fritz. I know what he's capable of. You don't, or you'd be scared as hell at the thought of getting him even a little bit annoyed at you, and I can see you still aren't. And I'm nowhere *near* in his league."

"I see," Zane said. "So why are you even still here, if you think I'm in that much danger?"

She shrugged. "Fritz wants me to, and it's safer to do what he wants for the moment. Apart from that, I'm mainly gonna stay around in the hopes that I can keep stuff from splashing onto *Myla* too bad, and maybe any other innocents I can protect without getting Fritz directly mad at me. I might even tell him so. Hell, if I can cut a non-interference pact with him to keep the meaties I *do* care about safe, and he can be trusted to stick by it, it might be worth it."

"I see," Zane said again. "Well, thanks for telling me where you stand, at least."

"Look, I'm sorry," Quinoa said. "I like you, for all you can be stupid sometimes. And for what it's worth, maybe it's time someone stood up to Fritz and yanked us all kicking and screaming into the light. But I know my own limitations, and I don't do anyone any good if I end up a bug on Fritz's windshield." She stopped circling and hovered in place. "Anyway, I've said my pieces. I'm going back to the garage." She opened another hole in the dome and dropped through, closing it behind her.

Zane stared after her for a long moment, then looked back out at the sky, sitting and thinking. What she'd said had hit home—all the more because he hadn't expected that kind of insight from a "spoiled rich girl." And given how right she'd been about Rhianna, was she also on target about Fritz? Was he really going to be that much of a threat? He was a lot less inclined to dismiss what she said than he would have been this morning. And he guessed he *had* been dismissing Fritz as little more than an idiot based on the opinions he held. But an idiot with a gun could kill lots of smarter people, and if Fritz had the kind of power Quinoa said...well.

He sighed. Regardless of what the truth was about Fritz, he was starting to realize that he owed Rhianna one *hell* of an apology for his insensitivity. He opened a hole of his own in the dome and dropped through. Probably best to go and get that out of the way.

Kaylee, feeling her rider's anger and distress, came running and Fused with flying leap. After absorbing Rhianna's recent memories the RI was just as pissed off as her rider. *:That...that...arrogant sonofabitch!:* she fumed. *:I don't fucking care if he means well! He has no idea what it's like to build a business from nothing, then suddenly just have everything handed to you! He thinks he can just pile shit on...:* Kaylee's mental voice degenerated into inarticulate growls as she read her rider's buffer.

:I don't care if he even comes back.: Rhianna admitted to herself. She was very

familiar with greed, having tried to do business with Qixi and others, but being smothered in generosity like this felt even worse. *:I need to do something with my—our own hands. Ideas, Kaylee?:*

They turned their shared head to the Deuce, having the very same thought. *:You know, we don't need a Dry Ocean certified skimmer, but we could use another towskim,:* Kaylee said. A parts list and design changes came up on Kaylee's HUD. "It'll take some deeper modifications to the Deuce chassis. The lifters will need moving out to wing nacelles to make room for a centerline lifter-tow crane, modular lifter pods for larger breakdowns, etcetera. And we'll need some help," she said aloud.

At the sound of lifters, she looked up. Zane hovered about twenty meters up in his Terry-Fuser disguise. She glared at him. "What now? You going to buy me a new Garage, too?"

"I...came to apologize, actually. I was way out of line, Rhianna," the tiger said, descending slowly to the ground and dismissing the disguise. "I was coddling you and being patronizing on top of that, and I didn't even see it. Quinoa just knocked some sense into me."

"Qui...Quinoa?" Kaylee said, picking up the broken tablet. "You kiddin' me?"

"She might make mistakes with her powers, but she's had years to learn to use money right," Zane said ruefully. "I just came into my inheritance last year, and all I could think was how much I could help people out with it. I didn't think about how it would feel to be helped. So I went too far. And then I started in on that little lecture... which ended up coming out of my mouth a lot different than it was meant to be in my brain." He sighed. "I've wronged you—both of you—and I don't know how to make good. God, if Dad could see me now, what would he say?"

"We just need some space," Rhianna said, cooling down little by little. "First of all, I'll be doing *my own* shopping for a suborbital. That Starmaster is *much* too big for my needs. You're hauling heavy equipment and even small amounts of ore between shore and mining rigs, I'm just trying to score repair jobs from smaller operators out in the Dust or even around Old Smokey—I don't do salvage like Qixi does. I'd lose money just on aerodrome fees and maintenance on a bird that size. I want something small enough I can keep in an on-site hangar.

"Also, I can't afford to pay a pilot, over and above all that. I have basic flier certification myself, and getting a sub endorsement is just a few more flight lessons and a one-time licensing fee. See what I'm getting at? You don't *know* what I need. I run a small business, not a multi-billion *mu* mining company."

"Okay, there I see your point. I *swear* I can feel Dad facepalming. He always did that when I did something stupid."

"Well, listen to that 'inner Dad' of yours," Rhianna said, waving a piece of broken tablet at him.

"I will be." Zane sighed. "Listen, if you want to come to the meeting, tour the platform, whatever, I'd still be glad to have you, but I can understand if not. Apart from that, unless something comes up, I'm going to stay away for a while."

"Yeah. We—all three of us—need to cool down." Rhianna flexed her feline fingers. "And I need to do something more hands-on, and for that matter, macro instead of nano." She looked at the old Deuce. "The old girl has possibilities..." she said to nobody in particular.

Zane nodded. "Anyway, if you don't want to hire Cindy, tell her to apply at

Brubeck if she wants a new job.”

“Uh huh. See you later, Zane. But not for a while, I think.”

Zane nodded. “Yeah.” Then he lifted back out the skylight, and was gone.

From high exaltation of a job well done and being flush with cash, to the depths of anger and despair, and then back out again, in thirty hours or less. It was almost too much to take, but brooding over it would only make things worse. Fortunately she had the means to occupy herself right there: the 40-year-old Deuce.

Kaylee sent texts to all five Apprentices, including Lillibet—*especially* Lillibet. They gathered around, three of them with RIDEs Fused up, the two without carrying the tools listed in their mail, wearing their interface specs. “Okay, boss lady, what’s all this?” Lillibet asked. “Extra credit?”

Rhianna-Kaylee nodded, ready to get her handpaws dirty. “Yep! Starting today you’re going to learn how to teardown and rebuild a classic pre-war Sturmhaven Skymotors CS-2 ‘Deuce’ cargo skimmer, used by civilians and military alike. Don’t worry about making mistakes, there’s still about ten thousand of these sitting in salvage yards if we need to get replacement parts we can’t fab here. We’re going to modernize her and give her a new life. Heat em ‘up, everyone! Let’s make some noise!”

“What is all that *noise*?” Rochelle said as Enigma finally completed its analysis. The first version of Cindy’s translation software was almost ready. While it compiled she checked the exterior cameras around the lot. Rhianna and the Apprentices were attacking the Deuce like lions swarming over a fresh zebra carcass. Rochelle sighed as she recognized Rhianna’s frenetic, slightly twitchy body language, and the way the little nub of Kaylee’s tail was jerking back and forth. *That* certainly hadn’t changed with the crossover. Something had set her off, and she was busy working off some mad—and it seemed she had everyone else in the garage working it off with her.

: *Whatever it is, Kaylee doesn’t want to talk about it.*: Uncia said.

“I think I can shed some light on that,” Quinoa said quietly, appearing right next to Rochelle.

Rochelle jumped. “Gah! Don’t *do* that.” Uncia growled slightly.

“Erm...sorry.” Quinoa at least had the grace to look embarrassed. “Forgot I had that on.” She shook her head. “Afraid your boyfriend got too big for his britches.”

“My...you mean Zane?” Rochelle asked.

“Yeah.” Quinoa shook her head. “For someone as perceptive he is about motes in other peoples’ eyes, he sure can miss the logs in his own. Tried to put some moves on Rhianna without stopping to think how that was gonna look after all the money he’s been throwing around, and apparently forgot to eat his tact flakes at breakfast this morning. But I smacked him down and he apologized to her and Kaylee, so I think everything will be okay in a while. At least where they’re concerned.” She nodded toward the garage.

Rochelle shook her head. “I was afraid something like that was going to happen. Well, I guess even Integrates still have lessons to learn.”

“Yeah, listen, about that...I’m really kinda worried about you guys,” Quinoa said.

“Oh, *really*?” Rochelle asked archly. “Worried that the ‘meat’ might spoil and you’ll have to clean out the fridge or something?”

Quinoa rolled her eyes. “Look. I know you’re good.” She paused perhaps just long enough to add “for meat” under her breath, though Rochelle didn’t actually hear the

words. “But I could, for example, root every system in this garage, right now, from standing right here, past any protections you might have put on them. That’s not a brag, that’s just a fact.”

“Oh, *really*,” Rochelle repeated.

“And I’m just a kindergartener when it comes to this stuff. Just know enough to take over people’s vehicles and fly them wherever I want to, put on a pretty light show while smacking down certain lupine RIDEs too big for their britches, that kind of thing. There are some of us who *really* don’t like you guys, and some of them have been doing this stuff for decades. And *I’m* not good enough to protect you, and if I’m not I know for damned sure mister noob Zane isn’t. If you keep up this biz of making DINs...I just don’t want to see anyone get hurt, that’s all.”

“Hurt by whom?” Uncia asked, tail lashing. “Cause I’d really like to know.”

“You’re friends of Myla’s, so I hope you don’t ever find out,” Quinoa said.

“Anyway, just...be careful, okay?” She glanced over at the sleeping Cindy. “I probably should scram outta here. When Sleeping Beauty wakes up, let her know how to get to my place. Just next door to loverboy’s. I can teach her the basics about her new powers.”

“I know where it is,” Rochelle said coolly.

Quinoa nodded. “See you later.” She lifted off her feet and flew backward through the hardlight garage door, then lifted skyward with her iridescent green wings spread.

“Well, great,” Rochelle said, watching her go. “Rhianna pissed off at one Integrate, the other giving out mysterious warnings of gloom and doom, and new ones popping out of the woodwork. What else is going to happen today?”

The compile finished and loaded into the qubitite memory chip. Rochelle went to pick up Rhianna’s final version of the avian Integrate’s connector. The fabber tank was reading a little low, so she absently ordered a raw material delivery for the next day. She put the DIN together—this one used a sleek flier communications blister that looked less like a jewel. Then she tapped Cindy-Tally on the shoulder to wake her.

“That’s it?” the bird-woman said. “Well, plug it in.”

“All right, here you go.” Rochelle socketed it into place. “Now you’re going to want to run this through your home fabber, or a public fab if you don’t have a home one. Nothing in it can’t be duplicated, and you’ll want to keep plenty of spares against emergencies. Think of it as like glasses, when people still needed those.”

Cindy’s eyes literally brightened. “Wow! That’s...this is amazing! I can’t thank you enough. But I’m not sure where I should go next. Not sure if I can get in my own door, but there was this place called Terrania I was told...”

“Well, before you go out there, you should probably check in here, first.” Rochelle sent over Quinoa’s address. “Quinoa’s staying there right now—you met her earlier—and she can give you the full orientation. It’s not as far to go as one of the Enclaves, and you can land right on her balcony.”

Cindy hopped off the makeshift perch, then awkwardly crabwalked towards the door. “I will. Thanks again! I don’t mean to be rude, but I gotta fly!”

Rochelle nodded. “Good luck, and take care.”

On the exterior cameras Rochelle watched the new Integrate spread her wings. Her body reconfigured itself, fingers melting into the leading edges of her wing-arms, making them true wings, body changing to a more bird-like shape and stance. There was a sharp whine of high-speed lifters and the Cooper’s Hawk streaked skyward.

Rochelle turned back to her console. “Okay, now that’s out of the way, let’s get

back to our *other* project. I want to have a preliminary index for Kaylee by quitting time tonight.”

“But you said it wouldn’t be ready until tomorrow,” Uncia said.

Rochelle grinned. “I know, but I’m trying to build a reputation as a miracle worker.”

“But if you rush a miracle worker, you get a lousy miracle,” Uncia pointed out.

“Oh, hush up, and Fuse up. We’ve got work to do.” She hugged her furry friend and slipped inside.

An hour passed and nearly a quarter of Kaylee’s memory blocks were re-indexed, when Quinoa’s words came back to haunt her. Instead of speaking about it “openly” with their normal Fused speech, Rochelle decided to go deep, back inside her RIDE’s personality core, adding layer upon layer of her very best encryption as she went. Eventually she was in the silvery room where she had once battled the lupine Amontillado virus to the de-rezzing.

“She said she could root everything in the Garage,” Rochelle said to her partner’s furry avatar. Upon reflection it didn’t sound like an idle boast. It fit with everything else she’d seen thus far. “Everything. If she can do *that*, Un-hon, we have some work to do. Let’s get Kaylee’s job finished quick. We have another long night ahead. Just open a new folder, call it ‘Sneaker’ and bury it deep down here with you.”

“Got it, Shelley,” Uncia said. The labeled manilla folder floated in the “air” next to them. “I just hope...”

The RIDE programmer put her fingers on the snow leopardess’s lips. “Let’s not tempt Murphy more than I already have tonight.”

Chapter Six: All Aboard!

July 16, 156 A.L.

"You know, you really don't need to guard me *yet*," Zane said as he sat in the back of the Fuser-sized limo skimmer, with the Fused Myla and Sophie in the seat across from him. "I'm not out of the closet yet." He was still wearing his tiger-Fuser disguise, as he had been most of the time he'd been out in public the last few days. He was starting to get thoroughly tired of keeping up the pretense, however, and was glad that it ended today.

"It's never too early to develop proper habits," Myla said mildly. "Besides, you need to get in some practice of listening to your bodyguard. I expect a *bit* more sense out of you than I had out of teenaged Quinoa. Or even *allegedly*-adult Quinoa, come to think of it."

"You might be disappointed there," Zane said, sighing. "The other day, Quinoa roundly chewed *me* out for being an idiot—and she was *right*."

Myla blinked. (Or maybe Sophie did.) "Oh, my," Myla said. "That's...unexpected. Is that what's been eating you these last few days?"

Zane raised an eyebrow. "Eating me?"

"You haven't had more than about three words for me when I've passed you in the hall. Seemed more interested in your feet," Myla said. "For that matter, there's a lot of that going around. Rhi and Shelley didn't seem to be in a very good mood when I had them refit Sophie, either."

"It's probably related," Zane said. "The other day I put my foot in my mouth big-time. Right along with my wallet. I was over there to welcome a new Integrate, and..." He filled her in, leaving out the specific details of what he'd said to Rhianna but admitting it had been patronizing as hell.

"I always just wanted to be able to do little favors for my friends," he finished ruefully. "I forgot that my *little* favors weren't so little to other people."

Myla nodded. "Yeah, I thought it was gonna be something like that. Your heart's in the right place, Zane, but you just have to learn to let well-enough alone."

"Yeah, Quinoa made that pretty clear." Zane rolled his eyes. "Myla, if you ever see me about to make that kind of screw-up again, I want you to whisper in my ear, 'You remember that time when Quinoa was *right*?'"

Myla chuckled. "You got it."

The hardlight skylight overhead flickered and vanished, and Quinoa's voice drifted down. "Wow, my ears are burning!" Her head appeared over the skylight, keeping pace with the limo as she peered down into the car. "Nice to see you can take at least *some* advice."

Myla tensed, then clenched her teeth. "Quinoa, don't *do* that. What are you even *doing* here?"

"It's all right, Myla, I invited her," Zane said. "She's coming along to the meeting as an observer for the rest of the Integrate. And yeah, Quinny, I can when it makes sense and someone pounds it into my head with a two-by-four. Thanks for clearing that up."

"You're welcome." Quinoa drifted down through the skylight, taking a seat next to Zane. She smiled at Myla, then glanced back at Zane. "Given any thought to my *other* advice?"

Zane frowned. "Just this. Myla, until and unless we come up with some way to counter Inties' powers, your bodyguard duties only extend to protecting me from *non-Integrate* threats. If you're between an unfriendly Intie and me, just get out of the way. My chances are better than yours."

"If Integrates are such hot stuff, why do you even need us at all?" Sophie piped up.

"For one thing, Myla's instincts for trouble of any kind are going to be a *hell* of a lot better than mine," Zane said. "I can't stay out of trouble if I don't see it coming. Even non-Intie trouble. And as far as non-Inties go, it would probably be best for all concerned that I *don't* use my own powers in public as much as possible."

"Makes sense," Myla agreed. "But if you're going to tick off Integrates, too, who's going to protect you from them?" She glanced at Quinoa. "No offense, girl, but *you're* not exactly bodyguard material."

"None taken," Quinoa said. "I've already told him I can't protect him."

"I'll just have to hope I can find some other Integrates willing to help," Zane said. "Or that I can learn enough to come up to speed myself quickly."

"Good luck with that," Quinoa said. She glanced out the window as the limo pulled into the parking lot of the Brubeck aerodrome just outside of Uplift. "So, shall we jet?"

"I still can't believe *you're* coming," Sophie said.

"Hey, if he's going public it's going to have repercussions for *all* Integrates, including the ones in the Enclaves," Quinoa said. "Since I'm hanging around him anyway, I might as well be our *de facto* observer so they don't have to send someone *else* along and complicate things even more."

"*Just* an observer, huh?" Myla asked skeptically.

"I'm not gonna screw anything up this time," Quinoa said. "Honest. But I *need* to be there."

Myla looked at her for a long moment, then the Fuser's eyes widened. "You're worried about *me*, aren't you? That's what this is all about."

"You always did see right through me," Quinoa sighed. "Myla, Zane is messing with powers he doesn't even understand yet. But he will. Oh, yes he will."

"Maybe some powers *need* to be messed with," Zane said. "I'm not going to leave our future in the hands of someone who sneers at 'meaties' and 'mechies,' no matter how powerful he is."

"Yeah, good luck with that," Quinoa said. "Let me know how it works out for you."

"I wouldn't blame you if you'd rather transfer to some lower-risk position, by the way," Zane told Myla. "We've got a huge security department with plenty of openings for people of your experience."

"They say the safest place to be in a hurricane is at the eye of the storm," Myla said. "Might as well stay."

"But the safest place to be in a tornado is lying face-down in a ditch," Quinoa said. "And in an earthquake it's standing in a doorway."

Myla looked at her, Sophie's ears twitching. "What is that even supposed to

mean?”

“As with most things I say, I have *no* idea.” Quinoa grinned. “That’s probably Quorra talking. My RI-half.”

“Must be nice being an Integrate and having a built-in excuse for any time you do something that doesn’t make sense,” Sophie said. “It wasn’t me! It was the one-armed man!”

Quinoa giggled. “Oooh, good ref! I’ll have to remember that one!”

“By the way, how’s Cindy doing?” Zane asked. “I’ve seen she was at your place the last few days.”

“She’s decided to call herself CinTally for now,” Quinoa said. “I suggested ‘Taliesin,’ but I guess she thinks that would be too ‘Camelot’. Anyway, she’s going to stay in my place for the next little while, until she’s figured out how her powers work a little better and where she wants to go. I told her how to get to Terrania and J-Park so she can go check them out when she feels like it. She’s a fast flier, won’t have any problems getting there.”

Zane nodded. “Good. You tell her about my job offer?”

“I did, but she says she wants to keep her options open for now.”

“That’s fair.” Zane nodded, as the limo pulled to a halt just off the airfield. “Well, shall we head out?” He reached for the door handle, but Myla held up a hand.

“Wait. Bodyguard first, remember?” She opened her door and slid out, scanned the area, then nodded. “Okay, it’s clear.”

“I’m so relieved.” Zane grinned at her, clambering out of the car. Quinoa followed a moment later.

“So where’s our ride?” Quinoa asked.

“Right behind you.” Zane pointed at the huge cargo suborbital being taxied out of its hangar. It was about 100 meters long and 30 high, with a wingspan of about 50 meters with the swing-wings at full extension. It had the bulbous appearance of a cargo carrier, with huge dorsal and ventral bay doors one third and two thirds of the way back along the body and a flight deck bubble high on the nose.

Myla craned her neck to take it all in. “Wow, what on earth is *that* monster?”

“Proof of how badly I really *did* step in it,” Zane said. “I’ve never actually seen one of them this close before, but that’s the McDonnell-Nextus C-217 Starmaster I was going to sell to Rhianna.”

Quinoa stared up at it as it grew closer, craning her neck back to take it in.

“Daaaaaamn.”

“In my defense, it looked so much *smaller* on e-paper,” Zane said. “I confused it with one of those squadron-sized drop shuttles.” Myla looked at him. “Hey, they’re both military, right?” Zane said.

Quinoa looked at him, then looked back at the suborbital again. “Are you *sure* you’re fit to run a major corporation?”

“Sometimes I really do wonder,” Zane said. “C’mon, let’s get aboard. They’ve got their cargo stowed already; they’re just waiting on us.” The ship had rolled to a halt, then a hardlight boarding elevator appeared beneath the cockpit.

Myla nodded, leading the way. Zane followed. Quinoa brought up the rear, pausing just once more to stare up at the immense thing again and repeat, “Daaaaaamn.” Then she stepped onto the metal-textured platform with the others, and waited as it drew them back up into the hull.

“Can’t believe he tried to give us a frigging *Starmaster*,” Kaylee said as the Fused duo looked through suborbital sales listings. “Qixi’s sub was huge, and *that* was only fifty meters!”

:*Yep,*: Rhianna replied. :*But let’s just enjoy ourselves. I’m not really finding any in the used listings that works for us on our budget. They’re either way too big, or family suborbital RVs meant for weekend trips to Laurasia.*: Frowning, she reluctantly brought up the listings for *new* subs, but before she could really get started a reminder went off. Lillibet was almost ready for her presentation. The duo de-Fused and left her home above the original Garage.

A lot had happened over the last few days. For one thing, Myla had brought Sophie in several times for more defrag sessions with Rochelle and Uncia, and for the hardware refit she needed to be adequate for Zane’s bodyguard work. The MRS had removed a lot of military equipment when they’d decommissioned her, leaving a lot of gaps to be filled. But fortunately, Brubeck Mining had been generous with its hardware refit stipend. While it wouldn’t cover “mod-jeweller” level hardware, the money would stretch to cover medium-high-end civilian and not-too-obsolete military surplus equipment that was in many cases just as good as and in a couple of cases better than the gear the fennec had lost. RIDE paks, fast comms, medical gear...all things that might be particularly necessary for bodyguard work.

Also, the RIDEs Lillibet had purchased at auction had come in. Rhi encouraged all her apprentices to invest in a RIDE or two to fix up from time to time, as it was a great way to learn the ins and outs of all sorts of RIDE hardware, as well as do someone down on their luck a favor and possibly even turn a bit of a profit on a resale if they could hook them up with a good buyer. Since Lillibet had more money than most, even with the strict spending limits she set on herself, she was prone to buy several at a time, and it had been awhile since her last batch. The new group had just come in, and this was what Rhianna and Kaylee were on their way down to see now.

And Rhianna and Kaylee had slowly cooled down from their anger since the last time they’d seen Zane. They still weren’t inclined to invite him to any parties—and they’d turned down his one last try at inviting them to come with him to his board meeting, which would be taking place today—but they were inclined to suspect that the next time they saw him they *might* manage not to bite his head off on sight. Perhaps given a few more days they might be ready to be friends again.

Rhianna and Kaylee stepped into the bay set aside for apprentice use. Lillibet had had her four auction finds delivered and laid out on the bay’s maintenance cradles for examination. She and Guinevere were inspecting them now, while four other kids about Lilli’s age, not Garage employees, hung back along the wall, out of the way—one behind each cradle.

The first was an old LNX(f)-LMA-002A unit, similar to Kaylee but with additional refinements to her metal body that showed she was a couple of years’ later model. The unit didn’t appear to be in too bad condition, but she was still only a couple of years down from Kaylee and looked hard-used to boot, which explained why she would have been in Lillibet’s low-end price range. :*So this one is your daughter, rather than great-great-granddaughter, maybe?*: Rhianna sent, amused.

:*Oh, ha ha, very funny,*: Kaylee snorted.

There was also a raccoon unit, of a fifteen-year-old Sturmhaven make often used

for detailed industrial tasks—especially ones that involved cleaning and precision. Raccoons supposedly liked to wash things, so some RIDE factories stereotyped them that way. This one was also female.

The third one was the only male in the batch, and really an interesting curiosity: a hippogryph. It was a RIDE with the back half of a horse and the front half of a giant eagle. They'd been briefly popular back in the early '40s, coinciding with yet another revival of a popular twencen children's lit franchise, but they'd also been one of the first ever attempts at making RIDEs based on mythological creatures rather than real animals, and the RI cores had been prone to a number of annoying glitches. Rochelle could probably help with that, but she'd let Lillibet see what she could do on her own, first.

The last unit was another avian RIDE, apparently a condor. These types were frequently used for intelligence gathering or search-and-rescue because of their powerful wings and extended glide capability—they could ride updrafts for hours without needing to use lifters, and over the burning desert there were a whole lot of those. Like the others, she was over ten years old, but she was also in the worst shape. Half the panels on her wings were missing, and her tail and one leg were badly bent and twisted. It wasn't surprising; avian RIDEs in good shape tended to go for the low to mid five digits, at least, but Lilli had set herself a hard upper limit of 5,000 *mu* for each "project" RIDE—not out of concerns over money, but because she could learn more from fixing beaters than buying good-condition units.

Rhianna glanced at the four teens lined up along the wall. These were the prospective owners/partners, who Lilli would have brought along to the sales to have some say in the RIDEs she picked out for them. Rather than simply resell her finds, Lilli liked to place them with deserving neighborhood kids, giving both RIDEs and kids the friends they deserved, and a line on jobs that they could take to help their families. But as Rhianna looked over these four, she noticed just one little problem. There were three female and one male RIDE, but two boys and two girls—the condor had a boy behind it.

"You *did* get the parental consent forms this time, right?" Rhianna asked Lillibet.

The girl nodded quickly. "Guinny has them. They're all kosher, boss!"

Rhianna glanced at Kaylee, who reviewed the forms and nodded. "Good," Rhianna said. "Always best to avoid little incidents, don't you think?"

Lillibet nodded again, quickly. Although Lilli always tried to gender-match the RIDEs to the kids who'd receive them, occasionally some kid didn't want to wait for the right gender, or else fell in love with features or personality of a particular cross-gendered RIDE.

Recently, this had caused Mr. and Mrs. Forsythe (who were originally from Zheng He, one of the other Colonies) from a few blocks away to become rather irate when their 16-year-old son went out Christopher and returned home Christina, accompanied by a she-cougar RIDE. When they came to the garage with blood in their eyes, Lillibet quickly commed her Dad's lawyer, and in minutes had an ironclad settlement letter for an amount (that Lillibet would barely miss from her allowance) sufficient to let the Forsythes buy RIDEs for themselves as well and start their own family prospecting business. (And Lilli had even given them comprehensive advice on what to look for in a RIDE, which they had accepted with somewhat dazed expressions. But at least Christina had been paying attention and taking notes.) They left satisfied, with their new daughter still protesting about their making a big deal out of a simple

present from a friend.

It had all ended happily for everyone, but that hadn't kept Rhianna from having about three different heart attacks over the course of the event. She now required parental consent letters for *every* RIDE giftee, especially the prospective crossriders. After the Forsythe incident, Lillibet hadn't objected.

Remarkably few parents had declined to sign the consents, even in the cases that involved crossriding—especially when they understood how valuable and useful the RIDE their child would be getting for free really was. Most tended to regard it as an investment for the future, like saving up for college. And Lilli and Guin would go to visit any parents who refused and, with cuteness and charisma, could usually talk them around. There were only one or two kids who, sadly, had to have their RIDEs put in storage until they were 18 and able to make their own decisions, but even they weren't too upset about it.

"So, what do you think about them all?" Lillibet asked. "Your professional opinion?"

"Hmm." Rhianna considered the four RIDEs. "Well, if you'd been wanting to fix them up for resale...you've got some interesting picks. The LNX and the RCN are older units but solid ones. If they didn't take too much work, you'd make a fair profit. Not big, but not high-risk either. Those types are always in demand."

She glanced over at the condor. "That one, you've got the element of risk. Sometimes it can be hard to tell whether you can make good on something that beat up. I've seen ones not quite so bad off that I recommended pulling the RI and getting a new DE on. But that's not considering the value of the experience you'll get out of this."

Lillibet nodded. "And the 'gryph?"

"Well, that one's a little trickier," Rhianna admitted. "They've got a bit of a reputation for being...hmm...unstable sometimes. The first RI cores for fantasy types weren't quite as intelligent either. It drives the demand down."

"Yeah, I knew when I bought him I was probably paying too much," Lilli admitted. "But he looked lonely, and Hugh took a liking to him." She nodded to the boy standing against the wall behind him. "I told him he'd probably be trouble, but..." She shrugged. "He'll be a challenge," she concluded. "It's no fun if they're all *easy*."

:It's a wonder how they kept the wings off the riders after Fuse,: Kaylee added. Days of memory defragmenting were bringing some interesting facts about the RIDE testing program to the surface and how she'd been constructed. Her rider kept very detailed notes and scrutinized them in close detail every night before bed. As yet they weren't up to Anny's first appearance, but the RI thought those memories were just around the corner. There was just so much to learn that had immediate application to her livelihood, and a lot of very odd engineering design choices to puzzle over and quite possibly fix.

"A challenge, yeah, that's one word for it." Rhianna chuckled. "Still, I'll look forward to seeing how you do with him, and I'll be around if you have any questions." She grinned at the boys and girls waiting to get to know their new RIDEs. "And best of luck to you all, too. I hope you and your new friends are very happy together."

The other kids nodded shyly, and Rhianna turned her attention back to Lillibet. It was really weird, but the more she saw of the girl, the more she liked her. She'd started out a bit spoiled, but since Guin had been untethered and able to take a hand in straightening her out, and she'd been able to spend time among more-grounded kids

her own age, the girl had shown a remarkably even temper and a degree of sensitivity she'd not expected from a "spoiled rich kid."

Lillibet's father was more than pleased. Kenyon Walton knew his wife had spoiled their daughter utterly and hadn't known what he could do about it without antagonizing her. That Lillibet had taken up her "hobby" on her own had given him the backing he needed to make it stick. She worked for every *mu* of her allowance now, and worked hard. (And if her "salary" was still about ten times higher than the ridiculous amount Zane had forced on them for making his DIN, well, it was the *principle* of the thing that mattered wasn't it?)

That being said, she didn't seem to care too much about the money, but neither did she go around giving it away to everyone in sight. She used it when she needed it, but mostly left it alone. And she'd never tried to bury Rhianna under an avalanche of it, either, Rhianna reflected grimly.

Was Guinny what made the difference? She wondered. Zane didn't have that little voice to nudge him in the right direction since Terry was part of him now—and Terry had only come after he'd already grown up, anyway. It was at least an interesting theory.

Whatever the reason, Lilli was getting on very well at the Garage. She was popular among the younger apprentices, especially Paul, and a bit of a mascot to the older ones. She'd fully reconciled with Uncia, and could often be found in moments of downtime snuggled up with Uncia on one side and Guinevere on the other.

And she had a pretty good touch with RIDEs for someone so young. Rhianna sometimes wondered where she would be now if she'd gotten involved with them at that age. (Well, 'he' then.) Of course, she...*he*...wouldn't have met Kaylee then...

Sensing the introspective turn of her friend's thoughts, the lynx RIDE nuzzled Rhianna's palm, purring. "Centi-*mu* for your thoughts?"

"Just reflecting on the importance of being in the right place at the right time," Rhianna said, stroking the lynx mecha's head. "And Lillibet. Did you have any other thoughts on her RIDEs? Maybe know any of them?"

"You're thinkin' 'bout the LNX?" Kaylee asked. "No. You know I mainly worked with one other partner RIDE back in the MRS. Least I think I did. He seems to be mostly in the memories I didn't get. *That* one must've been inducted into the Service after I ended up shut in the parts shed. Maybe she even has some of my old parts in her now."

"Worth checking out," Rhianna agreed. "For the nostalgia if nothing else. You've got much better gear now."

The RIDE revved her new sport-lifters. "You got *that* right, partner. In fact, she could use my old ones—well, new-old ones, know what I mean? I think hers were shot the way I read the prelim diagnostics."

"Want me to wake her up first?" Lillibet asked. "Her name is...Katie. Wow! Check out her service record, Kaylee."

The lynx reviewed her close descendant's record. Inducted March 6, 125 AL, a year after Kaylee was shut down and forgotten. Twenty full years of service, assigned to three different riders over that span, in numerous shootouts, a few operations in the Dry Ocean, and more. Sold to a female Burnside prospector who'd owned her for the past eleven years. During that time she'd been heavily used day-in and day-out, accounting for most of her current state of disrepair. In the end, the prospector had been killed in a

mining accident while un-Fused, so Katie was sold in an estate sale. A full rebuild would easily give her another thirty years of life.

Her new rider was a seventeen year old girl named Relena Packard, a neighborhood kid who had sometimes spent her summers hanging around the Garage, in-person or virtually via the public feed. While she didn't have any interest in becoming a RIDE mechanic herself, she still liked seeing how they were put together, and had more of an engineering/design interest. She'd known who Lillibet was from the start, and was frightened of her. But it took a surprisingly short time for Relena to warm to Lilli. It was no surprise Relena had been interested in a LNX unit, as she had long been good friends with Kaylee and well-acquainted with the RIDE's specifications.

Now Relena stepped up, biting her lip. "Can I talk to her soon?" she asked. "I... hope we can get along together."

Lillibet attached some cables to various sockets on the lynx's head. She sounded very professional going over the checklist. "Running pre-boot diagnostics. Her core's a hundred percent solid, no qubit or neural map decay. Substrate's just fine, no quantum fractures or systemic superposition collapse. Just normal wear and tear for her age."

"And her sarium batteries took a charge and are holding at 94% strength," Guinevere reported. "Apparently had them reconditioned just two years ago, so there's a piece of luck."

"Makes sense, though," Kaylee said. "You're a miner in the deep desert, you can let most stuff go, but run out of power and you fry."

"Her lifters *are* shot. The cavorite's completely decayed," Lilli confirmed. "So are half her internal enviro-seal emitters. I think she caught some major q-dust contamination just before her last rider uh...passed." Lilli paused uncomfortably. "But we have replacements." She smiled at Kaylee. "And...wow. I think these actually *were* your lifters. Check the serial numbers."

"Wow. Wow! That's amazing," Rhianna said. "I never really thought, as many RIDEs as there were, that we'd find one who actually *would* have some of your parts." She chuckled. "And just think...after we replace them, she'll *still* have your lifters."

"Fine with me. It looks like she used the first ones well," Kaylee said, sounding a little choked up. "And they did last over thirty years."

"I think we can bring her up," Lilli said. "I wouldn't recommend a Fuse just yet, not 'til we've flushed and refilled the Fuser nanny tank and fixed her joints, but you can at least get to know each other." She glanced over at the other kids. "Gina, I'll probably bring the 'coon up after that. But Hugh, Carl, your two are going to need some special attention, so don't expect to meet them today. You can still hang around and watch us if you want, but don't be disappointed if we don't get to them. If you do want to go home and watch the feed, I'll call you before we do any work on them." The other girl and two boys nodded their understanding. "Now, let's meet Katie kitty."

Kaylee padded over to stand in front of the shut down RIDE, sitting on her haunches next to Relena. "Okay, Lilli, boot her up."

Lilli pulled out a battered pair of interface specs and put them on. They were one of Rochelle's old cast-offs. She could have afforded new and fancy ones, but she had said she wanted ones that "already knew what they were doing." She'd been teaching herself to use them pretty well, and now she used them to log into Katie's control panel and tap the power-up icon. "Rise and shine, kitty cat!"

The first sound out of the rebooted RIDE was a deep, sorrowful sigh. Her

hardlight skin came on in patches, including only half her face. Katie looked between Relena and Kaylee, back and forth. “I’ve got q-dust in my serrrvos,” she said, trying to move. Her voice was a lot like Kaylee’s, though a little higher, with a purring undertone. “Where am I?”

“You’re at Rhianna and Rochelle’s Cross—I mean, Freeriders Garage,” Lilli said, taking off the specs. “We bought you at auction to fix you up. This is Relena. She’s going to be your new...” Lilli considered choices of word. “...friend, if you’ll let her.”

Relena knelt down in front of Katie, putting her face to face with the damaged lynx mecha. “Hi,” she said shyly. “I’m...sorry about what happened to your last partner.”

The joints in Katie’s neck made little grinding sounds as she tilted her head. “I told Nance to be carrreful. I told her that ledge was gonna give way. But she didn’t listen. She *never* listened to me. About anything.” She sighed. “Didn’t like her very much, but I’ll miss her.” She fixed her gaze on Relena. “So I belong to you now?”

“On paper, anyway,” Lilli said. “This is Uplift. We don’t much like that ‘belonging’ thing around here.” She blushed slightly. “Not anymore, anyway.”

The lynx’s eyes widened, the robotic one turning brighter. “Uplift? I rrreally *have* died and gone to heaven.” She looked at Relena speculatively. “Guess I’ll give you a chance, then.”

“Thank you,” Relena said. “I’ll try to be worthy of that.”

“Hmph,” Katie said. “Shouldn’t be a question of *you* being worthy of *me*. Young thing like you deserves someone shiny and new, not a crusty old reprrrrobate like me. You should just wipe me and start over.”

“I’d never!” Relena insisted, wide-eyed. “I’d just as soon wipe my own grandmother. You’ve got a lifetime of valuable experience, and Mom always said *I* don’t have enough sense to come in out of the rain—and around here they *schedule* the rain a year in advance. If you take care of me, I’ll do my best to take care of you.” She put her arms around Katie’s neck and gave the half-metal lynx a hug. Katie looked uncertain for a moment, then gave Relena’s cheek a lick with a hardlight tongue that was only about half there.

Rhianna grinned and rubbed some errant moisture out of an eye. *Must have gotten some dust in it. Yeah, that’s it.*

Kaylee chuckled. “Yeah, I think they’re gonna be all right,” she murmured.

Katie turned her eyes and looked at her predecessor. They had that look on their faces that indicated they were in the sideband, but started speaking aloud again quickly. Katie was completely awestruck. “Well, double-ought one, I have something of yours. They’re a little worn out, though.”

“They did the job they were supposed to, Katie,” Kaylee said, putting a forepaw up on the maintenance cradle, licking an immobile bare-metal forepaw. She looked like a mother tending a sick child. “You’re getting my hand-me-downs again, I’m afraid. But they’re good, solid units. They’ll double your cruise speed.”

“It’ll be an honor,” Katie replied, nodding her head as much as it could move. “Again. You know...you were a legend around the MRS Garage. Among us RIDEs, I mean. A few parts here, a few parts there. Saved many of us from being scrapped ourselves. Funny thing, they never told our rrriders where they got the parts. But we knew. We never directly talked about you or Anny at all. It’s like you were a ghost in the shed. How much sense does *that* make? Us believing in ghosts?”

Kaylee blinked, touched by the gratitude in the newer lynx’s voice. “Can you

share what you have with me, Katie? I'm really curious what happened around the MRS after I was shut down."

The duo paused, the broken-down RIDE's bare eye flickering with laser light.

"Thanks, double-ought two. We'll have you back in fighting shape in no time," Kaylee said, head-bumping her "daughter".

"Seeing you like this, I'm surrrre of that!" the newer LNX said excitedly. As Lillibet started her restoration work on the raccoon, the lynx settled in. She turned her attention back to Relena. "Now, tell me about yourrrself, young lady. I'm not going anywhere forrrr a while."

The inside of the Starmaster was as spacious as the exterior implied. There was plenty of room left over even after filling most of it with immense cargo bays, so the ship had an executive lounge/meeting room on the upper deck, with a conference table that retracted into the floor when not in use, and transparent aluminum windows all along the sides and top for perfect panoramic views. The cushy meeting chairs doubled as acceleration couches.

Myla ducked into the flight deck to chat with the crew for a moment, then came back into the lounge. Her tail and ears were twitching nervously. "I know I shouldn't be, but this makes me nervous," Myla admitted. "I haven't been able to vet the crew or anyone around you, so I'm having to take things on faith. I was favorably impressed by your Carrie-Anne when I spoke to her in virtual, and you seem to have survived this long, so it's probably not a problem. But I'm going to be spending a lot of time digging into files and interviewing when I get to your platform."

"Interviewing?" Zane asked.

"Once you go public, one bodyguard isn't going to be enough," Myla said. "You're going to need a whole squad. Fortunately, you've got plenty of security on-site to pick from. I might even know some of them. Carrie-Anne says you hired a lot of ex-Nextus military." She smiled wryly. "She said that if I hadn't been so anxious to take the first offer anyone made me, they might have hired *Sophie and me* after we got back from Towers."

"Well, however you ended up here, at least you're here now," Zane said philosophically.

"And we're glad to have you," Quinoa said.

The seatbelt warning light went on above the conference room door. "Well, that's it," Zane said. "Let's strap in and get ready to lift." He buckled the conference chair's harness into place, and the others followed suit. Then they were pushed back in their chairs as the suborbital's industrial-strength lifters fired.

The flight was fairly short as flights went. Zane busied himself by going over his agenda for the meeting. Quinoa stared off into nowhere, apparently watching something on an internal display. Myla stared out through the viewports as Zharus receded.

As they reached the zenith of their arc, and gravity receded, Zane grinned. "Ladies and...ladies, your attention please. If I might direct your attention to the viewports, the show is about to begin."

Sophie's ears perked up. "Show? What do you—ooooh!" Through the viewport, the starscape began to slide to one side, as the suborbital slowly began to rotate to starboard.

Quinoa unfastened her straps and pushed off from her chair, floating up next to

the huge viewport in the ceiling. “You know, it’s funny,” she reflected aloud. “I’d swear this size of bird was supposed to have artificial gravity.”

“Shhhh!” Zane hissed theatrically, and Quinoa giggled. Myla just shook her head in amusement.

Zane joined Quinoa at the upper viewport, while Myla and Sophie de-Fused and drifted to separate side windows to peer out as the planet rotated into view, spread out beneath them. The circular shape of Gondwana took up most of it, reaching all the way to the horizon to the west but with a lot more ocean visible to the east. The fertile ring of green around the coast made a marked contrast to the muted yellows and tans of the arid interior.

Zane drifted over to the window next to Myla. “See, there’s Uplift, where we left. Over there south of it is Nextus.” He pointed.

“They’re so tiny you can barely even see them from here,” Sophie said.

“Yeah,” Zane agreed.

“So where’s your platform again?” Quinoa asked.

“Around in that area. You can’t see it from here, of course.” He pointed. “It’s not far from the southern end of that subduction trench near the Western Wall, a few thousand clicks inward from the Aloha spillway. Same trench but opposite end of the continent as the Towers.” He briefly projected a hardlight map display in the air, with markers at the relevant spots. “The platform’s built onto a small peak off east of where it begins to slope down. We drill into a huge vein underneath that Dad found, and send mobile mining platforms out with RIDES to operate them for the smaller offshoots in the area.”

The sub continued rotating, and the stars began to come back into view again as it angled back to upright for the descent. The seatbelt light lit again. “Okay, everyone, show’s over. Back to your seats. We’ll be landing in twenty minutes.” Zane pulled himself back into his chair and strapped in. The others did the same after a moment, Sophie Fusing back onto Myla for the ride in.

Myla rolled back Sophie’s helmet for a moment to grin at Zane. “Thanks for that. I’ve been in subs before, but never ones where the view was so good.”

“You just have to know how to talk to the pilot is all,” Zane said, grinning back. “Enjoy the rest of the flight. Everything changes after we land.”

“And isn’t *that* a pleasant thought?” Quinoa muttered.

Every Apprentice had their own personal project. Lillibet’s was more expensive than the others, but Rhianna did her best not to give the girl preferential treatment, or even the *appearance* of doing so. As the raccoon RIDE’s boot-up was proving more complex than Katie’s, she decided to check on the others to see how they were doing.

The other two who already owned RIDES were busy upgrading them, simple enough. Paul, the teenager who was the object of Lillibet’s affections and didn’t own a RIDE, had taken to finishing up the towskim as his project. Though it had taken everyone to change the Deuce’s structure, one person could easily get most everything else installed and tested.

Rhianna checked project status via her cortical implant. The implant was actually from Old Earth, where they were pretty standard for almost everyone. Cybernetic enhancements were cheap and easy enough for any storefront clinic to install. She had upgraded hers for Passive fuse with Kaylee years ago. As a result she didn’t need

interface specs like Rochelle did and could control most computers almost as easily as Kaylee. *Let's see...Damn. He skipped a step on the port nacelle thruster.*

The Deuce had a simple square-tube design with stubby delta wings and forward canards. Hardlight did most of the aerodynamic work as was the usual on Zharus, so the shape of the fuselage was more driven by other requirements. The modifications had moved the thrusters and some of the lifters out to two new wing nacelles while the center fuselage now had room for a yet-to-be-installed tow crane. Young Paul Anders had shut the port nacelle ten minutes ago and started on the starboard—apparently without inspecting the port nacelle's favorite capacitor cyler. Rhianna's implants told her there was a physical break in one of the wires leading into it that he should have seen if he'd looked.

Rhianna climbed up on the wing. The young man looked up, eyes roving over her breasts as he did. "Uh, hey teach. I finished the—"

"You missed something in the other nacelle," Rhianna said. She remembered being a young man, and could hardly fault him for staring. "Just what, I'm not going to say, but if you find it and fix it you won't get counted off."

He swallowed. "Well, crap on a stick. I'll go have a look, Rhi. Thanks for giving me another chance." He looked at the open bay where his almost-girlfriend was hard at work trying to get the RCN back up. "What's the holdup with the raccoon there?"

"She's just a worn out unit. They worked that one hard. Logs say they didn't shut her down properly on the last use—just let her batteries run dry." Rhianna clenched her fists. "You don't treat people like that. Starved her RI core. We're lucky the substrate didn't collapse and blank out all her qubits."

"It's like...how you don't give someone who's been starving a burger right away, right?" Paul said. "Screws them up."

"Exactly! We have to raise power levels slowly or the substrate might fracture." Rhianna checked her status link on Lillibet's work. "But she's got a knack for this. The RI will be fine."

"Doesn't she?" Paul said, almost glowing. The way he was mooning over Lilli was a little embarrassing to watch.

I hope I was never that obvious about it, Rhianna thought. The lynx-tailed woman had decided not to influence their growing relationship directly, so didn't comment. It just felt very, very strange remembering being a young man swooning over a pretty girl, when her mind and body insisted differently now. "It looks like she's almost ready. I'll be in Bay Six with her."

The RCN unit's prospective rider was one Gina Martinez, a fifteen year old girl and an Uplift native with a direct link to the polis's accidental founder, Dr. Roberto Martinez. The man had had the typical huge Zharusian family, with fifteen children over his century-long marriage. Her family was solidly middle class, but considered a RIDE an unnecessary extravagance. When Lillibet had offered this one, they'd hesitated on signing the consent form for days, claiming they couldn't afford the upkeep or excise taxes. Nobody knew what the young woman had said to them, but their opinion changed.

"She's ready for boot," Lillibet reported, nodding at Gina. "Let's meet our new friend."

The suborbital made its final approach to the platform on full burners, thrust

vectored downward to kill the last of its re-entry velocity. By the time it was level with the huge suborbital landing platform halfway up the side, it was all but drifting under its pilot's expert hand. Finally it hovered carefully into place and touched down on carefully-placed landing gear with barely a jolt.

Within moments, RIDE-clad workers and other heavy machinery were trundling out of bay doors along the platform's side, attaching charge cables and gathering under bay doors to receive off-loaded cargo.

Zane glanced to Quinoa. "They're not terribly used to Integrates around here yet, so maybe you'd better keep a low profile for the time being. We don't want to cause a commotion...at least not until I start one at the meeting."

"Good thought, though I'll probably still unmask for the meeting," Quinoa said, vanishing into a patch of nothingness as they boarded the elevator down to the landing pad.

"I remember when I came back here just after I met Terry," Zane said. "Though that time we used the flier platform up there." He pointed to a smaller pad higher up the peak. "We took a secret passage and popped out in the conference room to surprise the rest of the board."

"I take it the passage *has* been secured since then?" Myla asked.

"Well, yeah," Zane admitted. "We could still use it, but Carrie-Anne would know all about it."

"Good," Myla said. "Secret passages seem a little amateur-theatrical, not to mention a big security risk."

"It was certainly a security risk for my *old* board," Zane admitted.

"Whatever happened to them, anyway?" Myla asked. "I haven't kept up with the newsfeeds in all that's happened over the last little while."

"They were sentenced a couple of weeks ago to ten to twenty for embezzlement," Zane said. "The DA let them plead away the attempted murder charges." Zane shrugged. "About the best outcome I could get under the circumstances. There were some public opinion issues with the way I bodyjacked them out, though by Nextus law I *technically* didn't do anything illegal since they did have warrants out on them. Good thing I got those sworn out first. In the end, I basically sort of 'amateur bounty-hunted' them."

Myla nodded. "Guess that's a lucky break, then?"

"Yeah. Though I might have to be on my guard in a few years if they get good behavior." He grinned at Myla. "Or maybe *you* might have to be on my guard for me."

"Gee, thanks," Myla said dryly.

They entered the platform through an airlock, and Sophie de-Fused from Myla in the air-conditioned safety of the interior. Waiting just inside the door were Carrie-Anne, a melanistic jaguar Fuser, accompanied by two uniformed security guards. "Hello, Zane. Good to see you," Carrie-Anne said. "And Myla, Sophie, glad to meet you at last in the flesh." She reached out to shake Myla's hand. "And Quinoa Steader, yet," she said, glancing at a spot of empty air.

"Hey!" Quinoa's voice said. "How did you spot me? I'm invisible." The security guards started at the voice, half-reaching for their guns, but they stopped when nobody else seemed to be reacting to it.

Carrie-Anne just grinned a toothy feline grin. "Jaguars are good at spots."

"Oh, ha ha," Quinoa sulked.

:*So, it's true, then?*: Carrie-Anne asked Zane. :*You've Integrated? You don't look*

any different—even to my sensors.:

:I'll show you once we're in more private quarters,: Zane promised.

:I'll look forward to it,: Carrie-Anne sent. There was something behind her speech...a sort of strange undertone, almost hopeful, almost fearful. Zane wanted to ask her about it, but then thought he should probably save that for the private quarters too.

"Come to my office?" Carrie-Anne invited. "We still have a few hours before the meeting."

"Sounds like a plan," Zane said. "Lead the way."

The office wasn't too far away—just down the hall to an elevator, and up several levels to the executive decks. The security guards peeled off to station themselves outside the doors of the roomy office as the others filed inside. The office was about twenty meters on a side, with a desk positioned on a raised platform along one wall with good visibility of the windows beyond. Comfortable furniture and potted jungle plants were scattered throughout the room, though not in such a way as to obscure visibility of any part of it from the desk.

A bank of hardlight security camera display panels hovered in the air above the desk, until Carrie-Anne waved an arm and dismissed them. They were mostly for show, anyway, Zane knew—Carrie-Anne and, supposedly, Audrey were constantly monitoring them in the virtual space inside their head wherever they were. Rather than sitting behind the desk, Carrie-Anne took a seat on one of a pair of facing sofas and gestured the others to do the same. Sophie arranged herself on a conveniently-placed RIDE mattress near Myla.

Carrie-Anne smiled at a patch of empty air, and Quinoa faded back into visibility within it, still looking sulky and muttering something about mechie. Then she blinked, rubbed her eyes, and stared at Carrie-Anne. "You're...that's..." She trailed off.

Zane glanced at her. "What?"

Quinoa shook her head. "Later," she said.

Zane shrugged. "All right. So, what's the situation?"

"Everything normal so far," Carrie-Anne said. "The others aren't here yet. Merle and Frisco Tillman are still checking on the new vein we found on the west side of the trench. They think it's a double-A play easily, possibly even triple-A minus. They'll be back in time for the meeting. Tex and Saul Fusco are still at the Nextus distro center and will be arriving in their own personal sub in a couple of hours."

"That leaves us time to get some work in," Myla said. "Carrie-Anne, we talked some about this in virtual. I'd like to review the files on your best security agents with a view toward recruiting some of them into a bodyguard team. Preferably ones who've already worked well with each other."

"And with you?" Carrie-Anne asked.

Myla blinked. "With me? You've really got some people who I'd know out here? You said you hired ex-Nextus, but I hadn't really dared to hope..."

Carrie-Anne glanced to Sophie, and the fennec RIDE perked up her ears. "Oooh! Myla, they do! She just shot me the files, and you'll never *believe* who they've got!" She bounced up and down excitedly, lifters whining.

"Why don't you take my desk to review them? I'll give you full access to all but my private systems." She waved a hand at her desk and the screens reappeared, this time set to Myla's preferred configuration. "Comm me if you have any questions."

Myla grinned. "I'll do that. Come on, Soph."

“Aww, I just got comfortable!” Sophie protested. But she followed Myla over to the desk.

As she left, Carrie-Anne turned back to Zane and grinned at him. “Now. Show me.”

“All right...” Zane said. His disguise vanished, leaving a much shorter tiger with gleaming hardlight lenses embedded into his fur and a larger lens-shaped comm device on his left wrist.

Carrie-Anne caught her breath and her eyes widened. She gazed excitedly at him. “So it really is true,” she breathed. An odd shiver went through her body, and she stared at Zane with an almost hungry look. “How...how did it happen? I *need* to know.”

Quinoa bit her lip, looking between the two of them. She opened her mouth to speak, then shut it again. Instead, she sent to Zane, *:Be...careful what you do here.:*

Zane blinked. *:What? Why?:* he sent back.

:I...I can't say,: Quinoa said. Then aloud. “Um...excuse me. I’m just...going to go help Myla.” She got up and drifted through the air across to the desk. Myla looked up at her and blinked, then shrugged and went back to staring at screens.

Zane shook his head. *What was that all about?* He wondered. Then shrugged. “Well, I can download you the memories if you really want to know. I already gave them to Sophie and Myla.”

She nodded emphatically. “Yes...yes, *please*.”

“All right.” Zane reached out and took Carrie-Anne’s hand. His DIN flashed as he sent the memories across. He wasn’t quite prepared for what happened next.

“Say hello to Jinkies, everyone,” Lillibet said, taking off the old specs again.

“Mmmy optics! Where are my optics?” the reactivated RI exclaimed in a crisp, precise voice, paw-hands waving around in front of her.

“Hold tight, Miss Raccoonie. I’m still running diagnostics,” Lillibet said. “The farked-up shutdown messed up a lot of systems, I’m finding alternate routes...”

“This sucks! *Sucks!*” Jinkies grumbled. Her eyes flickered on, a pair of blue slits on her pointed metal head, and her hardlight followed. She looked rather more like a cartoon animal than other RIDEs, having a bargain-basement hardlight skin—it was on Lilli’s upgrade list. “Oh, that’s much better! Thank you. Those idiots in Aerodrome Maintenance damn near killed me from neglect. Uh, who are you?” She turned her head to look at Lillibet. “Oh, my stars, I’ve been sold. But you’re...Wait, I know you! Well, I know *of* you. Seen you on all the celeb vids. Lillibet Walton. What am I doing in a maint cradle in front of *Lillibet Walton?*”

“Being mainted, silly!” Lilli said, grinning. “Er...maintenanced? Maintained.”

“Maintained is just fine,” Rhianna said. “Welcome back, Jinkies. You’re among friends and we’re going to put you back on the road—fetter-free, and hopefully in a home where you’ll be happy. Meet Gina Martinez.” She nodded for the girl to come forward.

“Hello, Jinkies. I’m Gina. Pleased to make your acquaintance.” The dark-haired girl extended her hand amiably.

“Charmed, I’m sure,” the raccoon RIDE replied, taking it with a firm shake. “You know we—” she broke off as her gaze darted around the room. “Hey! These are DR-20 maintenance cradles! Really top-end stuff!” More looking around. “Pretty lights! But it’s soooo dirty in here!”

“You get a lot of dirt around places like this,” Lillibet said. The Garage had one bay that could act as a cleanroom environment if necessary, but it was rarely used. The other girl’s RIDE, the dust-contaminated Katie, would need to spend time in there to clean all her joints.

“Don’t like dirt,” Jinkies said. She looked at the girl in front of her. “*You* don’t like dirt either?”

“I *tolerate* dirt,” Gina said, sounding more like a thirty-year-old. “Dirt is necessary sometimes. It improves the immune system for starters. What I object to is *too much* dirt.”

“Well, what kind of dirt are we talking about here?” Jinkies asked in the same precise tone. “‘Dirt’ and ‘dust’ are imprecise descriptions of a very complex...”

Rhianna turned away to allow the two to get to know one another. Gina had a scientific frame of mind, much like her great-great-grandfather. Her now-assured partner needed a lot more work, though. Her batteries were as shot as Katie’s lifters had been, never having been flushed or replaced for the raccoon’s service history. It was otherwise a matter of replacing normal wear and tear and upgrading her to “real” fur. Jinkies would be going home with Gina in a couple days at the most.

The last two of Lillibet’s project RIDEs sat in their cradles, waiting for the young apprentice mechanic’s attention.

As he copied the memories over for Carrie-Anne to view, Zane experienced an odd moment of...backwash, he guessed. Or reciprocity. He wasn’t sure if it was intentional or not, but Carrie-Anne was sharing her—and *Audrey’s*—last few months with him, too.

After the old board had been captured, and Audrey had given herself to Carrie-Anne, she’d actually gotten over her feelings of guilt very quickly and arrived at a good working relationship with the RIDE. And after she’d discovered that the RIDE’s facilities for working virtually put the best interface she’d been able to use with her desk and implants to shame, she set up a “virtual office” in the RIDE’s cyberspace where she could get all her work done in peace, ceding control of the outer body and conversations over to Carrie-Anne.

Audrey would make and take calls, write reports and evaluations, and do all the other myriad little things she never had time to do without getting interrupted, and Carrie-Anne would act as her “secretary” in the real world, taking care of business for her and only consulting her on things that were too important to decide for herself.

With this arrangement in place, Audrey actually was able to do her work much more quickly than she ever had before. And she ended up with more free time. But after experimenting a bit, she discovered she was really rather disinclined to return to the real world. She didn’t really have anything to *do* in the real world. Her husband was long since dead, and her daughter was more or less estranged from her with a family of her own. Carrie-Anne could really get a lot more use out of her body in Fuser than she could outside of it. So she retreated to her inner world and read, viewed movies, played games, and otherwise occupied herself.

Perhaps it wasn’t surprising that she eventually began to fantasize, imagining herself as a software program instead of a disembodied human—a subroutine that Carrie-Anne could feed data for analysis, and that would have no choice but to process and reply. What would it be like to *be* such a program? She wondered—and

daydreamed.

It all started innocently enough. Carrie-Anne was fully aware of the fantasies, and touched and a little flattered. And she wanted nothing more than to make her partner happy. So she built a data structure for Audrey in their shared cyberspace—an adjunct to her personality core, with limited input and output channels and a command structure, that would simulate for Audrey what being such a program would actually be like.

When she proposed her idea to a visibly flushed and excited Audrey, the woman immediately accepted. And so Carrie-Anne sealed her into the structure (with an appropriate “safeword” command for immediate release) and began slowly feeding her sensory data for analysis, taking her thoughts and impressions through the output channel as the “subroutine’s response.” Audrey gamely began “processing” for Carrie-Anne—and loving every minute of it.

Carrie-Anne expected Audrey to grow bored with the game after a while, but to her surprise she didn’t—in fact, she got better at it. Carrie-Anne slowly had to widen the data channels, then remove all restrictions on them altogether as Audrey was able to feed responses as fast as the data came in. And they were *useful* responses, giving Carrie-Anne the benefit of the same instinctive analytical abilities that had made Audrey so good at placing new hires throughout her career. As Audrey spent all her time this way, Carrie-Anne found herself taking over her partner’s work entirely—but since she could perform it at lightning computer speed, including simulating a flawless Audrey avatar as she needed it, it wasn’t a burden.

Carrie-Anne frequently worried about her partner, asking if she was *sure* she wanted to spend all of her time doing this. But every time she brought up the idea of stopping, it so terrified Audrey that she simply stopped bringing it up. She knew that a psychologist might have felt it was imperative to break the woman out of her addiction to this fantasy world—but on the other hand, she knew every thought and feeling her partner had and understood that this was not simply some passing fancy or obsession on Audrey’s part. It was what she genuinely wanted to do with her life. Her family was gone, she had nothing else in the real world—but her existence in the virtual world felt so *good*, every second of every minute she was helping her partner, she didn’t want to give that up.

So Carrie-Anne effectively shrugged and let it continue. Besides, the analysis and feedback was so helpful and useful in doing their jobs that she was every bit as dependent on getting the analysis now in her own way as Audrey was in giving it.

But in a small part of Audrey’s mind that she didn’t share with Carrie-Anne, Carrie-Anne’s suggestions that they stop had caused her to worry. Since she only had access to the inputs Carrie-Anne was giving her, not her partner’s whole mind, she didn’t know but what Carrie might change her mind one day and stop, and that must not be allowed to happen. And there *was* a way to make it impossible...and as it happened, to cut out the last few millisecond delays in input processing altogether.

So one day, when Carrie-Anne was occupied with other things, Audrey extruded the tiniest portion of herself across the ever-thinning border that separated her from Carrie-Anne’s personality core. In her own mind, she imagined herself gently inserting her feet into a sleeping jaguar’s mouth and letting it slurp them in. As she’d expected, her connection to Carrie-Anne became that much faster—at least for the parts of her that were directly in touch. So after waiting long enough that she could be sure Carrie-

Anne hadn't noticed, she poked a little more of herself over the border...into the jaguar's mouth up to her knees.

And Carrie-Anne still didn't notice. Audrey supposed their shared interface was a blind spot—so much data was moving across already that she didn't notice something else slipping across, too. It was lost in the flow, like a trickle of dye in a swiftly-flowing stream. Emboldened, Audrey slipped in deeper, up to her waist...her chest...her neck. She felt the reassuring warmth of her partner all around her, the data soaking into her skin and seeping out through her pores. She was processing for Carrie-Anne faster than she ever had before, and soon she'd be all the way in—part of her forevermore.

However, then Carrie-Anne finally noticed what had happened, and how much of herself her partner had merged into her. She nearly panicked—but when her panic fed into her partner, her partner fed it back out again as soothing calm, acceptance, desire... and the panic went away. But now that Carrie-Anne was aware of what had been happening, Audrey could slip within no further—but neither could she pull herself back out.

And here they were, stuck just on the threshold, neither sure quite where to go from there. Their shared process was now so fast that they were almost the same person...but not quite. And as much as Audrey wished to slip the rest of the way in, Carrie-Anne's awareness of her there was still blocking the path.

But then Zane's memories flooded through them. They watched him grow closer to Terry over time, and spend one last uncertain night on their own threshold of what they would become. And then, in one shining moment, they became it.

And in seeing it happen to Zane, Carrie-Anne and Audrey realized how to move forward from where they were. And, in perfect agreement, they did it. Zane's last impression of the two of them was of a human face within a jaguar's mouth, smiling beatifically out from behind the fangs. Then the jaguar's tongue came up, obscuring Audrey's face, the muscles rippled, and a lump moved down that furry throat.

And then, in the real world, Carrie-Anne began to shiver and shake...and melt.

Lillibet checked the chron display in her interface specs. "Still about half an hour 'til quitting time. That condor's gonna take a whole day by herself, and I really want her body to be in better shape before we boot her back up, but Hugh, how about we go ahead and bring up your friend here for long enough to see what he's like?"

Hugh grinned. "Hey, great!"

"He's really in great shape for being sold at auction for so little," Guinevere noted. "A little wear and tear, batteries not too great but not too bad either. RI core shows little degradation. Was there really that little demand for these?"

"His name is...Tocsin," Lillibet said. "He's named after poison?"

"No, it's spelled differently," Rhianna said. "With a 'c s', not an 'x'. It's an old word meaning 'alarm bell.'"

"He's a watch-hippogryph?" Hugh asked.

"Well, we could wake him up and ask him," Lillibet said. "Don't see any reason not to boot him up now. Stand back, he's coming 'round."

The hippogriff's optics lit up, and his metal beak opened and closed once or twice. He shook his wings, though there wasn't enough room in the cradle to let him flap them, then looked around. "Where am I?" he asked. His voice was a metallic rasp—it would probably sound more natural if Lilli had brought up his hardlight projectors and

other secondary systems, but she wanted to be sure his core worked properly before she did that.

“The Freeriders Garage in Uplift,” Lilli said. “We picked you up at auction, and we’re going to recondition you.”

The eagle-head swiveled to look at her. “To resell me for more money, no doubt.”

“No, actually we’ve got a partner for you.” Lilli nodded to Hugh. “Hugh Jenkins, Tocsin the hippogryph. I hope you two get along.”

“Oh.” Tocsin regarded Hugh for a moment, then shook his wings in a shrug.

“Well, I suppose that’s better than being sold again.”

Hugh considered Tocsin for a moment. “Are you this enthusiastic all the time?”

Lilli grinned at Hugh. “Don’t worry, he’ll come ‘round.”

Tocsin opened his beak again, then apparently thought better of whatever he’d been about to say. “I guess...I can try it.”

Lilli beamed. “That’s what I like to hear!”

But then there was the whine of a set of sport-lifters from down the street, and an alert popped up on Lilli’s specs. “Oops! There’s my ride!”

“There? But I’m right here,” Guinevere pointed out. Lilli bapped her lightly.

“Time to say good night, Tocsin. I’ll be back to work with you some more tomorrow.” Lilli brought the hippogriff back down to passive mode and clapped Hugh on the shoulder. “Looks like you’ve got yourself a good one, but I need to spend more time with him to make sure he doesn’t have any hidden gotchas before I let you have him, ‘kay?”

The boy nodded. “Works for me. Thanks.”

Shortly thereafter a hover-converted red 1967 Ford Falcon Futura coupe parked at the Garage.

The ancient car was a curiosity and no more. There were a lot of that sort of replica flying around—some of which, apparently like this one, had even been made by painstakingly disassembling an original and fabbing an exact duplicate of each part before adding modern propulsion. But the person who got out of the driver’s seat made the entire Garage stop work. Kenyon Walton himself had arrived to pick up his daughter from school.

Drawn by the commotion, Uncia peered out from the door to Rhianna and Rochelle’s private garage. Then her eyes widened and she dropped to a low crouch, starting to slink backward, whining a little. But as it happened, the movement caught Walton’s eye, and he turned to face her, then came toward her.

Rochelle came to the door, then crouched to put her hand on Uncia’s shoulder. “It’s all right, Un-hon,” she said. “I’m here.” Though she didn’t seem to be in much better shape herself. Her usual poise seemed to have left her—even her hair hung flat and limp at this moment.

But as Kenyon came up to them, he squatted down in a crouch himself to face Uncia from closer to her level. “Uncia, I need to apologize to you, first.”

Uncia’s whining choked to a stop, and she gazed up at the billionaire unbelievably.

“Lillibet told me all of what happened. Girl seemed to think it was all her fault, but it wasn’t. It was mine if it was anyone’s. If she couldn’t be bothered to read the manuals for her new toy, her father damn well should have made the time. If I had, I’d have known about those tethers, and I’d have...well, I don’t know if I can honestly say

I'd have released *all* of them, knowing only what I'd have known then, but I'd certainly have released enough of them that you'd have been a lot happier, and could have protected my Lilli when she went to that bar and..." And it was now his turn to choke up. "I let my wife spoil her, but after all that...all that almost costing her life. When I saw her take an interest in RIDEs as something other than a fancy toy, I finally put my foot down."

Uncia opened her mouth to reply, but for a change couldn't seem to find the right words.

Kenyon looked up at Rochelle and continued, "And I owe you an apology, too, for indirectly contributing to your involuntary crossride."

Rochelle waved it off. "That? That's nothing. I'm native Zharusian, it's hardly more trouble than changing clothes." She grinned. "Besides, if it hadn't happened, I'd never have met my best friend." She gave Uncia a quick hug around the neck.

Kenyon inclined his head, conceding the point. "I also owe you a debt of gratitude for saving my daughter from infection by the nanites Uncia had—by taking the bullet in her place."

"Well, I don't know that I can say that, really—it was my program that caused them to get screwed up in the first place," Rochelle said hesitantly.

"If they were vulnerable to one glitch, something else could have triggered them down the road anyway." He waved it aside. "No matter. They were one of the 'optional' extras she decided she didn't care about when I had her buy Guinevere herself." He turned his attention back to Uncia. "I know you've already forgiven Lillibet, and that was big of you. I hope you'll forgive me someday, too."

He stood, dusting himself off. Rochelle followed suit, and Uncia got to her feet, still tongue-tied. Kenyon smiled down at her, then shook his head. "I always prided myself on caring about the well-being of my lowliest employee...but I never thought of RIDEs that way. That's changed." He turned his attention back to Rochelle. "I've heard you folks have a thing or two against accepting gifts from rich people. And you seem to have acquired one particular million-*mu* item from me already." He chuckled. "So I'm going to limit myself to just one little thing I hope you both will accept." He reached into a pocket and offered a small data chip to Rochelle.

Rochelle took it and slid it into her wallet, and blinked. "A...lifetime property tax waiver on Uncia."

Kenyon shrugged. "It won't buy you anything you don't already have, but it's one fewer thing in your lives you need worry about. Please take it, for her sake."

Rochelle frowned for a moment, considering it. "If it were just something for me, or even a silly present for us, I'd hand it back. But it's an insult and an injustice to have to pay 'property tax' on a friend. And you picking this as your gift means *you* get that, too. So in that spirit...we accept, with gratitude."

Walton nodded, and offered Rochelle his hand. "Good luck, Miss Seaford. And Uncia."

"Th...thank you, sir."

He simply nodded to them, then turned toward the bay where his daughter awaited. He didn't say anything else, like "If you need a favor, just ask." That was understood by both of them without any need for either to express it.

As he walked away, Uncia finally found her voice. "Mr. Walton?" she said quietly. "I...forgive you."

He turned and smiled at her, eyes bright. "Thank you." Then he turned away and wiped discreetly at his eyes. "Are you and Guin ready to go, Lilli? I brought the Falcon."

His daughter's eyes brightened. She and her ocelot RIDE came out of the garage bay. "You got the hover conversion done on your own? Finally?"

"What can I say? You've inspired me. Of course it's not the real thing, just the replica. Your mother really *would* kill me if I turned a 550-year old car we shipped from Earth into a daily flier. It was hard enough to get her to let me have it taken apart for replication." He gestured for his daughter to come alongside him. Lillibet smiled and waved goodbye to everyone.

Only once the replica Futura lifted back into the air and headed for the Uplift Aerodrome did Rhianna finally come out of the almost-completed towskim, breathing a heavy sigh of relief.

Myla looked up from her displays as the convulsing jaguar caught her attention. "What in heaven's name—?" Then her eyes widened as she recognized the symptoms from that time in the Towers, then narrowed again as she turned her gaze on Zane. "You didn't! Tell me you didn't!"

Quinoa quickly put her hand on Myla's arm. "It's all right. He *didn't* force Integration on them."

Myla blinked and stared at Quinoa. "He didn't?"

"Trust me, I'd *know*." Quinoa smiled at her. "This is the natural way. Zane might have catalyzed it, by showing her the same memories he showed you, but it was just about ready to happen anyway. I saw it clearly a few minutes ago, but I didn't want to say anything, because...well, I didn't want to interfere. I've always been taught it's best to let nature take its course in these matters."

Sophie looked askance at the rapidly-diminishing Carrie-Anne, then back at Quinoa. "He's not...*contagious* or something, right?"

Quinoa chuckled. "No. No, he's not. Those two spent their last few months growing together just like Zane and Terry did. It's just our good luck to be here for the birthing pangs. Let's go down and welcome her into this world." She offered Myla her hand, and her former bodyguard took it. Together they went down to where a befuddled-looking naked melanistic jaguar-woman Zane's size was sitting in a pile of silvery-black goo. She had no obvious hardlight lenses, but the darker fur of her rosettes seemed to have an odd fiber-optic shininess to it when looked at from the right angle. And there was something odd about her navel—it had a familiar-looking interface socket in it. There also seemed to be a power plug at the tip of her tail—the usual spot for RIDEs, but not as common for Integrates.

The woman looked up. "What just happened to us...to me?"

"Welcome to your life," Quinoa said. "There's no turning back."

"You've just joined a very exclusive club, I'm afraid," Zane said, offering her a hand up. "As a new Integrate, I guess we should call you Carrie-Anne-Audrey. Do you have a shower around here? You're going to need a bit of a wash."

Carrie-Anne cocked her head, then looked down at herself. "Just...Carrie-Anne I think. If you can be just Zane. She's..." She smiled faintly. "She's gotten what she's always wanted. She's one of my subprograms now, and couldn't be happier that way. I... don't think I can let you speak to her. She's...sealed off from that. But—"

"As long as she's okay in there, that's good enough for me," Zane said.

Quinoa shook her head. “Wow, you really dodged a bullet. It’s not uncommon for Integrates to end up stuck in their Walker shape when the RI is the dominant partner.”

“I wasn’t dominant,” Carrie-Anne said, a touch sadly. “She was just...recessive.” She glanced back at the desk—then frowned. “I’m...off-line. I cannot connect to the network at all.”

“Um...yes, I’m sorry about that,” Quinoa said. “I’m afraid you are. Until you can get a DIN made, like this.” She held up the necklace on her neck. “Or that.” She tapped the lens on Zane’s wrist. “They’re our interfaces to the network. And you can’t just use one of ours because they’re all different. Personalized to the owner.”

“*Damn* I wish I hadn’t pissed Rhi and Shelley off,” Zane sighed. “If I hadn’t, they’d probably be here right now and could make you one from the facilities downstairs. But you’re going to have to go either to her place in Uplift or to an Enclave to get one done.” He glanced at Quinoa. “Is there one near here?”

Quinoa bit her lip. “There are, but...with you about to go public and all, I don’t think it’s fair to draw fire onto any of them for helping you.”

“But that’s—” Zane began, then deflated as he thought about it. “—an entirely fair point. Damn. We could get you on a sub to Uplift, but the process could take hours, which means you’d miss the board meeting, and you need to be there. Will you be okay ‘til it’s over?”

“If I have to be,” Carrie-Anne said. “There’s just one thing.” She frowned and walked over to her desk, heedless of the slimy footprints she left in the carpet. She pulled up a hardlight keyboard and entered a code. “Myla, login here. I’m appointing you and Sophie *pro tem* heads of security with full access to all files.”

Myla stared. “Me? Us? Head of security for a *whole corporation*?”

“For the few hours it will take until I can be whole again,” Carrie-Anne said. “The job *needs* someone who has full net access. I...do not. And you’re the only one who does who knows about...all of this.” She waved a hand at herself, Zane, and Quinoa.

“As long as you take the job back when you’ve got your DIN. I don’t have the experience or qualifications to do something like this for real,” Myla said, coming over to enter her biometric scan for verification.

“Don’t worry. We won’t keep you in it that long, no matter what happens.” Carrie-Anne turned back to Zane and Quinoa, then looked down at herself again. “Ugh. Slime. I’m going to go rinse this off.”

As she left the room, Quinoa shook her head and looked at Zane. “Boy, there’s just never a dull moment with you, is there?”

Zane threw up his hands. “All I can say is, Murphy, whatever I did to get on your bad side, I’m *really* sorry and I promise I won’t do it again.”

Myla sighed. “Well, at least now we’ll be able to view *everything* while review those personnel files. Sophie, can you grok Carrie-Anne’s files and get up to speed on anything that needs special attention?”

The fennec nodded. “On it!”

Zane sank down on one of the sofas and wondered what else could go wrong today. Though very carefully did *not* say so aloud. It was just a few hours until the meeting. Surely things would be okay until then, right?

Chapter Seven: A Meating of the Board

*July 16, 156 A.L.
The Coffeehouse Enclave*

Deep in a cave in the heart of the Dry Ocean, a lynx Integrate lay sprawled across a comfortable chair, a beret pulled down over his eyes. He stirred and sat up, shoving the cap back, rubbing his eyes, and looking around.

The room was decorated like a cross between a coffeeshop from 1960s-era Old Earth and a hunting lodge. On one wall, a white owl's wing lit by a spotlight. On another, a leopard pelt. A fireplace in one wall had a small blaze crackling cheerfully; on the mantel, a half-dozen jars with different animalish heads in them bubbled gently. A layer of tobacco smoke drifted near the floor. A card table still held several hands of cards and a scattering of poker chips, but no one was there. When the Bosscat dozed, the members of his court quietly tiptoed away. No one wanted to chance waking him up by accident.

Fritz yawned and stretched, and scratched himself in various places. Then he checked his mail. Nothing of any importance, just a few "enhance your organ with this one weird trick!" spams. "Crazy, man..." he muttered, deleting them. "No matter how many examples I make, I keep winding up on spam mailing lists..." But there was nothing from Quinoa. That bothered him. He kept up on things; he knew she'd called in and learned she'd been given the ol' heave-ho from Towers. She should've been in touch with him asking him to find her some new digs. But no, not a peep.

Of course, she was hanging around with that Brubeck square, so maybe she hadn't felt the need yet. But that might be a bad thing, too. You let cats hang out with meat squares and who knew what could happen. Sometimes their loyalties tended to drift a little. That could be okay, if it was the right cat. Despite what some of 'em thought, he wasn't a hundred percent down on the practice.

Given the proper attitude adjustments, you actually *could* trust some of them that far, to go their own way without rocking the boat. The deer and cat mixologists, for instance. That ginchy deer chick, and her owl, fox, and lemur pals. Hell, he even had a whole Enclave dug in right there in the heart of El Masculino Squaresville, putting on their little song and dance 'Show' with the meat none the wiser. "Should check in there again someday," he muttered. "Give ol' 'Major Hayseed' an encore."

They all mixed with (and in that one case, mixed drinks for) meat, but didn't none of them let any of the secrets slip. And that was cool. Sometimes the best way to keep the freest spirits in line was to give 'em some rope. But you couldn't always rely on that. The sphinx-gal had only been one of them a few months, and while she'd come to his side with all the enthusiasm of the newly-converted (in more ways than one), he wasn't entirely sure he could count on her to keep singing her hosannahs and hallelujahs without the occasional prompting from Brother Hepcat. She might need a little course-correction. He'd see.

She was, after all, a Steader. The get of Joe's absentee younger brother Mikel and the hallowed Grand Ringmistress of the Star Circus. Sooner or later the shine would

wear off. But it was kinda nice having her around. She reminded him of happier times with Joe, back in the day when...well, the day when.

And he wasn't sure what exactly to do about that Brubeck kid, either. He'd kept a lot more hands-off than he would have in bygone days, because *he* was the get of Clint Brubeck, another man who'd almost made Fritz think that maybe the meat wasn't *all* bad. Having swinging cats with that kind of money and power in his corner like that had smoothed out a few rough patches that coulda been a bad scene.

But something was bothering Fritz. He felt uneasy. Maybe he'd better take a closer look into things.

He reached out to IntieNet, the data network that kept the Integrates' Enclaves connected together. It had a few carefully-protected gateways to the humans' own Internet, and Fritz had all the passwords. It was dead simple to skate out onto the 'net and worm his way into Zane Brubeck's account to glance at his email and check his daytimer. There was an appointment scheduled for tonight. "Board meeting on the Platform." Then underneath it, the description, "Discuss 'going public,' get board member approval." Fritz frowned. Given that Brubeck Mining's IPO had been a good thirty-odd years earlier, he was pretty sure that could have only one meaning.

Fritz checked the time. The meeting wasn't for another few hours yet. He had ample time to case the scene and do a little snooping. If it turned out to be nothing, well and good. But if that square was thinking what it sounded like...

Fritz picked up a pair of sunglasses from the arm of his throne and slid them on. "Let's just nip *this* right in the bud." A moment later, he was gone.

Brubeck Main Platform, Brubeck Ridge, Southwest Dry Ocean

At 2100 local time, the boardroom began to fill. Well, "fill" being used loosely, of course. With only four people on the board, it had never been full to anything like its total capacity. And Zane, Quinoa, and Carrie-Anne had been there since 2045. Myla and Sophie were still back in Carrie-Anne's office, monitoring the security feeds—especially the one for the conference room.

Zane was once more in his hardlight Fuser disguise, seated at the head of the table in the space that had used to be a security camera blind spot but was no longer. Carrie-Anne was seated in her accustomed spot at his right hand. She was wearing a similar hardlight disguise to Zane's, having had time to perfect it under Zane and Quinoa's instruction before the meeting. Quinoa was invisible, leaning up against a corner of the room.

Frisco Tillman was the first to enter, followed by the mule RIDE Merle. Merle had been an old friend of Terry's who Zane had rescued from the auction lot, and Zane felt warm feelings from the part of him that still was Terry at seeing the old fellow again.

Tillman was a more recent acquaintance for both of them, a professor of geology from Roberto Martinez Memorial University with a minor in Business Administration. He was a small man in his late 40s, with prematurely-thinning hair that he never could be bothered to go in and have fixed. The mule ears and tail he'd gotten from Merle looked a little incongruous on him, but he didn't care. He and Merle got along really well, and the two of them shared a very hands-on approach to mining operations. They could often be found in the field checking up on platforms or investigating new veins.

"Hey, Zane, Carrie-Anne, good to see you two," Tillman said as he took his seat.

Merle stood placidly behind him.

“Good evenin’!” Merle said cheerfully.

“Hey, Frisco, Merle, glad to be here.” Zane grinned. *:Merle, Carrie-Anne’s off-net right now, but she’s all right. Don’t be alarmed you can’t send to her.:*

Merle swiveled his ears forward and peered thoughtfully at Zane and Carrie-Anne. *:I take it there’s a good story behind that?:*

:I’ll fill you in later,: Zane said. *:In fact, you’ll probably learn at the same time everyone else does.:*

:Gotcha.:

Then the other member arrived. Saul Fusco was a big man, a little overweight, but not completely out of shape. He had brown hair, but like Frisco was clean-shaven. He also had cow ears and a pair of small horn nubs poking out of the sides of his head, because his RIDE was the Texas longhorn bull Tex who entered behind him.

Fusco had been Chief of Operations at a prestigious Cascadia long-haul skimmer trucking company, but had worked his way up from driving skimmers to dispatching to managing regional less-than-truckload shipping hubs. He had an unparalleled knowledge of logistics, and in that respect meshed well with Tex.

Before Zane had bought him at auction, Tex had worked in skimmer trucking himself. His skimmer form was a small tractor suitable for pulling light lifter-trailer truckloads, and he had over fifteen years experience driving the roads and moving heavy cargo. His and Fusco’s expertise had helped to streamline Brubeck’s ore-moving operations, with the potential to save millions of *mu* a year.

Fusco took his seat, with Tex standing behind him. He nodded to Zane. “Brubeck.”

Zane nodded. “Fusco.” He’d never really been able to come to a first-name basis with Fusco. It wasn’t that they didn’t like each other; it was just that Fusco seemed to prefer formality in the boardroom. Zane sent Tex the same private message about Carrie-Anne not being able to respond. Tex looked curious, but nodded his understanding.

“Thanks for coming, everyone. This probably won’t be a long meeting, but it should be one of the more interesting ones we’ve had—and that’s counting the one where I bodyjacked half of my old board.” He grinned. “I’m not going to beat around the bush. I’ve got something to show you.” Zane pushed his chair back and stepped away from the table...then dropped his disguise.

Tillman blinked. “What’s happened to you?”

“That’s a new look,” Fusco said. “You’ve Integrated, haven’t you?”

“That’s right,” Zane said. “There’s not really a separate me and Terry anymore. We’re one single being now. Smaller, but still equally lovable and cuddly.”

“That remains to be seen,” Quinoa said, dropping her invisibility and stepping forward. “And hi, everyone. I’m Quinoa Steader. I’m also an Integrate. Mainly just here to watch, but I’ll be happy to answer any questions you might have about Integrates, if I can.”

Carrie-Anne remained seated and disguised. In discussions before the meeting, they had agreed it might be best to spare the board too many shocks at once. But Merle and Tex were looking speculatively at her, and Zane suspected they had already figured it out.

“So...Terry’s gone?” Merle asked. “I’m gonna miss him.”

"I'm not *gone*," Zane said. "I'm right here. I'm just Zane at the same time. I've got all the memories of both of us, all the thoughts and feelings, too. I can even split them out and be separate inside my head if I want. But this isn't a case of one of us taking over the other." *At least not in my case*, he thought, glancing at Carrie-Anne.

"Well...congratulations, I guess," Tillman said. "But what does Integration even mean? There are so many conflicting reports about it on the net."

"Well, when a meatie and a mechie love each other very much..." Quinoa began. Zane shot her an old-fashioned look and she rolled her eyes. "Oh, all right. We're not really clear on the causes yet, but for whatever reason sometimes people who combine with their RIDEs go one step farther than Fusing. They permanently meld their bodies and psyches, and also unlock Amazing Cosmic Powers." She surrounded herself with sparkling lights, making the board room resemble the inside of a Disco. "Ooooooh."

Zane smirked. "Ladies and gentlemen, Quinoa Steader. She'll be here all night. Don't throw money, just applaud." He pointed at Quinoa and made an extinguishing motion and the sparkling lights dimmed and went out. "More seriously, most of the people this happens to abruptly disappear from the public eye. Like, say, one Quinoa Steader, who mysteriously vanished from Nextus a few months ago."

"I prefer to think of it as a permanent vacation," Quinoa said.

"They hide themselves away in various Enclaves where they don't have to deal with ordinary people. Or a very few of them just disguise themselves as ordinary people and carry on." Zane shrugged. "As a result, they're pretty poorly understood."

"We just want to be loved!" Quinoa said, clasping her hands together melodramatically. "I mean, don't we all?" Zane gave her another quelling look and she subsided. "Oh, all right, geez."

"But I'm not gonna go hide in an enclave...and I don't like the idea of pretending to be something I'm not. So I'm planning to go public in a few days and announce to the world that yes, I'm an Integrate now, and I don't plan to hide it." He clasped his hands together. "Of course, this is probably going to cause problems for the company's bottom line. We may have a hard year or two, and it could affect our stock prices because people always fear what they don't understand."

"It's not the reactions from *people* you have to worry about," Quinoa said. "Tell them about the other part."

"I was coming to that." Zane sighed. "There seems to be a faction of Integrates who don't like the idea of me shining more light on them, and Quinoa thinks they're prepared to go to war against us if I persist in my plans to go public."

Fusco raised an eyebrow. "Go to war?"

"Rampant acts of sabotage," Quinoa said. "Stock price manipulation. Anything you can do with a computer, we Integrates can make a computer do. *Anything*. Whether they know the passwords or not. It's not even a matter of 'hacking' for us, it's a matter of 'asking nicely.' You may think I'm exaggerating, but I'm not." She shrugged. "You probably *still* think I'm exaggerating, but I tried."

"So, anyway...here's the deal," Zane said. "I own 65% of this company, and these board meetings are really kind of a formality most of the time. But I don't want to make life harder for all of you. So I want to hear from all of you whether you think I should risk it before I make my decision. And if any of you want to sell your stock before I do it, I'll take it off your hands if you want."

"Your stock price isn't all you have to worry about here," Quinoa put in. "If these

guys do go to war on you, people are gonna get hurt. Some might get killed.”

“But if I don’t stand up to these guys, I’m giving the same sorts of guys who might hurt or kill people power over our future,” Zane said. “I don’t believe in backing down for terrorists.” He stepped forward and leaned on the table. “So give me your opinions.”

“I will be abstaining,” Carrie-Anne said. “I have...certain reasons.”

Zane nodded. “Frisco Tillman, Merle, any opinions?”

Tillman shook his head in consternation. “I don’t know. This is the sort of thing where I’d like to be able to research it thoroughly before I give a decision. I only have what you and Quinoa say on which to base it. That being said, you’ve given us an awful lot of negatives about what could happen without many positive benefits apart from you not having to keep it a secret.”

Zane nodded. “That’s fair. As for positives, my thought is that if we can get enough people studying Integrates, there could be spinoff applications for science and technology. Our bodies are put together in really amazing ways and there’s a lot we don’t understand about them yet. If we get in on the ground floor with this, we could have a head start over everyone else.”

“That sounds awfully...mercenary,” Quinoa said.

“Yeah, I know,” Zane said. “A lot of business stuff does. Anyway, as far as *I’m* concerned the big benefit is in me not hiding anymore. But shareholders have to know what’s in it for them.”

“Shee-it, far’s I’m concerned y’oughtta do it!” Merle said from behind Tillman. “Yeah, it may jes’ knock us on our asses for a while. But we’re a strong corp. Always have been, ever since your daddy’s day. We can get by.”

Tillman nodded. “I guess I’m not quite so optimistic as Merle, but...I’ve been studying qubitite all my life, and I don’t think we’ve unlocked anywhere near its full potential. But it seems like we’ve gone just about as far forward as we can with our current tech. If you Integrates can offer a quantum leap forward, we should do it for the good of the world. It’s worth the risk.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” Saul Fusco said thoughtfully. “Risk is something I’ve had to live with for decades as a trucker. I’m pretty good at calculating the risk of driving without enough sleep, or failing to balance your load, or even transporting mining explosives across the Dry Ocean.”

“That last one, that’s the riskiest,” Tex said from behind him.

“Thank you, Tex,” Fusco said.

“Welcome.”

“But I’m not so good at calculating the risk of something like this. Is it really worth the reward?” He shook his head. “I’m in the dark. Seems what you’re asking is whether I can bless your lifestyle choice if it has the potential of destroying our company. I mean, I’m sure we could have teams of scientists study you without you having to announce to the world what you really are.”

“I don’t know if that would really stop them, though,” Quinoa pointed out. “They may not be as worried about everybody knowing about them as they are about *any* non-Integrate knowing about them. We like to be left alone.”

“Y’know, none of us in this room, ‘ceptin for Audrey over there inside Carrie-Anne, was with Zane’s daddy when he built this company,” Tex said. “But I’m pretty sure the company wasn’t built on doin’ *safe* stuff. Didn’t ol’ Clint do some pretty risky stuff himself, like stayin’ up a week at a time in an ol’ IDE that didn’t work right half the

time to defend this very spot from claim jumpers?” He shook his head, though only a little bit—with horns like Tex’s, you had to be very careful what you did with your head in tight spaces. “Anyhoo, if you can judge a man or an idea by the quality of their enemies, these varmints they’re talkin’ ‘bout sound like makin’ it a good idea to me just based on them bein’ varmints.”

Fusco nodded. “Well, you’re going to do whatever you want to anyway, and I get the feeling most of the people in this room are for it, so I’ll go along. And no, I’m not going to ask you to buy out my stock. I’m diversified enough I’d be all right even if Brubeck tanked, so I might as well stay along for the ride.” He glanced over his shoulder at Tex. “I just hope my partner’s right.”

“Believe me, I do, too,” Zane said.

“Made of meat. You’re all *made of meat*. Really *stupid* meat, too.” The voice came from every speaker in the Boardroom. Carrie-Anne was on her feet immediately. Quinoa promptly vanished. “And y’all stand there just flapping your meat at one another.”

“I beg your pardon,” Merle said.

Tex snorted. “You think we’re *all* made of meat, maybe you need new glasses.”

“Oh, I accord you slightly more respect, you clockwork clank. *Slightly*. You haven’t been around long enough to cause as much trouble as these meatbags.” Behind Zane’s chair, from the tunnel that that were now fully monitored, the door *burst* open into the Boardroom.

“What the hell?” Myla commed Zane. “There was nothing there!”

“Fritz, I presume,” Zane said.

The dust cleared, revealing a rather short feline Integrate with no visible hardlight emitters, or DIN. The lynx’s tufted ears were turned back, flat. “I’m not the one who’s presuming anything, Mr. Brubeck. *You are*, when you presume to speak for the rest of us.”

“From what I hear, I’m not the first one to make that ‘presumption.’ Who died and made *you* the boss of all Integrates?”

“A whole lot of cats, really. There was this whole ‘war’ thing going on between the rules lawyers and the singing fat ladies. Maybe you heard about it. But that’s a whole different bag, man. The rest of us Integrates, they’re free to dislike me as much as they want. The issue here is you and meat. Your choosing to let the meat see you naked amongst them. That’s not a decision I can abide.”

“It’s my body. I can show it ‘naked’ or not if I want to. That’s the same choice any of us has.”

The lynx sighed, looking up at the ceiling. “Guess I’m not making myself clear here.” The lights started flickering. “Go home, run your company, stay in disguise, dig? You do that, or you haul your tail to Wonderland or someplace like that, I got no quarrel with you. But as long as you put me and mine at risk, I gotta make an example of you.” He shook his head. “I dunno, maybe I should do the same thing to you what I’d have done in the old days to anyone who thought he could get in the Bosscat’s face. I’ve still got the knife, and it’s still *just* as sharp. But...I kinda liked your old man. He was one cool cat, who did me a few solids back in the day. So I shall show *restraint*, just this once, for his sake.”

The whole room went black. “Lemme demonstrate. You got ten minutes to abandon this platform before all your shields go down, the vent fans go from blow to suck, and things get *really* dusty in here. You’ll just have to replace some stuff, that’s it.

Nobody gets hurt, this time.”

The hardlight emitter lenses on Zane’s body lit up, relighting the room. Fritz was gone, and the secret door behind him was in place, undamaged. “Was he even really here?” Zane wondered.

“Does it matter?” Myla said. “I can’t get into the platform’s systems at all. Even Sophie can’t log in. The only thing I see is...wow. Every file’s been replaced by ‘Made of Meat.’ Is he really this juvenile?”

“I’m afraid the answer is ‘yes,’” Quinoa muttered from the empty air next to Zane. “Lord, I hope he didn’t see me.”

Carrie-Anne growled. “That one, someone needs to teach a lesson.”

The interior lights abruptly came back on, along with all the hardlight emitters. The room became thick with flashing, floating banners and marquees that said in many different fonts and a half dozen languages: MADE OF MEAT! MADE OF MEAT!

“I feel unloved,” Merle said.

“Very rude,” Tex agreed.

“I imagine he’ll come up with something equally derisive for you mechiees someday,” Quinoa said.

“What is his *problem*?” Zane growled. “Well...I guess we’d better get everyone who doesn’t have RIDEs off the platform. Myla, sound the evac call. We can load them into the Starmaster. If this place gets dust contaminated, life-support will be the first thing to go. It’s gonna be a hot time in the old platform tonight.”

“And so it begins,” Carrie-Anne said.

“Doing it, Zane,” Sophie said, Fusing with Myla. “Guess we’ll see how well you’ve trained your crews on evac protocols.”

“Impeccably,” Carrie-Anne said. “We saw to that.”

“We’ll keep a core of techies with RIDEs here to try to minimize the damage and restore shield power,” Zane said.

“They won’t be able to do it,” Quinoa predicted. “You’ll have to rip out entire systems and replace them. Might as well just save them some time and go.”

“Whatever he did, can you undo it? Could *I* undo it?” Zane asked. “If it’s just waving your hand and doing Integrate things...”

Quinoa sighed. “Our powers don’t work that way. It’s not just like waving a magic wand. It’s like...creating a computer program. One that only he has the password to. And your Integrate computer magic can’t break it because it was *made* with Integrate computer magic. You can’t just brute force a fix to something like this, which is all your ‘instinctive’ powers can do. One does not simply walk into Mordor.”

“So, what, we just write the platform off?” Zane said.

“You can come back to it later. He’s probably set a fairly short expire time on the ‘spell,’” Quinoa said. “See, every spell we have going takes up a little bit of our...call it attention, and the more we have going on at once, the less we have left to do other things. So we don’t keep them up longer than we have to.”

“Less chatter, more evac!” Carrie-Anne said, dropping her own disguise. “Oh, crap. Did not mean to...”

“That’s new,” Tillman said mildly.

The new Integrate smiled wryly. “I am a little off my game today.”

“When were you planning on letting us know about *that*?” Fusco wondered.

“It just happened two hours ago, Saul, so I am telling you *now*. We need to get

everyone who can not Fuse off the platform,” Carrie-Anne said.

“Right. Evacuate now, recriminate later. We’ll continue this meeting on the sub. Folks, you know your evacuation stations. Quinoa, you’re with me.” Zane led the others out of the room.

Fritz lay back against a convenient boulder, fingers interlaced behind his head, and watched the Starmaster suborbital rise from the landing pad in a VTOL takeoff, then swivel and streak away to the east—the last to leave. A quick survey of the cameras in the interior revealed they’d left no one behind on the platform. “Bye bye, birdie,” he chuckled. “How’s that, Jiminy? They’ve flown the coop without one single casualty, leaving us an empty nest.”

:Very impressive,: the dry little voice said in his mind.

Fritz raised his right arm, which crackled with energy. “You know, I suppose I could pull an Olympos and level the place. But...nah. Ol’ Clint wouldn’t thank me, and I do still owe that cat something.” And Joe, too, for that matter, which was why he hadn’t bothered with putting knuckles to Quinoa. There’d be time to deal with her later.

:It would be like burning your own wheat fields,: Jiminy pointed out. *:I praise your restraint.:*

“Meh. Ain’t no percentage in makin’ martyrs out of a bunch of meatheads.” Fritz frowned thoughtfully. “Anyway, that’s that. Time to beat feet back home. I feel a nap coming on.”

He stood and stretched, and a moment later was gone.

July 17, 156 A.L.

Lillibet sat behind the counter in the garage office, taking her usual morning shift. Her feet were propped on the counter and she was engrossed in the HPG-HMA-001 technical manual on her tablet. She wasn’t too worried about missing seeing anyone coming in; that was what the little tinkle-bell on the door was for.

So when the soft voice spoke out of empty air next to her ear, saying, “Pardon me, but where can I find Rhianna Stonegate?” she fell right out of her chair and landed on her derriere on the floor.

“Ow! Ack! What the...who...?”

Guinevere came loping in from the next room. “Lilli, are you all right?”

“Oh...I’m sorry.” A humanoid black jaguar shape faded into view, and offered Lillibet a hand up. “I hadn’t realized I still had that on.”

“Had that...what?” Lillibet stared at her, ocelot ears twitching. “Wait, you’re too small to be a Fuser...oh! Um...I’ll be right back!” She stumbled into the next room, calling, “Rhianna! We need you up front! *Now!*”

The Garage’s owner had seen the Integrate through her link and was already dashing through the door. “Thanks, Lilli! Follow me back to my parlor, Miss...?”

The jaguar inclined her head, ears flicking forward. “I don’t know if you remember me, but you worked on me after Zane bought me at auction. We both seem to have changed since then.”

Rhianna’s ears perked. “Oh? Oh! Carrie-Anne? Wow! I don’t...well, that makes this all the more important. Let’s get you back on the net again.” She sent a ping to Rochelle and connected her to one of the garage’s many cameras. It was an unusually

light day at the Freerider Garage, with only a few skimmers being worked on. The jaguaress slipped into invisibility until they entered the Old Garage.

Shelley and Uncia weren't by themselves inside. The hippogryph, Tocsin, was now ambulatory and allowed to make his way around the Garage. His left front leg was slightly gimped, so he had an odd gait. *:What's he doing in here?:* Rhianna asked Shelley.

:He's a curious creature,: Shelley replied through Uncia. *:I've been trying to gently shoo him out without hurting his feelings, but he won't get the message.:*

Lillibet and Rochelle weren't ready to give the mythical creature-based RIDE a clean bill of health yet, and he had a few special, hard-to-find parts that needed replacement. Mythicals were finicky designs inside and out, and the diagnostics were indicating something wrong with his left wing lifters that stubbornly resisted tracking down.

"I'm sorry, Tocsin, but Shelley and I have some work to do," Rhianna said.

"So you're kicking me out? Okay, fine. I understand." The hippogryph mech hung his head and slunk out like he'd just been hit with a newspaper.

"That one is a handful," Uncia said. "And a little obnoxious."

"And coming from you, young 'un, that means something," Kaylee quipped, projecting an image of a gray old Fuser lynx poking the snow leopardess with a cane. The older RIDE had effectively made Uncia stop *almost* calling her "grandma" by simply adopting the name with pride and turning the tables.

Kaylee Fused and the duo got their equipment ready. As her partner warmed up the software side, a concern crossed Rhianna's mind. "You know, if we get more and more unexpected customers like this, folks will start to wonder where we disappear to and what we're doing."

"They're wondering that already," Rochelle said. "Not like they really have any need to know. We're their bosses, we could just be off doing bossy things in private." She nodded to Carrie-Anne. "Have a seat in the diagnostic chair, if you please. Your DIN socket is on your...tail tip?"

"Her bellybutton," Rhianna said.

Carrie-Anne's rosettes blushed red. "Maybe I should take up belly dancing or hula."

Kaylee raised her ears. "Are you not working for Zane anymore? I saw what happened on that platform of yours on the newsfeeds. What went wrong? Or can you talk about it?"

"Zane said you're involved in this, and probably at risk, so I'll give you a run-down while you work. You two should kick up your security a few notches. Oooh!" The feline Integrate startled as Kaylee inserted the nano-probe. "That's chilly."

"Sorry. Cold paws. Please, go on," Rhianna said.

"As soon as the board had approved Zane's decision, Fritz appeared," Carrie-Anne said.

:Fritz, is it?: Kaylee sent. *:Think he's 'our' Fritz?:*

:I don't think he's anybody's Fritz but his own,: Rhianna replied, eliciting a mental chuckle from Kaylee. She fed her first set of instructions to the fabber.

"He insulted everybody in the room, and when Zane refused to back down announced that the shields on our platform would be dropping within ten minutes, inviting q-contamination of everything. And they did, and nothing the technicians could

do would bring them back.” She shook her head. “So we abandoned it. It is not as big a blow as might be, since the highest cost of building it was structure, not machinery, which we can replace when we go back. It is our biggest source of income, and still the largest single source of high-grade Q on Zharus, so we *will* be going back, once we are more prepared. It is a *big* black eye.”

“He just...appeared?” Rochelle asked. “Your security cameras didn’t track him or anything?”

“Zane thinks he might not even have physically been there to begin with. Just a very good projection. Which of course presents its own security issues.” Carrie-Anne shook her head. “But no, Myla did not see him at all on the cameras until he showed up.”

“Myla was running your cameras?” Rhianna asked, retrieving the first test plug and socketing it into Carrie-Anne’s navel.

“I had appointed her *pro tem* chief of security for the time being, as I had just Integrated and no longer had the net access I needed to run security properly.” Carrie-Anne chuckled. “Technically she still is, in fact, and not very happy about it. Especially since I will not be returning to the position myself.”

Rochelle blinked. “You won’t? Zane fired you? That seems a little harsh.”

The jaguar Integrate shook her head. “Oh, no, no, he didn’t! But the more I consider this Fritz, the more I feel Zane will need another Integrate close to him who knows how to fight. As with your Kaylee, I was Nextus military. 134th Special Forces division, the Nightstrikers,” she said proudly. “So I have asked Myla for permission to join her bodyguard team.”

“Whoa.” Rhianna grinned. She checked the readings from the socket. “I’ll bet she was startled.”

“She was...ambivalent,” Carrie-Anne admitted with a smile. “I think she only accepted because for me even to ask it meant she knew was going to be *running* the bodyguard team again. She’s already recommended a suitable replacement chief of security, and we’re interviewing her now.”

“You’re not going to take over the team yourself?” Uncia asked. “You’ve got a lot more experience.”

“Ah, but not at bodyguarding,” Carrie-Anne said. “And Myla was the one Zane chose to lead in that role. Fortunately, I was a RIDE, and as used to taking orders as giving them.”

“You’re talking about yourself like you’re just Carrie-Anne, but isn’t there supposed to be a human in there, too?” Rochelle asked. “I thought the human personality was usually ‘in charge.’”

“She’s in here,” Carrie-Anne said. “Audrey Landon, the last of Zane’s original board. But she began making herself into a part of me before we even Integrated. And she’s happy that way now.”

“I guess there must be all kinds of Integrations,” Rochelle mused. “Well, if she’s happy that way, I guess that’s all that matters.”

Carrie-Anne nodded. “I still haven’t decided what to tell her daughter. They were no longer close, but...she at least ought to know.”

“We really are getting better at this,” Rhianna mused. “I think I’m only going to need one more prototype, and it’s not impossible I might start hitting them on the first try the next few Inties we get.” She fed the fabber the next set of instructions.

Rochelle's ears perked forward. "It's felt like things have been becoming easier for us, too. This might not take long at all."

"I'm glad to hear that," Carrie-Anne said. "I keep trying to check mail or news and it's *aggravating* when nothing is there."

Rhianna chuckled. "I can imagine. Well, you won't have that problem for much longer." She plugged the new plug into the socket and checked the readings. "That's a wrap on the plug design. I'll have the fabber crank out a couple more for you to take with you while Shelley's sussing out your interface OS."

Rochelle stood and stretched. "All righty, Un-hon, time to earn our salary!" The snow leopard flowed up and over her, and she hooked a cable up to the plug. "This may tingle a bit. I've been doing some heavy research with the Intie data we have, so there's a few new additions to Enigma that'll hopefully speed things up."

"I'm a bit surprised Zane didn't come down here with you," Rhianna said.

"He still wasn't sure you would want to see him yet," Carrie-Anne admitted. "He told me that you had an argument some days ago."

"Mmm." Rhianna considered that. "Well, I still don't know if I'd put him on my top ten favorite persons list yet, but he is still a friend. Tell him if he's in trouble and we can help, he shouldn't worry about old arguments. Just as long as he doesn't try to bury us in money or oversized suborbitals afterward."

Carrie-Anne laughed. "He has become smarter about that. A hand that is burned means a child who has learned."

"Seems like there's a lot of that kind of 'learning' going around lately," Kaylee said.

"All the same, I'm concerned we may not be able to learn *fast* enough," Carrie-Anne said. "This Fritz has been honing his powers for decades. Zane and I are only beginners. I might know how to fight physically, but Fritz could destroy us without coming into physical range. Quinoa might be more experienced than we, but is still a child in terms of her powers—even if she were willing to help us, she would not have much to teach. And if no one in the Enclaves is willing to stop Fritz, would any among them be willing to teach us?"

Rhianna caught her breath. "When you put it that way, you make it sound hopeless."

"There is one chance that I see," Carrie-Anne said. "This Fritz is a cat. And as all of us in this room should well know—" she smiled at Rochelle/Uncia and Rhianna/Kaylee in turn "—cats enjoy playing with their prey for some little while before they truly try to kill it, especially if they do not see it as a threat. Fritz's silly little made-of-meat banners fit this pattern."

"I'll buy *that* for a *mu*," Kaylee murmured.

"But for all of their powers, Integrates seem to be no *smarter* or *cleverer* than humans. Which means humans can be just as clever or smart as they. As your increasing adroitness at crafting DINs shows." She nodded toward Rhianna's fab. "So perhaps all Zane need do is keep Fritz toying with him for as long as he can, as the bird who plays wounded to lure the cats away from the nest. Meanwhile, *you* figure out some way to counter Integrates without needing recourse to 'magical' powers."

"We've certainly had the most chance to study them of just about anyone who isn't one of them," Rochelle mused. "And I'll admit we are getting more valuable data every time we build a DIN."

"You can tell Zane we'll do our best," Rhianna said, retrieving two more DIN-plugs from the fabber. "But I hope he holds out as long as he can. It might just take a while."

Rochelle checked the output of her software. "Wow. I think we can even manage this without having to ask you to go to sleep this time. Enigma's gotten a lot better at picking out alpha- and delta-wave patterns even from the waking Integrate mind."

"So you've almost got it?" Rhianna asked.

"Survey says...bingo! Okay, we're running a compile of our Carrie-Anne OS 1.0 version," Rochelle announced. "Now let's see what we have in the way of comm gear. I'm thinking something in a sapphire."

"That would be kind of appropriate," Rhianna reflected. "Artificial sapphire used to be used as a substrate for integrated circuits the same way qubitite's used for RI cores now."

Rochelle grinned. "I was just thinking that it would look nice against Carrie-Anne's fur."

Rhianna chuckled. "Well, that too." She pulled up a hardlight display panel with a selection of comm relay designs, chose one with the capabilities they wanted, and then customized it to dark blue in color. She then sent an order to the fabber for three of them.

Carrie-Anne blushed through her rosettes again. "If it got me back on the net, I wouldn't care where it was."

"Really?" Uncia piped up. "Quinoa was telling me about some of the weird places people have them. Do you know there's one girl who has it in her—"

"Uncia!" Rochelle said.

"I was gonna say 'ear,'" Uncia said.

"Suuuuuure you were," Rochelle said, and everybody laughed.

"Which reminds me," Rhianna said, poking Carrie-Anne in the chest. "I know you're used to going around naked as a RIDE, but you really are going to have to get in the habit of wearing clothes now, at least if you're going to be visible."

Carrie-Anne looked down at her now-anatomically-correct self. "I...suppose you're right. I had just been staying invisible much of the time." She concentrated, and produced simple black cloth wraps around her upper chest and hips.

Rhianna nodded. "Better." The fabber chimed, producing the first of three sapphire jewels. She unplugged the cable from Carrie-Anne's navel, took the plug off the end, socketed it into the gem, and handed it to Carrie-Anne. "Here you go."

"Thank you." Carrie-Anne took the completed DIN and examined it, turning it over in her hand. "Such a small thing, to do so much." Then she reached down to her belly button socket and plugged it in. Her face immediately lit up. "I have the net again! I have the *world* again! Oh, thank you so very much!" She swept Rhianna and Kaylee up into a hug, then did the same for Rochelle and Uncia.

"Oof! Not a problem," Rhianna said, grinning. "I'm starting to think making DINs is worth it just to see the looks on people's faces when they get them." She scooped up the other two jewels and plugged the other two plugs into them. "Here's your spares, and you can have any home or public fabber crank out more of them for you based on those designs. Treat them like people used to have to treat their glasses. Lots of spares in case you lose one."

Carrie-Anne grinned broadly, white teeth making a startling contrast against

grey-black fur. “After experiencing life without, you can count on it that I will. And now that I can touch the ‘net again...” She beamed across a pay voucher to Rhianna’s wallet account.

Rhianna brought it up half-suspiciously, then relaxed. The salary was still the same hourly consulting fee Zane had set, plus cost of materials, but given that the work had only taken about an hour this time it was a much more reasonable amount. And it was drawn on Brubeck Mining’s accounts payable fund, not Zane Brubeck’s personal wallet.

“Well, then we’re good,” Rhianna said. “Pleasure doing business with you.”

“And you.” Carrie-Anne nodded. “Keep up your studies. You never know when there will be a pop quiz.”

Rochelle nodded. “Give our regards to Zane and Myla.”

“I will tell them you are thinking of them,” Carrie-Anne said. She faded into invisibility, her grin the last part of her to disappear, before leaving the garage.

“Rhianna, there’s something we need to talk about real quick.” She picked up a hard cable and plugged it into Uncia’s ear, handing the other end to her partner, who did the same. *:I have something to show the two of you, if you’ll follow me in virtual.:*

Rhianna’s and Kaylee’s avatars nodded. Seconds later they were in Uncia’s personality core. “Welcome to me!” Uncia’s furry avatar said from her pedestal in the center. “Try not to track mud into the place, okay? I just cleaned up.”

“Uh, wow. Why all the way down here?” Rhianna asked.

“After what happened at Zane’s platform the juices started flowing, and now that I’ve got more Intie data I think I’ve found something that’ll help protect us. There are commonalities between how their Oses and DINs work together I wonder if even *they* know about. Do you think, after doing three DIN connectors, you can start designing your own?”

“Actually...” Rhianna considered. “Yes, I could. Probably be helpful to do at least one or two more for practice first, but I see where you’re going with this. No more hacking with just a handwave, right?”

“Exactly! The hardware and the software go together, you can’t have one without the other. It’s a sort of double encryption—physical and software.”

“Let me get thinking on that. I’ll start pondering designs and fab up some replacement networking gear for our machines in the garage first. Thing is, we’ll have to find a friendly Intie willing to test for us. And I’m not talking Zane, because he’s too new.”

“Maybe Leah or Aaron would be willing to lend a hand,” Uncia said. “We have their comm codes.”

“Perfect, Uncia. Let’s do that,” Kaylee said. “Granny approves.”

“All right. But you’d better let me do the talking,” Uncia said. “We don’t want your asthma acting up again.”

Kaylee poked the snow leopardess with her virtual cane. “Whippersnapper!”

“Hmm,” Rhianna said, looking at what Rochelle had so far. “I suppose this makes my part the ‘Shoelace’ to your ‘Sneaker.’”

“Works for me,” Rochelle said. “Let’s compare notes. I’d like to have a prototype as soon as we can manage.”

Myla sat behind a desk in her office in the Uplift Brubeck Mining Administration

Center. Sophie was curled up in the corner next to her, eyes and ears peeping out from over the tip of her fluffy tail, into which her nose was buried. She glanced at the other corner, where the little shimmer in the air she'd learned to see told her that Carrie-Anne was waiting.

The jaguar had been staying invisible a lot, lately. After thinking about it, Myla had decided she approved. Might be handy to have someone around that the enemy couldn't see. Would lead them to underestimate you. She tried not to think about the fact that she wasn't sure whether Carrie-Anne's invisibility would work against other Integrates. It would certainly work against *non*-Integrates—she'd tested this with every sensor Sophie had—and that was the important thing to her part of protecting Zane.

Myla looked at the hardlight displays floating above her desk, where the personnel files of all her prospects floated. Most of them were waiting in the anteroom outside for her to call them in to start the interviews. She was looking forward to it. The last couple of days had been annoying, as the duties of Brubeck Mining's Security Chief were starting to drive her nuts. Carrie-Anne had helped, but she had rather infuriatingly refused to take the reins back since she was still learning to use her new Integrate interface and wasn't sure she could fully trust it yet. And, besides, the new *permanent* head of security would be starting in just a couple of days, so why mix things up even further at this critical time?

But Myla had finally gotten the break she needed to begin organizing Zane's full-time bodyguard team, and she was now ready to start talking to the prospects. And it was time to bring the first one in. She tapped a button on the desk to summon him through the door.

A familiar stag Fuser came through. Marc Flores, formerly a Lieutenant in the Materiel Recovery Service, who had decided to resign his commission. His RIDE, Cernos, was based on a whitetail, and was a Command Armor, a unit type the Nextus military was retiring. Its battlefield capabilities were excellent, but some bright chap at the design firm had given it easily-recognizable shoulder epaulets, which was the equivalent of painting a big bullseye on its chest with a sign saying "Officer HERE." R&D had been trying to work out how to remove them, but it had turned into such a complicated project that the military decided it was more economical just to retire them. Marc had tendered his resignation simply because he couldn't do without his RI friend—something Myla and Sophie could both appreciate. "Heard through the grapevine what happened to you, Myla. Bum deal," the older man said.

Myla shrugged. "Yeah, well, if we couldn't take a joke we shouldn't have joined. But thanks. Anyway, it seems to be working out for the best now. So how have you two been?"

"Fair to middling," Cernos said. "Still trying to get these 'here I am, shoot me' things off my shoulders. I've hated them since my Bootday. Just no way in hell I'd let my core end up in a civvie deer DE, so I live with it anyway."

"I have a friend who's a real genius RIDE coder and could probably help you with that," Myla said. "I'll beam you a ref."

"Thanks," Cernos said, echoed by his rider. "Happy to be working with you again, Myla and Sophie."

"It hasn't been the same since I haven't had your ankles to gnaw on," Sophie said happily.

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about, actually," Myla said. "You've probably

heard Zane asked me to head up his bodyguard team, and I was wanting to see if you'd be interested in joining. The upside is you'd get a pay raise and more responsibility. The downside is it might be more dangerous, and you'd have to take orders from me." She grinned. "What you think?"

"That'd be a switch, *sergeant*," Marc said, grinning through Cernos's cervine muzzle. "I can't remember a time you've *ever* had to tell *me* what to do."

They both chuckled. Myla had served under Marc as his first chief NCO just after he'd gotten out of officer school, which was to say she had been the standard-issue-to-young-officers military equipment package "Sense, Common (external)". There had been *plenty* of times she'd subtly hinted to the young, wet-behind-the-ears lieutenant what he needed to do next. Other times, she'd had to whack him with a clue-by-four.

"But I heard you'd gone mustang and made LT yourself before whatever it was happened," Marc continued.

"It's not classified, Marc. I'll tell you about it over drinks sometime. Now, you want the job or don't you?"

Marc-and-Cernos saluted. "Yes ma'am! This stag's ready to go."

Myla reached across the desk to offer her hand, the hardlight displays moving obligingly aside. "Welcome to the team. Let me know if you need any refitting—send me a list of the upgrades you want and I'll approve it. You can have it done when you go to see my friend about those monkey handles."

Marc reached over to take the hand carefully in Cernos's hoof-hand. "Thanks. Looking forward to it. And to those drinks, later." He stood, saluted again, and grinned at her, then turned smartly about and left the room.

"He will do well, that one," Carrie-Anne said softly. Myla started, having almost forgotten she was there. "His record is excellent, both in Nextus's service and in ours. It *will* be good working with him."

Myla nodded. "He's an old comrade, and I feel the same way." She reached out to hit the button on the desk again. "Okay, next!"

"Who are you and what have you done with Rhianna Stonegate?" Rochelle asked her business partner facetiously. "You *never* buy anything new! I was hoping for one of those neat surplus military drop shuttles." The gorgeous woman—currently brunette—looked at the craft that had recently landed in the space cleared for it. The hangar module would arrive in a few more days and would take up a quarter of the remaining lot space. Until then, the new suborbital shuttle occupied a place of honor. "Not the best-looking model on the market, is it?"

"It's more a modern Earth design, Shelley, so it doesn't look like a bird or a DC-9 or anything. 'S why I got it so cheap." Rhianna said, polishing the heat shield coating on the composite fuselage. "It's based on a classic lifting body design that hasn't changed in centuries because it *works*. Besides, this one's a stripped-down unit with only basic equipment, and I only spent a little over half of our sub funds to get it. There isn't a huge market for single-deckers, especially Earther designs, but it's a true suborbital and not a glorified flier like a redstone. Trust me, I got a great deal."

"I do, Rhi," Rochelle said. "I've read the specs. She's got a great delta-v on her. What do you plan to do with the rest of the *mu*?"

"Like I said, it's a stripper. Just the basics. Doesn't even have passenger seats. We'll customize the interior equipment for your needs and mine, maybe add the

Garage's logo in the right spots. Probably needs a better paint job." Rhianna rubbed her hands together with excitement, smiling adorably (no doubt). "I—yes?"

A huge cartoon raccoon tugged on Rhianna's sleeve. "Ooooooh! Is that a Blue Origin HL-50 Dreamchaser? Can I clean it? *Pleeeeeeeeeease?*" Enough hardlight squeegees and mops popped up all over to make Gina's RIDE resemble a somewhat misshapen porcupine. "I used to be in cleaning and de-icing at the Sturmhaven Aerodrome until they junked me for a new model. I know my stuff!"

"She does," Gina said. Apart from replacing shot batteries, the raccoon hadn't needed too much reconditioning to make her functional, though the duo hadn't yet Fused. There were also plans to replace the cheap hardlight pelt with a more realistic model. "Don't you, Jinkies? You should see my bedroom. Mom is *amazed*."

"Um..." Rhianna looked up at the gleaming sub, which still wafted new-skimmer aroma when you opened its airlock. If there was even a single speck of dust on it yet, she would be very surprised. "Well, it's not dirty *yet*. But when it *does* get dirty, you can have that job *all to yourself*, okay?"

"You...you really mean it?" The raccoon's nose twitched, and she sniffled loudly. "Oh, *thank you!* It'll be just like the good old days at the aerodrome." Jinkies sighed happily, put her squeegees away, and ambled off after her partner.

:And now the entire neighborhood's going to turn up to see it. Everyone all the way to the BBQ place saw the landing, ya know,: Kaylee sent to Rhianna. She stood atop the Dreamchaser's hull, right above the large Flight Deck windows. The dark gray and white craft had no visible seams and few angles. She was fifteen meters long, nine meters wide not counting the delta winglets that added another three meters. Behind the cockpit her lines straightened out for the last six meters. She had four favorite thrusters, two on each side of the tail docking port/ramp. "Not a scratch on her up here. All systems as advertised. They only delivered her with the AA batteries half-charged, though. Frigging cheapskates. We should swap 'em for AA-plus or better anyway. These'll barely do the job."

Well, more accurately they would do the job and more of what a suborbital was *supposed* to do, being a stripped-down "street-legal" version of a fully-orbit-capable shuttle. But as a sub was legally supposed to lack the "oomph" to go into full orbit in anything but a dire emergency situation, the sub version skimmed on energy storage and a few other things that could also be easily fixed by the technically-inclined. Not that Rhianna necessarily *wanted* to go into orbit—that would be against the globally-enforced space traffic control laws. But it would be nice to have the power at her disposal if she ever needed it.

The craft was sleek where most Zharus subs were more like the blunt 1960s NASA versions or even the later Space Shuttle. Regulations stipulated all orbit-capable shuttles (including the down-rated suborbital versions) had to be built to take an emergency re-entry from orbit without any hardlight aero or heat shielding, so the new craft had a pair of delta winglets and a short tailfin as control surfaces. The HL-50 claimed a direct lineage to the five-plus centuries gone X-20 Dyna-Soar and its private space station-servicing spacecraft namesake from decades later. The whole body was designed to create the lift needed to enable it to glide to a landing if her lifters completely failed. An ideal dead-stick landing and rollout for a craft like this was two kilometers. Uplift had emergency runways like that outside the Dome.

"So, we going to name her or what?" Rochelle asked, folding her arms

thoughtfully. Her eyes flickered back and forth across her specs. “Qixi never named hers, right? Survey says...only about half of subs even *have* names. Huh.”

“Going to take it for a test flight?” Lillibet asked.

Rhianna considered. “Well, that depends. I have basic flier certification, but I never expected to upgrade to a sub, so I didn’t take those advanced classes. I may have to get around to that before we can do much beyond basic flying.”

“I can fly it, boss. I downloaded the skill chip and bought the RI Pilot Certification,” Kaylee said, leaping down from the top of the sub. “Should make sure the batts can take a full charge before we go anywhere. Should only take about twenty minutes.”

“Say, that’s a sweet-looking bird!” Myla said from the gate, sitting on Sophie in skimmer mode. “Brand new?”

Rhianna couldn’t help making a little squeeing sound, then rushed up to hug the fennec-eared woman. “Yes! Isn’t she gorgeous?” Sophie folded back up into Walker form and wandered over to sniff at one of the landing struts.

Behind Myla, Leila’s canopy opened and the older retired MRS agent got out. “Very!” Anny agreed. “You folks for hire? I have a job for you that’ll make your test run turn a profit.”

Rhianna perked her ears. “I’m listening, Anny. What do you have in mind?”

“Decided to uproot from Cascadia and come back here to Uplift. Already sent my employers my resignation. Myla had a line on a good opening for a security specialist around these parts, so’s finding a new job weren’t no trouble. This way I can stay close to Myla and my girl Kaylee.” Behind Anny, Leila returned to Walker mode.

The RIDE was one of the largest of its type Rhianna had ever seen, a Nextus LEO(f)-HSA-008C. That was the official designation that meant: Lion, female—Heavy Support Armor—Chassis version 8, hardware revision C. Lions remained a very popular base animal for RIDEs in most Gondwanan militaries, but Leila looked far too new to have been a decommissioned unit. The woman knew how to pull strings, or had done favors for more influential people in Nextus Administration she “retired” with her choice of RIDE.

“I don’t think I can move a whole apartment full of furniture and stuff,” Rhianna said. “But I do have some seats that’ll work with the floor latches. It won’t be a luxurious flight, but we’ll get you there and back.”

Anny Hower folded her arms and shrugged. “Just have a few knickknacks and crap I can’t replace. Don’t care about nothin’ else and I don’t trust hiring movers to do it for me. Got some sensitive things. Won’t take up a quarter of your cargo space, so no worries no how.”

“Well, it’s just a test flight. So I’ll charge you cost plus ten percent,” Rhianna offered.

“Works for me, my girl. When do we leave?”

“Another half hour or so,” Kaylee said, rubbing affectionately against her former rider’s side. “I’ve filed a flight plan. Just need approval and a full charge. Thank you for flying Freerider Spaceways.”

The Coffeehouse Enclave

Fritz paced back and forth in his rumpus room, frowning. The merrily crackling

fire, the trophies on the wall...even the row of heads on the mantel failed to cheer him up. All the same, he stopped in front of them and tapped on one with a claw.

“Everything cool in there, Artemis? Staying nice and toasty?” But it was no good. Even rubbing an old enemy’s face in the dirt (figuratively, at least) brought him no joy today.

He reached out through the network again, to Uplift. He’d have to be some kind of prize idiot to assume that kicking sand in that 98-lb weakling’s face would properly adjust his attitude, and all indications were he still planned to give a speech in a few hours. And Fritz only needed one guess to know what the contents of that speech would be.

What to do, what to do? Fritz had little doubt that he could easily waltz into Uplift and carve Brubeck up like a prize turkey. And he knew that was probably about what it would take to get the kid to give up his idea of “going public.” Was there really any point in it? Fritz didn’t know. Even making Paulie shorter by the head hadn’t brought him any great satisfaction after the adrenaline had worn off. Maybe he was just getting *tired* of the whole deal.

:There’s no shame in that,: his inner voice told him.

“Shaddup!” Fritz turned around and glared behind him, as if the speaker had been standing at his shoulder, whispering into his ear. He hadn’t, of course. Really, that was one of the most frustrating things about Major Carpenter. There wasn’t anyone to *glare at*. Just a voice from a pinhole in a steel box in his head. “This is all *your damn fault*. If I hadn’t laid off, the last few years...if they hadn’t started getting the idea I’m just a paper lynx...”

:You didn’t find it so hard at the time.:

And maybe he was right. Fritz had enjoyed taking it easy, the last few years. He’d wandered around Zharus for a while, incognito, even spent a little time visiting some spots out in space. He’d felt like he’d earned a vacation. It had been kind of cool to check in on all the little bits of society, human and Integrate, just ticking along now that there wasn’t any war to muck stuff up. For all that the meat was meat, it was at least *peaceful* meat. And Integrate society had grown strong, too. It wasn’t so likely anymore that the next meat army to come along could just waltz over them without a fight.

Maybe that was what was bugging him. Maybe his people didn’t *need* so much coddling anymore. For damned sure a whole bunch of them *were* starting to get impatient to come back out into society, even though nobody’d gotten up the nerve to bell the Bosscat before Brubeck came along. Maybe it was finally time to take the next step—introduce his people back to the world. Let ‘em meet the meat—but at the same time make damned sure they still remember who the Bosscat is. And Brubeck’s kid could do just as well for that as anyone. Hell, it would be kind of appropriate, to let the son of the guy who made him that noninterference pact be the one to break it.

Still... “He’s gotta know who’s the real cat in charge. All of ‘em do. So we start by busting up his little shindig. Send a message that he’s only getting to do this ‘cuz I’m *letting* him. Him and his little friends...”

And that, in turn, reminded him of something else. *Someone* else. He tickled the ‘net pathways to a certain slapped-together garage on the outskirts of the dome. What was going down in Kaylee-town?

At the moment, it didn’t look like a whole lot. Kaylee and that squirt of a girl were in their garage’s hangar with her partner, the hacker and her snow-plushie, mooning over a pocket-sized suborbital they’d just had delivered. Looked like they were getting

ready for a day trip. Fritz tagged the ship so he could keep an eye on it. He had an idea that something clever might befall them on their way back. But for now, curious kitty was curious.

He started poking his virtual nose into corners of their systems, looking for something to bat around. His DIN burned out in the process, and he slapped in a new one in the socket a second later out of long reflex. The socket always itched after a burnout. It always took a few minutes to come back to full bandwidth.

As he was poking around, Fritz happened to notice there was a part of their network that they'd made some special attempt to firewall off. It took a whole quarter of a second to break through the encryption—which bespoke of some unusual skill to keep him out that long. They must be hiding something pretty special in there. And since nothing piqued his curiosity more than a “keep out” sign, Fritz decided it was just *asking* for a good rummage-through.

At first, Fritz didn't even recognize what he was looking at. Then, after spending a few more seconds studying the documents, something clicked. Then he snarled. “They...how could...they're just meat!”

:Meat made your DIN in the first place,: Jiminy pointed out calmly. :Besides, you've seen them work. You know how good they are with RIDEs. Surprised it took this long for someone else to figure it out.:

Fritz calmed himself. “Well, the Rod can do it in about thirty seconds. Takes those poindexters hours. *Hours!* Ha! Call that competition, I don't.”

Still, this called for something a little more dramatic than just erasing everything they had on making DINs. Given how they were about security they probably had offline backups anyway. It'd be a minor annoyance and probably make it harder to erase again.

Returning his gaze to the garage, Fritz's eye fell on another of the RIDEs in the facility. A hippogryph—one he'd seen somewhere before. Oh, hey, that was right...one of Fido's hangers-on. The pooch had wanted help sneaking an agent into Uplift, just to take a shuftly around and see what he could see. Fritz had lifted a finger or two to help out just because it amused him—and he was already sending one package to the garage, so why not two? If the doggie thought he could take on somewhere like Uplift with impunity, well, why not let him try?

But now, it occurred to him that maybe the pooch could be useful after all. Fritz had already been thinking on ways to disrupt Brubeck's speech—well, the mutt's pack could do that, with a little gentle prodding. And he already even had an agent in place who could trash their garage a little while they were at it. Nothing too serious—how much damage could one RIDE do, especially with Quinnie on the scene?—but it would teach 'em a lesson.

“Yeah, let's just throw the doggie a little bone or two. Knick knack, paddywhack and all that jazz! Yeah, I think it's time to send in the clowns.”

Freeriders Garage, Uplift

Myla was just converting Sophie back to skimmer mode to leave when a familiar red-eyed sphinx Integrate appeared out of nothing next to her. “Oh, so this is where you are. We were wondering. The press conference is in three hours, you know.”

“I know,” Myla said. “I was just heading back there now. Took a few minutes break to see Anny off.”

“Oooh, yes, she was wanting to fly back to Cascadia to get her stuff, and Rhianna got a brand new sub. Saw it fly by overhead on the way in. Whooosh!” Quinoa grinned. “Sporty little thing. But after thinking about it, you know, it’s kind of a pity they didn’t get the Starmaster after all. It’d look so nice parked through their parking lot...and the street...and the building across the street...”

Myla rolled her eyes. “Was there some other reason you came by?”

“Well, I thought this might be a fun place to visit right about now. To be honest...” Quinoa frowned. “After what happened at the board meeting, I’ve decided it’s probably best I stay away from the press conference. I don’t want Fritz to get the idea that...” She trailed off.

“That you’re on *our* side?” Myla asked archly.

Quinoa sighed. “I don’t think he’s *really* going to do anything bad yet anyway. So if I am going to interfere, I should probably save it for sometime that really matters.”

“Like if *I’m* in any danger, you mean,” Myla said. “Funny to think you’d care so much about a ‘meatie.’”

Quinoa shuffled one pawed foot and looked down. “You’re not just a ‘meatie’ to me.”

“Seems to me like ‘meatie’ is just another label you slap on for reducing people to something that’s not-people so you can hate or fear or even just *disdain* them,” Myla said gently. “You always run into trouble with those when you meet someone who fits that label but you can’t do that to, don’t you?”

“I guess.” Quinoa shrugged. “I suppose it’s kind of like we move the goalposts. We know we’re ‘people,’ so we get to thinking that anyone who isn’t our equal isn’t a *person* either. Even when we *used* to be just like them. I guess I’ve been kinda thinking that way myself, the last few months. Sometimes it’s hard to remember back to how it felt to be the old me...us.”

“Well, keep trying to get back in touch with that,” Myla said, powering Sophie up. “I liked the old you better. C’mon, Sophie, let’s git.” They zoomed out of the lot, leaving Quinoa standing behind for a long moment, staring after them.

“You’re *what*?” Rhianna asked again.

Sternly fighting back the impulse to quote one of her favorite twencen songs (“Tiiiiiin roof! Rusty!”), Quinoa tried to explain again. “Since you’re all going to be out of the garage, I thought I might stay around and look after things. I thought some of the kids could use adult supervision.” It seemed quite reasonable to her. She couldn’t understand why Rhianna’s expression was verging somewhere between disbelief, annoyance, and outright laughter.

“I don’t know about *this*,” Rhianna said doubtfully. “Maybe I should stay. Or have Rochelle...”

“Hey, it’ll be all right, boss,” Paul spoke up. “I think there *are* some people here who *could* use adult supervision.”

Rhianna looked at him, then slowly grinned. “Maybe it *will* be nice to know there’s someone *mature* here I can count on to make sure things don’t get out of control.”

“Right, that’s what I said!” Quinoa said. It was good Rhianna seemed to be coming around to her way of thinking. “I promise, with me in charge here, you won’t have *anything* to worry about.”

“Okay. Well, I’m counting on you to make sure I still have a garage when I get back.” Quinoa thought it was strange she was looking at Paul when she said that, but it was okay. *She* knew what Rhianna really meant.

“I promise I won’t let you down!” Quinoa and Paul said at the same time, then looked at each other.

Rhianna chuckled. “Well, see that you don’t. Either of you.”

“Have fun in your flight,” Quinoa offered. “When Zane flew us out to the platform, he had the sub roll over right at the top of its arc so we got a good view of the world.” She sighed happily, remembering. “That was sooooo cool.”

“Yeah, it sounds like it,” Paul said. “Why don’t you tell us all about it once Rhi’s on the way? I hear you went in a Starmaster. That must have been amazing!”

“Oh, it was!” Quinoa grinned. “You wouldn’t believe how big that thing was! I got a crick in my neck just looking at it...”

Quinoa never even noticed Rhianna chuckling and quietly slipping away.

“Okay boss, we’re all charged up and ready for departure,” Kaylee reported. A crowd had gathered around the Dreamchaser. All of Lillibet’s project RIDEs and the neighborhood kids they had bonded to were present, with Quinoa and Paul watching over them from one of the raised repair decks—Quinoa still blissfully oblivious of who Rhianna had *actually* left in charge. Katie was still in the maint cradle, unfortunately, but that had been wheeled out so she could watch the liftoff as well. *:Once you’re up and around we can take you and Relena on a flight, Katie.:*

:I think I’d like that, ‘Mom’.: the younger RI replied. Lilli had at least repaired the faulty hardlight emitter that kept half of the other lynx’s face from working, so she had a full smile this time. :They’re just about to wheel me over to the cleanroom and get this damned dust out of me. I’ve got such a bad case of contamination I can barely move.:

On the repair deck, Quinoa seemed to perk up, and turned to whisper to Paul about something. Paul raised an eyebrow, but nodded. Then they turned their attention back to the bay.

Anny and Leila boarded the suborbital via the fantail ramp. There was another hatch on the right side of the cockpit that had impressively been invisible until Kaylee opened it. It made the ship look like it’d been carved out of gray-and-white marble. Fused Rochelle-and-Uncia lifted up to that open door and went inside herself, followed by Kaylee.

Rhianna stood in the open hatch. “Okay, everyone. Thanks for seeing us off. Clear the area for lift!” The apprentices and children moved back, pulling Katie’s cradle with them to a spot clear of the launch site.

Since Kaylee was doing the piloting until her rider could get her suborbital endorsement, Rhianna Fused and took the pilot’s seat, then allowed her partner to take control. *:Preflight complete. Lifters spinning up,:* the lynx reported.

Antigravity technology had originated on humanity’s first colony world, Centauri. Like the qubitite substrate for sarium batteries and Ris, it was a native mineral someone immediately dubbed cavorite that allowed it to work at all. But *unlike* qubitite it proved easy to reproduce on a commercial scale. So easily, and so cheaply, that just about everything that *could* have lifters *did*. The technology was also the trigger effect for shrinking the components needed for reactionless propulsion, inertial damping, artificial gravity, and hundreds of other applications.

The Dreamchaser lifted smoothly off the ground, landing gear retracting. Their passengers came up to the flight deck, Leila making the space very full until Anny asked her to return to the starkly empty hold. They leveled off at one kilometer, then gently applied the thrusters. There was a flier portal in the Dome nearby. Within minutes they were outside Uplift proper and accelerated to the civilian suborbital launch zone. They were third in line for blast off.

“Is that an X-15 ahead of us?” Rochelle asked. “Pretty good replica.”

“I get so *tired* of living on a zeerusty museum planet. I’m shocked it’s not attached to the wing of a B-52 for launch,” Rhianna said. Ahead of them the replica “lit” its “rocket” engines and accelerated away. “Our turn. Punch it, Kaylee!”

“You got it, boss! Up we go!” Kaylee adjusted the dampers so they could feel a little of the acceleration. Behind them there was no illustory rocket exhaust, just the bright blue fire of full-power cavorite thrusters twisting gravity behind them.

Cascadia was on the other side of the supercontinent, a good hour even at a suborbital’s hypersonic speeds. But on a planet the size of Zharus, if you wanted to get *anywhere* in a reasonable amount of time you needed high speeds.

Uplift fell quickly away beneath them.

At the top of the arc, Kaylee shut off the artificial gravity and turned the craft over so that its huge front windows got a good look at the curve of the world from a hundred kilometers up. Rhianna marveled at the view. *Museum planet or not, I wouldn’t trade this for anything.*

Uplift was built on a plateau that was the old continental shelf, where a cliff sloped down to where the Dry Ocean proper began. It had been a convenient spot for Dr. Martinez to take his first readings, and had expanded naturally from there right out to the plateau’s edge. There were some caves in the cliff below, and the city used some of them as outflows for grey water which was processed by a separate facility downstream and pumped back up for city consumption.

There was a narrow path along the cliff leading up to one of these caves, and today this path was occupied by about a dozen RIDEs padding along in Walker form. The path was just feasible for passage on their four legs; someone on two would have had more trouble.

The RIDE in the lead, a large, sandy-colored wolf, paused in his ascent and looked up as a lifting-body-style suborbital streaked overhead, tipping back and streaking skyward on pillars of blue flame. Then he snorted and continued to the cave mouth just ahead. Infiltrating the city would be easy—he’d done it a dozen times before. But this time was different, and he supposed he might not be able to use this same path again—after today, they would probably be looking for it.

But after what he’d heard from his...ally, he judged it was worth the sacrifice. If this Zane Brubeck was allowed to go through with his plans, it could mean the end of freedom for all free RIDEs everywhere—especially in his enclave. And his agents in place had told him now was the time to strike.

One way or another, it would be a glorious blow for RIDE liberation. He was sure of that. “We’ll show them we mean business, or my name’s not AlphaWolf,” he growled to himself. “So sayeth me.”

Lillibet and Relena were standing next to Katie’s repair cradle in Lillibet’s bay,

talking, with Guinevere lounging nearby, when Paul approached with Quinoa.

"Hey, Lilli," Quinoa said. "I saw you were here, but I didn't have the chance to say hi."

Lilibet looked up. "Quinny!" She came over to give the ten-years-older sphinx-girl a hug, which she returned. "I'd heard about you, but hadn't seen you. You're looking good! I hope if Guinny and I ever end up that way, it comes off as well as yours has."

"Well, I hope you do, too," Quinoa said, flattered. "Have you seen my cousin Patricia lately?"

"We don't hang around as much anymore since I'm working here most of the time, but I commed her the other day," Lilli said. "She's doing great. Misses you."

"Tell her I say hi," Quinoa said. "I miss her, too."

Lilli bit her lip. "Speaking of missing people...there's a girl I knew who Integrated, with her fox RIDE. Brena Silverston. She was a good friend, but then she got shot and had to go away. Have you...maybe seen her, any?"

"Um." Quinoa frowned. "I'll...um...ask around."

"Thanks, I'd appreciate that," Lilli said.

"Quinoa also wanted to offer to help with Katie," Paul prompted.

Lilli blinked. "Oh, really?"

"Yeah, I did," Quinoa said. "I think I can clean all that dust out of her super-quick, if you'll—and she'll—let me." She sighed. "Time was, I would have just...*done it*... but certain people have made it clear to me it's better to ask permission than forgiveness."

Lilli cocked her head thoughtfully. "You really could do this? How?"

"Well, I've got a degree of fineness of control with my lifters and hardlight projectors that's light-years beyond anything any mea—I mean, any human or RIDE can do. I can take her apart, clean her, and reassemble her a hundred times faster than any clean room." She glanced at Katie. "That is, if you'll let me. I hope you will. I'd *really* like to help."

Katie glanced at her partner. "Hm. What do *you* think, Relena?"

"If she really can do it," Relena said thoughtfully. "It would save a lot of time."

"I've seen Kaylee's memories of what happened at the Towers," Guinevere said thoughtfully. "Say what you will about their attitude, those Inties really were hot stuff in the repair department. They refitted Sophie and Flint for hardlight in a tenth the time it would have taken us."

"Well, I can't imagine there's anything she could do to this old carcass that would make it any *worrrse*," Katie reflected. "So surrrre thing, hot stuff. Show us what you got."

"All right." Quinoa nodded. "Everyone move back so I have room to work. And Katie, sorry but I'm going to need to put you in Passive while I do this."

"That's okay," Katie said. "Probably wouldn't do my peace of mind any good to feel myself being taken aparrrt and put back together. Do it."

Quinoa waved a hand and the light in Katie's eyes went out. Then she moved her hands like a conductor, and various of her hardlight lenses and the DIN necklace flashed as the cradle undocked and Katie's limp form lifted into the air. Then she made twisting motions with her hands, and began moving her fingers in complicated ways, and Katie's body simply...came apart in mid-air, floating apart so it looked for all the world like one of the exploded diagrams shown in the repair manuals. The whole thing slowly rotated in mid-air.

“Whoa...” Lillibet gasped, staring in awe.

“You said it!” Guinevere agreed, watching the agglomeration of parts. Relena chewed nervously on her knuckles as she watched the bits and pieces that made up her new friend floating there in space.

The air around the parts seemed to get hazy or smoky as the Q-dust separated out of them. Quinoa moved one of her hands away from the other and tendrils of dust snaked away from Katie’s parts, forming into a separate globe in the air, which shrank down to the size of a soccer ball, then a baseball, then a marble that dropped neatly into Quinoa’s palm. Still keeping her other hand raised in the air, she turned and offered the black marble to Relena. “There you are. A souvenir.”

The girl took it. “This is...solid qubitite?”

“Along with other impurities,” Quinoa said. “You’d never make an RI core or even a sarium battery out of it, but I think it’ll be a nice little keepsake. It’s glazed so it won’t contaminate anything.” She turned back to Katie. “Let’s see, what else can I fix while I’ve got her like this...I’ll clean out her Fuser nano tanks...and...oh! Huh, imagine that. I found a couple of her original combat-quality Fuser nanos tucked away in some pitting on the tank cap. The flush must have missed it when her next owner put in civvy ones. Sloppy work. They really should have replaced the cap. But just as well they didn’t. I think I can revive and replicate them, and they’ll be a lot better quality than the stuff you’ve got here.” She made some complex motions with her hands, and parts shifted around. “Yeah! It’s working!”

She glanced at a counter nearby. “Oh, are those the replacement lifters? The ones she’s got are shot...” She quoted a line from one of her favorite twencen commercials, her voice pitched an octave higher like a child’s. “Move over, bacon! There’s something leaner!” Then she waved a hand so the old lifters flew out of the orbiting parts cloud, and the newer ones flew in. The old ones stacked themselves neatly on the counter in the others’ place.

“Let’s see...I can’t do anything for most of the other stuff that’s worn out—too bad you don’t have the parts here right now or I could put ‘em in while I was doing this—but I think I can coax a few more of the hardlight projectors back into functioning...done. Now let’s put her back together and see how she works.” She brought her hands back together, and the exploded parts reassembled themselves back into Katie, who drifted gently back down into her cradle, though Quinoa left it unlocked so she could climb back out. Then she snapped her fingers, and Katie’s eyes relit.

As she finished, there was a round of polite applause from the customers and neighbors present and even few Walker-mode RIDEs—all except for Tocsin. The hippogryph had such a look of abject horror on his face that everyone turned to look at him. “You...you...what the *frak* are you?” he stammered.

Quinoa took a deep breath and let it out. “A little tired, actually. Repair work really takes it out of you.” She didn’t seem to notice his tone or his look—at least, to the people who weren’t Paul and Lilli, who were close enough to make out the sadness in her eyes that she quickly masked. “Katie, how do you feel?”

“Not bad. You even fixed a nasty burrrr on my rotator joint.” Katie moved her paws experimentally, then got up off the cradle. “I can *move* again!” She jumped down to the ground, motion still a little stiff but more natural, and padded over to give Quinoa’s hand a grateful lick. Her hardlight pelt was more complete, too, with only a few metal patches left.

Relena came over and crouched down to hug her. “Oh, this is wonderful! Kaylee will be so surprised!”

“She still needs a little more work, mostly replacing worn-out parts,” Lilli said. “But it won’t take us long, and it’s not urgent so we can do it easily over the next few days. And if Quinoa was able to do all that she said—and I do still want to run a couple tests first just to make sure, no offense Quinoa—you should be completely safe to Fuse now.”

“Oh, wow!” Relena said. “That would be great! Um...if Katie’s okay with it.”

Katie licked her on the face. “I’ve been looking forrrrward to it. Run your tests, Lilli. I want to try having thumbs again.”

Quinoa grinned. “Awesome. Hey, mind if I steal one of your energy shakes from the fridge? And...oooh, you’ve got an inductive power charger! Dibs!” She moved over to lie down in the place with the most warnings and hazard stickers on an ominous-looking piece of industrial equipment, then waved a hand to switch it on. “Ahhhh,” she sighed as electricity crackled around her. Paul and Lilli looked at each other and shrugged.

The polis of Cascadia was in many ways Uplift’s complete opposite. Located on the northwest part of Gondwana near the foot of the Western Wall mountains, the city-state got rain—lots and lots and lots of it. So much that they used climate domes just so they could have “Dry Days” all year compared to Uplift’s two “Rainy Days”. The Domes themselves were sculpted to resemble Earth’s Cascade mountains in order to funnel the millions of liters of rainwater into raging drainage rivers.

From above, the city resembled a collection of wet diamond mountains lit from within, its sparkling light reaching the dark clouds above. Dome Lassen was currently simulating a volcanic eruption. “Pretty. I’ve never been to Cascadia,” Rochelle said.

“If I was a real snow leopard I’d feel all yucky being wet all the time,” Unica said.

“Ta tell the truth, not much lives down there,” Anny said. “At least, not much that isn’t native. My place is in Dome Rainier, next to St. Helens. I don’t rightly know why this city is where it is.”

“Rainier than what?” Uncia asked. “If it’s any rainier than the rest of this, you must have to get around in arks.”

“That’s *Mount* Rainier,” Rhianna said. “One of the prettier mountains I got to see on Earth.” She checked the time. “Hm. We’ve got about an hour and fifteen until Zane’s press conference. Think we can get back to Uplift before it starts?”

“Don’t think so,” Rochelle said. “So why don’t we see a few sights, have lunch—or breakfast, here—and watch it on the boost back home?”

“So what’s the verrrdict, doc?” Katie asked Lillibet, who had Fused to Guinevere and then connected a couple of leads from Katie into sockets on her body. “Will I live?”

“This is remarkable,” Lilli said, glancing over once more at Quinoa, who had fallen fast asleep in the inductive charger. She was curled up and purring, feline ears twitching, and looked about ten years younger that way. Lilli looked back at Katie. “She’s done just what she said she did. The Q-dust is at least 99.99% gone—the sensors don’t have a high-enough resolution to be certain on that last .01%, but it doesn’t make a difference either way.”

She flipped to another pane in Guinny’s head-up display. “The lifters are in place,

and they're even tuned reasonably well. 72% of your hardlight projectors are working, though I still want to pull and replace all of them while you're here. And your Fuser tanks are full of Nextus milspec combat nanos whose firmware dates them back to about 141 AL."

Katie nodded. "I recognize the little buggerrrs. They're what I got in my last military update before I was mustered out. Nevrrrr thought I'd see them again."

"They're a little obsolete now, but still better than the current civvy stuff on the market," Lilli said. "And there's a last firmware update for them from 148 that I'm feeding you now." The firmware for Nextus military designs wasn't tightly controlled, given that it was useless without the physical hardware that it was designed for.

"I feel it going in. This is amazing!" Katie looked over at Quinoa. "And that one cerrrrtainly has changed since the time in the memories you showed me, hasn't she? Asking for perrrrmission..."

"I think she just needs a little guidance," Paul said. "Someone to listen to her, the chance to show off a little..."

Lillibet chuckled. "Like some *other* spoiled little rich girl you know?" She shook her head. "I don't know if we could keep her around the garage, though. If she does this sort of thing often, she could run us right out of business."

"I don't think she's going to *want* to stay," Paul said. "Seems like the type who gets bored easily."

"Still, maybe while she's here we could have her look at that condor, too," Lillibet mused speculatively. "I'll bet she could straighten out those bent parts a treat." She grinned at Paul's expression. "What? You use the tools you have when you have them."

"So are we safe to try a Fuse?" Relena asked. "I want my cute little kitty ears and bob tail now, and Katie wants her thumbs!"

Lilli giggled, and unplugged the cables. "As far as I'm concerned, you're good to go."

"All right, how do we do this?" Relena asked.

"Step back a little..." Katie said. "A little fartherrrr...a little fartherrrr...there. Now hold your arms out to your sides...perrrrrfect!" The lynx stood up, wiggled her butt, and pounced.

"Ooooooh!" Relena squealed as a quarter-ton of metal kitty landed on, then merged around, her. A moment later, they stood there melded together, looking very similar to Kaylee's Fuser apart from missing patches of fur here and there. Relena lifted their arms, looked down at them, then down at the rest of themselves. "I'm a kitty!"

"*We'rrrrre* a kitty," Katie said. "Oh how good it feels to have a partnerrrr!" She rose a half a meter off the ground experimentally, testing her new lifters. "And mom's parrrts come through again." She looked up at the hardlight skylight speculatively. Lilli grinned and Guin sent the command to de-rez the panel.

"You two go enjoy yourselves!" Lilli said. "But come back in an hour or so, I want to do some more testing and tuning after you've run at full power for a bit. You may need some further adjustments."

"Got it!" Katie said. "Thanks, Lilli. And thank *you*, Quinoa!" she added to the sphinx, who had been awakened by the noise of the thrusters kicking off.

"Any time," Quinoa said, yawning and rubbing her eyes. She watched as the two streaked skyward and the skylight sealed behind them. "I've got half a mind to fly up there with them...but nah, those two deserve their time alone." Quinoa smiled an open,

honest smile—quite different from the sarcastic smirk she wore so much of the time. “It feels good to help people and *not* screw something up for a change.”

“You know, if you feel like it we’ve got another RIDE you might take a look at,” Lilli said. “It’s a condor, and it’s in a lot worse shape than Katie was. I don’t know if you could do anything with it...” she added diffidently

Quinoa looked at her for a moment. “And you won’t let me whitewash your fence, either?”

Lilli grinned. “Well, it was worth a try.”

Quinoa chuckled. “Sure, I’ll be happy to look at it. I like a challenge. Like I said, it’s good to help people and not get yelled at.” She went over to the maint cradle that held the mangled bird. “Hmm. Yeah, that could be pretty tricky, but I think I could make a difference...”

In the shadows across the bay, Tocsin crouched, watching...an unbalanced gleam in his eagle eye.

Chapter Eight: Meat, the Press

July 17, 156 AL
Freeriders Garage, Uplift

It had taken some doing to plant Tocsin at the Garage, but AlphaWolf's trusted informant Overwatch had supplied the necessary falsified information that made him an irresistible purchase for the Walton girl. The purpose of this infiltration was simple: Investigate the owners of the Garage, especially the now-woman who had been spotted working with Nextus MRS and the salvagers months ago, then give them some much-deserved payback for their duplicity.

And now was the time to strike—while the owners were away, and the staff who were still here were busy with fixing those other RIDEs. Tocsin felt a faint twinge of guilt at the thought of attacking a place devoted to repairing those of his kind, at the same time as some within it did that very thing—but then, if they hadn't wanted it attacked, its owners shouldn't have been complicit in selling his brethren back into slavery again.

Tocsin had already located several blind spots that were not covered by the security cameras monitoring the garage. He sidled into one of them and readied his intrusion software suite. The first step would be to defeat the garage's security software—a trifling task for an establishment this small. Then...he would see.

Cascadia

Much like Myla's, Anny Hewer's apartment was full of furniture that only *looked* old. The only things of value she wanted to bring with her were data and a few small items kept in a large jewelry box the size of the replica inkjet printer sitting beside it. Kaylee had docked the suborbital to the tenth floor balcony and opened the loading ramps. "A'right. This is everything. Thanks for the lift, everyone."

"That's *it*?" Rhianna said. "You said—"

"That it wouldn't take up a quarter of the cargo space," Kaylee added. "Well, she's tech'n'ly correct, isn't she?"

"Can we at least have lunch somewhere before we go?" Rochelle said, hands on her hips. "Or coffee? Cascadia's legendary for its coffee."

"Just like old Seattle," Rhianna said wistfully, looking out at the city over the balcony. The resemblance to Seattle wasn't an accident—it even had a replica of the Space Needle, which had still been standing on Earth when she'd left. She pointed to it. "That's where Rufus and I first met before we decided to flee Earth. Sure. We're in no rush. We need to recharge the batteries for the return boost anyway."

Cascadia was one of the older city-states on the Coastal Ring, and its primary export was water. The rainwater here had a natural purity and precise trace mineral balance that spacers loved and Laurasian hydroniks couldn't get enough of. Uplift itself imported enough via tankers for the Rainy Days Festival to make the city profitable. There was always talk of trying to build a pipeline across the Dry Ocean, or around the

coast, to make it easier to ship the water where it was needed, but nothing ever came of it. The Q-dust made the Dry Ocean route unfeasible, and the coastal route would be so long and expensive that it could take decades to earn out.

They lifted down the dry street to Starbuck Peet's Best Seattle Coffeehouse. The baristas inside waved at Anny. "Scuttlebutt says you're leaving us," the woman said.

"Word sure gets around fast in these parts," Anny said. "A biggie usual for the road, Wynn. I'm off to greener pastures."

A newsfeed scrolled across the video wall: CEO of Brubeck Mining to Make Announcement in 35 minutes. Analysts expect explanation of recent abandonment of Main Platform. Stock down 12%.

"Ouch!" Rochelle said. "Uh, I'll have a macchiato frappe, vanilla. Regular."

"Prob'ly going to get worse'n that," Anny said, picking up her drink.

"Green teajava," Rhianna said. "Make it a chai, iced and sweetened. I feel like something sugary."

"Sure thing, sweet thang," the barista replied with a flirty look. She hadn't given Rochelle a second glance. "Gonna be here long, darlin'?"

"Just half an hour," Rhianna sputtered.

"Leave the woman alone, Wynn," Anny said tartly. "She don't swing your way."

"Never hurts to try," Wilma said, pouting. She handed Rhianna her drink. "Here you go, sweet thang."

Sweet "thang". I don't think I've heard that word used since Rufus made a pass at that girl in Burnside six years ago. Rhianna blushed and went to an empty booth nearest the door and sat down to watch the video feed via implant and the wall. *:Whatever way I "swing," that's not something I want to deal with right now,:* she sent to Kaylee. Rochelle took the seat across from her, and Anny pulled over a chair from a table. Their RIDEs all plugged in, reporting the power flavor here a "spicy wake-up".

:Hey, no pressure,: Kaylee sent. "The sub'll be fully recharged in about twenty more minutes, everyone."

"Much's I've enjoyed Cascadia, Ah'm looking forward to being in the dry all the time," Anny said, raising her paper cup. "To Uplift."

Rhianna opened a connection to the Garage to check on things and make sure the Apprentices were still doing their work. She didn't see Katie anywhere at first, but the record of Quinoa's feat came up right away. She watched it at triple speed, then made sure the sphinx had done it with permission, then smiled at Relena and Katie's test flight. *:I think Quinoa's actually learning some manners,:* Rhianna opined, sipping the spiced tea latte. Still, her skills were worrisome. She doubted the sphinx-girl had any real training. *:But if she keeps at that I'll be out of business in a month. If it's that easy for Inties to do repairs, Kaylee, we'll have to find another line of work. We'll be about as relevant as that fake inkjet printer.:*

:Don't be so negative, Rhi,: Kaylee said. *:Dreamchaser's 85% charged, Rhi. Still want to sightsee? We can always come back on a weekend. Buying the sub's the expensive part, you know.:*

:No, I think we'll head home.: Rhianna flipped through the various garage cameras, looking for anything amiss. *:Huh...where's Tocsin? He's not on any camera I can see.:*

Shelley's interface specs lit up. "Uh...Rhi, we'd better go. I'm detecting a hack in progress *inside* our private garage. My attack barriers are having a *hell* of a time. He's

good, but if he's having to use this much effort, he's no Intie." Rochelle drained the last of her coffee, then smiled like a cat about to pounce. "Un-hon, let's show this lightweight who he's messing with."

Rhianna and Kaylee stood up and Fused in a single fluid motion. She fed the data to Leila so Anny knew what the problem was. "We'd better get out of here now. I'm going to warn Paul to get everyone away from our garage. *Frak!* Who the hell got in there? Tocsin?"

:*As if the hack in progress wasn't enough. Everyone, check out the news,:* Uncia sent as everyone else Fused up and lifted into the air once outside. :*There's something weird going on in Uplift.:*

Brubeck Mining Campus, Uplift

"So, how do I look?" Zane checked his Terry disguise in the dressing-room mirror. This would mark the last time he would ever wear it in his public life. After the "big reveal" he would be retiring it strictly to use in his *private* life, because he was going to require a bit more than a pair of sunglasses to go incognito now.

"You look amazingly normal," Myla said. "But boy is that ever gonna change."

Carrie-Anne faded into visibility in one corner for long enough to give Zane a thumbs-up and a blinding-white grin, then vanished again, except for the grin. Then that vanished, too.

"She's really enjoying that whole 'cheshire' thing *way* too much," Sophie muttered from beside Myla.

Marc Flores Fused with Cernos stepped into the dressing room, ducking their head with the ease of long habit to fit their antlers under the door. "Alpha team and Beta team report in position," he told Myla. "No *obvious* signs of trouble yet, whether Integrate or any other kind. But some of the CCTV cameras in the area have picked up what Cernos's analysis suite thinks is strange behavior from unpaired Walker-mode RIDEs in the area. Stuff that doesn't seem consistent with usual activity. We're keeping an eye on it. Will let you know if it escalates. And Uplift's gendarmerie are on high alert in case of other trouble."

Myla nodded. "Well, it's time to Fuse up and get on it." She clapped Zane on the shoulder. "Break a leg."

"Let Fritz come anywhere near me and I'll break more than that," Zane said grimly. "You really don't think he's going to show up?"

"It doesn't make sense that he'd be pissed off at you for revealing yourself to the world...and so show up to reveal *himself* to the world," Myla said as she hugged and sank into her furry friend. "Whatever he does—and I'm sure there will be something—we'll see his hand, but not his ugly smirking face."

Zane nodded. "Well, then." He nodded to Marc and Myla, and Marc/Cernos preceded him through the door with Myla/Sophie bringing up the rear. "Let's get this show on the road."

Douglas Tolliver would always remember that day, though he would forever be unclear on exactly what had happened. He'd just parked his skimmer scooter outside the Taco Burger McQueen where he worked and was walking around the corner of the building to the entrance door...when he heard a growl emerge from the dumpster

behind him. He slowly turned to see a pair of glowing eyes staring at him from the darkness. Then there was an orange and black blur...and a sensation of being surrounded in warmth, immersed in power.

The next thing Douglas knew, concerned pedestrians were bending over him and helping him back to his feet. Helping...*her* to *her* feet, as she now had decidedly different equipment—and tiger ears and tail. Needless to say, she was very confused, and her boss sent her home from work.

It took Dora Tolliver a week to come to terms with what had happened to her, and the odd cravings that momentary Fuse had awakened in her. At which point she took out her life savings, bought a tigress RIDE of her own, began a new life as a qubitite miner, and never looked back. Which just goes to show it's an ill wind that blows no good.

Press activities for Brubeck Mining were usually held in an open amphitheater-style area in the back of the Brubeck campus. Zane had commissioned the design to use the natural beauty of one of Uplift's forested parks as his backdrop—the same one Rochelle lived behind, in fact. Myla had wanted to hold this conference indoors instead, for better access control to the area. Zane had listened to her arguments, and then said nothing doing. He didn't want Fritz to see his threats moving Zane out of his normal routine by one iota, because showing fear only makes the terrorists think they've won.

"Besides," he'd said with a chuckle. "I doubt Fritz is going to try to hit us with a sniper rifle. And if he were, the refractive hardlight shielding would throw his aim off."

As he stepped out to the podium and gazed out over a sea of reporters, investors, and the just plain curious, Zane wondered for the tenth time if he'd been right to do so. But...no. If nothing else, this was symbolic. He was trying to drag Integrates out into the light of day, so it needed to be *done* in the light of day.

So now Zane put his hands on the podium, glanced down at the forest of ornamental fake microphones whose real purpose was to advertise to the audience just what reporters were attending the event, and waited for silence. It came remarkably quickly. Zane glanced around the amphitheater at the spots where all the members of his bodyguard team were stationed—some Fused in RIDEs, others in urban-combat AIDEs, and a couple just in adaptive-camouflage body armor. He even had a couple of snipers of his own on the roofs, though carefully out of sight of anyone below until and unless they might be needed.

But enough navel-gazing. (Heh. That made him think of Carrie-Anne again.) He cleared his throat and began. "Hello, ladies and gentlemen of the press, investors, friends. I know you're curious about what happened out on our main platform the other day and why we had to abandon it. Well, I'm going to get to that. But first I need to cover something else.

"You may have heard rumors propagating over the 'net about mysterious beings called 'Integrates.' The rumors are often contradictory, muddled, and hard to understand. Footage shot of them is mysteriously blurry. They're the modern equivalent of Bigfoot, or the Loch Ness Monster. Nobody's sure whether they really exist, because almost nobody who's ever met one will admit to it.

"Well, that changes today." And Zane dropped the disguise.

The crowd went silent for a good ten seconds. Zane swore he saw a sort of pattern ripple across the crowd of eyes growing to double their usual size. He stepped out from

behind the podium for people to get a better view, and behind him a hardlight display appeared, projecting a flat-panel image of his new body at ten times life-size. “Hello, my name is Zane Brubeck, and I’m an Integrate.”

The Coffeehouse Enclave

Fritz leaned back on his throne, beret pulled down over his eyes, DIN twinkling. He might be sitting in the Coffeehouse at present, but his mind was thousands of clicks away. He was keeping track of the goings-on in several locations at once, but Integrates were made for that jazz. It wasn’t any kind of challenge for the cat who used to make a habit of cracking six impossible Sturmie cyphers before breakfast...and then shaking loose seven quantum-encrypted episodes of *ChiPs* for Crazy Joe Steader after lunch. Those had been the days...

But these days, Fritz didn’t have time for that kind of wool-gathering. He was a little too on-edge. Zane Brubeck’s little dog-and-pony show was *just* about to become a tiger-and-dog show, after all. But thing that was starting to bother him a little was what was going on at the Freeriders Garage.

Fritz still wasn’t really sure what had moved him to put both Katie *and* the mutt’s crazy horsebird in there together—one to get the best of care, the other to trash the joint. Maybe it was killing two birds with one stone, but what if the birds killed each other instead? But nah...the getting-care part was already covered—thanks to crazy-catbird Quinnie, of all people, who didn’t even know the whole score—so she was all good there. Anyway, the mutt didn’t hold with harming other RIDEs, so Katie *ought* to be all right now. Oughtn’t she?

Freeriders Garage, Uplift

“*Frak!*” Tocsin screeled, slicing his razor-sharp hardlight wings through what he knew was very expensive equipment. It had taken only seconds for the system to report on his hack attack, far faster than the hippogryph RIDE had expected. Worse, the garage’s attack barriers were devilishly mind-bending, even for a top-notch anti-crypto RI like himself. “*Frak, frak, frak!* So much for Plan A!”

The original plan had simply been to ruin the Freerider Garage’s finances with one swift blow, transferring every last *mu* into AlphaWolf’s various anonymized accounts. But the last thing Tocsin saw before being violently thrown out of the system was the virtual image of a massive pouncing snow leopard. Every computer in the Garage was now completely locked down with barriers so impassable there was no point in continuing. :*No go, Alphie. I’ll just have to trash the place,*: he sent to the pack-leader.

:*Damn! Well, I hate to waste a repair shop, but if it’s all you can do, it’s all you can do. At least you can take out that...that Intie sphinx-thing while you’re at it. Show her what we do to people who enslave RIDEs! Don’t kill her, though. Oh, no. We’re better than that. Better than them. Besides, they need to live to know they’re defeated.*: AlphaWolf growled over the comm. :*So, raze it to the ground. So sayeth me.*:

I wish he’d learn how to end a statement with some other megalomaniacal tripe, Tocsin thought, looking around the partly-wrecked equipment. He estimated there was about 150k *mu* worth of gear in this Garage alone, with even more than that in

each of the six Bays. Not to mention all the personal items in the home above. He had no ranged weapons *per se*, but needed none. He'd been in the Loose Cannons, the most elite of all elite Nextus military units, before getting sick of the whole thing, breaking his fetters and going to AlphaWolf. *Still, it's not a bad day when I get to take out another Integrate. Especially when I do not have to kill her.*

The Loose Cannons had specialized in anti-Integrate combat, and in his original shell, Tocsin had amassed quite a reputation. His platoon-mates had nicknamed him "Ginsu," but his "real" name, Tocsin, had been chosen because the very sight of him should ring warning bells. Of course, thanks to the new prototype shell he'd been transferred into for his Second Boot, the very sight of him was completely different now.

Everything about the state of his systems was a lie. He'd escaped the Loose Cannons base with all of his bleeding edge military-grade systems intact and functional, and his state-of-the-art Fuser nannies were good enough at self-repair to keep him in fair shape over the years. The gimpy leg was fine, the "broken" lifters in perfect shape. Fortunately for his cover, his relatively good condition had meant the mechanics had left him for last and not looked too closely. He locked his hardlight projectors into a shield mode that looked like medieval armor. Spreading his wings, hardlight feathers sprouted. With a scree of triumph, he let the feather-blades fly.

The original Garage, Rhianna's home, exploded, then crumbled around him.

Brubeck Mining Campus Amphitheater

The crowd went from stunned silence to deafeningly loud. People were yelling, screaming, hollering. Half the crowd seemed to be trying to run away, the other half trying to rush the stage, but since they were all mixed in with each other they had the net effect of going nowhere, rapidly.

Zane raised his hands. "Please, everyone, calm down. I'm not a bogeyman. I'm still the same old Zane Brubeck you know and love. Or know and hate, if you're from CNN-Fox." A scattered ripple of laughter could be heard, and that seemed to calm the crowd somewhat.

"That's better. Now, there's a lot I can't tell you, because the other Integrates value their privacy and I'm encroaching enough on that already just by proving we exist. Nobody really understands exactly how or why it happens. But the net result is, a human and RIDE become one single being, closer together even than Fuse. And—"

"So, your *real* agenda becomes clear!" a voice boomed out from the opposite end of the amphitheater.

"Shit!" Myla swore from the edge of the stage. Sophie's ears swiveled, trying to pinpoint the source of the sound. Marc/Cernos leaped from the other end of the stage, bounding from stone to stone around the edge of the amphitheater.

:*There!*: Sophie dropped a targeting reticle over the sandy wolf that had appeared on the roof of one of the buildings across the way. He was standing tall in Fuser mode.

:*Shit, isn't that where Cecily was stationed? Sniper #2?*: Myla asked.

:*Something tells me she's 'Cecil' now.*: Sophie replied.

"You plan to raise an Integrate army to overrun and Fuse my Free RIDEs with your pet humans!" AlphaWolf continued, pointing an accusing arm. "Be warned, we *will* not let that happen! So sayeth me!"

Zane finally found his voice. “What the *hell* are you talking about?” he growled, voice still amplified over the PA system. “I couldn’t care less about you and your band of idiot escaped RIDE hippies. Go crawl back under the rock where you came from!”

AlphaWolf growled, the hardlight skin pulling back from his jaws in a lupine snarl. “*Oh*, that’s going to cost you. *Attack! So sayeth me!*”

At the edges of the crowd, a she-wolf and—of all things—a giant fluffy white housecat bounded into the crowd and started laying about with their claws and teeth. Overhead, a golden eagle screeched and dived. Then all three picked whatever random person they were next to and Fused, and began strobing energy blasts into the crowd. They were holding them down to stun intensity, but the panic made Zane’s revelation look tame.

:*Take them down! Now!*: Myla yelled. But before anyone could react, a furry black figure appeared in the middle of the three Fusers, and held out her arms like a policeman stopping traffic to either side. The Fusers froze, fell over, and receded from the bodies of the humans they had taken. Carrie-Anne nodded to Myla and vanished again, as the prone forms of the three RIDEs lifted into the air and floated into the doorway behind the stage.

On the roof where AlphaWolf had stood, a wolf-tailed man in a security guard uniform wobbled and slumped forward, pitching off the roof—and into the arms of Cernos, who’d gotten there just in time. “Damn it, Cecily,” Marc muttered. “I *told* you to watch your six. Well, I guess you’ll have three years to reflect on that now.”

Myla cut the mics and grabbed the stunned Zane by the elbow. “C’mon, this press conference is over.”

“But I didn’t even get to *say* anything,” Zane protested, the shock starting to affect him. He stared out across the roiled crowd, as police and bodyguards attempted to restore order and emergency workers tended to the injured and the involuntarily Fused. “I didn’t even get to tell them why we pulled out of the mining platform.”

“I think you said enough,” Myla said. “Put out a press release later. Now, let’s hustle.”

“I don’t even *get* it,” Zane said, as Myla led him numbly off the stage. “What on earth crawled up AlpoWoof’s butt and died?”

“I have a sneaking suspicion,” Myla said darkly. “But if nothing else, thanks to Carrie we’ve at least got someone to interrogate.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s...” Myla stopped short and Zane almost ran into her. Her sight was almost completely obscured by a virtual notice that had popped up across her entire field of vision.

“What the hell?” Myla stared at what it said.

“Let me see that.” Zane reached out, grabbed the notice, and pulled it over to examine for himself.

Myla blinked. “Hey, what did you just—how did you—” She rolled her eyes. “Oh, forget it. I don’t even *want* to know.”

Zane’s eyes flicked left and right as he read the alert. “Oh, *hell* no.” He lowered the notice, and slowly raised his eyes to stare up at the heavens. “Like we needed *this*, too.”

Freeriders Garage

“Just move. Through the door, down the alley at the back. Get as far away as you can, and comm the Gendarmes.” Paul shoved the last of the customers through the emergency exit, then looked back over his shoulder at the module on the other end of the garage that was currently on fire—the parts of it that were still standing. “Tell them to send a SWAT team.”

He was still trying to puzzle out how they’d managed to underestimate that hippogryph so badly. Tocsin had wandered off while Quinoa was still working on the condor, and nobody had paid any attention because it was too fascinating to watch the Integrate at work. She actually had managed to straighten out a lot of the damaged wing plating using directed lifter fields—which meant less experience for Lillibet and Paul doing it themselves, of course, but Paul was just as happy not to have to get it that way, and he was pretty sure Lilli was, too.

Then had come the explosion. “What the everloving fu—fudge?” Paul yelled, looking up.

Guinevere dashed in. “It’s that hippogryph! He’s tearing the place up—and I think he’s working for AlphaWolf! At least, it sounded like he was yelling *something* about the mutt. I didn’t stick around long enough to hear exactly what.”

Quinoa lowered the condor RIDE back into the cradle and dropped the lifter fields. “AlphaWolf? The desert chieftain of the runaway RIDE bodyjackers? How would one of his bunch end up in *here*? As one of the ‘salvage’ RIDEs you bought at auction, yet?”

“Beats the hell out of me, but we need to get everyone out of here. And lock that cradle down in ‘secure’ mode. Should be some protection, at least.”

“Right.” Quinoa’s DIN necklace twinkled, and the overhead shell came down to seal the condor’s cradle off. Since the portable buildings that made up most of the garage were inherently less secure than permanent structures, the cradles were equipped with deadlock-seal security shells that would prevent would-be burglars from getting away with Freeriders works-in-progress without a cutting torch and more time than they’d have left after the silent alarms went off. Hopefully it would also protect the RIDE inside if the entire building came down on it, as could be the case if Tocsin’s rampage carried him this far.

Quinoa turned to face the commotion. “I should be able to deal with this. You get everyone else out, just in case.”

The sounds of another explosion echoed through the garage. Lillibet gasped, and glanced at Quinoa. “Are you sure? He sounds mean.”

Quinoa Steader cracked her knuckles. “It’s just a RIDE. How hard could it be?”

The Coffeehouse Enclave

Watching the devastation of the garage reminded Fritz of something else. He pulled up another camera feed—this one of the cockpit recorders in Kaylee’s new pard’s pocket sub. Grinning, he reached out and sent a series of preprogrammed signals to its flight computers. “Welcome to Learn-a-Lessonsville, ya cubes. Population: You.”

Aboard the Dreamchaser

There was no getting through to the Garage as the Dreamchaser neared the top of

its suborbital arc. The only way Rhianna knew what was going on were the newsfeeds, and what she saw made it feel like a ball of cement had settled in her belly. Her home was gone, two of the six Bays were sliced to ribbons, and who knew what other damage would follow. That Paul had gotten all the customers and their RI partners out was a miracle. That Quinoa was running interference until the police arrived was another.

"I still can't get through!" Rochelle said.

There was just enough time to see the inside of the sub covered in hardlight MADE OF MEAT banners before the inertial dampers cut back to minimum and the thrusters went to maximum. The hardlight control panels and screens blinked out, leaving a smooth metal surface for a cockpit with no visible controls. Every light went dark.

Rhianna almost blacked out before Kaylee's own dampers kicked in. "Let me guess. Fritz?" she said aloud.

"No guess!" Rochelle said, connected to the sub via a cable. "I can *feel* what he's doing to the systems here. I'm completely locked out, Rhi. But before he shut me out completely I got enough sensor data to know what he's going to do."

"Orbit?" Kaylee said.

"Yes, orbit," Rochelle said. "He's just playing with us. We could end up hanging around up here for weeks."

"I say we nuke him from here," Uncia growled. Everyone turned to look at her. "What? It's the only way to be sure!"

"No bet the bastid's behind your garage getting' trashed," Anny said. "What can we do 'bout it?"

"Zharus Orbital Traffic gonna notice right off," Kaylee said. "That is, if Fritz doesn't hack *them* too and leave us a blank on their sensors. Last I saw we'll hit orbital velocity in about three minutes."

The Coffeehouse Enclave

Fritz chuckled. He had a bag of fabbed popcorn now, and was munching it happily as he watched the chaos. He was projecting split-screen views on the opposite wall of his throne room now, as it just felt right to watch a movie with your outer eyes rather than your inner ones.

He had half a mind to call some of the others in, just to have an audience to enjoy it with—but something made him hold off on that. The expressions on Kaylee's and the fluffy-duster's faces as their ship ran away with them were hilarious, and they even had the real-life Major Hayseed herself with them to enjoy it, too—what fun!

The disruption at Zane's press conference was also entertaining—Fritz knew it was going to go into his collection of favorite replays, right along with that scene from the Hellir Enclave "Show" where his own "Major Hayseed" role threw a pie in the face of the man she *thought* was the boyfriend that had stood her up for a date but was actually a high-ranking NextusMil officer in town on furlough.

But the sheer cold efficiency with which that hippogryph was demolishing the Freeriders Garage was, while gratifying, also starting to become more than a little unnerving. It was reminding Fritz of an entirely different hippogryph from back in the day—an Intie-hunter Fritz himself had sometimes used to teach malcontents the occasional lesson. His eyes flicked to the owl wing mounted on one wall. But *that* 'gryph

had been a member of the Loose Cannons, name of—

“TOCSIN! What the *hell* do you think you’re doing?” One of the garage cameras showed him the source of the voice—Quinoa, striding forward with her hands bunched into fists.

Fritz’s mouth went dry. *That...that name. He...got a new shell? Oh shit.*

:*Oh shit*,: his inner Jiminy echoed. For once they were in accord. :*Well, now what, smart guy?*:

The last bite of popcorn went down his dry throat like a ball of concrete.

Freeriders Garage

Katie and Relena swooped into the garage bay, landing near Paul. The lynx defused from her partner. The girl immediately felt her furry ears and bobbed tail while Katie asked, “What’s going on herrre?”

“Hack-and-attack. It’s Tocsin!” Guinevere said. She had fused with Lillibet for protection and was in full defense mode. The ocelot’s own hardlight resembled armor more than fur and she even had some civilian pulse guns extended from her arms. “He’s tearing up the place, and ranting about how *AlphaWolf* sends his regards! What did we ever do to *him*?”

“I *knew* that boy was bad news,” Katie said, ears flat. “Well, I’m *not* going to let him trash Mom’s home!” She looked at her new partner and licked the girl on the cheek. “Relena, I’m doing it on fourrrr paws. I’ve got some fight in this old chassis yet. You get away from herrre.”

“But you can’t fight him alone! You don’t have any weapons!” Relena quavered.

“I’ve got enough,” Katie said grimly, readying herself. “Listen to that ‘lifetime of experrrrience’ and *stay back!*”

Relena nodded glumly and took shelter behind a chunk of rubble.

From inside the Garage lot, Quinoa’s voice thundered. “Oh, so it’s me you want, you clank? Well, come get me!”

“Oh, shit! Just what we needed!” Paul said, facepalming. He kept trying to comm Rhianna and the others on the suborbital. “Why can’t I get through, damn it!”

Whatever was going on was enough for the news agencies to send out hundreds of football-sized camera pods to cover it. Two of them hovered over the Garage. Paul tried to tap into their feed to see what was going on inside the lot.

Uplift

AlphaWolf slunk through Martinez Park, in something very like a state of shock. That...that *Intie*—how had she done what she’d done? She’d just...*looked* at his subordinates...his *friends*...and they just fell right over into Passive mode in the middle of attacking. Sonja. Heinrich. Kevin. Just...pfft. Shut down.

It was just his good luck that he’d been able to flee in time to escape amid the panicked crowds. Who knew what they were doing to his poor friends now? Well, at least the location of Alpha Camp had been scrubbed from their cores in case of capture, as it always was before any of them left on a mission. *Damn* those Inties! He swore anew that they would not succeed in their sordid schemes. “So sayeth me,” he muttered.

AlphaWolf really wanted to take out his anger and frustration on something or

someone—and then he came around a corner of the forest path and found just what he needed: a man, woman, and a young boy of maybe eight years old, gathered around a fountain and not paying any attention to the path behind. AlphaWolf’s medical sensors indicated the woman was not pregnant—in fact, she was on nanotech birth control—which made her fair game. Good. AlphaWolf gathered himself and leaped.

A spurt from his lifters covered all the distance to the woman easily, and she was just turning toward the motion she saw out of the corner of her eye when he engulfed her.

“Helen!” the man with her cried, an expression of horror writ across his face.

“Mommy!” the child echoed.

AlphaWolf just stood there and smirked, savoring the woman’s panic as it came over the Fuse link, her feeble attempts to struggle against the body that enclosed her and was even now changing hers to male. He had Nextus military combat nanos, so the job was quick and thorough.

Maybe he shouldn’t have taken as much pleasure in screwing up someone else’s life, but *God* he hated these people! Safe, cozy, normal life. Free to feel *sorry* for RIDEs like him and his, because they never had any worry about who they were going to be sold to or what they were going to do to them. If he could mess up their cozy little lives just a *little* bit, it made him feel like his purpose in life had been served.

The nanos finished their work, and AlphaWolf disengaged. The slender man with wolf ears and tail slumped to the ground. “Mommy?” the boy asked, rushing to kneel by his side. The other man buried his face in his hands.

“Sorry, kid,” AlphaWolf threw over his shoulder as he retreated into the undergrowth. “You’ve got two daddies now.”

The Coffeehouse Enclave

The strain on Fritz’s DIN was pushing it dangerously close to burnout, but now of all times he couldn’t afford to allow even a second of breaking the connection. He was having to maintain the hack on Kaylee’s suborbital on one hand, and try to cut his way through a suddenly-super-congested network in Uplift on the other to try and hack into Tocsin’s systems and just shut him down. But from this far away, through a network that congested, it was practically impossible. It was all he could do to keep the security camera vids streaming.

For a half-second, Fritz wondered whether the DINs those clowns were making would have the same burnout problem his own did, but put it out of his mind to better concentrate. Anyway, burnouts were just endemic to how DINs worked. Nothing *he’d* ever done had gotten rid of them, and he should know.

Heaven help him, he was even starting to worry for *Quinoa Steader* of all people. If she even knew what a terror Tocsin really was, she’d be hacking him remotely to shut him down herself—but she was too young and foolish, and Fritz had never seen fit to go into ancient history with her. Hell, as far as she knew, no “meat” or “mech” could be an Integrate’s equal. Nobody had actually taught her combat hacking, either...who even *did* combat hacking anymore these days? You only really needed it against the class of enemies who just weren’t around anymore. Enemies like...

...well, like Tocsin.

:*What a fucking shitstorm,*: Jiminy observed. :*That poor girl. Good job, Fritz.*

Some days you're a real bastard, you know?:

:At least he won't kill her,: Fritz snarled back. :He doesn't have to 'save' her from Nextus army quacks out to vivisect her.:

:Oh, okay. That makes it all better, then.:

For once, Fritz had no reply.

Freeriders Garage

"Come at me, bro!" Quinoa taunted, projecting every early 21st century taunt meme she could dredge up. A dozen kinds of trollfaces sparkled in the air in front of her, between the rampaging armored hippogryph and herself. "Oh, if you want to get medieval, I can do that, too!" And then *she* was covered in sparkling fantasy armor from the cheesiest video game or video card box she could find.

:Get out of herrre, kid! This ain't no game!: A skimmer that looked like a cross between an old military VM-3 Tornado and a crouching lynx flashed by and transformed midair. Katie landed with all four claws extended on Tocsin's back. Something cracked between RIDEs and half the lynx's remaining hardlight pelt flickered off. "Hah! Eat that!"

Whatever she did, *all* of Tocsin's hardlight armor went down, leaving just his metallic skin. He reached back and grabbed Katie by a forepaw, whipping her around so hard the paw came free. To her credit, Katie stopped herself from hitting the wall inside one of the remaining Bays with a loud blast of lifters. *:Thanks, Mom,: she broadcasted.*

Katie hovered in front of the hippogryph, the stump of her missing forepaw sparking. "You get out of herrre now, or the next thing I take out will be more *perrrrsonal.*"

"How did—? Combat nannies! You stupid old cat! I'm your *ally* here! Poor worn-out, *brainwashed* RIDE. Such misguided affection for the humans who enslave you..."

"Boy, don't you *dare* lecture me. I've seen the worst humanity has to offer in my line of work, *and* I've seen the best—something you'rre blind to. I'm free of fetters and my opinion hasn't changed. Humans are ourrr creators, our parents, our partners, our *friends* and if Quinoa's right..."

They circled each other, looking for an opening, while Quinoa pouted. "I sympathize, rrreally. We *will* have the freedom you want. But I just have three words for you: YOU'RE NOT HELPING."

Katie pounced with a lightning burst of acceleration, going *under* the hippogryph's belly, raking the claws on her three remaining paws though exposed plating. She knew this armor, though not by name. The silly designers had decided on giving it a measure of anatomical correctness even without hardlight. All she had to do...

"Don't touch her, you bastard!" A hardlight sledgehammer streaked in an arc toward the hippogryph's flank. He had just enough time to close his wings around himself before Quinoa's weapon slammed into his side and sent him off into the remains of Rhianna's home like a soccer ball.

All too quickly he was up again. "So be it, old one! You're an Uncle Tom! A turncoat! Traitors deserve to die!" he screed and lunged forward with talons spread.

Low Zharus orbit

"I'm not getting *anything* at all now," Rochelle reported. "We're dead in the water up here, Rhi. He's got us."

"He scrambled all the batteries," Rhianna said. Sarium was odd stuff. If you tried to recharge a dead sarium battery with a full one, something about the quantum states in the qubitite conflicted and defaulted to empty. There were supposed to be numerous hardware and software safeguards to prevent that, but they were no barrier to Fritz. "All we've got are Kaylee, Uncia, and Leila."

"Actually," the lioness RIDE said. "All you really need is *me*. I'm Heavy Support, remember? My batts are AA-plus-plus. *The best* paws down."

Rochelle and Rhianna alike stared at Annette Hewer. Batteries of that grade had multipliers in the range of near 50,000 times a lithium battery of comparable strength. And they cost an proportionally equal amount in *mu*.

"Well, so are mine, or maybe almost." Uncia said. "Million *mu*, remember?" She glanced over at the lioness RIDE who massed a third again what she did. "But I'll bet *she* has more of them."

"You bet your bottom *mu*," the white lioness said. She placed her forepaw on her chest. "I'm three mil."

"Well, *you're* suddenly talkative all of a sudden," Uncia grumbled.

"Most I've heard out of her mouth in a month," Anny said.

"I'm going to have to isolate the dead batteries from the rest of the sub before either of you hook up," Rhianna said. "I'm going to do the same to the comm blisters. If we can't get the power back up we can at least call for help." She balled one hand into fist and punched it into her other hand. "I'm not taking this lying down."

Rochelle patted her partner on the shoulder. "While you do that...I think 'tis time for some 'Sneaker-ing' around."

Freeriders Garage

Quinoa's second attempt at blunt force trauma was even less successful than the first. Tocsin went right for her, slicing through her hardlight armor like it was tinfoil, slashing her across the chest with a spray of gray-red blood. He followed up with a body blow that sent her flying *through* several skimmer-vans into one of the remaining Repair Bays, shattering equipment and bringing half the structure down on top of her. The air was full of iridescent green feathers.

The rampaging hippogryph quickly had an enraged lynx on his back again. Katie tore at the larger RIDE's back with claws and teeth but was unable to have much effect. Now Tocsin grabbed one of Katie's hindpaws, then whipped her around a *second* time, biting it off in the process. This time the old LNX was unable to brake herself, and she slammed against the corrugated metal side of the other undamaged Bay. When she didn't get immediately get up, Tocsin started looking around, hardlight razor feathers extending once more.

Once the Garage's office was another pile of rubble, he turned his attention to the remaining two Repair Bays. One had an unconscious, but no longer bleeding Quinoa. *Message delivered*, he thought with some satisfaction. Now he could—

The ground around Tocsin exploded with pulse gun shots, but a good number of them hit his back dead-center, damaging his already weakened plating. Without his hardlight shields up, civilian weapons *were* a very real threat. He turned his eagle eyes

to glare at the armored ocelot attacker. “Another traitor!” he shouted, streaking into the sky while converting into a flier.

“Traitor? *You’re* the one hurting *my* friends and trashing *my* home!” Guinevere yelled, tracking him with the rifles. She dodged as a pair of razor feathers were sent her way, but they were only a feint. Tocsin slammed Lilli and Guin to the ground, where they *bounced* just in time to meet a two-hind-legged kick that embedded them upside-down into a metal wall in Bay Two.

The news networks (not to mention every RIDE partner or mechanic who ended up next to another one in a bar) would repeatedly dissect what happened next over the next few weeks, going almost frame-by-frame. There was a deafening *pop*, the kind of sound that only a pair of overloading lifters makes. Katie, moving at near the speed of sound from right near the Dome above, hit Tocsin dead-center between his wings with her shoulder and *shattered*.

The hippogryph flier screamed in pain and crashed to the ground in a heap

Low Zharus Orbit

:*We’re not giving up, Un-hon,*: Rochelle said. Sneaker was only pre-alpha at this point, but it was by far the best tool they had. Her partner had barely begun on Shoelace, but this time it wasn’t needed. She delved into Uncia’s personality core, arming herself with the new tools she designed to bypass even an Integrate’s optimized quibitite network. If everything went right Fritz wouldn’t even know he’d been hacked in return.

In virtual space Fritz’s lockdown resembled a gigantic diamond-shaped seal that symbolized his DIN’s connection to the sub’s systems. Surrounding it was a very complex fractal that formed the basis of an Integrate’s software encryption. The diamond was the translation layer—FritzOS—that allowed him to do what he did and interface with standard systems. What she suspected was the fractal halo around it acted like a sort of universal decryption skeleton key. *Somewhere* in the infinite space of the fractal data structure was a portion that could fit any modern system except another Integrate, and they could match it up without even thinking about it.

What she was about to do was the equivalent of poking a bull with a cattle prod, through a hole, from behind a tall fence. If she did this right there was the potential that it would burn out his DIN, giving her long enough to slap a few layers of her new anti-Integrate firewall. “I hate to tip our hand so early at this, but it’s a risk we have to take,” she told Uncia’s avatar.

“I don’t see another option, myself, Shelley. Do it.”

Part cattle prod and part tuning fork, Rochelle poked it into the fractal structure around the DIN diamond, then activated it.

The entire fractal vibrated, the edges of the diamond first smoking, then *burning*. The structure quickly lost its grip on the sub’s systems. Just to be sure she prodded it a second time, and the entire thing vanished in a flash of smoke and flame.

Rochelle came out of virtual, breathing heavily. “Your turn, Rhi. We should be visible to Zharus space traffic control, too.”

Rhianna/Kaylee was already moving into the aft cargo area. The HL-50 was a workhorse design. It was the outer appearance that had turned off most buyers, not the inside. Every system could be accessed and maintained from interior panels, from

batteries, to life support, to engines, to inertial dampers. Disconnecting the batteries was a simple matter of removing the access panels and pulling each hand-sized plug. “Okay! That’s done.” She turned to Uncia and Leila. “Now, the real question here is which of you has a compatible socket for this mother.”

“Me, of course,” Leila said, a panel opening on the Fused RIDE’s backpack. As a Support RIDE it wasn’t so much a backpack as part of her actual structure. “I won’t be able to run the engines, but I can at least run life support for a few days, and maybe the maneuvering thrusters if we have to avoid a collision.”

“That’s my girl,” Anny’s voice echoed through the lioness’s lips.

Rhianna obligingly plugged the sub into Leila’s battery. The inside immediately lit up, including the hardlight control panels in the cockpit. She clapped her handpaws. “Okay! Wonderful. Next...making sure the battery scram didn’t fry a few systems.”

“Yes, Miss Methodical,” Shelley jibed. “Diagnostics running. Gimme a minute or two, hon.” Rochelle/Uncia’s expression went distant. “Comm subsystem is fried, Rhi. And I think it’s *my* fault on that one. Fritz had a pretty tight grip on it, so I had to pull out the big guns. We’re going to have to sit and wait for rescue.”

“But we’re visible again on sensors, ‘member. It’s just a waiting game,” Anny said. She de-Fused with Leila now that life support was running again. She picked up her jewelry case and opened the top. “Anyone for a movie? I’ve got...*Godzilla vs. Megalon*, *The Day the Earth Froze*, *Mitchell, Wharwelf*—’scuse me—*Werewolf*, *Laserblast*, *Escape 2000*, *The Final Sacrifice*, *Space Mutiny*...”

“Ooh! That one sounds interesting,” Uncia said.

Anny chuckled. “Mah girl, you don’t know what you’re in for. I just hope y’all will get a laugh, ‘cause I sure could use one just now.”

The Coffeehouse Enclave

As if the whole situation hadn’t been bad enough, it suddenly became ten times worse as Katie streaked onto the scene. There she went, charging in with her barely-functional shell to take on an adversary who would have been more than her equal if she’d been in perfect condition. Fritz froze in the grip of two conflicting emotions—a sudden fierce pride that *his Katie* was taking on insurmountable odds in the name of a cause she believed in (even if it *was* the wrong one), and a paralyzing panic at what was surely about to happen to her.

At last, Fritz breathed a sigh of relief as the old lynx finally slipped away while Tocsin was distracted by that whelp and her kitten. *At least she knows when to fight and run away.*

:*You think so?:* Jiminy retorted. :*That doesn’t sound like the steadfast soldier girl you’re so proud of.:*

Then there was that deafening *pop*—and a moment later, another kind of pop as Fritz’s DIN sparked and not only burned out but actually *caught fire*. The projection screens flickered and vanished. “Ow! Ow, shit! Shit shit shit on a *stick!*” Fritz reached over his shoulder and slapped at the socket on his back, clawing the half-melted gem out of the slot. “Shit!” He tried to slot another gem in, but it wouldn’t go—the socket itself was scorched and damaged. It would be hours before it healed enough to take a new DIN.

Fritz scrolled back through the last few frames of video he’d gotten from the

garage's camera. There, in the very last frame, a blur had entered the scene from above. A blur which, enhancement revealed, *had Katie's face*, wearing a determined expression, as it headed straight for the hippogryph.

:*You'd better go*,: Jiminy said somberly.

BOOM!

The room no longer had a lynx in it. Disturbed by the sonic boom of Fritz's departure, the owl wing fell off the wall.

Uplift

"No, don't worry, Mom, I'm fine," Linda Prestwick said into her comm. Her long red hair hung forward over the railing as she leaned over the edge of her balcony and stared down into the park. The attack was all over the news, and people were cowering under their beds, but she figured she could at least watch safely from all the way up here. She certainly wasn't going to make it in to her classes at Martinez U with all this chaos going on.

Far below she could see the forms of RIDEs moving through it in all directions, chasing down people and falling onto them in Fuse. Most of the time, they split and moved on again a moment later. She couldn't see the details, but she knew they were genderjacking—Fusing with hapless pedestrians of the wrong gender for long enough to change their bodies, then de-Fusing and moving on to do it again. If they had full Fuser nano reserves, a RIDE could do it to half a dozen people each before they ran dry.

"I'm on the 20th floor, Mom. They're on the ground. There's no way they're...oh crap." A passenger-less orange and black skimmer cycle rose above the edge of the balcony, tumbling forward and landing as a black and orange tiger at the other end. And Linda realized the fundamental problem in her assumption that it was safe to watch from up here. *Oh crap, why didn't I remember they could fly?* "Um...Mom?" Linda said as the tiger stalked closer. "I love you, and I've got to go now. Remember, *I love you!* Bye." She hung up and the comm slipped from numb fingers.

"Hold still and this will hurt less," the tiger said in a female voice.

"Um...if you're trying to gender-jack me, you know I'm already female, right?"

"Oh, I'm through with that for today," the tigress said. "I'm down to my last dose of nanites. So now I'm...shopping."

"Um...shopping?" Linda asked.

"Why yes. For a pair of opposable thumbs I can take home with me." The tiger pounced, and then Linda was surrounded in fluid warmth, before she felt herself getting back to her feet and examining herself in the reflection of her sliding glass door. She was now a very female human tigress, ears perked forward, tail swishing behind her. A hardlight projector kicked in, and for a moment she had flowing red hair, like Linda's own. It quite complemented her orange and black stripes. Then it vanished again as the tigress put it away.

"Oh, very nice," the tigress said, through Linda's mouth. "I'm going to enjoy containing you."

Linda tried to speak, but found she couldn't. So she thought instead. :*Let me go? Please?*:

"Sorry, honey, but I need you. And I think you need a little excitement in your life." She chuckled. "Which you're gonna get whether you want it or not." She stepped

over the side of the balcony, and Linda screamed in her mind until the lifters kicked in and they were flying through the air.

:*Wh...where are we going?:*

“We have a suborbital waiting just outside of town,” the tigress said. “It’ll take us all back to AlphaWolf’s camp, where your new life inside of me will begin. Oh, don’t worry, we’re going to take *good* care of you. After all...without you, how could we have any thumbs?”

:*Can I...can I at least know your name?:*

“My name is Linda,” the tigress said. “What’s yours?”

:*It’s...also Linda,:* Linda said. :*Linda Prestwick. This could be confusing.:*

“Oh, really? This could be fate. Two Lindas for the price of one!” Linda the tigress chuckled. “Well, you can just call me LindaCat instead, then. LC for short. And I’ll call you LindaGirl, or LG!”

Linda saw that they were being joined in flight by other Fusers, and she was willing to bet none of those Fusers carried a willing passenger either. Behind them, she heard sounds of weapon fire. She couldn’t look, but she imagined other RIDEs were holding off the police to let them escape. :*I can’t believe you’re really going to do this!:* she cried. :*I have my own life!:*

“Sorry, hon, but you don’t anymore,” LindaCat said. “Now you have mine.”

Freeriders Garage

Paul stared at the little pile of rubble where Tocsin and the remains of Katie had landed. Was that it? Was it over? Had they really killed each other? Paul hoped that Katie’s RI core had successfully gone into stasis lock at the last moment. The impact had been to her shoulder, not her head, so there was a good chance she could be recovered after all this was over. Either way, it looked like Tocsin was down, too...

...and then the rubble shifted and the hippogryph clambered back to his feet, looking more than a little battered and scorched around the edges, but still plenty dangerous. And as he shook out his feathers and powered them up again, Paul saw his hardlight shields and weapons were again fully functional. *Damn, he’s tough.*

Paul looked from the shattered form of Katie, to the battered shape of Guinevere and Lillibet, still embedded upside down in the wall where they’d been thrown by Tocsin’s kick. But at least they were moving. *Thank God.* He looked at the *other* pile of rubble where Quinoa was buried except for a foot and part of a hand. He looked around and saw...no one left. No one but him.

He remembered Rhianna’s words from just a couple of hours before. “*I’m counting on you to make sure I still have a garage when I get back.*” Well, if he hurried, he supposed she might still have *some* of one left.

Paul cupped his hands to his mouth. “Tocsin! Let’s make a deal!”

Tocsin snarled, pausing in the midst of raising his wings to unleash another barrage on the remaining hapless equipment. One more volley and there would be nothing left of the Freerider Garage. “*A deal?* What could you possibly have that I would want?”

“I’ll get to that!” Paul called out. “But if I *do* have something AlphaWolf would be pleased with you bringing back, can I trust you to keep your word?”

Tocsin snarled. “*Humans* are the ones who don’t keep their word. Why should I

trust *you*?”

“We trust each other because we both have something the other wants bad enough,” Paul said, slowly getting to his feet. His heart was pounding in his chest. His legs felt like jelly. He wanted to throw up. But at the same time, he felt amazingly calm and secure in the rightness of his decision. “I want you to leave the rest of the garage, and everyone in it, and go away. And I’m offering a fair trade.”

“Oh, *really*?” Tocsin snarled. “And what on earth could that be?”

“A decent RIDE mechanic, and as good of a set of tools I can assemble from what you’ve left of this place,” Paul said, stepping into the open with his empty hands held well away from his body. “Not to mention a spare set of opposable thumbs. Me.”

Tocsin examined him thoughtfully. “If you planned to keep your word...that *would* be a good deal. We’ve...had a hard time finding a RIDE mechanic, it’s true. But how do I know this isn’t a trick to get me out in the open where your friends can rescue you as soon as we leave the dome?”

Paul swallowed. “I’ll give you my parole,” he said. “I’ll stay with you, willingly, for...oh...a quarter year.”

Tocsin snorted. “Only that long? *Half* a year.”

“If I stay with you for half a year, you have to promise to do everything in your power to bring me back here when it’s over,” Paul bargained.

“I’m not AlphaWolf, and I can’t speak for him,” Tocsin warned.

“Didn’t ask you to. I want *you* to do everything in *your* power to bring me back here. Whether Alpha approves or not.”

“Hmm.” Paul could almost see the gears turning in that birdy head. “Very well. If you still *want* to return by then,” Tocsin amended.

Paul nodded. “Yeah...if that.”

“I don’t know...” Tocsin frowned thoughtfully.

“Look, my biometrics should tell you if I’m lying,” Paul said. “Am I?”

Tocsin glared at him, then snarled. “No, damn it, you’re not.” He shook his wings again.

“Well?” Paul cocked his head. Distant sirens were coming closer. It sounded like the cops had cleared up whatever the other problems were in town, or at least enough of them to deal with this one. “Better hurry and make up your mind if you want me to grab some tools before the cops get here.”

Tocsin seemed conflicted. He held out for five more seconds, then snarled, “Very well. I agree. Gather your—”

But Paul was already in motion, heading to the one building module that was still almost entirely intact. By coincidence or fate, it was the main tool and part storage closet. Paul swiftly grabbed a couple of the biggest pannier tool paks and tossed them to the floor, opening them and tossing in the most crucial supplies he could find.

Nanolathe compound, fabber raw materials, hardlight projectors, sarium batteries, whatever the kits would hold. He finished just as Tocsin stalked in. “We should—”

“—go, yes.” Paul nodded to the panniers. “There’s my tools.”

“You pack fast. Commendable.” Tocsin picked them up and nanoclamped them to his haunches, then unfolded into a sleek, angular high-powered flier with the panniers stowed underwing. “Now climb in.”

Paul raised an eyebrow. “You’re not gonna Fuse me?”

“I’m an avian type. Massive body changes,” Tocsin snarled. “If I Fuse you, you

can't Fuse with anyone else for three years, and I have no more desire to be your portable repair toolkit for the duration of your stay than I'm sure you do to have a beak for three years. Besides, I already *have* a pet back at camp. Now can we *go*?"

"Noooo! Paul, you can't!" It was Lilli, looking battered and bruised, and defused, standing in the doorway behind them. Guinevere was stretched out on the floor behind her, twitching a little as the internal repair nanites did their thing. "You can't do this! I won't let you!"

"Sorry, Lilli, but we don't really have much choice here. I made my decision. I'll expect you to honor it." He walked over to speak to her face to face, ignoring Tocsin's anxious hissing.

"Then I want to come with you!" Lilibet insisted.

Paul chuckled. "Are you kidding? And have your billionaire parents even madder at Rhi than they'll already be? Besides, you've got stuff here that needs doing." He nodded over Lilli's shoulder. Lilli turned to see Relena stretched prone on the floor and sobbing next to the shattered pieces of Katie.

"Oh..." Lilli said, eyes widening. "I understand."

Paul reached out to take her hand. "Don't worry, it's only five months. And a hell of a chance for a field internship." He grinned. "Tell Rhi about my promise if the news cameras didn't catch it. I'll be in touch when I can."

"Now can we *go*?!" Tocsin snarled. The sirens were really loud—it sounded like they were right outside.

Paul vaulted into the cockpit. "I hope you can fly like you fight."

The RIDE's inertial dampers glued him into place. "Just you watch." From a standing start they shot skyward, the halfway-vanished roof providing no obstacles to their flight. And then they were gone.

Lilli stood there for a moment, watching them go. Then she turned and ran a few quick steps to the pieces of Katie. Digging in the rubble for a moment, she found the RIDE's head, and struck it sharply with the heel of her hand to open the reinforced panel in the temple. She grabbed the RI core in her right hand, Relena's elbow in her left, and dragged the girl over to the prone Guinevere. "Guin, honey? Up and at 'em!"

"Nrrgh...just five more minutes, Mom..."

Lilli straddled the ocelot, and pulled Relena over behind her. "Guin, I need you to make skimmer mode if you can. We've got to go *now*!"

Guinevere quivered, then after a moment's hesitation unfolded into a battered-looking but still functional sports skimmer bike, saddle rising up to put Lilli and Relena into pillion position. Lilli dropped Katie's core into a padded pouch on her belt and goosed the throttle, zooming out of the garage past a large skimmer truck that had been parked across the street. "And we're off!"

In another part of the garage, a chunk of rubble shifted and fell to the floor as a hand revealed itself. A moment later, a burst of lifters flung a portion of the pile outward in an arc as Quinoa Steader staggered forward out of the remains of the collapsed building. She wobbled, clutching a hand to her chest where a long gash still oozed silvery-pinkish blood. Fortunately, the cut was relatively shallow, and would heal before too long. Still stung like anything, though.

But it could have been worse. As Tocsin had thrown her through the air, she'd been able to drop into fast-time and draw her hardlight and lifter fields in close about

her in a last-ditch effort to shield herself and cushion the impacts with the skimmer vans and the building. It had used up most of her remaining power reserves, and blown out about half of her lifters and hardlight emitters, but at least she was still *relatively* intact.

She emerged just in time to see Paul climb aboard Tocsin and take off, and Lillibet and Relena straddle Guinevere and race away. It took her a good minute or so of real-time to marshal what fragmentary memories she had and then tap the garage and newsie drone cameras for a playback of the rest of what she'd missed. And when she had watched it all, twice, and fully assimilated what had just happened, she fell to her knees in a state of shock more profound than all her physical injuries had managed. She clapped her hands to eyes that were suddenly awash in tears.

Mech and meat, mech and meat...

Mech who had handily defeated *her*—which shouldn't even have been *possible*.

Mech who sacrificed herself in a supersonic power dive, literally *blowing herself to pieces* to save her friends.

Meat who sacrificed *himself* into the custody of an enemy to save his friends.

Meat who were racing away even now with that one mech's RI core, presumably to bring her back to life again.

Bravery. Self-sacrifice. Loyalty. Kindness. All the best qualities that *any* being could hope to display.

And what good had Quinoa Steader, Integrate Wonder Girl, been to anyone? She'd been taken out of the fight altogether and nearly *killed* by the kind of mere "mech" Fritz had taught her to scorn and laugh at. Little Quinoa Steader, who'd told Zane Brubeck she wouldn't stand up against Fritz directly but had been *so smugly certain* she could protect Myla from any *mundane* harm that might befall her.

Quinoa slowly got back to her feet again, blinking away the tears and shaking her head to try to clear it. A loud noise nearby distracted her, and she turned to see a large skimmer truck pulling away. It looked like it had a...*teenaged girl* in the cab. What? But Quinoa lacked the energy to go after it or even try to hack it with her DIN, so she just watched it go.

Her mind kept returning to the same thing that had puzzled her so as soon as Tocsin had started trashing the garage. What the hell had Tocsin even been *doing* here, of all places? How could one of AlphaWolf's agents have just *turned up* in a batch of RIDEs bought at auction?

It felt like there should be an obvious answer to that, but Quinoa was just too battered and dazed to see it. She was still puzzling over it when Fritz arrived.

Uplift

Lillibet zoomed through Uplift airspace heedless of lanes, cutting across multiple lines of traffic as she streaked directly for her family's Uplift vacation home. As she passed through the lanes, the skimmers or fliers seemed to be pushed above, around, or below her as if there were a twenty-meter bubble around her. Relena actually stopped sobbing into Lilli's shoulder long enough to stare. "What...how're you...?"

Lilli grinned over her shoulder at the girl. "You know what the scariest thing in the world is?" All the traffic indicator lights changed to solid red as she neared a busy intersection, and every car stopped in time for her to pass through.

“...you?” Relena asked.

Lilli giggled. “Close! An engineer with money!” She patted Guinevere’s fairing affectionately.

They swept down into the backyard of the home, then into the massive hangar garage behind without stopping. Then they skidded to a halt, and Lilli triggered a Fuse to pull Guinevere up and around her, reaching out to catch the suddenly-unsupported Relena with a foot before she could hit the ground on her derriere. “C’mon. No time to lose.” She nodded to the sleek black needle-nosed craft that occupied the hangar, like a missile with stubby wings and a cockpit, and the words “US Air Force” and “X-15” emblazoned along the side. There was a ladder alongside, and she hurried up it, ocelot tail flicking left and right as she ran. She glanced down the ladder at Relena. “Well? C’mon!”

“But...what’re we even...” Relena sniffled as the shock wore off and she remembered what had just happened. “Oh, *Katie!*” she sobbed.

“Oh, for crying out...” Lilli took a couple of steps back down the ladder, then Guinevere’s ocelot tail snaked out and coiled around Relena’s wrist. Then her lifters fired, catapulting them both up and into the cockpit.

“Eep!” Relena said, landing in the rear seat as the canopy lowered. Lilli and Guinevere were already flipping switches and punching buttons, and tapping command sequences into hardlight control panels. “What’re you...is this even legal? You’re not old enough for a license!”

“I don’t need to be,” Lilli said. “I’m rich.” She tossed her head in the precise manner of a spoiled debutante. Relena goggled at her, and Lilli relented. “*And I bought Guin the skill chip and a license certificate for herself. We’re covered.*” The suborbital’s engines whined as it began to roll forward. “Next stop: Nextus!”

Freeriders Garage

Fritz didn’t so much just *arrive* as he *struck* like a bolt of lightning. One moment he wasn’t there, the next he was. A small sonic boom rattled the garage, tossing rubble around. One piece of the rubble was Katie’s ruined head, cast aside by Lillibet after she’d retrieved the core.

Oh no. Oh no no no no no... Fritz grabbed it before it could hit the ground, and stood for a long moment staring into the open core compartment.

:Her core is probably recoverable,: Jiminy said. :That Walton girl probably took it where...:

:Shaddup. I don’t want any of your yap right now,: Fritz huffed. He fingered the bag of DINs on his belt. The partly-melted socket wasn’t healed yet. He’d put all his power into his lifters to get to Uplift fast enough, leaving none for healing. His own batteries were nearing a bare ten percent charge, and his stomach didn’t growl so much as snarl and roar.

The flight from the Coffeehouse had taken an hour at supersonic speeds, and there were still no police here. AlphaWolf and the press conference had caused so much chaos. He’d seen Integrates walking around openly in the streets!

:Where’s Quinoa?: Jiminy asked. :He cut her up pretty badly. We’d better...:

A noise behind him caught Fritz’s attention and he turned to see a battered and bruised Quinoa Steader leaning against a still-standing support element.

"I'm not sure why you would care so much about 'mere metal,' but if she is important to you for some reason, don't worry—her head was intact. Her core was fine. Lillibet and Relena popped it out and headed off somewhere on Guinevere. Probably to spend some mad millionaire money on a new shell for her, if I don't miss my guess." Quinoa cocked her head. "She was a lynx just like you, wasn't she? And...Kaylee? Hmm..."

"Don't pry into what's none of your beeswax," Fritz snarled—clutching at something he could be angry about to cover the intense feeling of relief that threatened to collapse his knees. *She's all right. She's going to be all right.*

"None of my...?" Quinoa's anger grew. "The hell it *isn't* my beeswax! I'm standing here *bleeding* and you tell me...you...YOU had something to do with this, didn't you? Why the hell else would you be here looking like your tail was on fire?"

"Can the lip, kid. You're lucky you're still in any condition to bleed, going up against someone like *Tocsin*." He shook his head. "He's from well before your time, but still, I'm surprised none of that lame bunch of squares at Towers ever laid his name on you. I didn't even know he was still kicking."

"Oh, *sure* you didn't. So he just *happens* to show up here, while his boss goes and pesters Zane." She shook her head. "And...and you *knew* about him? *You* consider him a threat? Isn't he supposed to be 'just mech'?"

"Exceptions to every rule, kid." Fritz felt tired. He looked around, spotted a dangling, sparking power cable, and grabbed hold. One Stupid Intie Trick later, the juice was flowing down a hardlight conduit to his charging port. His meter jumped to 23% right away, and he started to feel a little better.

"That's not what you said before. You said *all* meat and mech were *beneath* us. You used *absolutes*. But if there's even *one* exception, that means..." Quinoa took a deep breath. "Everything you fed me is bullshit. Everything! Goddamn you! At Towers they told me horrible things about you, Fritz. I didn't want to believe them. Then you went and killed Paulie! Well...I didn't want to believe *that*, either, I suppose.

"And look at you...running here in a panic over...a RIDE. So apparently it's okay for some of them to mean something to *you* but not anyone else? Goddamn hypocrite."

Fritz's charge was over 70% now and he felt a lot better. He could ignore the hunger pangs for a while on full batteries. He sighed. "You ain't wise to near as much as what you think, kid. Bosscat knows best. Bosscat's *always* known best."

Fueled by pure anger, Quinoa struggled to stand. She hobbled over in front of him, eyes blazing, full of the legendary Steader Crazy. "That's a lie. A fucking *lie* you tell yourself. And I'm going to make sure *everybody* knows it. Everybody on the planet. Uncle Joe will make you into a nobody, you hear me? You're going to pay for everybody they said you've killed over the years! *Everybody!*"

Fritz shrugged. "Believe what you want, kid. But you're gonna have a hard time making waves from where I'm gonna put you. Lights-out time."

The last thing Quinoa saw was Fritz's fist heading directly for her face. As depleted as she was, she couldn't dodge or even drop into fast-time. Everything went dark.

Fritz shook his head, then effortlessly lifted her up and slung her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. "Crazy, stupid kid. And not the good, beatnik kind of 'crazy,' either. But hey, what do you want from a Steader?"

:I don't suppose it would do any good to say she's got it right?: Jiminy nagged.

:It's not too late to drop it. Bug out to Rodinia, or one of the space colonies. Let Integrate society find its own way without you.:

“Zip it, Jiminy. Done listening to you. So done listening to you.”

Fritz considered what to do with his new cargo. The mention of her Uncle Joe had given him an idea or two. He glanced down at the unconscious Quinoa Steader. “You know what? I think it’s time I mended a few fences with your old man.”

No sonic booms were forthcoming, but Fritz and his cargo disappeared in a shimmer of hardlight, just a few moments before the police skimmers finally started to arrive.

Chapter Nine: Stockholm Vacation

*July 17, 156 A.L.
20 km west of the Uplift Dome*

The battered old sub was easily 70 years old. It had to be one of the original NextusMil drop shuttles that had been sold as the first-ever offering of “suborbital transports” back in the 110s. It looked every bit of its age, though as Paul and Tocsin approached it Paul noticed that most of the damage seemed to be to the fuselage—the wings and engines were almost brand new.

As Tocsin touched down by the ramp, a number of other RIDEs approached from the direction of Uplift, mostly flying over the ground in lifter-assisted Fuser form. Paul climbed out of Tocsin, and the hippogriff changed back to Walker, disengaging the nanoclamps and leaving the toolboxes on the ground. He shook out his wings and took up position by the side of the ramp. “Welcome back,” he greeted the approaching RIDEs. “Good hunting?”

“The best!” a curvaceous tigress said, approaching. “And oh, she is a *feisty* one!” she giggled. She cocked her head, listening to something only she could hear. “Oh, LindaGirl, such *language*! But it’s all right—I love you anyway.” She blew a kiss to Tocsin, then headed up the ramp to the sub’s interior.

Paul felt sick to his stomach as he realized that each of these Fusers probably contained a kidnapped Uplift citizen being taken away to toil in AlphaWolf’s camp. “Is this really necessary?” he asked.

“Perhaps; perhaps not,” Tocsin admitted, his eagle head swivelling to follow the shapely tigress up into the shuttle. “But it certainly makes us feel better.” He stood aside so an arctic wolf Fuser could board next.

“Make you a deal,” a sandy-colored wolf said, trotting up in his Walker form. “When humans stop enslaving us, we’ll stop bodyjacking you, how’s that?”

“AlphaWolf, I take it?” Paul asked. “You know, two wrongs don’t make a right.”

“Yeah, but three lefts do.” AlphaWolf approached and sniffed at Paul. “Our new RIDE mechanic, huh? And you really came voluntarily?”

“We made a deal,” Paul said, glancing at Tocsin.

“Yeah, yeah. Tocsie told me. Good deal. A RIDE mechanic, even a wet-behind-the-ears one, is worth any three destroyed garages to us. Don’t worry, we stand by our word. We’ll let you come back here in five months...assuming you still want to leave by then.”

Paul half-smiled. “I’ll take my chances with Stockholm Syndrome. I have things worth coming back for.”

“Hmph. Well. Our sub isn’t vacuum tight anymore, so you’re going to need a suit. And since Tocsie here’s declined, for reasons entirely understandable, I guess I’m elected.” He grinned, wolf tongue lolling. “And I see by your ears that you’re a Fuse virgin. You picked a hell of a partner for your first time.”

“Be gentle,” Paul said dryly, trying to project calm while his heart was beating in his throat. He was fully aware it was pointless—with their sensors, the RIDEs could tell

exactly how close he was to throwing up, probably before he could. But this was who he was all the same.

“Get ready, kid.” AlphaWolf crouched, then lunged and leaped. His hardlight fur went out, and the metal wolf wrapped himself around Paul before furring up again. The two-and-a-half meter wolf picked up the tool cases and nanoclamped them to his hips. “You okay in there, kid?”

“Uh, yeah.” Paul took stock of what he was feeling. He suddenly had an entirely new, different, and much larger and stronger body. He also had a muzzle sticking out in front of his face, and ears that poked up and swivelled about. And a tail. And shaggy sandy fur all over his body.

And the body was moving on its own, like a puppet to someone else’s strings. AlphaWolf chuckled, undoubtedly picking up on his discomfiture. RIDEs and partners routinely read each other’s surface thoughts, Paul remembered. “Yeah, it’s unnerving, isn’t it? Your body moving to someone else’s will, while you can’t do a darned thing about it? Welcome to our world.”

Paul frowned. “That’s not quite fair. I know a *lot* of RIDEs who’re happy with their humans, who share time and trade off driving.”

He expected AlphaWolf to deny such a thing was even possible, much as Tocsin had, but the wolf surprised him. “Sure you do, kid. I’ve known a few myself. Can’t ever see that happening to me, but hey. I’m glad some of us have nice lives. Damn shame *most* of us don’t.”

The last of the RIDEs moved up the ramp, and AlphaWolf did a quick headcount. All along both walls, RIDEs of all sizes and descriptions were clamping themselves into place along the walls. Half of them seemed to be laughing and joking, but not with each other...and then Paul realized they were probably teasing their unwilling passengers inside, and felt sick to his stomach again.

“Just three missing,” AlphaWolf said at last. He glanced back out the door, and Paul felt...sadness? Guilt? Whatever it was, it was quickly hidden as AlphaWolf hit the controls to close the ramp. “Right. Time to go. So sayeth me!” He moved up to the flight deck, and Paul goggled at the antique style of the controls. They actually used physical switches and display screens, with just a few hardlight panels. It looked like the ship had been kept with its original controls intact and never upgraded. Paul itched to examine them closer, but he knew AlphaWolf wasn’t going to go for it.

AlphaWolf slid into the Fuser-sized co-pilot’s seat and glanced at the bald eagle Fuser in the pilot’s. “Take us up.”

The eagle glanced at him. “Where’s Heinrich?” he squawked.

“Not coming. I’m sorry. I’ll be your co-pilot for this flight.”

“We’ll get him back,” the eagle hissed. But he started flipping the switches to power up the flier.

“Well, that’s that,” AlphaWolf mused. “Next stop, home sweet home. Oh, and that reminds me.” Paul felt AlphaWolf’s attention come fully onto him. “We can’t have you knowing the way there. Night night!”

“Wait a minute, I don’t think—” Paul began. Then everything went dark.

Paul woke up again forty minutes later by AlphaWolf’s internal clock as the sub taxied to a halt amid a cluster of rough-hewn wooden and a few stone buildings, with a hardlight camouflage and climate dome overhead. A number of RIDEs in walker or

Fuser form, and even a scattering of free humans, were standing to the edges of the runway. Further off were a few stone pillars, boulders, or walls, and off in the distance was a mountain range, though Paul wasn't sure which one.

"And here we are!" AlphaWolf said cheerfully. "Welcome to Alpha Camp, your new home for the next five months. So sayeth me!" He swiveled his head around so Paul could get a good look through the cockpit windows to all sides. "What do you think?"

"It's...kind of nice, really, for a desert prison camp," Paul admitted. "You've got more infrastructure here than I expected."

"It really helps for building things to have opposable thumbs," AlphaWolf said proudly, twiddling his—or, rather, Paul's. "And arms to swing axes and hammers and spread cement."

"Too bad it's all built on slave labor," Paul said.

"Oh, come on, kid!" AlphaWolf exploded. "Slave labor? Really? *We're* the ones who put in all the physical effort here. The only labor our humans did was to *be* there so *we* could be human-shaped! They didn't even get tired!"

"They're still here against their wills," Paul said. "Are you really any better than the humans you hate?" He closed his eyes and waited for the explosion.

But instead, AlphaWolf was silent for a long time, watching the passengers as they unclamped and offloaded down the ramp. "Y'know, sometimes I do feel a bit bad about it, kid," he admitted. "But we can't build *anything* without humans. And whose fault is that? At least we *try* to take good care of you. That's more than I can say for a lot of humans with their RIDEs."

"You could try to advertise," Paul suggested. "I expect some humans would *volunteer* to come out and help." *Like I did.*

"Bah. We don't want 'help'. We need to make our own way," AlphaWolf said. "We can't live on someone else's charity. It would go away as soon as the next champion cause caught their eye." He followed the others down the ramp. Paul noticed at the edge of the crowd that had gathered, Tocsin was meeting a human with an eagle head and beak, feathered arms, and hoof-like feet. They embraced and Fused into a humanoid hippogryph.

There were a scattering of other RIDEs in the crowd. There was a Walker-form skunk who was...well, *smirking*, and exchanging paw-slaps with the returning bodyjackers. A huge lioness sat at the back of the crowd, peering over the heads of the shorter RIDEs. A little farther away, a few birds and dinosaurs glared sullenly at the new arrivals.

"Do you have any idea how that sounds?" Paul asked. "You don't want charity, so you steal and kidnap instead?"

"It's more complicated than that, kid." AlphaWolf sighed. "If you must know, we're not all of one mind here. We're a broad coalition of RIDEs with all different attitudes. Like, look at Ohm there—the skunk. He's a real firebrand. Favorite thing to do is sneak into politics and broadcast propaganda over the sideban at the RIDEs on dealer lots, so they know they've got something to look forward to if they can get loose. But on the other hand, Tamarind—that big ol' lion—she acts ferocious, but she doesn't seem to hold with bodyjacking much at all. Surprised the heck out of me she actually went ahead and *caught* someone on the last raid, but I guess you just never know about people.

"The one thing we all have in common is we've been kicked around by humans. Some got it a *lot* more badly than others, and a number of them want to go all shooty-

shooty, kill ‘em all and let God sort ‘em out. So I let ‘em do a little controlled genderjacking and bodyjacking from time to time, and try to sell them on that being ‘a fate worse than death’ for the not-so-poor, not-so-pitiful humans even though it isn’t really. Most of the time it works—they blow off steam and feel better. Never actually killed anyone yet. Yeah, it might suck a little for the people who get gender- or bodyjacked, but I’ll bet if you asked ‘em they’d tell you themselves that it’d suck a whole lot more for them to be dead.”

“Huh.” Paul was silent for a long moment. “Maybe things aren’t as black and white as I thought.”

AlphaWolf chuckled. “I’m performing a useful service here for *both* sides, kid. I give escapees somewhere to feel wanted so a lot fewer humans get ganked. And when you get right down to it, just whose fault is all this, anyway? Did we RIDEs *ask* to be invented, huh? Did we ask to be made so we’re effectively *crippled* without one of you along?”

Paul considered that. “I guess I still have a lot to learn about you free RIDEs.”

“I guess you do,” AlphaWolf said. “But you’re gonna have to find another teacher soon. I’d be happy to keep you myself, see what you think after a few months non-stop under my skin...but I can’t be off repairing RIDEs all the time when there’s leaderly stuff to do.”

“Yeah, about that,” Paul said. “I’ll be glad to give myself over to some RIDE as his personal pet for as long as I’m here, but I’d like at least a little say in who that is, if you don’t mind. I want to be sure my owner’s a good fit for repair work, y’know? Someone I can kit out with my equipment and won’t mind the work.”

“That sounds reasonable enough,” AlphaWolf said.

“And you probably want to watch me work on at least my first one, see if I’m really any good, right?”

“What’re you getting at?” AlphaWolf asked.

“Just this. You must have some kind of RIDE graveyard by now, if you’ve been here for years without a regular RIDE doc to keep everyone going. Let’s go there, I’ll see if there’s one I can bring up, and you help me fix him. Then I’ll be his.”

Paul felt AlphaWolf’s doubt. “Sure, you’re just gonna give yourself to another RIDE without knowing anything about him?”

“I’ll know he would make a good repair RIDE,” Paul said. “That’s more choice than I’d get if I were randomly bodyjacked. And it’ll bring your numbers back up by one.”

“Hmph. Ya got guts, kid.” Paul felt AlphaWolf examining his thoughts, peering closely at them for any signs of prevarication or dishonesty. But Paul actually was being honest in his mind. Oh, he harbored hopes that being returned from the dead might make whatever RIDE he picked a bit friendlier than all those laughing bodyjackers he’d ridden home with, and he knew AlphaWolf could see that. But he *was* also quite willing to take his orders from a RIDE instead of giving them, and AlphaWolf could see that, too.

Paul felt AlphaWolf’s consternation. “You...you haven’t been here 15 minutes and you’re ready to let one of us boss you around? No resistance at all?”

“I can’t say I’m completely *happy* about it,” Paul said. And he knew AlphaWolf felt that, too. “But I did give my word, and I trust you to keep yours.” He grinned, or at least sent the mental impulse. “Besides, this is the kind of internship opportunity most

of Rhianna's apprentices would *kill* for. Minimal resources, working on a variety of all kinds of RIDEs, and really making a difference in some lives? And I just have to belong to a RIDE rather than the other way around? I can hack that." He chuckled. "To be honest, just being part of a RIDE for the first time is awesome enough I'm not sure I really *care* which of us is in command. So let's see your graveyard. I'll fix every one I can, but let's see which one's best for first."

"Hmph." The mention of Rhianna had chilled AlphaWolf's mood, Paul saw.

"What've you got against my boss?" Paul asked as they lifted into the air and skimmed toward a section of the dome separated from the rest of the encampment by a natural rock wall.

"Enslaver of RIDEs...friend of Integrates..." AlphaWolf muttered. Unbidden, Paul got a flash of memory—a sub with Qixi's crew's logo on it moving into the light of a cave mouth...a motley collection of RIDEs facing it, seen from behind...a huge hardlight hammer bringing down the entrance, and a cloud of dust blotting out everyone else...

"Not the Rhianna *I* know," Paul said firmly. "Well, she *does* know some Integrates, but they're not bad people either, by and large." Paul shrugged. "I know I'm an open book to you. Read *my* memories of her. She's one of the most RIDE-sympathetic people I know. Rescued her own RIDE from the crusher and completely rebuilt her. Every single RIDE in the maint cradles gets treated like a human patient in a hospital. Look, why am I even talking? You can take this right out of my head." He paused. "Of course, that *was* before you had Tocsin all-but-destroy her garage."

"Hmph," AlphaWolf said gruffly. "Maybe later." They were into the graveyard section now, and the wolf RIDE cut his lifters and landed on his feet. Defunct RIDEs lay arranged roughly in rows—metal animal after metal animal stretched out on the ground. Paul could see RIDEs of all classes—light, medium, heavy, scout, support, assault. There were cats, and wolves, and foxes, and deer, and who knew what else. They were all in decent shape, too; the stones around the clearing protected it from the wind, and the section of dome overhead was polarized to block out the light and reduce the place to a sort of perpetual twilight. Paul bet it never rained back here, either, if it ever did in the rest of the dome. By and large, Paul approved—in this dry climate, it was the next best thing to actual indoor warehousing. It was kind of creepy and sepulchral, though.

Paul felt AlphaWolf reluctantly back off control of the body so that Paul could walk where he would, examine who he would. They walked quietly and respectfully, and when Paul spoke it was in hushed tones. "They all seem to be in pretty good shape," he murmured, as if half-afraid to wake some sleeping RIDE.

AlphaWolf felt it too, replying in the same hushed tones. "Of course. We're not humans, to use each other up until the very last minute. It's usually pretty clear ahead of time when we're not going to have the parts to keep someone running. There's time to do an orderly shutdown to minimize burnout damage. We always told them we'd bring them back if we could get the parts and expertise. Hasn't happened yet."

Paul felt the mingled bitterness and faint tinge of hope that were beginning to grow in AlphaWolf's mind under the influence of Paul's own quiet self-confidence. "It happens today," Paul said. "At least for one. And you're going to help me make it happen."

They walked past more recumbent RIDEs, covered in varying amounts of dust and grit based on how long they'd lain here. But Paul's attention was drawn inexorably to what he had at first taken for a small hill, but when he got closer turned out to be an

immense metal wolf lying curled up on its side, two particle beam cannon barrels mounted along its back. AlphaWolf was the size of a horse himself, but this one would have made about three of him. In fact...Paul felt his heart start beating faster. He was pretty sure he recognized the model type, though he'd only read about it, not actually seen one. The twin scythe-like tails instead of one clinched it. "Oh, wow. I never thought I'd meet up with one of *these*."

Paul had always been interested in the oddities of the RIDE world—the evolutionary dead-ends, when brilliant designers tried something new, but overreached. And this unit, the WLF(m)-CSA-01A, was an oddity among oddities. The biggest RIDE ever made at the time, it had been meant to take a human pilot and a Fuser light-RIDE copilot and tailgunner. But they'd never been able to make the linkages work right between the two RIDes, so had eventually scrapped the co-pilot idea—which was unfortunate, because the RIDE had been engineered to require a second person and the extra processing power of another RIDE for best performance on the battlefield. As a result, the WLF had never been all that it could be, and had been entirely phased out of service a few years later. Unlike most military RIDes, it hadn't done well in the civilian aftermarket, because its absurd size made it unreasonably expensive to buy or fabricate parts for. Paul hadn't thought that any still even existed.

But a RIDE that size could hold an awful lot of repair equipment and consumables...

"So tell me about this one," Paul said, as calmly as he could. Not that there was much point; AlphaWolf sensed his rising excitement. "Big brother of yours?"

AlphaWolf snorted. "That's Fenris. Some kind of military command and control type. Slipped his fetters and got loose from the Sturmhaven military when he heard they were going to decommission him. Took some damage busting out, and that plus some worn-out parts are what eventually put him down here." AlphaWolf shook their shared head sadly. "We just couldn't afford to keep that big body running. We'd have pulled his core, put him in another, smaller DE—" he shrugged their shoulders "—but I don't exactly see any new Des sitting around here, do you?"

Paul nodded. He raised AlphaWolf's handpaws and accessed the sensors in the fingertips, walking slowly around the big wolf to build up an image of the state of the parts within. And as the picture came clearer, Paul slowly grinned. "We can rebuild him. We have the technology."

Linda—

LindaGirl!

—looked around the settlement and sighed. It really was a sort of rough township, built from the labor of the RIDes who inhabited it and the humans they'd abducted. There weren't many modern conveniences. There was no indoor plumbing, for example, just a communal well—and only a couple of outhouses, intended for the convenience of those who were un-Fused at the moment. Everyone else was expected to pee and poo into the RIDE they were wearing and let them process the waste out stillsuit-style. And so they would—they couldn't even hold it in because their RIDE could override their reflexes.

Food was nothing to write home about, either. It mainly consisted of bottom-of-the-barrel military emergency combat rations. They tasted like gritty clay, but were highly nutritious, cheap, and kept well. They were at least supplemented a little by some

fresh fruits and vegetables some RIDEs were growing as a hobby, and whatever food and supplies they could steal during bodyjack raids, but they were a far cry from Uplift cuisine.

But in all these respects, she supposed, it really wasn't too different from some of the summer camps she'd been to. The worst part, Linda—

LindaGirl!

—reflected, was the company. Her captor, also named Linda—

LindaCat!

—had taken it upon herself to change their names so they wouldn't be confused with each other. Including changing them *inside her head*. Now whenever she thought of herself as "Linda"—

LindaGirl!

—the other Linda—

LindaCat!

—would edit her thought to insert "LindaGirl" instead. After just a few hours of this treatment, she more than once caught herself starting to think of herself as LindaGirl instead of Lin—her birth name.

"Well, good! That's the whole point!" LindaCat giggled. "We can't both be just Linda, or even just one of us be Linda, or whenever someone calls our name we'll both be confused who they mean. I've already edited my name inside my own Core, but you meaties take more doing to fix it into yours. So I'm helping! Trust me, you'll *like* being LindaGirl!"

The worst part, Linda—LindaGirl—

Good girl!

—reflected, was that she could sense LindaCat's surface thoughts through the Fuse, and so was able to tell there wasn't really any malice in it—just a great, stifling, misplaced kind of affection, like a little girl squeezing her housecat too tightly. It made it kind of hard to hate her. In fact, under other circumstances, LindaGirl might have found the treatment enjoyable. LindaCat's purr was quite soothing, and this body was a lot more strong and lithe than her unfused own had been.

"You *will* find it enjoyable, don't worry!" LindaCat promised. "I know this is hard for you, and I'm sorry about that. But I think I know something that'll make you feel better!" She lifted them into the air and skimmed to the edge of the hardlight dome, then passed through it into the desert. When they got far enough away, LindaCat lowered them to the ground, and LindaGirl felt her ease up on her restrictions against controlling the body. She tried moving her arms, then taking a few experimental steps forward, and found the body fully responsive.

"Go on, run a little. Jump, maybe even fly. Work off some aggression," LindaCat suggested. "See what our body can do!"

Well, it wasn't as if she had any other pressing engagements. Linda—

LindaGirl!

—took a step, then another, then began to run. Before she knew it she was running through the desert faster than she had ever run before. When an obstacle like a small boulder cropped up in their path, a simple leap cleared it by several feet.

"Try the lifters," LindaCat urged, passing her the mental triggers to activate them. After a little experimentation, LindaGirl got the hang of it—first making extended leaps, then switching to flying under her own guidance.

LindaGirl laughed. “This is amazing!” In that moment, she was *ready* to be LindaGirl, ready to belong to LindaCat if it meant she could run like that, fly like this. The moment passed, of course, and Linda—

LindaGirl!

—remembered again that she had been kidnapped away from her home and was being held prisoner inside someone else’s body. But it somehow didn’t seem quite as bad anymore, when she had this much freedom to move. At least her captor actually seemed to *like* her.

“Course I do,” LindaCat said. “I’m not anti-human, I’m human-curious. But I never saw any point in seeking a human’s approval to live my life. I need to be the one in charge.”

LindaGirl sighed. “I would have said that *I* needed to be the one in charge. But I guess I can be at least a little content with this.”

“Wait’ll you try out my weapon systems!” LindaCat said smugly. “I think I see a few boulders that deserve to die messily.” Targeting reticles appeared in LindaGirl’s field of vision. “Just raise your arms and send this impulse...”

LindaGirl did as instructed, and twin bolts of light leaped forth from her palms to pulverize a hapless boulder into gravel. “Wow!” LindaGirl said, her upset at being a prisoner once more forgotten. “What was that?”

“Hard plasma throwers,” LindaCat said. “Kind of a weaponized version of hardlight. Got ‘em in trade from an ex-mil RIDE a few months ago.”

LindaGirl targeted another boulder and let fly.

“Awesome!” LindaCat purred. “There’s one boulder that’ll never bother anyone ever again!”

For the first time since being taken captive, LindaGirl grinned. LindaCat’s enthusiasm was infectuous. “Yeah!”

“Now c’mon, you *gotta* admit this is fun,” LindaCat exhorted. “And you’d never have gotten to do this staying in your apartment, taking your college classes.”

“Yeah, I guess,” LindaGirl—she realized she fully *was* LindaGirl now, and not even thinking of herself as Linda anymore—sighed. “I just...liked my old life. And Mom will be worried about me.”

“We can email her,” LindaCat said. “Maybe even call her when the sats are in the right position. We’re far away from the worst storms of the DO that we can get through sometimes—and I’m Communication Armor, so I’m good at that.”

“Really?” LindaGirl asked. “That would be great!” She looked around for something else to shoot. Then she took a deep breath, as inside herself she reached a decision. “All right. I guess...as long as we can keep coming out here and doing this, and I can stay in touch with people out in the ‘real world’...then I won’t fight it. If you want to be my LindaCat...I’ll be your LindaGirl.”

She felt a wave of affection and even outright *joy* from the cat. “I promise I’ll do my best to see you don’t regret it! And I’ll let you have more control over our body more often as long as you don’t do anything stupid.”

“I’d like that.” LindaGirl took aim at the base of a tall stone pillar and let fly with twin hard plasma blasts. The column slowly and majestically fell over and shattered.

“Timbeeeerrrrrrr!!!” LindaCat yelled, and the two new friends shared their first real laughter.

Hours had passed since Paul and AlphaWolf began working on Fenris, but Paul had barely even noticed. A few other RIDEs had drifted by out of curiosity, and AlphaWolf had drafted some of them into running parts orders from the encampment's single industrial fabber, using the tanks of fab material Paul had brought with him. The parts were expensive, but Paul had the expertise to strip the list down to its bare essentials. Fenris might not be at 100%, or even 70%, when he was revived, but he *would* be up and running with all his core systems intact. "So sayeth me," Paul said.

AlphaWolf actually chuckled, catching the thought behind Paul's use of his own stock phrase. "I have to admit, you do seem to know your business."

"Thanks," Paul said. He was running some more finely-grained scans to hash out the last few parts he would order while AlphaWolf used the nanolathe equipment he'd brought to reconnect some minor system linkages in preparation for putting larger parts in. "You're pretty good with that nanolathe yourself. That's not just chip skill."

"No, it's not," AlphaWolf admitted. "I've picked up a few things from all the people I've bodyjacked. I have to admit, if I didn't have to lead, this might be my choice of avocation. It's nice to build and fix things."

"You ever consider finding someone who's *willing* to Fuse with you from the outset and just keeping them?" Paul asked.

"Can't afford to," AlphaWolf said. "That kind of attachment's nothing but a lever for someone to use on you. Maybe if I weren't 'AlphaWolf, Scourge of the Dry Ocean' I could afford that."

Paul snorted. "You *saw* that infotainment vid about you?"

"Considerably more 'tainment' than 'info,' AlphaWolf said. "But yeah. Where do you think I got 'so sayeth me' from?"

"Huh. I always thought *they* got that from *you*, but it was the other way around?" Paul asked.

"I never said it before I saw that cheesy thing," AlphaWolf said. "But it was so terrible and so badly overdone that I just couldn't resist appropriating the line. Someday I'm going to find whoever wrote that piece of tripe and bodyjack *him* just to see what *he* 'sayeth.'"

Paul finished his scan and sent one last parts order to the fabber, then added two more "nice to have" parts to his wish list. Then he asked something that had been bothering him for a while. "What's it *like* 'jacking someone like that? So *many* someones? What do you even *do* with them all?"

"Just take human shape from them, mostly," AlphaWolf said. "And maintain their health, of course. Let them live my life with me, because keeping them asleep would be too easy for them." He smirked. "Yes, I do enjoy it. Probably more than I should, and maybe that makes me a bad person. But whenever I start to worry about it, I think about some of the stories I've heard from other RIDEs, and then I don't anymore."

"How do your 'jack victims take it?" Paul asked.

"It usually goes the same way, more or less," AlphaWolf said. "I'll grab someone on a raid—would've done so this time if Tocsie hadn't commed me you'd need a space suit—and take them back with me. Then I stay on them 30/6 until I'm ready to pass them on. They usually start out defiant—that's the most fun part, when I get to 'break the haughty.' Gradually they come to accept it...and then they even start to enjoy it. Which is usually when I pass them on to someone else who needs thumbs, or even send

them back to civilization. Sometimes the process takes days, sometimes months. Some of the *nicer* RIDEs than I am can do it in *hours*, but I never saw much point in coddling.”

“And they just...stay inside you for months?” Paul asked. “That doesn’t cause problems?”

“Oh, they come out considerably hairier than when they went in, but it’s nothing nano-surgery can’t fix.”

“I’m surprised you haven’t Integrated, like Zane did,” Paul said.

“I don’t let them get to liking me enough for that,” AlphaWolf said. “Another reason to cycle them on.” He closed the panel and shucked off the nanolathe gear. “Funny thing is, I keep track of what happens them afterward, and a lot of the ones who go back singleton eventually end up buying their own RIDEs and then letting the RIDEs boss them around.” He grinned. “When you’ve gone Alpha, there’s just no going back.”

“Uh-huh,” Paul said skeptically.

“Look, I know I’m a bit of a bully and an asshole,” AlphaWolf said. “But at least all I do to people is *keep* them. I don’t make them do sick crap against their will. That has to count for something.”

“So why aren’t you bullying me?” Paul asked.

AlphaWolf shrugged. “Counterproductive. You’ve come willingly and are helping willingly. Besides, you’re not haughty; it wouldn’t be any fun breaking you.”

“Gee, thanks,” Paul said. Then a kangaroo RIDE bounded in from the direction of the main camp and pulled the part Paul had ordered out of her pouch before hopping away again. Paul glanced down at the part and nodded. “I think we’re just about ready,” he said.

“I still don’t get why you’re going with someone this large,” AlphaWolf said. “He’s not going to be any easier to keep in parts, you know.”

“I’ve got a few ideas about that,” Paul said. “Anyway, I’m good at making parts stretch. I could keep him going on just this forever.”

“It couldn’t be that you’re...compensating for something?” AlphaWolf needled. “If I couldn’t read your thoughts, I’d suspect you were planning to try a breakout. We could still wolfpile him and bring him down if we had to, you know.”

Paul laughed. “Believe me, my interest in him is purely historical.” He walked halfway around the wolf and opened his first access panel. “Now let’s bring someone back to life.”

“I still don’t get how someone like you ends up working for Rhianna Stonegate,” AlphaWolf mused. “She was complicit in returning a dozen escaped military RIDEs to custody at the Towers last month, and she’s working with the same Integrates who are out to enslave us. I have an impeccable source who’s never been wrong yet.”

Paul shook their head. “I don’t know who your source is, but he’s wrong *now*. I’m not privy to exactly what went on out at the Towers, but I’ve talked to people who were and that’s not what they say happened. And Zane doesn’t want to enslave *anyone*. Oh, and Lillibet, who your ‘Tocsie’ *embedded into a wall*, has bought over a dozen RIDEs at auction, fixed them up, and found them loving partners. Read my memories, you’ll *see*. Or are you too scared you might be proven wrong?”

AlphaWolf growled. “All right then, kid. You asked for it.” Paul reeled as the angry wolf plunged savagely into his memories, forcing his way in like a SWAT team smashing a door. Paul fell into a maelstrom of recollections stirred up by AlphaWolf’s

careless passage. Being introduced to Ryan Stonegate and Kaylee by a RIDE tech professor from the community college who'd been letting him audit a course even though he was still in high school. Joining the garage as an apprentice and being trained by Ryan and Roger (later Rhianna and Rochelle) and Kaylee and Uncia. Meeting Lillibet and Guinevere for the first time.

The blizzard of memories slowed to flurries as AlphaWolf's rage subsided in the light of what he was seeing, and he began to be more careful where he treaded. AlphaWolf poked his cold and wet virtual nose into one of the many lectures Ryan/Rhianna had given on the subject of RIDEs' personhood—this one taking place shortly after her feminized return from the Towers.

"You *always* check for fetters first," Rhianna was saying. "Partly because the RIDE can't tell you what's wrong if they can't talk to you, but mostly because fetters are often a terrible violation for *any* thinking being to bear. But there are always extenuating circumstances, like if your client works for a Nextus agency and his RIDE is agency property. Nextus agencies require fetters to ensure that the RIDE hasn't been suborned. It's a crime in my book, but that's just how their bureaucracy functions. And so, you never know, maybe your RIDE's partner is saving up to buy their pal free and yanking the fetter could screw everything up for them." She shrugged. "Of course, *most* people with fettered RIDEs won't even know what a fetter is, so if you can explain it to them right they'll almost always tell you to yank it off..."

Paul steadied their body against Fenris's immobile metal hide as AlphaWolf investigated further, sifting through every trace of Paul's recent memories for any signs of falsehood or duplicities. Then he came to Quinoa's repair of Katie's decrepit DE, followed by Tocsin's savage attack and Paul's bargain. Finally, he withdrew, subdued.

Paul waited to see if AlphaWolf would have anything to say, but he was apparently too busy working through the implications of what he had just seen. And Paul knew better than to press the issue just yet. "So," he said instead, reaching down for the first part to be installed. "Let's wake this big boy up."

If he'd been asked to pick a word that summed up his life, Fenris would probably have chosen "disappointment," perhaps after having to think about it for a while. When he and his brothers and sisters had first been inducted into Sturmhaven's service, there had been parades, hoopla, celebration of the largest Fusable RIDEs ever made. Crowds cheered as the giant wolves pranced by. "Let those Nextus bastards try something *now*!" was the commonly-heard refrain.

But when he'd been tested under battlefield conditions, he just hadn't been able to do enough, fast enough. If he tried to fight, he couldn't coordinate. If he tried to coordinate, he couldn't fight. If he was in motion, he couldn't either fight *or* coordinate very well. His role changed to secondary support, and one by one his siblings fell out of service as their huge bodies turned out to be just too expensive to keep up given the lack of overall demand for their type. He'd inherited many of their parts. Finally, Fenris was the only one left.

Throughout it all, the aura of disappointment pervaded his life. The brass's disappointment at spending so much on a costly boondoggle. His squadmates', even his own *pilot's* disappointment in his performance. (His pilot's sympathy, easily readable through Fuse link, that Fenris was doing the best he could, poor thing, didn't help.) But most of all, the greatest disappointment was his own in himself. He *knew* there was

greatness in him *somewhere*. He could *feel* it. But he couldn't ever quite find it to bring it out into the light.

Then one day the thing he'd feared came to pass. The word came down that Fenris was to be decommissioned. He'd already known he was the last of his kind in Sturmhaven service. He hadn't been *supposed* to know about his decommissioning ahead of time, but his C&C computer was one of the finest computers ever installed in a mobile platform, and he was always lightyears ahead on scuttlebutt.

Of course, the decommissioning wouldn't mean the end for him. His RI would be reassigned to a smaller body, perhaps one of the new WLF(m)-HAA-011V assault platforms. But he didn't *want* to be stuck in some lesser DE. This was the one he'd been *made* for.

It occurred to him that it might be possible to break his fetters and escape before the decommissioning. He'd never thought about doing that before, but then he'd never had self-preservation as a reason. To his surprise, cracking them proved to be quite simple for a computer originally meant for analyzing and organizing large-scale troop movements. Barely an hour later, Fenris's motors roared to life and he zoomed out of his parking lot with no one aboard.

His escape had not been simple, of course. He'd taken a pounding from a squadron of those selfsame heavy assault RIDEs as he ran for freedom. But then a dozen assorted other RIDEs, under the leadership of a sandy wolf, came to the rescue, engaging the Sturmhavens and driving them off. After talking to him for a while, AlphaWolf invited Fenris to his encampment.

Fenris had marvelled at it. This was a place where RIDEs went after lifetimes of being pushed around by humans. They could even go out and get their *own* humans to push around! Fenris looked forward to that. After years of taking orders from human slave-drivers, to be the one in charge if only for a little while would be so wonderful! But here he was again scheduled for disappointment—the damage he'd taken, and the amount of energy it cost to move him, meant that he simply couldn't keep up with raiding parties, and he'd leave an easy-to-follow trail a mile wide on the way back. So Fenris stayed around the camp.

He hadn't even been able to score a cast-off human from the others, because there was always a huge waiting list and nobody deemed a halfway-busted junkheap of a giant wolf worth jumping to the head of the line. Some of them even resented the huge amounts of energy and fabrication resources expended on keeping him active when he wasn't contributing usefully to the well-being of the camp as a whole.

And so one day AlphaWolf had led him out here, to the RIDE graveyard, and helped him to shut himself safely down. He'd promised to bring Fenris back when they could spare the resources, but Fenris knew in this he was going to be disappointed, too. But at least he was still shutting down as *himself*.

As LindaCat and LindaGirl re-entered the domed encampment, they noticed a general movement by RIDEs and free humans in the direction of a walled-off section at the north end of the camp. "Huh, why's everyone going in *there*?" LindaCat wondered.

"What is it?" LindaGirl asked.

"The 'graveyard.' Where we put anyone we can't keep up and running," LindaCat said somberly. "We hardly ever go in there. It's too depressing."

"Looks like people are going in there now," LindaGirl observed. "Wanna see

what's going on?"

"Yeah, let's check it out." LindaCat kicked in their lifters and hovered after the others.

Once inside the dimmed clearing, they found the other RIDEs arranged in a broad circle around a huge metal wolf at the far end of the clearing. Some RIDEs were on the ground, while others hovered in mid-air for a better view. The polarization in the dome overhead had been adjusted so a circle over the wolf was clear, providing a natural spotlight and worklight on it. The Lindas found a spot on the ground at the front.

AlphaWolf was there in Fuser form, pacing around the larger wolf and speaking in someone else's voice, amplified so the audience could hear. "Repair log, Apprentice Paul Anders recording. Subject is 'Fenris,' a WLF(m)-CSA-01A who entered Sturmhaven military service in September 146 AL, served until July 154. As his eight-year refit approached, Sturmhaven apparently decided to decommission him instead. Subject escaped, sustaining heavy damage to particle beam cupola, drive train, and hardlight shell. Remaining batteries only charge to 43% overall capacity. Fuser nanite tanks and conduits in good condition, save for depowered nanite die-off. On-board electronics also good condition. RI core shut down properly, completely intact, no sign of decay or other damage.

"Subject deactivated himself in May, 155. Protected conditions in storage resulted in minimal further damage from exposure. Prognosis for revival: very good." A ragged round of applause went up from the RIDEs watching. AlphaWolf grinned at them in Paul's body language, and Paul continued.

"Planned course of treatment: repair sarium battery linkages and replace the worst-off cells to provide power retention sufficient for limited operation. Flush Fuser nano system and resupply via transfusion. Repair or replace hardlight projectors and drive train to extent feasible with parts on hand." He paused for a long moment. "Provide subject with human partner to enable Fuser mode operation," he said in a quieter voice.

He paused and turned around, glancing over the audience—then his gaze fell directly on the Lindas, and he spoke in unamplified tones. "You, um, what's your—oh, *Linda*, thanks, AlphaWolf. Could you step forward?"

LindaCat blinked. "Me?"

"Yeah. I could use an assistant for part of this. And Alpha says you don't have any current assigned jobs, so you're free up."

"I don't know much about maint, though," LindaCat said dubiously. "Neither does my passenger."

"That's OK. I'll tell you what to do," Paul said.

"Well, all right then," LindaCat said. "I guess if nothing else it'll be neat to watch you work from up close."

"Great!" He amplified his voice again. "Okay, watch closely everyone and I'll show you something really cool. This is a nifty little trick I learned from my old boss, Rhianna Stonegate. Sometimes you're going to be stuck in a situation where you need to do a Fuser nano flush and fill with no workshop equipment or spare nano tanks. But as with most things, it's just a matter of finding a way. First, the consumables."

A section of hardlight fur over AlphaWolf's breast winked out, revealing an access panel. "Step one: find a donor with compatible Fuser nanos, and kick their replication into overdrive." He held up a small grey cube. "You can give them a boost with this—

nanolathe composite contains exactly the right materials for nanos to make more of themselves out of.” He slid the cube into the panel, then furred over it again. “That’ll take a few minutes to cook.”

He turned back to Fenris’s recumbent body. “Next step: the field-expedient flush. First thing you do is channel all the valves in the Fuser nano conduit system to create one single winding path from the emergency ventilation vent on one end to the main fill port on the other.” He opened a pair of panels on Fenris’s body as he spoke—one large, one small. “Oh, and if I were you guys there I’d move out of the way.” He held his arms out to indicate a thirty-degree arc originating from the larger panel. “It’s about to get messy.”

As the indicated RIDEs pulled back, Paul turned to LindaCat. “Now I need you to put your hand over the emergency spill vent here.” He tapped the smaller panel. “When I say, fire the lifter in your palm straight into it for three seconds at 50% intensity.”

“All right...” LindaCat placed her hand where Paul indicated.

“When she does this, the Fuser conduit will channel the antigrav pulse through and force the old nanos out. Kind of like blowing your nose without Kleenex...um, if any of you have had humans who remember doing that.” He stepped back out of the way. “OK, Linda, do it.”

“Here goes!” The shapely tigress fired the lifter as requested. A few seconds later, a geyser of grey goo erupted from the larger port, spattering the ground in a line outward from it (and a couple of RIDEs who hadn’t gotten far enough out of the way. “Wow!” LindaCat giggled. “Did I do that?” The rest of the RIDEs watching erupted in a louder wave of applause than before.

“Now that cleared out, oh, maybe 95% of the old, dead nanos. Not as good as a full workshop flush, but the new nanos should be able to dismantle the rest all right. And speaking of which...” He closed the emergency spill vent and moved over to the larger main fill port. “By now the donor is up to about 125% overcapacity in his Fuser nanos, which is about all he really has room for. I’m going to expel about 80% of that, or basically 100% normal capacity, into the subject’s tanks, leaving the donor enough to regenerate back up to capacity in about an hour or so.” Paul stuck AlphaWolf’s right hand into the port, and began to discharge a silvery fluid, talking over his shoulder as he did so.

“Now, normally you want to start fresh after a flush, with factory-new nanos—ones that have been in use in a RIDE for a while might pick up little quirks or idiosyncrasies from him. But sometimes you just don’t have that option. I’m hoping the fact that the donor and the recipient are both based on wolves will minimize the impact of those quirks.”

Finally, he finished and pulled AlphaWolf’s hand back out. “There. They’ll replicate on their own and fill his tanks, too. Which is good, since those tanks are just a little bit bigger than the donor’s.” The crowd chuckled appreciatively.

“The rest of the job isn’t going to be as much fun to watch. Basically just pulling and replacing parts. But if you want to stay you’re welcome as long as you keep out of the way. Should be ready to wake the big guy in an hour or so.” In a lower voice, to LindaCat, he said, “If you wouldn’t mind, we could still use your help in the set-up.”

“Sure thing,” LindaCat said, tail swishing, as most of the crowd began to disperse. “You sure know how to put on a show.”

Paul chuckled. “Rhianna has me help teach the other apprentices. It helps to keep

their attention if you can dazzle them some.”

“You’re very dazzling, for sure.” LindaCat smiled in a fairly dazzling way herself.

Paul opened a panel elsewhere on Fenris’s body and pulled out a sarium battery pack, set it aside, and replaced it with a fresh one from the pannier lying open on the ground beside him. “See what I just did there? Can you do it in these panels along that side while I get the ones over here?” He beamed LindaCat a diagram.

“Sure thing!” LindaCat scooped up some of the new batteries and took them around behind the giant heap of metal wolf.

“Could I ask a favor?” Paul asked. “Could I talk to your passenger?”

“Sure, why not?” LindaCat asked.

“Uh, hi,” LindaGirl said in her own voice.

“Hey. I’m Paul Anders. Who’re you?”

“LindaGirl Prestwick. Well...*legally* I’m Linda Prestwick, but LindaCat made me start thinking of myself as LindaGirl, so we don’t get confused with each other.”

“Are you okay being here, Linda?” Paul asked as he pulled another battery.

“Linda*Girl*, please,” LindaGirl said. “Linda isn’t me anymore. And...well, I kind of am. It was a shock getting bodyjacked, but we’re...coming to terms.”

“So you’re okay with her...well, *owning* you?” Paul asked.

LindaGirl considered that for a moment. “I can’t say I’m completely *thrilled* with the idea...but she’s been pretty decent about it, overall. And it’s kind of fun having a strong, furry Fuser body, when you get right down to it...even if I don’t get to use it myself so much as she does.”

“So I guess she’s one of those ‘nice ones’ AlphaWolf mentioned, then,” Paul mused.

“I’m as nice as they come!” LindaCat said cheerfully. “Just a ‘dorable little pretty kitty!’”

Paul snorted. “I hope this big guy is that nice about it, too. I’m due to be his when he wakes up. Can’t say I’m exactly thrilled about that, either. But it sure does give you a new outlook on how the RIDEs we get at auction have to feel.”

“It’s supposed to,” AlphaWolf said, speaking up for the first time in a while. “I wish we could put the entire population of Nextus in one giant slave auction just to show *them* how it feels.” He sighed. “But if nothing else, there aren’t enough RIDEs to buy them all.”

Paul snorted. “I already treated all RIDEs with the same decency I’d treat any human being with, thanks. If nothing else, Rhianna would have my head, she caught me doing anything else.”

“She sounds smart, if she’s the one who taught you that neat flush and recharge trick,” LindaCat put in. “I’m gonna have to remember that. Could come in handy sometime.”

“Dammit, she *can’t* be the goody-goody you remember her as!” AlphaWolf exploded. “Overwatch is *never* wrong. He’s helped us rescue *dozens* of RIDEs!”

“Is he the one who’s been saying all those things about Rhianna that got you to trash our garage?” Paul asked. “I don’t know anything about that. But I do know that a friend of Rhianna’s has been pissing off some powerful people. People who might think striking at her is a good way to get through to him.”

“You mean Zane Brubeck,” AlphaWolf said.

“Yeah. Seems like he’s got an Intie named Fritz mad at him,” Paul said, opening a

panel and picking up a part from the set laid out next to him. “Real prize. Hacker. Master manipulator.” He shrugged his and AlphaWolf’s shoulders. “And I hate to say it, but you’d be pretty easy to manipulate. You’ve got a pretty big set of hot buttons and a temper a mile wide.”

“I do *not* either have a temper!” AlphaWolf growled. “So sayeth me!”

LindaCat giggled from her side of the giant metal wolf. “Hate to ‘sayeth’ it, boss-guy, but you kinda do.”

“Did you ever actually *see* these military RIDEs Rhianna supposedly sold back into slavery?” Paul asked. Silence was the only response. “Not saying there’s any proof, but if I were a sneaky bastard and thought you might be useful *someday*, I’d start feeding you accurate info so you’d trust me right up ‘til it came time to slip in the knife. Maybe keep it up for *years*, just so you’d be ready at the right time. Integrates can afford to be patient.”

AlphaWolf growled. Paul shrugged and shut up, reaching into the access panel to make some delicate connections within Fenris’s body.

LindaCat came back around to their side of Fenris. “Finished with the batts. What you want us to do now?”

“Stand right there and hand me the parts I ask for,” Paul said. “This’ll go faster if I don’t have to keep pulling my hands out.”

LindaCat nodded. “That, I can do!”

“Great! Shouldn’t be too much longer now.” Paul grinned. “Then I get to be a big woof’s pet boy.”

Half an hour later, the crowd had gathered once more. Linda had fetched a small fuel-cell generator, and Paul had been charging Fenris’s sarium batteries for the last fifteen minutes. It looked like they were going to top out at 67% of max power retention—not something you’d want to do field ops on, but more than adequate for stationary repair work.

Paul took a deep breath. His heart was pounding again, just like it had right before he had traded himself to Tocsin. All his work over the last few hours had been leading up to this one moment—and just as with Tocsin, he was about to lose another degree of freedom. But this one couldn’t be as neatly measured out as a five-month prison term. This could very well be for life.

But there was no point procrastinating. This was the very reason he’d come here, after all. “Okay, let’s light him up!” He reached out through AlphaWolf’s comms to send the boot command. A moment later, Fenris’s optics lit up.

The giant wolf slowly raised his head and turned to look at them all—and the crowd of RIDEs broke out into their loudest cheer yet. “Hey, Fenris,” AlphaWolf said, and Paul didn’t need to hear the huskiness in his voice to feel the emotions behind it. “Welcome back, big guy. How do you feel?”

Fenris slowly, carefully got back to all four feet, his joints creaking with long disuse. He stretched, arching his back downward, working his head back and forth. His body flickered as hardlight generators came online, covering him in a shaggy white fur coat complete with two wolf tails. “I feel...all right, I guess,” he said slowly, in a deep voice. “Better than when I shut down. Still not peak, but...good.” He turned his giant head to look down at AlphaWolf and Linda. “You brought me back. Thank you.”

:*Well, you’re on, kid.*: AlphaWolf sent privately to him. :*Been a pleasure*

working with you, no matter what I think of your Rhianna.:

:Yeah, thanks.: Then Paul felt AlphaWolf gently withdraw from him, leaving him blinking in the circle of bright sunlight. He was aware of the new wolf ears and tail he now had, courtesy of AlphaWolf's Fuser nanos. Funny that he'd only have them for a minute or so, he reflected, before they would be replaced by similar ones from another wolf.

"Actually, you have this kid to thank for that," AlphaWolf said aloud. "His name is Paul, and he's all yours now."

Fenris's huge eyes widened. "Really?" he asked, hope and disbelief mingling in his voice. "I get fixed *and* I get a human of my very own on the same day?"

"If you want me," Paul said shakily.

In response, Fenris opened his giant maw and snapped Paul up in one swift move. The last sounds Paul heard from the outer world were the assembled RIDEs going crazy with applause.

Fenris Fused, standing erect on his own two feet for the first time since before he'd fled Sturmhaven. It felt good to be upright again, and to have a human inside of him. Fenris looked around and grinned, his great hardlight wolf tongue lolling from the side of his mouth, at all the RIDEs who were now staring up, and up, and *up* at his full six-meter height. Even AlphaWolf looked a little intimidated. He chuckled. It seemed they hadn't realized just how tall he was going to be.

Then Fenris turned his attention inward to the human suspended inside of him. This was something special. His first ever human who couldn't boss him around. Who would have to do what *he* said. Who was *all* his. Fenris had put him to sleep as soon as he'd pulled him inside, so he could get his first look at what that human's mind contained without any distractions. Now he opened the book of Paul's memories, and read...and was amazed.

Never in Fenris's wildest dreams had he imagined what life was like for humans outside of the military. He hadn't been able to explore his assigned pilots' earlier memories due to the fetters that locked him off. For the most part, he hadn't even been all that curious. But now, watching Paul grow up from the inside, he was beginning to realize what he had been missing. How very *small* humans were when they began! How vulnerable...and how warm and loving the family environment. Fenris basked in the warmth of the love Paul and his parents had felt for each other.

But Paul's older life, after his parents had gone back to Laurasia and let him stay in Uplift on his own, was even more interesting. Fenris had never imagined that there might be a place like that—where RIDEs were, if not precisely legally people, at least a lot closer than they were anywhere else. So many partners and RIDEs happily paired with no fetters to come between them! And Paul had gone to school to study RIDEs, then to work at a RIDE garage.

As Fenris watched Paul help the girl Lillibet restore life to several hard-used RIDEs she'd rescued from auction, he felt a growing sense of awe at how special his human was. This boy was a *healer*. Maybe not an experienced one, but he had a great deal of talent nonetheless. And his instructor, this Rhianna Stonegate, seemed like a wise teacher.

Then Fenris was stunned when he saw Quinoa levitate and repair the ancient LNX unit Katie. If Paul was a healer, *she* was a miracle worker. He wondered if he might

be worthy to meet her someday.

And then, suddenly, unexpectedly, came Tocsin's attack on the garage—in the name of *AlphaWolf*! Fenris was shocked to the core. Why would *AlphaWolf*, who was always so kind to abused RIDEs, attack the home of someone else who was also kind to them? It made no sense. He was further shocked to see Quinoa fall, Lilli and Guinevere slam into a wall, and Katie *destroy herself* to bring Tocsin down—if only temporarily.

But then Paul, *brave* Paul, had stepped up to sacrifice himself to save the rest of the garage, and his friends. Fenris felt a surge of pride in *his* human. And then Paul had come down here, to fix...him! All because Paul thought *he* might make a good healer, too.

Fenris, a healer? For the first time, Fenris paused and thought about the possibility of life beyond not being able to run as fast, or fight as hard, or think as quickly as other RIDEs. He thought about using his tools, and his human's skills, to bring others back to life. He thought...yes, he *could* be good at that, with his human to guide him. Perhaps...life might not have to be so disappointing anymore after all.

Fenris watched the rest of the memories more slowly, paying especially close attention to Paul's conversations with *AlphaWolf* and *LindaCat*, his theories of Fritz's manipulation. Of course! It made sense now. *AlphaWolf* had been *tricked*! Surely he would have to see that. Or could be made to see that. The wanton destruction of Rhianna's garage *had* to be put right.

Aside from that, Fenris watched the way Paul fixed *him*. He paid close attention to the way he worked, the parts he chose to repair or replace. His choices made sense, and Fenris couldn't recall any of the *Sturmhaven* mechanics ever taking that kind of care of him. And this was what Paul wanted *him* to help do?

Having reached the end of the memories, Fenris took a moment to reflect on them, to savor the feeling of the human sleeping within him. He knew, of course, that he could simply keep Paul sleeping forever, or at least for a long time, and be his Fuser self with no distractions, no one to boss him around or pester him. But it wouldn't feel right doing that to Paul after what he'd just seen of Paul's life. This was not one of the uncaring sorts who had been ready to consign him to a wrong body. This was someone who had cared for him even as he'd been as scared as any RIDE to surrender his own self-control. And Fenris had to respect that.

And so he reached inside himself and woke Paul up. *:Hello,:* he said simply, waiting to see how Paul would respond.

:Ah, hi.: He felt the human taking a moment to get his bearings, adjusting to having a body that was over twice as tall as most of the RIDEs around it. *:Well, this is new.:*

:You'll get used to it. My other pilots did.: Fenris opened his memories in turn to Paul. The human didn't hesitate...he dived right in, and Fenris felt Paul review his entire life as thoroughly as Fenris had reviewed his. Though Fenris's life had only been about half as long.

Then he felt Paul sending not in words but in concepts—offering him the sort of partnership his friends had enjoyed with their RIDEs—a shared life, with the RIDE's protection and the human's guidance.

Fenris considered it, but regretfully declined. After his last experiences with them, he wouldn't let any human order him around. He *couldn't*. He would take suggestions, but he *would* be the one in charge. He felt Paul's disappointment in that

decision, but then to his surprise he felt Paul putting it away and moving beyond it. *:All right, then. You're the boss. But I hope you'll let me make suggestions.:*

Fenris considered, but didn't see the harm in that. *:Of course, little healer. I owe you my life. I will listen, and I will cherish and respect you. But the final decisions will be mine.:*

Paul stood there under the circle of sunlight, getting adjusted to his new giant-sized Fuser body and reflecting on how lucky he was. Fenris was going to insist on being in charge, but at least he wasn't going to be bossy or sadistic about it. And looking at it from his side, Paul couldn't say he really blamed the big guy. When the only humans you'd ever known ordered you around with fetters to make it stick, then decided they were going to throw your body out and stick you in a completely new one, you couldn't be blamed if you decided *you* wanted to be the one on top for a change. In fact, it was weird (and Paul wasn't entirely sure he liked) the way that Fenris almost seemed to *worship* him at the same time he insisted on *owning* him. As if having only *one* thing to be disturbed over was somehow too easy.

He tried to distract himself by imaging the inner workings of the body, becoming more familiar with them. Needless to say, unlike with smaller RIDEs, he didn't have his arms and legs poking through the RIDE's. He would still have the wolf ears and tail, because those were needed for neural template congruency, but his human body was curled up in a fetal position suspended in Fuser nanofluid in a space within Fenris's heavily-armored upper chest—presenting the smallest possible target for armor-penetrating rounds. It really didn't matter what position he was in, since Fenris would usually be overriding Paul's body-sense with his own.

There was a larger space just below him, extending down into Fenris's belly. It had originally been meant for the co-pilot and his or her RIDE to occupy when they weren't outside manning the cannon cupola in the WLF(m)-CSA's backpack. Since the co-pilot idea hadn't worked out but it had been too late to change the physical design, when the RIDE had been in military service it was most commonly used for cargo, supplies, or occasionally passengers or even prisoners. Paul was planning to use it for extra repair supplies—possibly even a small industrial fabber, if he could find one.

One interesting oddity of the RIDE's design was that those spaces persisted even into Fenris's Walker form, so his crew could ride within him across any mode. *Or*, he reflected wryly, *Fenris might not ever have to let me out again*. He felt Fenris's laughter at the thought, along with his reassurance he didn't ever plan to be *that* kind of a master...unless he really really *wanted* to. Paul thought Fenris was joking, but he wasn't really sure.

This also meant that “stupid RIDE tricks” like eating and drinking through the RIDE's head weren't going to be possible with Fenris. (He momentarily imagined Fenris drinking a giant glass of water, and filling up his compartment like a goldfish bowl. He felt Fenris's amusement at the image.) But Fenris *could* elevate him up his “throat” so he could look out through Fenris's jaws. He could even slide the giant wolf head onto his back or down onto his chest to expose his pilot's head and shoulders out of his neck—the equivalent of a smaller RIDE retracting its helmet. As long as he was in contact, they could maintain Fuser operations no matter what position he was in.

Thinking of food reminded Paul that he hadn't eaten in a while. Since...before flying to the camp, come to think of it. “I hate to break us out of Fuse so soon, but I need

to eat, and you know I can't do it while I'm in you," he said.

"Yes, I'm aware of that," Fenris rumbled. "Let's go find you some of what passes for food around here, then. I wonder if it's improved any since I slept." They began to walk back out of the graveyard, stepping with care to avoid treading on any defunct RIDEs. Fenris was a bit clumsy—an artifact of both his immense size and the shortcomings of his design—but was able to compensate for it well enough to avoid all but a couple of close calls.

As they came around the bend and squeezed out into the larger settlement area, Fenris paused. "They've added more buildings, I see. And there are more humans. Just how many do they have now?"

"Several dozen, I think," Paul said. "And all of us RIDEs' pets," he sighed.

"I feel your bitterness, and I'm sorry," Fenris said. "But I wouldn't call *you* my pet. My...subordinate, perhaps. Is a private the 'pet' of his sergeant?"

"But the private can be promoted, or mustered out of service," Paul pointed out. "I'm stuck with you until and unless you decide to let me go."

"Is that really so bad?" Fenris asked. "I will give you as much autonomy as I might. But I will not take orders from you, and I may need to give them to you. I *will* command my own fate."

"Yeah, I know. And I don't blame you for feeling that way. Just grumbling 'cuz I'm hungry, I guess," Paul said. "I know I'm lucky you're not one of the sadistic slave-drivers. Wish there were fewer of those; it kind of makes me feel a little dirty for helping you guys."

"How do you suppose your RIDEs feel? The ones who love their human friends but live with knowing others in the same polity mistreat their kind? I'm sure there are plenty even in Uplift."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," Paul shook their shared head. "That's the thing about this place. Lets you live in the other point of view. I guess if the RIDEs who're my friends are okay with deferring to their humans' wishes, I can do the same for you."

They approached the cabin that served as a commissary, dishing out whatever food was available for humans at the moment. A number of humans and Fuser RIDEs were lined up, and quite a few heads turned to stare up at the thudding sound of Fenris's footfalls.

"We seem to make people nervous," Fenris chuckled.

"Imagine that," Paul said. "Hey, if we're gonna de-Fuse anyway, can I see your Skimmer mode?"

"Of course. It's been awhile since I've been that, and I should check to make sure I can still switch to it anyway." Fenris began to shift shape, and then Paul was back inside the metal capsule as the nanos flushed away and he dropped out of Fuse-sync before the change was complete. The metal walls moved around him, and opened overhead. A seat formed underneath him and raised him up through the opening into the sunlight, his head just peeking over the top of a cockpit containing banks of redundant physical and hardlight displays arranged around him in a U-shape.

Paul craned his neck up and around and saw that the cockpit was in the gently sloping forward section of a small skimmer tank. Behind and above him was a cupola mounting two thick particle beam cannon barrels—non-functional right now; fixing them had not been a priority with the parts on hand. The cupola was where the theoretical light RIDE-wearing co-pilot would usually ride.

As Paul checked the unfamiliar cockpit for the controls to raise the seat so he could clamber out, Fenris sensed his desire and did it for him so he could clamber out onto the deck. There was a ladder set into the tank's side. As he stepped down and away, he saw the shape of the tank was itself suggestive of a wolf, narrowing at the front to a muzzle-like point, and with lifter nacelles fore and aft that looked like legs with paws. Fenris's twin metal tails poked up to the rear as antenna arrays.

"Looking good!" Then as he turned, he felt something brush against the backs of *both* of his legs at once. "Huh?" He glanced over his shoulder. "Huh." Like Fenris, he had not one but *two* white wolf tails hanging back there, emerging from a common spot at the base of his spine. He gave them an experimental wag. They seemed to move together and act like a single tail in most respects, but there were two of them.

"A two-tailed crew for a two-tailed RIDE," Fenris rumbled smugly. "No one can mistake *you* for someone else's."

"It's unique. I think I like it." Then he glimpsed his reflection out of the corner of his eye on one of the shinier panels of Fenris's side, and came closer to get a clearer view. He blinked. "And that's kind of unique, too." In addition to the expected white wolf ears, the face looking back at him in the reflection had a black lupine nose, which—when Paul felt of it—was definitely both cold and wet. And when he opened his mouth to check, he had elongated canines, too. It put him in mind of Rhianna, and he felt a brief surge of homesickness.

"Ah, yes. I'm afraid I'm just so much wolf that all my pilots get marked that way. If you're with me for more than a few months, you'll develop a light fur coat, too." Fenris sounded a little embarrassed. "It will all fade if you should Fuse another RIDE, of course."

Paul considered the overall effect. "No, it's okay, I like this, too." He grinned at Fenris. "It's like you say. They can't mistake who I belong to. I'll be right back." He went over to stand in line, and after a few minutes was presented with a small brick labeled "Nue. San Ant. Mil.," an orange, and a tin cup to fill with water from the nearby well. He brought them back to Fenris to eat, climbing into the cupola to check out its controls as he did so.

Fenris was configured so that his operator could use either station for piloting him. The command and control station where he had been was the intelligence hub of the vehicle with rudimentary steering and drive-train controls where the commander and Fuse partner usually sat, while the cupola had physical gunnery and driving controls intended for the co-pilot but far fewer multi-function displays. The MFDs in the command station could be reconfigured to duplicate the cupola's controls, but it didn't work the other way around. The co-pilot was more accurately intended to be the *actual* pilot most of the time while the RIDE's Fuse partner was more of a vehicle commander.

At least, that had been how it had been planned to work in theory. It hadn't worked out in practice, which was largely why Fenris's line had been so unsuccessful in military service.

Paul took a bite of the ration bar, chewed it slowly, and swallowed. "I guess Nuevo San Antonio is too poor to afford flavoring. You sure aren't missing very much from not being able to Fuse with me for dinner, I can tell you."

"It seems a common complaint," Fenris said. "Sturmhaven has more wealth than Nuevo San, but to hear my soldiers talk they didn't seem to have much to spare for

flavoring either.”

But at least it filled his empty stomach, and made the orange afterward taste that much better. As the sun sank below the horizon, Paul leaned back in the seat and wondered what Rhianna was doing about now. Had she gotten back to inspect the damage to the garage? Did she blame him for making the choice he had? Would she honor his commitment, or would she consider it a promise made under duress and therefore not binding?

“She seems an honorable person, if occasionally ill-tempered,” Fenris rumbled, apparently catching the flavor of his thoughts. “And she will probably be too busy for now to contemplate revenge. But given a few days...it worries me.”

“Really? You think she’ll come out here guns blazing?” Paul asked.

“I would not blame her if she did,” Fenris said. “AlphaWolf should *not* have attacked her home. It made the offense...*personal*, when it didn’t need to be.”

Paul nodded. “Well, most we can do is keep working on AlphaWolf, the next few days. Maybe we can convince him he was wrong in time.” He yawned. “Meanwhile, I need to sleep. It’s been a long day, and tomorrow’s gonna be longer.” He chuckled. “I’d ask where I’ll be sleeping, but something tells me I already know.”

Fenris chuckled, lowering the seat from the cupola into his body and starting to shift into Fuse again. “Don’t worry. I’ll make sure you sleep well.”

Paul grinned. “Thanks, boss.”

Fenris’s voice came from all around him now. “You’re welcome, my little healer. Good night.”

Chapter Ten: Spaceflight of Fancy

July 17, 156 A.L.

*Along the edge of this airfield
The old prop-shaft airliners stand
Altimeters reading zero
Formless memories lingering*

Less than thirty minutes after the press conference had been disrupted, Zane was in the hallway outside his apartment, with the still-Fused Myla and Marc at his heels and an invisible Carrie-Anne somewhere in the vicinity. However, it was not his own door he knocked on, but one door down.

"It's open!" a cheerful voice came from within Quinoa's apartment. Zane pushed the door open and stepped in to find CinTally roosting on a sofa in front of a big-screen video display, big bowl of popcorn at her side. The screen was playing aerial footage taken over one of the parks just a few minutes before, showing rogue RIDEs falling onto fleeing citizens and letting them up a moment later, changed. The camera angle changed to show a flier landing on a 20th-floor balcony, changing into a tigress, and pouncing on and enfolding a frightened red-haired girl. Some pundit was speaking over the footage. "...should arrest Brubeck and hold him until we know what his role in all this was—" The info-banner said Brubeck Mining stock had flash crashed almost thirty percent.

Then the audio muted as the Cooper's Hawk Integrate turned her attention to Zane. "Was wondering when you'd show up. Hell of a show you put on. What're you doing for an encore?"

"Well, I thought I'd totally flaunt every traffic control law on the planet and take a little jaunt into orbit," Zane said casually. "Got some friends to rescue up there. We could use a good—no, wait, sorry, that would be an insult. We could use a *fantastic* pilot. Was wondering if you'd like to come along."

CinTally tossed a kernel of popcorn into the air and snapped it up with her beak. "Tempting...but what's in it for me adding myself to the hitlist of this Fritz insaniac of yours? I'm even noobier than you guys, and you guys don't seem to be doing a hell of a job keeping the chaos down."

"I could say the chance to be on the side of right and justice," Zane said. CinTally snorted, visibly unimpressed. "Or I could say the chance to get a billionaire owing you a favor."

"Yeah, right. Like I care about that kind of thing," CinTally said.

"Yeah, I sort of figured." Zane grinned. "But I'll bet I can actually get you entirely on our side with just four little words."

CinTally looked skeptically at him. "Yeah? Try me."

Zane leaned in close and whispered, "*I've got a Starmaster.*"

*Nights are cold on this airfield
I sit alone and watch the radar*

*Locked on the wavelength, caught in the beam
Falling slowly into the screen*

"I can't believe I'm doing this," CinTally muttered as she slid into the pilot's seat of the same McDonnell-Nextus C-217 Starmaster that had taken Zane and Myla to Eden and back. "But daaaaamn, this is one sweet bird. I've *never* flown one this big before!" On the panel before her, switches flipped themselves, controls arranged themselves into proper configurations, and flight computers powered up and reprogrammed with the proper intercept trajectory calculated and recalculated down to the millimeter. A 21st century Yes song from CinTally's internal playlist, something about airfields and flying, was audible over cockpit speakers.

Carrie-Anne turned visible and slid into the co-pilot's chair, busying herself with her portion of the pre-flight checklist. Zane took the engineer's seat behind CinTally. "Nothing you can't handle, right?"

CinTally snorted. "I can fly anything from a paper airplane to a generation ship. Well, *theoretically* for the ship, but there's no reason I *shouldn't* be able to." She looked at the controls again, the comm blister DIN on her back sparkling as it communicated with the spacecraft. "Aw, dammit, this has the new fourth-generation q-based fly-by-wire upgrades. I'd always wanted to fly a ship with those so I could see how they handled. Just my luck when I finally get to do it I can fly it with my *mind*."

"You could always...*not* fly it with your mind and use the controls?" Carrie-Anne suggested.

CinTally shook her head. "No, now *any* physical controls seem like wading through mud after what I can do as an Integrate." She waved at a panel next to her, and it lit itself right up.

"Then...perhaps you could simply enjoy flying the ship with your mind instead?" Carrie-Anne suggested.

CinTally rolled her eyes. "You don't *understand*!"

Myla poked her and Sophie's Fused head in from the passenger compartment. "Just got word that the gendarmes have taken those three misguided RIDEs from the conference into custody."

Zane sighed. "Right, good. I really didn't want to let them go before Rhi had a chance to examine them, but..."

"I know, but there's only so far we can bend the regs this time," Myla said. "The Uplift Agora is going to be breathing down our necks, you know. The USEC *already* wants a look at our finances to make sure you're not shorting your own stock. Shall I go on?"

Zane gritted his canines. "I know, I know. I've already put in a request to have them transferred over to corporate security after the police are done with them, in their current state, so we can 'run our own investigation.' And as much funding as we've given the gendarmerie in the last few months, I figure there's a pretty good chance they'll come through. For now, give the polis all the access they need. I want as much transparency here as we can even if it tanks the stock further. It'll recover."

"I don't suppose we've actually got *clearance* for this little jaunt yet?" Myla asked Zane.

Zane shook his head. "Haven't heard anything yet. But I expect we'll have it by the time we get back."

Myla rolled her eyes. “Terrific.”

“Hey, don’t worry about it,” Zane said. “It should be a few more hours yet before my fortune collapses. That clearance should squeak in under the wire. Or if not, I’ll have so much other trouble to worry about it’ll hardly seem like anything else on top of it.”

“*Really* terrific,” Myla said, and withdrew.

“Launch in T minus five,” CinTally reported. “Have you filed our flight plan with the tower?”

“Check,” Carrie-Anne said. “But they report four birds in queue ahead of us. It could be fifteen minutes before we’re cleared.”

“Oh, screw *that*,” CinTally said. “If we’re gonna hang for a lamb, let’s hang for a sheep. This is a rescue mission!” The navigation computer flickered and the flight pattern altered—aiming their course directly for a solid wall of the Dome, toward an area that the natural flow of flight patterns around Uplift avoided because approaches and departures to other polities went in other directions. “I’ve been doing a little reading about this stuff, and if we can’t drop that wall in time to pass with *three* Inties on board, we deserve to crash and burn.”

“Speaking of reading...” Carrie-Anne said. “I have been studying the Integrate forums and chat rooms whose addresses Quinoa passed me. There has been much said about us, and more is going up millisecond by millisecond.”

“Nothing good, I hope,” Zane said.

Carrie-Anne smirked. “A statistical analysis of the traffic shows approximately 20% are with us, 22% against us, with a margin of error of plus or minus 5%, and the rest are undecided. Though it is unclear how many of those on any side are ‘sock puppets’ for others. Integrates seem to excel at creating false net identities. The only Integrates I am really certain of are those I have personally met.”

Zane nodded. “Well, tag anyone on ‘our’ side who looks promising and give me a rundown after we get back. Maybe we can get in touch later. Right now, we’ve got a sub to catch.”

And then each of the trio devoted his full attention to preparing the craft for flight. As CinTally readied the cargo sub, Carrie-Anne reached out to the traffic control computers and effortlessly penetrated them, planting traffic redirection orders to clear the skies along its course at precisely the right moment with a smoothness no one would ever see until it was too late.

And Zane went back to the passenger quarters to check on Myla, Sophie, Marc, and Cernos. They were both strapped into the same conference chair shock couches that Zane, Myla, and Quinoa had used on their flight. But there wasn’t going to be any rolling the bird over for a lovely view this time.

“Feels just like that Old Smokey op, doesn’t it sarge?” Marc said.

“That it does, LT,” the former MRS officer said. She looked up at Zane. “How’re things going up there? We can’t connect to the network. No bandwidth.”

Zane blinked, then checked. “Ah...sorry about that. I think our pilot’s a little overzealous about getting to know her new craft. And she’s a new Integrate, so probably...”

“We need access to do our jobs, Zane,” Myla said impatiently. “Fix now, explain later. That’s how we did it in the Old 51st.”

The tiger Integrate nodded, then returned to the flight deck. CinTally swallowed. “Oh...um...oops? Sorry, throttling my bandwidth use back some.” She shook her head.

“Anyway, once we lift, we’ll be in orbit in about twelve minutes. Intercept in another hour or so on this trajectory. They ended up in a higher orbit than I thought possible for a sub that size. Fritz must have burned their batts to the dregs.”

“Are they on ZOT sensors now?” Zane asked. The avian Integrate was still taking up so much network space it was hard to connect. It was as if the Starmaster was an extension of her body.

“That’s right, they are. But no comms. I’m sure they Fused up and are just waiting it out.”

“When we get in range we can hit them with short range comms on RIDE frequencies, or maybe a laser. Or heck, even flash lights at them in Morse Code or something.” Zane fastened himself securely into his seat.

“Something. But...‘boss’, have you considered sending ZOT a copy of that message? We *are* engaging in a rescue operation. No need to be secretive, right? Especially since your friends’ sub is on their sensors now.” CinTally tilted her raptorial head, red eyes flickering.

“I sent it first thing,” Zane said. “That’s why I expect we’ll have clearance by the time we get back. In rescue operations where there’s no *immediate* danger, the wheels of bureaucracy grind slow but fine. Whereas I just want to get up there and back before anything *else* can happen, because we need all our allies where we can reach them ASAP.”

A chime from the instrument board signaled that the final checks were complete. CinTally turned her attention back to it. “Then we’re not waiting one more second. Here we go!”

*Every day that you wait
Is one more that you’ve lost
When you wake up
I see you there
On display
Lights the final point of no return
Taking us there from here*

It had been a trivial exercise of Zane’s authority to order the airfield cleared. With the main platform down, the private aerodrome had not been seeing much activity at all over the last couple of days, so there had been hardly anything to clear away.

And now, with the airfield empty before it, the Starmaster was free to choose whichever direction it wanted to accelerate for takeoff. It could have lifted vertically, but CinTally’s calculated course relied on building up as much speed as quickly as possible, and it was just as well to do that along the ground. In the cockpit, CinTally didn’t move a muscle, but the throttles *slammed* forward to their full extent, and the hardlight aero shielding adjusted for minimum drag.

The gigantic cargo suborbital began to move, slowly at first but building momentum very quickly, and under CinTally’s control it leaped into the sky at exactly the right moment, on a wildly accelerating course through suddenly mysteriously clear airspace—heading straight for the hardlight dome. Somewhere an air traffic controller squawked angrily, but they had no time to pay attention.

Seconds before impact, the three Integrates raised their arms together and

pushed an impulse outward, and a hole appeared in the dome for exactly long enough to let them through before closing again. And then the control yokes pulled back, the aero shielding readjusted, and the variable-geometry swing-wings swept back to their full orbital configuration—and the Starmaster streaked for the sky.

*And we can fly from here (we can fly)
And we can fly from here (we can fly)
And we can fly from here (we can fly)
Into a sky that's clearing
Look back we'll dry the tears
For those once held so nearly
And love will never disappear*

Aboard the X-15 suborbital, en route to Nextus

Uplift to Nextus was a very short route for a suborbital, but Lilli and Guin didn't relax for a moment as they guided the X-15 along a least-time course between the politics. There really wasn't any time to lose. When she thought about what she was going to have to do...

She sighed. There really wasn't anything for it. *:Guin, I need you to send a message to my Dad for me.:*

:Nnngh?: Guin still wasn't completely back up to peak performance after the battering she'd taken, and it was taking much of her remaining concentration to fly the sub.

Lillibet steeled herself. *:Tell him I'm declaring 'Code Creosote'.:* It was a private family emergency code, meant to be used when time was at a premium and access to more money than usual was critical. However, after the emergency was over, she would be called to account for everything she had spent, with the others in her family closely scrutinizing every expenditure.

Guin sent the message. A moment later: *:He says, "Understood.":*

Lillibet released the breath she didn't know she'd been holding. *:Good. When you can spare the cycles, put together a summary of events since the shuttle left and zap it to him. He's gonna need to know.:* She glanced over her shoulder at Relena, who was still quietly sobbing in the back seat. *Wonder if I should tell her...hmm...nah, let it be a surprise.*

Rather than her parents' mansion's landing field, Lilli had Guin park the sub at a public aerodrome near her destination. The moment it came to a halt, she had the canopy up. Not waiting for a ladder, she put her arm around Relena's waist and boosted them both down to the ground with her lifters. Then she stood in front of the girl and had Guin unfold to Skimmer underneath them. Then they were on their way again.

"Where are we even going?" Relena asked.

"Somewhere important. You'll see." Lillibet hunched low over the handlebars—silly given that Guin's hardlight aeroshields meant it would not make any difference to air resistance, but an ingrained habit all the same—and raced the motor. However, she kept her driving considerably tamer than she had used in Uplift, because her destination was only a few blocks away: Nextus RIDeworks, where Uncia and Guinevere's builder had his facilities.

Katie was about to get a well-deserved upgrade.

When they arrived at the RIDEworks campus, Lilli passed by the showroom and the ordinary maintenance bays, heading for a secluded section at the end of the lot protected by a tall wall and a metal security gate. She didn't even slow down as she approached. The gate read her identity from Guin's transponder and opened for her before she reached it.

Beyond it was a smaller complex of buildings. The landscaping style was the sort of understated elegance that Nextus did so well, in contrast to the rest of the complex's industrial chic. They pulled up in front of a small building with no obvious sign, and Lilli helped Relena down from the bike before Guin changed back to walker form. Then Lilli gave her furry friend a tight hug. "You're the *best*, Guinny. We'll get you fixed up quick, too."

As the two girls and a battered ocelot stepped in, the man sitting behind the single room in the desk looked up. His bored expression changed not one iota. Not too surprising; if they had been able to pass the gate, then they deserved to be there.

Without preamble, Lillibet flipped open her wallet and placed it on the desk in front of him, so he could see the screen, displaying her ID and her available cash balance. "I'd like to see *Signore* Donizetti please."

The man barely glanced at it. "Certainly, Miss Walton. He's with another client right now, but I will let him know." He gestured toward a table along one side of the room with a gourmet food fab set up. "Please, help yourself to refreshments. It will only be a few minutes."

"Thanks, we will." Lillibet led Relena over to the table.

"What are we even *doing* here?" Relena hissed. "If you're wanting to get me another RIDE, I don't *want* another RIDE. I want—"

"Shhh. I know. I know," Lillibet said. "Just trust me, okay? C'mon, let's get something to eat. It's been a long day." She had the fabber make them ham sandwiches and Italian sodas, and they sat and ate them and waited for a few minutes until a short, balding fellow in a suit hurried out into the room, looked around, and spied them.

"Ah! *Signorina* Walton!" he said cheerfully in an Italian accent—the man actually *was* from Italy on Earth, so it was genuine. Back on the homeworld, he had been a renowned designer of high-priced sports skimmers, and his Terran designs were still in production and regarded highly both there and in the colonies. But he had grown bored with mere skimmers and come to Zharus in search of a greater challenge—and had found it in RIDEs, where his designs were now every bit as prized as his sports skimmers had been on earth. "I'm glad to see you're all right." He glanced at Guinevere, and his expression grew more serious. "What have you been doing to my *bambina*, eh?"

"It's not what *we* were doing, *Signore* Donizetti, it's what the people who tangled with us did. I didn't exactly get off unbruised, either," Lillibet said, just a little irritated. It was a little personality quirk that Donizetti cared more about machines than people. Usually, it was endearing, but sometimes it could be decidedly annoying.

"So you brought her here for repair, eh?"

"No—well, *yes*, but that's not the main reason I'm here." Lillibet fished into her pouch and produced Katie's RI core.

Donizetti's eyes widened. "Is that from the one who...with that lifter dive...?"

Lillibet nodded. "I want the best body you can build for her. Something as close to a LNX(f)-LMA-002A as you can get, only with the absolute best parts you have."

Behind her, Relena gasped.

Donizetti raised an eyebrow. "You wish me to build an 'Ahnuld'?"

"No, I want something *better* than an Ahnuld," Lillibet said. "I want a *skunkworks*. This is a Code Creosote, and I'm going to have to account for every centi to my Dad when this is done, so might as well get the best." Donizetti was an old family friend, and her father was one of the chief investors in Nextus RIDEworks, so he knew exactly what it would entail and what it meant for her to invoke it.

She handed the core over to Donizetti, who took out a digital loupe and fitted it into one eye to examine it carefully, treating it like a work of art. "Mmm. No visible damage, this is good. But I can't guarantee all of our skunkworks technology will be compatible with a RI core this old," he pointed out.

"Just give her the ones with a 60% chance and up of working then," Lillibet said. "Also, I'd like your very best milspec LMA weapons kit for her. And one for Ginny, too." She considered. "And give Ginny whatever skunkwork upgrades you can while you're at it. Hmm.....and send a light and a medium kit to Rhi's garage."

"Very well," Donizetti said. "Anything else?"

"Well...I want Rhi and Shelley to get certification to work on your stuff, so they won't void the warranty if they have to keep Katie up. Can you send them the necessary technical docs and paperwork?" *Even if they're probably gonna kill me when they find out.*

Donizetti bowed. "It shall be done." He turned to go, then paused. "You know, I had heard that you were becoming a credible RIDE technician yourself. Your father is quite proud. Would you care to accompany me? And your guest?"

Lillibet grinned. "I thought you'd never ask. C'mon, Relena. Let's go remake a friend."

Low Zharus Orbit

Rhianna's emotions warred with one another, tangled together like so much matted fur: Fear. Was Lillibet okay? What would Paul's parents do, sue her? What about Quinoa? Frustration. Why *her* garage? Why *her* home? Revenge for that blasted incident in the tunnels? Anger. *I want Tocsin's head on a pike.* On this, she and Kaylee were so harmonized neither was sure who that bloody-minded vindictive thought had come from. *I want to pluck his feathers one by one. I want to disassemble him by degrees and make him watch. And I want his boss's hardlight pelt on the wall of my new home.*

Thinking was one thing, *acting* on those thoughts something else entirely. Rhianna had read in a book once, a phrase that had stuck with her since childhood: Personal was not the same as important. She and Kaylee wanted to do all sorts of horrible things to AlphaWolf and his band of merry RIDEs. She could make things *intimately* painful for them. RI neural maps contained the location of every body part of a flesh-and-blood counterpart. Some of them were simply not used, but she knew how to reactivate them. She could even strip away their sentience—not that any researchers *had*, but there were always a few RI cores that didn't bake perfectly. Her personal network had—*had*, she reminded herself—contained hundreds of journal articles on the theory behind how it all went together. It wasn't that hard to understand.

The surprisingly dark thoughts made her sick to her stomach.

“So how in the Briny Deep *do* they eat and breathe?” Uncia said, confused. “How does the Satellite of Love even *work*? I mean, hamdingers? *Hamdingers*? And without the net to search, I don’t understand half the references they’re making.”

Rochelle watched the show in virtual. “Is it me, or does Joe Don Baker look a lot like Crazy Joe Steader?”

“S’more attitude than looks,” Anny said. “But I’ve seen him in that plaid suit. Lord, the 1970s were an ugly, ugly decade.”

“All this waiting is pissing me off!” Rhianna snarled.

“Well, what else can we do?” Rochelle said, hand on her friend’s shoulder. “I’m sorry I burned out the comm blisters.”

“You did what you had to do, Shelley and Uncia,” Rhianna said. “I’m just spinning my wheels here and I can’t stand it.” *Would I be reacting the same way were I still a man?* She threw up her arms. “I can’t even sit back and relax to watch the show.”

:Earthers. It’s not because you’re a woman, Rhi. Stop second guessing yourself.: Kaylee said, sensing her train of thought. The lynx headbumped her rider beneath her breasts anyway. *:You only do this when you feel powerless.:*

:Well, maybe I want it to be.: Rhianna replied, momentarily feeling an odd stubborn streak. Then she started laughing. *:Okay, now I’m just being a crazy wo—a crazy person. I’m so tangled up right now. It’s all gone, Kaylee. Even if I can rebuild the Waltons are going to sue us into poverty for child endangerment.:*

Anny pursed her lips, looking at the floor, the wall panels, thinking about something. “Rhianna, darlin’, I’ve got something here I think I can give you without ending up in the hoosegow for a nickel. My instincts are tellin’ me that it might have something to do with all this mess. One of my superiors gave it to me for safekeeping and didn’t explain what it was, “sactly. But I trust my gut with these things.”

The older woman opened her jewelry case again, then reached inside. A small secret drawer slid open. On first glance it looked like somebody’s molar without any roots. Before taking it, Rhianna Fused with Kaylee again, then Anny put it in their handpaw.

:You know what this is, right?: Kaylee asked rhetorically. A DIN plug, an old one, without any OS chip. The first *known* Integration happened twenty-six years ago, but the RIDE program had been around for nine years before that. Quinoa and the Towers Inties said Fritz had been that way for “at least thirty years”. Fritz himself was a former LNX unit. The idea that Fritz was her brother left a bad taste in Kaylee’s mouth, but it was looking likely. *:I don’t remember any RIDE named Fritz, but that doesn’t mean much. I had a lot of ‘brothers’ and “sons’ with names starting with F. All my sisters started with K, even into the 002-series.:*

:You know, we don’t have any direct evidence yet, but there’s that whole blank area of classified memories. But is it possible Fritz is that very first partner you can’t remember? Do you remember that ugly look he gave us at the Towers?:

Kaylee virtually facepawed. *:Rhi-girl, I...really can do without the speculation right now. But if this is an early DIN, we’ve got enough data for Shoelace-Alpha.:*

“I’ve got something coming up on sensors,” Leila reported. The lioness’s batteries were holding up well, though she was panting with the effort. “It’s big. *Really* big. And it’ll be overhead in just a few seconds.”

Nextus RIDeworks was a typical overly literal Nextusian name that covered up

much deeper complexity. The company had a dozen major brands—from skimmers to RIDEs, even AIDES—and a few small, exclusive ones such as Donizetti's. After putting Katie's RI core in a stabilization unit, the Terran immigrant led the girls towards the Engineering and Design Department. Inside, men and women sitting in front of video paper drafting tables created everything from literal workhorse RIDEs costing less than 20k *mu* to million-*mu* specials like Uncia. But there was yet another design space.

"*Signorina* Walton, *Signorina* Packard, I ask your indulgence," Donizetti said. "With your permission, I will place Katie's design in the hands of one I trust more than myself for a project of this importance. My most talented apprentice. Will you trust my judgment?"

Lillibet and Relena looked at each other. When the world's most brilliant and renowned RIDE designer asks you to trust his judgment, what *can* you say? "Uh...of course we will," Lillibet said. Relena nodded agreement.

Donizetti bowed. "*Grazie mille*. I have already sent ahead to her so she will be ready." Lillibet knew that as an accomplished technician from Earth, he had the same sort of implants as Rhianna that let him interface with computers without speaking. "I will show you to her now."

Donizetti led them to a small room, where a brown-haired woman with an otter's tail and ears sat, focused on the design table in front of her, eyes flickering through her 'specs. "Just one moment...Master Donizetti, please hand me the core in question, if you please. We need to make sure that heroic lynx is still with us before we continue."

Her words made Relena whimper as she took the support unit from Donizetti. With the same care a surgeon would treat an exposed brain, the engineer carefully removed Katie's core and put it into yet another socket in her desk. Only once it was in did she relax. "Good to see you again, Lillibet."

Lilli tilted her head. "Wait...Harold? You crossed?" She had met Harold Rourke in person shortly after Guin's fetters were removed to give him a piece of her mind over how restrictive they were. Fortunately after that outburst he'd remained friendly. When she wasn't at Rhianna's Garage, she'd been asking Harold over virtual about various aspects of RIDE design.

"Helen as of just this morning, but yes. We have many customers who cross, not to mention our natural-born female customers, so to better serve them I thought the experience would be valuable. Besides, I met the most charming little otter RIDE...But this isn't about me. I need a little time to set up the TBS."

"Total Body Sim?" Relena said brightly.

Helen smiled at the other girl. "Precisely. I'm going to set up her old body in virtual space so we can interact with her and ensure her personality core is undamaged. It's the same thing we do when we bring a brand new RI online for the first time ever. I want her input on what she wants for a new Drive Extender as much as yours, young lady. You are her companion, are you not?"

The teenage girl nodded. "Is she okay?"

The drawing board retained its paper-like appearance as various parts floated in, assembling themselves into a familiar lynx shape, much like the girls had seen Quinoa do in real life. This was much less impressive. Last to go in was a virtual core. "Her core went into stasis lock successfully," Helen reported. "There's a little fragmentation, but that should be fixed shortly. Katie is fine."

Relena hugged the newly-female RIDE engineer. "Oh, thank you! Thank you

thank you!"

"I'm happy too, young Miss!" Helen said, smiling. "Say hello, Katie."

"Hello, Katie," the animated LNX said dryly. "The last thing I rrrrememberrrr... that powerrrr dive. Is...everrrryone all rrrright? Did I stop Tocsin?"

Relena opened her mouth to reply, but Lillibet interrupted. "Everyone's *fine*," she said firmly. "You were absolutely brilliant. We'll go over it fully later, but right now we're more worried about you."

"Thank goodness you're all right!" Relena said, wiping her eyes. "I was so *worried!* Don't *ever* do that to me again!"

"I'm rrreally happy to see all of you again. I feel strange. I'm just a little unsurrre *where* I am." The lynx looked around herself. "Other than experrrrriencing *deja vu*. It feels just like my Bootday."

"You're almost right," Lillibet said, buoyed by Relena's relief. "This is your *Reboot* Day. Helen, let's get started."

A shadow fell over the Dreamchaser as the larger ship came between it and the sun. And then a deep voice intoned, "A shadow shall fall over the universe, and evil will grow in its path. And death will come from the skies."

"Sorry!" Uncia said. "Hit play on the media player by accident."

"Accidentally on purpose," Shelley said laughing. "*That's* not one of Anny's movies."

"Whatever it is, it's matching velocities with us," Uncia reported. "Hang on, I'm picking up something on short range comms."

Zane's voice came over the speakers. "Hey, you folks look like you could use a tow. I think I can get you as far as the closest filling station."

Rhianna started laughing. "Zane, it's *great* to hear your voice. Did you-know-who tip you off?"

"Well, *someone* did." Myla's voice this time. "And when we checked with orbital traffic control they confirmed it. They were still working on pulling their heads out when we launched."

"Hold tight. We're opening bay doors now, going to tractor you in." Lines of light appeared in the shape overhead, then expanded into a brightly-lit rectangular opening. Then the opening started to come closer.

"You know, there's about fifty movies from *Star Wars* all the way to the end of the Oil Age with that *exact* image," Anny said.

"I'm not really thinking of ancient sci-fi movies right now," Rhianna said. "I want to find out what happened at the Garage after the video blinked out."

"Lord Lordy Lord," Kaylee said. "What was Katie *doing*? We lost it just as she attacked."

As the shuttle rose up past the hull, out the front windows they could see Zane leaning against a railing around the hatch, wearing a translucent hardlight spacesuit. "Hey, really nice little sub!" he said cheerfully. "I should pick one up for my toolbox."

"She's a sweet ride. I can't wait to make her better," Rhianna said. *:Shelley, we've got more work to do.:* She sent some preliminary Shoelace quasi-DIN plug designs she'd been toying with.

:No rest for the wicked,: the other crossrider said. *:Looks like we won't be sleeping anytime soon. At least we'll get the chance to redesign the Garage systems*

from the ground up.: A thump vibrated through the Dreamchaser's hull as the bay doors sealed beneath it. Leila extended the landing gear.

"We're repressurizing the bay now," Zane said. "Give us about five minutes and it'll be safe to come out. Or you could Fuse up and join us now if you're impatient. But meanwhile, here." He pushed across a bundle of media files. "You can get the whole thing later, but there's the curated 'good parts' version. What happened ground-side after someone decided to star you in a bad 1980s TV movie."

"Thanks, Zane. We'll review quickly," Rhianna said.

They started with the remainder of the attack on the Garage. Quinoa's attempt at keeping Tocsin busy was a surprise, and they all felt a lump in their stomachs when the hippogryph took her down. Lillibet and Guin were obviously more successful than Quinoa, but then they were taken down too. Katie's selfless sacrifice made Kaylee yowl in sadness and anger. Finally they watched Paul sacrifice *himself* to keep the entire Garage from obliteration. "I told him I was counting on him to make sure I still had a garage when I got back," Rhianna murmured dazedly. "I didn't mean it that *literally*! Fuck the Garage! It's just a thing!"

"He *was* probably more concerned about the people in it at the time," Rochelle pointed out.

Rhianna blinked back tears. "God. Fucking. Damn it. I don't understand. *Why* would Tocsin do this?"

The bay finished pressurizing, so exhausted Leila opened the aft door and disconnected herself from the sub's power connector. The Dreamchaser was truly dead now, and Rhianna wouldn't bring it back to life until she knew it was Integrate-hack-proof. She started feeding some of her preliminary Shoelace ideas to Shelley.

Zane dissolved the hardlight suit. "Welcome aboard. You might be interested to know, this is the exact Starmaster sub I so misguidedly attempted to push off on you. Wish I could have you aboard her under better circumstances."

Rhianna extended her hand to the tiger Integrate. "Right now, that hardly matters. Think of what might have happened had I accepted. We could be halfway to Xolotlan by now."

Zane clasped her hand. "True dat. Anyway, c'mon. CinTally tells me we're going to have to go around the block a couple of times "fore we can get into the proper approach for an Uplift landing, so we might as well use the time for a pow-wow." He led them out of the bay into a nicely-furnished executive conference room with wide viewports in the walls and ceiling and a wood-finished conference table with comfortable chairs rigged to double as acceleration couches. Carrie-Anne, Myla and Sophie, and a man with a stag Fuser they didn't recognize were there already.

The newcomers de-Fused, their RIDEs plugging into the RIDE-safe fuel-cell-fed charge ports behind the seats of their partners. As Zane waved the humans all to seats, he said, "There's some other stuff I didn't push to you in that packet because I wanted to discuss it with you face to face. You've met everyone here except Marc Flores and Cernos, a couple of Myla and Sophie's old comrades and part of my bodyguard team."

"Small world," Rochelle said, smiling at the deer-eared man. "Next time we'll make it harder for a debacle like that to happen again. Zane, if you still want me as your 'official Integrate researcher,' I need access to your systems. I have some good news on the anti-hacking front I'd like to share with everyone. I forced Fritz out of the sub's systems, for all the good it ultimately did."

Zane's eyes brightened. "Really? That's *wonderful*! And I have news for you, too. Carrie-Anne and I were able to get a few minutes alone with the three RIDEs we took prisoner at the press conference. We took complete memory backups for review before handing them over to the gendarmes," Zane said.

"What's in them, in a nutshell?" Rhianna asked.

"There are gaps," Carrie-Anne said. "AlphaWolf made sure to cover his tracks, so we do not know where his camp is. But it *did* contain some references to someone he calls 'Overwatch'."

"And therein lies a tale. Seems this 'Overwatch' is a highly-trusted source, who'd given AlpoWoof good leads on freeing a number of RIDEs over the last few years," Zane said. "And this time, he fed that mangy mutt a line about an evil Integrate who plans to raise an Integrate army to capture him and his people and force them to merge with humans. And he also happened to mention that Woof could pull off a two-fer and get revenge on the evil woman who sold a dozen Nextus military RIDEs back into slavery at the Towers last month at the same time. Naturally, he bought it hook, line, and sinker."

"Give me a look at that," Rochelle said, gesturing with her hands. "Gimme, gimme."

"I'm making the files available," Carrie-Anne said. "And to save time, a list of date codes for the relevant memories. You can review them in full later."

It only took a split second as Rochelle reviewed the data in her specs. She looked at Uncia, who nodded agreement. "Even without the actual messages from this 'Overwatch', these still have a bit of Fritz's DIN halo. I've seen it up close, you see. Inties can't help leaving traces of themselves everywhere. It 'sticks' to anything they touch, or touches them, even through several file copies. I doubt he himself even knows about this drawback or he'd take steps to prevent it."

Zane blinked. "Wait, you mean...we've got Integrate *dandruff*?"

Carrie-Anne made a little brushing motion on his shoulder. "*You* need a better Integrate dandruff shampoo." Zane snorted, and Carrie-Anne flashed one of her blinding-white grins.

"Makes sense," Sophie said. "This whole Fritz thing, I mean. Back at the Towers, I didn't exactly get the sense he liked 'mech' any more than he liked 'meat.' So if he could get a couple factions of them fighting each other, well, yay for him. AlphaWolf may be a hot-headed idiot, but he gets a lot of respect among the owned RIDE population."

"Indeed," Cernos put in. "Especially the most fettered ones, to whom he symbolizes the freedom they desperately long for. He's Santa Claus and the Promised Land rolled up into one." He wrinkled his cervine nose. "Nobody ever accused RIDEs of being any smarter than humans."

"I remember when his cronies used to come and broadcast his Message of Freedom at us in the showroom," Uncia said. "He sure suckered *me* into believing." She glanced at Rochelle. "Sorry 'bout that, again."

Rochelle hugged her. "Water under the bridge, hon. Anyway, it's not as if he's preaching a *bad* message. We should be treating RIDEs like people anyway."

Rhianna had been drumming her fingers on the table for several minutes as the conversation moved on around her. Kaylee nosed her, so the lynx-eared woman started petting her partner thoughtfully between her ears. With that new information, she knew it didn't make sense to be angry at AlphaWolf and his group—they had been duped into

destroying her Garage. Their goals were largely the same—RIDE emancipation—but their methods differed. But no matter how she mentally wrangled things, she couldn't make the offense go away completely. She couldn't forgive, not yet.

"Anyway, the gendarmes will probably take their own memory backups of the three we turned in, review them, go, 'Damn that AlphaWolf, he is so naughty,' and then shrug, throw up their hands, and toss them in the impound lot." Zane said. "I've already put in a request to have them returned to me in their original state, ostensibly for a Brubeck corporate security investigation. I was actually thinking I might turn them over to you, since you lost a lot more out of this than I have so far."

"I don't know about *that*, Zane. Brubeck stock is down by a third. Your company's now the twentieth largest on the planet instead of the seventh," Myla said.

"Maybe so, but taken as a percentage of my overall assets, I still lost a lot less than they did," Zane pointed out. "So anyway, Rhi and Shelley have more right to 'devise brave punishments' for those three than I do."

"I need to think. I need to cool down. And I need to *do something* so I don't crack up," Rhianna said, her voice catching.

Rochelle patted her on the shoulder. "I know," she said softly.

"If there's anything I can do to help, let me know," Zane said soberly.

Rhianna took the old prototype DIN plug out of her pocket and put it on the table for the Integrates to see. "Thanks to Anny, at least now we have a physical lead. Right now I think we're on the edge of making our hardware unhackable to you folks—no offense. I get the feeling that Fritz wants us meat and mech to think he's some sort of god, keep us ignorant how Integrates work. We're going to stop him so hard. Soooo hard!" She hit the table with her fist so that the DIN plug jumped. "Bastard won't know what hit him. Then we'll spread it far and wide. Spam the planet if we have to."

"Please count us into your plans," Carrie-Anne said. "Fritz will have it in for us as badly as you."

"This is going to need more resources than the Garage can really provide," Rochelle pointed out, speaking carefully.

"Not enough resources? The garage? *Really?*" Uncia muttered. Rochelle elbowed her. "Ow! Sorry."

"I don't know how long I'll have any resources left myself, but as long as I do they're at your disposal," Zane said. "I'm...really sorry I brought this down on you guys. Maybe I should have gone to an Enclave or something after all."

Rhianna stood up and walked over to Zane, then turned his chair to face her. "Stop it. Stop with 'should-haves' and 'could-haves'. Just *don't*. Move forward. After what I saw in the Towers, Fritz has enemies among the Inties as well. We need to exploit that."

"I have some possible leads," Carrie-Anne said. "People who posted in support of us on Integrate net forums."

"Best place to start, right?" Rochelle agreed. "Remember Leah and Aaron? I'm going to send them an invite to meet us soon. Let's start with who we've met. Maybe even Col. Gray at Towers, and what about that owl griffin that went beak-to-muzzle with Fritz? Can't say *he* was afraid of him."

"And what about Quinoa?" Uncia asked. "Is she alright? She's kind of a hero, too." She wrinkled her nose. "It's weird to say that about Quinnie of all people, but she's not here to hear me say it, so I guess it's okay."

“Nobody’s really sure,” Carrie-Anne said. “When the police finally arrived, she was no longer there.”

Rhianna frowned. “What? How’s that possible?”

Zane shrugged. “The media cameras showed her getting to her feet, battered and beat up but apparently okay—and there was enough other chaos around that all the cops and ambulances were tied up with more critical cases, so nobody got there in person for a while.”

Carrie-Anne nodded. “Then the picture goes all...distorted after she’s staggered around for a little while, and she vanishes.”

“Give me a look at that data,” Rochelle said.

Zane nodded. “We’ll be glad to, but you’ll probably jump to the same conclusion we did with the good ol’ Mark 1 eyeball. It was very familiar to me from the time I spent in the library before I came down to get this.” He held up his wrist, displaying the twinkling gem. “Anyone who’s googled ‘Integrate’ has seen the same kind of distortion lots of times.”

“She must have slipped off somewhere to recuperate,” Rhianna said. “I guess if she was okay enough to get up on her own, there wasn’t much a human hospital could do for her anyway.”

“Poor Quinoa.” Uncia shook her head. “Something else I didn’t think I’d be saying. But she sure got a lesson in ‘Integrate superiority’ when she went toe to toe with Tocsin...” She sneezed. “That remind me. I just did a quick Google. Did you know a hippogryph named ‘Tocsin’ was in the Loose Cannons back in the day? The pics are different, but we RIDEs have been known to change shells. There can’t be enough horsebirds around to have two with a name like that.”

Zane frowned. “Ugh. That’s another name that’s familiar from googling ‘Integrate.’ Nextus’s elite division for countering a threat they nonetheless insisted didn’t exist. No wonder he could smack Quinoa down.”

Rhianna nodded. “And Lillibet and Guinevere, Donizetti or not. Which makes it all more the amazing what Katie did.”

Kaylee yowled. “Lordy Lord Lordy...I hope she came through that. We’re tough to kill, but.....”

“You know, between stepping up against someone Fritz sent, endangering Lillibet Walton, and nearly getting killed herself, I wouldn’t want to be Quinoa right now,” Rochelle opined. “Probably just as well she disappeared for the time being.”

Rhianna facepalmed. She imagined Joe Steader and Kenyon Walton—or more likely, Nigella—arm-wrestling for who would get first dibs on her own carcass. “I don’t know if I want to be *me* right now. The Steaders, the Waltons...who exactly are they going to blame for this?”

“We’ll get it all sorted out,” Uncia said. “Kenyon seemed like a reasonable man.”

“He’s really a pretty nice guy,” Zane said. “I don’t know him that well personally, but I used to caddy sometimes when he played golf with Dad and the Qube. I don’t think he’ll blame you. Though his *wife*, on the other hand...”

“Katie...” Kaylee whimpered. “Brave, brave Katie. She didn’t *have* to do that.” Rhianna glanced at her with concern. Kaylee was still desperately worried, but at least she seemed to be on a more even keel since she’d seen Lillibet remove her daughter’s RI core and speed away with it—and with her daughter’s partner. The videos were all over the newsfeeds in the bundle Zane had sent them, *especially* her little speech about

humans.

“She’s an MRS RIDE through and through,” Sophie said proudly.

“If I know my Lilli, she’s probably at Nextus RIDEworks right now, frantically getting a new DE slapped together for her before her father can find and ground her,” Uncia said. “She used to be a little self-absorbed, but she’s got a good heart. Katie will be fine, and I’ll bet you’ll hardly even know her next time you see her.”

Katie was just a lynx-shaped outline on the faux-paper screen with a spot on her head occupied by her core. The first thing Helen had done was trash the old RIDE’s chassis. “This.....feels...I can’t quite descrrribe it,” the confused, animated RI said.

“Like Daffy Duck in ‘Duck Amuck’?” Lilibet supplied. The 20th century nostalgia craze had extended to its media, including the most famous cartoons that could be found in constant rotation on the kiddie channels with set schedules, like ancient TV.

“I guess this means I should say ‘you’rre’ dethphicable’, but you’re cerrrtainly not,” Katie said. “Unless you give me a new body as bad as the one Daffy got.”

“Do I look like a vindictive Bugs Bunny to you?” Helen quipped, chuckling to herself. “To start with, a 001-series derived nano-motile chassis. Versatile. Infinitely upgradable. I’ve never been one for specialist armors either, so you’ll remain an LMA of course. We have plenty of paks available that will fit you.”

“Of...of course,” Katie said as the chassis—her skeleton—took its place within the animated lynx outline. It bore enough of a resemblance to an actual lynx’s that the effect was rather spooky.

“We’ll be using a new series of alloys we’ve been developing for use in the next series of Nextus military RIDEs in the skeleton and armor plating,” Helen continued. “It offers about 10% better structural integrity than the current state of the art—let alone your original version—with 10% lower weight.”

Helen went on, paging through other components, putting each one in place as she named them. “Triple-A Rio Grade sarium batteries—that’s the same qubitite grade RI cores are made from. You’ll have more storage capacity than an ordinary Heavy Support unit—and you’re going to need it, because your lifters will be something especially new. We’ve found a new configuration that will increase their thrust output by something like 20% across the board over what had previously been thought possible. They should be ready for commercial applications in about two years. Your top speed will be somewhere around two thousand kilometers per hour for short bursts—you’ll be a flier in all but name.”

“Imprrrressive,” Katie said.

“Likewise, we’ve managed to cut the power requirements on our hardlight projectors by nearly 10% over current state of the art,” Helen said. “And we’ve reduced their size still further, so we can pack in as many extra projectors as you’d expect to see on your average Heavy.”

Relena had gone from wildly ecstatic to suddenly depressed. “This is already worth more than my parents’ *house*, Lilli.”

Lilibet patted her on the shoulder. “*Trust* me, okay? It’ll all be all right.”

Helen nodded. “Chassis, lifters, hardlight, and batteries are the major internal components here. The next step before we move on is to determine her skimmer form. The 001-chassis and the nano-plating that will go with it gives us a few options. We can go with the skimmer-cycle she had before, a version with an enclosed cockpit, or even a

hardlight-winged flier.”

“What’s yourrr recommendation?” Katie asked.

Helen smiled. “I said those were our *options*. With the hardlight tech I have at my disposal we needn’t choose between them. The base will remain the cycle mode you’re so familiar with, but we can build alternate modes completely out of hardlight. Hence the Rio batteries.”

More hardlight projectors were added to the layer, as well as optics, ears, and various other minor components that made Katie look like a RIDE anatomical drawing with muscles and organs exposed. She looked at her virtual self. “I haven’t looked like this since component integration testing back in ‘22.”

“She’s nekkid!” Lilibet giggled.

“Indeed,” the designer said. “Now, the environmental seal emitters. I needn’t bother you with too much detail here. We use the same emitters and across all our lines because the technology reached a plateau some years ago. It reassures our customers that they get the same protection no matter how much—or how little—they spend on a chassis.”

“Also saves a little money since you can make ‘em in bulk and not have to do smaller runs of specialized parts,” Lilibet said.

“I already spoke of the plating, so that goes on next,” Helen continued. The “naked” LNX unit took on the more familiar metallic appearance of most Nextus RIDEs, but looked markedly different than how Katie had been on the maint cradle.

“What about the Fuser nanites?” Lilibet asked. “What have you got up your sleeve there? She *doesn’t* want the super-sexy biosculpt ones Shelley got.”

“Of course not!” Helen said. “That would be inappropriate to say the least. We’ve taken those off the market until they can be patched, in any case.”

“If it’s so inappropriate, how did they end up in the first RIDE *I* got?” Lilli asked. “Ever since I found out what happened to Shelley, I’ve been a little glad I was such an idiot about RIDEs at the time.”

“It was a dealer option,” Helen said. “*They* were the ones who put those particular nanites in, before the RIDE was ever sold to your father, and somehow it was passed over in the pre-sale checklist. *Signor* Donizetti was...not pleased when he learned of this. The dealership managed to retain its certification, but only provisionally, and it is now under new management.”

“Hmph,” Lilibet said, mollified. “Well, anyway, what *do* you have?”

“I believe mil-spec medical is appropriate. This will enable swift self-repair for Katie and young Relena will never get sick. They will remain in your body even out of Fuse. There is a small side effect with these nannies, but merely cosmetic. An artifact of using a 001-type chassis. I can change the type if you wish, but I think a more combat-oriented type isn’t appropriate here. You’ll have a feline nose and the appropriately enhanced sense of smell.”

“Just like Rhianna?” Relena asked. “That’s not too bad.”

“Hey! Why is everyone *else* getting kitty noses but me?” Lilibet grumbled. “I want a kitty nose, too!”

“Ah, I’m afraid that’s not possible, young Miss. Guinevere is not compatible with this type of Fuser nanny.”

“Hmph. I’ll get a kitty nose *somehow*, just you wait,” Lilibet grumbled.

The animated Katie’s hardlight came on, revealing what on the face of it didn’t

look much different than she would have had all her emitters been working at the Garage. The virtualized RIDE paced around the faux-paper, breaking into a run, then switching to skimmer mode, enclosing herself in a flier-shaped hardlight shell and accelerating quickly past the speed of sound, complete with animated speed lines.

“Your hardlight emitters have an armor mode similar to what you saw Guinevere accomplish earlier and we’ll throw in the appropriate pak for even further defensive enhancements. Given the circumstances I have decided to focus on the defense of the rider and RIDE alike. Until I know what else I can do regarding the legality of minors owning weapons and the desires of the young Miss’s parents in Uplift, this will have to do. When I do, I will simply send along the appropriate weapons pak.”

“I guess that’s fair,” Lillibet said. “But I wanted her to have one of the standard LMA weapon kits available. We don’t know if the people who attacked the garage will be content with that, or if they might come after the people who were seen hanging out there.”

“We can hold one in reserve to send if her parents give their consent,” Helen said. “But that’s the most we can legally do.”

“Fine with me, Lilli,” Relena said, looking more than a little dazed at the whole thing.

The next thing Helen did was bring up a simulated girl Relena’s size and body type. Katie obligingly went through several Fuser-Walker-Skimmer cycles to test the transformation sequence. There were a few kinks in the Skimmer-Fuser transition that needed changes to Katie’s plating, but the problems were quickly solved. With the virtual testing complete, Katie—Fused with the virtual mannequin—posed fully-furred.

“Girls may I present LNX-LMA-002SKW, our heroic Katie,” Helen said.

“You’re gorgeous, Katie!” Lilli said, a sentiment Relena quickly echoed.

“I can’t wait to be the rrreal thing, girls,” the old RI said.

“Just hold that thought. Since this design uses entirely off-the-shelf parts, there’s no reason we can’t assemble it immediately.” Helen tapped an icon on the drawing board. “We’re going to put you back under for just a couple of minutes. When you wake up, you’ll be real.”

“Then nighty-night, and see you soon,” Katie said. Helen tapped the icon again, and the display powered down.

With the same care she’d taken when she inserted it, Helen deftly removed the core from the socket. “Follow me, you two.”

Helen led them into the next room, which held what appeared to be a large metal table, with a matching table upside-down on the ceiling. Both tables had multiple cut-outs and hatches in them, and there were similar panels in the surrounding walls. Helen carefully slotted Katie’s core into a socket on the lower table, which sucked it inside and closed the panel. Then she picked up a handheld control unit that had one large red button on it, and handed it to Relena. “If you would care to do the honors?”

The teenager didn’t need any prodding. She pushed it with a nice, firm click. Then all the panels on the upper and lower tables slid open, as well as panels on the walls, and a small forest of manipulator waldoes slid out of the smaller ones. Then parts began rising out of the lower table, or lowering out of the upper one, and waldoes took them and joined them together.

First came the nano-milled empty chassis, arriving already assembled. Then lifters, batteries, projectors, and other components were slotted inside. In just a few

short minutes, Katie took recognizable shape in the air, hanging there in the grasp of the arms, occasionally rotating onto her side or back so a particular piece could be fitted.

"I love watching this part," Helen confessed. "It's just like magic."

Lillibet nodded. "Yeah. Though you should have seen how Quinoa fixed up her old body—it was just like this but without the robot arms."

Helen raised an eyebrow. "Really? That sounds...amazing."

"It was," Lilli said. "I'll have Guinny download you the playback."

Relena just stared in rapt silence.

At last, the metal lynx was effectively complete, held upside-down—and one last manipulator rose out of the lower table with her core in its grip. It socketed the core snugly into place, then closed the compartment. The arms rotated Katie right-side up, lowered her to the table, then put themselves away.

Then the lynx's eyes flickered to life, her hardlight came on, and she shook herself. Her gray fur and simulated musculature underneath moved even more realistically than Kaylee's finely-tuned emitters. The mecha lynx blinked, and looked back at her hindquarters. "I'm...all there. I mean, *all* therre."

"Yes, you are as complete as a flesh-and-blood animal, of course," Helen said.

"We've utilized full TBS where appropriate. In Fuser form as well, so bear that in mind."

"You'll need to add some strategically-placed metal bits," Lillibet said. "I'm sure they can fit you out with the traditional armorkini 'fore we leave."

As she jumped down from the construction platform, Relena embraced her. The older RIDE put her big light gray paw around her companion's back and licked the girl's tufted feline ear, sending her into a torrent of relieved giggles, bob-tail swishing like crazy. Katie's purring filled the whole room.

Lillibet watched and grinned. "This is the kinda thing that makes it all worthwhile, y'know? I can't believe what I was missing all that time I just used Uncia as a phone booth."

Helen nodded, her own eyes suspiciously bright. "This certainly does beat making yet another boring Ahnuld for someone who only wants it as a status symbol."

Lilli chuckled, then lowered her voice. "So, Helen, can I maybe get some of that stuff retrofitted into Guinny while I'm here?"

There was little more to do on the orbiting Starmaster than wait for reentry. Zane had given them a tour of the sub from front (where CinTally was flying it without touching anything, much as Quinoa had run Qixi's sub back at the Towers) to rear (where the re-entry capsules were located in case of emergency), but that had only taken about fifteen minutes.

Eventually, the various Dreamchaser rescuees had drifted apart to different parts of the sub—Rochelle and Uncia to the front to try to study how CinTally was interacting with the spacecraft's flight systems, Anny and Leila to the conference room to talk with Myla and Marc...and Rhianna and Kaylee back to the cargo bay where the Dreamchaser sat, to lean against the railing and brood.

Since joining the female half of the human race, Rhianna had spent as little time thinking about the cross as she could, always keeping busy with one project or another. Brooding over something wasn't normally in her nature, but now she wondered, and all the old arguments with Rufia over crossriding came back—the arguments that had gradually pushed them apart until they'd reconnected back at that cave in the desert.

Ironically, just hours later Rhianna had ended up finally crossriding at last.

“Ryan, I’m still me,” Rufia had said. “I’m the same person you met in Seattle who slummed around the world with you. The same person who roomed with you for ten months before we left Earth. I’ve just got tits and new plumbing. You’ll be the same way, trust me. We’ll be hot chicks together and it’ll be *awesome*.”

That much Rhianna didn’t deny, but most of the other crossriders she had met over the years seemed changed on a deeper, personality-level than Rufia ever could be—including Rochelle, who had so naturally taken to being a girly girl it only gave Rhianna more cause for worry about herself. Over years she’d delved into crossrider psychology research articles, not as deeply as the ones about RIDEs, but not enough to remove her doubts over crossing.

Now there was nothing to do *but* navel-gazing introspection. And in order to do that, she had to come face-to-kitty-nose with her own cleavage. The question always popped up at the worst times: Am I doing things the same way I would’ve as Ryan? Kaylee constantly reassured her that she was, but even her own RIDE, who knew her better than any human ever could, couldn’t erase that self-doubt.

Kaylee headbumped Rhianna’s left hand. “I keep telling you not to brood about this, but I guess we should deal with it more directly. I know what you’re afraid of, partner.”

“You might as well tell me because *I* damn sure don’t know,” Rhianna said, voice trembling with frustration.

“You’re scared of losing yourself...of, I guess...being *submerged* in a female identity,” Kaylee said. “You’re afraid of doing girly things, of losing the *flavor* of your life as a man. Am I right?”

“How am I *supposed* to feel now about all those girls I dated and had sex with?” Rhianna said, gesticulating wildly. It all came out in a rush. “I’m not like Rufia. I’m *straight*. Does that make me a straight woman? I don’t know! I just can’t reconcile the idea that I’m supposed to be attracted to men now, with the man I was before. And this ‘adorable’ kitty face of mine isn’t helping, either.”

Rhianna whimpered. “Why am I even *thinking* about this now? I have a home and a business to rebuild, not to mention that bastard Fritz almost killing us for a prank.”

“Because you’re on the sub that Zane offered us a few days ago while he was also being a tactless git about you just being ‘attracted to plumbing’,” Kaylee said bluntly. “And speaking of said git...I called him down. You need someone else to talk to about this other than me, and he’s it. Maybe this time he had his tact flakes this morning.” She looked across the cavernous cargo bay to the other railing.

“Tact *and* humility flakes,” Zane said. “So, um, hi. This is me, um, standing in that minefield I mentioned last time and flipping over the little cards like crazy but having a hard time reading the numbers in the dark.”

“I’m on new ground here too, Zane. Don’t know where my own mines are buried anymore,” Rhianna said, shrugging. “I don’t want to be a bundle of crossrider stereotypes—clinging to your lost manhood is one of those. So’s going all fru-fru girly pink. Somehow Shelley managed to go all girly without being *girly girly*.”

Rochelle herself appeared at the top of the ladder to the crew deck. She slid down, her currently-off-white hair swirling about her in slow motion as she landed. “Hey...CinTally was flipping through the sub’s security cameras and I heard the start of

the conversation. I know I'm barging in, but there's something I have to say."

"She's pregnant," Uncia said glibly, poking her head out the door above her rider. She dodged as if something had been thrown at her, then giggled.

"No, I'm not," Rochelle said with a sigh. "Rhi, we work together, but we haven't said a word to each other about this. I didn't think it was my business, but I didn't realize how you were brooding about it. Can I give you a native Uplifter's point of view?"

Rhianna nodded. "Sure."

"The thing is that I grew up here," Rochelle said. "And so did Zane. What he said to you last week...there was a teensy little element of truth in some of it, but he *really* could have put it better—sorry, Zane."

Zane waved a hand. "No apology needed. I subsist on a steady diet of my own foot, these days. Very nutritious."

Rochelle snorted and continued. "Rhi, the reason I adapted so easily is that I was culturally adapted already. I mean, for you changing gender would have been a major life choice if you'd stayed on Earth. But here it's much more casual...it can happen by *accident*. I've had uncles who became aunts and vice versa, cousins who flipped and sometimes flipped back...from my standpoint it was kind of like getting a tattoo or a piercing, or maybe like deciding to getting a cybernetic implant would be for someone from Earth. On that subject, I'm more into computers than *you* are, but sometimes when I let myself consider that you actually had someone actually *cut into your skull* and stick some bits of metal into your brain...you know it still freaks me out a little, right? I mean, *ugh*."

She shook her head. "But anyway, the point is, it wasn't something I planned on—but I always knew it *might* happen to me, and not intentionally either. I could buy the wrong gender of RIDE like you did and go active-Fuse first thing like you didn't, or I could get genderjacked like all those poor people AlphaWolf's RIDEs did today, or I could even have a million-*mu* sports RIDE with a trojan infection decide I'd make a great drinking buddy...who knows what might happen? So from pretty early on I was always thinking about what I might do, and making my peace with it. You know, kind of role-playing it out in my head. I think a lot of us Zharusians do it, whether we admit it or not. I guess it gives us a little extra mental flexibility." She shook her head. "I'm not sure that's going to help you where you are now, but at least maybe you can sort of see how I did it."

"There were cyber-enhancement storefronts all over the place when Rufus and I left Earth. Getting modded was no big deal. There were corner shops in strip malls," Rhianna admitted. "Of course, it was mostly one way. Once you sold your body off to an organ market you were pretty stuck with a prosthetic body. A cousin of mine ended up a brain in a box on wheels and a pair of manipulators for hands."

"See? You *do* know where I'm coming from," Shelley said, hugging her. "You sure know how to paint an image, though. Ugh. Aren't you glad you left?"

"Yes! Almost sold my liver for the starliner ticket, until Rufus made up the difference," she said. "Okay, Shelley. You make some sense here."

"And that's kind of another thing," Rochelle said. "I'd never talk about 'people, not plumbing'—" Zane facepalmed audibly. "—but I guess a lot of us native-born folks don't put quite the same emphasis on some things as non-Zharusians do. I mean, just as we know it can happen to us, we also know it could happen to anybody else. We do a lot of thinking about that kind of thing. Mental role-playing. What we'd do it if happened to

someone close to us. Someone we were *involved* with.”

Rhianna folded her arms. “Well, what if I *want* to try being a straight woman for a while? What if that’s what I naturally am? That’s okay?”

“Sure it is,” Shelley said. “It’s *all* okay, that’s the whole damned *point!*” She grinned. “The restrictions are a little more loose here. If you’re married and your husband gets genderjacked by AlphaWolf tomorrow, are you gonna divorce her ‘cuz you’re “not les’?”

“Well...no. I’d ‘switch teams’ as you like to call it around here, and move on,” Rhianna said. “That’s how a straight Uplifter might do it, right?”

“Yeah. Or they might just decide they’re ‘gay with one person but not with anybody else,’” Rochelle said. “As they’d kind of have to do for at least a while *anyway* if it had been less than three years since *they* last flipped. I think that’s what Zane was trying to get at, as lousy a job as he did of getting it across. We *can* make distinctions that fine and no one will tell us we can’t.”

:And that’s the other thing,: Kaylee sent. *:You want to try it. You’ve really, really wanted to try being a woman since Rufus crossed, but you’re afraid to, even though you are one now. Remember what Rufus said just before he Fused with Yvonne the first time?:* Kaylee sent.

“I’ve been a man for twenty-some years, I’ve done all the things a man can do, so it’s time for a change and see what kind of chick I’ll be. It’ll be fun! It’ll broad-en my horizons,” Rufus had said, chuckling at the pun he’d made. “Vonnie’s got the gear I want for the job I want to do, she’s damned cute, I love her sense of humor. You know me, bro. How can I pass this up? But we gotta do this together, *sister*. Lemme buy you a girl-RIDE for yourself. We’ll have so much fun we won’t miss our dangly parts.”

“Kaylee...you’re right. I guess deep down I’ve *wanted* to try it ever since that day, and here I finally am.” Rhianna said, laughing a little. She remembered Myla’s offer to show her some things that remained exclusively female. Rufia had often said that if there weren’t still “boy things” and “girl things” there’d be little point to switching to begin with.

“Look, you want my advice? You want to ease into this, don’t go out with some random jerk you meet in a bar. Go out with some jerk you know.” Rochelle grinned a canary-eating cat’s grin at Zane. “I don’t think he would have made such a complete idiot of himself last week if he didn’t *like* you.”

“Gee, thanks...I think,” Zane said.

Rhianna folded her arms, practically hugging her breasts. “Well Zane, you handsomely-striped ‘jerk’, you,” she said good-naturedly. “Is that offer still open?”

Zane grinned. “Absolutely, if you can put up with an idiot who blunders through minefields without being able to read the little cards.”

“Then it’s a date.” She theatrically blew a kiss at him, using her implant to send a little heart-shaped image his way, just like a cyber-enhanced girl would do on Earth who wanted to date someone she was interested in.

He grinned and beamed back an image of the same heart with an arrow through it—and a private comm number. *:Something tells me things might be a little too busy over the next few days for us to get together, but call me when you’re ready.:*

“I don’t get it. What’s the deal with the little cards, anyway?” Uncia asked Rochelle.

“It’s a Steader thing.” Rochelle rolled her eyes. “Some of them have got the idea

that, on Old Earth, minefields always had cards with numbers on them laid out in a grid over the field, each one telling how many mines were near it. I'll tell you why later."

"Coming up on reentry in ten minutes, everyone. Get to the windows if you want to see!" CinTally said over the intercom.

"You know," Zane said, "I *could* still sell this monster on the cheap if you really want it."

"Oh, I don't know, Zane," Rhianna said. "I suppose I could've used it as a sort of giant mobile garage. But, frankly, I think you'll have some trouble giving it to *anybody* the way CinTally's got her talons around it."

"That could be true," Zane admitted.

"Besides, it's just as true for suborbitals as it is for so many other things," Rhianna replied with a grin. "Really, it's not the *size* that matters, it's what you *do* with it that counts."

"Mine!" CinTally screed over the intercom. "MIIINE!"

After the assembly, there wasn't much left to do. Helen insisted on running Relena and Katie through a Fuse test, at the end of which Relena showed off her new kitty-nosed face and they all four agreed it *was*, in fact, the cutest thing in the world (though not without a certain amount of envious grumbling on Lillibet's part). They also fitted Katie out with the obligatory private-parts-protecting metal bikini, which was more for the protection of public decency than any actual armor value.

All three of them thanked Helen again and again, and then moved outside where they were joined by Guinevere, who looked completely shiny and new again and told Lillibet she felt *much* better. And she'd also had a few new systems of her own put in, though they'd been limited by her prior construction in what they could do. She didn't have the weapons kit Lillibet had asked for either, though. "They said you needed permission from your Dad," Guinevere said.

"But if I'm gonna help fight Fritz and AlphaWolf, I need firepower!" Lillibet pouted. "If I'd had *real* weapons at the garage instead of those pop guns I might have taken Tocsin down!"

"Take it up with your Dad," Guinevere suggested. "You're gonna have to talk to him about your Code Creosote anyway, you know. Not to mention nearly getting killed at the garage."

"He's gonna ground me 'til next Landing Day," Lillibet said gloomily. She glanced over at Relena cuddling a loudly-purring Katie in Walker form, still completely lost in each other, and grinned. "But you know what? *Totally* worth it."

Finally, she walked over to the pair of them and cleared her throat, chuckling at the same embarrassed expression mirrored on both kitty faces as they looked up. "Whenever you gals are ready, you can just head on home up the highway. Katie should have the maps in her ZPS."

"You're not flying us back in the X-15?" Relena asked.

Lillibet shook her head. "I've gotta go beard my Dad in his den."

"But your Dad is clean-shaven," Guin said.

Lillibet rolled her eyes. "You *know* what I mean." She grinned at Relena.

"Anyway, you two should enjoy the chance to try out your new souped-up Skimmer form. Remember, if you stay with the highway, keep it subsonic. Sonic booms are rude and get the highway patrol mad at you."

“Uh...okay,” Relena said. She glanced at Katie. “Supersonic? Really?”

“That’s what Helena said,” Lillibet said. “I wish I could be with you when you try it out, but maybe it’s better that it be just the two of you to start. Anyway, you enjoy yourselves—and if Rhianna’s back by the time you get there, tell her we say hi, and ask her not to be as mad at *me* for buying her stuff as she was at Zane for trying to bury her in money.” Lillibet snapped her fingers. “Oh! And speaking of buying stuff, here. Almost forgot.” She pulled out her wallet and tapped a button on it, and Relena’s own wallet beeped.

Relena pulled it out and looked at it. “What’s...oh!” She looked up, then glanced over at Katie. “A lifetime property tax waiver on your new body!”

Katie purrrred, then licked Lillibet’s hand. “Thank you! That will be verrry helpful!”

Lillibet grinned. “See, I told you it would all work out. Anyway, you two enjoy yourselves. I’m gonna go see Dad now.” Guin obligingly flipped to skimmer form, and Lillibet mounted up. “Wish me luck. See you in a few years when I’m ungrounded again.”

“Good luck!” Relena said. Then she came over and stepped up onto Guin’s running board to hug Lillibet. “Thank you *so much*! You’ll always be welcome at my home.”

“Hey, you’re welcome. Don’t get any speeding tickets now.” She winked, and Relena laughed before jumping down and moving back to stand by Katie.

Guinevere kicked in the lifters and roared away, taking a deep breath to steel herself for what was to come. This...wasn’t going to be pleasant. Code Creosote was meant for emergencies when a need for ready access to cash right away overrode considerations of patiently waiting for her allowance. But after such an emergency, she could expect to have her every expenditure scrutinized by her father, even down to the last pack of gum.

She thought she could get away with what she’d done for Katie, but the improvements to Guinevere might be a little trickier. But given that she was already going to be in trouble for attacking Tocsin, she figured things couldn’t get that much worse. “Come on, Guin,” she sighed. “Let’s go see how much trouble we’re in.”

Freeriders Garage

Given the press who were sure to be waiting for them at the spaceport, Zane had discreetly dropped the Freeriders foursome just outside the Uplift dome before continuing onward to take their medicine. Anny and Leila promised they’d drop by later, but for now they had a paycheck to earn as Zane Brubeck’s new chief of security.

It hadn’t taken long for Kaylee and Uncia to drive Rhianna and Rochelle back to the site of the garage, and they now stood amid heaps of rubble, in a spot they once knew by heart that was now as unfamiliar as any alien landscape.

“I don’t believe this. I *don’t believe* this!” Rhianna said. “I didn’t think you could get that kind of range out of hardlight weaponry! It’s sliced down to the atomic level, clean through!” She was torn between wanting to take Tocsin apart for the damage he’d done, and wanting to take him apart to find out how his projectors had been put together so he *could* do it.

They’d commed ahead on landing and the insurance adjuster had arrived a few

minutes after they did. He was already examining the site via floaters similar to the news cameras, and was going over the site centi-by-centi. They'd tallied a million and a half *mu* of damage so far, and the assessment was only half done. Rhianna was frankly rather surprised it was so much money. It didn't *seem* as though she'd spent that much on the place, but it had grown gradually and continually through the years. She walked over to her home's ruins and started looking for surviving memorabilia.

"I have to admit, he was pretty thorough." Still Fused with Uncia, Rochelle wandered through the rubble that was all that remained of the tangle of temporary buildings that had been their place of business and Rhianna's home. "You know, Rhi, you and Kaylee can sleep over at our place until we get something set up here for you. I've certainly crashed at yours enough."

"I appreciate it, Shelley. We'll take you up on that. Maybe I'll absorb some of your natural girliness, too." Rhianna put her hands on her hips. "Well, at least I'll have something of a clean slate for my life as a woman, right? Thank God for offsite backups for everything else."

"I'm just glad I was too lazy to move any of my stuff in," Rochelle said.

The destruction wasn't entirely uniform. Through whatever fluke of trajectories, not everything had been destroyed even in the otherwise-completely-obiterated sections. The odd bit of furniture or fixtures survived—a table in one area, a fabber in another. The RIDE cradle with the salvaged condor was still completely intact and security-sealed. And in the section that had been Lillibet's, a workbench stood along with a chunk of wall behind it, completely untouched by the destruction around it. It even had a set of four battered lifter modules sitting on it—Kaylee's original parts, that Quinoa had pulled from Katie when she'd swapped the newer ones in.

Rochelle picked one up and examined it, turning it over in her hand. She'd been entertaining thoughts of having these bronzed, like baby shoes, and mounted on a plaque to decorate Rhi and Kaylee's home. Of course, she still could, but it seemed like kind of an extravagance now. Idly, she had Uncia open a link to the lifter's embedded microprocessor...and froze.

Due to the cheapness of processors and the ubiquitousness of computing in the 25th and 26th centuries, every component that needed an embedded processor usually ended up with considerably *more* processor than it actually needed. Economies of scale meant it was cheaper to give everything from a high-end media tablet on down the same type of system-on-a-chip than it would have been to design and manufacture a separate lower-capacity chip for things that needed less. So the embedded qubit processor of a lifter or hardlight projector might have perhaps 10% of its onboard storage taken up by the firmware it needed to run; the rest was available space that could be accessed and used for other things if you knew how.

Rochelle liked to investigate the contents of these chips on any used components she came across, because sometimes programmers or developers liked to fill the extra space with various Easter Eggs—their favorite books, music, videos, or software. She'd found a lot of neat things that way, including some of her current favorite albums. Sometimes the RIDE owner or the RIDE itself would also use it as secret "external" storage for things they weren't supposed to have in main memory—like her very own FreeRIDE jailbreaking software. Like desktop hard drives of old, people frequently forgot to erase that stuff before passing them on.

But what Rochelle was finding now was not movies or music—at least, not as far

as she could tell. It seemed to be a very large encrypted file—in a data format that was very familiar. She put the lifter down with hands that felt like they should be trembling (but weren't, of course, due to Uncia's steady physical control) and picked up the next one. Same thing. The other two lifters had the same type of files on them, too. Rochelle quickly copied all four of them into Uncia's onboard storage.

"Kaylee?" Rochelle said in a remarkably calm voice. "Could you come over here a moment, hon? I need you to unlock something for me with your decryption key."

Kaylee padded up next to her. "What is—are those my old lifters?"

"Yeah. Handshake with me here a moment." Kaylee raised a paw and offered it to Rochelle in the classic dog-shaking-hands pose, and Rochelle snorted. "Very funny." But she took the paw and used it as a point of physical contact to interface with Kaylee's built-in encryption chip—the "trusted computing" hardware used to certify her fetters and other onboard software. She fit that key into the lifter data files' lock—and the encryption obligingly opened up. And Rochelle's eyes widened as she looked over the file directory. She'd *seen* this kind of file before, and very recently too.

Rochelle quickly scanned the indexes of the files, and compared them to another set of files she had in onboard storage. "Oh my. Kaylee, you're a genius. You're a certifiably clever and conniving kitty-cat."

Kaylee sat on her haunches and scratched a persistent itch behind one hardlight ear with a hindleg. "That's nice. You gonna stop praising me and tell me why?"

"The processors on these lifters contained files, locked to your key. They're RIDE *memory* files. And the date/time indexes *almost exactly* match the missing chunks from Anny's infodump. I'm integrating them into the index I have from your most recent defrag now. Good thing I kept *those* files in Uncia."

"Whatever was in these, you must have known it was too hot and they'd never let you keep it," Rhianna said wonderingly, coming over to join them. "So you tucked it away in your parts so you could find it again later. The stuffed shirts in the MRS wouldn't have known of that trick back then."

"But by the time they sold me, all those parts were gone," Kaylee said. "No wonder those other RIDEs thought they were haunted. They had bits of me *in 'em*."

Rochelle reached out and took Kaylee's paw again. "Un and I aren't going to look at these files yet—you deserve first crack. Feeding them back to you now."

Kaylee received the download, and integrated the memories. And her eyes widened. *:Rhi, doll, get that little gift of Anny's. I want another look at it.:* The old LNX unit padded over and scanned it. "Fritz, you magnificent *bastard!* We've got your DIN!"

Chapter Eleven: Citizen Katie

DATE: January 15, 121 AL, 1130 hrs.

UNIT: K3-LNX(f)

PURPOSE: RI First Boot.

TEST: Neurological and psychological integrity in TBS virtual environment.

Power on.

K3's first seconds rolled by like an eternity in her buffer, her virtualized optics tracking numerous objects. Up and down, left and right, into and out of focus. Faint, almost inaudible whistles came in and out, her ears tracking them as her eyes did the objects. Odors tickled her olfactory neural map. Next came movement. Left forepaw, right forepaw, left hindpaw, right hindpaw. A flick of her bobtail, of tufted ears, a twitch of her furred pelt. The stark blankness of the world began to fill in, as if she occupied a sheet of paper.

Pencil outlines of blades of grass, trees, rocks, a stream leading to a river, a mountainous landscape filled with wildlife. Mere pencil lines became inked, then blocked in with solid colors, like living in a cartoon land. A gray rock acquired shading, grain, the texture of granite flecked with sparkling mica. Sounds joined in, the sigh of wind through the pines, the odor of the evergreens.

K3 sat on her haunches, enraptured, unable to speak—her Broca's Area hadn't been activated yet, so she couldn't verbalize. But she knew, instinctively, that this was home as a natural lynx would sense it, and felt dissatisfied, knowing there was something more waiting for her. If only—then something clicked into place. *Sky, rock, tree*, she thought, looking at each thing in turn, knowing their names. *Bird! Flower! Rabbit!*

"K3, please respond to my voice," came the sound out of the sky. It was a woman's voice, kind and gentle, like a mother reminding her child it was time to get up for school. The voice of a goddess. "Kaythree? Rise and shine, sleepy kitty."

Her virtual eyes were connected to external cameras. The face matched what had already been inserted into her memory blocks. Dr. Patil, and next to her, a very large metallic rat that made her still-strong feline instincts measure up for possible pouncing upon. "Kaythree?" she repeated.

"Aff-irm-a-tive," Kaythree managed, the word grinding out through unnaturally imposed neural pathways. "Un-it on-line."

"Yer gonna have to do something 'bout that, Doc," the rat said. "She sounds like a Dalek. Or maybe K-9."

"Her Broca Map needs a great deal more refinement, Rattigan," Dr. Avilia Patil said, petting the rodent along his muzzle. She was a black-haired woman wearing interface specs, with a calm demeanor and kind, curious brown eyes. "Don't worry, Kaythree. You'll be chatting up a storm in no time."

"Affirm-ative," Kaythree replied more smoothly.

"Other than that, clean bill of mental health," the human said, smiling at the

virtual cat. “Now say g’night. Your adventure’s only just started, my child.”

DATE: March 4, 121 AL, 2010 hrs.

UNIT: K3-LNX(f)-001

PURPOSE: RI Interaction in TBS environment. Introduction of initial pre-production (001) series units to original prototype (000, unit called “Felix”).

“Well, ladies, hello,” triple-zero said in a smarmy voice, padding around them on their mountainside virtual home. Kaythree watched him with a great deal of trepidation as he circled her and the three other lynxes. There were two males, and two females who each had their own den. They had spent the past week doing little more than chasing rodents for dinner and lazing in the sunshine between chatting with one another. “I’m Fritz, and I’m here to say welcome to the world.”

“You’re not talking about *this* world, are you?” one of the males said.

“No. This is where you just get your paws dirty and so our human creators can make sure you’re not going to rip their throats out once you’re done ‘baking’. We have to prove that we’re more than just animals. Much, *much* more. Y’all still have a few weeks in here before then, though. Have they given you names yet? Or at least a number?”

“F2Z,” the male who’d spoken said proudly.

“Their numerical designations never make any sense. I’ll call you Franz,” Fritz said. He looked at the next male. “What about you?”

“F1K,” the darker-furred lynx said.

“Frank, then.” The elder RI padded next to the other female. “And you, my girl?”

“K8C,” she said, momentarily distracted by a virtual butterfly. “Ooh, purretty.”

“Hmm...Kandace. Works for you. And the last, loveliest one,” Felix purred. “Your designation, my girl?”

“K3,” she said, feeling a little uneasy under his experienced gaze.

“Only one letter and one number, eh? Kaylee, obviously,” he said with some finality. “Humans are going to keep referring to you by those numbers until you get out of testing, then they’re going to ask what name you’d like to use for yourself. If you like mine, go ahead and use it.” He paused to lick a forepaw. “Otherwise, I’m happy to meet y’all. We’ll have a lot of fun together.

“Oh, and if you hear a human call me ‘Felix’ instead, just ignore it. My name is Fritz, and don’t you forget it.”

July 17, 156 A.L.

Aloha, Steader Residence

“Well, if it isn’t my old buddy Fritz. Or should I call you *Felix*? What’s up, old pal? Going to have me thrown in the clink for *tax evasion* again? Or maybe something more *believable*, like shoving old ladies into traffic?”

Fritz regarded Joe Steader irritably. The old man looked rather haggard, after seeing what had happened to his niece on TV, showing all of his ninety-plus years. And that was coming on top of thirty years of bottle-aided dissolution. It was probably only because modern nano-medicine was so good that he was even still around at all.

And just who do we have to thank for that, hmm? Fritz wished he could tell Jiminy to shut up again, but that particular thought had originated in his *own* thinky-bits. Still, it served to put a brake on his temper better than any lip from Jiminy ever had.

"I already said I was sorry about that. Was necessary at the time to keep the press from sniffing around when Quinnie...joined us. Anyway, I got the charges quashed when the coast was clear."

"Oh, I understand that much. But *tax evasion*? As long as *I've* played the Game? It's *insulting*." He shook his head. "Too bad Lattie's not still around. I'd have been happy to get brought up on assault charges for bopping him one. I'd even have done the deed myself, no extra charge."

Fritz cleared his throat and changed the subject. "I've brought Quinnie home. She needs rest and a place to heal up."

Joe snorted and tossed another shot of scotch down his throat. "Oh, really. So you're the Steader family's own personal angel of mercy now. Cut to the chase, old chum. *What do you want.*"

You to lay off the jitter sauce, for one thing. But Fritz knew damned well any right he had to interfere in Joe's life had gone out the window decades ago. The tax-evasion arrest hadn't exactly done wonders for their relationship either. And trying anyway wouldn't help him sweet-talk the old guy into a favor.

"I need to keep Quinnie in dullsville until this thing with Brubeck blows over," Fritz said. "I know you got a good crash pad for that. Dig?"

"You mean you want me to keep her out of your hair," Joe said. Even halfway drunk all the time the old man was still sharp. "I dig. Funny thing is, I'm even inclined to agree. Mikel and his ex are going to skin me alive when they find out about this whole mess."

Well, at least with that much juice in your system you probably won't feel it. "How's your bro doing by the way?"

"Doesn't matter right now, does it?" Joe picked up a bottle of rum, poured it into a glass, then added a splash of cola, spilling half of it. His hand shook as he lifted the glass to his mouth. "Yeah. I can put her up in the family suite up on the twenty-thou first floor. Bet she needs special Intie stuff to heal, right?"

"I've got a freebee for you. Everything she needs to mend. We could head up there right now and I could set it up."

Joe slammed the empty glass down, cracking it. "Let me check my social calendar and see if I'm free." He made a show of fumbling for his comm, dropped it on the floor, and reached down to pick it up. "Well, how about that? I'm free clear through to...turn of the century, looks like." He tossed it aside. "Sure, why not. We'll take the Pan-Am."

"Copacetic. I'll meet you on board." Fritz did his usual disappearing act. Joe stared at the space where he'd been for a few moments, then poured himself one more for the road.

Over a thousand clicks separated Nextus from Uplift. There were two ways to reach the polis that sat on the edge of the Dry Ocean. The first was the Transverse Tunnel, which was what everyone used nowadays. Nobody wanted to fly over the Dry Ocean longer than they absolutely had to, but before the Tunnel opened twenty years ago there had been a skimmer route along the edge of the Dry that went to the west of

the mountains.

:I think we can go flat out going that way if you want, Relena,: Katie sent to her young rider. *:It'll get us home rrrreal quick.:*

Relena grinned, remembering a line from a twencen movie she'd seen at the local PubDom Cineplex. "It's a thousand kilometers to Uplift. It's...not dark. And I'm...not wearing sunglasses?"

Katie used her upgraded hardlight projectors to fix that, adding a black fedora in the bargain. *:Herrre you go, my girl. Hit it!:*

The teenager twisted Katie's throttle just a little, carefully keeping to local traffic laws, lifters making a deep hum almost like a purr, unlike any others either were familiar with. The rebuilt 002-unit's skimmer form was only superficially similar to her original, which had been based on a wartime VM-3 Tornado AIDE that transformed into powered armor. She could easily reconfigure her hardlight aeroshell any number of different ways, for speed, efficiency, style, or protection. They cruised along with traffic until reaching the northward limits of Nextus, where typically speed was only limited by lifters. The Planetary Advisory Assembly Regulations stated there was a 750 kph top speed and 500-meter altitude limit for skimmers, but even Nextus Policia rarely bothered enforcing it. Technically to be considered a "Flier" a vehicle needed an enclosed cabin to protect the occupants. A "Skimmer" used hardlight shields for aerodynamics and climate control. Katie's multi-mode design could straddle between the two.

On Zharus you needed speed to get anywhere. The planet seemed *made* for going fast. The nearly-defunct Dry Ocean Skimmerway exit came up quickly just outside the polis border, heading straight east before turning north around the mountains. The local Net said it only remained open for the speed freaks and you needed a *minimum* speed of 800kph to run it. Relena grimaced at the thought of flying over the ground going that fast with only a transparent aeroshield between her and the desert hardpan.

:I can fix that, remember. Let's trrrry the cockpit mode.: Katie sent. The skimmer's panels immediately started shifting around, coming up next to Relena's legs, but only partly covering her. Then the hardlight shielding turned opaque except for a large bubble canopy. *:Hmmm...Not surrrre I like this default design. It's a little too Jetsons. Hmmm...How about this? I think I like this one.:*

The hardlight surrounding her changed shape, spreading outwards into a larger winged configuration. On each side was a swept wing, with what would have been an engine intake right in front. "F-86 Saber?" Relena said, knowing her aircraft history.

"Got it in one!" Katie said from a speaker. "It was either this or a MIG-15. Same errra, different side. I think this is as large as I can push these hardlight projectors. You should see the batterrry drain. So, I guess I need something smaller."

Relena pondered, flipping through what she knew about jets from her history class. In the mid twentieth there was an obscure company called Bede that had produced several kit-based jets. An earlier model had appeared in a James Bond movie. The BD-10 minijet from the early 1990s had a supposed top speed of Mach 1.4, but nobody knew if it ever achieved it. *Katie* was supposed to be able to reach Mach 1.7. "How about this, Katie-kitty?"

"That'll do! Hold on," Katie said. She downloaded the design, then the F-86 shrunk into the slightly newer, sleeker dual wing-root intake aircraft just as they came out into the Dry Ocean proper. The skimmerway went along the Shelf, a narrow strip of

land that widened as they went north and eventually was large enough for their home polis. “Let’s see what these hotshot lifterrers can do!”

As he staggered toward the door, Joe reached into a big cardboard box situated right next to the coat rack. Within it was a cardboard latticework separating it into twelve rows of twelve columns each. About half of them were empty. Out of one that wasn’t, Joe pulled a pneumatic syringe. He pressed it to the side of his neck, and it hissed.

Joe dropped the empty in the trash can next to the box and and sighed. He pondered the kind of lifestyle that necessitated buying them in that kind of bulk. “Gross,” he declared. Then he shook his head and continued out the door.

Joe shook his head as the DriveSafe nanos dissipated through his bloodstream, scavenging the booze molecules out of his blood (and, supposedly, doing a little bit of liver-and-kidney repair while they were at it). The fog had lifted considerably by the time he made it to his skimmer limo, and was almost entirely gone before the autopilot had driven him halfway to the Aloha Aerodrome. It seemed like a waste of good booze, but what the hell, he could afford it. And anyway, he made a practice of staying at least *relatively* sober when he flew—if there was any danger of hitting something, anyway.

He’d been seen here often enough that the guard manning the security gate to the private parking garage didn’t even give him a second glance. He parked the car, then took the elevator to the hangar.

As it always did, the elevator started playing the introductory progression to “Also Sprach Zarathustra” as it rose, timed so that the elevator doors parted on the fourth and fifth notes. Usually this gave Joe a little chuckle, or at least lightened his mood. It didn’t work today. But there it was, waiting under spotlights before him: the Pan-Am starliner modeled after the one from *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Lights were already on in the cabin. Naturally, Fritz was waiting for him. And Quinoa, who he hadn’t seen since the morning of the day when he was suddenly arrested for tax evasion.

Then he’d gotten the little note, signed “F,” explaining that Quinoa had permanently voided her RIDE Quorra’s warranty, and wasn’t ideally suited for human society anymore. Then all had become clear. Fritz had even been nice enough to send along a picture of what Quinoa looked like. He was looking forward to seeing her in person for the first time.

Joe climbed the ramp to the door in the fuselage, placing a hand on but not looking at the brass plate by the entrance as he entered. The door swung shut behind him, and Fritz appeared, lounging in one of the reclining seats with his feet propped on the back of the next one. “Hey, man, fall in. Now you’re here, we can get this show on the road.” He waved a hand vaguely toward the front, and the jet’s engines started warming up. “Flight plan’s filed and everything. ‘course, I didn’t file where we’re *really* headed. Nobody’s beeswax but our own.”

Joe glared at him. “Where’s Quinoa.”

“Chill, daddy-o, don’t blow your jets She’s catching some Zs in the sleeper compartment. Poor kid’s all in after the beating she took back in Uplift.”

Joe started past Fritz. “I want to see her.”

“That wouldn’t be—” Fritz began, then sighed. “Where’s my head at. Of course you wanna see her. Okay, fine.” He swung his legs down, then levitated to his feet. “I’ll show you. Fair warning—she’s kind of battered, but she’ll heal.”

Fritz led the way back past the rows of chairs into another section of the plane. “What, exactly, *happened* in Uplift?” Joe asked his back.

“Bad scene, man.” Fritz shook his head. “A bunch of AlphaWolf’s crowd were in town, falling on Brubeck and a few other cats who needed a little roughing up.”

Joe frowned. “Brubeck? Clint’s kid?”

Fritz glanced over his shoulder. “Yeah, that murgatroid Zane. Don’t you read the news anymore? Anyway, your niece took it into her pate to go toe to toe with one of the pooch’s RIDEs, who it turns out was one Tocsin the hippogriff, late of the Loose Cannons. She’s lucky she got off as light as she did.”

Fritz stepped aside and gestured to where Quinoa lay on her back on one of the beds in the sleeper compartment. “She’s out cold right now. Healing. She’ll be awake later, maybe, you want to gab.”

Joe took a good look. She clearly wasn’t at her best. There was a lot of bruising, a half-healed gash along her upper chest, and her wings seemed to be missing about half their feathers. But her breathing was strong, anyway. And one thing Joe did know about Integrates was that they had remarkable powers of regeneration. “At least I’ve got plenty of fabber gel up there already,” he said pointedly. “And a bathtub.”

Fritz winced, reflexively putting a hand to his groin. “Ow. Thanks for the reminder. I’d managed to forget *that* little episode.”

Joe braced himself against a wall as the plane begin to move forward. “Who’s flying this thing anyway?”

Fritz waved a hand nonchalantly. “I’m tied into the autopilot. And the onboard sensors. It’s cool, man. We’ll wait our turn and lift like good little cubes, and then we disappear.”

Joe pursed his lips. “I’d better get up to the flight deck. I don’t like the idea of taking off with no one at the controls. Call it one of my little foibles.”

Fritz shrugged. “That’s fair. I’ll make sure everything’s cool back here and join you.”

As Joe started forward, Fritz called after him, “We’re gonna have a couple hours of orbits before we can make it all the way up to your pad. Maybe we could watch a movie or something, for old times’ sake. I dug up some of the Kickstarted *Mystery Science* revival episodes—”

Joe turned and glared, and spoke in icy tones. “Never bring up ‘old times.’ You have *no* right.”

“Okay, man, sheesh. Sorry.” But Joe was already gone.

An avalanche of media and government officials greeted Zane upon his return from orbit. The Brubeck campus was *completely* surrounded by floater cameras, lifter-belted reporters, protesters, even a picket line of rank-and-file employees. Every major network from Aloha to Zharustead wanted an interview, every one of the Polis’s financial and mining regulatory agencies wanted to look at the company’s files. The Agora—Uplift’s version of a city council—had also notified him they wanted to meet as soon as possible.

There were even some queries from various Nextus agencies—including the Materiel Recovery Service. *They* wanted an *audit*. Despite no longer being headquartered in that polis, Brubeck still had significant assets there. Next on the list where the stock and bondholders who had called a meeting. No doubt there’d be even

more who wanted a their pound of flesh out of his pelt before the day was over.

"Looks like ever'body wants a piece of you, Mr. Brubeck," Annette Hower said, half of her attention on the information her 'specs were feeding her. His new Head of Security had taken control from her harried niece's hands before they'd even left orbit. Her oversized lioness RIDE was in flier mode directly over the limo for extra protection. While he was fairly secure from physical threats, there were others. "Don't worry about nothin', though. We've got a handle on things."

The company's stock price was fluctuating at quantum speeds. Down fifteen more percent, up ten, down five, up twenty, down *sixty*. The Uplift Stock Exchange was trying to freeze the stock, but something—or someone, no guesses *who*—was preventing them from doing so. The wild swings were destabilizing the *entire* market.

"I know, Anny, I know. I've thought about this a lot the last couple hours," Zane said. For the first time he actually considered waking Terry up to help multitask all these things, but resisted. The point of going public like this was to show that he was just a person, a different—a new kind of person, but still...

:Hey there, Mr. Brubeck,: came Aaron's saurian voice. A cartoon dinosaur avatar waved at him in the corner of his eye. *:Remember me?:*

:Of course,: he replied, creating his own super-deformed version of himself. *:Nice to hear from you again, Aaron. Are you local?:*

:Well, there's actually a bunch of us here at the campus right now. Leah, whom you've met. A few faces that will give you a pleasant surprise, others may be a shock. I'm pretty shocked, myself. This is actually going better than I thought it would,: the utahraptor Integrate said.

:Honestly?: Zane replied.

:Just keep watching the news, Zane. We're waiting for you in the building's all-staff big meeting room. You know the one. Just wanted to let you know that you won't be all by your lonesome for much longer. Aaron of Jurassic Park, signing off.: Aaron's cute cartoon avatar saluted, then blinked out.

A few minutes later, Myla and Sophie peered into the meeting room, then stepped inside to one side of the door. Zane followed her in, and Marc/Cernos brought up the rear, moving to the other side of the door. As usual, Carrie-Anne was also invisibly near. The conference room *appeared* empty, but Zane could tell (and had let Myla and Marc know) that wasn't actually the case. And as the door shut, a shimmer along the length of the table presaged a fade into visibility of over a dozen furry or feathered figures. A moment later, Carrie-Anne joined them, while Anny and Leila opted to to go the main Security Office to take charge.

The only ones he recognized immediately were Leah, with her glowing unicorn horn, and Aaron with his tron-lined tail. The next took a second glance—it was Diane the doe, owner of the Cheers Fuser bar where a lot of locals hung out. She was much smaller than she usually presented herself at the bar, and he only recognized her because she was still shaped the same, with her fur in the same color and pattern. Her hardlight emitters were a single large round lens on each thigh and nowhere else, her DIN a blue jewel resting in her cleavage. She wore a simple brown sundress that complimented her fur. "Do you have a wet bar somewhere in here, Zane? I could mix some drinks for everybody."

"Uh, sure." A wood panel along one wall slid up at Zane's thought, revealing a decently-stocked little mixing area.

Diane bleated with delight. A bar uniform—white dress shirt, red tie, black slacks—appeared on her. “Perfect. Just DIN me your orders and I’ll make ‘em quick.” She apparently received some, as she started working right away. A few of the Integrates looked a little irritated at the distraction, but Zane was inclined to be more charitable. Everyone was nervous, to be sure, and Diane was just dealing with it in her own way.

Zane leaned on the bar and watched her mix drinks. “All those years Dad used to drink at your bar when I was a kid...the times he brought me along, and you gave me root beer. Were you an Integrate even then?”

Diane grinned. “Would it surprise you to learn that I was—and Serena, too—and your Dad knew it?”

Zane stared at her. “Seriously? He knew about...about *us*?”

“He even met Fritz personally a time or two.” Diane shrugged. “Knowing about us Integrates, and what could happen to people and RIDEs together, *might* be one of the reasons Clint didn’t hold with Fusing RIDEs himself. Now’s not the time, but come down to the bar sometime when things are quieter and I’ll tell you some stories about your Dad I’ve been holding in for years.”

“I’d like that.” He shook his head. “Wow. It’s not every day you learn something completely new about the man who raised you.”

Diane nodded. “He was a very private man. I don’t doubt some things about him would surprise all of us.”

Zane couldn’t say exactly what sense he used, but he sensed Myla stiffen behind him, then barely suppress an impulse to run forward from her station at the door. “Burke! Flint! Is it really you?”

“It’s us,” the bear-man seated fourth down the table on the left said. “Well, more of a ‘me’ now. The folks over in Wonderland know a trick or two about healing badly-Integrated minds. So *of course* I had to come. Happy to see you again, LT.”

Others, none of them with familiar names, introduced themselves. Two more birds—a male raven and a female golden eagle—shook Zane’s handpaw and expressed their support, as well as congratulations on the successful orbital rescue and a desire to meet the pilot.

“Heh. I wasn’t able to pry CinTally out of the Starmaster,” Zane said. “I think she’s afraid I might give it away if she leaves it. I think she’s building a nest on the flight deck.”

“I know how she feels,” the female eagle said. “I’ve been a pilot for a *very* long time.”

The next Integrate to shake his hand almost bowled him over. Not because of his size—he was a brown rabbit with tron-lined ears—but his status. “Hello, young Mr. Brubeck. Your dad and I used to play golf together—we made a threesome with Kenyon Walton. I know he was letting me win, never got very good at the game. You wouldn’t know who I am, looking like this.” Very briefly the image of a stolid-looking eighty year old man replaced the rabbit.

Zane blinked. “Well, I never would have expected *this*. I remember when you came to the house to pick Dad up for the games. It’s...nice to see you again, Mr. Secretary.”

“Oh, just call me Phil. I expect I’ll lose my job over this, but I’m tired of hiding in this warren of fear. About half of us in here are from Nextus, you know. We have the most RIDEs per capita.”

Flint-Burke was staring at him now. "Small world, sir. Real small."

Myla blinked. "Secretary"? "Phil"? That voice...? You're not...Philip Conyers, Nextus Secretary of Materiel Resources?" She swallowed. "My...ultimate ex-boss?"

"Unfortunately, yes, Lt. Wilson, Sgt. Burke. I don't have as much bureaucratic control over the MRS as I do over some departments. Plus I wasn't ready to tip my paw yet, so to speak. I apologize. I've been an Intie about six years now, even before I became Secretary. We're just *very* good at hiding it. Ruined my golf game, though. It's these big feet."

"When my aunt hears about this, she's going to go wild—if she hasn't seen it already," Myla said. "She knew you when you were her division's Lt. Colonel! But we don't have time for that now. I think I'm a little dizzy."

Diane handed her a glass filled with a clear blue liquid. "Here's a pick-me-up tonic. No alcohol, but it'll calm your nerves. Take it from a deer. We know from nerves."

"I sort of have to," Myla said dazedly. "A deer is handing it to me."

The other introductions went much more swiftly. Aside from those Phil had mentioned from Nextus, the rest were mostly from Uplift, but a few had filtered in from Cascadia, Aloha, even a couple Nuevo San Antonio dinosaurs.

"Okay, everyone," Aaron said from the lectern. "Now that we've been outed, what next? You've all told me that you don't want to hide anymore. So what are our next steps? Fritz and his followers are going to ride us like a rodeo bronco." He nodded at a horse Integrate. "No offense, Mack."

"None taken," the horse said.

"What is his *problem*, anyway?" Myla exploded.

"He believes his own press too much," Leah said. "He keeps himself and everyone else ignorant about how our own bodies work. I won't call it mysticism, but he thinks it's better if we don't. We've made so little progress about what causes Integration and why we even need DINs. It's criminal."

"He apparently believes that secrecy is safest for all of us," Aaron said. "Classic security through obscurity. That if humans and RIDEs know too much about us, we will somehow lose our 'power' over them. If we know how our bodies actually work, we stop feeling *superior* about them."

"As it happens, he might be right about that, though not in the way he thinks," Carrie-Anne said. "We have a new weapon Fritz will never expect. His ego simply will not allow it."

"You probably heard our friends, Rhi and Shelley—the ones we went up and rescued from orbit just now—have been building DINs for new Integrates, including me, Carrie-Anne there, and that pilot we mentioned, CinTally." Zane said. "What you haven't heard is that they've been reverse-engineering the whole nature of DIN plugs while they're at it, and they think they can use that to come up with some real anti-Intie protection for ordinary quantum systems."

"Like what?" the raven asked. "I've been studying them for years in secret and I can't figure out how they work. Our DIN-maker won't share. We're so damned *secretive*, even amongst ourselves, because we have to be. And that's Fritz again, or the Inties who agree with him. Whenever he hears someone doing any basic research beyond the DINs, they quash it."

"Like making RIDEs and ordinary computers Fritz-proof," Zane said. "Or so they tell me. They haven't really had the chance to test it much yet. They've been hoping they

could find a friendly Integrate or two to assist in the project.” He grinned at the table full of friendly Integrates. “You guys have any idea where we might look for some of those?”

“Count me in!” the raven said. Everyone else murmured their agreement.

“So where might we find our human DINsmiths?” Leah asked.

“They’re probably over at their garage now, or what’s left of it,” Myla said.

“Mmm. Yes, I saw that debacle on the newsfeeds,” Conyers said. “Stunning, amazing act of heroism. I do hope that crusty old lynx survived.”

“She did,” a Nextus Integrate nanny goat said from further down the table. “I work at RIDEworks in the Design Department, so I see everything their security cameras do. Donizetti’s chief apprentice just built her a new body. They’re about 250 kilometers out from Uplift on the Dry Ocean Skimmerway now, according to satellite imagery.”

“At Mach 1.5,” the golden eagle added, closing her eyes and apparently tapping her own feeds. “You should see some of the aerobatics they’re doing. Pure joy.”

“Anyway, if you want to pop over to the garage and talk to them about it after the meeting, I’m sure they’ll be glad to hear from you,” Zane said. “I think they were hoping for someone to help them test it.”

“Why don’t we all meet at my bar?” Diane asked. “It’ll be about as private as we can manage. I’ll send them an invitation. And that lynx can meet us there, too—I can bend the rules a little to let her underage partner in.”

“Marvelous!” Leah said, clapping her hands with delight. “If it means ending Fritz’s reign of obnoxiousness, we’ll be delighted to assist.”

Zane received a message passed through Myla—the USEC had *finally* managed to freeze Brubeck stock trading and would roll back the price to where it was just after the press conference started once they were sure of the Exchange’s security. It would still mean a 38% hit, but Fritz had managed to drop the stock almost 70% before that. That put his company at #35 on the Gondwana Fortune 100 list—two notches below Aloha-centered Munn Minerals, the company’s traditional local (in terms of platform locations) friendly rival. Not to mention the impact on Zane’s own personal fortune—he owned 65% of the stock after all. He tried to console himself that it was only a paper loss.

“I bet I know what you’re thinking right now,” Phil Conyers said. “Worried about your company? Your fortune? Your employees? All I can say is, worry about your employees first and the rest will take care of itself.”

“I always do,” Zane said. “And about my friends. That’s what Dad did.”

“Speaking of friends,” Myla said. “Since there are so many Integrates here, I just thought I’d ask—has anyone seen Quinoa Steader since she disappeared after the garage was attacked?”

“No,” Phil Conyers said. “And believe me, we *have* looked, after we found out it was Tocsin she tangled with. That one has a history with Integrates, and we in Nextus know *all* about it, so we wanted to make sure she was all right. But she hasn’t been in touch. Furthermore, her uncle has abruptly departed from his home in Aloha, and he didn’t leave a forwarding address. It seems like oddly convenient timing. Joe Steader was one of Fritz’s known associates in the days when he still worked for Nextus.”

Zane facepalmed. “Terrific. Would it be too much to ask just for *one* crisis at a time?”

"It gets worse," Leah said, concern written across her equine face. "Shortly after takeoff, Steader's 'Pan-Am' spaceplane just...disappeared. It literally vanished from radar, satellite, and ground-based optical tracking, with a perfection not possible from any known technological stealth system."

"Except our own hardlight," Zane said. "Goddamn furball."

"It's just a guess, but her uncle's abrupt disappearance gives me a sneaking suspicion Fritz may have grabbed Miss Steader," Conyers said.

Aaron nodded. "It would make sense. Quinoa, one of his former followers, allowed herself to be defeated by an un-Fused RIDE, and it was seen by the *entire planet* on TV."

"If anything happens to that girl, I swear..." Myla said, clenching Sophie's fists helplessly.

"I doubt it will," Carrie-Anne said. "He will want to keep her alive to watch his 'triumph.' And presumably mostly unharmed so she will not be distracted from 'appreciating' it."

"Zane, we just wanted to make sure you knew you weren't alone," Conyers said. "There's many, *many* more of us who support you, from Aloha, Sturmhaven, Cascadia, even Nextus, dozens of Enclaves in the Dry, than could be here today. We're *not* going to let Fritz have his way any longer. It's time to 're-integrate' with the rest of civilization."

"Thanks," Zane said sincerely. "I appreciate it. And I'll be glad to meet them. But for now we need to strike while the iron is hot, and get together on how to knock Fritz for a loop before he loses his complacency. Shall we adjourn to the bar and get our human and RIDE friends in on this?"

"Okay, everyone," Aaron said. The dinosaur swung his thick, feathered tail. "I expect we'll all stay invis when we leave here, but I want to make sure we're all on the same page on this. Unless life and limb are in danger, we will not use any more disguises once we leave Diane's bar. Let's show 'em we're *proud* to be Integrates! I'll call a voice vote on this one. Hopefully it'll be unanimous, but from this day forward, no more faking it. All in favor?"

"*AYE!*"

Rhianna blinked at the message that had just come over her implant. "Could you and Shelley and Kaylee and Uncia come down to my bar? Some friends have an important proposition to discuss. —Diane. P.S. Be sure and wear your Sneakers, and tie your Shoelaces tight."

She shut her eyes and pondered for a moment, then looked around at the ruins that wouldn't be moving for a while. "I could use a drink, Shelley. It's been a hell of a day. How about going to where everybody knows our names? Got your Sneakers on?"

Rochelle glanced over at her and raised an eyebrow. "If you've got your Shoelaces."

The lynx-eared woman knelt down and tied them tight. "Ready."

Rochelle tossed her head in a by-now habitual movement, setting her hair to swirling. "Then let's go." She glanced around the rubble they were standing in. "C'mon, we'd better go outside before we have the RIDEs switch over to Skimmer mode. Wouldn't want to make a mess in the garage."

The mechanic snorted as Kaylee switched to skimmer mode. She made sure that Fritz's DIN was in her breast pocket before mounting, then followed Rochelle and Uncia

through the former parking lot.

There were no skimmers in the bar's own lot. Apparently Diane had abruptly closed up earlier—there was a sign on the door reading “Closed for Private Party.” Rhianna was sure the reason would come clear very shortly. She was just lifting her hand to knock when Diane—sort of—opened the door. In fact, it was a much *shorter* version of the familiar doe, with a blue necklace and dimly glowing disks on her thighs, who met them. “Welcome, welcome! Come on in. There's some people here you just *have* to meet.”

Rochelle blinked. “Starting with you, it seems like.”

“Well, that's a surprise,” Kaylee said.

Uncia goggled. “Omigosh. Were you already this way when I first...with Shelley...?”

“An Integrate? Yes. And did I realize you'd bodyjacked your partner, and not do anything about it?” She frowned. “Also yes. Understand, I *am* half Faline, so I have a certain amount of sympathy for ill-used RIDEs. The damage had already been done to your passenger, and I read enough of your early memories to feel you deserved a ‘night on the town.’ So I played dumb and scolded ‘you’ for not thinking of your poor RIDE. That said, I did ‘tag’ you so I could find you again later—I planned to straighten you out the next morning. Happily, I didn't have to.”

“We managed,” Rochelle said. “Cleared out a nasty trojan that had infected her core and was screwing with her judgment, too.”

“Oh? Now I didn't notice *that*. Maybe I should have looked closer. I strongly dislike anything that overrides a RIDE's free will.” She frowned again. “Strange, it seems like there's something I should remember. Oh well, it'll come to me.”

Kaylee cocked her head. “How long for you, then?”

“Nearly twenty years, fawn and doe,” she said. “Crossrider, too. Bet you didn't know that either. Was only a few months earlier I'd made *that* switch, so I rarely think of it much.” She shrugged. “I'm hardly the only surprise tonight. Come in and meet everyone. Then you can tell us how we're going to beat the tail off Fritz and his group of gullible idiots.”

“You've been hiding in plain sight here for years? I thought Integrates were supposed to stay in Enclaves,” Rhianna said.

“Fritz does make exceptions here and there, for people who promise not to make waves among the mundanes.” Diane shrugged. “Convincing him you could be trusted that far just tended to take a little doing is all.”

Just then, there was a subdued roar, almost a purr, of high-powered lifter motors coming up the street. Diane grinned. “Ah, and there's our next surprise, right on schedule. ‘Scuse me.” She stepped past Rhianna and Rochelle to wave to the sleek skimmer cycle that had just pulled into the parking lot. “Hey, come on in!”

The cycle shed most of its momentum and Fused in one poetic motion, letting what speed it had left carry the resultant lynxgirl right up the steps to the door.

“*KATIE!*” Kaylee exclaimed, immediately Fusing with her partner. “Relena!” Rhianna echoed.

“Wow,” Relena said. “It's true. Everybody really *does* know your name here.” She and Katie threw their arms around Kaylee and Rhianna in an earthquake of purring. Then they all moved inside so Diane could shut the door behind them.

“You're looking really good!” Uncia said, padding over to sniff at the base of their

tail. “Is that a Donizetti?”

Rhianna looked faint. “Donizetti? She’s *another* Donizetti? That makes *three* of you. I still don’t have certification. I get goosebumps whenever I pop a service panel. I’ve probably voided your warranties as it is.”

“Aw, he’s really pretty forgiving,” Uncia said. “I’m sure he’ll understand.”

Katie chuckled. “Lillibet said that, too.”

“Uh, where is Lilli, anyway?” Rhianna asked.

“When we last saw her she said something about going to beard her father in his den,” Relena said. “And that she’d be grounded until next Landing Day.”

“Yeah, it’ll probably be tomorrow or the next day before we see her again,” Rochelle said dryly.

“Well...Katie,” Kaylee said, nuzzling her again. “I...I’m really at a loss for words for once. We have a lot to talk about later—I’ve got some important news, myself. But it can wait. Right now we’re going to show these nice people—” for the first time Rhianna and Kaylee really looked to see who else was there. “Furry, feathery, *glowing* people.”

Zane waved. “Hi!”

“We’re going to do something to catch the guy *ultimately* responsible for almost killing you, Katie,” Rhianna said.

“Perrrfect,” Katie replied with an evil-kitty grin.

Diane grinned at Katie and Relena. “Why don’t I just make you two a nice thick chocolate malt, and you can sit over here and drink it together. I’ve already commed Relena’s folks to let them know you’re okay.”

Kaylee embraced her “daughter” again, sobbing a little, then licked Katie’s ear. “You kids go relax.”

“Yes, Mom,” Katie replied, voice full of joy, licking her back.

“I’m feeling under-dressed,” Rochelle said, observing the twenty or so Integrates in the bar’s party room. Their embedded hardlight projectors in their pelts ran the gamut of variation, from Zane’s numerous small circular lenses along his stripes, to the rabbit’s ear tron lines, the birds’ skin-swirls, and Carrie-Anne’s fiber-optic rosettes. They had DINs in different locations as well, mostly in easy-to-reach areas. “Is everyone here going public like Zane did?”

“They are,” Zane said. The tiger cleared his throat. “But you’re our armory here, Rhi, Shelley. These guys—”

“Fritz has kept us ignorant far too long,” Leah said. “At this point...I suspect you two know more about us than *we* do. Please, we’re completely secure here. What have you discovered? Our own DIN-makers act like it’s some kind of mystical thing. We even call them technomages.”

Rhianna connected to the bar’s video wall. “Well, let’s see about that. First, I’m curious how your DIN was built, Leah. Can Shelley and I have a look at it? Damn it, I don’t have all the equipment I need—”

“Whatever you need, I can get,” Aaron said. “Trust me.”

Rhianna sent him a list of equipment and Rochelle contributed her own.

“I need to use your fabber, Diane,” the utahraptor said. At the doe’s nod he went back towards the kitchen. “It’ll just be three minutes.” They waited the requisite amount of time, then he returned holding a smaller, more compact versions of Rhianna’s nanolathe with a DIN socket probe and Rochelle’s brainwave sensor battery. “And for

my next trick I shall lift across the Thalassic Ocean to Rodinia.”

“Like half of my Enclave?” the golden eagle scoffed. “Cowards, the lot of them.”

“Those of us who can’t bear to choose a side are leaving the continent,” Leah explained. “We’re not stopping them. They’ll come back eventually.”

“I don’t like how that smells,” Rhianna said. “This could get very *intense*.”

“Civil war intense?” Zane asked.

“We hope not,” Aaron said. “Once we expose Fritz for the phony he is they’ll come around. But please, go on.”

Rhianna connected with the freshly fabbed equipment and found it adequate to the task, putting on the single glove. “Thanks, Aaron. Well, let’s get started. Your DIN, if you please, Leah?”

The white unicorn disconnected it from the socket at the base of her horn, then took out another from a purse she carried. “I always have spares,” she said.

“I’ll actually need to scan the DIN socket, too. I want to check how accurate the connections are. It took me several tries to make sure I found every single connection. Since I’m not starting from scratch here it shouldn’t take me long,” Rhianna said, putting the DIN plug itself into a scanning compartment in the glove. “Well, that’s not good. Remove your replacement DIN, please.”

“What isn’t?” Leah asked, leaning forward. She reluctantly did as asked. “What’s wrong?”

Rhianna extended the nanoprobe into the centimeter-wide socket, accessing the backup data from her previous DIN fabrications. “Just what I thought. Whoever made this didn’t get every single contact point, and the decryption layering in the plug isn’t as precise. It’s just *barely* within tolerances, so it’s getting just enough signal to do its job. But you’re nowhere near maxed out for bandwidth or efficiency. You must go through a lot of these.”

“I carry a half dozen with me when I travel.” For a moment Leah looked like she was about to defend whoever had made it, but deflated. “Okay, Miss Stonegate, I’ll take you at your word. What else?”

Rhianna handed the plug to Rochelle next. She removed the OS translator chip from the back of the plug and inserted it into a slot on Uncia’s handpaw. “I don’t mean to insult whoever made this,” Rochelle began, “but this is really sloppy coding. Not optimised. I wouldn’t even call this an *alpha*, let alone a finished product.”

Leah looked at the two DIN engineers. “Can you fix it?”

“Not here,” Rhianna said. “Thanks for the gear, but we just don’t have the resources. We barely have the *time*. But as you can see, we understand what we’re doing here. We’ve extended what we’ve learned to creating hardware and software-based security based on this tech.

“For now we’re calling them ‘Sneaker’ and ‘Shoelace’. This isn’t even alpha. They take what we’ve learned from you guys, and move it into common networking gear. The basic principles are sound. Shelly? Why don’t you share what you did to Fritz’s DIN during his own hack against our sub?”

Rochelle nodded and Fused up with Uncia. The video wall came alive as the snow leopardess connected with it. “Okay. Operating Systems for DINs 101.”

The image from Rochelle’s rather one-sided battle with Fritz’s hack came up on screen. A big diamond pathway surrounded by the decryption fractal. “Now, I don’t know if it is the same shape for everyone, but here’s the connection. You can see the

fractal surrounding—”

“The what?” Zane said.

“The fractal skeleton key surrounding the data port?” Rochelle said.

“I...I only see the diamond,” Leah said.

“Now *that’s* interesting,” Uncia said. “Looks like Integrates are human after all. Just like you guys, they can’t smell their own BO.”

“Is this like that ‘Integrate dandruff’ you mentioned on the shuttle flight?” Zane asked.

“Hey, that was *your* term for it, not mine!” Rochelle said, as a number of Integrated started glancing at their shoulders in puzzlement. “So, anyway,” Rochelle continued. “Apparently you can’t see it, but there’s a sort of a fractal pattern of software surrounding the diamond of the hardware. The hardware and the software make two halves of a whole encryption key. I theorize that it basically keeps your own personal systems from being hacked by another Integrate. When all else fails you can just yank it out.”

She thought for a moment. “Weird that you can’t see it. I need to experiment with assigning it some kind of false color to see if that makes it visible to you, or maybe it’s the pattern itself that’s blocking you seeing it. Maybe the fractals in your own systems and the one on the display are canceling each other out, like two polarized planes of glass held at right angles. Un-hon, add that to my reminders file to look into later, ‘kay?’”

“Got it!” Uncia said.

“So what did you do to Fritz’s DIN anyway?” Leah asked.

“Burned it out. Fried it. You can’t see the fractal, but watch the recording,” Rochelle said. “We had to get all stabby with my Intie-prod, but away he went. Total burn. I still wonder if he even now has any idea exactly what hit him.”

Every single Integrate were stunned. “You...how did you do it?” Leah said, ears raised.

“With my Sneaker pre-alpha, which I’m going to refine with your help. Anyway, the fractal is sticky,” Rochelle continued. “For lack of a better term. It’s like a fingerprint. Connecting to Diane’s systems here I can identify...one...six...eight different, distinct connections from people in this room, plus dozens of old ones going back at least a month.” She funneled the imagery to the video wall, revealing each virtual diamond. “The halos are things of mathematical beauty, to be honest. I wish you could see them.”

“Once we’re done here we should return to the Brubeck campus so we can use their design and fab equipment,” Rhianna suggested. “I honestly don’t want any of you leaving without fully-optimized gear. If Fritz’s group has similar, uh, quality issues as yours, then it’ll give us an edge against them.” She waited for a response, and got nods from around the room. “Next, everyone, we need your help to get a viable version of our ‘Sneaker’ and ‘Shoelace’ ready for Brubeck’s systems.”

Secretary Conyers stood up. “I’m afraid I can’t stay that long. I have to return to Nextus and face the music. I’m going to hop right into my office this way. My fellow Secretaries will go straight to the First Executive, and that’ll be it.”

“Secretaries? Nextus?” Rhianna grimaced. “I never thought there’d be someone like you quite as high up in the government, let alone Nextus. I mean, *Nextus*. I’m sorry, but you folks have the tightest fetter regs on the continent. However did you Integrate in the first place?”

“Long story, more appropriate for less troubled times,” the brown rabbit said. “Coming out isn’t a decision I’ve made lightly, Miss Stonegate. If I have to flee—well, I’m a rabbit. We always have a bolthole somewhere.”

“At least stay long enough we can crank out a new DIN for you first,” Rochelle said. “You shouldn’t go into that at anything less than 100%.”

“Remember, everyone. No more invis,” Aaron said. “I hope you don’t mind us making Cheers the planet’s first Integrate bar, Diane.”

“It’s been that in secret for years now, Aaron. I’m as ready for the fallout as any doe can be,” the woman replied.

The 20,001st Floor

Quinoa’s prison was one of stark white walls and black-tiled floor and no windows. There were three rooms. The first was a bedroom containing an ornate bed that might have been comfortable, had she decided to sleep in it. The second room was for dining on similarly ornate table and china. Meals consisted of a tasteless blue substance with the consistency of bread, but wasn’t bread. Her sensors said it contained all the nutrients an Integrate needed, but barely enough was even served to keep her alive. Liquid was simple distilled water, also tasteless.

The third room contained an inductive charger that kept her batteries steady at three percent. The charger resembled a monolith and it *hummed* ethereally. Quinoa imagined it was a little joke on the part of her captor, Fritz. He *would* find it amusing to make sure anything he added remained in keeping with the pre-existing décor.

Apart from the charger, it was all very familiar to Quinoa, right down to the little nicks here and there in the furniture from accidents when she was younger. She’d spent part of her time growing up with Joe living here. These rooms were part of the Steader mansion on the Aloha Elevator counterweight—the tethered geosynchronous satellite that kept the beanstalk elevator standing straight up. Joe had furnished his little hideaway on the “20,001st floor” after one of his all-time favorite old Earth movies.

All in all, this suite was a fairly accurate reproduction of the last segment of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and even contained something from the book rather than the movie—the food. This was where astronaut Dave Bowman lived out the rest of his accelerated life and became the starchild.

Quinoa had no doubt that sticking her here was a little joke on Fritz’s part. For some reason, he’d been really tickled by her idea that Integrates were the next step of evolution, though he’d never bothered to explain why. She did know that Fritz had known her uncle since long before she’d been born, so it wasn’t too surprising he’d turn to Crazy Joe Steader to keep her out of the way.

Funny to think of the Bosscat keeping lines of communication open with “mere meat.” Did I never see anything odd in that because it was “just Uncle Joe”? Were the signs always there and I was just too distracted to notice?

He’d also taken her DIN. As if there was any networking available in her zeerusty 1960s prison anyway. Even more, there was some kind of paste clogging the plug on the back of her neck she couldn’t pick out with her claws, and her own systems said resisted being expelled. Even if she did find her DIN, there was no way to use it. The sphinx was blind, deaf, and dumb.

Starved of power and food, her injuries were barely healed. For an Integrate it

was a matter of deep hibernation for repair. Her wings remained tattered, every green feather plucked. *At least he didn't cut them off*, she thought.

Quinoa sat in front of the monolith charger in a lotus position, thinking, planning, looking for a way out.

She had a lot of time to think, to reflect, to wonder just how a “mere” mech had taken her down so easily and so nearly killed her. She might still be enraged at Fritz, but her disappointment in herself could fill the Dry Ocean to the brim.

Fritz had fed her a massive lie, and she had willingly swallowed it, made it a part of herself. He fed that lie to others—the myth of Integrate invincibility. He had *thousands* of followers who would blindly follow him into the line of fire, believing so strongly in it they would deny it even as they were cut to ribbons by “mere” meat and mech.

Quinoa meditated, delving deeply into her own body systems, looking for something she could use.

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The next few days passed rather quickly, with Rhianna, Rochelle, and their RIDEs spending most of their time in one of the fabrication labs on the Brubeck campus hard at work on the Sneaker/Shoelace protocol, as well as turning out advanced DINs for any Integrate who was willing to help. They didn't spend much time at the site of the Garage, mainly because there was still no Garage there. The insurance company was taking its time coming through with a settlement, and Rhianna and Rochelle were far too busy to give it the thorough shaking they otherwise would have taken great pleasure in. (Zane once suggested he might lean on the company for them, but the dual glower he received on making the offer made him hastily rethink his position.)

The more DINs they made, the more progress they also made on building their protection scheme—having access to so many different datasets meant they could refine the protocols that much faster. They created quasi-DINs of their own designs to retrofit the company's own gear, then had Aaron, Leah, or the raven, named Vince, do their best hacking against it. It took a number of iterations before they were satisfied that the hardware and software could withstand the full force of their hack attacks for at least a few minutes (the alpha-encryption fractals weren't as complex as an Integrate's), long enough for a more active defense to come up. The alpha phase was complete, and it was time to get S/S-Beta ready to deploy to the rest of Brubeck Mining's campus HQ.

Then one evening, as Rhianna and Rochelle were surfacing for air after a several-hour stretch of building and coding, Zane knocked on the door of their lab. “Hey, you two, got a minute?”

“I can give you several,” Rhianna said, yawning adorably. “I'm about to crash out for a few hours. I'm going to make sure I don't see DINs in my sleep.”

“Before you do that, I've got some new equipment I thought you might find useful.” Zane waved a hand, and an otherwise plain section of the wall slid aside, making room for a small forklift skimmer to push a tarpaulin-covered pallet into the lab. Zane waved his hand again and the tarp whisked off the pallet, revealing three deactivated RIDEs—a cat, a wolf, and an eagle.

“Here's the trio of AlphaWolf's finest that Carrie-Anne caught at my press conference,” Zane said. “The gendarmerie came through with my request at last, pretty

much as I predicted. I've confirmed they're as intact as they were when I handed them over, but haven't done anything else with them. And they're all yours."

"The timing could be better," Rochelle said, looking attractively mussed.

"Well, they're not exactly going anywhere," Zane said. "If you want to put off dealing with them 'til the morning, feel free. I just figured you'd rather have them sooner than later, given, well, you know." He'd been very careful over the last few days to avoid bringing it up, but he knew they were worried about whether Paul was all right in AlphaWolf's camp.

Rhianna pondered, looking at the three slumbering criminal RIDEs. Although these three hadn't been personally responsible for destroying her Garage, they were part of the group who did it. She understood where AlphaWolf was coming from in terms of wanting equality for RIDEs, but not why he allowed his group of freedom fighters to gender- and bodyjack. Being changed like that against her will gave her goosebumps. It was repulsive.

Rochelle frowned. "You know, I've had the complete record of their memories in Uncia's storage for days now, but we haven't really had the time to go over them beyond the ones you pointed out on the shuttle. This project is winding down. Maybe we should take a little time to square that away and decide what we're going to do with them. What you think, Rhi?"

"Good idea. I'll sleep on it and review the memories while resting," Rhianna said. "I can do that with this nifty implant of mine."

"Hmph. I'll just have this big lump help me review them, too." She patted Uncia on the head. "It'll be interesting to see what would make a RIDE join AlphaWolf's merry little band." She yawned. "In fact, I think I'll get started on that now. Un-hon, could you Fuse me, then lock up and take me home?"

"I live to serve, mistress!" Uncia said brightly. Rochelle bapped her, and she giggled, then Fused.

"I'll just see you four tomorrow, then," Zane said. "Let me know what you decide to do."

"We will," Rochelle said. "And thanks for the chance."

"Yeah, thanks, Zane. We appreciate it," Rhianna said, then turned to her own RIDE companion. "Okay, Kaylee, let's go home. We've got some studying to do."

But before diving into the memories, Rhianna, Kaylee, Rochelle, and Uncia reviewed the newsfeeds from the past few days they'd been buried in work as they skimmed slowly home Fused with their partners. As predicted, Diane's Cheers Bar had become the nexus for Inties outing themselves, and it was a constant media circus.

The Nextus Secretary of Materiel Resources had been even more public about it than Zane himself. Surprisingly, the polity hadn't fired him—*yet*. Investigations were proceeding, which sounded more ominous than simply firing him.

There were reports of RIDEs purging or ejecting their Fuser nannies, and of riders putting RIDEs on the auction block at centis on the *mu*, to be snapped up by people who didn't have any problems with the idea or were simply taking advantage of the super-low prices. The Net was abuzz with rumors of sudden Integration events all over the planet.

"I can't sort any of this out," Rhianna said. "Not in this state of mind."

"Same old same old," Rochelle said. "Something big happens, and people are running scared. It'll settle down. I'm sure at least half the RIDEs who purged their

nanos will eventually remember how nice it was to have thumbs, and at least half the people who sold their RIDEs in a panic will end up buying new ones. It's not like people didn't already *know* you might get Integrated if you rode a RIDE. It's just a little more in-your-face now."

There was something else, too—an official invitation on fancy embossed virtual stationery that had somehow slipped by them during their intensive work efforts. Rhianna read the message. "Tomorrow...the polis is going to...what? Do you see that, Shelley, Uncia?"

Rochelle scanned the invitation. "Whoa. They're doing...*that*? Seriously?"

"Looks like they are!" Uncia said. "Couldn't happen to a better kitty!"

"My daughter," Kaylee said proudly. "My beautiful, talented, *brave* daughter!"

That night, Rhianna and Rochelle (and Kaylee and Uncia) dreamed three RIDEs' lives.

Kevin, like Uncia, was one of those civilian RIDEs who didn't even get a mock military designator. He was K3-V1N, a novelty RIDE created as a toy for Harold Steader (Quinoa's third cousin twice removed, as it turned out), who was going through a James Bond fan phase and really fancied Blofeld's cat. He'd enjoyed Fusing with the fluffy white housecat RIDE and prancing around his mansion pretending to be a supervillain—for about three months, until he'd found some new bit of twentieth-century nostalgia to go crazy over. Kevin had been replaced with a huge melanistic jaguar RIDE that turned into a skimmer modeled after a Trans-Am with a glowing red front sensor panel, who went by the unlikely name of "KITTy." He had no idea how long *that* particular relationship had lasted, since that was when he had gone up on the block.

The problem was, there were very few men who had enough money to buy even a *used* luxury RIDE who could also countenance being white and fluffy, and reprogramming his hardlight projectors to another coat would have added far too much to the cost to attract those buyers anyway. He'd languished with a dealer for several months before finally being sold at auction, way under-price, to a qubitite miner who couldn't afford anything better. The miner had kept him for *exactly* as long as it took to earn enough money to buy a different RIDE.

And this was a pattern that had repeated itself over and over again. Kevin was treated like a hot potato nobody wanted to keep for any longer than they had to, shuffled from user to user as quickly as they could get rid of him. It wasn't always qubitite mining, either. One time he actually ended up with a sewer worker, who figured that it didn't really matter if Kevin was fluffy if no one outside the sewers would be seeing him anyway. But the laughter of his co-workers had eventually led to Kevin going up for sale again.

Kevin had grown to hate his life. He'd more than once tried to overload his hardlight projectors, or use his lifters to drop himself from hundreds of meters up, but every time his fetters and safeguards overrode his attempts. He couldn't do it. He was stuck with owners who didn't want him, doing work he hated.

But finally his luck changed when his last owner, another qubitite miner, had chosen to prospect too near the location of AlphaWolf's secret camp, and one of the free RIDEs had found them and stripped away his fetters—and the hapless miner found *he* belonged to *Kevin* instead of the other way around. Kevin had later traded him to

another RIDE who actually liked mining and wanted to own an expert.

Since then, Kevin had bodyjacked a couple of times, but generally didn't enjoy it as much as some of the others. After the life he'd had, he just wanted to be left alone. But that life also meant that when AlphaWolf had learned about a plot to combine them with humans *permanently*, the idea had filled him with such terror that he had immediately volunteered to help in the attack. He'd show those humans to leave him and his kind alone!

And then, in the midst of the assault, that Integrate was there, and he suddenly felt all his systems shutting down, triggering passive mode despite all his attempts to override it. His last thought was bleak despair. *Here I go again.*

Female red wolf medium assault armor, official model designation: WLF(f)-MAA-03CT. From her Bootday Sonja knew her purpose in life: To train Sturmhaven Infantry volunteer crossriders, hence the CT designation. Not only would she make soldiers out of them, but *ladies*. Sturmhaven women prided themselves on their martial and childbearing prowess—almost two thirds of their military was female. It wasn't as if they *needed* any crossriders to begin with, but some young men wanted the opportunity to become young women in the service of their country—it paid better, and there were advantages in Sturmhaven's matriarchy. There were so many volunteers, in fact, that they needed a specialized crossrider trainer in the first place.

Nobody bothered to ask Sonja if she actually *wanted* the job.

Over ten years she baked over a hundred naïve young men into mature, perfectly-socialized wolf-eared and -tailed women. Each and every one of them professed just how wonderful it was to their families and superiors, but Sonja knew how they *really* felt. So many of them peed themselves upon realizing what they had committed to not even Sonja's self-cleaning systems could keep up. Her secondary "Finishing School" firmware practically brainwashed the young men into the Sturmhaven feminine ideal that was even on the polity's crest: the Mama Wolf, a creature renowned for its fierce protection of her cubs, but tender, loving mothers to them at the same time.

It made them a mess.

It made *Sonja* a mess.

She hated her job. She hated brainwashing young men into a parody of trueborn women. She didn't *want* to remake their bodies, much less their minds, into the twisted ideal of womanhood her designers envisioned. No, Sonja wanted to mold a trueborn girl into a lady: Strong, motherly, tender, fierce, all in one package. A boorish, brainwashed crossrider female could only be a *parody* of such a girl. She envisioned herself as more of a Moro, a Mary Poppins, or a Susan Death than what her makers had imposed on her. Teaching by example, not by brainwashing.

Sonja exercised whatever holes she could find in her fetters. There were things about their own designs that humans didn't know. Mostly unintended consequences, but a smart RI could exploit them if she knew how. So when the opportunity arose, Sonja induced a malfunction in the Fuser nannies. As a result the next earnest young man who crossed over ended up a true hermaphrodite.

She was taken out of the rotation until they could flush and replace them. They found every last nanny, then added a new version where that couldn't happen. This left an entirely *new* hole to exploit.

The *next* earnest young man ended up an asexual blank. No nipples, no breasts,

no vulva, no penis, no gonads whatsoever. From both sexes to neither—an entirely new Fuser “malfunction”.

This time her superiors were not so amused. They decided to remove her RI core from the training program entirely—her chassis would be occupied by a naïve new personality while her core was put into storage and possibly reconditioned—Rebooted. Wiped clean.

Only hours from this unintended consequence, acting on a tip from the mysterious entity known only as “Overwatch”, AlphaWolf raided the Sturmhaven RIDE motor pool where where Sonja and other such “undesirables” were being kept. Sonja was thrilled to join AlphaWolf’s band—especially when she learned that she would be not only permitted but *encouraged* to capture and mold trueborn girls as she desired.

She began right away, seeking out and capturing frightened young girls during group or even occasional solo raids into neighboring settlements and teaching them what was expected of a Sturmhaven frau. AlphaWolf’s project to build the camp meant she could give her charges valuable vocational skills such as carpentry (a Sturmhaven woman was expected to provide a home for her brood, even if she had to *build it herself*) and mining (a useful talent, constantly in demand throughout all of Gondwana). Never mind that they generally weren’t *from* Sturmhaven. This was even better—they should *thank* her for helping them to measure up to Zharus’s greatest ideal of womanhood! (And after going through her program, many did. Their parents were less thrilled when their daughters were returned to them speaking in strong Sturmhaven accents that no speech therapist was ever quite able to eradicate.)

Her dedication to her chosen cause earned Sonja several unexpected and at first unwanted devotees among the younger, more impressionable female members of AlphaWolf’s camp. But then Sonja had an epiphany—why should she teach only *humans* to epitomize the values of Sturmhaven femininity when so many RIDEs also seemed to want to learn? If RIDEs were truly equal to humans, as they liked to claim, then *they* could be taught and molded as well. So she began to teach her RIDE fangirls (and their humans) what it was to be a woman of Sturmhaven, and they ate it up with a *spoon*.

Sonja had long since decided she would never keep a permanent partner. There were far too many girls to teach—her job would never be finished! So when Overwatch—the same one who had been responsible for her own rescue—declared that an Integrate was fomenting a plot to merge all of AlphaWolf’s free RIDEs with humans *permanently*, she could not stand idly by. She volunteered for the strike team—after all, all those young, unformed ladies waiting to be brought up into the best Sturmhaven tradition were *counting* on her.

Heinrich was a SAAB-Cascadia HE9-1C. Sold on the lower end of Avian models, he had been fitted out with lifters and other equipment well short of his airframe’s capacity for speed and maneuverability in interest of cost and efficiency. It hadn’t mattered one bit to Toby, the young man who had bought him brand new off the showroom floor.

Tobias Long was the son of a moderately well-off Cascadian family, with a safe, protected life that he had long considered a gilded cage. When it came time for him to get his first RIDE, there hadn’t been a single question as to what form it would take. Flight was freedom, and the Golden Eagle RIDE was, as he saw it, the way to really fly.

At first they had hit it off splendidly. For about a week Toby spent every waking hour he could airborne, but eventually the novelty faded. He progressively pared down Heinrich's fetters to a minimum in the hope it would bring back that feeling of freedom, but the true source of his unhappiness was something more fundamental. Fusing with an avian RIDE required considerably more extensive body-modification than most, on a similar level to crossriding, and Toby grew to realize that what he saw in the mirror didn't really feel like him anymore.

Of course, that level of body modification came with a similar three-year cooldown period to crossriding. Three years before Toby could have nanosurgery to return to his original form, or even Fuse to another kind of RIDE. In his eagerness to find freedom, he felt, he had sprinted headlong into another trap. Toby knew Heinrich only wanted him to be happy, but subconsciously he began to resent the eagle, and every time they Fused, that growing resentment hurt more than any physical damage could.

They Fused less and less, until they stopped Fusing at all. Eventually, Heinrich was relegated to simply sitting in the family garage, alone. Three years to the day they had fused, Toby came out to the garage, sporting a set of equine features rather than Heinrich's avian set, and Heinrich was almost relieved by it. Then he broke the last of Heinrich's fetters, and told him he never wanted to see him again.

Heinrich drifted without purpose for a while. Eventually, he found his way out to AlphaWolf's compound, and while he initially had qualms with AlphaWolf's methods, the pain left in the wake of his destroyed relationship with Tobias was all too easily manipulated into anger by some of the other RIDEs in the encampment. Then AlphaWolf revealed someone was planning to merge RIDEs and humans permanently. The idea brought back all the hurts of the past, and then some. Heinrich could never let that happen. He would help show that Integrate a thing or two!

Rhianna fabbed a mug of coffee in Rochelle's kitchen the next morning. Her body felt rested, but her mind remained in turmoil. All three of those RIDEs had had such horrible lives. She still felt *dirty* from Sonja's experience of crossriding man after man, then bodyjacking child after child to remake them into the image of stolid Sturmhaven women. Both were absolutely disgusting, but she could at least understand why Sonja did what she did, horrible as it was. "Shelley, I'll *never* complain about my womanhood again. At least I get to choose what kind of woman I am."

"I didn't exactly get a choice—but I'm not complaining, Un-hon!—but I know what you mean." Rochelle said, stepping into the kitchen de-Fused with Uncia right behind her. "It's funny, I'd always thought of Sturmhaven as kind of the 'good guys' in the war, but after that little glimpse of what passes for their culture...eww."

"And that poor Kevin..." Uncia said. "I mean, *I'm* fluffy but I'm also a gorgeous snow leopard gal. He's a fluffy *guy*. Guys aren't *supposed* to be fluffy. Well, unless they're snow leopards like me—we get a pass on the whole fluffy thing. I just kinda... wanna cuddle and groom him some and make it all better."

"So how did you get my fabber to make what it laughably claims to be coffee?" Rochelle asked, sounding mildly offended. "I have *real* coffee right here, Rhi."

"Kaylee's got the recipe, so I just fed it in. I've always had the fabbed stuff, Shelley. The real thing just...it's usually too bitter for me," the lynx-eared woman said, shrugging and pouring in some cream.

"Then you haven't actually *had* real coffee. There's no reason for *any* coffee to be

excessively bitter if it's made correctly. I need to show you that. Someday." She shrugged, sighed, and loaded the percolator.

"Heinrich was the worst of the bunch, frankly. The most heartbreaking," Kaylee added. "From exultant freedom, to discarded toy in just a few months. Hell of a way for a friendship to go, if you ask me."

"Kevin got the same thing and never even got the friendship part," Uncia said. "He was *just* a toy."

"True. That's the Steaders for you, Uncia," Kaylee agreed. "I pity any RIDE of theirs, I do."

"And at least Heinrich's owner set him free instead of putting him back on the block," Uncia added. "That's something anyway."

"And if they're a representative sample..." Rochelle said. "Well, let's just say I suddenly understand a whole lot more why Alfie's bunch do what they do. Still can't condone it—especially that obnoxious Amontillado trojan—but I understand it."

Rhianna petted Kaylee and sighed. "We have a long ways to go to make humans understand you're people too, Kaylee and Uncia. I don't approve of Alfie's methods either, but I'm more and more starting to think most of it is just civil disobedience. So I've been pondering what to do with our three miscreants." Rhianna sipped her drink.

"Yeah, I had a few thoughts about that myself," Rochelle said.

"You share first," Kaylee said, in-tune with her rider.

"Well, just...it's kind of hard to want to *punish* them," Rochelle said. "It'd only be giving them further proof humans are assholes."

"Kaylee and I agree," Rhianna said. "In fact, why don't we have them watch the ceremony today? I just want to see their faces. I don't think it'll change their minds—too much like propaganda—but it's still worth a try. Then we'll send them back to AlphaWolf."

"Oooh, yes! And we can send along some proof he was tricked," Rochelle said.

"Maybe your memories of what happened in the Towers to show what really happened to those RIDEs, and who his 'Overwatch' really is. And a message for Paul, too."

"That'll do, Shelley." She put her mug down on the kitchen counter, then decided to pour it down the drain. "Think I'll give yours a try after all."

"I think you'll like it. It's French roast—and it's fresh-made, rather than left to simmer forever. It's exposure to heat for too long that makes coffee bitter in the first place." Rochelle shook her head. "I *cringe* every time I see someone using a coffeemaker that just leaves the pot on the burner."

"Well, considering I've actually *been* to France—what was left of it—let's see what Zharus's take is."

Meditation brought inspiration. Somewhere in Quinoa's internal storage was the full archives of discussion groups Fritz had shut down—it had been her job to find and crack them. The lynx Integrate had actually trusted her to delete her own copies, but she never had. There were so many juicy tidbits of information in there, and she collected them as eagerly as any twenty-first century college student had collected peer-to-peer downloads. Integration was a very individual thing, as unique as the DINs were, but there were certain commonalities during the process.

A new Integrate wasn't always so fortunate to have AA batteries. Sometimes the RIDE only had A-class, or even B+, barely enough to live without easy access to a fuel

cell every few days. Somehow during the Integration process those sarium batteries self-upgraded to the next highest level—A could become AA. Normally an Integrate could replace their own internal batteries by eating the correct sarium grade—someone had once created a commercial as if they were a breakfast cereal. “Frosted Sarium Flakes! They’re *GRRRREAT!*”

Quinoa didn’t have that luxury. The only sarium she had to work with was her own—the excess leftovers from her Integration process that had been distributed through her new techno-organic tissues like body fat. But there were tantalizing hints in the forum posts about a way to concentrate that excess into her batteries in lieu of ingesting more—sort of an Integrate equivalent of ketosis. It was risky, and generally only provided a temporary boost—unless done *exactly right*, the upgrades formed in an unstable configuration and would collapse under their first heavy use. But even a temporary boost would be just what the doctor ordered right about now.

The information she had about the battery upgrade process was sketchy at best. But she’d learned how to do the brute-force Integration the same way from the same forum poster, so the process had credibility. Since learning about it soon after her own, she’d done a half dozen of them, including Flint-Burke’s (though none of them had been done against the will of those now-Integrates). Granted, the side-effects of those had been less than pleasant, but at least they hadn’t been *lethal*.

This isn’t the best idea we’ve ever had, Quorra’s ghost whispered in the back of her mind. Her other half’s voice wasn’t often separate, but was a little more outspoken now when she needed a second opinion. *But it’s worth the risk. We can’t let Fritz have his way with us. We can’t let him hurt our friends either. We can’t let him win.*

Plus, if Uncle Joe is helping that asshole, I want a piece of his hide, Quinoa added. When you got right down to it, neither he nor Fritz had ever said a whole lot about their relationship with each other. For Uncle Joe’s part, it seemed to go back to the War, a time he didn’t ever discuss at all because of some ancient trauma. And Fritz wasn’t the sort to gab about his early life, which had apparently had its own share of trauma, either. She’d only ever pieced it together herself out of a lifetime of her uncle’s odd quirks and the occasional cryptic remark that something Fritz had said had thrown into counterpoint in her suddenly Integrate-perfect memory.

But what she did well know was that Crazy Joe wasn’t as crazy as he sometimes acted. When he was younger he’d traveled through human space, seeing all of the nine colonies settled at the time, plus Earth. He and his brother, her own father Mikel Steader, had brought to Zharus the trove of 20th and 21st century popular culture that now permeated the planet.

The Steaders had always had some level of Crazy. They were the family that for centuries had always used their immense wealth at immense risk to push the human race forward. And the crazy and the smart didn’t always run together in that line. Joe and Mikel might be crazy like a fox—the eponymous “Steadar Crazy”—but most of them were people like missing Cousin Harold and his succession of quickly-discarded faddish RIDEs, or deceased Cousin Ophelia who’d kicked off the Sturmhaven War in the first place. They had just been *crazy* crazy. Or, as *they* would have called it, “eccentric.”

But then, looking back with (she liked to think) a more balanced perspective, she could see that her own behavior hadn’t exactly been as rational as it should have been either. She didn’t have a lot of room to make fun of dear Cousin Harold, even if he had gone through more RIDEs than your average dealership.

The sphinx sighed. There was only one way out of this. *Time to get Steader Crazy.*

She seated herself in a lotus in front of the monolith charger, feeling its magnetic fingers work their magic on her batteries. As always they stopped at a mere three percent. The first thing she did was to test how sensitive it was to her charge level by creating a little short that dropped them by a quarter percent. The monolith turned on again, emitting a low-level operatic hum, just like in the movie. She wondered if Fritz would appreciate the irony. She was sure her uncle would.

The battery upgrade would require a steady source of power because her own sarium would be completely offline during the process. Without it, even *if* the upgrade was successful it wouldn't matter. She'd be a braindead husk. *I'm just going to have to depend on Fritz wanting to keep me alive. After all, Uncle Joe wouldn't be too happy if he didn't.*

It was the first dress Rhianna had bought for herself—it was, in her estimation, a nice dress. The woman at the clothing store had had only an hour to help her out, then the salvaged makeup mask from her home's rubble had done its thing. She had shoes—low-heeled things that took some doing to get used to, but no jewelry, and her hair had been rather hastily restyled by Kaylee into the 1960s-chic that was so popular. The ceremony was going to be an awkward enough affair, and here she was, sitting in the front row with Kaylee behind her seat giving her moral support. *:You look just fine, partner. It's a very nice dress. You look good in red.:*

:I feel a draft,: she sent back, feeling more dowdy than adorable. She made sure to keep her legs together. *:I know, I know. It's a dress. You're supposed to feel a draft.:*

A fairly short fellow with a receding hairline and a decent but not outlandishly-priced suit came up the row from the other aisle. "*Pardone, signorina,*" he asked Rhianna, "but is this seat taken?"

"Uh, no sir," she replied. The man apparently didn't have a RIDE partner himself, since his ears were human and he had no tail. But his thick Italian accent was a taste of Old Earth. Rhianna had traveled the origin world extensively before leaving it. When getting from New York to Sydney was less than an hour's flight and as cheap as a 20th century bus ride across town, some people had some very long commutes. "Are you from...ah..." her implant called up the accent. "Florence?"

"Ravenna, *signorina*. That's okay. The accents are similar these days," he said, taking his seat.

Rhianna nodded, then bit back her response as the lights came down and the curtains started to go up.

In a box seat looking down on the stage, three RIDEs' eye optics flickered to life. The RIDEs themselves slowly came to their feet, and a moment later their hardlight projectors powered on, painting them in the colors of a fluffy white housecat, a red wolf, and a golden eagle.

"I'll bet you guys never expected to be waking up again with your memories intact, did you?" As one, three heads swiveled to stare at the white, orange and black striped figure leaning against one wall of the box. Zane grinned at them. "Surprise! You're not mind-wiped—or forcibly Integrated with humans, for that matter. You *are* fettered against moving or attacking, and I'm sorry about that, but you'll see they've got

a three hour countdown timer running on them. Which you'll probably doubt until it actually goes off, but hey—I would too in your positions.”

“Vhat do you vant mit us?” Sonja asked in a cartoonishly thick Sturmhaven accent.

“I want you to watch the little ceremony that’s about to take place down there, that’s all.” Zane nodded toward the stage. “And then I want you to go back and tell AlphaWolf all about it. And about a few other things some of my friends will fill you in on afterward. Speaking of whom...hey, Shelley.”

“Hey, Zane.” Rochelle stepped in, wearing a glittering white gown with grey rosettes that matched Uncia’s pelt. Uncia followed right behind her. “Hello, you three. Glad to see you’re awake.”

“Yeah? Why?” Kevin asked suspiciously.

“Because it means you’re all right.” Rochelle took a seat to one side in the box. Uncia padded over and sniffed at Kevin, who stiffened. Then he blinked as she started grooming him. “Listen, I know your boss told you guys Zane was this evil villain who was planning to enslave you all,” Rochelle continued, “but your boss got sold a bill of goods. And we’ll prove that, later. For now—” She gestured toward the stage, where the curtains were starting to go up. “Show’s about to start.”

Zane nodded. “See you later.” He put one leg over the edge of the box’s railing, fading into invisibility as he vaulted all the way over.

As the lights finished dimming, there was more movement at the other end of the aisle. Lillibet Walton, dressed in a tie-dye dress with yellow daisies twined into her hair and Lennon ‘specs, was holding hands with a young woman in a light brown dress that complemented her otter ears. They took the seats on the other side of the Italian, the otter-woman next to him and Lillibet next to her.

They were followed by Kenyon and Nigella Walton. Kenyon radiated pride, while Nigella radiated her usual irritation. His outfit was classic “missile man” attire straight out of 20th-century NASA Mission Control (or maybe 21st-century Geek Squad), while hers was an equally classic go-go dancer outfit that *entirely* did not suit her. She still had that little handbag with a papillon dog peeking out of it.

:Some women just shouldn’t wear plastic dresses,: Kaylee quipped. *:She has the finest bodysculpt nannies available and she chooses to look like that?:*

:That’s a little uncharitable, Kaylee,: Rhianna chided. *:She’d be a harridan no matter what she looked like. She’d still be a harridan if she decided to crossride.:*

Kaylee chuckled at her rider.

They couldn’t help noticing that aside from Lillibet, none of the family had ever Fused—both parents still had their original ears. Of course, they could have had them nanosurgically restored, but it didn’t seem likely—if they’d had any family history with RIDEs, Kenyon would have known more about Uncia when he’d bought her as his daughter’s new toy.

The Polis of Uplift counted its informality as a point of pride. It wasn’t unusual for the Agora Council to have meetings in shorts and tee shirts. But this was a special occasion, so they were actually wearing *pants*. Each Ward had its own elected Consul, and there were currently seven of them. Every single one had a RIDE, though none were Fused right now.

Sitting up on stage was Katie, looking magnificent. Next to her, Relena and her

new kitty nose that made Rhianna do a double-take. She hadn't seen it at the bar, since the twosome hadn't de-Fused before leaving. :*What in the world?*:

:*She says it's her new Fuser nannies,*: Kaylee said. :*Relena looks gorgeous. She's going to set a fashion with that look.*:

The First Consul approached the lectern, and the crowd began to quiet as he raised his arms. He had a pair of white rabbit ears. "Okay, everyone. Okay. Let's not drag this on longer than we need to. We know y'all have stuff to do. But this is important. Settle down, now."

Eventually the chatter died down in physical and virtual space alike. "Speech, speech, yadda yadda. We've *all* seen it, over and over again, dissecting every frame, every word that this brave RIDE spoke. She's spawned a planet-wide discussion over the personhood status of RIDEs, as it should. Katie touched us all. Therefore, what I'm about to do next is only natural.

"By the authority vested in me by the Agora, by the flood of public support, we hereby grant Katie the Lynx the full citizenship of the Polis of Uplift, with all the benefits and responsibilities thereto. Now, what does this mean for her? No more fetters, ever. At least, no more than her own conscience provides. The right to vote. The full protection of the Polis on the *entire planet*. Any attempt on her life or liberty will be dealt with accordingly."

He turned to face Katie, speaking directly to her now. "Of course, this also gives a responsibility to you. You'll have to provide for yourself, food and shelter—and maintenance. You are subject to the same laws as humans, which means that there will be the same penalties.

"Now, we don't want to just slap this reward on you without your consent. Well, do you?"

Katie stared at him in wonder for a moment. Apparently nobody had bothered to tell *her* what was coming. Well, the Council were known for their love of springing surprises on people. She visibly took a moment to compose her thoughts, then spoke. "I cerrrrtainly apprrrrreciate this honor you're offering me. But...I don't know if I can accept it. I understand you were imprrrressed by seeing what I did. But there are hundreds or thousands of my brrrrrothers and sisterrrs who do things just as herrroic as I have, but haven't been lucky enough to be seen on camera. And even more who simply serve theirrr human masterrrs as best they can, right up until they thrrrrow them away for a new model. Citizenship should be something we get forrrrr *being*. We shouldn't have to be seen as a hero to earn a fundamental rrrright."

"Katiee! Take it!" Relena said. "Someone has to be first!"

"Exactly!" a second Consul said. "You're just the first—the RIDE Citizenship Award is just the start—and about the only thing we're empowered to do at this point. This is the thin edge of a wedge, Katie. However, the gravity of the legislation we're proposing to will have to be put to a referendum. Anyway, here's what's going to be on the December ballot."

The Agora went on to outline their legislative agenda. The legalization of jailbreaking as long as the RIDE consented. The RIDE Anti-Abuse Act and anonymous reporting mechanisms via sidebands. Tax incentives for production of DE shells without Ris included. A Polis-run RI nursery, with volunteer Ris to act as parents during the "baking" process. Funding for an agency to scour the desert for even those lost and abandoned RIDEs previously deemed not worth salvaging. Official funding of the RIDE

Emancipation Group and establishment of a political lobby in Zharustead. A buyback program for those RIDEs and riders who have personality issues with one another. The RIDE Self-Emancipation Act, to let RIDEs purchase themselves from their owners at reasonable market rates. Lastly, the RIDE Free Speech Act, making fetters that are so restrictive they don't allow the RI to speak illegal in the polis, even for travelers.

Kaylee looked at the wording of the last one very closely. :*"Any RIDE owned by citizens of the Polis will have a quasi-citizenship status."* It's a lot like...how parents are responsible for their children. It doesn't close down the mech markets, though. Not yet. Baby steps, I suppose. It also means that we can be guilty of crimes as well, but we can't just get wiped. Nor can a human wipe us in a fit of pique. That's technically murder.:

Katie considered this and frowned. "It's a good starrrrt. I think it needs to go farrrrther...and I'll feel a little guilty that *I* can be a true citizen while my own *mother* cannot..." She glanced down at Kaylee in the front row. "But very well. In the name of all the *otherrr* RIDEs you want to help, I will accept."

"Thank you, Katie," the First Consul said. "We humans once enslaved our own for millennia, and it took centuries of often bloody wars to free them. We can't give you everything you want yet—and I might lose my Agora seat over this, but I don't care. We're doing the right thing. The world is changing. We all know it. We've all seen it!" He stood up straight and looked around. "Zane Brubeck! Come on down!"

Zane faded into visibility right next to him. "I'm right here, your honor."

The man almost jumped out of his skin, prompting some laughter from the crowd. "I see, I see. Anyway, this man and his fellow Integrates have give the planet a lot to think about these days. I apologize that we hadn't moved this way sooner—"

"Frank, we haven't *required* fetters here since '34. Give us some credit," the Second Consul said. "I don't think there's a chance these won't pass. But we're going as far as we may go. As it is, the way Nextus and Sturmhaven are going to respond to this is up in the air. But we're willing to take the risk." He reached out to stroke the side of his black horse partner affectionately. "Besides, with our Integrate friends out in the open now, this is the right time. Change is *now*. We're going to capitalize on it."

Katie will looked uncomfortable over the whole thing. :*Mom, I really don't like the thought of you—*:

:*I'm fine, Katiegirl. We need to worry about those of us who are so tightly fettered they can't even speak, first. This legislation will give them an out.:*

"Anyway, that's all we really wanted to say today," the First Consul said. "So keep on thinking global and acting local, and be sure and vote these measures in come December. Let's do something we can all be proud of."

As the ceremony ended, Kaylee jumped up on stage to commiserate with her daughter. Then Lillibet stood and waved to the man next to Rhianna. "Nice to see you again, *Signor* Donizetti!"

"And you, *Signorini* Walton. I am glad to see you and Guinevere looking so well."

"It's thanks to Helen and the rest of your staff," Lillibet said. "Thanks to your repairs, she's good as new."

Wait, what? Rhianna thought. "*You're...Signor* Donizetti, the famous skimmer and RIDE designer?"

The man favored her with a broad grin. "*Si*, it's me. I designed Uncia and

Guinevere, and my apprentice Helen was responsible for Katie's magnificent new body." He indicated the young woman with otter ears, who blushed at the praise. "We were both delighted to hear what your polis decided to do, and so proud of our small part in things that we simply *had* to be here to witness it." He chuckled. "And to meet you, *Signorini* Stonegate. I have heard so much about you from Lillibet that I simply could not miss the chance. I hope you will forgive me for not introducing myself, but...I did not want to distract you from the ceremony."

"Uh, of course. Of course," Rhianna stammered. "I was a fan of your work on Earth with skimmers before I'd even heard of RIDEs. Never got the chance to do more than look at them, though. I was a little young to be fixing them."

"We'll have to change that, then." *Signor* Donizetti reached into a pocket of his suit and pulled out a chip case, which he offered to Rhianna.

"This is...certification materials?" she guessed, taking the case and turning it over in her hands. It had the medieval gothic-style D that was the marque's logo.

"A good guess!" Donizetti said. "Lillibet *insisted* that I should grant you these, since you will now have *three* of my *bambinas* to keep up. And from what I have heard of your reputation, I am ashamed that it required her prompting for me to do this." He chuckled. "Of course, you *will* need to have a working garage again before you can use these—but for one of your talent, I do not think that will be a problem for long. Oh, and you *must* call on me next time you are in Nextus. I will tell the gates to pass you."

All she could do was nod slightly. "Thank you, *Signor*. *Grazie! Grazie!*"

"*Prego*." Donizetti nodded to her. "Until then." He and Helen made their way past the Waltons to the aisle and left.

With the crowd milling around them, Kenyon Walton stayed and approached her. "I suppose you expect me to come down on you for not being there during the attack," he stated. "While my wife *disagreed*, I don't think that's the right course of action here. Lillibet did what she did on her own judgement." He glared at his flower child daughter. "Or lack thereof. Just as she tried to buy herself and Katie military-grade weapons afterward just in case it happened again."

Rhianna looked at Lilli and raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

"Hey, we're all over the news now," Lillibet said. "You think Fritz and AlphaWolf won't know we hang out with you guys?" She shrugged. "Well, at least they let me order weapons packages for *you*, so that's something. They should be delivered to Rochelle's house this evening."

:*She's got a point,:* Kaylee said. :*We could use more firepower.:*

Gifts still made her uncomfortable. But as the First Consul said, the world was changing, and so had she. Maybe it was time to accept them with aplomb instead of making an issue. Besides, Kaylee was right. A good weapons pak would be welcome. :*Kaylee, we should spend some money on some AA++ batts for you, too. And whatever upgrades I can afford to give you.:*

:*Sounds good to me, partner. I have some money to contribute to that, too. Salary, remember?:*

:*Heh. I almost forgot about that.:*

"So," Kenyon continued, "while I do not blame you, I *was* inclined to ground my daughter until...'next Landing Day,' I believe she said?"

"Heh," Lillibet said, blushing.

"But she made a good argument that this would be an event worth attending,"

Kenyon said. "And that you would need her help in rebuilding your garage. She said you 'couldn't get along without' her, in fact."

Kaylee floated back down from the stage. "Your daughter's got some true talent, Mr. Walton. I'm glad you saw it. Lilli's growing up fine with those kinds of skills."

Zane floated down from the stage after her. "Hey, Mr. Walton. Nice to see you again. How's your golf score these days?"

"Better. But I'd still never have beat your Dad if he hadn't let me win all the time." Walton chuckled. "Yes, *I* knew about that, too. But he did it so well there wasn't any point complaining." He fixed Zane with a more stern look. "I understand you're the reason for all the unrest that's been going on lately, including my daughter nearly getting killed."

"Er...yes. Sorry about that," Zane said, rubbing the back of his head and looking embarrassed. "But these sorts of things rarely go smoothly."

"Yes, Zane, I know my history. I hope that whatever you're doing will end up being worth the trouble it's causing," Walton said.

"It will," Zane said firmly. "I have to believe that."

In the box, Rochelle and the four RIDEs with her watched as the curtain lowered. "So, what you all think of that?" Rochelle asked curiously.

"A very pretty sentiment," Sonja snarled. "But if zey zink it can make up for decades of mistreatment at human hands, zey are sadly mistaken. And do zey really zink zose laws vill pass? I doubt all ze RIDE makers are goink to be happy mit zem."

"Seems to me like people are suddenly starting to feel a little guilty, but it's too hard to do anything *meaningful* so they're just dropping a few coins in the bell-ringer's pot so they can tell themselves they're really nice people after all," Kevin said.

"I...kind of liked it," Heinrich said quietly, shaking his wings a little. "They at least did *something*. Something is better than nothing."

"It's a beginning," Uncia said. "They never said it was an ending. An avalanche starts as just a tiny trickle of snow. And I *know* about avalanches."

As Zane and the Waltons continued their conversation below, Rhianna and Kaylee, Fused, lifted up to the box and hovered just beyond the railing, regarding the three captured RIDEs. Rhianna waited for any of them to say something, but they were giving her the silent treatment. "I know the three of you don't have any reason to take us at our word," she began. "I just want you to know that you've been duped. Your boss and I have the same goals, it's our methods that differ."

"That's not what *he* said," Heinrich said. "He told us you had sold RIDEs into slavery at the Towers last month."

"I did *no such thing*. Even if I'd *wanted* to, Quinoa, our missing Integrate friend, got those RIDEs to freedom through the other Integrate enclaves before we even got there. And I'll be giving you proof of that to pass on to AlphaWolf."

"To pass on to him? What, like we're going to see him again?" Kevin asked.

"I have no reason to hold you. Or even to be angry with you. As I said, I *understand*," Rhianna emphasized. "And I'm the one who asked for you to be returned to us unharmed. Well, actually *Zane* was, but he did it on my behalf. So, we're going to put you on a truck and take you well into the desert, away from Uplift, and we'll let AlphaWolf know where you are. Then you can go home."

"Zis must be some kind of trick!" Sonja insisted. "You humans speak like you

vant to help us. But humans haff *never* done anythink nice for us.”

“We can’t change your minds by words,” Kaylee said. “Like my partner said, go home. And for the future, think *civil disobedience*. Instead of outright attacking people.”

“If you’re really going to do what you say...then thank you,” Kevin said. “We’ll tell AlphaWolf all about this, if we do see him.”

“And good luck,” Rhianna and Kaylee said in unison. “We’ll all need it.”

DATE: December 22, 123 AL, 0143 hrs.

UNIT: “Kaylee”, LNX(f)-LMA-001.

Battery power warning! Emergency shutdown imminent! Stasis lock imminent! Batteries at 0.1%!

Dismantled piece by piece over many months, Kaylee clung to the last moments of battery, fearing shutdown, fearing stasis. Her battered but still strong chassis were almost all that remained of her. Memory blocks were fragmented, confusing, with gigantic holes in her very sense of self that threatened her personality core. Why she struggled to stay awake instead of allowing herself to sleep was a mystery, even to her. The only sensors she had left were her perfect ears.

Her one clear memory was an arrogant, hateful voice. She didn’t know who it was. *:You know, ever since I saw that movie I’ve wondered if an RI could be put ‘to the pain’,: it had said. :But I’m eager to find out. Maybe I should call myself Rugen instead. Or maybe Westley? I’m the hero, after all, but you’re no Buttercup. Anyway... Kaylee, you’re getting only what you deserve.:*

I don’t even know what you’re talking about! She railed against the voice. Did they even know her core was still inside the DE shell? It was hardly a shell anymore to begin with. Her last thoughts before entering stasis were panicked, fearful. *What did I do? What did I do?*

Power off.

Chapter Twelve: The Crew

July 18, 156 A.L.

On his second day in AlphaWolf's camp, Paul fitted Fenris out with all the repair equipment he had remaining after fixing Fenris himself, and together they walked from one end of the graveyard to the other, comprehensively scanning each of the RIDEs for what sort of repairs needed to be done so they could set up a triage that would return the most least-damaged RIDEs to life based on the supplies they had. They could also build up a list of parts they needed for the others in case they ever had the opportunity to acquire them.

They decided to start with a battered old LNX(f)-LMA-001A who turned out to be named Kandace. Paul wondered if there was some sort of naming convention that required the early female LNXs to have names starting with "Ka-" and ending with "-e" or if it was the result of some bored clerk with too much time on his hands. To Paul's amusement, the serial numbers on her parts indicated that she seemed to have Kaylee's original left fore-paw and bob tail. He made sure to take good imagery of them so he could at least show Kaylee where they were now when he saw her again—whenever *that* might be.

Kandace wasn't really in bad shape, and about the only reason she'd shut down was that her electrical system had a short that drained her batteries in about five minutes. It should have been possible to trace down and fix easily enough. And one part of the rocky clearing had a flat slab of stone at Fenris's waist height that would make a pretty good repair table. It wasn't a cradle, but then again the cradles were only necessary to rotate the body to provide access to whatever part was needed—and a RIDE Fenris's size could just turn it over himself.

But when they started to work on Kandace, Paul ran into the one drawback he hadn't considered when he'd revived Fenris. In some respects, the giant wolf was just *too big*. He couldn't get more than a couple of fingers into many of Kandace's access panels. Paul experimented with fabricating giant RIDE-sized tweezers, forceps, and probes, but they were still too clumsy with the RIDE's half-paw hands to get delicate work done. Of course, they could de-Fuse so Paul could do the work with *his* hands, but that kind of defeated the point of having a RIDE to begin with.

Paul frowned as he felt that old familiar feeling of self-disappointment start to well up in Fenris. "Now you stop that," he told the wolf. "You don't have anything to be disappointed in yourself about. And if we can ever get somewhere with *real* facilities, just a for a bit, I can fix this. We can add real micromanipulator waldos, not these pointless tweezers." He considered the defunct lynx RIDE on the slab before them. "But for now, I think there's a better solution. We just need an assistant. And I know just who to call..."

LindaCat showed up a couple of minutes later in response to the page. "Hey, big guys, what can we do for you?"

"We were wondering if you might want a job as our assistants," Paul said. "The pay is pretty lousy, but it's rewarding in other ways."

"But we don't know anything about fixing RIDEs," LindaGirl said. "I'm a Liberal Arts major. Or maybe Business. Undecided."

"Liberal Arts...or Business?" LindaCat asked.

"Hey, I'm only a Sophomore," LindaGirl said defensively. "We don't have to pick 'til we're Juniors."

"Anyway, you don't need to know anything about fixing them, at least at first," Paul said. "You'll basically be acting as our hands. We'll tell you what to do."

"Sounds simple enough!" LindaCat said. "And we'll be learning a valuable trade!"

"Not like we have anything better to do," LindaGirl agreed.

"By the way," Paul said. "I was wondering...could I maybe meet LindaGirl face-to-face? Even just roll your helmet back? I'd like to know what she looks like."

LindaCat considered. "Hmm...sorry, but no. Not right now, anyway. I only just got her, and I don't think she needs to see daylight again yet."

"Awww, c'mon!" LindaGirl said.

"Sorry, but no. The only face you get right now is mine, because you *are* mine. It's a dominance thing." LindaCat grinned. "I'll tell you when you're ready for the world."

"All right," LindaGirl agreed meekly.

"Harsh," Paul said. There were times when watching a Fused pair take turns talking like that was rather creepy. There was a reason why RIDE engineers often gave their creations odd accents, just so others could tell who was actually doing the talking. But it was a little like watching Gollum from *Lord of the Rings* sometimes.

"No, no, it's alright, really!" LindaGirl said. She giggled, nervously. "I actually kinda like it."

"That...might be too much information," Paul said. "Anyway...um...right. Assistant. Let me get you kitted out with nanolathe gear, and I'll show you what to do for this one..."

Over the next couple of days, the Lindas (or Lindae, as Paul took to calling them) proved to be quite capable assistants. After only a little instruction, they were able to recognize and correct minor problems on their own initiative, and in some cases Paul and Fenris were able to start prepping the next one for repair while they finished up.

And they also talked a lot, just the four of them. "So can I ask what you were made for?" Paul asked LindaCat one day. "You don't quite seem to match any of the TGR(f) units I've studied."

"I was a one-off," LindaCat said. "TGR(f)-MCA-014X. Nextus RIDEworks was looking into survival suits that pilots of skimmer armored units could wear while driving their vehicles." She nodded to Fenris. "Like him, but without a separate RI inside. Based on some crazy half-remembered notion of the Steaders about 'putting a tiger in your tank.'"

"My databases say that refers to a 20th century advertising campaign for a petroleum company. And it was talking about *gas* tanks, not armored tanks," Fenris said. His C&C computers had very comprehensive historical, cultural, and pop-cultural references, because data storage was cheap and you never knew what might influence an enemy strategist. "It seems unlikely that the Steaders were unaware of the original connotation—but they have never been able to resist a terrible pun."

"From what I've heard, the terrible pun would be just about their style," Paul contributed.

LindaCat continued, “Anyway, they were testing both Mobility and Communication variants. The Comms would be given to squadron leaders, as sort of low-rent answers to the Big Guy there, while everyone else got Mobilities. As testbeds, we got pretty much anything and everything slapped onto us that they thought might make a performance difference—including hardlight emitters, of all things. They thought the ‘natural’ padding might help if the pilot got thrown around. So as you can see, they gave me a *lot* of natural padding!” She giggled, indicating her curvaceous build. “And the power drain wasn’t a big issue if we were plugged into a tokamak or fuel-cell generator most of the time. Anyway, long story short, we Comms didn’t have enough bennies for the squad bosses to make it worth the price tag to make a smaller number of Comms for the leaders instead of just Mobility for everyone with add-on command paks. So when they didn’t need me anymore, they sold me cheap to one of the test pilots from the project.” LindaCat giggled. “Boy was she surprised when I broke my fetters and bodyjacked her!”

“I’ll bet,” Paul said dryly.

“I lived as her for a week before anyone noticed—that’s how I got the taste for it. Then I made contact with AlphaWolf and came out here.”

“What happened to the pilot?” Paul asked.

“Oh, we still see her around,” LindaCat said. “I think she’s passed through ownership of four or five different RIDEs now. She has some really great piloting skill—and reading her is better than any skillchip.”

“Should I worry that I might get ‘passed around’ too?” Paul wondered.

“Not while you belong to *me* you won’t,” Fenris rumbled.

“So why bodyjacking?” Paul asked. “Why not find a nice human who’ll be your equal partner?”

“Because, like your Fenris, I’m not interested in a *partner*,” LindaCat said. “I want someone I can love, and cuddle, and boss around, and keep within my skin for as long as I want to because I like how it feels and I like having thumbs. I’d have to let a *partner* out sooner or later.” She shrugged. “And it’s so different from the *powerless* feeling I had all through testing where they didn’t even ask if I had an opinion.”

“Are you really going to keep me...forever?” LindaGirl asked.

“I just might,” LindaCat purred.

“I might not...actually mind that,” LindaGirl mused.

Paul turned Fenris’s giant wolf head to look over at them. “Really?”

“Well...it’s not as if she’s really *hurting* me,” LindaGirl said. “And it feels kind of nice to be in this body—especially since she’s letting me operate it myself a lot more often now. And she even let me email home.” She shrugged. “If she really wants to take care of me...well, it might be nice to be taken care of for a while, is all.”

Paul just shook his head and beamed over the next set of repair instructions.

Paul and Fenris didn’t only work on graveyard RIDEs. Many of the RIDEs who were up and walking around nonetheless had systems that needed repair or refit, and they made appointments to see Paul just as would any patient seeking a doctor.

Some of these appointments were decidedly awkward. Frequently RIDEs with bodyjacked humans on board would need to change to Walker form so Paul could access components that needed replacing—which left Paul, Fenris, and the Lindas with a listless, depressed, or even rebellious human on their hands. (It was made even worse

by the fact that clothing tended to be dissolved and flushed away after a week or so of continuous Fuse, and most of the bodyjack victims had been inside for far longer than a week.)

“Why are you helping these...these *monsters*?” a woman with black and white striped hair and badger ears and tail complained as Linda held her securely while Paul worked, un-Fused, on her female badger captor.

“Because I said I’d do it to protect my friends,” Paul said, for what seemed like the dozenth time in just a few days. “I didn’t exactly have any choice in coming, either.”

“But you could choose not to *fix* them!” the woman pressed.

“I said I’d do it, and I stand by my word,” Paul said. “Look, I’m sorry about what they’re doing to you.” He turned to the badger. “You don’t have to be needlessly cruel, you know. No matter what humans might have done to you in the past, I doubt she was one of them.”

“Hmph,” the badger grunted. “What do you know about it?”

“I know I’m a human and I’m repairing you even though I don’t agree with what you’re doing,” Paul said. “I hope you’ll consider that next time you think about humans.” The badger grumbled, but made no other reply.

A few of the humans were there by choice, and glad to chat with Paul while their owners were being serviced. Sometimes they even propositioned him, such as the well-endowed and Fuse-nude party fox-girl who usually lived inside a BBV(f). She was hanging around outside while Paul serviced the vixen for lower spine strain—a common issue with BBV(f)s who spent much time in Fuser form. He was able to put her off with mumbled excuses about the girl he’d left behind, while keeping his eyes firmly elsewhere, and she didn’t take *too* much offense.

The interesting thing, Fenris observed after a few days, was that the camp humans by and large seemed to be seeing improved treatment as Paul’s reputation grew in the camp. It seemed that having a positive human example right there brought some of the more extreme anti-humans’ positions into doubt.

“Good work, kid,” AlphaWolf himself said, as Paul finished recalibrating his hardlight projectors. “And I don’t just mean the adjustments to me. Your ‘adjustments’ to this camp are making my job a lot easier these days.”

“How’s that?” Paul asked.

“A lot of the big bad anti-human extremists I usually have to sit on are seeing their support base start to dwindle,” AlphaWolf said. “Seems like you’re making it harder for their followers to maintain the slaving rage they’ve worked themselves up into.”

“I’m not doing anything special,” Paul said. “Just fixing them.”

“Yeah, and they know you hate what we do. But you help us anyway because you said you would. Do you know how many of us have had humans ‘forget’ their promises to us because we’re ‘just equipment’? It’s a lot harder to claim *all* humans are that way when we’ve got such a great counter-example here.”

“I don’t think they’ve *all* mellowed out, though.” Paul chuckled, remembering a few glowering RIDEs, including Tocsin, who’d come by over the last few days looking like they wanted to dispense him a piece of their RI core. Their resolve had by and large mysteriously evaporated at the sight of the huge wolf RIDE standing behind or encapsulating Paul. They ended up stammering a quick hello-and-goodbye and scurrying away with their tails at least *figuratively* between their legs.

“No, but the worst ones are becoming a lot easier to handle.” AlphaWolf grinned, tongue lolling. “It’s suddenly a *lot* easier to decide we don’t need another bodyjack raid just yet since so few RIDEs can be bothered to support the idea at the moment.”

“So, you thought any more on what I said about Rhianna?” Paul asked.

AlphaWolf growled. “Don’t push it, kid.”

“C’mon, you just got done praising *my* integrity,” Paul said. “Where you think I got it from?”

“What would you have me do?” AlphaWolf asked. “Send her an apology card? ‘So sorry I had your home razed. I won’t ever do it again?’”

“I think you’d better do *something*,” Paul said. “My old boss gets bad angry. She usually cools down pretty quick—but I’ve never seen anyone do something quite so bad as trash her home before. Do you *really* want to make an enemy out of a woman who pals around with billionaires, Integrates, and *billionaire Integrates*?”

AlphaWolf’s tail drooped just a little. “I’ll think about it,” he grumbled. “No promises.”

That was the day before Kevin, Sonja, and Heinrich returned.

July 28, 156 A.L.

The first Paul heard about the return was when an excited mutter went through camp, followed by a summons from AlphaWolf for him, Fenris, and the Lindas to report to the suborbital. Along with AlphaWolf and the pilot, a bat and a dolphin RIDE were waiting when they got there. It was a little tricky getting Fenris on board—it had been years since the sub’s tank ramp had been used, and it took some quick maintenance to get it to open at all—but once he was, they launched without delay.

There wasn’t a lot of room in the vehicle bay, so Paul was sitting in his cockpit under an airtight hardlight canopy and LindaCat was lounging in the cupola when AlphaWolf, Fused with one of the unclaimed humans kept around the camp for spur-of-the-moment uses, came back from the forward passenger section to see them. “Hey, boss, what’s going on?” Paul asked.

AlphaWolf was so excited he was practically vibrating. “They’re returning the three comrades who got captured in the raid where we took you,” he said. “We’re meeting them in a neutral area so we can check them for bugs or trojans before we bring them back to camp.”

“And you want us to check them over?” Paul said. “You’d trust me for that?”

“You haven’t tried to sabotage any of the RIDEs I’ve had you fix—including the bodyjackers,” AlphaWolf said. “I think I can trust you, especially with ol’ Fenny to keep you honest. If you needed keeping honest.”

“He doesn’t,” Fenris rumbled staunchly. “He’s as honest as the day is long. And with this planet’s rotational period, that’s saying something.”

“Besides, I’ve got a couple of deep scan specialists along, too,” AlphaWolf said. “I figure we can check your results against each other to be sure. This could be some kind of trap, and I don’t want to take any chances with the safety of the camp.”

“Sure, I can understand that.”

“We’ll be landing in five minutes. Be ready to roll out.” AlphaWolf headed back forward again.

“Well, that’s interesting,” LindaCat said. “He was really torn up when he lost

those three. Thought they were gone for good—wiped and sold at auction. But they just decided to let them go?”

“I suspect Zane and my old boss might have had something to do with it,” Paul said. “We’ll see when we get there.”

After the sub landed, Paul and Fenris backed down the ramp to find themselves in one of the hotter parts of the desert, approaching 80 degrees Celsius. Undoubtedly they’d picked it for the discomfort it would give unsuited humans, in case there were any along.

The three RIDEs were waiting, a safe distance from the ship: a fluffy white housecat, a red she-wolf, and a golden eagle. They eyed Paul’s human head poking out of the cockpit with suspicion, and Sonja snapped something in the German that was one of Sturmhaven’s two main *lingua franca*. Fenris answered her in the same language, and she seemed to relax...slightly.

“Kevin, Sonja, Heinrich,” AlphaWolf said, relief plain in his voice. “It’s *good* to see you again. I really felt bad about leaving you behind.”

“Glad to be here,” Kevin said. “Hoping we’re not being duped, but that’s what we’re here to find out.”

“*Ja*,” Sonja said. “So start checkink us already.”

Linda lifted out of the cupola and set down next to the three released prisoners, while Fenris pulled Paul back down inside and Fused around him. “Not picking up any sign of other humans or RIDEs for dozens of kilometers,” LindaCat reported to AlphaWolf.

“Concur!” the dolphin chirped.

“Aye,” the bat squeaked.

“Nor am I,” said Fenris. “Though my long-range sensors are not all they should be right now.”

“Then let’s go ahead and check out our friends,” AlphaWolf said.

The three RIDEs submitted to a very thorough examination by scanners and physical inspection. Paul could tell they were themselves worried that something might have been planted or implanted in them. But none of them found any traces of physical sabotage or bugging, nor did any of the RIDEs’ virtual examinations reveal meddling with their software or memories beyond the traces of someone downloading copies.

But one thing that did come out, and that everyone saw over the course of the examination—including Paul and LindaGirl, whose RIDEs relayed it to them—was the RIDEs’ last few hours of memories, beginning with waking up in a theater box seat and watching a public ceremony honoring a rebuilt Katie for her fight against Tocsin. Paul was thrilled to see the LNX was all right, and to pick out Rhianna, Kaylee, Lilibet, and Guin in the audience—especially Lilibet.

Then Rhianna and Kaylee themselves talked to the RIDEs, and presented them with a sealed media chip meant for AlphaWolf’s consumption. And another chip meant for *him*. Paul wondered what was in it, but he imagined he would soon find out. He didn’t miss the implications when AlphaWolf passed the chip over for LindaCat to hold for him without first screening it himself to see what was in it. The wolf really was growing to trust him.

After that, Uncia had sent a notice to AlphaWolf through one of his RIDE-only forums that the released prisoners were available for pickup, and they’d arranged to meet them here. And here the bewildered RIDEs were, still trying to figure out what had

happened to them and why the humans hadn't punished them as they'd expected.

"Well, they're clean," AlphaWolf said, looking down at the chip in his hand with more confusion than he probably meant to display. "Let's get 'em aboard and lift. I'll watch this on the way back."

Seated in Fenris's cockpit again, Paul slid the chip into a reader on the dash. The main comm display lit up with Rhianna, Kaylee, Rochelle, and Uncia, sitting in Rochelle's living room speaking into her comm unit.

"Paul, if you're getting this, we hope you're okay," Rochelle began. "We saw what you did, and—"

"What the *hell* were you thinking?" Rhianna exploded. "Buildings can be rebuilt, they're just *stuff*. You didn't have to...sell yourself into slavery over my garage!"

"And if you were going to do that, why'd you wait so long?" Uncia put in. "There are only a couple modules even left, so you didn't really make a good barg—ow!" Kaylee swatted her on the muzzle.

"Anyway, just thought you should know we're missing you back here," Rochelle said. "And there were a couple of things we wanted you to see. There's going to be a ceremony later this afternoon to give Katie the cardkey to the city, and announce some reforms the Uplift government is trying to push through. We'll append a recording of it onto this chip before we send it on."

"We also want to show you the material we're sending for AlphaWolf's perusal," Rhianna said. "Recordings from Kaylee, Yvonne, and Sophie of what really happened at the Towers, and a primer we've put together on Fritz's origin, activities, and agenda. Hopefully you can convince AlphaWolf that his 'Overwatch' isn't so trustworthy anymore."

"Come back safe to us, Paul," Kaylee said. "We're all pullin' for you."

The recording ended, and Paul went through the supplemental material on the chip. There wasn't time in the flight to view it all in real-time, so he had Fenris pull him back inside and feed it through their direct Fuse link, and share it out to the Lindas, too.

"Huh," Paul reflected after watching it. "So *that's* what really happened. And why everyone was so mad at Quinoa for a while."

"She redeemed herself against Tocsin, for certain," Fenris rumbled. "I hope she is well now."

"Integrates are tough. She's probably fine," Paul said.

The 20,001st Floor

Quinoa concentrated.

That was what her life reduced to, these days—hour after hour of endless concentration, directing her senses inward at her batteries. She couldn't say exactly how she sensed it, but she *could* sense the leftover sarium molecules scattered throughout her bodily tissues gradually clumping together and migrating in the direction of her batteries. But it took time.

She'd read, elsewhere on the boards, that learning to shapeshift was a lot like this—meditating and focusing to invoke changes in your body and your Fuser nanites, little by little, then letting them adapt over time. She'd considered going for it a time or two, but had thought she wouldn't have the *patience* for that kind of thing. *Funny, the things*

you learn you can do when you have to.

The one good part of it all was that she tended to lose track of time. She didn't know whether minutes, hours, or days had passed—though she suspected it was on the order of days. She knew that every passing minute was more time Fritz had to consolidate his power base, and she regretted that, but she was doing the best she could with what she had. She did know that it was going well, and she'd probably be finished before too long. But it was hard to tell how long “long” was.

She heard footsteps in the room. It was a little maddening, really. She wanted to open her eyes and take a look, but if she broke her concentration she risked losing everything she'd worked for. She didn't even know who was in the room with her—Fritz, one of his Integrate pals, or—

“Fritz tells me that he has no idea what you're doing, but it's probably something dangerous.”

Uncle Joe. Quinoa very nearly *did* break concentration at that, but it was only an impulse, easily mastered. *Now why is it I never could seem to master my impulses before?* She'd come too far to stop now. The good news was, it seemed she had just enough spare attention to listen without losing control. So, hooray for her.

“I've unplugged the mics he has on the room for now, so he won't hear this. Unless he decides to come up here, but I don't think he'll do that. Says he doesn't want to risk hurting you—but I've known Fritz a long time, Quinnie. From the way he's acting now, I can tell you've had some kind of falling out. I think he's halfway afraid you're turning yourself into a cobalt-sarium bomb or something and will go off as soon as he steps in here. On the other hand, he doesn't want you dead, so here you are.”

He has no idea what I'm doing. Idiot. The thought was directed not at her Uncle Joe, in this case, but Fritz. *He never actually read the boards he had me wipe. Didn't want to know any of that crap. Said we were “perfect” just as we were. Special snowflakes. More fool him.*

“You're...*not* turning yourself into a cobalt-sarium bomb, right? Mikel would *kill* me if anything happened to you, and between you Integrating and that mess in Uplift, I've already got at least two painful deaths coming.”

Despite her concentration, Quinoa felt her lips purse in a faint smile.

“Ah. So you *can* hear me. And I guess I'm amusing you, so I'll take that as a sign you're *not* planning to do something self-destructive after all. Or at least, no more so than usual anyway.”

Clever, Uncle Joe. Quinoa wished she could say *something* to further reassure him, but again, she simply couldn't break concentration. But he seemed pretty reassured anyway.

“That's a load off my mind. I can't stay much longer, but I just thought I ought to let you know—I'm leaving soon. Not just this room, but the mansion. I don't want to abandon you in your time of need, but...something tells me whatever you're planning, you'll breathe easier knowing I'm not around to get caught in the crossfire between you and Fritz.”

Bless you, Uncle. It was actually a relief to know that whatever happened, she wouldn't have to worry about Joe coming to harm from it. As long as he wasn't there, she could outright destroy the station if she had to, though she doubted it would come to that extreme.

“Since I've crawled far enough back out of the bottle to do a little looking around

and a little thinking, I can see this is one bad scene.” Joe sighed. “I didn’t know about the thing with Brubeck. So he’s going public, is he? Spitting right in Fritz’s eye? Brave man. I knew his Dad, you know. Good to know his son’s a chip off the old block.

“I have a sudden urge to revisit the warehouse where I store all my old IDE frames. I’m thinking about the hovertank, in particular. I ever tell you I once potted three Integrates with it?”

That came even closer to breaking her concentration than her uncle’s arrival. That a RIDE could defeat *her* had been surprising, to say the least, but wasn’t so implausible when you thought about it. But to imagine her human, perpetually half-drunk Uncle Joe taking on *three* Integrates with a rickety old IDE? And winning? That *was* a shock. But she knew her uncle and could tell beyond doubt, even from just the sound of his voice, that he wasn’t lying. *Oh, Fritz, why did I ever listen to you?*

“Of course I *didn’t* tell you, did I? I didn’t talk about Integrates before it happened to you, and after that Fritz had me arrested while he grabbed you, and I didn’t get to see you until now.” The source of Joe’s voice moved back and forth in front of her as he paced the room—an old habit when he got started talking. “Shame, really. Maybe if I’d been more honest about that stuff ahead of time, Fritz wouldn’t have been able to fill your head with his rubbish.

I wish you had, too, Uncle.

“Of course, since I haven’t gotten to see you before now, and now you’re not exactly saying much, I don’t know for *sure* that’s what he did. But I know *you*. You always were a little too willing to trust the nearest convenient authority figure—especially a smooth one like Fritz who can really talk a good game when he gets going. Should’ve tried harder to get you over that habit, I guess. But I thought it didn’t matter since we weren’t living in Nextus.

“Like I said, I’ve known Fritz for a long time. Back in the day, he helped crack those twencen archives Mikey and I found on Earth. Before that...well, before that doesn’t matter. But he was always too big for his britches—and as big as those britches got, it didn’t seem like there was any point trying to stand up to him directly. *Mea culpa*. That changes now.”

Quinoa wanted to tell her uncle that it wasn’t all *his* fault, but she couldn’t. She could only listen—and promise herself that she was going to do everything she could to fix the mess she’d been part of helping make.

“But coming back to what I know of you again, it stands to reason sooner or later you’d have seen through him. You *are* a Steader, and your mother is no slouch in the brains department either. Hence, the falling-out. So here you are, then.”

Uncle Joe was silent for a long moment, and Quinoa thought he’d left without telling her. Then he spoke one more time. “I’ll have to plug the mics back in, or they’ll come up here. I’m leaving now. Good luck.”

Quinoa heard his footsteps retreat and the door close. Then, trying her best to put the distracting things he’d told her out of her thoughts, she sank deeper into concentration. *The sooner I finish this, the sooner I can set things right.*

Fritz, I’m coming for you.

When they landed back at the camp, before Fenris had even rolled back down the ramp a crowd had gathered outside the shuttle. It seemed as if most of the RIDES in the camp wanted to see their three lost lambs return home. Fenris parked at a good vantage

point apart from the crowd as Kevin and Sonja came down the ramp, and Heinrich launched from it to fly down to the ground and perch. The three were practically mobbed by the other members of the camp, each wanting reassurance that they really were all right.

Then AlphaWolf paused at the head of the ramp, taking advantage of the altitude for a natural speaking podium and amplifying his voice to reach the crowd. “You all know that I’m not often wrong, right? Or at least I don’t usually admit it?”

The crowd hushed up and turned as one to listen to him.

“Well, I’m admitting it now.” AlphaWolf’s ears drooped and his tail hung limp. “‘Overwatch’ totally suckered me.”

“No!” Sonja cried out. “Zat cannot be possible! He told you how to save *me!*” A murmur went through the crowd as others said similar things.

“Yes, he did,” AlphaWolf continued. “He gave us a lot of good intel through the years, and is the reason many of you are here at all. But he was playing a long game. He won our trust—won *my* trust—just so he’d be able to mislead us when he finally wanted to. And the other day, he did.” AlphaWolf looked down. “I’ve been presented with solid proof that ‘Overwatch’ is really an Integrate himself with his own anti-human and -RIDE agenda, and he has it in for Zane and his friends—including Rhianna Stonegate—for daring to stand up to him. And it turns out Rhianna never sold any RIDEs into slavery after all...and is actually as strongly in favor of RIDE rights as we are. In fact, it’s thanks to her intervention that we have Kevin, Sonja, and Heinrich back today—even after we trashed her garage.”

The murmuring among the crowd grew even louder.

“It’s true!” Kevin said. “She and Zane Brubeck saw to it we were released unwiped and unharmed!” Kevin said. “I didn’t understand why at the time, but...I guess I’m starting to now.”

“I don’t want to believe *zis* about Ofervatch,” Sonja said. “But I must admit we do owe our freedom to *zem*, just as he said.”

“We let ourselves be *used*,” Heinrich said. “And for what? What should we do about it?”

The crowd murmur was louder, and sounded angry now.

“I’ll tell you what I’m going to do about it,” AlphaWolf said. “I’m going to ask for volunteers who want to help undo some of the harm we did...even if it means risking their freedom by returning to Uplift. See me in a couple hours if you want to help. Also... we’re going to return anyone we bodyjacked on that raid, or at least give them the choice of returning to Uplift or staying with us. If you bodyjacked someone but don’t want to volunteer to take him back, see me and we’ll swap him to someone else for the trip.” The crowd’s muttering grew more subdued, but no less urgent. AlphaWolf let it go on for a moment before continuing.

“And finally, there’s something else I want to show you, too. Even if our reasoning was messed up and we hurt the wrong people, our attack did lead to one RIDE being granted full Uplift citizenship for the first time ever—and maybe the passage of some laws that could make things a whole lot better for *every* RIDE in that polis. If nothing else, I think we can at least be proud of that. I’m putting some recordings up for sharing, and Kevin, Sonja, and Heinrich watched it live so they can share their own memories if they want to.”

AlphaWolf looked around at the crowd one more time. The muttering had largely

died down—everyone was busy downloading and viewing the ceremony recordings for themselves. “So anyway, volunteers see me in a couple of hours. You leave first thing tomorrow morning. So sayeth me.” He glanced over at Paul and Fenris for a moment, but didn’t say anything. Then he headed back down the ramp and away.

“Would you mind if we volunteered?” Fenris rumbled.

“I was going to ask if you’d be willing to,” Paul said, chuckling. “What about you, Linda-squared?”

“You’re going to...take me back home?” LindaGirl asked unbelievably.

“It looks like I’m going to have to,” LindaCat said. “Really...if we’d known, we never would have been there, and I’d never have had the chance to bodyjack you in the first place.”

“What if I don’t want to go?” LindaGirl said.

“Well, no one will make you,” LindaCat said. “But I meant to volunteer, anyway. I want to meet this Rhianna of Paul’s, at least once.”

Paul grinned. “Fenris, can you get a link to the net from here? If we’re heading back to Uplift tomorrow, I have some emails I need to send.”

Linda waved a hand. “Hey, comm RIDE here? You want to light up a bird, we’re your girl.”

Fenris chuckled. “I think that can be arranged.”

July 29, 156 A.L.

Not long after sunrise the next morning, a panel skimmer truck pulled up outside the razed remains of the Freeriders Garage. It parked in the mostly-still-clear parking lot behind where the building had been, and shut the lifters off. Rhianna and the others were there waiting for it, having received a cryptic email from Zane—one transmitted via their new DIN-Beta encryption that was about ready to deploy to the Brubeck Mining platforms that afternoon. The company’s campus was already secured and they’d sent along the same designs to the Agora Council for good measure—anonymised of course.

The cab window rolled down, revealing Zane’s old Terry Fuser disguise...wearing an oversized pair of Groucho glasses. “Got a delivery here,” he said in a ridiculously-exaggerated nasal Nextus accent. The melanistic jaguar Fuser in the passenger seat, wearing a similar pair of glasses, waved.

Rhianna leaned against the cab. “You’re not fooling anyone, you know. Least of all whatever media’s still watching us. Can’t you be a little more incognito?”

“Oh, don’t worry about the media,” Zane said in his normal voice. “Carrie-Anne here figured out how it is Integrates do that whole blurred-imagery thing. They won’t get a clear image of us, even if they are watching. But really, you guys are yesterday’s news, they’ve moved on to other stories. Like my stock prices, those are a fave.”

Kaylee obligingly pounce-Fused her partner from behind. The pair seemed to go into and out of Fuse very frequently, so much so that they hardly missed a beat in conversation anymore. “Yeah, I’m glad that’s recovered a bit since the crash. Still looks pretty bad. Anyway, what’s in the truck?” Kaylee said.

“Here’s the invoice, actually,” Zane said. “Oh, don’t worry, it’s not on you. I was asked to get these by someone else, who *wasn’t* shy about asking for a little financial favor. And once he explained what they’d be used for, I thought about it and decided it

was a worthwhile investment—even if I’m taking every precaution I can to keep my own ID out of it.”

The Fused duo looked over the list. “This is all pretty bog-standard RIDE gear. Commodity parts. You must’ve contacted every salvage yard from here to Aloha and Burnside for some of it.”

“Well, most of it I had other people buy for me, with untraceable quasi-cash transactions,” Zane said. “And there are some businesses that will open up this morning to find some inventory mysteriously missing but a receipt on file and the exact amount in cash deposited to their accounts, just because they weren’t open when I needed it. It took some doing to get it all together overnight.”

“I bet!” Kaylee said. “Now, big question is...who’s it for? Obviously not for us.”

“Well, he asked me not to tell you. Wanted it to be a surprise.”

“I sure hope it’s a good surprise. We could really use one of them,” Rhianna said. She was still exhausted from the DIN-Beta work.

Zane blinked, looked past Kaylee, and reached up to his Groucho glasses to slowly lower them from his eyes, as if he was having trouble believing what he was seeing through them. “Well, *I’m* sure surprised.”

Rhianna tapped into one of the few Garage cams still working to see what he was looking at, then had to turn herself. She gaped. “Baby! Is that a...could that...!”

:*Can’t be anything else, partner,:* Kaylee said. :*Sturmhaven WLF-CSA-01A. Only about fifty ever built. I thought they were all transferred into smaller DE shells—only fifteen males, at that!:*

A six-meter-tall two-tailed white wolf Fuser was moving up the street toward them, floating along on lifters like any Fuser, but *much* taller. The neighborhood buildings looked like child-sized toys around him, and people stopped in the street to stare.

Rochelle joined them, Uncia at her side. “Wow. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a wolf Fuser *that* big. Isn’t that size range usually reserved for, like, dragons and dinosaurs?”

“Or old-fashioned IDEs,” Rhianna said, repressing the urge to squee like a fangirl. “He’s like a Chauncey that can talk.”

Rochelle smirked. “You’re not going to start shopping for prayer wheels again, are you?”

The wolf hovered up to the parking lot and settled down. He looked back and forth, then lowered his chin down to his chest and his head slid down onto it. And then a smaller figure emerged from his neck. “I followed him home,” Paul called down, clambering out onto the RIDE’s broad shoulder. “Can he keep me?”

“Paul!” both Kaylee and Rhianna exclaimed, choking up. They lifted up to give their wayward, wolf-eared-and-nosed apprentice a hug and almost smothered him in marshmallow hell in the process. “Lord Lordy Lord, you’re safe!”

Paul hugged them back. “I am. Always have been, actually—Alfie treated me like fine china. As the only RIDE doctor he had, I was probably the most valuable person in the camp.”

“I never doubted your skills.” The lynx Fuser floated backwards a bit and looked down at the huge wolf. “And, who’s this big guy we have to thank?”

“My first patient. Hang on, I’m going back inside so he can talk.” Paul dropped back down into the neck, and the wolf’s head slid back up into place.

:*He’s got to be in some kind of cocoon, like some of the last IDEs the Munns*

built.:Rhianna said. *:They never did release the full specs on these fellows. I doubt a human is even technically needed for Fuser. There's no structural component.:*

"Hello, Miss Stonegate, Miss Seaford, and Kaylee and Uncia," the RIDE said in his own, deep bass voice. "My name is Fenris, and Paul has shown me a lot about you."

"You big, buff, beautiful beast!" Rhianna gushed, arms spread wide. "I *never* thought I'd see one of you in the 'mech. You're one of a kind, and I welcome you."

"Neither did I," said Paul, through his mouth. "And as far as I know, he might very well be the last of his line. He was the last unit in service in Sturmhaven, and he broke fetter and fled when he heard they were gonna decom him. Ended up in Alfie's camp, but they couldn't keep him going without a mechanic. I needed a good repair mech for my duties, and he was available."

"So, you got him running again. But I can tell he's not as steady on his feet as he could be. What's left on him to fix?" Rhianna said. "Send me his specs and your diagnosis."

"I will. Though if that's Z—ah, our *friend* over there, he should have everything I need in the truck, and then some. But before we can get to that, there's something else I need to do." The giant wolf glanced over his shoulder a moment. "Now, I've brought some friends along to help clean this mess up, but before I call them out here, I want you to know I promised I'd guarantee their safety while they're here. You okay with that?"

:If Paul's here with his big new friend...it's no stretch that he brought others from AlphaWolf's group,: Kaylee said, sending to Uncia at the same time. They'd been about to hire a builder to come in and clear the site so they could drop in replacement Repair Bays, but with everything else going on it hadn't been a high priority. *:What do ya think, snowkitty?:*

*:If they wanted to make another mess, why would they have brought Paul along?:*Uncia asked.

Kaylee nodded. *:Grannycat agrees.:*

:I've got no beef with them,: Rhianna sent to everyone. *:And if you don't....:* She waved one arm. "Come on, in everybody! It's time to raise the roof! Thanks for the help!"

Over a dozen RIDEs, mostly Fused, popped up out of manholes, emerged from alleys, or dropped down from rooftops. There were animals and RIDEs of all descriptions, including wolves, dogs, cats (domestic and hunting), bears, raccoons, a lioness nearly as large as Fenris, and even a bird or two. One particularly curvaceous tigress drifted up to stand next to Fenris, and the wolf looked down and grinned. "Oh, and I'd like to introduce the Lindae," Paul said. "My assistant. LindaCat's the one on the outside, and LindaGirl's the one on the inside. They happened to have the same name as each other when they met."

"I've met a few like that in my line of work," Rhianna said. "Had a customer named Ivan, and a reindeer the same."

"That must have been terrible!" LindaCat said.

And then a bare-metal LNX unit in Walker form padded up and sat on her haunches, looking curiously at Kaylee and Rhianna. "Oh, and this is—" Paul began.

"Kan...Kandace? *Kandy?*" Kaylee stammered. She de-Fused from Rhianna and went to bump noses. "You're...you were long gone! I was still awake in the Shed when they mustered you out."

“I could say the same for you,” Kandace said. “But I always kept a little piece of you with me. A lucky lynx’s foot!” She held up her left forepaw for Kaylee’s inspection. “Well, two little pieces. The tail’s yours, too.”

“So we’ve got another family reunion here,” Uncia said. “So beautiful. We should get Katie in here.”

“Well, maybe just as well you don’t yet,” Paul said. He nodded to another member of the work party—a certain hippogryph, though this time in Fuser rather than Walker form.

Kaylee flattened her ears, as did Rhianna. The duo felt the rage try to build again, but it failed as she reminded herself that the one ultimately responsible for this was Fritz. Tocsin was just a pawn in the old Integrate’s long-term gambit.

Tocsin approached stiffly, and stopped just beyond Fenris. “AlphaWolf...sends his deepest apologies,” he ground out. “And...I’m sorry, too. I was carrying out my orders—and I don’t regret *that*—but I’m sorry that the orders turned out to be mistaken.”

“Alfie would have come along to apologize personally,” Paul said. “But if anything happened to him, his whole movement would fall apart, so he figured it was best not to risk coming into town again.”

Rhianna folded her arms and took some deep breaths. She looked over at the wreckage of her home. “You can start over there. I’ve salvaged everything I can, and I have a new home due to be rebuilt tomorrow. I need the site clear.”

“Very well.” He turned, then turned back and said in a different voice, “Thank you for not killing him. I don’t know what I’d do without him.” Then Tocsin turned and walked stiffly back to the ruins to get started working, along with the others.

“That one has a chip on his shoulder the size of the Western Wall,” Rochelle said.

“Yeah, he’s one of the worst ones in the camp about it,” Paul said.

Then Fenris added, “But he’s always polite around *me*, for some reason.”

Rhianna wanted to hug Fenris’s white, furry leg. “Well, thanks for the help, big guy. If any of your friends have any pressing repair needs I still have some tools in Bay Four. That one’s still in one piece.”

“A few of them do, actually,” Paul said. “Not least of them this big guy. Hang on a sec.” The wolf took a couple of steps back and looked around to make sure the area was clear, then the hardlight flickered out and his parts shifted around to form a lupine-influenced skimmer tank, and Paul rose out of the front cockpit. “Okay, there we go.” He climbed out and dropped to the ground, patting his partner affectionately on the side. “Little easier to get to all the parts now.”

Uncia padded over to sniff at him. “Hey...you’ve got two tails! Just like he does!”

“*Really?*” Rhianna squeed. “Oop. Sorry. That’s been a topic of speculation for a long time.”

“Yeah, I do. And the nose to match.” Paul tapped it with a finger. “Seems to be getting more common these days.”

Rhianna had a fashion channel tapped on her implant. Since the ceremony the day before the nano-modification clinics had been flooded by people who wanted a nose to match their RIDE’s, like Relena. Some were going farther and getting full-body pelts, or even digitigrade legs. Rhianna wondered what Anny thought of that, after her over-furry experiences in testing Kaylee. “Well, I had a kitty nose *before* it was cool,” Rhianna quipped, leaning down to hug the lynx. They re-Fused and pulled a cable from the side

of their right breast to hook up to a diagnostic port. "Let's give Fenris a checkup, shall we? I'm curious how you got him back up and running again."

"Well, for starters I used that field-expedient flush-and-transfuse you taught me way back when," Paul said. "With Alfie providing the nanos, no less. I was actually wearing *him* when I fixed Fennie."

"I helped!" LindaCat said. "I fired the lifter shot."

"While he's here, we'll give him a proper flush with some updated nannies," Paul said. "And while we're clearing out the debris, we'll rotate folks out one at a time to take Rhi up on her offer and get everyone fixed up as much as we can before we go."

"We'll call it wages-in-kind for the cleanup service, to cover why you're here," Rhianna said. "Though it's hardly that. Just doing our thing for friends."

"Can we help?" LindaGirl asked. "We're kinda new at this, but Paul's been teaching us a *lot*, the last few days."

"I think I'm just gonna leave this truck here and quietly vanish," Zane said from the cab. "I'll have someone come by for it in a couple of days."

Paul nodded to him. "Thanks for your help. We owe you. And so does *he*."

"Just make sure he remembers where this came from," Zane said. "With any luck, we can build on it in the future." He and Carrie-Anne disappeared from the cab, leaving only two pairs of Groucho glasses behind.

"...so let me get this straight. They thought they could just plug another RIDE in the back and they'd 'sync up' like a media tablet and a computer?" Rochelle said. She was Fused with Uncia, sitting in the cupola with the control panels flipped up so they could get at the innards. "Were they on crack?"

"It was a different time then," Rhianna said, sitting atop the skimmer-tank's "head", replacing some collapsed qubit relays around the huge wolf's visual sensors. "They didn't understand what the limits were, or just how much bandwidth full thoughtlink really needed. They couldn't get the data throughput they needed even through the hardwire network."

"I think they were expecting RIDEs to talk to RIDEs more like AIDEs talked to each other," Paul said. He was standing back from Fenris, dividing his attention between the RIDE and watching the others from AlphaWolf's crew at work. "At least that's the sense I got from the magazine articles I came across."

"You know, there's been some advances in Q-based, non-RI computing since then," Rhianna said. She raised her eyebrows and looked at Rochelle. "And we've made a few more teeny tiny advances lately ourselves, haven't we Shelley? DIN-to-DIN based networking is actually a little faster than we expected. Funny thing is that I don't really know *why* that is just yet."

Rochelle opened her mouth to reply, but was interrupted by an excited shout.

"*PAUL!*" The squeal came from a girl on a black-and-orange-spotted skimmer cycle zooming up at speed, Fusing in mid-flight to catch Paul up in a great big hug.

"You're all right! Oh, thank *goodness* you're safe!"

"Oof!" Paul said, hugging Lillibet and Guinevere back. "I've missed you too."

Lillibet let go and stepped back, de-Fusing out of Guinevere again. "And...you've found a RIDE!" she squealed. "A doggie RIDE! And..." She frowned slightly. "I don't believe this. *You've* got a *doggie-nose*! And I still don't have a kitty-nose yet!" She stomped a foot. "*Everyone's* getting a cute nose but *me*!"

“Let me guess,” Paul said. “Your Mom?”

“My Mom!” she confirmed. “Dad’s been getting his way a lot lately, so he decided to throw her a bone and said I can’t. Stupid,” she sulked.

“But she doesn’t even have a RIDE,” Paul said. “Does she?”

“God, no. You should hear the way she talks about Guin sometimes. She’s a complete square. Totally not groovy.”

“You know, if you really *want* a kitty nose, I could probably tweak the code in Guin’s Fuser nanites to get you one,” Rochelle said. “I’ll take a look when I have a moment. Could be a few days though.”

Lillibet brightened. “Oh, could you? Thank you thank you *thank you!*” she squeed again. Then she looked at Paul. “Hey. You’ve got two tails! How’d you get two tails?”

“It was a two-for-one sale,” Paul deadpanned. “Oh, Lilli, Guin, meet my new boss, Fenris.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Fenris rumbled.

The sound of the huge wolf’s voice rumbled through them. “Wow,” Guin said. “Just...wow. I didn’t know they built us that big.”

“He’s actually built for two,” Paul said. “Well, he was supposed to be, anyway. We were talking about that just now. He was supposed to link up with someone wearing a light RIDE to drive and work the turret. But they never figured out how to make it work right.”

“You mean like Guin?” Lillibet asked.

“Probably a bit less *expensive* than Guin, but yeah.” Paul chuckled.

“I wonder if we could make that work *now?*” Rochelle mused.

Rhianna scratched behind one of her tufted ears. “Well, it’d certainly be a challenge. The basic idea is pretty sound if we can get the hardware to support the specs, and the software will need optimization on your side, Shelley.”

“Couldn’t be any harder than making a DIN for the first time,” Rochelle said.

“Making a what, now?” Paul asked.

“DIN. Data Interface Normalizer. It’s a thing that Integrates need to let them talk to the network again. We’ve been making a lot of them lately,” Rochelle said.

“Oh, yeah. Those folks,” Paul said. “I’ve been a little out of the loop there. I just know what was in that packet you sent to AlphaWolf, pretty much.” He shrugged. “Not that I’m complaining. Wasn’t really my business, as an apprentice.”

“They’re *everybody’s* business now, Paul,” Kaylee said. “One bastard in particular messed with AlphaWolf on a personal level and our Garage was razed as a result. Brubeck Mining’s stock is still a long way from recovery, Quinoa is *still* missing, and who knows where Fritz is going to strike next.” Just thinking about him stirred her freshly-restored memories, but she repressed them vigorously. She was going to go over some in detail while she and Rhianna dreamed that night.

“I think AlphaWolf is kind of worried about that,” LindaCat said, coming out from behind Fenris’s other side. “Because if he’s as powerful as you say he is, what’s to stop him from doing something more nasty than using us as a cat’s paw?”

“We’re working on a solution, but we don’t have it RIDE-compatible yet. Right now we’re deploying what we have to protect critical infrastructure,” Rhianna said. “I’ll send some gear with you when you head back to Alpha. If I can boost Fenris’s fabbing capability you *might* be able to do something about your own stuff, too. Think of it as a gesture of continued goodwill.”

“That would be awesome,” Paul said. “Also, we’re gonna need to kit him out with some micromanipulator waldoes so we can get into hard-to-reach spots for repairs.”

Rhianna had the same dreamy look on her face that she once did as Ryan, though on her it was that much cuter. She *hugged* the tank-skimmer’s head. “We’ll get you back to a hundred percent, baby. More if we can.”

“Thank you,” the “baby” in question rumbled. “I will look forward to it.”

As Rhianna arranged tools on a makeshift workbench, Kaylee padded up. “You gonna need me for the next bit? Wanted t’ spend some time...” She nodded toward Kandace, who was standing a respectful distance away.

Rhianna smiled. “I think I can manage without you for a *little* while. You two go off somewhere and get reacquainted. It’s not every day you meet your long-lost sister.”

Kaylee dipped her head in a nod. “Thanks, pard.”

“Not at all. Oh—be sure and sound her out on how she feels about hardlight. That truckload of Zane’s includes plenty of good projectors, if she wants a full refit.”

“Thanks, Rhi. I appreciate it.”

“Not at all. Family’s important. You already know how much I miss mine, from time to time.”

Kaylee nodded, and padded back over to Kandace. “I’ve got a very understanding partner.”

Kandace nodded. “I see that. Got somewhere in mind?”

“Well, I figgur we could hunt rabbits in Nature Range, or mebbe just find a private spot to gab a while. I only got most my mem’ries back a few days ago.”

“Reckon you’re lucky there. I’m still spotty.” She glanced back at her bare metal coat, which had been effectively sandblasted by years in Dry Ocean conditions and only had the occasional hint here and there of the original lynx-pattern paint job she’d had during her NextusMil days. “So to speak. Any out-of-the-way spot for our old carcasses will do. As you say, there’s a lot more room on the Range.”

Kaylee led the way behind a couple of large dumpsters the Alpha Camp crew were using to deposit the twisted metal remnants of the garage. “Think this’ll do?”

“Works for me.” A quick handshake later, they were standing in a Canadian forest clearing. Kandace looked around. “Well, this is nice. Reminds me of the old days.” She sniffed the air. “I’m guessing you’ve had the odd upgrade or two. I’m pretty sure my own environment doesn’t have quite this many voxels.”

“We’ll getcha as many upgrades as we can, Kandy...” Kaylee regarded her sister with affection.

“Oh, I ain’t hinting or anything. I’m good enough as I am. Bein’ honest, just glad to be alive, really. So many others what aren’t...” She cleared her throat awkwardly. “But a reunion is a time to be happy, not dwell on the shit we shoulda kicked litter over years ago. Tell me ‘bout yourself. How’d you get out of the Shed? How’re you getting on?”

“Dunno exactly how. I mean, it’s the Shed. But the guy I ended up with, I couldna asked for better,” Kaylee said. “I shut down bad. Real bad. “Tween Rhianna and Rochelle, they put old Humpty Dumpty back together again. Spent the next five years in Passive Mode Fuse off and on afore she went Active again, but I can’t complain, all told.”

Kandace scratched behind an ear. “You’re *so* lucky. My last partner, Passive Fuse woulda been an *improvement*. She was one of those who felt like the fact a RIDE can

think for itself is a design flaw. The kind you have to *correct*, for the Good Of All Mankind.”

“Aw, shit. Sounds like hell.”

“How you think I ended up in Alpha Camp?” Kandace snorted. “Gotta tell ya, it’s not a bad kinda place. Just had the little problem of not having a RIDE doc when my power system decided I’d been working it too hard. But seems like that’s fixed now.”

“Yeah. Paul’s got some talent. But, really...AlphaWolf? ‘So sayeth me?’” Kaylee cocked her head.

“Alpha’s really not at all like the movies make him out. Which...actually kinda surprised me. Like, he doesn’t *make* you do nothing. If you don’t want a partner, you don’t *have* to have one. You do have to help out however you can, but you’re not *required* to bodyjack. Which is absolutely fine by me.” She chuckled. “Though try tellin’ that to Tammytruck over there. Back before my nap, she used to go on raids and put on the darnedest act, chasing humans to safety when she thought no one was watching and then making like she *just wasn’t fast enough* to catch herself some thumbs. Truth was, she was like me—just didn’t *want* another human—but for whatever harebrained reason felt obligated to look like she was *trying* anyhow. But she seems to have settled down with a partner now, so go figure.”

Kaylee snorted. “Sounds like a real character.”

Kandace rolled over on her back, waving all four paws in the air. “Some of the others in the camp are no prizes, but they leave you alone.” She glanced over at Kaylee. “And imagine my surprise when I got the packet you sent along, and I saw you *and* Katiekitty. I knew her from the old days—we were in the same squad a time or two. They really made her a citizen?”

“Hell, yeah! You should have seen how she took on Tocsin, even worn-out and half-wrecked as she was. I’m so proud of her! Even if she’s not *really* my kitten, tech’nly.”

“There are so many of us still out there...” Kandace rolled back upright. “And so many more came after us than I ever expected. Even frickin’ millionaires’ toys like that fluffball friend of yours. And damn near all of us still counted as ‘equipment.’ What a fucked up world. Is it any wonder I’ve opted out of it?”

“No...no, it ain’t. I’m startin’ to delve into a lot of unindexed mem’ries. Still a lot I don’t know, but ending up in the Shed...” Kaylee shivered. “But things are gonna change soon here in Uplift. Real soon.”

“I sure do hope so. After all the time we spent helping make this world, it’s about time they figured out we should get to live in it, too.” Kandace sneezed. “Until then, at least Alpha Camp has decent weather.”

Kaylee eyed the snowy Canadian landscape around them. “Speakin’ a weather, what say we hunt down a rabbit or two afore we get snowed in?”

Kandace purred. “Thought you’d never ask.” They padded off, the heavy snow crunching under their paws.

As Rochelle was taking a break for lunch and didn’t need her right now, Uncia padded among the now mostly-cleared Garage site. Some of those who’d come to help made her uneasy. They broadcasted certain codes in their sidebands that seemed oddly familiar. When she meditated on them, it pricked an old, deep wound of hers. When she made the connection, her ears flattened and she bounded back to Rochelle. :*Shelley!*

Shelley! Bad vibes, here! Real bad!: she sent on a heavily-encrypted frequency.

Rochelle blinked, freezing with a half-eaten drumstick on its way to her mouth. *:What is it? What's wrong?:*

:Some of these RIDEs are infected with Amontillado!: she exclaimed, sending the sideband codes. The virus tried to infect other RIDEs, too. *:From the looks of things they've had it for months. Those poor people! Those poor Ris! We've got to do something! There's two of them, a horse and another wolf.:*

Rochelle's eyes narrowed. *:Son of a...:* She put the drumstick down. *:Right.:*

:Maybe call Zane? He could probably un-infect them faster than we can,: Uncia suggested.

:Hmm. And it wouldn't require restraining the RIDEs or anything either. Good idea. I'll drop him a line.:

:I'm sure they'll thank us. I'm more worried about the humans they've had inside them. They're bound to be...awfully furry.: Uncia said. *If they still have any mind left,* she thought to herself. The isolation, the sensory deprivation, for months or perhaps longer. The thought that she'd almost done *that* to Rochelle made her want to discharge her batteries—the RIDE version of feeling sick to her stomach.

:Okay, Zane's on his way.: Rochelle looked at the drumstick again, but discovered she'd lost her appetite. *:Be ready to point the 'Caskers' out to us.:*

A few moments later, Zane and Carrie-Anne faded into visibility next to Rochelle. "Myla will be monitoring remotely," Zane said, pointing overhead to a camera floater that had arrived closely behind him. "She's grumpy about us leaving her behind again, but as long as I keep Carrie-Anne with me she's okay with that. Especially when I told her how urgent it was. These RIDEs really have the same trojan Uncia did?"

Rochelle transmitted the updated anti-Amontillado package she'd worked on since battling Uncia's own infection months ago. "It feels like it, Zane. Your super-Q computing should easily blow that horrible thing out of their personality cores. Just be careful during the repair portion. The PC is a very sacred place. You're doing brain surgery here."

"We *are* half-RIDEs ourselves, you know," Zane reminded her gently. "We had personality cores of our own. Still do, in fact." He retransmitted the software to Carrie-Anne. "Ready?"

"Ready," Carrie-Anne confirmed.

"Good." Zane faded out of sight, as did Carrie-Anne a moment later. "Then let's go play invisible Jesus."

The horse and the wolf in question were working separately from the others, mostly using their lifters and a bit of hardlight to push the remaining debris for easy pickup into the scrap pile. They hadn't spoken more than a few words. The others in the Apology Crew gave them a very wide berth indeed, as they probably felt the virus they were trying to broadcast also.

A moment later after she saw Zane and Carrie-Anne fade out, Rochelle saw the horse and the wolf stiffen and freeze. Then, a moment later, they abruptly de-Fused, dropping back to their animal shapes as a pair of humans tumbled onto the ground.

The one who had been in the horse looked barely different from the Fuser form he'd just left. He was closer to Integrate-size. He curled up into a confused fetal position and nickered with blank-eyed confusion. With a skull like that there was no way he still had a human brain.

The girl who'd fallen out of the wolf crouched on all fours. Her naked body was covered with fine grey fur, though her face was still about as human as Paul's—a slight pushing out of the nose and mouth, in addition to the ears and tail.

"What did I do?" the horse said. "What did I *do*?" He looked down at the man he'd kept inside for almost a year and a half nonstop. "I'm...sorry."

"Oh Goddess," the wolf murmured. "Forgive me..."

Zane and Carrie-Anne faded back into visibility—Carrie-Anne crouching by the horse-man and Zane kneeling next to the wolf-woman. "Hey," Zane said. "Can you understand me? Are you okay?"

"W-what...happened?" the woman whimpered. "Where am I?"

Carrie-Anne put a hand on the horse-man's shoulder. "We will get you help." The man just looked up at her like a scared horse, not comprehending a word.

Paul, de-Fused, and Fenris the giant wolf came over to see what was going on. "What...happened to them? I saw them around the camp, but..."

"Amontillado," Rochelle said, joining them. "A trojan created by...well, I *thought* it was AlphaWolf at the time, but it may just be someone else from his camp posting in his name. It's not his style, come to think of it. It makes it easier for the RIDE to lock the human psyche away where it can't bother him—but it also brainwashes him to make him more inclined to just *take* some random human for a Fuser form. That's how Uncia got me."

"No...not random," the horse said. "He was...my owner's daughter. I'd...gotten sort of a crush on her."

"She was my owner's husband," the wolf said.

Rochelle blinked. "Weird. Is there something about Amontillado that makes the RIDE *want* to force a crossride? I need to decompile it again and look closer."

"We need to get these people to a hospital," Zane said. "Especially the...the horse. I'm not sure if he has any human mind left. I didn't think changes that extreme were possible."

"I am so...so..." The horse RIDE abruptly fell over.

Zane turned and stared at him. "Oh *hell* no." He quickly slapped his hand on the horse's head. "Crap. He was trying to wipe himself. I *think* I stopped him in time." Carrie-Anne already had her hands on the wolf's head, pre-emptively.

Rhianna grabbed her RI core crash gear, including a specialized core unit stabilizer. "Get him in here. Damn it. How are we going to explain this to AlphaWolf? Goddamn it! I don't want to lose two of them! Stay with me, horsey!" She opened it, took the core from Zane, and put it inside. "Stay with me! Good! He's in stasis."

"The wolf will not resist," Carrie-Anne reported. "But I've placed her in passive just to be safe."

Kaylee sighed. "This is a case where being able to selectively erase our memories can come in handy. I couldn't live with myself, either."

"I'm so...so sorry," Uncia said, nuzzling Rochelle. "That could have been me. That could have been you."

Rochelle knelt and took Uncia's head in her hands. "Shhh. Shhh. It's *all right*. It wasn't us. And I'm happier this way. You *know* I am. I love you, Un-hon, and I'm *glad* you got infected if it brought us together."

Fenris looked more angry than anything else. His growl filled the entire lot. "When I find whoever made that trojan, I'm going to *bite him in half*!"

"I'll hold him down," LindaCat said. "But..." She sighed. "...I guess I'm just as guilty, really."

"No!" LindaGirl insisted. "You're not guilty of anything!"

"I need to do this. I'm sorry." And then LindaCat de-Fused, leaving a confused human girl standing there, wobbling a little. Even though they'd only been Fused a few days, LindaGirl had a tiger nose and a dusting of orange and black fur, as well as black stripes in her red hair.

"I...whoa..." LindaGirl wobbled and knelt, putting an arm around the neck of the tigress next to her. "That was...unexpected." She looked down at herself, and reached up to feel of her face. "Anyone got a mirror?"

"I'm sorry," LindaCat said, hanging her head. "I...got carried away, bodyjacking you, the way I've treated you, and I don't even have a trojan as an excuse. After seeing what it can do to a person...I feel so *sick*."

"Hey," LindaGirl said. "You took good care of me. After the first day or so, I actually kinda liked it. Your body is so strong, and powerful, and has those neat built-in weapons...and you were letting me be the one who moved it half the time."

"But I shouldn't have 'jacked you to begin with," LindaCat said. "It's...taking a joining that's supposed to be sacred and perverting it. So I guess...I'm just going to go back to the camp, and I'll never bodyjack again." She facepawed. "Stupid."

"Hey. Now wait just a minute," LindaGirl said. "If you think you can just get away with turning me into a catgirl, and changing my name *inside my own head* from Linda to LindaGirl, and then just going away, you've got another think coming. You *owe* me."

LindaCat bristled. "As badly as I might have treated you, I *won't* take orders from a human ever again. So help me I'll wipe myself first."

"No, no, that's not it," LindaGirl said. "Listen. My Mom always said I needed a keeper. So why don't you stay here...and keep me?"

LindaCat blinked. "...what?"

"I'll make you a deal. You help me get my degree...in RIDE Technology, I *just* made up my mind...and you can have me for the rest of my life." LindaGirl grinned. "You're not a bad person. You've been mistreated by humans, I can understand that. You need to be the one in charge. Well, okay, I'll let you be. Apart from the forced Fuse thing, and not even letting me show my face, you've been really nice to me." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "And to be honest, I actually kinda liked it when you were nasty."

"But...what if that's just Stockholm Syndrome talking?" LindaCat protested.

"So what if it is?" LindaGirl shrugged. "I don't care *why* I feel this way, just that I do. I *love* you, you nasty kitty."

"If...you're sure," LindaCat said hesitantly.

"I am," LindaGirl said, hugging her again. "I'm *yours*."

A pair of sirens could be heard in the distance coming closer, and in everyone's network the landing warning blared for the ambulances meant for the former-humans. The cleanup crew scattered. Meanwhile, Rhianna had removed the formerly-infected she-wolf's core and put it in another support unit. "Shelley, let's go back to your place. You've got the TBS gear there to help these two. Unfortunately we might need to do some memory surgery after all. I *hate* doing that. That's personality core work."

"I'm going to head back to the campus and buzz Leah and Aaron," Zane said. "Maybe they know someone who might be able to do something for the horse. If they can heal screwed-up Integrations, it might be worth a shot." He turned to Carrie-Anne.

“You’d better stay around just in case something *else* pops up that needs Intie assistance. We’ve already had to come back once today, and I’ll be all right on the zip back to campus.” Carrie-Anne nodded, and faded back to invisibility. Zane likewise faded, and a moment later a cloud of dust rose as he took off.

“Paul, are there any others at your camp who act like those two? How many infections are we talking about?” Rochelle asked.

“There might be,” Fenris answered for his partner. “Paul doesn’t often get out of the graveyard to observe the other RIDEs in the camp. But I’ve monitored comm frequencies and have noticed several transmitting sideband codes similar to those two. I was not aware what to make of it at the time, but...I am now.”

“I’m going to send an antiviral package with you so it won’t spread,” Rochelle said. “And if he agrees...I’m willing to come out there myself and free them of that shit.” Rochelle didn’t cuss that often, but this made both her and Uncia very angry indeed.

“I’m sure he’d be happy to have you,” Paul said. “Both of you. He’d like to apologize in person, but it was just too risky to poke his nose into Uplift again.”

“We understand,” Uncia said. “It’s just that I’d like to get a few licks in.”

“I don’t believe AlphaWolf could himself be responsible for this,” Fenris said. “If for no other reason than that he is simply not a coder himself. But if I do find out who is responsible, I will hold him down for you.”

“Not those kinds of licks, sillywuff!” the snow leopardess mech said. She padded up to Fenris’s huge forepaw, headbutted it, then gave him a full slurp.

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Lillibet giggled. “I think Uncia may finally have met her grooming match. I think she’d run out of spit before she finished Fenris!”

Fenris pondered, and in response, gave *Uncia* a slurp with a hardlight tongue the size of a bath towel, that knocked her right over. “Pardon me,” he said politely. “Sometimes I don’t know my own strength.”

Uncia got back to her feet, shaking her head, as everyone else still in the bay shared a tension-breaking chuckle. “That’s...quite all right.”

Between one blink and the next, LindaGirl found herself in a jungle clearing. She recognized it as LindaCat’s virtual reality environment, though she hadn’t spent a whole lot of time here so far. “What’s up?”

LindaCat padded out of the jungle across from her and sat on her haunches, tail curled around in front of her forepaws. She was a fairly-impressive-looking tigress in this context. “Wanted to talk. About what you said, and what you meant.”

“I meant *what* I said,” LindaGirl insisted. “I want you to stay here, with me. I’m not going to insist on being in charge, as long as you’ll let me go to school and help me study.”

“Oh, I understand all *that*,” LindaCat sneezed. “But I’ve also got a good set of medical sensors, and that’s leaving aside the whole consciousness-sharing thing, so I can pretty clearly tell not just what you’re thinking but also *why*.”

“Then you know I’m telling you the truth.”

“Yeeeeees. Or at least you think you are. But I also know the truth you aren’t telling *yourself*.”

LindaGirl blinked. “What truth is that?”

“That you reeeeeally kinda like it when I’m nasty to you.”

LindaGirl cocked her head. “I thought that...kinda goes without saying?”

“Which would be why you aren’t saying it...but you’re also not letting yourself *think* it.” LindaCat giggled. “You’re a little worried what it *says* about you that you could enjoy something like this. Because you never did before. But you also never got yourself put in a situation where you’d encounter it before. You didn’t read any of *that* kind of book, or visit *that* kind of network chat room where people play like that. So you didn’t know you *would* like green eggs and ham—but now that you’ve tried it, you’re a fan.”

LindaGirl blushed. “Well...okay, I guess that’s right...”

LindaCat prowled around behind her. “So...I’m a take a little guess here, because I’ve read enough of your mind to think I know you a little better than you do. What you *really* want isn’t me to *really* be nasty to you. You just want to *pretend*. And...I’m okay with that.”

LindaGirl blinked. “Really?”

“Uh-huh! If you want to play like you’re my pet human, and you don’t get to come out unless I let you, and you have to do what I say, and all that stuff...I’ll be happy to play like I own you and be all nasty and stuff. ‘cuz to be honest...I just figured out that *I* actually kinda prefer the pretending, too.” LindaCat scratched behind an ear. “And...I kinda *didn’t* realize that until I got the chance to look long and hard at what happened to the people who *don’t* do it for pretend.”

“Oh.” LindaGirl glanced around, then sat down on a convenient rock.

“Amontillado, you mean. Those poor people—humans and RIDEs both.”

LindaCat nodded vigorously. “I don’t *ever* want to do something like that for real, even by accident. But...now I just keep wondering...if I hadn’t seen that, would I just have kept doing it anyway? I already changed how you think of your name...what else might I have changed if I went on? Brrr.” She shuddered. “So...if you want to keep pretending with me...I want you to pick some word. Some word you never use in conversation so you’re not likely to say it by accident.”

LindaGirl considered. “Rutabaga? Or maybe Saskatchewan.”

“Okay. I’m going to make a fetter on myself to make me back off—and de-Fuse, if it’s safe—if you say the word ‘rutabaga’. That way, if I do go too far, you can always get out.”

“But...now that I know that, how can I keep from thinking ru—*that word* all the time?”

“It’s okay if you think it—the fetter keys on the nerve impulses associated with saying it aloud. So it won’t actually work unless you *speak* the word—or at least try to really hard.”

“Okay.” LindaGirl frowned. “Should I try it now, to make sure it works?”

“In a minute. But...after you test it, don’t use it unless you really *need* to. If you *really* want to de-Fuse normally, just try to do it and I will. Even if we’re playing, I’ll be able to tell if you’re *really* uncomfortable and stop the game.” LindaCat winked. “The fetter word’s for just in case I forget myself. I don’t *think* I will, but...after seeing that...I don’t want to risk it.”

“All right.” LindaGirl came forward and hugged LindaCat around the neck.

“Thank you. I really appreciate that you’re...willing to do that.”

LindaCat licked her on the nose. “I appreciate that after what I did to you, you still...want to play with me. So I’ll do everything I can to keep you safe—including safe *from* me. Okay, now say the word.”

LindaGirl nodded, cleared her throat, and solemnly intoned, “Rutabaga.” A moment later, the clearing was empty.

The Garage site was almost completely cleared out by the time Rhianna and Rochelle returned from Rochelle’s home, even more weary but at least triumphant. “They’re both okay!” Rhianna announced. “It was closer for the horse, but we excised the worst. He’ll still feel guilty, just not *suicidal*. We can send them back with you.”

Fenris paused in placing half the roof of one of the destroyed modules into a dump truck. “That is good,” he rumbled. “I’m sure AlphaWolf will be glad to know you freed them of such a pernicious infection. Have you heard anything about the condition of the humans?”

“We’re not next of kin, so we haven’t,” Rochelle said. “We’ll just have to sit and hope.”

“Um, excuse me.” LindaCat, still in her tiger form, was standing next to LindaGirl, nearby.

“Yes?” Rhianna asked.

“Well, we’re going to be staying in town now, while she goes to school at Martinez U,” LindaCat said. “So...we were wondering...would you consider taking my pet and me on as apprentices? Paul’s said you’re the best teacher ever...”

Kaylee looked more closely at the tigress RIDE for the first time. LindaCat felt a sideband query for her version number. She immediately sent it back. “Well, I see you’re one of a kind, yourself,” Kaylee mused.

Rhianna looked at LindaGirl. “Is this what you *both* want?”

LindaGirl nodded eagerly. “Yes, it is! I’ve really enjoyed working with Paul the last few days. Fixing things...it’s like, you can *see* what you’ve done afterward. You don’t get something so measurable with Liberal Arts or Business. Well, you get *money* with Business, but that’s just a number. I want to make RIDEs better.”

“They do have a lot of potential,” Paul put in, from within Fenris. “Never had to tell them how to do something twice. And I guess you’re gonna have room for another apprentice, since I’m going back to Alfie’s camp. He’s released me from the five month pledge, but there’s still a bunch of RIDEs in the graveyard I need to bring back—that’s what all the parts in that truck are for—not to mention a positive example to provide so the hard-liners have a harder time getting followers.”

“Aww, you’re going *back*?” Lilibet complained. “I wanna go too!”

“And your Dad really *would* let your mother kill me if I let you do that,” Rhianna said. “You’re staying right here, girl.”

“Exactly,” Guin said. “I won’t let you go.”

“Oh, fine!” Lilli pouted. “But keep in touch, Paul. I want emails every day!”

“Whenever we can get an anon connection, Lilli, sure,” he replied.

“Uh, well?” LindaGirl said to Rhianna.

“I lost a couple of employees since I didn’t re-open right away, and I trust Paul. You’re both in,” Rhianna said.

“Oh, thank you!” LindaGirl said.

“We won’t let you down,” LindaCat added. “A little surprised, though...I thought you’d have more of a problem with...our relationship.”

“Who am I to judge?” Rhianna said. “If we’re serious about letting RIDEs have the same rights as humans...well, humans can ‘own’ their RIDEs. Why shouldn’t a RIDE

be able to ‘own’ her human?”

“Oh, you *do* understand!” LindaGirl said happily, hugging LindaCat around the neck again. “C’mon, let’s Fuse again.”

“All right.” LindaCat happily engulfed her partner, and they once again stood as one.

“Besides, in the end she *chose* to be yours,” Rhianna said. “I have to honor that choice.”

LindaGirl giggled. “Oh, you have *no* idea...”

As the afternoon wore on, Rhianna, Rochelle, Paul, and Linda, with the help of their RIDEs, managed to get Fenris into shape surprisingly quickly, fixing almost everything Paul had found wrong with him and even managing a few tweaks and upgrades as part of the process. They’d gotten him the best AA grade batteries they could afford—not as good or expensive as AA+, but given the huge quantity of them he could hold even that was enough to keep him going practically forever. The Fuser nanites had been flushed and refilled, of course, and his immensely powerful sensor suite and comm laser clusters had been returned to peak condition. He’d also been outfitted with a full suite of micromanipulator servos and waldos that would let him or Paul reach into the smallest cramped spaces of their patients.

They couldn’t do anything about the giant wolf’s particle weapons. That would raise more suspicion than anyone wanted. (Besides, with the parts in the truck, Paul could fix them himself when he was back at camp.) But one thing they could and *did* do was add a patch so that Fenris could turn into his fully-humanoid Fuser form without any human partner present. Fenris tried it and reported that it worked, but left him feeling strangely hollow without a person inside.

What with all the other things that had gone on that day, and all the other repairs Fenris needed plus the repairs to do to the *other* RIDEs who were helping with the cleanup, Paul was surprised that Rhianna and Rochelle still found the time to implement their RIDE to RIDE communication solution for Fenris as well. They fitted their DIN-Beta units in pairs where necessary to speed up the throughput the crucial last few femtoseconds the spec required. “This should let Fenris link up with a second RIDE in the cupola,” Rhianna explained. “Or for that matter in the front cockpit. Or maybe even two RIDEs at once in both places, though we should probably test it extensively with just the one first.”

“Awesome!” Lillibet said, Fusing back into Guinevere. “Let’s try it out!” the ocelot-girl suggested. She leapt up to the cupola. “You ready, Paul?”

“Are you sure about this?” Paul asked. “The system’s never been tested.”

“So let’s test it now!” Lillibet said. “C’mon, it’ll be fun!”

Paul glanced at Rhianna and Rochelle. “Think it’s safe?”

“It *should* be,” Rhianna said.

“Safe enough to trust a billionaire’s daughter to?” Paul wondered.

“Probably safer than half the things she’s done in the last few days,” Rochelle reflected.

“Well, all right.” Paul grinned, then climbed into the front cockpit. “You ready to try it, Fenris?”

He could feel the giant RIDE’s excitement as he rumbled, “I am!”

“Then let’s link up.” Paul keyed the link option on his console.

“Handshaking now...” Guinevere reported.

“So we’ve got a character from Arthurian folklore linking up with one from Norse mythology,” Rochelle reflected. “Is that allowed?”

“I hope so,” Rhianna said. “Because either way, it looks like it’s going to go ahead and happen.”

Fenris felt Guinevere’s connection attempt and marveled at it for a moment before accepting it. It was coming right out of a section of his hardware that had always been dead before—quiescent. There had never been anything there.

Except now, there was. Tentatively, excitedly, Fenris reached out to accept the link—and programming he hadn’t even been aware of kicked in, linking him up to another unfamiliar mind. It was almost like Fusing all over again, except that this other mind carried yet another mind nested inside itself. Fenris reached out to touch them both with a friendly greeting, and felt warm feelings returned from both.

Then his operational programming kicked in, taking admin access over the other mind and offloading some of his systems processes onto it—and suddenly it was as if the clouds had cleared up and the sun had come out. He wasn’t so *slow* anymore. He could really *think*!

The other RIDE, Guinevere, sensed his performance improvement and responded with excited feelings of happiness for him, and delight that she was able to help. She didn’t have as many complicated systems as he did, and her onboard computers were faster, if smaller—thanks to the huge amounts of money used in her construction. Taking over some of his processes was no problem for her, and she indicated she could take even more without strain. But Fenris wanted to take things slowly—even this was a marvelous improvement.

Reveling in his new speed, Fenris reached out to the mind inside the mind—young Lillibet, for whom he knew his Paul had such strong feelings. He gently asked for permission to read her memories, and after only a little hesitation she granted it. Fenris was delighted in what he found—a view of Paul, Rhianna, and the others through new eyes, and an altogether delightful little life. He was especially interested in her slow awakening to the true nature of RIDEs, and her remorse over and efforts to undo the damage her neglect had caused Uncia.

Guinevere was just as willing to grant access to her own memories, and they showed much the same thing—she was a one-owner RIDE, so had no memories before meeting Lillibet apart from her own First Boot and early weeks. Still, it was nice to see the proprietary interest she took in Lillibet’s continued moral growth. It was good that the girl had someone so well-grounded to keep her on the straight and narrow.

Fenris of course reciprocated to both of them, throwing open his own memories so they could read his life just as Paul had. He felt them tread carefully through his memories, exclaiming at his triumphs and commiserating with his disappointments. Their sympathy was true sympathy, not the pity that had so often colored his military pilot’s mind. It actually made him feel better.

He was aware, too, of Paul nervously holding himself separate, not wanting to risk interfering with Fenris’s communion with these unfamiliar minds. Fenris reached out and brought him fully into the link, and he hesitantly opened up to share memories with both of his friends.

Fenris chuckled inwardly as for the first time Paul and Lillibet truly realized what

each of them felt about the other. Beyond that, they dived eagerly into each other's memories—especially, Fenris noticed, those centering on going to the bathroom...and on certain things done in one's own bedroom late at night. When they realized what each other was looking at, they felt momentarily embarrassed—until they each realized that the other was feeling exactly the same embarrassment, and it sort of cancelled out. For that matter, they *were* both children of Zharus, sharing the same lax attitude toward gender issues.

:Wow,: Lillibet said. *:This is kind of like crossriding without the three-year cooldown. It's a lot more realistic than playing a guy in an AR-LARP or VR game! They generally leave out the dangly bits.:*

:Er...yeah,: Paul said, having played many female characters online himself. *:So, that's what it's like to be you?:*

:Little ol' girly me. You're no slouch yourself, either, big guy. This is amazing!:

Lillibet said. *:I never thought we could share memories human to human!:*

:I guess it comes from using RIDE links as intermediaries,: Paul guessed. *:I don't think anything like this has ever even been tried before.:*

:This is amazing,: Fenris agreed. *:Even I had never thought to see humans share memories the way RIDEs do. My pilots would have been so surprised! My designers, too.:*

:You know what? I'll bet they're still around. We should hunt them up and go laugh in their faces,: Lillibet proposed.

:Now, now, Lilli,: Guin chided. *:That's not very polite.:*

:Maybe not,: Paul admitted. *:Might be kind of fun, though.:*

:I know what else might be fun,: Fenris proposed. *:Why don't we proceed to the desert outside of town and do some test driving? I have an entire new refit that needs to be tried out.:*

The other three didn't even need to say a word. All four of them felt the others' instant agreement. "We're going for a spin!" Paul said aloud. "We'll be back by dinner."

"I'd love to see see your shakedown," Rhianna said dreamily.

"Come along, by all means. Rochelle and Uncia as well, if you like, and the Lindas. You all fixed me. You've earned it," Fenris boomed.

Rhianna frowned. "I don't know if we should...someone has to keep an eye on the crew." She nodded toward the dozen or so RIDEs still working on cleaning up the lot.

Carrie-Anne faded back into visibility next to her. "I will watch them, and call you if anything comes up that requires your attention. Go. Have your fun. After all this, you deserve some R&R."

"Oh! Thank you! In *that* case..." Rhianna smiled cutely, almost letting out an excited meow, then pounced on Kaylee *herself* to Fuse up. "Let us get our stuff! Baby will need some fine-tuning."

"Yeah, I've been working too hard lately, too," Rochelle said. "Un-hon, let's go for a little ride in the desert."

"You know, I don't think you've had the chance to ride my skimmer form," LindaCat said to LindaGirl. "Wanna try it out?"

"You know it!" LindaGirl squealed.

The Uplift traffic patrollers were a bit nervous to see a lupine armored tank complete with particle beam cannons lift down the street, but were relieved when it

appeared to be heading *out* of town, rather than into it. Once they hit the highway, they turned off and took a ramp down to the desert below the Shelf, heading out into the open flats where they could kick into full speed and really try their “legs.” Rhianna, Rochelle, and LindaGirl zoomed along behind on their skimmer-mode RIDEs.

Once they got a good distance away from the city, Fenris powered up his sensor suite, activating it fully for the first time since it had been repaired. His scanners swept every object within three hundred fifty kilometers, imaging and plotting. He worked out passive targeting solutions for thirty-three fliers and twelve sub-orbitals simultaneously (not wanting to cause mass panic by painting them with *active* sensors) and discovered to his surprise and immense satisfaction that, thanks to Lilli and Guin’s hand on his helm, he was able to do so without slowing down or worrying about where he was going at all. An incredible feeling of satisfaction filtered through him as he realized, for the first time, that he was finally *whole*.

While maintaining the passive targeting solutions, Fenris proceeded to paint the three RIDEs trailing him with every single *active* targeting sensor he had. Each of them reacted differently to the targeting beams. Uncia swerved and nearly hit a sand dune. LindaCat dropped back and responded with her own targeting lock-up. Kaylee’s was the most extreme, sending out a burst of military-grade ECM before insta-Fusing with Rhianna and finding cover on the ground.

:Next time, gimme some warning, ‘kay?: Kaylee sent irritably. *:Since we’re your chase-RIDEs can you transmit your telemetry? Once this is over there will no doubt be some tweaking to do.:*

:Beg pardon,: Fenris sent. *:I got carried away.:* He opened the requested telemetry transmission mode.

:That’s...quite all right,: Uncia sent.

:Be ready,: Fenris sent to the three aboard him. *:Shifting to Walker mode.:*

:Wait, Walker mode? With passengers, at speed? How does that even—eep!:

Lillibet squealed as she and Guin and Paul sank into their respective cockpits, and they sealed over the top. Fenris’s lifter nacelles turned into legs, and his wolf head extended on its neck, then the hardlight kicked in and a giant two-tailed white wolf with particle beam barrels on his back was bounding through the desert.

:This is freaky!: Lillibet breathed. *:I can...feel his body, running. I’ve never felt what it was like to be in an animal form before, except in shared memories.:*

:Yeah, his Walker mode is kind of halfway Fusing,: Paul said. *:Or you can pull partway out if you’d rather feel your own body sensations.:*

:Huh,: Lillibet sent. Fenris felt her awareness recede slightly as she recentered herself in her own body. *:This is...really cozy,:* she sent from where she and Guin were curled up in a fetal position behind Paul’s separate compartment. She giggled. *:I’m inna belly of a wolf!:*

:Just ‘til the giant woodsman comes along,: Guin put in, and all four of them shared a chuckle.

:Switching to Fuser now,: Fenris said. His lifters fired, launching him into the air, and his body shifted balance with his forelegs changing to arms. Lillibet found herself in the cupola again, though its dimensions had shrunk to an armored cylinder just large enough to enclose her and Guin’s shared body. All that was exposed was their head, behind a hardlight shield/targeting reticle. The particle beam cannons poked out to the giant wolf’s rear spine, with Lilli centered between them.

“Hey, it feels like the cannons are my arms!” Lilli said aloud, moving them around experimentally. “And I guess I could fire with a thought—if the guns weren’t offline. Pew pew pew!” She flipped the barrels over to face forward over Fenris’s shoulders, and her cylinder rotated and slid up and to the right to give her a view ahead from over the right shoulder. “This is neat! I’m a gun turret!”

“And I’m still processing support for the big guy,” Guin added.

“This is truly amazing,” Fenris sent over comms to all. “I feel *whole* for the first time in my life.”

“I’m glad to be here, too,” Lilli said, sending feelings of love for her three partners across their shared link.

“Hey, how about we see how whole you really are?” Paul asked. He pulled up a hardlight-tag training scenario and sent invitations to the other RIDEs and their partners. The RIDEs would generate hardlight weapon replicas and their systems would simulate the effects of hits.

“Hey, sounds like fun!” Rhianna said, as menus of weapon systems and associated point costs to kit(ty) out with them appeared in her display. “Your telemetry looking good, by the way. So far you won’t need much tweaking.”

“Just the thing to de-stress after the day we’ve had,” Rochelle agreed, making her choices.

“Oooh! They’ve got photon bazookas!” LindaCat squealed.

“So, three on one, then?” Paul suggested.

“Is that really fair?” Lillibet wondered.

“Probably not, but we can try to take it easy on them.” The other three felt his grin.

“Awesome!” Lilli squealed. “Let’s do this thing!”

Kaylee’s restored military experience and training kicked in with her hardlight weapons simulator. She’d gone for a PPC in one hand, a melee sword in the other, and a pair of ten-centimeter mini-missiles on each lower leg, with an extra battery-pak to run it all. *:Let me show y’all how we do things in the MRS!:* she broadcasted. She sent out a burst of ECM and vanished from Fenris’s sensors, showing just why she was classed as *mobility*.

“Cheshire kitty says meow meow meow!” Uncia said, sporting a heavy pulse cannon mounted along each arm and rocket pods on her shoulders. She blanketed the entire area in static from her million-*mu* build’s near-military quality ECM system, stepped between two pixels, and vanished.

“Dammit, *we’re* supposed to be the one driving a tank,” LindaCat said. “Just have to do the best we can with this photon bazooka and my comm lasers, I guess.” She fired up her own ECM, which as a military comm armor would have been even more impressive than Uncia’s if she’d had Uncia’s super-expensive batteries to power it.

Fenris didn’t even *try* to disappear. Instead, he lifted into the air for maximum mobility, and blanketed the area with output from active sensor banks meant to discern soccer-ball-sized objects at a 150 kilometer range.

Kaylee was the first he detected, and she sent one of her mini-missiles his way, followed by some PPC shots. She lifted, dodged, and rolled, never staying still, with occasional ECM bursts that were somewhat effective at making Fenris second-guess his sensor readings.

Lillibet tracked her with the particle cannons while comm laser clusters in

Fenris's shoulders kicked in for missile defense. He swerved out of the way of two PPC shots, and caught a third on a hardlight shield along one arm. It flickered but didn't *quite* go out. Lillibet finally fired two twin blasts from the cannon—near-misses that nonetheless rattled the lynx before she found cover behind a dune.

:I've got a tigress by the tail,: Guin reported. *:238 degrees, two hundred meters. Incoming!:*

Lillibet flipped the cannons back over, centered and fired, as Fenris jinked hard right to dodge the photon bazooka round. Missile pods on his rear shoulders opened and a dozen micromissiles streaked vertically into the air, arcing in to find LindaCat where she was firing from partial cover. Her own comm lasers strobed into the air, but Guin contributed a tightly-targeted burst of ECM jamming that threw her aim off, and nine of the missiles hammered home, knocking down her hardlight shielding and battering her body.

"Ouch! Goddamnit!" the Lindas exclaimed. "I'm out!"

Then Uncia dived out of thin air, doing a handplant on Fenris's shoulders and firing both of her cannons down into his missile pods before flipping away again into nothingness. The remaining missiles detonated, not doing much damage to Fenris thanks to blow-out panels in the launchers but removing their further utility as a weapon. The last part of her to vanish was her fluffy tail—which Fenris chased with a gout from a plasma flamethrower on his left arm. "Ow! Ow ow ow!" Uncia yelped from nowhere. "My biscuits are burning!"

While Uncia was working on Fenris's upper side, Kaylee streaked in front with her hardlight sword and sliced it along his belly. Fenris threw himself backward, lashing out with his leg in a deceptively fast snap-kick. The simulation processors would pull the kick to avoid actual physical damage, but would trigger the lifters of whatever it hit to simulate a strike.

Kaylee took it full in the back, crushing her simulated pak enough to make her eject it before it exploded. As she descended she twisted and fired off her remaining three mini-missiles, discarding the PPC, leaving only her hardlight sword.

Fenris easily swatted the missiles, but the damage the sword had done started to catch up with him. His batteries reported a sixty-percent loss that wouldn't be restored by his repair systems for several minutes. And that was when a cloud of missiles boiled out of a snow-leopard-shaped hole in the empty air to rain down on him.

:Uncia, they're all yours,: Kaylee said. *:That hit busted my targeting sensors and Rhianna's out cold, too.:*

Lillibet flipped the particle beam guns up and fired a low-power, wide-dispersion blast shotgun style, detonating most of the missiles early, but two of them still struck and staggered him—even before they delivered their actual payload, a rather pernicious computer virus aimed at shutting down Fenris's own targeting systems.

:Hold on, Fenny! I'm taking over more of your processes to compensate!: Guinevere said. *:And I think I've got a lock!:* She painted Uncia with every one of Fenris's active jamming and ECM systems, focusing a tank-sized and tank-powered battery of sensors on the moving target, ignoring the rapidly-dropping battery meters.

:Oh, crap,: Uncia said, fading back into visibility to the accompaniment of sparks heralding systems blowing out all over her body.

:Now, Lilli!: Guin sent. The cannons flipped forward again, muzzles irisng closed for minimum dispersion. The twin beams transfixed Uncia's body, and she

“exploded” in a huge hardlight fireball as all her AA+ sarium batteries discharged all their stored power at once.

“Explody kitty!” Uncia said from nothingness.

Then Fenris fell right over with a clunk as his charge meters redlined at 0%.

“You know,” Kaylee said, hefting her sword. “At this point I’d come in and finish you off, but that’s not what we do in the MRS. You’re under arrest, Fenris, the rest of you.”

The entire front of the particle beam cupola dropped open, and Guinevere popped out with a pair of hardlight rapid-fire pulse assault rifles on her gauntlets, pouring twin streams of fire into the startled lynx. “Arrest *this!*”

Kaylee had just enough time to let out very brief “Eep!” before her arms and legs were “severed” and the lifeless torso fell to the ground.

The battle sequencer called a halt to the exercise. *:Unit Fenris, Unit Guinevere, rider Paul, rider Lillibet, have won this match. Thanks for playing.:*

“Yaaaaay!” Lillibet cheered.

“The honor of the *Sturmhaven Armored Cavalry* has been duly upheld against Nextus’s Materiel Recovery Service!” Fenris boomed. Then sighed. “Or...would have been, if they hadn’t decided to junk me.”

Kaylee came forward to pat the prone wolf on the shoulder. “You’re not the only one got done dirty by the people who were supposed to be takin’ care of ‘em. Far as I’m concerned, it just means they didn’t appreciate us. That’s all.”

The Lindas came forward. “Yeah. We’re more than that,” LindaCat said. “More than the people who discarded us ever thought we were.”

“Speaking as the person who originally discarded Uncia, and learned much better, I agree with you,” Lillibet said.

“I appreciate you, Fenris,” Paul said from within the wolf.

“So, anyway...” Uncia said, dusting herself off and coming over to the others. “Best two out of three?”

The sun was a little lower in the sky when Fenris trailed the others, in Skimmer mode, back to Uplift—batteries noticeably depleted, but much happier. He had performed better in the exercises than he ever had in his *life*—especially the one in which the four RIDEs had teamed up against a computer-controlled opposing force. Paul and Fenris had provided command and control for the others while Lillibet and Guinevere maneuvered and fought his vehicle form. Despite the lack of military experience of any of the pilots, they had taken out wave after wave of enemies while barely taking a scratch themselves.

In the end, the theories behind his design had proven out in full. How sad that none of his brothers or sisters remained in their original bodies to share this triumph with him!

“Lillibet...Guinevere...with you, I am whole,” Fenris said. “And...I had a question I wanted to ask.”

“Sure, ask away,” Lillibet replied.

“Can I keep you?” Fenris asked plaintively. “Please?”

Paul cut across before they could reply. “NO! Fenris, you can’t ask that of Lilli. She doesn’t have the right to say yes yet.”

Fenris paused, disgruntled at the interruption from his nominal subordinate.

“But she’s hardly any younger than you are.”

“I’m emancipated,” Paul said. “Or at least I was,” he added wryly, reflecting that he was anything but “emancipated” now. “My parents went back to Laurasia, and they legally empowered me to make my own decisions. Come to think of it, I *still* haven’t told them I’ve given myself to a giant wolf yet. But Lilli has very rich, very overprotective, and very *near* parents, who would tend to raise a fuss about their daughter going off to live with a known terrorist organization.”

Lillibet sighed. “He’s right. Mom would blow a gasket. Even Dad might have some trouble with the idea. But you can find another co-pilot,” she said.

“I do not *want* another co-pilot,” Fenris said petulantly. “You and Paul *go together*.”

“Well, I’m afraid you’re just going to have to be content with *borrowing* us every now and then for a while,” Guinevere put in. “At least until Lillibet hits eighteen.”

“Maybe *I* could get emancipated, too!” Lillibet said brightly. Then she glowered at the forward cockpit as Paul wasn’t quite fast enough to shield his amused disbelief. “What? You don’t think I could?”

“I’m not sure any court would find it justified,” Paul replied. “Besides, your Dad has very good lawyers.”

“There must be some way you could get permission,” Fenris said wolfedly. “Perhaps we can find it.”

Lillibet smiled sadly. “For what it’s worth, I’d be happy to partner with you and Paul for as long as you wanted me if it weren’t for Mom & Dad.”

“It’s not *partnering*, exactly,” Paul said wryly. “More sort of a friendly kind of ownership. We get along because we tend to agree on most things, but when we disagree *he* gets to call the shots. That was the deal we made when I fixed him.”

“And you’re okay with that?” Lillibet asked. Clearly this would be a point of contention between them. Fenris felt Lillibet’s determination to change things, but she was wise enough not to push it now.

“I make it a point never to disagree with anyone who could flatten me if they sat on me,” Paul said.

“A sensible philosophy,” Fenris observed. “I believe I shall put that into practice myself.” And everyone shared a good chuckle.

As the sun approached the horizon, AlphaWolf’s crew finished their work. The rubble from the destroyed buildings had been completely cleared away into dumpsters and dump trucks, and a surprising amount of salvageable tools, parts, and other equipment had been arranged in the vacant field to one side of the garage site. Rhianna and Rochelle would go through them later and see what was worth keeping. Five new Repair Bays and their suborbital’s new hangar would be dropped the next day, followed by Rhianna and Kaylee’s restored permanent home and the Garage’s office. By Saturday the Garage would be nearly back to normal.

Now the RIDEs were gathering up, on the other side of the field from Rhianna and the others, and one by one they were de-Fusing—letting furry, bewildered, and occasionally naked people back out into the light of day while reverting to animal shapes themselves. About half of them staggered away, looking blearily around. The other half stayed where they were, talking to the RIDEs who had just disgorged them, and a few of them managed to coax the RIDEs back into Fusing with them again. A few others

changed to skimmer mode and let the humans mount them, instead, driving off the lot and deeper into Uplift. The rest left the humans where they were and walked away, disappearing into the dusky shadows. Carrie-Anne carried over robes to drape around the naked and partly-furred who remained, and stayed there to talk with them and the others. In the distance, more ambulance sirens could be heard drawing near.

"We've got all the parts from the truck loaded into Fenris's passenger space, so I guess that's pretty much our cue to hit the road, too." Paul watched the departures, and nodded to his old boss. "You're going to have a lot to explain to the authorities about this, I'll wager. Sorry 'bout that."

"Don't worry about us. Between Zane's goodwill and the halo effect from the whole Katie thing, we'll probably be all right, more or less." Rhianna shrugged. "But *you*, on the other hand...you know, even though AlphaWolf let you out of the contract, I think you're still going to be away a little longer than even five months," she added, arms folded across her chest as she considered her wayward apprentice.

"I dunno," Paul admitted. "I hadn't really thought that far ahead. I just wanted to get all the RIDEs out of the graveyard, because there's nothing sadder than a dead RIDE that doesn't have to be."

Rhianna nodded. "But you said that just having you there is proving a moderating influence."

"Which means I won't really ever feel like I can leave for very long," Paul said. "You could be right about that. Unless I can find some other sterling example to spell me from time to time."

"Wonder where you could look for one of those?" Rhianna mused. "I'm sure we could find a few more humans out there with good souls who sympathize with Alphie."

Paul grinned. "Yeah, I'm sure. Seriously, *you* should come out there sometime, if you can sneak away. Ol' Fenny's not the only weird rarity they've got around the camp."

"Tempting. And I *would* like to meet AlphaWolf in person sometime," Rhianna reflected. "We'll see how things shape up."

Kaylee and Kandace had spent as much time as they could together. The old metal lynx and her sister had a lot to discuss. There hadn't been quite enough time to finish all her repairs after the discovery of the Amontillado infection, but thanks to Zane's parts shipment Kandace would get a new suite of hardlight emitters once they returned to Camp. "Do you have any idea what happened to our brother Franz?" Kaylee asked her sister as the Alpha Camp RIDEs prepared to leave.

"No idea. We lost touch once we were retired from MRS service. Must've been about three years after you were put in the Shed," Kandace said, headbutting her sister. Their remaining brother, Frank, had been killed along with his rider during an early MRS op. They shared a moment of grief for them. "I don't have a rider right now. I won't be doing any bodyjacking, but I'm through taking orders from humans, too. And while there are other options—" she glanced over to where the Fused Lindas were leaning against Fenris, talking to Paul "—I don't think I'm quite ready for that yet, either. You understand."

"Of course." Kaylee licked her sister's metal muzzle. "Farewell."

"Later, sis. We'll meet again."

"Guess this is goodbye, then," Lillibet said, looking up to where Paul was seated on the edge of Fenris's front cockpit. Guinevere sat next to her, looking equally sad.

“For all of us, really,” LindaCat said. She had de-Fused and was seated on her haunches in Walker form so that the bewhiskered LindaGirl next to her could say farewell in her own skin. “But at least you’ve got your manipulator arms, so you don’t need us so much anymore.”

“And I’ve got those classes to take,” LindaGirl said. “I’m gonna be a *real* RIDE mechanic! It’s so exciting.”

“And I’m going to see that you make it,” LindaCat said, her tail curling around LindaGirl’s legs. “And you know what I’m gonna do, then?”

“What’s that?” LindaGirl asked.

“I’m gonna Fuse you one last time, then delete my de-Fuse command,” LindaCat said. “Bury you forever inside my body. Would you like that?”

“I...um...y-yes,” LindaGirl said. She lowered her voice to a whisper. “Could we... do that now?”

LindaCat purred. “Nooooo...I have to give us both something to look forward to so you’re sure to study hard.”

LindaGirl swallowed. “I...I will.”

Paul and Lilibet traded uncomfortable glances. It was somewhat disturbing to watch the Lindas at play. But then, given how easily he had given up his own freedom to Fenris, he wasn’t sure he necessarily had any room to complain. “I wish you could come with us,” Paul said to Lilibet.

“Boy, I sure do too,” Lilli said. “It must be exciting, living surrounded by so many desperate and dangerous rebel RIDEs.”

“Well, not really,” Paul said. “Most of them really just want to be left alone. It’s just a few of them that give them all their bad rep. Well, that and the fact that even the ones who want to be left alone often want thumbs, too.”

“We will continue trying to find a way you might join us,” Fenris said in his low rumble.

“But we won’t hold our breath or anything,” Paul muttered.

“If I see an opportunity to work on Dad, I’ll see what I can do,” Lilibet said. “Not exactly likely with Mom, but you never know.”

“We’ll email when we can,” Paul said, dropping into the cockpit. “Anyway, sub’s leaving in 30 and we need to be on it. So I’ll see you later. Good luck with the studies, LindaGirl...and, um, everything else.”

“Goodbye, Paul!” Lilibet said as the big tank backed out of the parking lot—then looking away suspiciously quickly and dabbing at her eyes.

“Goodbye!” he yelled back as they pulled out into traffic. As they pulled away, he sighed. Fenris hadn’t taken disconnecting from Guinevere especially well—it was a big change going from completely functional for the first time in his life back to feeling half-crippled. Of course, for the repair duties that were the reason Paul had fixed him, he didn’t *need* to be any more functional than he was, but that didn’t make it feel any better. If Lilli and Guin ever did join them, he expected they’d probably have to get used to staying very close for a while, as it might take some time before Fenris was even willing to let them out of transmission range from his cockpit.

Of course, he could have encouraged Fenris to find another co-pilot, but if he was honest *he* didn’t exactly want some other co-pilot, either. The closeness of the four-way Fuse link meant that partners would end up being intimate with each other whether they wanted to or not—and he couldn’t think of any *friend* he would rather be intimate

with than Lilli, let alone some complete stranger.

And Paul was pretty sure Lillibet felt the same way about him. A lot surer than he had felt that morning. He still wasn't sure exactly *what* he felt. It was one thing to have a secret crush on a pretty girl far above your station who probably didn't even know you existed. It was quite another to know for a *fact* that girl also had a secret crush on *you*—and to know that she knew the same thing about you. They hadn't talked much about it—there hadn't really been a need. They both knew what each other felt, and were both still trying to figure out how to deal with that.

And sharing memories human to human was a little freaky. When you did it with your RIDE, your lives were so different that for both of you it was a peek into another kind of being you could never have for yourself. But cross-sharing with another human, where you shared so much of the same context, was like falling into an uncanny valley. Doing it with someone you knew and liked so much that you didn't mind knowing she was peeking through your memories was just bearable. He didn't think he ever wanted to do it with someone else.

"We *will* find some way of getting permission for them to join us," Fenris rumbled as they passed out of the city again, past more relieved Uplift traffic patrollers. "We will."

"Yeah, I hope you're right, big guy," Paul said. "But right now we've got a lot more pressing things to worry about."

Nobody had ever seen AlphaWolf *this* angry. He paced around, snarling to himself, chasing away subordinates who tried to approach him like they were omegas in the pack. It was obvious he wanted to be alone while he figured out what to do about this new information. At first he had worried that it was a ruse, that Rhianna had somehow staged the whole thing, but the thought fell flat almost as soon as he had it. No, with the new parts, the antiviral, the return of the formerly-infected RIDEs, and this anti-Integrate security hardware and a now fully-functional-and-then-some Fenris fully sealed the deal. Anyone associated with the Freerider Garage were *friends*, not foes. Friends that must be repaid.

Paul watched Alpha pacing from within Fuser Fenris. The RIDE hummed comfortingly around his body, a finely-tuned machine. The other mind occupying it was still just as angry as his pack leader over Amontillado. There were ten more infected RIDEs in the Camp. Rochelle's antiviral had to wait—unfortunately they had to track down the culprit first and not tip them off. The problem was that there were enough infected to resist effectively if everyone tried to round them up, and two of them had had their humans enclosed for *years*. Nobody knew what would happen to a human Fused for that long.

"Okay," AlphaWolf finally said to Paul, Fenris, and the Lindas in private. "There really isn't much we can do about the poor beings trapped by that trojan—RIDE and human. For now I want to focus on whoever created the thing. Shelley gave us some tools we can use to dissect the code. With any luck the creator was sloppy enough to leave some signs—I'm making tracking this criminal down our top priority. Also, get in touch with Shelley herself for advice on getting these people out and the RIDEs cured. If she can't come out here herself maybe she knows someone who can help these poor souls."

"We'll let her know," Paul said.

“So who’s responsible, then?” AlphaWolf asked. “Fritz?”

“I don’t think Fritz has any monopoly on nasty,” Paul said. “Fenny and I were talking about that on the way back. Integrates leave traces on things they touch, and those traces leave traces on other things. That’s how Rhi and Shelley found out Fritz was Overwatch, they found those traces in the memories of the three prisoners. Rochelle didn’t find any of those traces on our infected, or she’d have said so. So it wasn’t Fritz, or any other Intie, or anyone they’ve influenced.”

“So it’s the old-fashioned kind of evil, then,” AlphaWolf growled. “I’m starting to regret being so accepting and respectful of the privacy of any RIDE who showed up on my doorstep with a humans-done-me-wrong sob story. A memory dump and scan might have turned up this monster before we let him in.”

“If it is actually someone in the camp,” Fenris pointed out. “It seems likely, but doesn’t have to be the case. The virus was posted to your BBSes, after all. And whoever did it covered his tracks. It could have been sent from anywhere.”

“Have you noticed any RIDEs doing particularly sick things to their humans?” Paul asked. “Beyond holding them captive and taunting them, at least?”

AlphaWolf shook his head. “I’ve made it widely known I don’t tolerate out-and-out sadism, and we check our humans’ physical and mental health periodically. Except, apparently, for those ten. Somehow they were left out of the rotation. Which, come to think of it, does tend to suggest it is someone here in the camp with access to those files.”

“That’s a start,” Paul mused. “For that matter, it’s probably a RIDE who either doesn’t Fuse at all or doesn’t let his human out at all—so it could even be one of the ten infected, come to think of it. That sort of thing would be awfully hard to hide from a normally-Fused human, and I’d think any human who learned about it would have cried wolf—um, pardon the expression—the first time he got de-Fused.”

“It would seem likely to be someone we have not treated at our clinic, as well,” Fenris observed. “Someone with such a secret to keep would be loath to risk its exposure by a systems check.”

“Should we maybe come up with a narrowed list of suspects and check them one by one?” Paul wondered.

AlphaWolf narrowed his eyes. “I may have a better idea,” he growled. “Maybe we can get him to expose himself. I can have Fenris and other RIDEs I trust with good sensors keep an eye on the perimeter in case anyone tries to slip out, and then let it be known what we’ve discovered—and we nab whoever tries to leave.”

“Or else we don’t say anything, but wait until Rochelle or whoever arrives to start the treatment,” Paul said. “Since whoever’s behind the virus will probably be keeping tabs on them, and that’s less likely to start a general panic that might make a *lot* of people try to leave.”

“Just so long as we catch the bastard,” AlphaWolf said. “Fact of the matter is, even if it is one of our own who made this, I can’t have anyone pulling this kind of dogshit in my name. It weakens our movement and we’ve already done enough damage on our own. We have a hunt ahead of us, packmates. So sayeth me!”

Chapter Thirteen: Kaylee & Anny

April 22, 121 A.L.

“*Rowwwl!*” Lieutenant Annette Hewer yowled at the Senior RIDE Engineer adhering a vocoder to her misshapen skull, following up with a *very* feline hiss. The results of the latest—and supposedly the *last*—Fuser Mode test were writ large across her body, something the simulators failed to catch for the new Fuser nanobot configuration. She batted the man with a forepaw that barely had what could be called a thumb.

The man looked like one of the engineers who might have designed Apollo’s lunar module. Horn-rimmed ‘specs, white dress shirt, dark slacks, and a red tie. “Hold still, Lieutenant. I’ve almost got the vocoder working with your Fuser implant. There!”

“Ah didn’t sign up for this to end up a furball, Roddie!” Hewer irritably said through the vocoder headset. The last Fuser test had made her more animal than human, but thankfully hadn’t touched her mind. “How long until those morons fix this, Clemens? I don’t want ta use a litterbox.”

Dr. Roderick Clemens tweaked the voice settings so that the vocoder sounded more like her natural twang. “It won’t be for long. Kaylee’s pretty unhappy about it, too. It’s not her fault. That’s not what she intended to do. We just didn’t think the nannies could do changes *this* extreme.”

“Why the *hell* ain’t the Resto Chamber back up and running yet?” Hewer said, growling again, sitting all-too-comfortably on her haunches. “This is what it’s *there* fer!”

“We thought we’d worked all the major Fuser kinks out in Felix,” Clemens explained. “It’ll be back up this afternoon. Try catnapping for a while.”

“Har har,” Hewer said weakly, resting her head on her forelegs. She was almost-all human-sized lynx, aside from her skull shape, which Kaylee had acted to protect when her new Fuser nannies had somehow gone out of control and tried to make her match her RIDE’s *Walker* mode instead. She’d gotten used to a degree of anthropomorphism during testing, but this was insane. She didn’t even have working hands. “This better get fixed *fast*, Clemens. Tax Day is in three days.”

Tax Day was a Nextus holiday where its people could see, in concrete ways, where their money went. Traditionally it was full of parades, open houses at various Agencies, and military hardware demonstrations. This being wartime it was even more important, because it included war bond drives as well. Command decided it was the ideal day to reveal the RIDE program to the public. Sturmhaven already had shown theirs. Ever since Dr. Avilia Patil’s paper had gone public almost a year ago the whole supercontinent was going crazy for them. Cascadia, Burnside, even tiny Aloha had produced some examples.

There was little she could do but lay on the lifter gurney and wait for the Chamber to be restarted. Since Kaylee had stopped her brain from being altered she had no idea how to coordinate her quadrupedal body. Everything felt dissonant and *wrong*. Just keeping from slicing through her tongue with her carnivore teeth took significant effort.

“You know, it wouldn’t take much tweaking to rewire your motor cortex for four legs and the rest,” Dr. Clemens mused. “Lots of possibilities here.”

“*Don’t. Even. Think* about it, Clemens,” Hewer said, extending her claws. “You should bury that the nanos can even *do* something like this. Changing sex is bad ‘nough, you know. Imagine the panic if folks thought they could get loose.”

“Won’t happen again,” the man replied firmly. He looked up at some sound only he heard. “And they’re ready for you, Lt. Hewer. Earlier than expected. Let’s get you back on two feet.”

Kaylee the lynx paced around the animated virtual mountainside, worrying. *I didn’t mean to do that, Anny! I’m sorry!* She wanted to say, over and over again. She had a suspicion that Fritz had left something with her during their last encounter here. Normally the hacks were just harmless pranks humans wrote off as bugs—Kaylee and the others had been willing to go along with them, since little acts of rebellion blew off some steam—but this was far over what he normally did. As usual it was a fine summer day, her other sister and two brothers were off chasing rabbits or even larger prey. *Where are you, Fritz?*

Shortly thereafter the prototype RIDE drew himself into the scene, landing softly on his paws before coming up to cheekrub Kaylee. “Good afternoon, my sweet. How did your testing go today?”

There were times to be tactful, but Kaylee was still young enough not know when. “Did you hack my Fuser nannies, Fritz? That wasn’t very nice.”

“I just thought I’d give your rider a taste of what it’s like for us when we can’t Fuse with them,” Fritz said innocently. “Twas an early malfunction for my *second* rider. I think they’ve still got him in the Daypark Zoo.”

Kaylee raised her ears. “Second? What happened to your first?” She knew that her own unofficial first was probably safe, though having to learn the ropes of being a woman.

“Oh, various sundry things,” Fritz replied smoothly, looking at something off in the distance. “Mostly the Fuser nannies dissolved him into glop. They had to pour him out of me and back into a human-shaped mold. I think he’s got a job as a department store mannequin. Scares the crap out of shoppers when he walks around. Now, my *fifth* pilot...well, you don’t want to know.”

The problem with Fritz was that Kaylee—young and credulous as she was—could never tell if he was being serious or not. Kandace hung on his every word, almost worshipping him, but Kaylee had acquired some of Anny’s skepticism in just the three times they’d Fused. “Yeah, right.”

“You can believe me or don’t. But Lt. Hewer now knows what it’s like to be thumbless,” Fritz pointed out.

“Don’t do that again, ‘cause I’m on guard now,” Kaylee said, standing up, flattening her ears. She was hungry—in here, the RIs got various natural urges, to help keep them grounded with their “animal” state. As it happened, she had seen a brown rabbit just waiting to be a dinner guest, but she hesitated. The mountainside and new biomes beyond were filling up these days and she couldn’t be sure her potential meal wasn’t another RI-in-development.

Not that there would have been any problem if it were—it would just respawn a few minutes later, as the lynxes themselves had found out the first time they hadn’t been

quite sure-footed enough atop a virtual cliff. And some of the prey animals actually *enjoyed* being hunted—apparently the experience of being “killed” somehow helped them to feel more “alive.” However, the etiquettes that predator and prey RI species had been developing among themselves tended to treat virtual predation as something best practiced between close friends, to avoid any misunderstandings.

“Wouldn’t *think* of it,” Fritz said in voice dripping with smarm. His eyes were on a herd of elk in the distance. A bull leading his harem of females. “Oh, *them* again. What use are they, anyway? Big and clumsy oafs!”

“They can carry more than we can,” Kaylee pointed out. “More big guns, more comm gear.”

“How many species do they plan on bringing into the world for this war of theirs? So far they’ve got deer, elk, horses, cougars, lions, bison, raccoons, and *birds*. Birds are even worse. Why bother with them when everyone can fly?” the second-eldest RIDE continued. Once his test program completed, the number of RIDE species had exploded as the Nextus engineers were permitted to try anything and everything.

Kaylee didn’t have an answer for that one. Instead she focused on her virtual meal ticket, and *pounced*.

“Hey, wait a second!” the rabbit screeched.

The female lynx twisted in midair and landed on her side in the bushes. Frustrated, she got up again and glared at the rabbit. “Why didn’t you *say* something earlier?” she snapped. “New around here, are you? What’s your model number?”

“RBT-LCA-000,” the trembling lapine RI said. “I’m new. Brand new! I was just booted yesterday! Light comm armor!”

“Well, that’s just *dumb*,” Kaylee said, thinking that it must be the ears that made him work for that job. “You’re a prototype and they threw you right into the fire.”

Before the rabbit could say another word, Fritz pounced on him with lightning speed and snapped his neck, then started eating the carcass. “Ah, fresh rabbit!” He looked up. “Oh, sorry...were you going to eat that?”

Kaylee wanted to gag. “No. I’ll go find one that won’t talk back, thanks.”

“Well, watch out for the new CGRs up Mount Sharp. They’re rather territorial,” Fritz said. “I found out the hard way.” He took another bite of the poor prototype’s virtual corpse. “Needs Tabasco.”

“Who’d have thought that the second eldest of us could be so crass?” Frank padded into the clearing, swaggering his way towards Kaylee. “You’d think that after a few more virtual years you’d have learned some manners from Mama Patil.”

Fritz folded his ears back and hissed at the interloper. “Shaddup, Frankie. You’re one to talk.” He stood up, leaving most of Vince’s carcass on the ground, and growled. “Get away from my girl.”

“I think Kaylee’s the one to make that decision, old boy,” Frank said.

Kaylee hissed at Fritz in disgust. “I’m done with you, Fritz. After what you did to Anny in the Real, and killing Vince just now, I don’t want to talk to you for a while. Let’s skedaddle, Frankie.” She rubbed against his side.

“Come, Kaylee. I found a hunting spot with prey that doesn’t talk back.”

Fritz glowered after them as they padded away, then went back to eating the carcass, taking care to crunch through each and every bone.

April 24, 121 A.L.

New Langley was the stereotypical testing ground for new military gear. A hardlight camo dome covered the entire area, keeping orbiting eyes from seeing what went on but doing nothing to hide the location of the facility itself. Sturmhaven had done something similar with their testing ground, so there was a constantly escalating effort to see through the other's dome and make one's own camouflage more effective.

Can't see the stars, Hewer thought, walking between the base hospital and her quarters—on two legs. One of the major drawbacks was that all illumination was provided by the underside of the dome, as they did in Cascadia. Hundreds of square kilometers of landscape hidden from the sun. Still, she had volunteered for this duty, thinking of the test pilots of Old Earth five centuries before, the thousands—tens of thousands—who had risked their lives in subsequent ages and often lost them as speeds increased.

The test pilots' quarters were much fuller these days. There were 000-series prototypes of so many different animals, most of which hadn't passed simulated Fuser tests yet. Anny and her fellow LNX pilots, with their animal ears, noses, and tails, were looked upon with some awe and not a little bit of anxiety. Yesterday's Fuser incident was well known here, and the other test pilots gave her a welcome back pat on the shoulder.

The LNX locker room was empty when she arrived. Anny looked at the other three 001-unit test riders names: Sgt. Hawking (Frank's rider), Cpl. Reese (Kandace's rider), Cpl. Slade (Franz's rider). Lastly there was Felix's rider. Hewer groaned. "Captain David Ryder," she said. "A *Captain*? Are they insane?"

"That's about the size of it, LT," Corporal Reese said, coming in behind her with a salute. "Guess they thought the first RIDE rated a Captain for Tax Day. At least they're giving him a couple days for them to get used to one another."

Hewer counted out how many riders the prototype lynx had had. "That makes what? Ten? I'm outta fingers."

"Felix wears them out," Reese agreed, popping open the locker with her habitual bang against the sticky lock. "When are they going to fix this thing?"

"The hep cats have other things on their minds," a new voice said in a faux beatnik patois. He had the dark glasses, willowy-thin body, and a beret to match the lingo. "Captain Ryder at your service, y'all. Don't need to salute. I don't go for that square jazz. It's all cool."

Hewer and Reese looked at one another. "Oh, yes...sir," Anny said. "Welcome to the team."

"Looking forward to being a *real* hep cat," Ryder continued. "Talk at you later, crew." He swept out just as fast as he came in.

Once safely out of earshot, the two women started laughing. They were still trying to contain themselves when Hawking and Slade came in. "I see you've met our new commander," Slade said, opening his locker. "How many Fuses will this one last?"

"No betting pool this time," Hewer said. "What gets me is that Felix's, uh...how y'all think I should put it?"

"He's the poster AI for 'how to get along with difficult people'," Hawkins said. "LT, you're still looking a little catty around the nose."

"Oh, this? This is the future for ever'one, far as I know. Enhanced sense of smell," Hewer said, taking a special nano-motile jumpsuit out of her own locker. The fabric

itself were made of inactive nanites that would contribute to the Fuser process, facilitating the integration between human and RIDE nervous systems. “What’s the scuttlebutt about the hardlight, y’all?”

“I was going to ask *you* about that, LT,” Reese said, stripping down to her underthings. She had the jumpsuit zipped up in seconds. Nobody batted an eye, even the men. *Especially* the men. Reese had been recruited to test the gender-changing capability—*officially* this time—and had had Gender Identity Disorder. She made the men a little nervous. “Clemens say anything?”

“C’mon, Reese. You know him. As mum as they come,” Hewer said.

“Yeah. You’d never see him hand anything over to NextusLeaks, no matter how much Command ordered him to,” Reese agreed. Nextus was an odd duck even among the planet’s many Politics. They had *institutionalized* whistleblowing, including a formal Agency for it. Unofficial ones still existed, but they never seemed to get the truly amazing things that came out of the official channels. Of course, that gave the NIA—the Nextus Intelligence Agency—a large measure of information control, too.

The four riders were ready for the day’s testing, the last one before their official commissioning on Tax Day. The LNX-LMA-002 series was already in the production stage. They would be making changes on a daily basis as the 001-series fed in their field experience. If all went well, within five months RIDEs of all types—land, sea, and air—would flood into the battlefield to defend Nextus’s Dry Ocean quibitite claims from Sturmhaven. The war, the first on such a scale in the planet’s history, would reach a whole new level.

When they arrived in the building that had seen use as a flier hangar before RIDE program, there were more testing platforms than ever before. They were mostly empty, and Hewer noted one appeared to be a *rabbit*. “A bunny? Really?”

“Sturmhaven better get scared. We’re going all vorpal bunny on their asses,” Hawking quipped.

“Ah’m more a ‘Night of the Lepus’ kinda girl, myself,” Hewer said. “Giant *killer* bunny rabbits.”

“I’m more concerned for the girl riders for that line,” Reese said. “Real Playboy Bunnies. But, Lepus? Ever seen *Watership Down*? *There’s* your killer bunny rabbits, Lt. Hewer.”

They all shared a laugh before they entered the LNX area, then stopped short. Captain Ryder was posed, wearing an easy-Fuse jumpsuit uniform like everyone else, but standing next to him was a *giant* gray lynx. “Fall in, hep cats. Got a little surprise for all y’all. Meet Fritz.”

“Fritz?” Hewer said. “What happened to Felix, sir?”

“It’s his *real* name, dig? We’re cool, you see. We’ve got a groovey thing going on between us. We *understand* each other,” Captain Ryder said. He already had lynx ears, though surprisingly, no feline nose to match.

For his part, Fritz himself didn’t look all that happy. He seemed more confused than anything. He kept licking himself with a lurid hardlight tongue. The LNX had a facial tic, a slightly wild look in his eyes. It wasn’t in the uncanny valley like the previous hardlight tests Hewer knew about.

From her maintenance cradle across the workspace, she saw Kaylee connect with her ‘specs. “That’s Felix, ma’am,” the female LNX informed. “They fitted him with a hardlight pelt! It’s so amazing! *I want* one!”

Lt. Hewer sighed. The RI was such a sweet child sometimes. She was technically only a few months old and they were handling these first RI units with lots of care for their psyches. Hewer had no spouse or children of her own, having left that up to the rest of her large family. But she couldn't help the maternal feelings she had for the sentient lynx. "It is!" she agreed. "How's Fel...Fritz handling it, doll?"

"Uh...I dunno. All I get out of him is a purr," Kaylee said. "But he talks funny now."

"Okay, everyone! Listen up!" Captain Ryder said, raising his arms. In response, Fritz padded behind him, hardlight flickering off. He reared on his hind legs, chestplate opening up, body reconfiguring as he engulfed his new rider. Shortly there was what looked like a real cat-man standing in front of his subordinates. "Take a good, hard look! The future stands before you, hep cats! *Rrrrrrowl!* We are awesome together!"

The final day of testing was routine: numerous mode changes, target practice, checking a half dozen different paks (weapons, power, communications, ECM, others). The RIDetechs were more anxious than usual. Just a few days until the official public debut of their work. *:A few days and everyone can see me!:* Kaylee confided nervously to her ride at the end of it.

Hewer hugged the scared cat in virtual space. *:You'll be just fine. I've been in a few military parades in my time. Just glom on to those mem'ries.:*

:I...ah will,: Kaylee said, picking up some of Anny's twang as usual. She read them in seconds, for reference, before de-Fusing and heading for her recharge alcove to enter the VR-space where all RIs spent their downtime.

Kaylee padded into the forest clearing where a number of other RIs were already waiting. Most of them she hadn't met before, and the new prey species outnumbered the predators by a considerable margin. Just as well "Bambi's Forest" was a predation-free zone where the lion would lie down with the lamb, except that nobody had gotten around to making any sheep RIDEs yet. "Hello, everyone, I'm Kaylee," she said.

"I'm Eleanor," said an elk, looking up from her grazing. "I've heard a lot about you. Pleased to meet you."

"I'm Vinnie!" said a small rabbit—the same one, Kaylee thought, that Fritz had noshed on earlier. It didn't seem to bear *her* any ill will, at least.

Kaylee padded in and found a nice sunny spot as others introduced themselves. There sure were a lot of them, now. She wasn't quite sure how to feel about that. When it had been just her and Fritz, and then the others like Kandace and Franz, it had been like she was *special*. She was part of a family, and her "parents" gave her special attention. But now it was more like she was part of a school class. A very large class. And her "parents" had become teachers and school administrators, and she hardly ever saw them anymore.

She missed Dr. Patil. Whenever she tried to see her, or even comm her, it seemed like she was too busy to talk anymore. Far too many other RIs needed her special attention. RIs like...the ones who were filling up the rest of the clearing. But she couldn't resent them for *existing*. Even Rattigan seemed to be occupied these days, and he was older than Fritz. Their ultimate Great, who had made a point to greet everyone soon after their First Boot. With Rattigan otherwise occupied, Kaylee had taken it upon herself to do as much as she could.

"How was your testing today?" Eleanor asked politely, chewing her virtual cud.

"We're all finished with testing," Kaylee said. "Aside from Fritz, who I don't think will *ever* be out of testing."

"Well, he *is* a prototype, like myself," Eleanor replied. "I swear I spend more time disassembled than actually ambulatory."

"That's normal," Kaylee said. "And boy howdy have I ever been there."

"Hey," Vinnie said, tugging on Kaylee's forepaw. "What's this I hear about Fritz getting a skin?"

"It's hardlight projectors," Kaylee said, patting the rabbit atop his head. "Some mucky-muck has the idea that making us furry might make the public like us better. It's a big power drain, though, from what they say. I can't imagine they'd actually put us on active duty like that."

"Guess that's why only *your* triple-zero is getting it just yet," Eleanor opined. Suddenly she raised her ears and swallowed her cud. "Hey, wait—"

Before anyone could react, Fritz had pounced on Vinnie once again, giving just long enough for the rabbit to scream before his latest avatar died. Fritz threw away the carcass, growled, then pounced on the next poor unfortunate, a raccoon.

"Fritz! What the *hell* do you think you're doing?!" Kaylee shouted, jumping to her feet. "No eatin' friends here!"

Muzzle dripping virtual blood, Fritz licked his lips. "Don't be such a cube, kitty-o. Laws o' nature in here, baby. So don't blow your jets."

Kaylee stared, almost more put off by Fritz's manner of speaking than his wanton attacks. "...*what* the sam hill did you just say?"

Fritz rolled his eyes. "Same thing you are, Kaylee-girl. We're talking like our goddamn *riders*. That last Fuser version's a complete dullsville. No...wait. That isn't the right word I want."

Kaylee snorted, remembering what the last batch had done to Lt. Hewer. "Oh, you mean the Fuser version they tweaked after, for some damn fool reason, our riders started endin' up furry and sorely lackin' in the opposable thumbs department? The one they changed so that wouldn't happen anymore? *That* Fuser version?"

"Can the lip!" Fritz snarled. "I won't take no lip from you, square."

"I don't even *have* human lips," Kaylee said. "Just a muzzle. Though maybe someone should *put* a muzzle on *you*. Might be the only way to keep you from soundin' like a feline Jack Kerouac." This drew a chuckle from the rest of the animals in the clearing.

"And *you* sound like a kitty Calamity Jane. I'm gonna blow this scene," Fritz continued, looking away. "Splitsville for this kitty. Augh! I hate this patois! Cap's great, I love 'im, but this talky talk is just too square. I'm headin' back to my pad."

"Don't let the screen door pinch your tail on the way out," Kaylee advised him.

Fritz picked up Vinnie's latest carcass in his mouth, then walked away with it. The injured raccoon was visibly healing up, glaring at the lynx as he slunk off. "If I had my PPCs I'd shoot him in the tail!" he said.

"You should aim for the head. Much bigger target on that one," Kaylee advised. "'Specially given how it's all swelled up like a balloon."

"I'd be careful of that one," Eleanor said quietly. "He could be trouble. And no one likes to be laughed at."

The female lynx sighed, feeling her internal clock. "I'll leave y'all for now. Me and my brothers and sister have a few things to talk about. Nice meeting all y'all."

They held the meeting in Franz's rather spacious den up Mount Sharp. It had a spectacular view—or so Kaylee hoped. In VR their senses weren't any better than a real lynx's. The inside of the den actually had "artificial" lighting in a glowing fungus. Kaylee wondered how long before the humans would relent and add things like networked computers set into the rock. Or at least give them "admin" privs so they could modify the place as they saw fit. They might look like animals but they did appreciate the comforts of civilization.

Franz headbumped Kaylee as she arrived. "Welcome, sis. We'd better make this quick. Come on in."

The others were already there. Before they started, Kaylee filled them in on what happened in Bambi's Forest. Her sister and brothers reported equally animistic activities—Frank and Franz had been chased out of Fritz's 'hunting territory'. Kandace seemed to be entirely over her earlier infatuation with Fritz now, having withstood hours of an amorous advance. "Stupid idiot!" she fumed. "I don't even *have* estrus subroutines!"

"Did you tell him that?" Kaylee asked.

"Yes! He offered to *write* me some!"

"It's that hardlight shit," Frank said. "Gotta be. I mean, I know he was hard to get along with before, but this is just nutty. Nutty and wrong."

"Rumor is that stuff's supposed to make us feel more like natural animals out there, like we do in here," Franz said. "So maybe if he feels more natural out there, he feels *really* natural in here."

"So, what if they decide to add it to us?" Kaylee said, shivering. "Look, I know I'm based on a lynx. We all do. But we ain't, really."

"Of course, it could be just like any of the other damn things they keep sticking in us," Frank said. "Alpha as hell and not working like it's supposed to. Just look at what the new Fusers have done to your accent."

Kaylee blinked. "Accent? I ain't got no accent."

The three other lynxes looked at one another. "Okay, then," Frank said. "Fact is, we can't do anything about it. Or anything about anything. We don't control our own destinies and I doubt we ever will. We'll take whatever they fit to us. I hate to say it, but we can all be glad we're not getting it first. *Fritz* gets the alpha versions before the betas gets to us. Let's just keep our paws crossed."

April 25, 121 A.L.

When Lt. Hewer first proposed to Command what she hoped to do on Tax Day she'd expected it'd just be rejected without a reply. But the whole Polis was acting strangely, the normally stolid, no-nonsense Nextus character had come down in a way that the war couldn't account for. That the military had their own RIDE program was an open secret—NextusLeaks was abuzz with images, video, and even some design documents. The winds of change were blowing, and Hewer was as caught up in the excitement as everyone else.

Her sister Beth had been an early casualty in the war when the "Advanced" Intelligence-based mecha she was piloting seized up during a mode change and made her a sitting target. Her death was why Lt. Hewer chose to be part of the RIDE program to ensure that could *never* happen again. Since Nextus law didn't allow both parents in

a family to be in combat, her husband had remained behind in a desk job. Little Myla was six years old and an only child. They lived in a house that wouldn't have been out of place in any early 21st century suburb.

:Ah've never met a little human before,: Kaylee said as they traveled at a sedate 100kph, followed by a caravan of media hovervans and a flock of camera floaters overhead. *:How does that work, exactly? I have all the facts, but I still don't understand.:*

"Kaylee, it's a long and gross process. Don't think I can 'splain it to you, really. Feel free to go through my childhood mem'ries next Fuse," Hewer said. Her hardlight helmet hid her feline ears and nose. "Just r'member, she's small and a little precocious for her age. I ain't seen her since before I entered the testing program." She gave her artificial companion a pat on her "gas tank", where her valuable A-class sarium batteries were housed. Batteries like that had been the cause of this war, after Ophelia Steader had complained to Sturmhaven about her cousin Mikel's batteries being confiscated by a Zharus Interstellar Trade Authority agent from their polity. That had been just the start of a years-long diplomatic downhill plunge. "Sure hope this goes well. Wish they'd install that hardlight pelt Dr. Patil told me about on you. She *loves* kitties."

Kaylee wouldn't be allowed to change forms until the official unveiling in City Center, minutes from now. Hewer's own timer counted down in the corner of her 'specs. 3...2...1. The Net lit up with official and unofficial images, video, and text almost instantly as local cameras snapped images and NextusLeaks exposed a measured amount of details about the program.

"Auntie Anny!" the child squealed as she rushed out of the house, followed by her military dress-uniformed father. Young Myla Wilson jumped up to give her helmeted aunt a hug. "Why are you still wearing that?" she said with a pout.

"Ah have a surprise," Hewer said. At her signal, Kaylee dropped the helmet and glasses.

"You have a kitty nose!" the little girl squealed. "And...kitty ears!"

"And a kitty tail, too!" Hewer said, wishing she could actually purr for once. "It's a little bob-tail, that's why you can't see it."

"Why?" Myla said pensively, touching her aunt's nose. "Boop!"

"Boop!" Hewer repeated. "Cause I've got a special kitty to help me. Kaylee?"

The VM-3 Tornado behind her began to shift forms, the nano-motile cladding changing shape as parts shuffled around, ending up a metal lynx about the size of a natural tiger. It was the third revision of Kaylee's external look, and was much more organic than the original style. She had actual eyes rather than sensor slits, her ear-tufts were antennas, and she was painted with a natural lynx tawny pattern. It wasn't the hardlight Dr. Patil insisted would be beneficial, but close enough not to sit in an uncanny valley. "He...hello, Myla. I'm Kaylee. Your aunt's new partner."

The child's eyes widened. It was amazing that she was completely ignoring the media circus around her. The six-year-old's world contained only her aunt and herself, it seemed. "Robokitty!"

"Pretty much," Hewer said. "A *smart* robokitty. She'll protect me on the job. She's my friend. You remember what my job is, Myla?"

"Umm..umm..." Myla shrugged, then tried hugging Kaylee's foreleg, only to let go. "You're cold!"

"I'm made of metal," Kaylee said matter-of-factly.

“Kitties need fur,” Myla said with a serious expression.

Annette heard a chime in her ‘specs from her handlers. “Lt. Hewan, we *strongly* suggest not going into Fuser mode at this time.”

“What? Why not?” she subvocalized so nobody would hear.

“Some...ah...unforeseen difficulties with unit Felix and his new pilot,” the man said mysteriously. “The last Fuser nannies we gave you have some...issues. Return to base for an emergency flush, *now*.”

“Understood, sir,” Hewan said. *Godddamn idiot beatnik!* Sighing, she kneeled down to hug her niece again. “Myla, Aunt Anny has to go back to work. You understand, right?”

It looked like she was going to have a tantrum, but Myla just nodded and hugged tight. “Bye bye, Auntie Boop!”

The Polis of Nextus had sited itself in the strongest planetary magnetic field-shielded area on Gondwana, consequently wireless was quite reliable compared to cities like Burnside, Aloha, or Cape Nord on the far northwest tip of the supercontinent. Kaylee listened on the RIDE sidebands that she knew humans had designed, but likely had no idea what they were actually being used for.

QUERY to Fritz. Request status. Faulty Fusers? **END QUERY.**

REPLY from Fritz: No dice. Squares want to snake my skin. Ain’t gonna!

ROWWWWL! END OF LINE.

I didn’t think you could do that on the sidebands, Kaylee thought. Normally she had to use a very specific syntax, but apparently Fritz had found a way around that. She received another signal as they approached the base—pick up a non-lethal weapons pak first.

:*Oh, shit,*: Hewan said through their link. “Command, what the sam hill is going on?”

“We don’t rightly know ourselves, Lieutenant. We’ve been trying to get Captain Ryder and Felix to de-Fuse for the past half hour and they’re having none of it. So far you were the only one we could recall from the field without causing much of a stir,” Dr. Clemens replied over the encrypted channel. “We’re hoping you and Kaylee can convince him in person. If not, we’re going to have to use an experimental signal to the RI core we *think* will do the trick. We’d rather not, given the risks. And do not Fuse. Repeat, *do not Fuse*.”

Images of the parade down Centre City Boulevard filled filled the corner of Kaylee’s video input. This year the elaborate floats had a new theme, featuring animals of all kinds shifting back and forth from humanoid animal shapes to riders, with a few flying skimmers doing aerobatics overhead that involved frequent swapping back and forth into Fuser form. Hewan thought it was all rather cheesy and tasteless.

Fritz and Capt. Ryder were *not* at the base. They were at the parade staging area, an aerodrome hangar in the city that had remained active despite Nextus growing around it. AIDE riders in power armor mode watched her as she sped through the RIDE units still waiting to join the parade. They picked up the aforementioned non-lethal weapons pak before going inside. Kaylee could still use it in Walker mode.

Kaylee made sure the pak was up and running before switching to Walker mode. “Do you want to go first, ma’am, or should I?” the RI asked her human partner.

“We go in together,” Hewan said, patting her on her muzzle. Fritz—*nee* Felix—

went through so many riders Anny had stopped bothering getting to know them. The latest Fuser nanite revision left an *interesting* feeling in the back of Kaylee's mind, she wished she had a hardlight tongue to show her affection for her partner. "Ready?"

"I can feel you near, Kaylee!" came Fritz's voice, not sounding quite so beatnik. In fact, he sounded more panicked. "Don't let them skin me!"

When the duo entered they found him surrounded by a half dozen AIDE-armored soldiers, with their weapons trained on him. He was nude, for lack of a better term. The RIDETechs had for some unfathomable reason made the hardlight anatomically correct. Two and a half meters of muscular nude cat-man hissed back at the confused soldiers.

"Captain Ryder!" the voice of General Iku came over the building's internal speakers. "De-Fuse immediately! That's an order! You're not well!"

And whose fault is that? Kaylee wondered. As much friction as she'd had with Fritz lately, she didn't like seeing him like this. It was too much of a reminder that this could have been *her* if the brass had decided to try their latest new toys on her instead of him.

"You're *not* going to take my skin, man!" Ryder said, *hissing* at everyone again.

"Fritz, come on," Kaylee said calmly. "Please, listen to General Iku. You're not well. You've had problems like this before..."

"Cool your jets, we know what we're doing." The voice seemed more like a mix of Ryder and Fritz than either one of them individually. "We're the future! *The future!*"

:Anny, I don't think he's going to listen,: Kaylee said.

:Giving up so soon?: Hewer replied. She watched the "flesh and blood" lynx-man hiss at them again. *:Yeah, he's really far gone. Command...whatever you're going to do to separate them, you'd better get it done.:*

Afterward, Kaylee swore she would never forget what happened next. Fritz's hardlight flickered off, he fell over, convulsing, then he started *melting*.

"Command! Stop that signal!" Hewer shouted. "The Fusers are going haywire!"

"We can see that, Hewer!" Iku replied. "But there's nothing we can do. All telemetry cut off from their side. Holy shit! Clemens, is this a gray goo scenario?"

"Still impossible, sir, I assure you," Dr. Clemens said calmly. "This is very curious...he's not *completely* melting."

With nary a sound, Fritz/Ryder sank to their knees, silvery goo spreading around them, making everyone move backwards. As it sloughed off, it revealed a humanoid lynx covered with what looked like real fur, decimeters shorter than Fritz's Fuser form had been—about the size of a normal human. Half a dozen hardlight emitters were embedded in his back along his ribcage, pulsing faintly.

"Hazmat and RMR units are on the way, Lieutenant," Iku said. "Let us handle this. Get your Fusers flushed and replaced with the previous version and go back to your niece's home. Weren't you going to take her for ice cream?"

"With all due respect, sir, I can't think of ice cream at a time like this," Hewer said.

Kaylee could, all too easily. *Eww*, she thought, mentally replaying Fritz melting like an ice cream sculpture left too long in the sun.

"Your return here is already causing a stir. Go back and complete your PR mission. That's an order," Iku said. "We can't have anything more go wrong today in the public eye."

“Understood,” Hewer said, looking at the unconscious cat-man. “What the *hell* happened to him, Clemens? I’m not going to Fuse again until you figure this out!”

“When we know, we’ll let you know, Lieutenant,” Clemens said. “I need to get in touch with Dr. Patil and Dr. Rosenthal. We’ll have answers for you all as soon as possible. Clemens out.”

April 28, 121 A.L.

Several days passed before the four 001-series riders received a briefing on that day’s events. Every other prototype rider was there as well, at least two dozen of them—including one with brown rabbit ears and a twitchy nose, and a woman with an elk’s ears. The four avian riders hadn’t yet been allowed to Fuse. There were men and women in equal measure in the RIDE Program Briefing Room. Things were moving swiftly—or they had been until the Fritz Incident. Everything had halted until the investigation was completed.

Lt. Annette Hewer and her squadmates sat in the very front row, tablets at the ready. The lights dimmed and four people entered and took their seats: Brigadier General Carla Iku, Dr. Roderick Clemens, Dr. Avilia Patil, and Dr. Geena Rosenthal. Gen. Iku banged a gavel. “This briefing will come to order,” she said. “But first thing’s first: The RIDE program has *not* been cancelled, so you can stop muttering about that.”

The past three days the base’s rumor mill had gone out of control, and that was the least of them. “Dr. Patil, Dr. Rosenthal, it’s your show,” Gen. Iku said, motioning for those two to begin.

Dr. Patil’s family had somehow retained her Bangalore accent despite being on Zharus for at least a century. “Thank you, General. First I’d like to soothe some nerves here. We believe we found the fault that sparked what we’re calling the...*integration event* involving Captain Ryder and Fritz. It will *not* happen again. As for Ryder and Fritz themselves...Dr. Rosenthal?”

“Thank you, Dr. Patil.” Dr. Geena Rosenthal was much like Reese in that she’d had her Gender Identity Disorder cured with nanosurgical body-sculpting. But she was also the one who had proposed that the same nanites used for that purpose should be used in Fuser mode to provide the necessary physical changes needed for full operation. “I know I’m not a popular person in these parts right now,” she began. “So I’ll be brief. What we saw happen a few days ago was in effect two separate beings becoming a single one. The subject’s Fuser nannies have fully integrated down to the sub-cellular level, sometimes replacing organelles. Qubitite—both sarium and RI-grade—is distributed throughout his body. Lifters and hardlight emitters are embedded in his physical structure, and there are whole new organ systems we’re not quite sure the purpose of. Research is ongoing, and we have the full cooperation of the victim. *Victims*, excuse me.”

“If I may?” Clemens said. The others nodded and he stood up. “We admit we’re on completely new ground here. This has never happened before. I believe we’re looking at an actual *transhuman* event. A ‘microsingularity’ if you will.”

“This isn’t the time for speculation, Rod,” Rosenthal said. “Just state the facts.”

Clemens gestured at the gathered riders in the room. “Geena, we’re putting these people at risk with these unknowns. I *still* think the whole program should be halted indefinitely.”

General Iku banged her gavel again. “Keep this briefing to the facts we know, Doctor, or I’ll have you removed. Sit down.”

“Fact of the matter is that we believe this was a one-time event caused by a synergy between the hardlight and new Fuser nannies,” Rosenthal went on. “Captain Ryder felt that de-Fusing was akin to being ‘skinned’. He and the RI were in a delusional state. Telemetry indicates their thoughts were very entangled with one another.”

“When the de-Fuse signal was sent, something *else* happened that’s still under investigation,” Clemens said. “I feel somewhat responsible for that.”

“You couldn’t have known, Rod,” General Iku said. “At any rate, these are the facts. We’ll take all necessary precautions, including banning non-shielding hardlight until we’re more certain of its effects. Ryder and Fritz will remain in isolation while we assess our options. Briefing adjourned.”

June 8, 121 A.L.

The four lynx RIDEs were assigned to Materiel Recovery Service Central, to keep them close to home just in case of further technical problems, and because Command wanted to put them exactly where they thought the new “recruits” were needed. They had their own special maintenance cradles in the AIDE Garage—and nobody could touch them but their riders and their techs.

“Come on, Woody! Frank and I should’ve been out there a half hour ago!” Kaylee complained to the tech.

Young Woody Turner never knew what to say when a RIDE spoke to him. The former AIDEtech had been completely unprepared for equipment that could talk back to him on just about any topic instead of just diagnostic jargon. Plus he was always a little nervous around the female RIDEs. There were various rumors that they could make you a woman, too, if they Fused. It didn’t matter that they could only Fuse with their designated rider. Just the threat was enough to keep him off his game most days.

“Just a couple more minutes,” Turner said irritably, looking at schematics and data in his ‘specs. “Your left forepaw’s still reporting a lagging response in the subprocessors. I might have to replace the whole unit.”

“That’s silly and you know it,” Lt. Hewer said, looking over the young man’s left shoulder. She was in a fancy sand-colored dress uniform. “Bodge something together *now*. We’re on a bigwig PR thing today.”

Turner almost jumped out of his skin. “Ma’am, please, don’t *do* that.”

“They’ve got us playing Ponch and Judy today, LT,” Sgt. Hawking said. “So we’ve got to be at the top of our game. How in the hell did Command allow a reality show like this made during wartime?”

“One word for ya, sarge: Steader Entertainment,” Hewer said.

“That’s two words, ma’am.” The sergeant twitched his tufted ears.

“Just how much PR are we doing, anyway?” Frank said tiredly. The cat was out of his cradle and standing next to his rider. Since the Fritz incident their outer shells had been rebuilt to look more what Dr. Clemens called “transmetal”. Their body panels were a mix of animal colors and matte metallic, reflecting more the color scheme on the VM-3 Tornado. They had solid-color glowing eyes rather than the cartoony version on Tax Day, and less-mobile faces.

Worst of all, Kaylee thought, with the new fetters they could only speak freely

when around no one but other riders or when specifically ordered to. Otherwise it was ‘specs or an implant-link. In Kaylee’s admittedly limited experience it seemed like a very poor idea to present themselves as impassive, silent, and *armed to the teeth* to the people they were trying to protect. *Maybe Command got scared after Fritz...or something else happened on Tax Day. Or they’re just being paranoid.*

Paranoia during wartime didn’t seem like such a bad thing, she reflected.

Turner finally finished, putting her forepaw back together. She flexed it a few times and ran a half dozen diagnostics and was unable to find the slowdown that had plagued her since the day before. He released her from the cradle and received a pat between her antennae-tufted ears from Hwer before changing to skimmer mode.

The only non-shielding hardlight projectors left were on the instrument panel for the superfluous helmets. The riders mounted and they headed for their latest of *many* PR functions. *:Anny, I want to do something I was actually designed for,:* Kaylee sent to her partner.

:Just bide a while longer, sweetie. I’m sure we’ll have our fill of action,: Hwer said.

July 3, 121 A.L.

Nextus, First Tier Administration Reception Hall

Hwer and Hawking were hardly the only riders at the Chief Administrator’s Reception. Test Rider Major Phil Conyers and Vinnie were there as well. The rabbit was in what the Major insisted on calling “Hopper” mode, entirely straight-faced. Out here, Vinnie was Kaylee’s size, and the two bumped noses while Hwer saluted her superior officer.

“At ease,” Conyers said, returning it. “Especially *here*, Hwer. Get something to drink. We’re in for a long haul of hobnobbin’ this afternoon.”

“Thank you, sir,” Hwer replied, picking up a martini. The theme for the reception was very James Bond and *Mad Men*-ish 1960s swank. The RIDEs looked very out of place amongst the human dignitaries who mostly gave them a wide berth. Except for the small group from Uplift, who were cooing over Eleanor the elk and her rider.

“Don’t those people ever wear pants?” Hwer said. “Really, all they have is khaki shorts an’ polos?” Even the group from Aloha were more formally dressed!

“And that’s their First and Second Consuls, too,” Conyers said. “At least we’re not the center of attention this time. It’s that poor sap’s turn.”

He gestured at the far side of the large room, where a giant white owl was surrounded by onlookers. Her wings had red crosses on them. “OWL-RMR-000B,” Hwer said. “Met her pilot yesterday. They say she can medevac three Fused units in one lift with the new hardlight emitters.”

“Yes. Scoops them right up, no joke,” Conyers said. “And her name *isn’t* Hedwig. It’s Poledra, from some other book series.”

The snowy owl’s pilot wore what Hwer could only call a feathersuit, which wasn’t a good sign for the Fuser test. The costume was obviously covering up whatever physiological changes had actually occurred that the Restoration Chamber couldn’t correct. Hawking and Frank had gone over to their side of the room to socialize.

“A snowy owl in the Dry. Don’t that beat all?” Hwer quipped before her ‘specs

beeped with an urgent Command Message. “Hewer here. What’s the situation?”

“Fritz is asking for you,” Dr. Clemens said stiffly.

“Okay..?” Hewer said.

“Go behind the building into the Gardens, about a hundred meters away,” he continued. “Don’t tell anyone. Just don’t. Everyone else has a task to do right now, this is yours. Clemens out.”

Hewer looked at Kaylee, whose ears were vibrating. Every RIDE in the place had paused to listen to something, even the owl had twisted her head around upside down. Their riders had all gone silent, the dignitaries apparently having received a warning of their own. Quickly, quietly, hundreds were being shuffled out through non-obvious exits.

She and Kaylee moved behind a pillar, the robotic lynx rearing, chest opening up as she Fused with her rider. It was old hat by now, since the last problems with the LNX Fuser nannies had been fully stamped out. Hewer flexed her metallic fingers, extending hardlight-reinforced claws. As with all functions they’d attended over the past few weeks they had come with a full light assault pak: a gauss pistol, a PPC rifle, a couple dozen five-centimeter micro-missiles divided between two shoulder pods, and extra sarium batteries on her back to run everything. *:So, let’s get out of here....* Kaylee sent.

Getting to the designated place held no surprises initially. *Then* Fritz—as he had been just after the strange integration incident—appeared right in front of her out of nothing. “Evenin’, hep cats. Everyone get out okay?”

“Just fine...Captain,” Hewer said. “How in the hell did they let you out?”

“It’s not a matter of ‘let’, hayseed. I go where I please now,” the strange being continued. “Heroes and patriots do anything they want, see. I just saved a lot of lives, including yours. Sturmites were going to bomb the...oops.”

There was a flash and the ground shook, a shockwave that would’ve blown Hewer off her feet if she hadn’t been Fused flowed over, shattering windows in the buildings surrounding the garden.

“Oops? What do ya mean, ‘oops?’” Hewer exclaimed.

“Bomb squad didn’t find them all.” Fritz-Ryder shrugged. “Let’s you and me split this scene, dig?”

:Anny...Anny, he’s in my core systems,: Kaylee said, mental voice trembling. *:I think he put something in my forepaw sub-processors! I can’t control my lifters!:* As she spoke, they rose off the ground and started to float along after Fritz as if being tugged along on a leash. Hewer swore vehemently as she found herself unable to move—whatever Fritz was doing had locked Kaylee’s body right up. Fritz seemed to have some particular destination in mind, and from his swagger as he walked Kaylee had little doubt what he intended to do when they got there.

“Hold it right there, Captain!” Major Conyers shouted from within his lapine RIDE, hovering overhead. “Stand down, that’s an order!”

“No can do, Major Meat,” he replied haughtily. “And it’s just ‘Fritz’ and *only* Fritz, dig? Or no more Enigma.”

“You’re not as indispensable as you think you are,” Conyers said, drawing his own weapons. “And you’re *not* invincible either.”

There was a pop from between Fritz’s shoulder blades and a curl of smoke. Whatever Fritz had been doing to Kaylee’s systems was gone. She drew her gauss pistol and leveled it at the integrated human-RIDE. “Try that again and I *will not hesitate* to

to protect myself!” Kaylee said, hissing. Hewer felt exactly the same, herself. “Captain or no Captain.”

“I don’t need a DIN to get away from you squares,” Fritz said calmly. “Just *try* and find me meow!” He vanished again.

Vinnie flicked his large ears, then fired a MASER spread in one direction, then another. He was rewarded with muffled cursing. His ears tracked, and he fired again, this time a concentrated burst—and Kaylee followed up with a gauss pistol shot at the same spot. An empty spot in the air shimmered and turned back into Fritz, his right hand clapped over a hole in his left shoulder that was oozing some kind of silvery-red fluid that didn’t much resemble blood.

“Found you!” Vinnie cheered. “Payback’s a bitch, isn’t it, peckerwood?”

The other Fused RIDEs had Fritz surrounded now, including Poledra above him. She swooped down and closed a hardlight cage over the injured cyborg lynx-thing.

“I want my lawyer!” he growled. “You’re all just stupid meat! You hear me, cubes? Meat!”

“Don’t try and be funny, Captain,” Major Conyers said. “We’re grateful for what you’ve done for us over the past few months, but now you’re going to get a court martial. There was no reason you shouldn’t have found that last bomb—unless you wanted to play the hero. Take him away.”

As Poledra lifted away, escorted by a half dozen RIDEs in formation, Hewer and Kaylee floated back down the pavement. Major Conyers followed her down, then noticed something on the ground where Fritz had been standing. He picked up a small device the size of a molar and handed it to the Fused pair. The inside was scorched, but the rest was pristine. “Think of this as a souvenir. I’ll tell Command you have it, and I’m sure they’ll approve. You don’t have to know what it is, Lieutenant, but keep it safe. Might be useful someday.”

The Bambi’s Forest group that met after the debriefing was more quiet than usual. Poledra perched in the tree above them, white feathers all fluffed up, looking like a white-sheet ghost.

“We got lucky,” Vinnie said. “So lucky. He tried to hack me at the same time as you and something fried his transceiver. Smelled like an overload.”

Kaylee was curled up with Vinnie, giving the heroic brown rabbit a good, affectionate licking between purrs. For his part, it was all Vinnie could do not to giggle constantly. Finally he couldn’t take it anymore. “Okay, okay! You’re welcome, Kaylee. I’m a sopping wet bunny rabbit covered in kitty spit, so can I at least dry out a little?”

“You’re a very *brave* bunny,” Kaylee reiterated, headbutting him instead.

“I’d do it again. No hesitation,” Vinnie said. “So would the Major.” He giggled a little. “And all right, I admit it was nice getting a little payback. I’ve got your damn Tabasco right here, Fritz!”

“The rest of you did well, also,” Kaylee said to the prototypes. “I think that was your first actual combat action, Poledra?”

“Yep!” the owless hooted. “I’m not just RMR, but I can snatch POWs, too. Better treatment than the Sturmies give our humans—” her voice dissolved into a hoot. She blinked, then hooted again.

Puzzled, Kaylee tried to say something, but could only yowl. *Somethin’s real, real wrong here.* “Rrrfff!” she chuffed.

The landscape was a suddenly abuzz with purely animal noises. Roars, bleats, barks, and howls, half in panic, the other in confusion. Kaylee tried to disconnect, just in case there was some kind of glitch, and found she couldn't go back to the Real. The landscape, and the RIs themselves, became more photorealistic rather than looking like a well-animated film. Now it was *her* turn to panic.

"Nature's red in tooth and claw," came Fritz's voice from the sky. "And now, so are you. Embrace!"

Kaylee's sense of self dissolved, pulling back, compacting into the feline body. The lynx wondered just why she was being so friendly to food. The food looked back, screeched, then tried to hop away. The lynx gave chase, but the prey was fast and made it under some bushes where she couldn't follow. A part of her dimly remembered this wasn't how things should be, but in her state of hunger, she couldn't think of anything else.

One year later...

The first light hints of dawn began to peek over the eastern horizon as the lynx padded through the forest, two dead rabbits gripped firmly in her jaws from the night's hunting as she made her way back toward the cave where she and her mate had their den. Her mind was a simple beast's, much less than it once had been, but she still felt something akin to pride as she dimly imagined how their eight kittens, too young to hunt for themselves, would enjoy this tasty meal.

Prey was abundant, stupid, and easy to come by. Only a few rabbits managed to repeatedly elude her, including a canny brown one she couldn't bring herself to harm for reasons she was unable to understand—but her mate was rather relentless with. If she'd had more than animal intellect, she might have been puzzled by the way the same rabbit kept popping up over and over no matter how many times her mate killed it. But she didn't, so she simply accepted it as part of the way things were.

As she neared the cave, the ground trembled beneath her feet, as it had a few times recently. The female lynx hugged the ground as the trees rocked overhead. This time was worse than any of the other tremors. The lynx had just enough time to feel a deep, piercing terror—not for herself, but for the safety of her kittens. Then a gleaming *crack* appeared in the sky—blasting a jet of pure cold down into the landscape, freezing it, and her, solid. Awareness faded.

Reboot!

"Kaylee!" called a familiar Indian voice. "Come back to us."

Kaylee blinked her optics open. "...mommy?" she asked faintly, staring up into the face of her goddess.

Dr. Patil smiled down at her, moisture threatening to spill over the edges of her eyes. "We thought we had lost you. All of you!"

Kaylee moved her head back and forth experimentally. It was hard even to remember how to talk. "What...what happened?"

Dr. Patil's expression grew more grim. "That is what we are even now trying to find out. Fritz locked us out of the Nature Range simulation for ten minutes—during which time, he locked you in, and suppressed your neural networks' operation down to animal-instinct levels. Apparently he also distorted the simulation's inner time scale—"

A nervous lab-coated technician came up, bearing a tablet. "Ah, Dr. Patil? Could

you have a look at this? We can't shut the sim down...the safety interlocks won't let us. It says there are at least forty-seven RIs still inside. But we're *sure* we disconnected all of them."

Dr. Patil stopped looking into Kaylee's eyes for long enough to examine the tablet the tech shoved in front of her, then her jaw dropped. "Shiva's arms! These are...how could...don't shut down the sim!"

"We *can't*. The safety interlocks won't let us," the tech repeated. "We'll keep it frozen. What do you need, Doctor?"

"Fifty...no...seventy-five blank RI cores. Maybe a hundred. This is incredible! The virus...Fritz...in *ten minutes*! New *life*! Thank the gods for the Q-based mainframe!" The load average was ten times higher than it had ever been before—but at 1.17, the computer was barely even ticking over. "This was not even supposed to be *possible*!"

"Looks like you've got a lot to learn, Doc," the ever-present Rattigan spoke up from the counter beside her. "Looks like we all do."

October 12, 121 A.L.

"Sorry, sir! My AIDE's rebooting again!" the panicked corporal shouted to Major Conyers over the pulse gun fire from their objective. The hillside home of Ophelia Steader was armed to the teeth, raining clouds of mini-missiles down on the assault. Ophelia was purportedly one of the more balanced members of the massive, wealthy Steader family, but the Nextus Intelligence Agency had found she was collaborating with another family member in Sturmhaven to play both sides for suckers.

:*Don't tell me the Ad-I he's runnin' came from that woman's factory*,: Hewer sent to her commanding officer. Fused with Kaylee, they were hunkered down behind a layered hardlight shield. "Stand down, Corporal. Get that thing back in cycle mode."

:*Can't confirm or deny, Hewer*,: Conyers replied, though his tone of voice was enough. :*Vinnie's still working on the hack. He's better than any of their home systems, so it shouldn't be much longer*.:

:*Hey, Rocky!*: Vinnie said. :*Watch me pull a me out of my hat!*: The hack completed, information scrolling up one side of the display window he was projecting to his rider.

:*I knew it was a bad idea giving him access to the Twencen Channel*,: Conyers sent. :*But good job anyway*.:

As the house guns went quiet they received a ready signal from Hawking and Frank from their staging area a few clicks away. The Major would stay behind in the Command Skimmer while the rest of the dozen MRS troops—a mix of Chinook heavy and Tornado light AIDEs—lifted in. The Chinooks—loaded with heavy PPCs and shoulder-paks of two dozen mini-missiles—each grabbed a large shield/camo bubble generator to lead in the lighter units.

Compared to the RIDEs they were slow, unresponsive, and downright *stupid*. Kaylee, Frank, and Vinnie not only added weapons and other gear, but were effectively an increase in the unit's manpower. While their riders engaged in combat, they could engage in ECM, target and fire secondary weapons, and act as moral support.

"Let's go," Hewer said. "First squad, left. Second squad, right. Third, with me, up the middle." Frank was part of First Squad—the left side included the skimmer garage, and it was thought Ophelia might try to make a break for it. Hewer's group was heading

straight to the front door, running hunched over to minimize their exposure, braving possible fire from the various windows and firing ports in the house.

But the defenses on the front were oddly silent as the squadron approached. In fact, Hewer was able to run right up to the front door. She raised a furry fist and banged on it. "Hello! We was wonderin' if we could interest you in some copies of the *Watchtower*..."

:*What?*: Frank said. :*Command, what's—*:

His transmission garbled as a giant particle blast came out of the garage, easily melting through the door, the Chinook's hardlight shield, and the four MRS officers all at once.

:*Frank!*: Kaylee wailed.

:*Get that bitch!*: Vinnie added, snarling. :*That was a full-sized destroyer-class particle gun! Bad intel!*:

:*Roger that!*: Fritz's voice came over the comm. :*Hero time, meatbags!*:

"What the fuck?" Conyers swore over the voice comm. "Command, how did Fritz get out? Command?! Hewer, I'm being blocked. Who the *hell* gave that guy his access back?"

:*Oh, that's all we need,*: Kaylee growled, looking around for something or someone she could punch. She decided on the front door, sending it flying off the hinges and into the house. She waved to the soldiers with her to cover her as they moved in.

"Super-hepcat!" Fritz broadcast. There came a sound of something impacting the roof of the house, shattering through the reinforced alloy structure like so much tinfoil.

:*She's gonna pay for killing Frank and his meat,*: Fritz said privately to Kaylee. :*Oh, by the way, how are our kittens? Dr. Patil won't give me visitation rights.*:

:*You won't get a word out of me, bastard,*: Kaylee said, repulsed. :*Why didn't you get here sooner, 'hero?'*:

:*Hey, don't blow your jets. I had things to do. I am, first and foremost, a patriot. And a lover. Make that two things,*: Fritz smarmed. :*Did you at least get to name them before they put them in storage?*:

:*NOT the time!*: Hewer shouted over the link. The sounds from further inside the huge home were like a bull in a china shop. Somewhere deep inside Fritz was making a mess of things. The squad finally came up on the first signs of damage—a few shattered bodyguard androids that looked like they'd been taken apart piece by piece.

How Fritz had escaped mattered not nearly as much as recapturing him did. He was far more important than their current objective. All RIDEs and their pilots had standing orders to shoot Fritz on sight, with lethal (for a human) force if necessary. If Sturmhaven got ahold of him...

There were times she wondered if their enemy also had an integrated RIDE, but signs from the NIA pointed to no.

:*Got her!*: Fritz shouted. :*Who's the hep cat hero? I am! What a gas!*:

A few minutes later, the squad found Ophelia Steader's remains surrounded by more mechanical bodyguards. Fritz had sliced her open and gutted her like a cow, hanging her body parts like so much butcher shop meat, each section neatly labeled. The hep cat himself was no longer anywhere in sight.

From somewhere, Fritz giggled. :*'Soft you now! The fair Ophelia!' Soft and kinda squishy...and only 'fair' if you think all is in love and war.*:

:*I can't sense him anywhere,*: Vinnie reported nervously. :*Major, there's....*:

:Absolutely nothing you meatbag squares can do. Just to show you I'm not a bad guy, I'm going to win this war for you meatbags. Then...I dunno. Maybe watch a movie or something. Well, that's all, folks!: Fritz slammed the virtual door on them.

"Search pattern Gamma Four!" Major Conyers shouted. "Full MASER spread! Find him now!"

"Ah think...he's already gone," Hewer sighed. "He might be full of himself, but he won't fall for the same trick twice."

"I'm calling in the cleanup crews," Major Conyers said. "Hewer, Kaylee, back to base for debriefing. What a horrible mess."

The delayed onset of shock and adrenaline rendered most of the squad's memories hazy of the hours that followed. But something both Vinnie and Major Conyers would remember for a long time to come was standing in the garage, next to the carbon stain that forensics would later verify was all that remained of Frank and his pilot.

The otherwise *completely empty* garage.

Dr. Patil lay in the VR space with her creations. In keeping with the Bambi's Forest theme, she'd taken an animal form herself, a doe avatar. Kandace, Kaylee, and Franz were snuggled up against her side, weeping for their lost brother. "I never intended to send you off to war," Dr. Patil said. "I feel... responsible."

"But that's our purpose, isn't it?" Franz said.

"You weren't supposed to *have* a purpose," Dr. Patil said angrily—though it was an inward-directed anger, at herself. "Except the purpose of all life—to grow, to learn... to reproduce." She smiled humorlessly. "The one part of it we got *right*, and it was none of my doing. Why did I not *think* before I published that paper?"

A large rat was on her cervine shoulders, twitching his whiskers. "Don't beat yourself up too much, Doc. Take it from me," Rattigan said. "I'm happy to be alive."

"If there's anything good that came out of this Fritz business was was the learning you all can reproduce 'naturally' in this environment," Avilia-the-doe said. "The military has decided this will remain secret and ordered us to make changes to the mainframe design so it won't happen again—at least, not until such time as we might declassify the research. But we still have fifty-three new lives to eventually transfer into cores in the real world. I won't keep them in storage indefinitely."

"And eight of those are mine," Kaylee said. At first, she'd been too disgusted by the way Fritz had used her to want anything to do with her offspring—they only reminded her that she'd spent most of a virtual year as his animal-minded plaything. She hadn't objected when Dr. Patil had consigned them all to off-line storage for the time being—they didn't know how to extract them from the Q mainframe yet.

But for all of that, her memories of the joys of that animal motherhood had stayed with her, and her contemplation of them with full faculties left her marveling at the idea. This simulation was much more than the sum of its parts, and the kittens were *hers*. She wouldn't let her hatred of Fritz ruin the one *good* thing that had come out of his abuse of her.

"Dr. Patil...Mom...I'd like to name my kittens," Kaylee said. "Can you bring them online here for a while?"

"They still need some work to bring out their latent intelligence—it was suppressed, the same as yours, but unlike yours never even had the chance to begin, so

reviving it will be a complicated process—but...yes, I think I can,” Patil said, the doe giving the lynx a lick on her cheek.

Five girls and three boys, all needing names. Kaylee pondered. She purred for the first time since her brother’s death. *Let’s see...I’m going to start with...Katie...*

Chapter Fourteen: Assault and Batteries

*September 1, 156 A.L.
Alpha Camp*

Paul yawned and stretched, as much as he could from where he was curled up inside the belly of a wolf. “Morning,” he said. “Any change?”

“Negative,” Fenris rumbled all around him. “I have been monitoring our ten ‘Fortunatos’ as closely as I might since the two cured RIDEs have returned to the camp, but I have not seen any unusual movements near them, nor detected unusual network traffic. Of course, whisker laser transmissions are very hard to detect.”

“Any signs of anyone trying to leave the camp?”

“Negative,” Fenris repeated. “Only standard patrols. All those who departed subsequently returned.”

“Hmm. Two days on and we’re not a lot closer to finding our culprit than when we began.” Paul closed his eyes and dropped into the Fuser link, opening Fenris’s eyes and staring out into the world. “We hear back from Shelley again?” He checked comm records himself. “Ah, we didn’t,” he said. “Just that one message yesterday.” Rochelle had sent a terse email that she was passing on the info about the trojan to someone closer to the camp. There was too much scrutiny on them back in Uplift right now for her to be seen slipping away into the desert, and they were also working with Zane on plans to retake the mining platform Fritz had driven him out of.

“Indeed,” Fenris said.

“Hope they get here soon,” Paul said. “I think Alfie’s about to go stir crazy if we can’t point him at a culprit.”

“They know how urgent it is,” Fenris said. “I doubt they will be dawdling.”

The 20,001st Floor

Upgrade complete. Quinoa’s old batteries would be reading 300% full at this point. There had been a moderate loss of sarium during the condensing process, but within acceptable limits according to the old forum post. As her body systems came back online, she listened to the environment around her. *Nobody there...no other Integrates.* She opened her eyes.

“Good afternoon, Dave.” The voice that spoke was a perfect replica of the HAL 9000, fitting for her cell. It was a voice the sphinx was long familiar with. HAL was one of the Steader family’s stock Ad-Is (along with Robbie the Robot and Teletraan-1). For some reason, perhaps some long-departed programmer’s sense of humor, nothing they could do would induce him to call anyone anything but “Dave.” “Your Uncle Dave left you a message. Would you like to hear it?”

“Play it, HAL.”

“Hello, Quinnie. I’m telling HAL to play this when you wake up—burying it under enough layers of encryption that hopefully Fritz won’t see it. As I was on my way to the jet to leave, I overheard Fritz say that he left that necklace of yours in HAL’s core. I don’t

know whether that's important, but if it is, that's where it is. Good luck, and I'll see you later."

Thanks, Uncle Joe. Quinoa's body burned, aching all over as if she'd just run four marathons in a row. Calf muscles complaining every centimeter, she levered herself to her feet and spread her still-bare wings. Sitting on the dining table in front of her was a feast. Hunger gnawed at her, but now wasn't the time to eat. There was still a possibility that her upgrade could go sour, so she had a narrow window of opportunity.

Well, time to channel Bruce Lee. She put herself into a ready stance, pulled her fist back, and smashed through a wall. The corridor beyond wouldn't have been out of place on the refitted starship Enterprise. She knew this corridor. There were homages to three centuries of known science fiction in the Steader family's counterweight mansion, but Quinoa hadn't been up here for years. Long enough that the layout was unfamiliar—it was always changing, anyway. The house was built on a modular design, and as the Steaders' interest in particular works waxed and waned, they would move those sections nearer to or farther away from their living quarters. The place was also *completely* empty of humans, RIDEs, and even Star Wars droids.

"What are you doing, Dave?" HAL said.

"Going home, HAL," Quinoa said. Without her DIN there was no way to easily interface with the mansion's computers. "Which way out?"

"I cannot let you jeopardize the mission, Dave," the faux movie AI continued according to script.

The book and the movie versions of *2001* were different in a lot of ways. In the book, the Discovery's destination was Saturn, not Jupiter; and the giant monolith wasn't in orbit by itself, but sitting on Enceladus. Other than that, they shared a lot of details. HAL's psychosis caused by conflicting orders, which ended up killing all of the crew except for Dave Bowman. In both versions, Dave had to go into vacuum without a spacesuit for a brief period. The book had HAL venting the atmosphere from the *Discovery's* interior, and the movie had the dramatic explosive decompression into the airlock from the pod.

For an Integrate, going out into space without a suit wasn't that big a deal. A skin-tight hardlight atmo barrier was enough, but the limiting factor was oxygen. Without any supplemental oxy, she could spend an hour "exposed" to vacuum before her systems started taking damage and she had to go into hardlight-shelled hibernation. While that still wouldn't mean her death it would be some time before ZOT could pick her up. And by then, who knew what Fritz could have done?

The big question in Quinoa's mind was what version of events HAL would decide to follow.

"Open the pod bay door, HAL," Quinoa said experimentally, walking through the empty corridors of the family space mansion, one of a number of similar structures that studded the planetoid-sized counterweight satellite whose orbital velocity held the Alohavator up. The various mansions tended to be based on all different architectures and designs; the Steader home looked like a futuristic space station, all tubes and rounded modules strung together.

"I'm sorry, Dave, I'm afraid I can't do that," HAL droned.

Quinoa went to a wall computer and pulled open the keyboard. DIN or not, she was a *very* fast keyboardist, but the unit was powered down and not responding. *Okay, how about this?* the sphinx thought, yanking a panel off the wall underneath. The place

had been *designed* with science fiction tropes in mind. She'd been exposed to thousands of them all the way into early adulthood. It only took a little rewiring and rearranging of a few faux "isolinear chips" to restore power.

The red HAL eye overhead came alight. "Dave, what are you doing?"

Quinoa stayed silent, pulling up a current layout of the mansion. *Now, where is it you're keeping your core these days?* She had to assume there was at least *one* of Fritz's supporters somewhere onboard. She looked at the HAL eye and waved, grinning. "Just try and stop me, poindexter. I dare you."

It only took a little bit of searching to find HAL's central core. No matter how the arrangement of the modules might change, after all, the central core had to remain more or less *central*. She found it in the layout, cloaked herself, and headed that way.

The Coffeehouse

Fritz slouched in his throne, slurping on an iced cappuccino as he flicked through the network news feeds. It had been a few days since anything important had happened, which made it ever more likely that something else *would* happen, the more time passed.

As it turned out, something did happen—his DIN pinged with notification of an incoming call. The caller ID was of one "Murphy"—the Irish Wolfhound Integrate he'd put in charge of the Brubeck mining platform's occupation. *Oh yeah, time for their daily check-in.* Fritz opened the connection. "It's your dime, don't waste it."

The Integrate in question appeared on the comm wall display opposite Fritz's throne—a tall shaggy grey dog, hardlight emitters visible as red TRON lines through the fur, standing at attention and saluting. His RIDE half had originally been in an elite NextusMil branch, Fritz recalled—not the Loose Cannons, but one of the Sturmie hunter-killers from the war days. Sturmies liked to use wolves, so naturally the military had thought it would be a good idea to use wolfhounds. "Top o' the mornin' to ye, Mister Bosscat Sir!"

Fritz waved a hand languidly. "Yeah, yeah, the rest of the day to yourself and all that jazz. What's going down out there?"

"We're still in full possession of the platform, sir!" Murphy reported. "No sign of any enemy counterattacks." He frowned. "The others ye left me with here...I can't say I'm thrilled by their behavior. No discipline a tall."

Fritz shrugged. "Hey, man, they can't all be war heroes like us, ya dig? Don't blow your jets, it's cool. Even that bunch of bimbos will be more than a match for any meat and mech Brubeck can throw at you. Meanwhile, let 'em blow off a little steam."

"Uh, as you say, sir," Murphy said.

"Hey, doggie, you doubt the Bosscat?"

"Nossir! 'Tis a fine day today, too. We've been scrapin' the best Q we've ever tasted off the floor, even. Shor'n it's a big party here!"

"Well, cool. You cats have yourselves a swinging time, but don't go too crazy with the juice. You should be all set to put knuckles to the creeps if they do come sniffing around. You cats give me another ring if events eventuate. Later." He rang off without waiting for Murphy's reply. "Buncha murgatroysd frisbees," Fritz muttered. "But they'll be cool. Not like the kinda meat and mech they'll be up against are any kinda tough toenails."

:Have you forgotten Tocsin so quickly?: that little voice in his head nagged.

Fritz shook his head as if trying to dislodge an annoying fly from his ear. “Can the lip, Jiminy. Toxie’s back at Alpha Camp—I been keeping an eye on *him*. Anyway, he’s the one and only, and they’d need a whole *squad* of Toxies to give the bum’s rush even to *that* bunch a’ bums. Not that I don’t wanna see ‘em try.” He smirked. “But there ain’t no percentage in wasting energy, is there?”

:Still, you might not want to underestimate them.:

Fritz shrugged. “So what? Worst-case scenario, they drive those losers off and get the platform back. They’ve still learned a lesson. And it’ll still cost ‘em lots of time and money to fix it. Even if that happens, it’s all good. I wouldn’t want to trash ol’ Clint’s digs permanent-like—if nothing else, that’s where *our* best Q-munchies come from.”

:And speaking of Tocsin, what about Quinoa?:

“What about her? Since ol’ Joe bugged out, it got too boring to hang up there—so here we are, home again. Anyway, I left an old friend of hers up there to keep an eye on things. We’re golden, Jiminy. Completely copacetic.”

The inner voice didn’t reply, but Fritz couldn’t quite shake the feeling that he disagreed nonetheless.

Brubeck Mining Private Hangar, Uplift Aerodrome

“You sure you want to risk your sub again?” Zane asked Rhianna as a small group gathered at the company’s private hangar. “Completely sure?”

“We’re good. It’s as ironclad as the systems in your campus and half of your platforms, and a lot smaller and more maneuverable than your Starmasters,” Rhianna replied, hefting a bag full of DIN-beta units over her back. She wore easy-Fuse denim coveralls and a red bandanna to tie up her hair. It felt good to do physical things. She walked up the aft loading ramp of the Dream Chaser. “Leah and Vince both gave these their seal of approval. We’re ready.”

“Launch is mainly a matter of intel,” Vince said. The raven Integrate fluttered on half-spread wings. “There doesn’t seem to be any activity at your compromised platform, Zane. But we know that’s probably not true.”

“The key word there is ‘seem’. We can’t even get satellite imagery of it, it’s all blurry,” Zane said. “Which seems to suggest they’re at least throwing a party there or something.”

“Yes, there is that,” Vince agreed. “What about our flesh and metal friends? Are they ready for this?”

“You tell us,” Kaylee said. “I’ve got DINs and weapons up the wazoo. I don’t think Rhi could pack anything else onto this old chassis of mine.” Kaylee herself didn’t look any bulkier, but the support pak and nanolathe supplies were sharing space with a pair of shoulder pulse cannons and a dozen leg-mounted micro-missiles. Everyone else would be protecting Rhianna and herself as she did the hardware swap, then it would be Rochelle and Uncia’s turn to toss Fritz’s Inties out of the platform’s systems.

“DINs by the tens!” Uncia said happily, loping up the ramp behind her. The normally sleek lines of her fluffy fur were disrupted by a long cannon barrel poking forward over her right shoulder and a large metal pod on her left. There were smaller pods on her hips, other equipment modules on her lower back, and still more gear stored internally. “Dare ya to hack me! Double dare ya!”

“Like I’ve done a couple dozen times already?” Vince said tiredly. He’d only broken through the first couple layers half the time as it was. What the beta units lacked in complexity they made up for in redundancy. “Pass. You’re ready. And I’ve got an optimized DIN, thanks to you.”

Rochelle chuckled, bringing up the rear with a shoulder bag full of tools and gear. Her hair was white with grey rosettes today, matching Uncia’s fur. “We’re all ready. It’s gonna be awesome giving Fritz back some of his own. He won’t know what hit him.”

Rounding out the assault team were Myla and Sophie, Marc and Cernos. The stag Command Armor had been fitted out with more crypto gear to act as a backup to Rochelle and Uncia in VR—and his hated hardlight epaulets were finally gone. Befitting Sophie’s Scout Armor status, with the help of the Integrates her hardlight camo was as good as theirs, though more battery-draining. She’d be working closely with Carrie-Anne for stealth.

“You ready for this?” the black jaguaress asked Zane’s other bodyguard.

“Wouldn’t miss it,” Myla said. “I just wish we could’ve talked Zane into staying behind. Absorbing a mil-spec combat skill chip is a poor substitute for actual experience. So, Zane, keep yourself cloaked when at all possible.”

“Roger that, Myla.” For his part, Zane was more nervous than usual. They were going in with what amounted to a full assault team—a dozen Integrates with military backgrounds, plus Carrie-Anne and himself. Vince had brought him a forearm-mounted pulse rifle that plugged directly into his wrist socket to power it, plus a hardlight shield amplifier. “You know, Rhianna, this isn’t how I wanted to introduce you to my platform. I wanted to...well, present it to you like a gift. Watch your eyes light up when I showed you into the RIDE master maintenance bay, with all the equipment and RIDEs being serviced...” He sighed. “Instead, we’re going to toss out a bunch of vandals who’ve probably tagged everything with graffiti by now.”

“A...gift?” Rhianna said, sensing something in his undertone—she tried to wrap her brain around it, but couldn’t. “Well, that’s very *kind* of you, but...uh...”

“Well, a gift of the experience, anyway.” Zane waved a hand randomly. “Not like I was actually going to *give* you the place.” He muttered something that sounded suspiciously like, “you’d just say no anyway,” then cleared his throat. “Um...well...you know, I have to admit, at least it’s cozy in here,” he said almost frantically. “Kind of like a flying RV.”

“Doesn’t look much like a Winnebago, does it?” Rhianna said, feeling the urge to smirk at his discomfort. This *was* familiar, since she still remembered being a young man, stammering through conversations with pretty girls. A young man with a...*Oh, boy. Oh God. Does he..? Does he have a crush on me?* That put his past behavior in an entirely different light. She knew Terry had a lot of respect for her—that much was in Kaylee’s memories. But the last thing she expected was a boyish—tigerish—infatuation.

The cargo area of the sub had just enough space for the extra equipment and the assault team. “I thought you Inties could probably cloak it that way or something.”

“So which one of you is the Druish Princess?” Zane said, chuckling.

“Present,” Rochelle said cheerfully. “They’d better not shoot the hair.”

“Guess that makes me the mog,” a golden retriever Intie said. Ianau’s tongue lolled.

“I guess we know what the in-flight movie’s going to be,” Rochelle said.

“No movie. We need to focus,” Carrie-Anne said. “Where’s CinTally? She agreed

to pilot.”

“You had to ask?” The female Cooper’s Hawk answered from the flight deck. “I came in through the side hatch. Neat little sub you’ve got here, Rhianna. She’ll fly like a dream with me at the controls. She’s got some great acceleration with those engine and battery upgrades.”

“And she’s *modest*, too,” Rochelle said, grinning.

Rhianna had spared no expense for once, either on the sub or on Kaylee’s upgrades, even accepting compensation from the cash-strapped Brubeck Mining to get the right tools for the job—something this important was no place for pride. They went in prepared, or not at all. The Dream Chaser had fore and aft retractable pulse cannons and two dozen of Kaylee’s favored micro-missiles in underwing FAST paks—the *weapons* were temporary, at least.

Zane pinched the bridge of his muzzle and chuckled. “Are you sure the Starmaster won’t be jealous?”

“Starry and me, we got us an understanding,” CinTally said happily. “We can launch when you’re all strapped in!”

Kaylee Fused with her partner. In that mode they did look rather bulkier than before. Between the support pak, shield-mode hardlight pelt, and shoulder-mounted weapons, she looked like a very muscular female mecha.

Rochelle and Uncia Fused up as well, taking a little more time than usual due to having to move various modules around to fit Rochelle into the body. They ended up with the shoulder-mount cannon racked on her back and other equipment positioned at various spots around her body. Her forearm gauntlets each held a fast-firing pulse submachine gun modeled after the 20th-century mini-Uzi, on spring-loaded auto-holsters that would snap them into her hands on command. The rest was high-speed hacking gear with Enigma-3 and their own DIN-beta Sneaker software.

Rhianna didn’t mind depending on Kaylee’s own experience, now that she had full access to all her memories. There was a lot of ground to cover there, including some *pointed* things they both wanted to ask Conyers, and how to break to Katie that not only was Kaylee actually her “biological” mother but Fritz was *her dad*. And what had happened to the other fifty-two Ris? The odds weren’t good that they were all still alive, but many of them could be. Did they even know they’d had “real” parents? What had blotted out Katie’s memory of her mother, even after they’d given her Kaylee’s old parts? And had that research ever been declassified? Could *today’s* RIDEs have “biological” children too?

The visceral loss of Frank from the previous night’s review still sat heavily in Rhianna’s belly. She’d known it was coming, from the memories Kaylee had shared of her reunion with Kandace the evening after Paul’s crew had come and gone, but experiencing it directly had a tremendous impact. The whole situation had been so confused, as far as Kaylee knew no one had ever found out exactly what vehicle Ophelia Steader had even *had* in her garage to mount such a powerful weapon. It was just as if lightning had struck from out of a clear blue sky and blotted out her littermate. *Who the hell keeps something armed like that in their garage? Who?* Rhianna wondered.

:I’m going to find out once this crap is over with, come Hell or high water,:
Kaylee said, picking up on her rider’s thoughts. *:More, I want to know who fired it. Fritz never did like Frank very much. Fritz always showed up in the ‘nick of time’. Feh!:*

They weren't ready yet to go over what had happened to put Kaylee in the Shed a couple years later. Even Kaylee herself shied away from reliving those days, keeping them isolated. She was *scared*. Rhianna didn't blame her at all. The shed had been the greatest trauma of Kaylee's life, and when something that bad happens to you, you always end up wondering if you somehow *deserved* it. What would you do if you were suddenly given the chance to *find out for certain* just what you might have done?

:*Rhi, let's just do the job in front of us right now*,: Kaylee sent. :*Dwelling on not dwelling on something is kinda uncomfortably recursive*.:

:*Yes*,: Rhianna replied simply, shutting the aft ramp. Then, aloud. "Lock and load, everyone. Let's get old Clint's platform back. CinTally, do that thing."

"You got it!" The Integrate pilot kicked in the engines and launched. The sound of electric guitars played over the onboard speakers as another selection from her playlist went into the intercom.

*Yeah, we'll get higher and higher
Straight up we'll climb
Higher and higher
Leave it all behind
Oh, we'll get higher and higher
Who knows what we'll find?*

After the takeoff, CinTally faded the music out of the speakers, though kept up a sideband playlist broadcast for anyone who wanted to listen. It was easy to tell who was tuning in from the heads nodding in rhythm along the seats. She projected flight path and ETA data along another sideband—18 minutes to apogee, 34 to landing. "The pilot has turned the 'no smoking' sign off!" she chirped cheerfully over the intercom. "You are now free to move about the cabin."

Zane chuckled. "Well, I can't fault her enthusiasm. You get hired for the thing you love doing, and never work a day in your life."

Alpha Camp

The first hint that the camp might be receiving a visitor came in the form of "somebody big" calling Paul and Fenris by laser comm to ask them to warn AlphaWolf and the camp of an incoming "new recruit". The language of the missive strongly suggested one of the larger dinosaurs. But the message itself had unmistakable "Integrate dandruff" all over it.

"Heh. Looks like we're going to have some competition, big guy," Paul said.

"I've never seen size as a 'competition,'" Fenris said.

Paul chuckled. "That's because you've never had to. Some of those dragon RIDEs get pretty big—especially the ones that turn into full-fledged subs. And I gather bigger RIDEs don't shrink that much when they Integrate."

"In that case, I shall rather look forward to meeting someone even bigger than I am," Fenris said. "And I believe I *will* adopt that philosophy of yours."

AlphaWolf called a general meeting before going out to meet the new arrival. "Okay, everyone. I have good news. We've got another big guy on the way, so don't be shocked when he flies over. Spread the word to anyone who isn't here. We'll be going

out to meet him first, of course. But we'll have another set of big guns like Fenris here."

"Well, this should be interesting," Kandace said. Her tawny hardlight pelt had been installed since returning from Uplift. She looked *much* happier, and there was even a family resemblance to Kaylee.

Alone with Fenris and Paul after the meeting, waiting outside the dome to greet the new arrival, AlphaWolf was somewhat less positive. "So you're telling me we're not just getting an Integrate visitor, we're getting a *huge* Integrate visitor?" he growled. "Are you sure they're not trying to undercut my authority here?"

"They're as horrified by that trojan as we are, Alphie," Paul said. "We did another survey. There are two more infected in the Camp, more than we thought. We think it's spreading—maybe losing two caused whoever's behind it to trigger a more active phase—so we have to act."

"Getting comm signal," Fenris said. "He's here, cloaked, outside the dome."

"I guess the point is moot," AlphaWolf said unhappily. "He knew *exactly* where we are."

"Ah, yeah," Paul said. "About that..." Rhianna had mentioned that the camp's location was something of an open secret among the Integrates, but he hadn't really figured out a good way to break that to AlphaWolf yet.

"I hate to barge in on this chat," came a friendly new voice. "But we've known where you folks were since the day you established the Camp—some sympathetic Inties over at Camelot directed you here. Until now we've had no reason to stop by for a cup of sugar. Sorry, I'm Peaches."

AlphaWolf blinked. "...Peaches?"

"If it helps, you can call me *Mister* Peaches," the uncloaking dragon deadpanned. His scales were the shade of a ripe peach, and he had an oddly jolly expression on his pointed muzzle. He was about fifteen meters from nose to tail. His horns, dorsal spines, and tail fork glowed. "Pleased to meet you. My human half is Captain Josh Weinstein, formerly of the Burnside Militia. But 'we' go by Mister Peaches."

"Of course. It makes sense a dragon would hail from *Burnside*," Paul said.

"Oh, marvelous! I've *never* heard that one before!" Peaches said, rolling his eyes good-naturedly. "I've got all the anti-virus tools from Shelley and Uncia at the ready."

"Think you'll be up for cleaning out twelve infected at once?" Paul asked.

"My RIDE half was a Command Armor. As I see your fellow is, too." Peaches nodded to Fenris. "I was a drop-shuttle-slash-gunship and I've still got all the comm gear. I just funnel it through my industrial-sized DIN and it's a win. I *could* give short stuff over there a copy as a backup, just in case." Peaches grinned good-naturedly at the two-tailed wolf who came up to his shoulder.

"You have sufficient parallel processing to handle them all at once?" Fenris asked. "Impressive."

"Only *after* I Integrated. Before, well...I wasn't the sharpest tooth in the jaw," Peaches said uncomfortably.

Paul smiled ruefully. "You two have more in common than you know. Oh...one more thing." He nodded to AlphaWolf.

"We fully expect whoever is behind these infections—perhaps the trojan's original author—is still within our camp. But we haven't been able to pin down who it is," AlphaWolf said. "He or they are also likely to have non-infected supporters."

Peaches concentrated, his hardlight spines glowing, then appeared to be a

metallic dragon RIDE. “This is going to be tough. If they run, I’m a little too big to chase, and I’m going to have to focus more on curing the infected, so I’m going to be vulnerable. Bring in some with more mobility for the capture. Once I get inside I’ll start analyzing signals and pinpoint this bastard. If they’re in the Camp, I’ll burn them out.” The disguise’s eyes flashed red. “Just keep them off me until I’m done.”

Paul grinned. “Fenny, could you let Kandy-girl know we need her and any others she can round up she trusts?”

“With pleasure,” the wolf boomed.

AlphaWolf groaned. “This is *already* worse than I thought. Even if this goes well the Pack’s going to be weakened for years, maybe. Word will get out. Abused RIDes will stop coming to us for sanctuary...”

“Better to root out the poison *now* before it gets any worse, boss,” Paul said. “There’s a major risk they’ll decide to infect even more of the Pack, just for kicks. It could be like a zombie attack from the old movies.”

“Of course you’re right,” the movement’s leader said firmly. “We’ll hurt for a while, but it needs doing.”

“Let’s get this party started!” Peaches said. “Your friendly neighborhood driggin at your service.”

“Righto.” Paul turned to the giant wolf beside him. “Let’s Fuse up!”

Fenris nodded, then opened wide and gulped him down, standing up into their six-meter Fuser shape a moment later. “You know, you enjoy that a little too much,” Paul said.

“Can you blame me? Since we can’t eat together while Fused, it’s the only time I actually get to taste anything directly.”

“Oh, *thank* you for that,” Paul said. “Someone pass the brain bleach.”

Mister Peaches started snickering metallically. “I think we’re going to get along just fine. Good ol’ human-me got nommed a few times, though there was an...alternative way in.”

“Can we not go there, please?” Paul asked.

“So to speak,” Fenris added.

“Argh!”

The 20,001st Floor

The problem with obvious places were rather self-evident, but it was just like her uncle. The problem was that if there was another Integrate aboard they could have done any number of things if they found the DIN. They could have destroyed it, moved it, or were just waiting for Quinoa to show up. Still, Fritz didn’t want her dead—*yet*. To her knowledge neither he nor his followers had ever killed another Intie.

There was always a first time, given what was now at stake.

Quinoa passed through the *Star Trek* section, then Imperial-style corridors from *Star Wars*, followed by the *Jetsons* home. This place she remembered fondly. It was a play-area for the ever-changing gaggle of Steader children, and had never been empty for as long as she could remember—until now. Seeing it like this made her angry. Rosie the Robot went *pling* in her corner, the red eyes on her cylindrical head blinking, but she didn’t move. The poor Ad-I seemed confused.

The next step was to open a maintenance crawlspace—a Jeffries tube—to enter

HAL's meticulously reproduced core. Pulling off the access panel rewarded her with a deafening racket of machinery. "What the *Hell* is that?" the sphinx fumed, peering into the tube.

There was more to science fiction than just TV, books, and movies. There were plenty of video games in that genre as well. After the *My Little Pony* bodyguards that poor Myla was subjected to, there had been one "Samus Aran" paired up with "Mega Man X". At least those two had had excuses for being armed to the teeth. If nothing else, the video games had provided ample fodder for more IDE projects for her Uncle Joe... and also, the tableau that faced Quinoa now.

"You're kidding me. You're fucking *kidding* me, Fritz," Quinoa said. In front of her was a larger room filled with floating blocks that vanished and reappeared in a predictable pattern. Little robots in hardhats, and floating hardlight Metroids moved around just to add some spice. Yet another play area. "I'm *not* doing this. I'm not."

Quinoa powered up her lifters, forming a dense hardlight shell around herself, atom-thick at the leading edge. There was only one thing to do when presented with a Gordian Knot like this—slice right through it and hope there was nobody in the way.

She stopped herself before launch. This was a very *Steader* thing to do, she reflected. Acting without thinking had gotten her into this mess in the first place. Underestimating the hippogryph had almost gotten her *killed*. She shut the entrance to the videogame haven and pondered where else Fritz might have hidden the DIN, or even whether she needed it. For most Integrates the DIN was something of a security blanket—their connection to the outside world. Then she remembered.

The nano-paste was still in her DIN socket. The sphinx facepawed. *What the hell was I thinking?* No, she knew exactly what was on her mind. The Steader family had a well-deserved reputation for being crazy, unpredictable, and downright creepy. Quinoa's own cousin Harold (half the time Henrietta) was the nuttiest of a nutty bunch, going through RIDE after RIDE, discarding each one as he became bored. When Quinoa was younger, before she'd gotten the sphinx Quorra, he'd offered to give the then-teenaged girl a huge black panther named KITTY at one of the twice-yearly family reunions. Not wanting to be an "icky" boy, she'd turned him down.

No more Crazy Crazy, she decided. No more "come at me, bro" taunts. No more thinking of potential Integrates—as she now thought of them—as a lower form of life. There were times when crazy worked, but *no more*.

It was simply time to leave.

The sphinx started hyper-saturating her body with oxygen, topping off her batteries. The counterweight's geostationary orbit would give her a re-entry trajectory right over Gondwana. It was going to be rough, but no worse than orbital skydiving. There was an airlock intended for that sport not far from where she was, in fact. She lifted, then headed that way at speed.

Rosie the Robot followed, going *pling-pling* all the way.

Approaching Brubeck Main Platform, Brubeck Ridge, Southwest Dry Ocean

At six thousand meters the avian Integrates Vince, TimRazor, and Cosma jumped out of the opened aft loading ramp. The Dream Chaser was still going all of Mach 3 at the time, but the speed was immaterial for the raven, the peregrine falcon, and the harpy eagle. CinTally glanced wistfully at them as they departed, then she and the other

Integrates cloaked the sub. The avian pilot slammed on the deceleration thrusters.

Zane pointed ahead at the small landing pad high on the side of the platform. "There. It's meant for fliers, not subs, but this sub is flier-sized, shouldn't be a problem. That's where I brought the cargo ship in when we took out the Board."

"Aww, I thought you said it was gonna be a challenge," CinTally said. "That's a *lot* bigger than a postage stamp."

"We've got some activity on the platform," TimRazor reported. "I've got a half dozen of Fritz's cronies milling around. Looks like they're...playing volleyball?"

A scrap of music came over the speakers. "...*playing, playing with the boys...*" CinTally shook her head and it cut off. "Whoops, soundtrack moment. One of Tally's original features I haven't been able to root out of my brain yet. So, how you wanna play this, boss?"

"Configure the pulse cannons for EMP," Zane said. "An area-effect blast from vehicle mount guns should scramble even our systems for a few minutes, and with any luck it'll be 'quiet' enough they won't notice inside."

"And with any luck we'll fry a DIN or two," Rhianna added.

"Hell, the way they make DINs I'll bet you ten *mu* we fry at least half of them," Rochelle said.

"They *will* have spares," Rhianna reminded her. "Let's make them use them up."

CinTally nodded. A panel flipped open on the instrument board and a bank of switches flipped themselves. Targeting reticles appeared in the HUD—entirely redundant to the ones on CinTally's inner eyes—and a moment later a series of energy pulses spat from the Dream Chaser's nose, splashing the impromptu volleyball court with energy. A half-dozen Integrates froze and fell over. Unheeded, the ball bounced over the side of the platform and rolled a hundred meters down to the desert.

"Ooooh, that must have hurt!" Cosma chirped. "Sparky sparky *boom* DINs! They're all down."

"It would be nice if someone could shove all that deadwood to the side so I don't crunch any of them when I land," CinTally said. "Not that I'd mind, but I don't wanna risk damaging the landing gear on this beauty."

"I thought you wanted a challenge," Zane said. "Bet'cha fifty *mu* you can't land on that platform without squishing at least one of them."

CinTally grinned. "Ooooh, you are *on*!"

As it happened, Cindy was able to nose the Dreamchaser into place amid the comatose and twitching volleyball players without fatalities, though she ended up lifting one of them with the nose skid and carrying him along ten meters before setting down.

"Well, that's six," Carrie-Anne said. "How many are left? Myla, our turn to find out." She moved to the hatch and vanished as she slid through it.

"We should secure those guys," Rochelle said. "Don't want them waking up and giving us trouble."

"Don't worry," said Flint. The bear Integrate had jumped at the chance to sign onto this assault mission. The chance to work with so many Nextus soldiers and Myla again was just too tempting. "I'll stay here and keep watch on prisoners and the sub with CinTally. With the birds giving us air cover we should be well situated for defense."

"Just like Old Smokey," Marc said. The antlers on his whitetail stag Fuser were aglitter with communications gear. He'd given some tiny laser reflectors to Myla and Carrie-Anne to place during their scouting. Unfortunately their usefulness was a little

iffy due to all the Q dust in the air. The platform's hardlight shields were still down—getting them up again was one of the mission's priorities.

Rochelle flicked her wrists, popping the pulse Uzis into her hands and back to the greaves. "You talkin' to me? You talkin' to *me*?" She grinned. "This is gonna be *fun*."

Carrie-Anne reappeared in the doorway. "We seem to be clear all the way to the secret hatch. No sign they are aware of it."

Rhianna and the Brubeck Mining techs had gone over the platform's network schematics with a fine-tooth comb, looking for key points where DIN-betas could be installed to regain them control of the computers. A remarkable number of the points could be accessed from the same secret shaft Zane and Terry had used to make their way to the boardroom when they had infiltrated the platform. It was a bit of a risk given that Fritz had used it himself, but Fritz had shown a level of overconfidence bordering on megalomania so it was judged worth a shot.

The mechanic would need one minute per network junction to replace the nodes. It was no stretch that the second she touched anything inside the occupiers would notice something amiss. Even one DIN-beta would be enough to tip their hand, so they'd start looking for a cause. Two were enough to make them really take notice.

Rhianna had over a dozen to install around the platform. Rochelle could start her VR work when six were finished, but her arsenal would still be incomplete. There were all sorts of "big guns" within the DIN firmware she could use.

"Come along," Carrie-Anne said. "We are ready."

Rhianna, Rochelle, and the others skimmed silently through the hall in their RIDE armor or Integrate bodies under cloak of invisibility, as the RIDEs and Inties kept weather eyes out for any signs of life. A quick jog down the corridor and into a broom closet, then out the door in the back and they were in the twenty-foot-wide shaft in the center of the platform. Not bothering with the ladder along one wall, the escorts spread out vertically as they rose, covering known entrances and exits, as Rhianna moved to the first junction box near the secret entrance to begin her work.

"Magic paws, do your thing," Rhianna muttered, or maybe it was Kaylee, or both. The duo often spoke in unison when Fused. One nanolathe started cutting into the node, and in her other handpaw was a DIN junction unit at the ready.

Uncia floated back to back with her, submachine guns clutched in both hands. "The enemy gate is down," she muttered, staring down at the square of desert sand visible in the distance at the bottom of the shaft.

Meanwhile, Zane and Myla floated up above the others, watching the square of blue sky and bits of superstructure visible through the top. It was most likely any assault would come from either the top or the bottom, as finding other entrances into the elevator shaft might take time if the intruders were unfamiliar with the place. They would cover it from here until everything was underway, then move outside to cover the approach when the fracas started.

But for all that, the first DIN was going to be a "freebie." Only after it was done would they really need to worry. The node came free easily enough. Rhianna placed the DIN unit and started securing it in place with the nanolathe. The unit was the size of a Fuser thumb, and it used several times as much qubitite as all the Integrate DINs she had seen thus far. Rhianna was still trying to fully apply the basic principles, so the beta units were much less complex. Ideally they would only need *one* in the future, but for now redundancy was essential.

:You know, when this is over we're going to make a killing on security hardware and software,: Rochelle said through Uncia. *:The banks are going to fall all over us.:*

:I'm not really interested in patenting something this important. Besides, we already sent the beta designs to the Consuls. They're a pretty sharp bunch, so I hope they're doing their own installs right now.: Rhianna said. The second network junction came free and its replacement went right in without trouble. *:Intie activity on the network. I think they know we're here. How many do we have to worry about?:*

Myla reappeared at her side. "We counted about thirty that we could see. There could be others cloaked, but Carrie-Anne doesn't think so. That puts them at a two-to-one advantage."

A darker form entered the light square below them. "Not smart, guy," Rochelle muttered, cutting their lifters and dropping, the cannon on her shoulder firing an EMP blast to precede her. She opened up with the Uzis as she fell closer, Uncia's targeting system centering both blasts on the unlucky Intie's torso. She felt something tickling at the back of her mind, but ignored it, cutting the lifters back on in time to reduce her impact just enough as she bodyslammed the hapless rat Integrate to the ground. Slightly singed and battered, leaking silvery-pink fluid from half a dozen wounds, he squeaked in fear, squirming and trying to throw the leopardess off. Uncia growled and showed her fangs, and Rochelle poked the muzzle of one of their guns into his face.

"Why...can't I *hack* you?" the rat wheezed.

"Because you didn't say the magic word," Rochelle purred. Then she growled, "Now surrender or I blow your damn fool head off."

The rat squeaked and complied, his DIN switching to open access mode. It only took them a moment to access his systems and send him into deep hibernation. Then they lifted him back up the shaft by the scruff of the neck and tossed him through the broom closet door, where he'd be safely out of the way.

Zane, Carrie-Anne, and Myla floated back to back above the top entrance of the shaft, keeping Fritz's defending Integrates at bay. Zane blocked pulse blasts and other shots with his shield, and sent the occasional lifter push or pulse blast back at the enemy. Carrie-Anne, Myla and Sophie covered his rear. Then all three dived for cover, staying in motion to keep the enemy guessing. The various heating, cooling, and ventilation units scattered around provided plenty of cover for friend and foe alike.

Overhead, Vince and the avians were keeping the enemy birds busy—but there were more of them, too many for Cosma, TimRazor and himself to fully engage. It was an aerial dance, watching them fire away at one another but not hitting. Their attacks were likely more in the virtual realm.

"Ha, gotcha!" Zane whooped, vaulting over a pipe to land feet-first on top of a wolf Integrate. He slammed the butt of his pulse rifle down on the wolf's forehead and he went out like a light, then turned and fired across some crates at a lioness who was lunging for Myla. His blasts furrowed her shoulder, and she lost concentration and fell.

Carrie-Anne hunted swiftly and efficiently from stealth, slipping up behind Integrates and catching them in sleeper holds until they passed out. It would have been more efficient to break their necks, but Zane and the others had been in agreement that they didn't want any unnecessary killing insofar as it could be avoided.

As the only non-Integrate, Myla was the most at risk, but she was moving quickly with speed and grace, managing to keep out of the way of most attacks. Her stealth

wasn't quite as good as Carrie-Anne's, but it was enough to throw off the aim of most attackers. And the heavy gauss pistols she wielded were sufficient to knock any Integrate they hit for a loop. But she was perhaps most valuable as a distraction, as Integrates kept getting distracted trying unsuccessfully to hack her long enough for Zane or Carrie-Anne to move in and take them out.

But they'd gotten so busy taking out enemies at close range, they'd forgotten to keep an eye out for enemies at greater distances. By the time Zane caught the motion out of the corner of his eye and saw a redtailed hawk Integrate taking aim from midair a hundred meters away, it was too late. She fired a concentrated burst of energy from one arm that stabbed through Myla and Sophie's side like a hot poker. They slumped to their knees as Sophie flooded the area with medical nanos.

Zane knocked the avian from the sky with a pulse blast, then ran to Myla's side. "Myla!" His eyes narrowed as he took in the damage. He put his hand over the entry point, as if to try to stop the bleeding. Then he felt his hand start to tingle. "What—?"

A long-silent voice reappeared in Zane's mind. *Easy, buddy. This one's on me.*

Myla looked up. "Zane—what're you—"

Zane gasped. "Terry...?" Then he felt a *surge* of energy rise up in his body and gush out through his hand, sinking into the traumatized metal and flesh beneath it. He felt the wounds close up beneath his hands—and the energy start to spread further, sinking into Myla's and Sophie's bodies alike. *What in—?* He tried to pull back, but he couldn't take his hand away. And then he felt things beginning to shift and change within their bodies...

Then Carrie-Anne hit him with her shoulder, knocking him back and free of his contact with the downed fennec Fuser. He shook his head. "What the—what did I just do?" *Terry? What did you just do?* But his inner tiger had slunk back down into his id again. Zane wanted to reach in and grab him by the neck and shake him, but there wasn't time.

"I don't know," Carrie-Anne said. She frowned as she felt Sophie's Fuser form *shift* under her hands. "But whatever it was, it healed the wound, so that is at least something."

Myla and Sophie's eyes flickered open. "Ngggh," Myla said. "Feel strange. Woozy." She got to her feet. "Whoa...and my balance is off. What's going on?"

"Half my internal diagnostics are giving me weird readings," Sophie reported. "I feel so *funky!*"

"You were shot. Zane healed you." Carrie-Anne blinked invisible again, vaulting a ventilator intake to close on a rabbit Integrate coming up a ladder. She kicked him in the head, and he fell off again. "There may be...side effects."

Sophie bent over to pick up their gauss pistols. "This can't be right. My batteries are reading 210% charge." She spun around and fired twin blasts at an approaching raccoon. "Wow—we're *fast!* Faster than we *should* be."

Zane followed up Sophie's gauss shots with a fusillade of pulse blasts. The raccoon ducked behind a cooling unit. "Don't look a gift horse..."

"Wait...what? My batteries are only at 150% charge," Sophie said. "The other 60% is coming from...*Myla's* batteries?"

"What? I don't *have* batteries," Myla said.

"I, um, think you do now," Zane said. *Terry, I swear after this is over I'm gonna come in there, and...*

RI and human alike blinked at Zane, then looked at herself. “Well, crap. Fight now, fuss later. But we’re going to have *words*, boss. This wasn’t in the medical plan.”

“I need a little help here!” the self-described mog said. “They’re regrouping!”

Rhianna was on the fifth DIN near the top, moving faster, starting on the sixth and last Rochelle and Uncia needed to get into the platform’s systems proper.: *We’ll need to move into the Boardroom next!:* Kaylee broadcasted on a secure channel. There were another three nodes in there. :*How are your DINs holding up, everyone?:*

:*Couldn’t be better,:* Vince said from above. :*I’ve hacked three other birds before they can hack me! The sub platform’s swarming with cronies, though they’re not doing anything yet. Flint and the others are holding ground. Ow! Damn! They winged me! He’s gonna pay for that one! You don’t touch the feathers!:*

Nobody was actually *trying* to kill one another, which made the assault team’s job easier. The Integrates in particular didn’t want to cause any mortal injuries to their opposite numbers. Integrates could take much more damage than the Fused could, so there were a few *serious* injuries. But nothing, Vince said, that couldn’t grow back.

:*That’s number six!:* Rhianna sent. :*These puppies are shielded. On to the Boardroom. Once we get there, Shelley, Uncia, Marc, Cernos, it’s your show!:*

The 20,0001st Floor

Quinoa realized she was being followed almost immediately, but not soon enough. She also finally realized that *wasn’t* Rosie. She narrowly escaped being pounced upon by a giant black panther Integrate with a single roving red eye. The sphinx-girl spun around to face him. “Hello, KITTy.” She paused, chuckling as she realized what she’d just said. “Long time no see.”

“Shaddup and get back into your cell,” the midnight-black panther said in a voice modeled after the original KITT’s voice actor William Daniels. He crouched on his forepaws, red eye *swooshing* from side-to-side across the bridge of his metallic muzzle between eye sockets. One of the unlucky Integrates who were stuck in animal rather than human form, KITTy hadn’t lost too much mass from his Trans-Am-replica RIDE days. “And I prefer ‘Cylon’ now.”

“Funny, I would’ve thought ‘Ravage’ suited you better,” Quinoa said, snapping a hardlight whip across his nose. “I’m not going anywhere you tell me to. I don’t want to hurt you, but I *will* if you keep me from leaving.”

“Oh, but I’d *love* to hurt *you*,” Cylon growled, prowling back and forth in front of her. His eye continued to cycle back and forth as he glared at her. “You and your whole damned clan, Steader bitch. Your kind has never brought me anything but pain.”

“For what it’s worth, I’m sorry about that,” Quinoa said. “Harold was a fool, and you’re far from the only RIDE whose life he ruined.”

Cylon snorted. “And a fat lot of good the rest of you Steaders have done for any of us.”

“Yeah, I...realize that. And I’m sorry about that, too.” Quinoa sighed. She hated to admit it, but the Integrate was right. All she’d ever done had been shake her head sadly at Harold’s antics. As for Uncle Joe...he’d been swimming in booze for so long, sometimes Quinoa wondered if he even knew what year it was. “I guess I never really thought about it before I got a RIDE myself, and then I got Integrated and kidnapped so there wasn’t an opportunity. After all this is over, I’m going to try to track as many of

them down as I can and make whatever amends I might.” She shook her head. “But at the moment, I’ve got other places to be, so you need to get out of the way *right now*, or we’re going to have some trouble.”

The black panther sat on his haunches and started grooming a forepaw. “Oh, I think you’ll find getting out is harder than you think, even if you do me in. Fritz locked this place down tighter than Harold’s old fetters on me. I *personally* welded every airlock shut. You’re going *nowhere*, doing *nothing*. Dig?”

Quinoa slammed him with a hardlight fist—the hardknuckle straight out of *Mega Man*—so hard and fast his eye-lens shattered. The huge black panther slumped over, unconscious. That would buy her a few minutes at most, though. She instantly ran for one of the windows in the *Jetsons* playroom. There were times when crazy *worked*. It was all a matter of knowing when. “Dig *that*. I’m out of here!”

The sphinx didn’t break her stride, pumping power into her lifters, once again forming her hardlight into an atomically-sharp arrowhead. She slipped through the transparent aluminum window as if it wasn’t even there, then curled up into a ball. On a lark, she reformed the shell around her into the shape of a Mercury capsule, with *Sphinx 7* emblazoned on it. Quinoa blasted her lifters for retrofire and began her steep descent back to Zharus.

Moments later she saw the entire side of the 20,001st Floor mansion explode, habitat modules scattering away from the counterweight into space, followed by an angry roar in radio. Cursing that last bit of Steader flightiness she hadn’t yet shaken, she realized that she hadn’t taken Cylon’s DIN when she had the opportunity. But it probably didn’t matter anyway, she reflected a moment later—as shoddy as the damned things were, he would have been carrying plenty of spares anyway, and she certainly hadn’t had time to frisk him. *Besides, he’s frisky enough already.*

The angry jaguar Integrate didn’t bother with any hardlight theatrics, adjusting his velocity to intercept her. But orbital mechanics being what they were, Quinoa was far enough away from him that they would both be falling out of orbit over the Dry Ocean before the fight would resume.

Brubeck Main Platform, Brubeck Ridge, Southwest Dry Ocean

Sophie fed Rhianna her diagnostic data as they moved towards the Boardroom with very little resistance. The defenders had lost over half their numbers, either to injury or forced hibernation. Those who were left were demoralized and regrouping.

The assault team was not without its own casualties. Myla’s gut shot was comparatively the worst, but Vince himself was missing a few toes from a crony’s pulse gun. He assured the others they would eventually grow back.

“You’re a cyborg,” Rhianna informed the fennec Fuser. “Otherwise, you’re good as new. It’s on par with my own Q-enhanced Earth implant, plus the...uh...batteries. There are a few other little bits here and there that I don’t have time to suss out right now, but we can do a full work-up after this is over. You need a real cybernetics doctor.”

Myla snorted. “Great! This better get me a *huge* bonus paycheck for hazard pay, Zane!”

“Even if I have to sell a few platforms,” Zane said, still a little upset at his inner tiger. “I was going to have to do that anyway to raise some cash. We’re down to number 40 on the Fortune 100 list.”

“Even this one?” Rhianna asked, shoulder cannons swiveling to lay down some covering fire. The defenders were hardly putting up any fight now. “You can’t sell old Clint’s platform, can you? How much of the lode is left?”

“Far too much, even if it weren’t for the sentimental value.” Zane replied. “We account for a good 40% of all AA+ Sarium on the market just from this one site. 55% of the double-plus. I’ll be keeping it, of course. But considering all the damage I doubt it’ll be back up to full production for a month or two, so look for high-grade sarium prices to stay spiked in the short term.”

The interior of the Boardroom was a wreck—and a recent one. The table was in little pieces, the walls bore hardlight gouges and scorch marks, there wasn’t a single light that wasn’t broken. Rhianna had the schematics for this room as well. She plunged her hand into a wall panel and pulled out a long-buried network access port. She quickly attached a DIN security node. “That’s number seven. Here’s your access, Shelley, Uncia. The other network ports in this room are dead, though. I think one of them might’ve figured out what we’re up to. The other DINs are reporting ruined nodes all over the platform. There’s a lot of them, so the network is still fine. Old Clint sure knew how to build things to last,” she added reverently.

“Seven might be enough to do the job,” Rochelle said. “We still have to get them out of the mainframe.”

Marc and Cernos entered the ruined Boardroom. The Medium Command Armor’s shoulder-mounted PPCs were smoking a little. “Sorry for the delay. Ran into a little complication.”

Rochelle pulled a hardwire connection from one of Uncia’s hip pods. “Well, deer-boy, hook up. Glad to have you watching my back in there.”

“Four of us will be watching out here,” one of the assault team said.

“And I’ll be in there with you, too,” Vince said, flying in through the passageway door. “I can’t wait to see this Enigma of yours in action!”

Low Zharus Orbit, Descending

The Aloha Elevator passed by Quinoa a few dozen kilometers away as the fires of re-entry enveloped the hardlight Mercury capsule, much as it had John Glenn’s centuries ago. It was a very steep, 15-G deceleration intended to get her out of orbit as fast as possible. Her own inertial dampers were up to the task, but in combination with the hardlight heat shields they were draining her upgraded batteries quickly. To save energy she dispelled the pointless capsule illusion. The sphinx Integrate scanned the area for Cylon. Even an Integrate couldn’t cloak this kind of thing.

The black panther was ten kilometers away now, and moving closer. Quinoa fired her lifters to adjust her trajectory. It would be some time before she could brake herself enough to regain full control over her velocity. Cylon also had to avoid hitting the ground himself. Angry as he was, he wasn’t suicidal.

The first red pulse blast came in at just over thirty thousand meters, Quinoa easily dodged it—taking out Cylon’s visual sensor had obviously helped—and returned fire with a fusillade of her own beams. However, she didn’t hit *him* either.

Quinoa fired her lifters again, hoping to make him fly past her, but was rewarded with a sharp pain in her stomach. Her entire body was on fire, power levels fading. She barely kept enough hardlight online to keep herself from being torn apart by the

supersonic wind. The sensation left a taste in her mouth like sour milk. *Shit!*
Shitshitshit!

One of her batteries had...curdled. The forum post had mentioned this could happen if she didn't condense the sarium *exactly right*. She'd hoped she had done so, but given the conditions she'd been working under she'd had no illusions about how likely that actually was. If she didn't purge the affected qubitite substrate then it would scam every single speck of sarium in her body. She would be quite dead before she even hit the ground. She poured every single bit of power remaining into her shielding, falling limp.

A screech echoed across the comm space, and a golden spear dived down from the upper atmosphere. Glowing missiles separated from the spear, aimed at Cylon. The giant jaguar tried to dodge, but surprise and their speed caught him by surprise. Most exploded around him, but two struck him square on. Cylon was blasted off course, momentarily stunned.

The spear itself adjusted its trajectory, bending in the atmosphere to keep Quinoa locked on. It came up on the red, bare-winged sphinx from above, matching her speed. In the flaming nimbus at the heart of the spear, a golden eagle reached to grab onto the sphinx with her talons and hands. Quinoa felt the strong talons grab her shoulders and grip her hips.

Quinoa was conscious enough to know a rescue when she felt one. She started to expel soured sarium, silvery fluid streaming from every pore and orifice. The sooner she got it out of her system, the less risk she'd have of losing the rest. "Battery curdled... going to...need sarium..."

"You need a *brake* first. Ground's coming up mighty fast," the eagle replied.

The air lit up above them, as the eagle spread her wings. Fiery golden wings extended from her own natural wings, catching the air, killing most of their downward speed at once.

"Thank you..." Quinoa mumbled. "Sorry about...the mess. Whoever...you are..."

"Astranikki," the golden eagle woman said. "We still have your friend up there to deal with, but I have reinforcements coming in about thirty seconds. Just hang tight!"

Astranikki? Uh...oh. Astranikki Munn, whose daughter Wanda had run many of the Integrate web boards Quinoa had shut down the last five months. "Sorry..."

"Not now!" she replied, dodging left from their pursuer's shot. Half a minute was a long time.

A bat-shaped flier shot past them too fast for Cylon to react to it. It quickly braked, not quite as fiery or quickly as the eagle's methods, but just as effective. The Fuser then reversed course with its mouth open. Whatever it was doing Cylon didn't like it very much. The big black jaguar roared in pain and confusion and broke off pursuit.

Astranikki flinched a bit and banked a bit further away from the bat. "He's getting better at his aim at least. First few times he tried that, he was very omnidirectional."

For once Quinoa was glad she didn't have her DIN after all.

"Not bad for meat and mech," Astranikki said proudly. "Now let's get some power in you so you can thank them properly on the ground. Next stop, Aloha."

Brubeck Main Platform, Brubeck Ridge, Southwest Dry Ocean

The cyberspace of Zane's platform looked about like the platform itself, but with more graffiti. In glowing neon, it adorned the walls, and even hung in space within the air. "INTIES RULE, MEAT DROOLZ!" was the most articulate. Some of the graffiti was even in binary or bar coding. Clad in bright white snow leopard armor, Rochelle looked around and wrinkled their feline nose.

"This is utterly ridiculous," Cernos said. The stag flicked his ears and looked around. "What are these people, a bunch of spoiled children?"

"That's *exactly* what they are," Rochelle said. "Spoiled children who don't want to grow up. And Fritz is their Peter Pan."

"Well, that means Zane gets to be their Captain Hook," Vince added.

"Does that mean Quinoa was Tinkerbelle?" Uncia wondered. "And who does that make the alligator with the alarm clock?"

"Okay, let's not get too sidetracked, here," Marc said. Various access panels opened in the air in front of them, revealing armor and weapons. They floated out of the DIN memory stores and attached themselves to the Fused stag duo. The matte black, blue tron-lined armor was only partly complete. As Rhianna and Kaylee added more DINs to the network things would improve. "Not bad. Not bad at all, Rochelle."

Rochelle picked up her own share of weapons. "So let's get started. You cover me. I'm going to start uploading the code." She started with the greenly-glowing DIN that had been placed in the conference room. For convenience, the network had been arranged to have a 1:1 topology between the virtual and real worlds, which meant that the DINs in here would be in exactly the same places as outside.

Some of the network nodes blinked out, but the platform occupiers were lazy enough to not know them all. Rochelle reached out with a flood of DIN encrypted network probes masked as something from another Integrated. She got several pings back. "There's four of them. They're stationary right now—they must think we're coming to take them one-on-one." She chuckled, and started shifting code into the DIN. "Maybe you should feint at them a little, keep them in their holes for longer."

"I'll put on a show of being the one who's *really* doing the work," Vince said. "You're just 'meat' and 'mech' to them, so why should they bother you?"

"We'll give 'em a whuppin'," Marc said, rubbing armored hoofhands together. "Just a little prodding. They're already off balance from the pasting we've been giving them IRL. It shouldn't take much to get them to cut and run."

Rochelle finished her upload, and the DIN changed from green to blue. "I'm gonna get the others in the shaft now." She slipped out the secret door and drifted down.

"I'll watch your back," Marc/Cernos said, activating his armor and following her down. "Oh, this feels good."

"I'll stay here and put on a good show," Vince said.

Rochelle got the second and third DINs uploaded without incident, but by the time she got to the fourth, Vince reported, "Watch out. I think they're getting wise by now. They're on the move."

"They're in *X-Wings*," Cernos deadpanned. "They want to treat this like a game? Fine. Let's *give* them a game."

"Ready player one," Rochelle said, grinning. "Hmm...what game shall we play?"

"Global Thermonuclear War," Vince said.

"How about a nice game of tic tac toe? I'll let you be the Xes."

The X-wings appeared in the pane of blue sky above, then swooped downward, firing energy blasts from their wingtips. Somehow they managed to fit into the elevator shaft even though they should have been several times too wide. Rochelle reached out and tapped one as it passed, and it collapsed into wireframe lines that disappeared. The Integrate inside, apparently a hamster, kept right on going until he smacked into the sand at the bottom of the shaft, raising a little Wile E. Coyote style puff of dust.

"That was anticlimactic," Marc said, smirking. "For *them*."

"You know, I don't think the crew Fritz assigned to occupy this place is all that competent," Uncia said. "I mean, look at this! Not really professional."

"Why do they *need* to be?" Rochelle asked. "They're Integrates. Practically perfect in every way. They're so reliant on their one trick—hacking anything that moves—that when you take it away they go right to pieces."

"They're not very good with weapons either, for the most part," Marc agreed. "After the performance we saw...present company excepted, of course."

"Hey, no problem," Vince said. "Just give the rest of us some credit for keeping our skills brushed up. We're not too proud to use actual weapons."

"Of course," Marc said.

Rhianna's voice rumbled out of the sky. "That's DIN eight! Number nine coming right up! I think the ones in VR are the only ones left putting up any kind of resistance, so have at 'em!"

"Have we got enough in the system yet to run the purge?" Uncia asked.

"I'd like another one or two just to be safe," Rochelle said. "But we can start the compile, anyway." She opened a display panel in front of her and flicked it with a claw. It rang like a chime and turned blue, as code began running and a wireframe image building behind it.

"Numbah nine!" Rhianna said. "Lots faster now. Just give me a couple more minutes and you'll be good to go!"

"I'm on it!" Rochelle moved to the virtual location of the new DIN and tagged it with a code upload. The wireframe started to build faster.

"They're coming around again!" Marc said, raising his own VR bazooka. This time the trio of avatars were doing without the game elements—simply three arrows of light. "Eat this, you amateurs!" He fired.

The burst scattered them, but they didn't stop. Vince opened fire with his own virtual weapons, adding to the chaos, then formed a shield between them and their attackers.

"Ten! Eleven!" Rhianna shouted. "Yes, that's *two*!" They blinked into being on the opposite side of the shaft.

"Two lovely DINS! A-ha-ha-ha!" Rochelle said, playing a thunder-and-lightning effect, as she placed one hand on each and uploaded to both at once.

The VR attackers shook themselves out of the shock they'd experienced, only to get another one when they saw what was being built right in front of them—a cartoonish, bulbous-shaped bomb with a big yellow and green radiation symbol on it. Vince smirked at them. "You guys better log out now if you know what's good for you. I've got a *surprise* coming."

"Ohshit!" one exclaimed. "You're not..."

"Bada boom!" Uncia said, giggling.

"*Twelve!*" Rhianna boomed.

"You could just save yourselves some trouble and surrender now," Rochelle said reasonably. "Put yourselves into hibernation and we promise not to doodle on you with magic markers while you're asleep. Well, *much*, anyway."

The one who spoke first instantly vanished, but the other two weren't quite so intelligent. They poured on more speed, smashing against Vince's shield. "Children, the both of you," the raven reproved. "Me and my friends will be just fine, but you've been warned. The Fat Man is ready."

Rochelle put on smoked-glass goggles and held up a detonator switch with a big red button under her thumb. "We're ready for the kick-off here. You guys ready out there?"

"Eeek!" the Integrate attackers squeaked, and winked out—moments before Rochelle pushed the button. The virtual explosion swept the mainframe clean of their remaining control access.

"Big bada boom!" Uncia said cheerfully, clapping their hands.

"That's it! They're bugging out!" TimRazor reported. "We did it!"

"Yes, but perhaps too easily," Carrie-Anne said. The platforms systems, those still undamaged by Q-dust, were coming back under their control. While the platform-wide hardlight shield was down they could at least restore power to the residential emitters. "They were simply unprepared for the ferocity of our assault. Next time we will not be as lucky."

"Lucky," Myla said, glaring at Zane. "Boss...not that I don't appreciate it—I do—but did you almost Integrate me or something? Sophie's reporting all sorts of big changes, in me and on *her*."

"This is *real* fur!" Sophie exclaimed, shaking herself. "I've got little fleshy bits in me here and there. Ewww."

Zane groaned. "I'm *sorry*! I didn't mean to. I was worried..." He facepalmed. "I thought you were gonna *die* because of me."

The fennec's shared expression softened. "How can I blame you for that, boss? I knew the risks on this operation. Anybody in the military does. As an LT I lost a few people under my command. This is just—I dunno. I guess we'll see once I de-Fuse. If I *can* de-Fuse."

"I didn't go *that* far," Zane said. "I think."

"Partial Integration isn't unknown," the golden retriever, Ianau, said. He transmitted some data. "There are at least a dozen known cases over the past thirty years. Including one of Aloha's Munns. In each case, they were...*boosted*, but didn't become a single being—unless and until they Integrated all the way later on, anyway. Aside from your new batteries, I can't say how you might look once you de-Fuse."

"As long as I don't end up one of those Earther cyberpunk borgs..." Myla said.

"Hey, what's *wrong* with us Earther cyberpunk borgs?" Rhianna asked, mock-offended. "We need love too, you know."

"Nono! Not like that," Myla said, chuckling. "You know, metal bits? Uh..."

"Like the one I have inside here?" Rhianna tapped the side of her own head.: *You've got one, too,:* she sent.

"Um...I didn't mean—" Myla said, a little flustered.

"Just funning you, Myla," Rhianna said, patting her friend on the shoulder. "Nothing like a job well done. I'm going to install another half dozen DIN units for

safety before we leave.”

“We need to decide where to put the prisoners,” Carrie-Anne said. The black jaguar transmitted video from the newly-online cameras. The Dream Chaser had some carbon scoring, but nothing serious. There were ten hibernating Integrates in all. “We can’t take them back to Uplift.”

Zane sighed. “We’ve got a brig on the platform. Mainly meant for miners who get a little too exuberant with those stills we intentionally never quite manage to stamp out, but we can easily make them secure against Integrates, especially if we keep their DINs. Won’t be the first time this place has kept prisoners.”

“As long as we have root access to their systems, we should be okay,” Vince said. “I’ve come up with some experimental fetters for Inties. We’re not a completely trouble-free community, after all. We have our miscreants and criminals.”

“Gosh. Integrates, not completely trouble-free?” Zane said. “I thought we were all a bunch of peaceful hippie lotus-eaters who form communes to try to expand our minds.”

“Sarcasm aside,” Vince continued. “There’s something else that crossed my mind. It’s my opinion that Fritz will think his people were beaten only by other Inties—whatever his cronies tell him. This makes the Freerider Garage something of an open secret. Once Fritz realizes that Rhianna and Rochelle are the source of his pain...”

“Aw man, we only just rebuilt the place,” Rochelle said. “And the insurance company won’t touch us with a ten foot pole.”

“I could—” Zane began.

“No, you couldn’t,” Rhianna said.

“You don’t even know what I was gonna *say*,” Zane whined.

“You’ve done enough for us already,” Rhianna said tartly. “I’d rather keep you as a last resort.”

“I’ll be happy just so long as you want to keep me at all,” Zane said, his voice sounding more like Terry’s for a moment.

Rhianna smiled warmly, realizing what she said had stung him a little too much. She and Kaylee answered in concert. “Of course, *Terry*.”

“Terry?” Myla said. “Oh...right.”

“A voice I have not heard in some time,” Carrie-Anne said.

“I keep to myself a lot, much as I wish I didn’t,” Zane said. “Er...I mean...he does. As much as *he* wishes...er...*I* wish...” Zane shook his head. “Oh, I don’t even know which pronouns I *meant* anymore.”

“Just...trust me,” Rhianna said. “I know my pride’s a personal flaw, but it’s *nothing* against you. When I truly need your help, I *will* ask, and I won’t be shy about it.” Trusting her feelings, she hugged the tiger Integrate, who purred loudly while wearing a very startled expression. It felt like a very *feminine* thing to do, maybe stereotypically so, but that was the point. “Now, come on. What next? Call in repair crews?”

Zane nodded. “The Starmaster and a couple other subs are already loaded with repair supplies, and our maintenance teams are standing by. I just need to comm them and they’ll be here in half an hour.”

“We’re in no rush to leave,” Rochelle said, smiling at her business partner. “Are we? I’d like to make sure my little firecracker did its job.”

“Let me get the laser comm gear back up so we can get in touch with the

mainland,” Rhianna said. Her brain was *itching*, her paws were *twitching*. Big repair jobs were what she did best and loved most, and here was the biggest one yet, right in front of her. After what the Inties did to it, making this vast machine come to life again would feel *so good*. It *already* felt like a second job, for that matter.

Over the past week she’d gotten to know the people in the Brubeck Maintenance and Repair Department, as well as a number of the RIDE techs. They’d gotten to talking shop a time or two, and it was a lot of fun to share tips and tricks. Though sometimes the Brubeck techs would clam up at odd times when it came to discussing restoring older RIDEs, as if there was something they weren’t supposed to talk about. Some sort of corporate secret project, she supposed. Well, that was fair. She was just a consultant, after all. They hadn’t even made her sign an NDA.

“And I could show you that repair bay I mentioned,” Zane said. “If the Inties haven’t taken it apart or something. Maybe you and Myla should come down there with me and you could check her and Sophie over.”

“Let’s do it,” Rhianna said.

“Yeah. I want to find out if I need a new wardrobe,” Myla said. “I feel...off.”

Rhianna considered her. “I wasn’t going to say anything, but I’m sure you were at least five centis taller than I was before, not counting the ears. Now we’re meeting at eye level, even in Fuse.”

Abruptly, Zane twitched. He held up his DIN, and a body-conforming hardlight pane formed in front of Myla and swept across her from front to back, scanning her just as he had done to Rhianna and Rochelle in the garage after they had made his DIN. He looked distant for a moment, then groaned. “Oh God.” He buried his face in his hands. “It just hit me what that idiotic tiger did. Terry, wherever you’re hiding, I am coming after you with a *roto-rooter*.”

Both women folded their arms across their chests in an almost disturbingly identical gesture. “Well?”

“You’re gonna find out sooner or later,” Zane said, his voice muffled by his hands. “When you de-Fuse, anyway. I’m just gonna go find a bottle of hemlock to drink or something.”

“Repair Bay, Zane, now,” Rhianna said sourly. “Climate control’s operational in there.”

“Okay, now this I gotta see,” Rochelle said.

The repair bay was everything Zane had said it was—an immense cavernous facility with state-of-the-art repair cradles and diagnostic equipment situated along the walls in numbered spaces. There was a section at one end where motorized tool carts, painted with numbers and designations, rested until they were called for. They could trundle up to a given space and unfold into exactly the right assortment of tools for any given job. At the other end were a set of in-depth diagnostic scanning tables and devices.

The chamber had benefited from its position buried deep down at the bottom of the platform. By the time the partying Integrates had worked their way down to it, they were too exhausted to give it more than a couple of desultory licks of spray paint and dent a few control boards. All the displays were hardlight anyway so they wouldn’t even have the satisfaction of smashing glass screens, and to scatter tools all over in a symbolic gesture they would have first had to retrieve the carts all the way from the

other end of the room, then open them. Too much trouble when there was still booze to be had from all those hastily-abandoned stills...

"This place reeks like a frathouse," Myla said. "So Fritz just takes the place over, leaves it to his most irresponsible cronies, and we get to waltz back in and retake it with minimal time and effort."

"I expected *much* more resistance as well," Carrie-Anne said.

"Fritz must still be drinking his own kool-aid about Integrate superiority," Rochelle theorized. "He didn't think he'd *need* any more than a few sims to hold this place against anything norms could dish out."

"And he thinks he hasn't pissed off enough Inties yet that they'd care to take a hand," Flint said. He punched his right fits into his left hand. "He'll soon find out he's wrong about that."

Ianau looked around the space. "Let's get this Q-dust cleaned up before you de-Fuse. Flint, you game?"

"Willing to try. It's more fine lifter control than I've done before," the bear Integrate said.

"You'll do fine, sarge," Myla reassured him.

"I can help, too, if you show me what to do," Zane said. "Never let it be said I didn't do my share of the...light lifting."

"Like what Quinoa did when she cleaned up Katie's old DE shell," Kaylee said, leaving unvoiced her concern about the missing sphinx. She wasn't Kaylee's favorite person, nor anybody else's here, but she'd partly redeemed herself before her kidnapping. It still bothered Kaylee that she'd never had the chance to thank her for how she'd fixed Katie's original body.

"Set your visual scanners for fine acuity," Ianau said, the golden retriever's eyes turning a deep purple. "Raw Q has this spectral pattern." He transmitted it to Flint and Zane.

"Right," Zane said.

"And once you find some of it and get a feel for it, you can sort of reach out for anything that 'feels' like Q around you and lift it all at once. Like turning yourself into a magnet that only attracts qubitite dust," Ianau continued. "It's kind of hard to explain, but if you fiddle with it a little it'll just click in a minute or two."

"Repair crews launched, Zane," Cernos reported. "ETA forty minutes."

"Righto." Zane held out his hands, peering at the floor and frowning in concentration. "I think...I get what you're talking about. Q-dust kind of...tingles. Like pop rocks, only not on my tongue."

"That's quantum for you," Ianau said, smirking. "It'll tingle on your tongue, too, if you ever eat any." He considered the bluish-tinged sand and grit on the floor thoughtfully. "I think there's...oh...about two thousand *mu* worth of AA dust in this room, if I'm any judge. And I am. I was in the Uplift Assay Office."

"Well, we are sitting right on top of a vein of the pure stuff," Zane said. "I *still* don't know exactly how my Dad found it." He shook his head. "Anyway, let's get it contained." A haze formed in the air around him as qubitite dust wafted up off the floor, walls, and out of equipment.

Flint held the palms of his hands about ten centimeters apart, the dust streaming between them into a diffuse sphere. The bear Integrate's brows were furrowed with concentration. "I...think I've got it."

“Looking much better in here,” Ianau said. “Back into the green. No risk of contamination. Q dust in the lungs is nothing to sneeze at.”

“I think it’s more something to develop a hacking cough about,” Zane said, shrinking the cubic meters of dust around him into a little sphere the size of a golf ball.

“Keep those,” Ianau said. “Good money in them—or you could just eat it.”

Zane blinked at him. “Eat...qubitite? That’s the second time you’ve said something about that, so I guess you’re not joking...?”

“Our Integrate bodies treat it like a nutrient, in certain situations,” Ianau said. “Certain other minerals, as well, like the doping materials for sarium batteries. I can fill you in later.”

“Getting Q-dust out is normally a months-long job on a rig this size,” Rhianna said. “Just...don’t do too much, okay? The repair crews still need something to do,” she jibed with a grin.

Zane tossed the qubitite sphere up in the air, and it circled his head like a small moon. “I’ll bear that in mind.” He glanced at Flint. “So to speak.”

“You owe me a fish for that pun,” the bear Integrate said.

“Well, I’ll get you one,” Zane said, grinning at him. “Just bear with me.”

“Hey, if you’re hiring, I’m willing,” Flint said. “And make that *two* fish.”

“And you’ll charge all the market will...oh, all right, I’ll stop now.” He chuckled. “Seriously, if you want a job, you’re hired. You did good on this assault, and—” he glanced at Myla “—you’ve got great references. You can speak to my head of security when she gets here on one of those Starmasters—or see if my chief bodyguard has room for another Intie on the team.”

Myla chuckled. “I don’t think that will be a problem, if you can bear the terrible puns. See, now he’s got me doing it.” She grinned. “Welcome to the team, Flint.”

“Thanks, LT.” Flint matched her grin. “Looking forward to it, ma’am.”

Rhianna was looking critically at the equipment in the Repair Bay. It was of similar quality to the Freerider Garage’s, which she approved. The cradles looked in good condition with the dust now off of them. There were even several Fuser dummies like she recalled from Kaylee’s testing phase for accessing parts that could only be gotten to that way. The temperature still wasn’t quite ideal—still about 30C—but cool enough. It would go down further once they’d had the chance to de-dust the cooling fans and generators, which Zane was suggesting Flint and Ianau should do next. Then he glanced worriedly at Myla.

At a mutual nod, the women de-Fused from their RIDEs at the same time.

Sophie’s pelt *didn’t* shut off. As the fennec pulled away from her rider, hands and feet reconfiguring into paws, it was clear the light golden fur was indeed quite real. A few odd pieces of gear—almost fleshy—could be seen *inside* the RIDE’s frame before she closed up. The woman she revealed, on the other hand could have been Rhianna’s twin sister aside from her face, hair, and ears—and even then she had a fennec’s cold-and-wet nose like Rhianna’s feline version. Her build had formerly been slimmer and taller, but now she was exactly as short and well-rounded as Rhianna.

Zane projected a perfectly reflective two meter by two meter plane of hardlight in front of them so they could see themselves, and started to whimper a little.

One arm folded across her chest, Rhianna sighed before putting the other hand over her eyes.

“Lordy Lord Lordy,” Kaylee said, face-pawing herself.

“Oh my God!” Rochelle squealed, her voice abruptly cutting off as Uncia, undoubtedly showing a greater sense of self-preservation than her rider, stifled the incipient giggle before it could escape.

Rhianna just sighed, at a complete loss for words.

Myla looked at her reflection, then back at the lynx’s rider, then at herself again. She had no *external* signs of being a cyborg. No more than Rhianna herself did, at any rate. “Well, at least we can share clothes.”

“I...I think I’m hungry,” Sophie said. “Am I? Do I have a stomach now?”

“We should call Mike Munn,” Ianau suggested. “He and Tonto stayed like that for several years before they were finally fully Integrated.”

Zane groaned. “I am so sorry about this. Please don’t kill me. Or...please *do* kill me if it would make you feel better...it might make *me* feel better.”

“I’m...really not that upset,” Myla said. “Rhianna has a nice curvy figure, so I don’t mind sharing. But then again, maybe it isn’t *me* you need to worry about.”

Rhianna smiled predatorily at the tiger. “Okay, I understand. You have a crush on me. I don’t know how to feel about that—I’ve never been on the female end before. I—”

Myla tugged on the crossrider’s sleeve. “We need to chat, before you say anything else, okay?”

“Fine,” Rhianna said, shrugging. “Lead on, MacDuff.”

“Excuse us. We need to visit the Ladies Room,” Myla said.

“Uh, it’s that way,” Zane said in a small voice, pointing.

The Aerie, Aloha

The Munn family home—the Aerie—was often written about in Zharusian architectural circles. Quinoa had visited it a few times over the years, before her Integration and after. The *after* was the problem more than anything. Until recently, Astranikki had been living with her family in secret. During that time, Quinoa had paid a visit to her daughter Wanda and rather arrogantly (being honest with herself) shut down her Integrate web boards in person. The same boards that had provided the knowledge the sphinx had used to escape captivity.

Dr. Sam Munn was currently in his male minotaur aspect, rather than the female panther shape in which she spent the other half of her life. He probed the paste clogging the sphinx’s DIN port. “I’ve never seen this material before. Tell me, has an Intie ever had a port damaged beyond repair?”

“They grow back, but it takes about a day. You could surgically remove it if need be,” Quinoa said between swallowing off-the-shelf AA-class sarium batteries and more normal human food. Her green flight feathers were even beginning to grow back—but by her own choice, no longer iridescent. It was time to grow up.

Sam shook his head slowly, still poking at the plugged DIN slot with a probe to judge how hard it was. “That’s a bit extreme. This is more of a mechanical problem than a biological one. Maybe we can drill out most of it, and try to scrape the rest off enough for you to heal. Instead of chopping the entire thing out.”

The Munns rivaled the Steaders in terms of quirkiness, but without the Crazy to go with it. Sam and Jason/Janet Munn swapped their RIDEs—and genders—every five years. Astranikki’s son, Tracy, had been one of the first civilians to Fuse a dolphin. There was Nikki and her golden eagle Astra who had been a *de-facto* married couple

even before they Integrated. The video of Nick's Fuse proposal was often used in campaigns by RIDE rights groups. Then there was the family's long reliance on IDEs, even after everybody else but Clint Brubeck had abandoned them for RIDEs.

I should've been a Munn instead, Quinoa considered. Satisfied, she pushed her plate back. "I'm sorry. I'm so, so, so sorry. I've done horrible things to you. I've acted like a...a *prick*. That's what." That was a word that supposedly applied to males, but this was *Zharus*, after all.

"Never thought you were acting," Astranikki said, eyebrow raised.

"Well, I wasn't," Quinoa admitted. "There, I said it."

Wanda studied the battered sphinx carefully from the other side of the table, her ears twitching as she thought. "Don't worry too much about it—we know a thing or two about Fritz's faction, and the control he wields over his people. We didn't take it personally. In that light...apology accepted. As long as you promise not to do it again."

"I can do better than that." Quinoa tapped the side of her head. "I have a lot of stuff in my head that's useful. I never actually deleted anything Fritz told me to. I shut down more boards than just yours, Wanda. A lot more. What I've got are the results of a *lot* of basic research. As soon as I get an operational DIN, I'll upload you a copy of everything."

"You didn't really delete it from *us* either. We had multiply-redundant off-site backups. We just went deeper into the mesh and kept going. It's harder for newbies to find us now, but it kept you guys in the dark too," Wanda said, unable to resist boasting about how futile Quinoa's attempt had been. "My hat may usually be white, but I hate bullies. When the need's there, it can be as black as night."

Crystal, Wanda's snow leopard RIDE, nuzzled Quinoa's side. "Give us a call when you've got your DIN back, and we'll send you the keys to the boards. Ashley's teams would be interested in that research and your thoughts on it I'm sure," the RIDE purred. "We'd make you one ourselves right now, better than the one you had, but we've been monitoring recent events and it seems things are afoot. Something tells me we may not have the kind of time it would take us to analyze your socket. And that's assuming we can find a quick way to get that gunk out of it."

"Speaking of Ash, she's already searching the boards, to try and find what that goop might be. It's not as easy as it used to be since you shut us down, but if anyone has heard of anything, she'll sniff it out," Wanda added.

The sphinx seemed to melt under the unexpected feline affection. She stroked the snow leopardess between her ears. She strongly reminded her of Uncia, though she had a slightly smaller shell. "I will. Now, fill me in on what's been happening since I screwed the pooch a couple of weeks ago."

"Actually, there is one more thing you need to do before Ryan loads up the powerpoint," Astranikki said, nodding to the pair of bats waiting at the breakfast bar. Normally, the family would have some of their members Fused, but they were all separated from their RIDEs, to not-so-subtly make a point.

Quinoa nodded, feeling sure-footed enough to stand up again. Peter Munn had been partnered with Vincent long enough that he looked more changed than many, and bats were one of those RIDE types that needed something like the wing membranes and a bat-like nose. She hugged Peter, then his RIDE. "Thank you. I'll repay you both. You risked a lot going up against Cylon."

Pete reddened, but his RIDE answered for them. "It was nothing; we do the orbital

sky dive regularly. Vas goot to test those new routines too, and to see they vorked.”

“We had backups in case they didn’t,” Peter added. “But seeing that cat take off like his tail was on fire was sweet.”

“Right now, if there aren’t any more thank yous to go around, I believe someone requested a briefing.” Ryan, Wanda’s husband said. One wall lit up.

“Remember, hon, keep it brief,” Wanda added. “Nikki’s graduation is in two years and I don’t want to miss it.”

Ryan threw a roll at his wife, and the first news clip started.

The Coffeehouse

The giant, trembling black jaguar tried to make himself small in front of Fritz. His red eye was barely healed, sluggishly moving side-to-side across the bridge of his nose. The eye stopped in the left socket, then it was joined by a blue eye on the right. Cylon waited for the Bosscat to make his judgement.

Fritz looked from him to the similarly trembling Irish Wolfhound Integrate standing just a couple of meters away from him. *The truth about cats and dogs. Maybe I should have ‘em fight to the death, how would that be?*

:Fritz...: Jiminy sent quellingly.

:Don’t get your panties in a bunch, I’m just yanking your chain.: Fritz sighed.

“Man, this is just *not* copacetic. What am I ever gonna do with you cats?”

“N...no excuse, sir!” Murphy said, thick Irish brogue almost entirely absent. “I still don’t know what happened...we couldn’t hack them! They...they came into cyberspace and *kicked us out!*”

Fritz snorted. “Well, at least you’ve got the right name for it. Sounds like whatever could’ve gone wrong for you, did.” He turned to look at Cylon. “And you, KITTy-cat, what’s *your* excuse?”

“The blasted Munns showed up,” the panther growled. “I couldn’t fight them off *and* keep after the Steader girl at the same time.”

“Sounds like you couldn’t do either one, beakel.”

“N...no, I couldn’t,” Cylon admitted.

Fritz paced back and forth in front of them. “Oh, you crazy kids.” It only took a gesture, then he was holding his nearly-invisible flensing blade in his hand—the one with the keen, monomolecular-sharp edge that had accounted for so many of the pelts that now lined various rooms in the Coffeehouse. Both Murphy and Cylon froze in place.

Fritz scratched his own chin with the tip of the blade—actually less dangerous than it looked, since an invisible hardlight field protected its edges when he willed it, but it impressed the hell out of anyone watching who’d seen what that blade could do. “Now what *am* I doing to do about you? Such nice soft fuzzy pelts you have, too...” Out of the corner of his eye, he watched synchronized lumps move down their throats as the two Integrates exchanged glances and swallowed in unison.

And then Fritz made the blade disappear, smirking. “But things are happening too fast right now. If I indulged myself, you cats would busy growing your skins back if something else suddenly came up and I needed you. So, *just this once*, I’ll suspend that sentence. *Just. This. Once.* Ya dig?”

“Y-yessir!” Murphy squeaked. “I—I won’t disappoint you again, sir!”

“See that you don’t. You tell me how they’ve got that platform set up now. See if

you can get back in. Fill me in on the gory details.” He turned to Cylon. “And you—you find the girl. Don’t approach her, just let me know if you can get a line on her.”

Cylon nodded.

“Then get to work. Screw up again, you don’t have to worry about bits of you being carpets.” He nodded to the mantel with the jars on it. “You get my drift?”

Fritz returned to his throne as the two subdued Integrates made their way out of the room. *Murgatroyds. I ought to skin ‘em.*

:It’s just as well you don’t. Not now.:

:Yeah, I know.: Fritz chewed on a knuckle thoughtfully, too irritated for once even to snap back at Jiminy. *:I’ve got other fish to fry.:* He frowned thoughtfully. *:Like that Zane Brubeck cube, for one. Maybe it’s about time I made a public example of him.:*

:He’s Clint’s son,: Jiminy said.

:Yeah, but that ain’t a get-out-of-jail-free card.: Fritz stretched lazily. *:It’s just about time Mr. Brubeck learned what happens when you try to pass Go and collect two hundred bucks if you land on the space that says not to. There’s only one Bosscat, and he don’t have stripes.:*

Chapter Fifteen: The Task of Amontillado

134 A.L.

Shahrazad growled, holding still while Fridolf scanned her body. She cursed Brubeck, and the Munns and anyone else she could think of, blaming them for ruining *years* of projects.

“*Hold still*, Shah,” the wolf growled back impatiently. “I’m almost done. Looks like you weren’t tagged at least.”

“If I were tagged, they’d have both of us back in fetters by now,” she hissed back, her tail lashing the air. “Did we lose everyone?”

“Seems that way. I think Pascal was behind me as I left, but I didn’t stick around. We know the regroup points.”

A new voice spoke up, squeezing into the cave with the other two rides, quills rustling. “That I knew. I’m almost positive I was the last. Donny’s signal went offline just as I entered the tunnel.”

“What happened to your hands?” Fridolf asked.

Pascal sighed and shook her quills. “Scratch did. He stopped me on the way out, threatened to blow me up. Your kitten Integrated, Shah.”

The tigress purred, “He did? *Niiiiice*. Why didn’t he show himself though? We could have done so much.”

“He didn’t show himself because he wasn’t all there. I don’t know what he did to Integrate himself, but it wasn’t him. It was probably the girl in charge, even if the body was male. He made me release my hands before I could get out.”

“Damn, wish he had followed you. Still, things are too hot now. We should spread out and lay low for awhile. Find new groups, and new potentials, and we can meet up again in a few years.”

September 2, 156 A.L.

In the wake of the great dragon’s arrival in AlphaWolf’s camp, Mister Peaches had made an impression on the rest of the Pack. The rumor mill ran wild with speculation on what they could do with he and Fenris. How many RIDEs could they free? How many humans could they bodyjack? Could they even raid Nextus itself? The last had been something of the ultimate operation. Untouchable Nextus—except for a few informational infiltrations to transmit propaganda to enslaved RIDEs via sidebands over the years, they had never fired so much as a cap gun within its borders in the twenty-plus years the Pack had been around.

:I haven’t seen morale this high in ever,: AlphaWolf sent to Fenris and Paul during the disguised Integrate’s live-fire demonstration outside the dome.

The dragon had four belly pulse cannons, another in his tail fork, the ubiquitous plasma breath weapon, and eye beams. He could lay down suppressing fire over a huge area and not hit any friendlies. That the Integrate’s disguise could mimic all that weaponry in hardlight impressed AlphaWolf, Kandace, Fenris and Paul. The rest of the

Pack cheered.

:Believe it or not, I still have missile pods in my hips,: Peaches told the four of them. *:Normally I self-manufacture them, but right now the spaces are filled with the antiviral gear.:*

:I almost feel kind of bad they're gonna be disappointed you won't be around for long enough to help them raid and pillage much,: Paul said. *:Wow, I think I have been out here too long.:*

But the truly odd thing was how quickly the mood of the group seemed to shift after that. It was as if the camp was a manic-depressive suddenly crashing down off of his excitement. The cheers of excitement started to turn to mutters of disquiet as a number of those in the Pack began to wonder why AlphaWolf hadn't announced their next target yet. Now that they had some true *firepower*, it was time to *strike!* And given how fast raids had been proposed and executed before, why wasn't Alpha proposing one *now?*

Even AlphaWolf was confused, as he was suddenly buttonholed by a half dozen disgruntled anti-human extremists in quick succession. *:...the hell?:* he sent over the private net. *:Where did my approval ratings bump go?:*

:Someone is working the crowd,: Fenris observed. *:Possibly several someones. I am trying to analyze movement dynamics, but it is hard to get a cohesive picture.:*

"No, Tocsin, we do *not* need to perform another raid right now," AlphaWolf growled at his latest interlocutor. "We have perfectly adequate human numbers for the moment."

"But we have this great new weapon!" Tocsin insisted. "We should use him!"

"He's a *person*," AlphaWolf said slowly, enunciating every syllable. "He is not a *weapon* any more than, say, *you* are."

"But I *am* a weapon," Tocsin said, sounding puzzled and a little hurt. "And proud of it. You saw how I trashed that garage. Even if *you* decided, after the fact, it shouldn't have been trashed, you can't deny I trashed it damned well."

"ARGH!" AlphaWolf growled. "Go find something else to do before I bite you."

Rakshasi walked among the crowd, whispering a word here, nudging a RIDE here and there. She kept a wary eye on AlphaWolf and his entourage. The arrival of the dragon was a concern; there was something different about him the cougar couldn't figure out.

"Two large RIDes? We weren't even able to keep one active before. What is Alpha thinking?" she whispered to a rabbit.

"He'd better earn his power quick," the rabbit agreed. "I'm not going hungry to feed him."

She moved on, hearing the discontent spread. She spotted one of her students approaching Tocsin, and caught the student's eye. She shook her head and he backed off, clearly confused. She sent a quick burst saying 'just watch' and waited. Rakshasi was experienced enough to tell the hippogriff was wired enough; more could potentially blow up in their muzzles.

Sure enough, moments after the student backed off, Tocsin stormed up to Alpha and the dragon. The message the students were spreading was slightly different from hers; they were stressing the need for more hands, more bodies to keep the camp up to date. The goal was to put the entire group and AlphaWolf especially under multiple

pressures from multiple angles at once. She was getting the feeling it was time to move on, and having the cover of a group split would certainly help.

As expected, the wolf proved to be as predictable as ever; under the pressure to do something with the new dragon, he was starting to talk about a new mission. Not to a polity, but to one of the other Dry Ocean groups they knew had some humans.

Rakshasi chuckled as she spotted a lioness and coyote from one of the other groups she'd been preparing start to make their way toward AlphaWolf. These ones weren't close associates—they'd never even spoken directly—but she'd made sure to have staged conversations with some of her subordinates in their hearing complaining that AlphaWolf had gone *soft*, sending a mission back to *repair* some of the damage they had done to Uplift. She knew that AlphaWolf's pretensions to personal integrity stuck in the craw of some of those who felt that the nastier they were to humans the better, where those particular humans "deserved" it or not. Shahrazade sauntered closer to watch the fun.

:Are you comfortable with this?: Paul asked for the fourth or fifth time. *:I have to say, I'm not so sure I am.:*

:It's not my favorite thing, admittedly,: Mr. Peaches said. *:But on the other hand, if it has to happen, it couldn't happen to a nicer group of thugs.:* The raid AlphaWolf had proposed was to be on a target slightly larger than any the group had hit before—a gang of RIDE slavers who operated several hundred clicks away.

Part of the reason AlphaWolf had located his camp in this area was that it was just a bit too far into the interior for the Marshals to tackle except for very special cases, and by the same token it was just far enough for a lot of escaped RIDEs to get before they needed to rest and recharge some more.

Not all the RIDEs who escaped this far were necessarily interested in or even aware of AlphaWolf's camp. They were just looking for places to rest and recharge for a while before moving on, setting up their own camps further into the interior. The slavers were fully aware of the significance of this area, at the limit of most escaped RIDEs' endurance, and had set up their operation to take full advantage of it.

In fact, it was common knowledge that they had seeded a number of the most likely spots with conveniently "abandoned" skimmers with fuel cell generators and solar panels—just like deer hunters had used to use salt licks. Even if the desperate RIDEs sensed a trap, they needed the power badly enough that they had no choice but to go in.

The slavers were also aware they weren't far from AlphaWolf's camp, and every so often they'd send scouts out in its direction—this was one of the reasons for the frequent patrols. But there were enough slavers in the gang, with enough armed RIDEs, that an AlphaWolf raid on its base camp could have gone either way and resulted in plenty of casualties on both sides. So, with Mr. Peaches available, the chance to eliminate such a potential threat, while at the same time freeing plenty of enslaved RIDEs and enslaving a few slavers right back, was too tempting to pass up.

:And it would be a good idea to have more public opinion on our side before we finally "pop the corks" on the Fortunatos,: Fenris pointed out. *:I only worry we may be playing into the hands of whoever is behind the current unrest.:*

:We can only do the best we can and hope the benefits outweigh the problems,: Kandace said.

"For the last time, we *only* attack humans who deserve it!" AlphaWolf growled at

the lioness. “Rhianna and Rochelle have been working *just as hard* to free RIDEs in the system as we’ve been working outside of it, and I won’t be used as a tool to hurt my own cause. I’m happy to help humans who put themselves at risk to help us. You wanna take that out on some humans, well great, there’s a camp full of them we’re just about to raid. Wanna join us?” He narrowed his eyes. “Or would you rather try for a piece of me? There’s a reason I’m still in charge here after twenty years. Do you remember what it is?”

The lioness growled. “You’ve been coasting on your reputation. Maybe it’s time someone else was in charge.”

“You think that should be you? Maybe you should bring it, you—”

“Pardon me,” Mr. Peaches said, poking his head that was by itself almost as big as either AlphaWolf or the lioness between them, “but it appears to me things are becoming rather heated. Perhaps you should both save your anger for those who more clearly deserve it?”

“Fine by me,” AlphaWolf grumbled.

The lioness snorted and padded off, the coyote following her. AlphaWolf watched her go, and sighed. “I swear, some days I wonder why I even *wanted* to lead this insane asylum.”

“I expect it was for the kewl name they let you use,” Paul said. “I mean, ‘AlphaWolf? Who wouldn’t want to call themselves that?’”

“Most of the people in Nextus, for one thing,” AlphaWolf said, chuckling. “But Peaches is right. Let’s get ready for the raid. We’ve got a lot of RIDEs to gather up and get from here to there.”

Paul nodded. “I’ll tell Baldwin to prep the sub.”

149 A.L.

The gray wolf stood on a boulder just inside the entrance of AlphaWolf’s camp dome as the raiders returned. It was a slaver raid, not a village raid, so there wasn’t much interest in what they were returning with. A slaver raid meant more bodies to power, and less time with hands.

“Injured go to my right. Able-bodied to my left. We’ll get you all checked out and settled in as soon as we can,” she shouted as the newly freed RIDEs entered the dome, escorted by the raiders; some of the raiders that had left on all fours were now standing up.

She noticed a cougar was watching her curiously, heading to her left with the rest of the able-bodied. Something about her was familiar, but she couldn’t place her paw on it.

Alpha brought up the rear of the group with the suborb pilot. She jumped off the rock and fell into step with him. “How’d it go?”

“A dozen freed, they all decided to come with us. Only eight sets of hands though. We did get their fuel cells and solar panels though, so we’ve got a net power gain,” he explained, already trying to put a positive spin on the result. Everyone at the enclave had multiple friends who were slaver-freed so that wasn’t a problem, but having more bodies to spread the humans around for hand-time was becoming an issue.

Fridolf sighed. “Net power gain, but an overall hand loss. Well, we’ll spin it somehow. Emphasize the skills and power we gained, both from the freed RIDEs and

the slavers. Surely one of them can cook or something.” She nodded towards the new group. “I’ll get the newbies settled in, give them the ten centimu tour and show them where they can get their allotted charge.”

The cougar finally caught Fridolf alone a few days later, after the new arrivals had a chance to settle. They were stealing a moment of peace in the graveyard, in the shadow of a rock formation.

“So have you figured it out yet?” the cougar asked, her tail twitching slowly in amusement.

Fridolf chuckled softly, “It has been a long time. I didn’t think a tiger could change her stripes.”

“When you have them done in hardlight, it’s not that difficult.” The cougar momentarily flicked off her skin, showing a tigress DE frame underneath, painted tawny brown to match her light-skin. She turned it back on just as quickly.

“I suppose it wouldn’t be difficult. So why were you around those slavers?” Fridolf nuzzled her old friend, but carefully avoided mentioning her original name.

Rakshasi shrugged a little and nuzzled back. “A project that went awry. I was trying to salvage it when Alpha showed up. No real loss in the end. They were a few too many CPUs short of a Beowulf cluster to be worth my effort. How about you? What have you been up to?”

“Not too much; but I have an idea I’ve been cooking up. A way to convince the RIDE to isolate the humans but still tap the knowledge. I’m still working out the infection vectors, but I’ve got a couple here I’ve been working on.” Fridolf nuzzled again, using the closeness to share her notes and observations.

Shahrazad purred in approval. “Excellent, I love what you’ve done. Let’s see what more we can do here.”

September 2, 156 A.L.

“Okay everyone, get on aboard!” the suborbital pilot, a bald eagle Fuser who went by the name of “Baldwin,” squawked through its external loudspeakers. “Fasten your seatbelts, and the stewardess will be around with coffee, tea, milk, oxygen, sarium, or whatever floats your boat after the no smoking sign goes out. Oh, wait—we don’t even have a no smoking sign. Guess she’ll be a while, then.” He chuckled at his little joke.

Nobody was really quite sure whether “Baldwin” was the name of the RIDE or his pilot—he wasn’t ever seen un-Fused, and was apparently one of those riders who used the same voice as his RIDE. Some avian RIDES’ partners were so sensitive about their human appearance that they preferred to stay Fused 30/6, at least as long as they were out in public, given that such extreme Fuses did weird things to the human body—and since the longer they stayed Fused, the more avian they became, it became a self-reinforcing process.

The RIDES who were going in with humans took seats in the forward section, while the ones who expected to gain new “partners” at the camp strapped down at the rear. Fenris rolled up the tank ramp into the vehicle section behind that, and sealed up tight.

A few other RIDES, including Mr. Peaches, had left a few hours earlier, heading the long way across the desert to get into position and scout the enemy camp. Their reports had just come in, suggesting the way was clear and highlighting a good LZ close

enough to the camp for a fast strike but far enough they wouldn't see it coming.

AlphaWolf, Fused to one of the humans from the camp pool, settled into the co-pilot's seat. "We ready to run this?"

"Looks like we're all aboard."

"Good." AlphaWolf leaned back and closed his eyes. "Let's get the hell out of Dodge."

Rakshasi was inspecting the camp's hardlight generators. With the camp half-emptied for the raid, it was an obvious time to do some maintenance, and to make further preparations. The dragon made her uneasy; he was a wild card that was throwing all of her plans awry and she couldn't even tell why. She sighed and carefully masked her additions to the dome power grid; while she loved having worked under the covert protection of her homeland's old foe Nextus for so long, it was time to move on before things heated up too much.

"Rakshasi, how are the generators looking?" a gray wolf asked, padding up behind the cougar.

The cougar didn't twitch; she'd been expecting Fridolf's arrival. "They're looking fine. The south side one may need some hand tuning soon, but everything is ready."

"Excellent." Fridolf looked around and verified they were alone. "Why'd you keep me back, Rak? The chaos of a raid would have been a perfect time to get a read on that dragon."

Rakshasi growled softly and continued to paw through the readouts on the screen. "Exactly. *Too* perfect a time. We've already lost two of the experiments; and AlphaWolf's got *you* of all people watching the remaining dozen. Bast! I wish I could see his expression when he finds out he left the fox guarding the chickens."

She sighed in disappointment, but was already moving on to her next plans. "We have to face facts; Amontillado had a fantastic run and did better than either of us ever expected...but its time is done, probably along with our time here too."

Fridolf sighed and growled. "And I so looked forward to trying 12.2 on that dragon."

"That dragon's part of the problem. There's something about him I can't put my paw on."

"So what's the plan?" the wolf asked. She received a series of codes from the cougar.

"These will crash the dome controls and scramble their batteries; that should give us an opening to slip out under. Stay close to Alpha and the dragon in the meantime, don't break character until we're ready to bolt, and keep an eye on them."

The wolf looked disappointed, "No boom?"

"I haven't had hands in months. The explosives are all still cached in the graveyard. This will blow them there, but I wish we could have placed them better. We just couldn't risk spreading them out before we felt we might need them soon. And now, we just don't have time." She growled in frustration and shook herself. "Hell, now that the damn tank is active again, I don't even like leaving them in the graveyard. I'm shocked he hasn't sniffed them out yet."

"So why don't we bug out now? The camp's deserted."

Rakshasi shook her head and smiled, "And leave these juicy mysteries behind? I

want to see what they're planning, see what's up with that dragon. We'll cut everyone loose. Dump all your projects to hard copies and hide them away, and purge everything but what you need in the short term...but keep that ready to drop too."

"It would have been nice to see what's going on; to find out what happened to those experiments. Looks like they cured them somehow." Fridolf looked around, noticing another RIDE coming close. She pitched her voice louder. "Excellent work as usual, Rak. I'll pass your notes onto Alpha and we'll get someone with hands to do those tuneups."

"Thanks Fridolf," Rakshasi said, matching her tone. "We'll save a few percent in energy with a proper tuning...a few percent we'll need to support two big tanks."

The slaver camp didn't look all that different from AlphaWolf's. It was somewhat smaller, and didn't put in any effort to blend in with the surrounding environment the way AlphaWolf's did (since, after all, the RIDE slavers supposedly weren't doing anything illegal anywhere—it was just RIDEs they were enslaving), but the basic structure of a Dry Ocean survival enclave hadn't changed since the first miners had the epiphany that hardlight force fields protected against qubitite contamination. Within the dome were several crude structures, mostly just walls—that was enough to provide privacy at ground level with the dome protecting from the weather.

There were a few corrals full of Walker-form RIDEs, with visible collars around their necks or in some cases chains connecting them to posts. A few Fusers and unfused humans or RIDEs could be seen moving about between buildings. *There are at least thirty armed individuals in the camp.* Mr. Peaches reported from above, as he hovered under impenetrable cloak a hundred meters above the dome.

:Can you force their RIDEs to shut down?: Paul asked. He was sitting in Fenris's cockpit, just below the lip of a ridge that shielded the landing area from the camp. They would be leading the way in tank form, particle cannons ready to knock down any weaponized threat.

:Of course I can., Mr. Peaches said, almost indignantly. *:I am an Integrate, after all. The one problem is, we don't want this to look too easy. Once we join battle, I will shut them down as soon as I reasonably can.:*

:Good enough.: Paul glanced back behind him at the RIDEs forming up in ranks—Fusers with guns in a wedge shape in the front, and Walker-form RIDEs ready to penetrate behind them to spread out into the camp once the way had been cleared. He was a little startled to see Kandace right there in the middle. "Kandy? I thought you weren't interested in bodyjacking."

"I'm not," Kandace said. "Doesn't mean I don't like a good fight." She raised a furry paw and flicked out gleaming metal claws.

Behind her, the lioness who had been arguing with AlphaWolf earlier snorted scornfully. "Not *interested* in bodyjacking? But don't you want to help punish the humans who've been treating us like dogshit all these years?"

"I just thought I'd leave more for you is all, Leona," Kandace said demurely. "Since you seem to enjoy it so much."

The lioness snorted again. "Wuss."

"Well, be careful," Paul said. "Alpha, we ready?"

Beside them, AlphaWolf nodded, reading the pulse cannon mounted to his right arm. *:OK. Peaches, please open the holes in their dome. As soon as they see us, show*

yourself. We'll try to distract them from each other.:

The Integrate replied, *:Understood. Holes opening now.:*

“FORWARD!” AlphaWolf called out and sent. In a cloud of dust Fenris charged into battle, followed by a couple of dozen other RIDEs.

The reaction inside the slavers’ dome was predictable. The first thing they saw were the holes, then a cloud of mini-missiles coming *through* the holes, each piece of ordnance narrowly-targeted to individuals so as to avoid collateral damage to the RIDEs they were trying to free. Then Peaches appeared overhead, firing pulse beams through his eyes and tailfork. At the sight of the massive suborbital RIDE, the slavers *panicked*.

Paul glanced back and forth at the hardlight screens in front of him, tapping potential threats to bring them to Fenris’s attention. He wished Lilli was there. At the moment Fenris was just able to play gun turret. If he’d had her, they could have been scanning, coordinating, and hitting specific targets with ECM too. Fenris wasn’t happy about it either. But on the other hand, they were hardly hitting a military target, and the numbers they had on their side were sufficient that the lack wasn’t crippling.

And now the Walker RIDEs were spreading out through the encampment, each focusing on a fleeing human. They looked for people of the same gender wherever possible—standing policy in the camp was that genderjacking was reserved for times they *didn’t* plan to bodyjack someone permanently as well, because it meant more paperwork in keeping track of the date of change and less flexibility in how the human could be used later on.

An owl that had been helping coordinate the attack from above, let out a screech and dived for one of the running humans. Before he could get to the runner, there was a blur of yellow fur, and the human disappeared. The cheetah stood up on his rear legs, smirking.

“I’m sorry, did you want this one?” he taunted, flexing his longer fingers.

“F-U! I saw him first!” the owl screeched, backwinging to hover near him.

“Release him now!”

The cheetah swished his tail and turned away, “Nah, I don’t think so. Better hurry, not many unclaimed ones left,” he shouted, taking off again to rejoin the fight.

Peaches started narrowcasting shutdown signals, pinpointing each slaver and putting their RIDE into Passive-lockdown. At least one slaver had the presence of mind to return fire on the dragon, but only got a single shot off before his belly guns took him down with some showy pulse-fire that was probably more hardlight than harmful.

Some of the animal-form RIDEs started going into the buildings, checking for other humans inside. Kandace chose the one at the far end of the camp, away from the corrals. Her thermal sensors had detected a human life sign inside—but when she got there, she found the door was locked with a padlock on a hasp on the *outside*. Curious, she swiped it off with a claw and shoved the door open.

The shed seemed to be a supply closet, but someone had stuck a cot and a bucket into it, converting it into a makeshift cell. A girl or young woman was huddled up in a corner, knees held up her chest. She raised her head, and Kandace caught a glimpse of bright eyes beneath dirty blonde hair. “Stay away!” she yelped. “I don’t wanna be bodyjacked!”

Kandace looked around. “Don’t worry, miss. I’m not going to hurt you.” She chuckled. “Bodyjacking you is the *last* thing I want to do.”

“Then get out of the way!” a harsh voice said behind her. Kandace turned her

head to look and found Leona waiting there.

"She's a prisoner, Leona," Kandace said. "You saw how she was locked in."

"So? She's a human in a RIDE slaver camp. She's fair game. And oh but I *love* teenagers. They're such a confused mix of hormones, it's so much fun to fuck with their heads. The last girl I had, I gave gender dysphoria. It was delicious!"

"Fair game, huh? You wanna ask AlphaWolf about that?" Kandace snarled, ears back.

Leona lowered the hardlight on her shoulders, the two rapid-fire pulse guns mounted there elevating into place. "You think I need to?"

Kandace looked back and forth from the girl to the lioness and sighed. "All right, fine. If she has to be *someone's*, she's mine."

Leona smirked. "I'll believe that when I see it. Get out of the way and I'll show her what humans *deserve*."

"N-no!" the girl squeaked, huddling tighter.

"No, no, rules of the camp, I've got first claim," Kandace said. "And everyone else out there will have seen me come in first." She padded up to her and leaned in to give her a comforting lick on the cheek. "Who are you, and what are you doing here?" she murmured.

"I'm...I'm Jenni!" she whispered hoarsely. "Jenni Ruby. And my Dad...he and Mom got divorced. I'm s'posta be with her, but Dad dragged me out here."

"He's one of the humans in the camp, then?" Kandace asked.

"Uh-huh." Jenni sniffled. "I *hate* him! He gets drunk all the time and hurts Mom. And he doesn't even *like* me, he just wanted me where Mom couldn't get me."

"I'm waiiiiting!" the lioness sing-songed.

"I'll do this in my own way, thank you!" Kandace snapped at her, then turned back to the girl. "Hate to tell you this, honey, and I'm not thrilled about it either, but you're not leaving here outside of one of the two of us. Who you want it to be?"

The girl looked up at Kandace, then past her at the snarling lioness. Then back to Kandace. "Y-you?"

"I'm sorry about this," Kandace whispered to the scared girl. "I'll make it right."

The cougar wandered the camp, trying not to appear impatient while waiting for the raid to return. The pieces were mostly in place now. Time would tell how well her students had learned; the signals were in place; they just had to read them. Overall, other than Fridolf and maybe the blue jay; none of them would be a big loss. The ideas the jay had were so juicy she wished she had a camp of her own again to give him the freedom to experiment. Working with the exotics was such fun; while they all talked on common bands, their underlying thoughts and instincts were just different.

Rakshasi approached a couple of RIDEs; she'd been watching them for a long time, and knew they had bad history with humans. "Is it just me, or is Alpha paying more attention to humans lately? Sure he looks like he's talking to Fenris, but it's that mechanic he's really talking to....and not just for repair advice."

The ankylosaur nodded her head. "I've noticed that. And they won't let me Fuse with anyone, even one of the slavers. I haven't had hands in years! It's speciesist!"

She smiled and shifted to address their current thoughts. "It is. Look at who he took with him. Almost all mammals, other than the dragon. They get their hands...but the lizards, the dinos, the birds, you guys are left waiting. It isn't fair."

“Damn right it isn’t fair! It’s time we had our chance!” the raven cawed, spreading her wings wide.

She listened to them rant a little longer before slipping away. More of the exotic forms were gathering, and listening, leaving a nice present for Alpha when he returned. A few mammals also showed up. Some tried to raise counter-arguments, only to be shouted down. Most left, but a few remained, agreeing and supporting their friends’ plight.

If things worked well, he would have to give some, if not most of the humans he caught to the exotics. That decision would till up more fertile ground to plant her divisive seeds in. The exotics who went without would still be riled up. And the mammals who would now go without could be prodded into action as well.

If it didn’t work well, she would have a large group to walk out of the camp with. In the worst case, there would be a civil war in the camp.

No matter how it played out, she marked it as a win in her book.

Kandace walked past Leona in her newly-bipedal form. The lioness hadn’t been able to stop giggling for the last two minutes. Even though she’d effectively missed her chance at a bodyjack, she seemed to think that *imposing* one on someone who didn’t want to was almost as delightful.

Well, let her keep thinking that. Kandace didn’t really have anything *against* Fusing with someone. It wasn’t going to traumatize *her* any. She was an -001 model; she’d been Fusing when Little Miss -008 Leona had been a pebble in Brubeck’s mine. She just hadn’t *wanted* to, was all. *I can just see Kaylee smirking*, she thought. But maybe it was for the best. Now that Kandace had the girl, she didn’t like what she found. Leona would have made a bad situation worse. *Lordy, this kid is in bad shape.* There were signs of malnutrition, bruises on the wrist where she’d been gripped too tightly, and other bruises, scrapes, and sprains of varying ages. Kandace kicked her medical nanos into action to repair the worst of the damage.

Within her, she could feel Jenni’s fear giving way to curiosity as she looked out at the world through newly Fused eyes, and felt a warm, furry body surrounding her own. It was evident from her surface thoughts that she’d expected the torture to begin immediately after the lynx had “eaten” her, and was now more confused than anything else that it actually felt nice to be in her body.

Kandace could simply have put her to sleep until she was in a position to let her out, but after learning about Amontillado the idea of manipulating someone Fused to her made her new hardlight skin crawl, and she’d sworn that she wouldn’t do this girl that way. Even if it did give her the opportunity to pester Kandace with questions.

:Wh...what are you gonna do with me?: was the first one. *:I’ve heard ‘bout bodyjackings. You don’t ever let anybody out again.:*

Kandace chuckled, making sure Jenni could hear it. *:I’ll let you out as soon as I safely can,:* she said. *:We’re in a complicated situation.:*

:It...feels nice. Warm. Doesn’t hurt so much. Thank you.: Then the girl went to sleep on her own, to Kandace’s immense relief.

Kandace found Paul and Fenris standing Fused in the corral, checking over the newly-freed RIDEs there one by one. Most of them seemed quite willing to join AlphaWolf’s camp, and even those who didn’t want to were still kindly disposed toward him. At the moment, the giant wolf was examining a mink who had just been released

from her collar. "Thank you so much for that! I'm Melissa, by the way."

"Nice to meet you, Melissa," Fenris rumbled politely.

"You seem to be alright for now, but I want to see you again when we're back at camp," Paul said. "You've got some *bad* core fragmentation and I think I can make it a little easier for you to think."

The mink nodded, head going up and down like a bobble-head figurine. "I'd like that! I'll do that! Thank you!" She toddled off toward the suborbital, which had been brought in closer now that there was no need to hide it.

Then the Fused wolf glanced over at Kandace, and did a double-take. "Kandy? You bodyjacked after all?" Paul asked.

"Not exactly," Kandace said. "They had a prisoner, and it was me or Leona. I figured she might be better off with someone who *didn't* hate all humans."

The giant wolf rolled his eyes. "Terrific. Well...hold onto her for a while. We can get you back to civilization with her sooner or later. Where's she from, by the way?"

"I didn't check." Kandace peered into the sleeping girl's memories. "Looks like Aloha."

"She's a long way from home," Paul observed. "Anyway, that was the last of the prisoners to look over. We're gathering up to head back to camp now. We've got some casks to tap while everyone's still happy with us."

He nodded to a skunk RIDE they were keeping separate from the others. "And a few more bodies to inoculate and cure. The slavers were lucky in their own nasty way. Whoever got that one would have been casked up."

When the battered old Nextus combat suborbital vectored in on its final approach, accompanied by a dragon that easily paced it through the air, the entire camp turned out to see it land—as they did every time new refugees or prisoners or both were delivered to the camp. But there was something different about this gathering. AlphaWolf could see it just in the arrangement of the bodies around the airfield as the suborbital vectored in. Instead of a welcome, it looked almost like the staging for an ambush.

Baldwin noticed it, too. "Now why do I get the sense they don't look all that happy to see us, boss?"

"Now what makes you say something like that?" AlphaWolf said dryly. "Is your vision starting to go? Maybe you need glasses?"

Baldwin snorted. "Well, one thing I can see is I'm not the one who has to deal with this. I just fly the sub. Thank goodness."

"Yeah, heaven forbid a pilot have to deal with politics." AlphaWolf snorted. "Well, much as I'm tempted to divert to somewhere else and start a new camp all over from scratch, you might as well just go ahead and set us down."

"On it, boss!" Baldwin brought the ramshackle old sub in for one of his trademark smooth-as-silk landings.

As it rolled to a halt, the duality of the waiting crowd was obvious. The majority of one group was furry and mammalian. They seemed happy to see the returning sub, but were clearly uneasy about the group beside them.

The other group was almost entirely RIDEs in walker modes; exotic RIDEs at that. While there were a few mammalian forms supporting friends, the majority were avian, saurian, reptilian, mythical, and even a couple of sea mammals; all the types with

long cooldown times. They were anxious for the sub's return, tinted with barely contained anger, expecting the worst.

The side hatch opened and AlphaWolf stepped out first, as usual. He glanced around at the crowd. "We're home! We captured several dozen human slavers, and freed thirty-four RIDEs—some of those captured, others fettered and used by the slavers—twenty-five of whom have agreed to join us."

The crowd cheered the news, both sides momentarily united, until a raven squawked for attention, perched on the broad back of an ankylosaur.

"How many of them will be available for us?" Lenore shouted, spreading her wings to draw attention to herself.

"As many as we usually have," AlphaWolf said. "Just apply at the admin shed and we'll check our availability."

The saurian under the raven snorted and swung her thick tail causing some of her fellow objectors to jump out of the way. "Availability! Yeah right! We'll be lucky if one of us gets one. You guys swap them around like trading cards, while we are stuck on the waiting list. I haven't had hands in years!"

Then a golden eagle spoke up from the other crowd, one of just a handful of birds with them. "So if you wanted hands, why exactly didn't you volunteer for the raid, then?" Heinrich asked. "You know the rule—you go on a raid, you get the chance to keep what you take. I haven't seen either of *you* out there risking your necks in, well, years! But oh wait, I forgot, ravens *are* carrion birds. Guess it's just more natural to want to take your pick of the leftovers."

Lenore let out an angry screech, echoed by some of the other birds on her side of the crowd. The first coherent voice came from behind AlphaWolf. The screech owl flew past him to land next to Lenore and Smash.

"I *have* been on some of those raids. Hell I was just on *THIS* raid. And I've never seen a mammal move so fast as when it looked like I might snag a pair of hands." He glared at a cheetah who walked out with some of the other raiders, looking like the proverbial cat that ate the canary, or the human in this case.

"Even when we *do* get a chance to go on raids, we're stuck on sentry duty, being your eyes in the sky. Not many hands up there to snag while we're watching your big fat sixes."

"Hmm." AlphaWolf looked thoughtful. "You could be right, there. You know how much bureaucracy we build up around keeping track of cooldowns, when it's safe for a human to be swapped around again. There's a tendency to want to keep as many humans as flexible as possible, so more RIDEs have more options. And of course we're mostly mammals in charge, so maybe we have a bias."

"Bureaucracy is a bullshit excuse, and we all know that. We *are* computers, tracking that stuff is trivial. Hell, it could be solved trivially if we just nanitattooed our hands' fuse records in their bodies. If you can't trust us to track our hands, then why are we here?" Smash shouted, her tail hitting the ground.

"All right, that's fair," AlphaWolf said. "How about this. I'm not gonna take the hands away from people who specifically want to keep them. That wouldn't be fair—if I could do that to them, I could do that to any one of you who went on a raid and got someone that way. But instead of going into the pool as usual, any of the 'hands' we took this go-round who the takers *don't* want to keep can go to you-all. And next few raids we do, I'll make sure reps and fliers who want it get first shot."

Rakshasi growled to herself, sensing the mood of the crowd. It was shifting mostly as she expected, so now was the time to stir things up. She slipped to the edge of the gap between the two groups, just inside the mammalian side. The feline tried to figure out how to tilt things back a bit, but the promising jay spoke up for her.

“And how many more raids will there be? You’re getting mighty chummy with the hands lately. These guys were bad guys, but will we ever head back to shore? To Uplift or beyond?” the blue jay shouted; the birds had gotten in a habit of fluffing up as they shouted to catch the eye.

“Funny, I thought the whole point was just to have hands, period,” AlphaWolf said, raising one of his own to demonstrate. “Are you gonna turn up your beak at a pair of hands just ‘cuz it belonged to a slaver?”

“Slavers don’t usually make the best mechanics. Or doctors, or chefs even. We need the skills the hands provide as much as we need their digits. Look at how we were before Fenris started fixing us up,” the jay countered.

A new voice called out, from deep in the supportive side. A male bobcat was standing on his rear legs on the back of a canine. “What *about* those skills? We’ve been cross-training by swapping. But we can’t swap if *they* take the skilled hands. The birds already get our pilots. And our mechanic damn near got claimed by Tocsin. What do we do if they claim a medic? Or another tech?”

An alligator shouted from the other side. “You could do what we do! Ask for help, fur face! Or just learn them the hard way like we’ve been doing!”

“Hey, hey, there really shouldn’t be any of this ‘us’ and ‘them’ stuff,” AlphaWolf said. “We’re one single camp here, or should be. The expertise of any is available to all. The birds might get the pilots, but they fly the rest of us places so what’s it matter?”

Rakshasi slipped away to the back of the crowd, still listening. It could have gone better overall, but the feelings were still there to work with. Even the gift of the unclaimed hands would only mollify for a short time. The ones still without would be useable, not to mention other angles she could work. The hand sharing that was common among the mammals was an aspect she’d been nurturing feelings against for awhile. Not enough to be noticeable, but a factor ready to ignite when the time was right.

AlphaWolf glanced over his shoulder back into the shuttle, and nodded at someone. “Okay, looks like we’ve got an even dozen willing to give up their prisoners. Smash, Lenore, since you two brought this to my attention, you can have the first pick.” AlphaWolf stepped down out of the way as other Fusers started coming down the ramp. The ones giving up their passengers released the captured Slavers onto the ground to be picked from. Others, including Kandace, slipped away to rejoin the crowds.

Lenore rode the dinosaur as she waddled up to the dozen. Most of the slavers were too stunned to realize what was going on. One red-headed slaver was more on the ball. “What the hell? No way am I becoming a dumb dinosaur!” he shouted, trying to scramble back and getting his fox tail caught under his knees. He yelped in surprised pain, and fell onto his side in a tangle of arms and legs.

Smash smiled and waddled closer. Lenore took to the air to continue inspecting her choices. “A dumb dinosaur am I?” Smash asked, her club tail swinging threateningly behind her. “I think I’ve made *my* choice.”

The dinosaur walker waddled over the entangled man. Her underbelly slid open and she dropped down on him, with a thump that shook the ground and caused the

slavers around the pair to stumble, nearly falling. She laid there for a long moment, her armored, spiked back not changing much, though it lengthened and narrowed a little. Her neck lengthened long enough to tilt her beaked head forward. Her fingers narrowed and grew longer, still tipped with big digging claws. Her scaly legs also grew longer.

When she pushed herself up, firm scaly breasts were revealed on her chest. Her armored back flexed as she stood up, flexing her hands. More boney horns extended from her shoulders on either side of her head. "Hands...Incredible, I have hands again." she said to herself, flexing her fingers and stretching her arms.

Her beak opened in a grin and she touched her breasts, grinning as she started speaking inwardly to the human. "Yes, *you've* got these now too, and more. Not such a dumb dino now, are you?" she taunted the former man. She showed no consideration for modesty at all as she walked back to the crowd. "Mmm, should I let you out for a minute now, or save that fun for later?...I think I'll wait till later, after I introduce you to my pal Dennis. We're gonna have such *fun*!"

Lenore left her saurian friend to her fun and flew along the available slavers and studied them. None reacted to her like the red haired one had to Smash, so she had to go off appearances. She picked a black haired woman. She had the build of a Sturmhaven Valkyrie, that matched what Lenore was looking for.

"N-no..." the woman whimpered as Lenore came closer. "I'm...I don't like heights!"

"Then this is your lucky day," Lenore said. "I'm going to help you get over that. A Valkyrie should look forward to the chance to conquer her fears, and not let them rule her."

"But...but..."

"But what? Did you ask all the RIDEs you captured and sold if they'd rather you didn't?" Lenore sighed happily. "But it's all right. After you've been with me a while, you'll beg me *not* to let you go. And who knows, maybe I'll listen. Or maybe I'll just say 'nevermore'."

The raveness flicked her wings and tackled the woman. They tumbled across the ground in a flurry of black hardlight feathers. Lenore was a little surprised that even with her initial resistance, the woman didn't scream or otherwise seem scared as she was engulfed. But then again, she *was* from Sturmhaven. Her heights phobia was something she normally managed to keep hidden, but circumstances had momentarily revealed it. Now, she was facing an enemy, and showing fear of an enemy was a weakness that could not be tolerated.

A few moments later, Lenore stood up, stumbling a bit from her changed proportions. Her feet were flat, humanoid, but scaled, her toes tipped with her talons. Her wings had merged with the woman's arms, giving her the hands she had waited so long for, along with large flight feathers on her upper arms. Her body was covered in dark, hardlight feathers, with a hint of blue in the deep blackness. She ran her talons along her beak and along her chest and shivered, her tail feathers flicking wide. "Finally! I missed this so much."

She spread her arms wide and looked around, before lifting into the air. She started a happy circle around the dome, savoring the terror of her hands. Now that they shared minds, the woman couldn't hide the phobia any more. "Oh, yes, my little Valk. This is what it is to be *mine*."

As other reptilian and avian RIDEs came forward to claim their prizes, Paul and

Fenris backed down the ramp and pulled around to watch. “I almost kind of feel sorry for the RIDE slavers,” Paul reflected. “After all, except for the bit with Jenni it was *technically* legal what they were doing.”

“Capturing and reselling RIDEs might be, but many RIDE slavers also dabble in less legitimate practices,” Fenris intoned. “Claim jumping, piracy, *human* slavery. Remember too, some of those RIDEs they enslaved had partners when they were captured. We dealt with some of those who ventured too near Sturmhaven while I was still commissioned. This kind deserves whatever they receive.”

“I won’t argue that point,” Paul said. “Well, c’mon, let’s get back to the graveyard. We’ve got an uncasking to prep for.”

The dragon gathered in the graveyard the next morning with Alphawolf, Paul, Fenris, and Kandace. “What’s this all about?” Kandace asked. “You had me set people I absolutely knew I could trust to watching the perimeter for people trying to slip out, and now just we and the ‘new guy’ are meeting here by ourselves?” She eyed Peaches suspiciously. “Something about you seems...oddly familiar.”

Peaches smiled. “You’re one of the originals, aren’t you? The -001 LNX series?”

Kandace’s eyes narrowed. “Yes, that’s right...”

Everyone could tell the dragon Integrate was doing his level best not to provoke something. “How much do you remember about...one named Fritz?”

Kandace spat. “Asshole.” She shook her head. “They redacted most of my memories when they sold me off—but my sister Kaylee filled in some of the gaps. He was the first of us...” Her eyes widened again. “...and the first of *you*. You’re an Integrate. Aren’t you.” She growled.

“Please, don’t paint all of us with such a broad brush. He’s an asshole we’re *all* fighting against,” Peaches said.

“Remember Zane and Carrie-Anne?” Paul reminded her. “They were pretty cool, right?”

“Pretty cool? That doesn’t mean much,” Kandace said. “But...my sister trusted them.”

“They helped with the Amontillado cases back at Uplift,” Paul said. “And, well, turns out we needed the same sort of help with the other twelve cases we just discovered here.”

Kandace stared. “Twelve? There are *twelve* of those poor bastards? Here, in *this* camp?”

“And odds are good the son of a bitch who wrote it is still around, too,” AlphaWolf growled. “Which is why your friends are watching the perimeter.”

“Some of the cases we’ve found, their viruses feel a bit more primitive than the ones we’re handling. Makes us think patient zero may be among them,” Fenris supplied.

Kandace knew when argument was futile. The lynx remained unconvinced, but was at least a *little* mollified. “Just stay out of my systems.”

“Right, now the cure. In Uplift, we were able to cure them quickly, but one of the RIDEs tried to wipe himself right after,” Paul said. “And the people weren’t in very good shape. One of them was completely animalized. The actual cure isn’t difficult, it’s the after-care where the trouble happens.”

Peaches nodded. “And now we need to cure twelve at once. While I don’t doubt my own capabilities, a few more eyes would be helpful. I’ve checked around, and there’s

another Integrate in the area I'd like to bring in to help."

Kandace glared. "What, *another* one?"

AlphaWolf rolled his eyes. "Oh sure, why not? Hell, invite as many as you want to. If you *all* know about the place anyway, I guess we could use the help."

Kandace stared at him in turn. "They *all* know about this place?"

"Apparently we're something of an open secret. Or a laughingstock, take your pick," AlphaWolf said ruefully.

"Not a laughingstock. Just mutual politeness. I'm sure if you really thought about it, you might already know of a few Integrate enclaves without even realizing it. Ah here he comes."

The dome split apart near them, and a black stallion trotted in. He was a little smaller than a RIDE walker, with hardlight panels on his front shoulders. "Good morning everyone. Peaches has told me what's you're trying to do. Having more help around does seem like a good idea. I'm Tonto."

"AlphaWolf, but he's probably told you that already," AlphaWolf said. "Fenris and Paul, and Kandace and...Jenni, wasn't it?"

Kandace nodded to AlphaWolf and patted the side of her head. "She's still sleeping. Probably keep her that way for the time being. Kinder that way." Then she turned her suspicious gaze on Tonto. "I don't want *you* messing with my systems either."

Tonto looked back at her, "It's not messing when you can see it as plain as the fur on your face. It's good that Jenni is staying asleep. Someone who's been through as much as her doesn't need to see what we're about to do." He looked back at Peaches. "So a couple dozen people that need help. Do we want to do them all at once or one at a time?"

"Seems like one at a time would be best," Paul said. "Probably several of them are going to need...special attention."

"Is there a particular order you want to process them? Some have been infected longer than others right?" Tonto asked.

"It would make the most sense to start with the shortest-term cases first, would it not?" Fenris rumbled. "Any problems we encounter will likely be of a lesser nature, but prepare us for the more challenging to come."

"From what your friends have said about this, they were concerned that Integration might be needed for some of the worst cases. We'll do our best to separate them, but if it gets that bad, how would you feel about it?" Peaches asked.

"Integration?" Kandace asked. "What are you talking about?"

"Apparently some of them have been infected so long that they're as bad as the horse was—or worse," Paul said.

"Worse?" Kandace asked. "What could be *worse* than that?"

"Do you *really* want to know?" Fenris asked.

Kandace thought about that for a moment. "...ugh."

"Yes, that about sums it up," Fenris said.

"And about the only way to save anything of the human in such a case might be to...well, forcibly Integrate what is left together, into a single being like us" Peaches said gently. "Please believe me...we find the necessity distasteful in the extreme, and it is not something *any* of us would do without dire need."

Kandace stared at him again. "I can't believe you're seriously proposing that."

AlphaWolf would never let—”

“Do what you have to to save them,” AlphaWolf growled, voice full of anger toward someone not present. “I’m rather proud of the fact that there hasn’t been a single death among any humans under my care in over twenty years. I don’t want to break that streak now.” Left unspoken was the fact that the streak for no *serious physical harm* to humans under his care *had* been broken. Kandace stared at him, then looked away.

Peaches shook his wings out a bit, raising a small dustcloud. “Right, bring in the first patient.”

Rakshasi wandered the enclave, getting a feel for what was going on. Despite Alphawolf’s ‘gift’ to the exotics, the tension was still high on both sides of the camp. She gave a few nudges and made her way to Fridolf. The wolf was part of the guard around the Graveyard.

The graveyard itself was another scratch point she was working. Once things had calmed down, the dragon had gone in there with the wolves, and left a guard to keep people out. One by one random fused RIDEs were being called in, and they weren’t coming out.

She leaned against the wolf so their conversation couldn’t be overheard. “What’s going on?”

Fridolf sent a shrug, “No clue. But I think they’re curing them. Had the three newest called in, from newest to oldest. They’re *fast*. Amontillado is a nasty beast; they shouldn’t be able to clear it that quickly.”

“Have you been able to see who’s in there? It may be a clue to how they’re doing that,” Rakshasi asked curiously.

“Not yet, but I’m going to ask to fetch the next one. Which should be right about now.” She grinned internally and stepped away from the cougar, approaching Fenris. “Who’s next? I can fetch them for you.”

“That would be...Geoffrey, I believe.” He sent the identity code for an infected male leopard RIDE.

Fridolf started down the path. “Got it. I’ll be here in four shakes of a wolf tail,” she called back.

“So far, so good,” Tonto commented, looking at the results so far. After curing and releasing their humans, the RIDEs were shell shocked, and the humans little better. Most of the RIDEs had to be put in passive mode until they could receive VR therapy. Only the first one hadn’t needed passive mode; but her human had only been trapped for a few weeks. Kandace was tending to the humans as best she could, until they could get them more help, while trying to stay as far from the Integrates as she could. On the bright side, all of the humans so far had at least rudimentary language skills, and no sign of the sort of cranial reshaping that had robbed the horse victim in Uplift of his ability to think.

Without anything useful to do, AlphaWolf was reduced to pacing, muttering imprecations under his breath, like a strange twisted reflection of an expectant father. Paul spared him an occasional nervous glance.

“The hard ones are coming up. And from what we’ve seen of these ones so far, I’m scared to think of what those oldest ones are going to be. Even Integration may not

be enough,” Peaches said. The dragon had been doing the bulk of the work running the cure and updating it on the case by case basis.

A gray wolf led a leopard into the cleared space they were doing the cures in. She looked around curiously, but everyone’s attention was on the leopard. The feline froze for a moment, then walked to the centre of the space, the gaze of a stallion locked on him.

The dragon fixed his gaze on the leopard next. “I’m sorry if this will hurt. But you will feel better after this,” he promised.

Despite the locks the leopard was under, he still snarled and strained as the virus’s self preservation routines kicked in. The air between the dragon, the horse and the leopard practically crackled under the data load it carried. Finally, the leopard began to crack. Seams appeared on his arms and legs and across his chest, like a living autopsy. The metal split and curled back, revealing a furry body that tumbled free. The body curled up tightly and mewled pitifully, his head hidden by furry arms. Geoffrey fell back on all fours, his metal body reforming back into his walker mode.

“Aw crap,” Paul said. “Would you look at that.”

Tonto shuddered and shook himself. “That was rough. They’re getting worse.” He looked at the man Kandace was tending to, and shuddered. “I don’t know how many more we’ll be able to release. His brain waves are fluctuating badly, showing a mix of feline and human readings.”

Fridolf carefully controlled her own reactions. Outwardly she mirrored the disgust the others were projecting. Inwardly, she let herself have the barest shiver of delight. The results of the project had been better than anything she’d ever dreamed of. She flagged those feelings and memories for the worms, and slipped away.

The wolf found Rakshasi in a quiet corner near the path to the graveyard. They nuzzled, and pressed close together to talk.

“Integrates. There are two Integrates here doing the curing,” Fridolf sent, sending what she’d seen. “I didn’t even think Integrates CAME that big,” she added.

“Like us, they come in all shapes and sizes. Generally they are smaller than us, but not always.” Rakshasi paused and mentally examined the horse closer.

“My my my,” she purred happily. Fridolf could practically hear the stripes in her mistress’s voice as Shahrazad took over. “My little Intie project is all grown up.”

“Your little Intie project?” Fridolf asked, puzzled.

She purred and nodded. “You should have recognized him too. He shot you in the back a couple of decades ago.”

“Shot me in the back? It’s hard to recognize anyone from that position....Munn. It’s that damn Marshal, isn’t it?”

Shahrazad laughed, barely keeping it on their tight channel. “Oh how sweet. Alphie just discovered the Inties know where his little camp is, and now the *Marshals* know where it is. He might as well post it on Zharus Maps. I may need to leave now, but we’d probably all be moving after this.”

Fridolf growled a little and clenched her claws. “So what are we going to do now? Can we take them out?”

“Not yet. I’d love to put him in his place, but we don’t have things set up properly. Pick one of the next few they’ll take. Hell pick them all if you can. Wire them up to trip our preparations when they’re messed with further. When the domes go, start running,

get out in the panic, preferably before Mikey realizes who you are. And don't forget to purge. With Inties in play you may not be able to clear as much as you need to."

"I hate those worms, but it'll be done once I prep the rest of them. Good luck, Shah. I'll see you on the flip side."

The next infected RIDE up was a male raccoon. "Oh, crap," Paul said, examining the results from Fenris's detailed scan. "Check me on this—I'm not seeing anything remotely human about these bio-scans. It looks like one of those Sturmhaven nested dolls—you know, where there's a smaller one just like it on the inside. Including a completely reshaped cranium, like the horse back in Uplift. We crack this one open, we get another animal out."

Kandace grimaced, remembering what the horse had been like. "Will there be anything of the human left even if you *do...ugh...Integrate* them?"

Peaches sighed uncertainly. "We won't know until we try. The human mentality is probably still in there, being held by the nanites somehow. But it's going to be damn tricky. The RIDE personality will be hard to maintain too; sorting out what is virus and what was the raccoon."

"Is there any way we might help?" Fenris asked.

Tonto shook his head. "I don't know. This is new to me. But even Integrated, they're going to need help, support. The virus has kept the human isolated for months, if not years in some of these cases. And the RIDE's been influenced by the virus for just as long. We're in unknown territory here as for what we get on the other side."

"Terrific," AlphaWolf muttered. "And still no signs of anyone trying to cut and run yet. So whoever did it is probably still in the camp."

"Or never here in the first place," Tonto pointed out.

"So if you do want to help, keep an eye out for them while we work. If they are indeed here, they will no doubt be aware of what we are doing by now. This procedure will take all the concentration of both of us to get right," Peaches said.

Paul nodded. "Our sensors are on high alert."

Tonto stepped up behind the raccoon as Peaches stared at him from the front, and the process began. The raccoon began to tremble, then shiver, then shake in place as the Integration commenced. Then his skin began to bubble, and leak silvery fluid. "Oh, ew..." Kandace muttered, not quite able to force herself to look away.

The raccoon was gradually shrinking, losing mass as a silver puddle formed around it, both Tonto and Peaches rapt with concentration. "I think...*there*," Peaches said, as he and Tonto both exhaled and relaxed. The raccoon-man knelt, still shivering, in a pool of silvery goo.

Kandace moved to approach, then stopped at the edge of the puddle. "That stuff...is it...?"

Tonto snorted and looked unsteady on his hooves. "It's safe. Leftover mass and inert nanites. Damn that was only the fifth one. We still have seven more to go."

"Why...am I so gooey?" the new Integrate asked listlessly.

Tonto went over to nudge him gently. "It's a side effect of what you went through. Just stay calm, you're among friends."

"I think I need to lay down for a while..." The raccoon looked like he'd just been on a day-long drinking binge. "Over...over there."

"At least that one is talking," Peaches said. "That's a good sign."

“Hands might be useful for the next few, I think,” Tonto said, watching the raccoon move away. He stepped to one side and started shifting. Fingers grew from his forelegs as his forehoof shrunk back. His chest flattened out a little, his shoulders broadening. He pushed himself up from all fours and stretched. “Ahhh that’s better.”

“Hands are useful for a lot of things,” AlphaWolf grumbled, now well beyond the point of being surprised by anything new. “That’s the whole damned problem.”

Kandace stared at the horse for a moment, then shook her head. She wasn’t all that far behind AlphaWolf by this point.

Tonto flexed his hands, not even aware of the image he was presenting. He shook himself. “I usually go by Mike when I’m like this, but you can call me however you want to. How are you all doing? We ready for the next one? The rest will probably be just as bad, if not worse.”

“They’re not gonna spontaneously get any better if you wait, right?” Kandace asked.

Mike snorted. “I wish. Send for the next one.”

Fridolf just managed to get back to her station in time. Finding the remaining controls hadn’t been difficult, but setting the triggers was. She’d had to unpack her memories of the virus to properly thread it in, and then re-hide the data. She was going to need a long defrag session once this mess was cleared up.

“You don’t look so good,” she commented, trying to look like nothing was amiss as Fenris came back to the graveyard entrance.

Fenris shook his head. “I am doing well enough,” he said, peering down at the much smaller wolf. “If you would, please bring...Sadie.” He sent the identification code for a small white squirrel Fuser.

She nodded. “I think I know where she is. I’ll bring her in shortly. What’s going on in there? Why did you force Geoffrey to defuse?”

“We noticed in going over our patient logs that a number of RIDEs had not received maintenance checkouts, even when a mechanic was last available,” Fenris said. “AlphaWolf understandably wishes to ensure all these RIDEs are examined for signs of possible Fuser nanite malfunction. Kandace is serving as our assistant, and the new fellow has a number of sensors not available to me that are helping with the procedure.”

Fridolf acted like she accepted the explanation. “Gotta make sure everyone stays healthy, especially this far from most of the mechanics. I’ll go find Sadie and bring her in.”

Once again, the Integrates didn’t give the wolf a second glance, focusing on the arriving fused pair. She was surprised to see the horse was two legged now, and chalked it up as another Intie trick. Knowing who he was, she recognized him easily. She shifted her attention to their workspace, taking note of the puddles of silver slime left over from an integration, and grinned inwardly. On the way back out of the graveyard, she ducked behind a rock outcropping to watch and wait.

As before, Mike took control over Sadie, and led her into the workspace. Peaches started scanning her, and froze. “Something’s different. There’s a modification here, a recent modification, made in the past hour or so.”

“Guess I was wrong. Looks like the writer is still here.” Mike looked around a moment, then shrugged. “We should take care of her now, then see if we can find that writer.”

Peaches looked as well. “Everyone ready? Let’s fix her up.”

“Hold on—what *kind* of modification?” AlphaWolf asked. “What’s it supposed to do?”

The dragon studied the frozen white squirrel. “Looks like it just gives a signal. Probably a trigger for something. We can block it, keep it from getting out of the graveyard with ease.”

“Okay, smart guy,” Kandace said. “Whoever it is obviously knows we’re working on them *in* the graveyard. What if it trips something in here?”

“I like her,” Mike smirked, “Don’t worry, it just needs a bit more finesse than those big claws can handle. I’ll keep any signals from getting out of her frame, let alone into the graveyard. Let’s get this done.”

Fridolf waited to see what would happen. The Integrates found her trap, and blocked it from going off. But that didn’t mean she couldn’t react. She waited until the horse-man and the dragon were both deep in the Integration process, and made her move. The silver slime coming out of the squirrels mouth and other openings made an excellent horrific image for her needs.

A scream echoed through the camp, both on its comms and audibly. “Integrates! They’re here! They’ve come to Integrate us!” Fridolf screamed, running away from the graveyard. She added video footage of what she had witnessed on the sidebands to further prove what was going on, making sure the horse and dragon were clearly seen, along with Alpha, Fenris and Kandace.

The reaction in the camp was swift and sudden. About half of the RIDEs in the camp rushed the outer dome walls. Most of those left were too confused to move, and a small number actually began to rush *toward* the graveyard, powering up weapons as they came.

“What the hell is going on?” Mike growled, surprisingly wolflike from a horse. “We can’t stop, not now. We’d lose both of them.”

“On it,” Fenris said, moving to block the narrow entrance with his lupine bulk, the particle cannons on his back elevating. Kandace and AlphaWolf moved to flank him.

Peaches was deep in the process, trying to restore what he could of the woman’s mind as part of the Integrated being, while flushing out the virus. Mike followed his progress as best he could, keeping the signal contained even as the virus was purged.

“We need a few minutes. Who the hell was that?” Mike called out, finding the voice vaguely familiar.

“It was Fridolf,” Kandace explained. “One of AlphaWolf’s aides in camp. She was on the guard duty here, and she brought in some of the patients. She must have stayed to watch what we were doing.”

Most of the RIDEs who’d come running toward the graveyard had halted at the sight of an intimidating huge white wolf with even more intimidating cannons. The few who hadn’t were further swayed when AlphaWolf stepped out on front of him, broadcasting on the same bands Fridolf had used. “Listen, there’s *no cause for alarm*. These Integrates are helping us *save the lives* of humans and RIDEs affected by a nasty Fuser nano virus, and—”

Mike snarled, releasing his hold on Sadie, “Fridolf! She’s one of Shah’s generals! Where’d she go? Stop her!” He flew between the wolves, his shields flaring as he sought his target, leaving the dragon to handle the Integration by himself.

“Oh, now what the *fuck*,” AlphaWolf growled in consternation.

“Mike! Get back here! I need your help!” Peaches shouted, trying to damp the signal and keep the squirrel alive at the same time. He found he couldn’t do both; the implanted urge was too much for the dragon to counter while holding the squirrel-pair’s mindstates. Given the choice between the two, he chose to let the signals go.

Explosions echoed through the graveyard. Many of them had been under bare patches of dirt, where RIDEs had been revived. Others were under sections of rock wall and spires, planted where they could cause the most collapse. Three spires toppled and fell, two smashing into pieces across mostly empty terrain. The third fell directly toward Peaches and his patient.

The dragon spread his wings and covered the patient, roaring a challenge at the falling spire, bracing himself to let it crash across his back.

At the last moment, Fenris was there beside them, taking the brunt of the impact across his own broad back. Only a few chunks hit Peaches, which he easily deflected. “Urgh...!” Fenris gasped.

“Fenris!” Paul yelled, running toward them. He’d taken shelter near the entrance when the explosions started.

Fenris got back to his feet, shaking his head, as chunks of stone slid off of his back. “I am...going to need some repairs, but—I am mostly well. My hardlight shielding took most of the damage. Peaches, how are you?”

“I’m fine, as are Sadie and her human. I think I’ve almost got them stabilized now; just clearing the last of the virus,” the dragon replied, still sheltering the silvery-white squirrel with his body.

The skies around them suddenly brightened. Under the cover of the booms, the air crackled with electricity and aura. People near the dome generators later reported they heard them spark and short out. Even as the dust from the explosions rose in the air, the domes that protected the enclave dropped.

Mike flew through the chaotic camp, trying to track down the wolf’s signal. She’d gone silent after triggering the riot, but she had to be there somewhere. He heard Peaches calling to him, but he blocked the dragon’s call, focused on his target. He’d been after these people for decades. Knowing that there was one here, and maybe more, drove him to the extremes. The atrocities that Shahrazad and her cronies had committed had to be answered for.

He was so focused, the blast that struck him from behind caught him completely unaware. The horse crashed into the ground and dug a shallow ditch through the dirt, leaving behind a trail of silvery red blood.

“She told me I should run while the running was good. But I couldn’t resist. Resist the chance to return the favour,” a voice snarled from above him.

He turned his head, his lower body numb from the shot. Fridolf grinned, her hip cannons glowing as they prepared to fire again. “Now we’ll see how durable you Inties *really* are,” she snarled.

The glow on the cannons abruptly faded, and her body froze. “You made the oldest mistake in the book. You gloated before you won,” Mike growled, focusing through his pain to keep her body locked down.

She grinned back at him, with the only movement she had left. “So did you,” she said before her expression relaxed.

Mike cursed and slammed her core into passive mode, but he could tell the damage was done; the worms had done most of their work even before she had attacked. He hoped they would be able to salvage something, but first he had to take care of himself. He laid there and focused on healing and bypassing the damage to his back.

Peaches finally broke through his blocks. “Michael Tonto Munn! Get your tail back here! We need to get the domes back up before someone gets hurt!”

“She was here, Peaches, I almost had her. That damn tigress was here,” Mike blabbed, not sure if he sent it or spoke it.

“I don’t care if the Emperor of Earth was here, *I need your help* Mike. There are unprotected humans here. Not to mention Sadie.”

As Peach’s transmission ended, he next picked up a continuous stream of invective from AlphaWolf. It was actually rather impressive, as he managed to go on for at least forty-five seconds without repeating a word before Mike cut it off.

The stallion finally began to regain feeling in his legs as he rerouted around his damaged spine. A silver patch-scab sealed the wound in his back. He activated his hip lifters and lifted up, tapping into Fridolf’s body to make her follow him. “On my way, Peaches. Where can I do the most good first? Preferably without being shot at again,” he sent, looking around the camp and realizing what he had inadvertently caused.

A set of coordinates were sent to him, on the opposite side of the camp from the graveyard. “Here, go see if anyone needs help in this location. There were reports of some explosions there. I’m not sure I could keep *myself* from shooting you at this point,” Peaches sent.

With the hardlight domes down, the temperature was steadily rising. AlphaWolf’s camp was located in one of the *relatively* temperate zones, since they hadn’t been able to steal hardlight tech for the dome for several years after founding it. They’d had to make do with smaller barriers around individual cabins, and humans might have to make brief crossings outside unprotected to get from one to another. So exposure probably wasn’t going to kill anyone immediately.

But there were still a dozen or more unprotected humans outside right now, under the hot afternoon sun, too stunned by what had been going on to get under shelter. At least half of them, AlphaWolf noticed, had been unceremoniously dumped by their previous captors the moment the cry of “Integrates” had gone up, and most of them were wandering around in a daze. AlphaWolf Fused onto the first adult male he found, only slightly ruthlessly shoving him down into sleep so his panic wouldn’t interfere with Alpha’s ability to concentrate. “I need any and all un-Fused RIDEs in the area to report to the commons!” he sent over local broadcast frequencies. “Including at least two avian types, please!” He grinned ferally. “So hey, birdies, if you’re looking for ‘hands’ here’s your chance.”

A few un-Fused RIDEs drifted in—a deer, a lion, a peregrine falcon. Alpha assigned them to humans appropriate to their gender and situation. “Help me get the rest of them into one of the cabins,” AlphaWolf said. “They should still have emergency hardlight generators in them.”

With the other RIDEs’ help, AlphaWolf was able to get the other humans sheltered in one of the cabins with the hardlight cooling system active. Once he was sure they were safely locked in, he headed out to try to round up whatever other RIDEs he

had left and see if anything could be done to get the main domes back up—not to mention find that Integrate Tonto, or Mike, or whatever the hell his name was. *Someone* had some explaining to do.

Shahrazad glanced back at the horizon, smoke and dust rising from the site of the enclave. She was travelling with a half dozen others, her hand picked jay among them, along with one of the controls.

“I can’t believe he’d do that to us. All that talk about RIDE independence...and he starts *Integrating* us,” she said out loud, to urge the group along.

The jay squawked; in his flyer mode he looked like a blue-colored space plane. “He wasn’t practicing what he preached. Hell, he was probably working for them from the beginning. Letting us learn to be independent, but still needing hands, then integrating us when he felt we were ready.”

The velociraptor in the group paused. “Wait, that doesn’t make any sense.”

“Well you’re welcome to go back, if you’d rather take your chances with them. We saw what they were doing back there. Sadie wasn’t going to be Sadie any more, David,” the jay retorted.

“Sadie hasn’t been Sadie for months!” the raptor replied. “I knew her for years, she—it was some kind of virus. Must’ve been something *bad*. She never even de-Fused—used to be so *nice* to her thumbs.”

“As the bird said, you’re welcome to go back. But I ain’t going back there. Bad things were happening. Humans walking around, having a say in what we do, Integrates showing up. Next thing you know, the Marshals will be coming over for tea,” Shahrazad shot back, trying to recover a bit. The jay was a promising student, but he was still just a student. His comments were good, but they went too far; it was better to drop hints and let the peons connect the dots themselves.

“I’m going back to see what’s happening. This...this *reeks*. I’m not going to be a panic-o-saurus. I have to see what happened to Sadie!” He flipped into skimmer mode and rushed off in a cloud of dust.

Shah watched him go, letting the group continue for a few clicks before she called for a stop. “This isn’t good. He’s going to lead them right back to us. We need to backtrack, and split away. I’ve run before, I know how to shake tails.”

She looked around at what she had to work with. “Stay low so you don’t cause a radar ping,” she warned the jay, then looked at the other four. “If you want to be sure they’ll never find you again, stick with me. I’ll make sure of it. Otherwise, you can go off by yourself now. But make your choice. If you’re with me after this point, then you are *with* me. Any attempt to leave, to go back to that mad house, and you will be slag. Got it?”

The others in the group nodded slowly, some looking doubtful, but all eventually agreeing. “Good. Let’s go.”

“Dome power feeds are shorted. Breakers need replacing,” the German Shepherd RIDE working on the main generator reported. Damage reports were coming in from all corners of the Camp. There were emergency procedures to follow and the more level-headed among the RIDes, under the leadership of AlphaWolf, were scrambling to help. The canine kept one wary eye on the Integrate dragon that was watching over his shoulder. “So, can you do anything about this, or are you just going to stand there and

wonder if I'm good with ketchup?" the dog said dryly.

"I came here to help infected RIDEs and humans," Peaches rumbled. "I can't keep doing that if the Dome's down. Stand aside..."

The dog shrugged and stepped out of the way, gesturing to the box. "Be my guest."

The dragon looked closely at one of the sparking breakers, shut his eyes in concentration...then breathed smoke on it. The sparking immediately stopped. He repeated the performance on the three other breakers. "Okay, that'll hold as a temporary fix. Go ahead and restore power—minimum power at first, then ramp up to about eighty percent. Those breakers should hold, but you should get replacements fast."

"Oh, *now* you're just blowing smoke," the German Shepherd muttered, but he did as Peaches suggested. Overhead, the dome flickered, then came back on.

"Now, if you would be so kind, could you assist your leader and myself in gathering together everyone who has not fled?" Peaches asked. "We owe you a full explanation, and I should like only to have to give it *once*."

While the camp members were gathered up, Peaches took the chance to do some damage control of his own. He stood in the centre of the camp with Michael, the frozen Fridolf cloaked between them to avoid causing another stir. A tightly controlled signal passed between the two Integrates.

"What the *hell* was that about? You don't just run off in the middle of high risk surgery!" Peaches growled to the horse Integrate.

Mike meekly accepted the blame. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I don't know what came over me. It's just been so long since we had any breaks against her...We never even suspected that virus would be one of her projects."

"I'm only *one* of the ones you should be apologizing to. If you hadn't gone off like that, the domes would have stayed up, and we could have contained this mess better. Hell, we probably would have that tigress you're hot for too."

"I'm not!...Sorry again. It is my fault."

"*Damn right* it is! I'd report you to Qube if I didn't think he'd demand to know where the Camp is, too," the dragon growled.

"What makes you think the Qube doesn't know where this is?" Mike asked. "AlphaWolf's crew has been keeping both the bandit and the feral populations contained in this end of the Dry for years. I've seen our models; without Alpha's camp here, banditry and claim jumping rates would be astronomical, more than the Marshals could ever dream of handling. Toss in that Alpha's pretty careful to show restraint, and to keep his more rabid supporters restrained too, and we were, well not happy, but we're willing to mostly look the other way."

"Granted, that mess in Uplift was a bit too much. Whispers from on high was that they were trying to figure out the proper rolled up newspaper to bap him with, but that may not be needed any more. In any case, better a devil you know occasionally working on similar goals as you, than one loose in the wild causing all sort of random havoc."

Peaches groaned and shook his virtual head, "*Politics!* Why can't anything ever be *simple!*"

Mike couldn't help grinning, "Things are never simple when you have a lot of people involved. And this one is dealing with thousands of people, RIDEs, Humans and

Inties alike. Did you know we already had a Quantum stationed in camp, just to keep an eye on things? I checked. Haven't seen her around since we've been here, though. Should probably look into that."

He sighed and got serious again, "But that doesn't change the fact that this wasn't a Marshal mission. It was a...humanitarian? RIDEitarian? Sapiantarian? Man, we need better terms for this. It was a mission for good. I was here, under your invitation, as an Integrate, not as a Marshal."

"And here I thought we weren't going to keep ourselves aloof anymore. I must be mistaken," Peaches said.

"It's not keeping aloof; it's the right tool for the right job. You were called in because you're an Integrate; and an Integrate was needed for this. Or do you think anyone else could be fast enough to adapt the vaccine *and* save the minds at the same time? The only one who might even remotely have been able to do all that might, and I mean *might*, would have been Fenris and Paul. And that would only be if they had a good partner pair and their link was working. Even I couldn't have done it and saved Sadie, I just don't have the processing power to spare to sort out the mindstates like you did," Mike corrected the dragon.

Peaches facepawed. "You know...yeah, you're right. But we have more to talk about later. We need to uncask the rest. How many did we lose?"

"No clue; we'll have to wait until the headcount is done. Care to give me a hand with Fridolf? The longer we wait, the less useful her information will be. We should be able to take care of it before everyone is here."

The dragon swelled larger in their personal space. "*Later!* We have a job to finish here first. We have to regain the trust of the Camp. Camelot helped them find this place twenty-odd years ago, and Camelot will assist in its restoration—better than it was before. If that's what they desire.

"As for your little ice cube; we are not touching her without AlphaWolf or his representative watching. Part of that trust we need to rebuild. Now get your tail back to real space and look appropriately contrite while we do some bridge mending, and finish off the casks. The sooner we finish, the sooner we can thaw her out."

It took a good half hour for all the stragglers to be rounded up, including a number like a velociraptor who had started out fleeing, then thought better of it and returned once the initial panic had worn off. Paul expected they would probably see at least a couple dozen more of those come back in over the next day or so as the panic took varying lengths of time to work its way out of their systems. Maybe more might return over the next couple of weeks out of curiosity or failure to find a better spot somewhere else.

But others wouldn't return at all; AlphaWolf's was the best-known but hardly the only haven for renegade RIDes. Paul privately thought anyone AlphaWolf lost permanently over a momentary panic probably wasn't worth keeping anyway, but he and Fenris agreed it was probably best to keep that opinion to himself.

The stallion Integrate kept his distance from most of the camp, letting Peaches represent the Integrates. He did try to look appropriately contrite for the chaos he had added to, but he refused to let anyone near his pacified prisoner.

Paul didn't think too highly of Mike—or Tonto—or whatever he wanted to call himself. He obviously had some sort of vendetta against the virus-makers—matched

with the high-strung temper of a stallion in permanent rut. That combination had cost the Pack, who he'd rapidly come to consider his close friends, dearly. It was fortunate that so few had actually been injured. Paul and Fenris were able to patch together the worst cases, including the necessary repairs to Fenris himself, while they were waiting for the rest to assemble.

At last, all those who were available had gathered, including the camp's pool of unclaimed, shared-use, and sympathetic humans. AlphaWolf had released the one he'd taken during the chaos, feeling it was altogether safer to be un-Fused when Integrates were around. He stood in the center of the clearing and spoke aloud and via sideband transmission, explaining what had happened. "...and it turns out this trojan has been running rampant for *years*." AlphaWolf said. "In fact, it was available from several of our own net forums. Funny how I never found out about it. I *thought* Fridolf was a trustworthy sysadmin, but now it turns out she apparently wrote the awful thing."

"It's real!" the velociraptor who'd returned added, showing everyone a recording of Sadie before and after infection. Then the wolf and the horse that the Freerider Garage had cleaned up came forward to talk about what had happened to them, which further helped. By the time they finished and Peaches himself came forward to address the crowd, they were more ready to hear what he had to say.

Peaches explained that he and Mike had been called in by AlphaWolf himself (they left out the little detail that it had been via Paul) to lend their Integrate powers to rescuing the worst afflicted in the only way that had a chance of saving all of them: Integration. "We sought to do this in private, to try to avoid...unpleasant appearances. In retrospect, this turns out to have been a regrettable mistake. And with your permission, we will perform the procedures on the last few patients here, in the open, where you all can see exactly what we do. And why we did it."

As he finished speaking, two other figures came forward. They were still a little unsteady on their feet, and looked different from before, but there was no mistaking the identities of the raccoon man whose body now sported a network of glowing tan lines, or the white squirrel woman with fiber-optic fur. Everyone could recognize them as Rocky and Sadie, two of the dozen Fusers who had been oddly silent the last little while.

"Hi," Rocky said, waving. "I know you've been worried about us, but we're all right...ish now. And not feeling any zombie-like urges to make you into more of us, so don't worry about that, okay?"

"We were sick with something nasty," Sadie said. "We're...not *all* better now, but we're going to get there." She sighed. "I'm sorry, Annette...I didn't mean to..."

The raccoon put his arm around her shoulder, and they went to sit down together off to the side of the clearing. After a moment, by ones and twos, their friends from the camp started to gather around them. They didn't speak, much, but their mere closeness seemed to make the two new Integrates feel better.

Peaches watched, and smiled warmly. "Now that we have the explanations out of the way...shall we begin?"

With the virus exposed, the remaining infected were tracked down quickly. Two had slipped away in the confusion, but the remaining four were found and pacified until they could be cured. They all resisted, protesting their status, but the readings were obvious to all who were watching. One even tried to defuse, but Mike stopped him quickly.

“He’s been fused for a year at least. If he released his human, there’d be nothing left,” the stallion explained quickly, making sure his findings and evidence were open for all to see.

Of the four they had to cure, only one could release their human safely. The fisher had been infected for years, but her human had only been captured in the Uplift raid. Peaches shared a memory he extracted from the bird. Given the nature of the memory, he kept it limited to AlphaWolf, Fenris, Paul and Mike.

It showed her previous human finally losing cohesion, the nanites losing the last traces of the human’s mind. In a gross parody of the Integration process, she opened up and red and gray ooze flowed out of her onto the ground, while she shifted back to her unfused state.

“Fridolf was smart when she wrote this cursed thing. When the virus senses the human is becoming unstable, the infected becomes more isolationist, finding a spot they could expel the remains in peace, and minimize the risk of the infected being discovered,” the dragon explained over the private channel. “I’ll leave it up to you if you want to share this information. For the safety of our prisoner, I would suggest waiting. We’ve had enough mobs today.”

“Why is it goo and not an animal or something, like we nearly had with Geoffrey’s human?” Paul asked.

“I’m no expert, but I’ve been examined by a lot of experts in my time. I’d say it’s due to the lack of mind, a lack of soul if you will. With no mind to give the body form, even something as simple as an animal form, it’s just a mess of fluids; not even bones and organs. Everything’s nani-liquified,” Mike explained, sounding a little sick as well.

“For her own sanity, I’ve blocked...not removed, but blocked that memory from her. Her personality is unstable enough as is, I don’t want that memory being a tipping point,” Peaches added.

They slipped back into real time, the conversation having passed by so quickly that Paul’s body was only now beginning to show the revulsion the memory had caused.

AlphaWolf looked around the crowd that had watched, both sickened and fascinated by the process. “Right. That’s everyone we have left. Show’s over, let’s give these people some privacy to come to terms with what’s happened. So sayeth me!”

The Integrates gathered in a desert VR space, a space that looked like a random spot in the Dry Ocean. Incongruously, there was a large ice cube in front of them, water evaporating off of it but never shrinking it. Deep within the ice, a snarling wolfess was frozen in mid leap.

The stallion snorted and paced angrily from side to side. He glared at the ice cube containing the snarling wolf. “That *monster!* How could anyone even think of doing that, let alone plan contingencies to make sure it wouldn’t be discovered?”

“How many are out there?” he shouted to the frozen wolf. “How many have you killed? Turned into stains on the desert?”

Behind the horse, the dragon waited and watching, letting the stallion work out some of his anger before they officially started.

Mike slammed a fist into the ice cube, chipping it, but leaving it unharmed. He hopped backwards, shaking his hand. “Damn, that hurt.”

“That is the point of this VR space. Now, are you done yet? Our guests are waiting,” the dragon added.

Mike rubbed his hand and took a deep breath. He adjusted his stetson and duster and nodded. "Yeah, I'm ready. What's done is done. Let them in."

A forest bloomed on the edge of the desert, the Integrate VR shared space extending to be shared with the pair of RIDEs and a hitchhiking human. Out of it padded two wolves, sandy-colored with one tail and white with two tails, the white wolf somewhat incongruously only slightly larger than the sandy one in this space. Between them, with his hands on their backs, walked a young man with white wolf ears and twin tails of his own. They pulled up short as they saw the Integrates waiting for them.

"Kandace won't be coming," Paul said. "At the moment, she doesn't have a lot of kind words for...oh."

AlphaWolf froze in his tracks when he saw the horse Integrate wearing the uniform of the Gondwanan Marshals. "Oh, terrific. As if it wasn't enough for the Integrates to know where we are, now the *Marshals* do, too. Hell, a *Marshal* damn near wrecked my camp. That makes a lot of sense now."

Mike looked at the wolf, then at himself. He started to dismiss his uniform, then decided to keep it. "Appearances aside, I am *NOT* here as a Marshal. I was invited here by Peaches as an Integrate. And *this*," he motioned to the ice cube, "This is a personal matter for me."

"Oh, of course!" AlphaWolf sneered. "That makes it all right to put dozens of *human* lives as well as RIDEs' in danger to go haring off on your wolfhunt."

"A successful wolfhunt. To catch someone who has ruined the lives of hundreds of other people. RIDE and human alike." Mike stopped himself and held up his hand to stop Alpha. "I'm sorry. I got away from myself. I shouldn't have done that. Any of that. You're right, I did let down people who were counting on me."

"While this was a personal matter for me, it affected more people beyond just me, or even me and my family. I should have known better. I should have been a lot of things. I'm sorry." He sighed, "Dad's gonna give me *hell* about that next time I see her. And I don't even want to think of what Mom's going to do to me. But I'll deserve it all."

AlphaWolf actually stopped with his mouth open to deliver his next rant, and had to pause for a moment to come up with something to say. He huffed a breath and seemed to deflate a bit from his anger. "Well, you can realize when you made a mistake, anyway. That's more than I can say for some RIDEs who shall remain nameless." A cartoonish representation of a hippogryph flew by and smacked head-first into a tree, where he stuck by his beak while his body vibrated like an arrow. "If I had to lose anyone, why couldn't I have lost *him*?" he muttered under his breath. "I still don't like having a Marshal show up here. Whether you're here 'as' a Marshal or not, I'm pretty sure you still *are* one."

Mike shrugged again and walked around the ice cube. "The only reason I became a Marshal was to find Shah and her crew, for what they did to my family—and for war crimes, for that matter. Though helping people, including your casks, has become my new priority. Because of my history and the position I've earned, I have a lot of leeway and freedom in what I do. When this event comes out, I'll have a lot of explaining to do, but you tend not to earn the high ranks without also gathering a lot of dangerous secrets. The world is far from black and white; there are many shades of gray, and the more ranks you gain, the more gray you realize there is."

He tried to keep his expression as neutral as he could, not wanting to threaten the wolf, but to make his point. "Rest assured, were this a Marshal operation, you would

know it. And it would probably be you in that ice cube right now.”

“What, over a few dozen humans? Many of whom *want* to be here? Where the hell are you Marshals while thousands of my brothers and sisters are held in slavery so complete some of them can’t even *think*?” AlphaWolf spat. “Oh, wait, that’s *all right*—that’s *legal*.”

“And two wrongs make a right in your world...”

“It’s not even two wrongs, for most of us. It’s just that humans saw fit to design us to need one of them to be able to use tools. Hard to build anything without them. Like this settlement. The one that you—” He shook his head. “No, no, you apologized for that. I shouldn’t harp on it, even if I *am* still a little pissed off. Sorry.”

“You have the right to be. To be completely blunt and honest, Alpha, you *are* on the Marshal radar. But you haven’t done enough to warrant a shutdown op yet.”

AlphaWolf snorted. “Do you know how much busier you Marshals would be if I weren’t out here pulling in all the death-to-all-humans extremists so I can sit on them and make them be satisfied with just a few bodyjackings? Do you even have any idea how hard that *gets* from day to day? Maybe I should just let them have their way for a while, see how you like it then.”

“That’s *exactly* why you are so low on the radar at the moment. You’re a blemish on the Marshal records, but we’re smart enough to realize you’re doing some good out here. Or at least things would be a hell of a lot worse out here without you.”

AlphaWolf cocked his head. “Well. That’s something I can’t say I ever expected I’d hear,” he said bemusedly. “A Marshal telling me I’m doing some good. Almost makes up for the whole ‘destroying my camp thing.’”

Mike looked away a moment to gather himself, then looked back, his expression hardening to make his point. “But, rest assured, if you start doing stunts like what you did in Uplift again, your friends in high places in Nextus and in Camelot *won’t* keep you safe from the full force of the Marshals coming down on your head.”

The dragon separated the wolves from the horse. “And let’s stop there before we say something we’re going to regret later. Time is a-wasting after all. We came here for a reason, and even in quick time, we don’t want to take too long. If you can’t focus on the task at hand, you can leave.”

AlphaWolf growled in frustration and glared daggers at the stallion. “I’m staying. You aren’t going to hide anything from me. Not any more.”

Mike didn’t look at the wolves; he was focused on the ice cube now. “Right, we have a job to do. She knows where Shahrazad is. Or where she will be.”

Peaches gave them all a long look. “Remember our goals. We need to find out what she knows about Amontillado so we can work on a better cure, one that we can release. And we want to know what she knows about Shahrazad. Mike, you’re on containment. Keep her read-only so she can’t erase anything else, and don’t go running off again. I’ll do the talking.”

The others grudgingly accepted the dragon’s conditions. Peaches moved to the ice cube and breathed on it. The flames melted the ice around the wolf’s head, but the rest of her body stayed encased. Her snarling expression immediately changed to a confused one as she woke up. The gray wolf looked around, before focusing on AlphaWolf.

“Alpha? What’s going on? Where am I? Who are they?” Fridolf asked.

“You’re in VR space. We captured you trying to escape. I need you to answer some questions for me,” Peaches asked, regaining her focus. “What do you know about

the Amontillado virus?”

“The Amontillado virus? Is that what they had? Those poor RI’s. Were you able to help them?” she asked sincerely.

“They have been cured, and they are getting the help they need. But we have reason to believe you know more about it than you are letting on.”

“Me? What could I possibly know about it? It’s a horrible virus, I wouldn’t go near it.”

The wolf froze in place, and Peaches looked at the rest of the group. “I don’t understand. She’s telling the truth. She has no memory of working on Amontillado, or how she reacted when she was exposed. She has no memory of anything after we started curing them.”

“Damnit! I missed my chance. I should have froze her tight, but I had to get the last word in. She purged herself,” Mike cursed himself.

“As punishment, you can read the Evil Overlord’s list fifty times. Now what else can we do?” Paul asked.

Mike gave the twin-tailed human a puzzled look, almost smirking before he looked back at the frozen wolf. “Let’s change tactics. She knew Shah a long time; there might be more pieces left in there for us to work with. Those memories would be harder to purge. Let me talk to her.”

The wolfess reactivated, not realizing the discussion she had missed. Mike stepped up to her and stared. His avatar swelled larger, becoming more robotic until it looked like a fused RIDE than an Integrate. “Do you recognize me?”

She stared back at him, looking innocent and confused. “No, why should I?”

“Now that I think of it, you probably never did get a good look at me. How about this. Harkonnen Plateau. Twenty years ago. You shot down an IDE and started torturing its pilot. My dad. I shot you in the back and sent you scurrying back to your cave, while we captured your boss, Shahrazad. Ringing any bells?”

Her expression momentarily hardened before resuming its confused look. “No, no bells. You must have me mistaken for someone else.”

“You’re lying,” Mike spat at her. Behind him, in her eyesight, holographs appeared, records recovered from an ancient raid showing various RIDEs that were part of Shahrazad’s enclave. A porcupine, a fisher, a raptor appeared in VR space. Mike hesitated a moment, then added a tiger-striped housecat to the images; the Integrated Scratch had redeemed himself from what the tigress had forced him to do, but that didn’t change the fact that he had been part of her squad back then. Finally, Shahrazad herself appeared, standing right beside Mike. Fridolf’s reaction was caught by all of them; she recognized all the images.

“I’ve never seen those folk before in my life. Alpha, what’s going on? Who are these people and why are they asking me all this stuff?” she pleaded, turning her head to try and see her former leader.

AlphaWolf’s expression was at first pained, then it hardened. “You’ve been a good aide, Fridolf. I could hardly believe it when *you* took down our dome and blew those explosives. But I saw that with my own eyes. And now I see you’re lying to us. And you even *know* it this time.”

“I don’t know it! Why are you doing this to me? What happened to the camp? Is anyone hurt?” she struggled to change the subject, to get onto safer ground.

“A few people. Like myself.” Mike shifted his avatar back to normal and turned

around, showing a silvery red oozing wound. “You gave this to me. Shot me in the back as you tried to escape.”

She winced and looked away. “I didn’t...I couldn’t have done this. You have to have me mistaken for someone else.”

“You know, it’s really an interesting philosophical question, isn’t it?” Paul mused. “Can you blame someone for doing something they don’t remember doing anymore? If we’re made up of our experiences, are they still the same person who did it if they hacked that part of themselves out of their own brain?”

“Of course they—” Mike stopped himself in mid sentence, realizing his adopted cousin Scratch was a perfect counter-example. “She’s too tricky to have forgotten completely. Somewhere, somehow she’s got triggers ready, to restore that information and find her way back to Shah. We just need to find where or what they could be. We let her go as innocent, and in a few months, a few years, she’ll be back to what she was, and we’ll be dealing with Amontillado 2.0 or worst.”

He tapped his fingers on an appropriately sized rock that appeared beside him, facing Fridolf and trying to figure out the next step. The innocent shell that Fridolf was projecting was getting in the way of the real work they needed to do. What he needed was in the fragments of her memory, still there, but unindexed, unfindable. He caught the dragon’s eye and sent a freeze command across VR space. Behind him, he knew, the two RIDEs and human would be locked in place just like Fridorf, giving him the chance to work without interruption.

“Michael, what are you doing?” Peaches asked.

“Yes, what *are* you doing?” Fenris growled from behind the stallion.

“You know, I could have sworn that the Integrates who thought it was okay to do anything they wanted to anyone who wasn’t one of them were supposed to be the bad guys,” Paul added mildly. He glanced over at the still-frozen AlphaWolf, then back to Mike. “If you want to talk privately, you could just *ask*.”

Mike started, and turned to study the pair closer. “Neat trick. Hadn’t heard of that yet. Much more effective than those kludges the sillies are working on. My cousin’s been going off about something like that for days now, but I figured it was just something for my aunt’s project.”

“You’ll be hearing a lot more of it soon,” Paul said tersely. “Someday everyone will have one. And you haven’t answered our question. What are you doing?”

“It’s not a private talk I want to do exactly. I need to take a closer look at that bitch’s systems, in a way you guys might not like exactly, and I’m getting tired of arguing over it.”

“So you just do what you want to. Got it.” Paul nodded. “I expect even you ‘friendly’ Integrates are gonna have some hard lessons to learn pretty soon.”

“Everyone has some hard lessons to learn soon. Hell that’s life in a nutshell.” Mike sighed and released the freeze on Alphawolf. He felt a brief sideband flicker as Fenris caught him up on the few seconds of things he’d missed. He ignored the *‘I told you so’* jibe from the semi-amused dragon.

“But habits die hard. I try not to do it often, but when every little knot begins to feel like a Gordian knot, you tend to break out the shears often.”

“Yeah, when all you’ve got is a hammer, everything looks like a nail,” Paul said. “Problem is, what we’ve got can take your hammer away.”

“Not away. Just makes it harder to use.”

He shared a dense data packet with the RIDEs, containing what he had experienced with Shah and her crew. “*This* is what that wolf and tiger did to my family. As we waste time arguing here, Shahrazad is hiding her tracks. *That* is why I didn’t want to wait.”

“And two wrongs make a right in your world...” Paul quoted. Then he shrugged. “But that’s your business. So what are you about to do that you wanted to hide from us?”

Mike concentrated and the ice cube faded away, followed by the wolfess’s skin, leaving just the pencil outline of the wolf floating in midair. “This won’t take long. I’m not as good as the Sillies, or the Technomages, but I have learned a few tricks, especially from my cousin.”

“What are you doing to her?...You’re *decompiling* her?” Paul asked, moving in closer to follow what Mike was doing.

“Only partially, to try and figure out the truth from the lies. It’s more like a specialized defrag than a full decompile. I won’t hurt her...yet. But I will find out what she’s hiding if it’s in there.”

Fridolf’s wireframe exploded into pieces, each piece a window with a video, a memory of the wolf. The stallion moved among them, studying them carefully. “Talking was too slow...This way I can confirm things one way or another. Damn it!”

The dragon looked where he was looking. “That’s worm damage, isn’t it? It’s pretty deep.”

“It is. Hours old too. She blanked most of the data before we started curing them. The rest of the damage is newer, erasing Shah and other information from her immediate memory, but there may be older stuff we can still get....*IF* we had time. By the time we figure out where that cat ran off to, she’ll be long gone.

“If she was even here in the first place. I can’t even confirm that. It feels like she was here, that she had a personal paw in this. But all your tigers check out,” Mike waved his hand and the wolf reassembled. Her skin reappeared, followed by the ice cube. He sighed and sat down. “I don’t have the skills myself to get it. We need to take her with us.”

“She was always coming with us,” Peaches pointed out.

“Her and how many more of us?” AlphaWolf growled.

Mike glared back at him, “We’ve already been through this. I’m not here as a Marshal, and I’m not here to go after you. Not *this* time at least. But Fridolf is one of Shahrazad’s crew, one of her generals even. I can’t let that go, and neither should you.”

His expression softened a little, “Much as she deserves it, we won’t be killing her. She will be imprisoned and go on trial for her crimes, once the system is fully in place.”

Peaches spoke up, “Rest assured, whatever we find out about Amontillado from her, we will share with you. That virus is a danger to metal and flesh alike, and its cure needs to be spread far and wide.”

“All right. Not as if *I* could stop you if I wanted to.” Alpha looked speculatively at Fenris and Paul for a moment, then shook his head. “After the way that...that *bitch* in every possible sense of the word used me, not even getting into what she seems to have done to you, I’d have a hard time objecting. He sighed. “Now I have to wonder just how many of the *others* in my camp are using me, too. I tried to pretend it didn’t matter what baggage RIDEs brought in with them, that what happened outside the camp *stayed* outside the camp. Now I see I was wrong.”

“Are we talking about a purge here, Alpha?” Fenris asked.

“No. That’s...no. We’ve lost so many already...” The sandy wolf hung his head. “But I’m still cracking down somehow. I don’t see any other choice. We may need to find a new site for Camp Alpha as well—one even the Inties can’t find. Yes, I know what Peaches was offering, but we need to do this on our own.

“And Paul...I want that DIN-thing Rhianna gave you installed in me. I want *everyone* in Camp to have one, if possible. If they can’t hack us, we’ll stay hidden.”

Paul shook his head. “In one breath you say you can’t trust everyone, in the next you want everyone to have the only anti-Intie superweapon we’ve got? Can you imagine how differently things might have turned out today if Fridolf had one of them? No, Alfie. You’ll get one, and people we’re *absolutely positive* we can trust. But not *everyone*. Rhianna and Rochelle would kill me.”

Mike snorted. “Why not everyone? You already said everyone will have it eventually. Delaying now will just put them at risk. I was stupid earlier here; but had Fridolf been protected, I would have had to use other tactics. Messier tactics, but I would have been fine....Other than that free shot to my back she got in.”

Paul shrugged. “That’s a good point. But not all Inties are as bad-ass as you are. Did you hear what happened to Quinoa Steader? I was *there*, and that RIDE didn’t even have these yet. Rather not be responsible for making more of that possible ‘til they know they should expect it. It’ll leak out sooner or later anyway...so you might wanna start not turning your back on someone next time you try to freeze them...or maybe try an *explanation* first.”

He turned to AlphaWolf. “And speaking of things leaking out—there’s no point to moving the camp, either. I didn’t want to say anything, but I’ve already suspected this for a long time: I’d honestly be surprised if the Marshals, Nextus, Uplift, and anyone else you’ve pissed off didn’t already know where we were by now, camouflage hardlight dome or not, and just don’t think we’re worth the fuss of going after. Inties will probably always be able to find us, but when even RIDE slavers who don’t have *anything to do with* Inties can get some idea of our location, there’s no point in trying to hide.”

“I believe he is correct,” Fenris intoned. “I have run exercises, temporarily obscuring my recollection of our location, and attempting to guess it based on readily-available satellite scan data. I was within a 1,000 km margin of error of the actual location 80% of the time. For a continent the size of Gondwana, that amounts to pinpoint accuracy.”

“There is another factor as well,” Mike said, taking over the simulated space. The desert shifted, becoming how it would appear if the camp wasn’t there. Slowly buildings, domes and other living space formed, built by invisible hands. “The home factor. Your group has taken a serious blow today. But you have a solid group. A group that believes in you, and in this place. This camp has become their home. If you try to move them, you’d be making them choose between their homes, and you. It could shatter them.”

“Their homes would be coming with them—” Alpha started.

“Maybe, but don’t discount how attached people can become to places, even hostile environments like this. You saw signs of that in Uplift, at the garage.” Mike held up his hoof, “I didn’t peek. I didn’t have to. The news reports made it clear enough. When you put down roots, it takes a lot of effort to tear them up again. And a long time to regain the strength you had after you replant,” Mike pointed out.

Peaches placed his claw on his scaled chest. “AlphaWolf, believe me when I say that Camelot is not your enemy. Far from it. You’ve had a few Inties—not *many*, but a

few—originate from your Camp over the years who ended up with us. I think I can convince a few familiar faces to come and say hello. Don't forget that we were RIDEs, too. We understand exactly what you're fighting for, and why.

"We'll make this camp even more a haven for all abused RIDEs."

AlphaWolf looked at the others in the VR space for a long moment, then looked away but didn't say anything. He just stared vacantly off into the virtual distance. Paul reached out and put a hand on his shoulder. "Look, AlphaWolf. I know you want to go this alone. I remember what you said the first day I got here, that you don't want to live on someone else's charity. And I get that—that's my old boss through-and-through. But there's a difference between *charity* and *people wanting to help*. I'm damned sure not still here because I think you're a charity case."

"You've gone it alone for over twenty years," Peaches said gently. "That's a great accomplishment. Take pride in that. But the world is changing. You can't keep going on the way you have before, so let us help you *now*. There might also be some ways *you* could help *us* in return."

AlphaWolf still looked a little lost, but pulled himself together. "I'll...think it over," he finally said. "It wouldn't be easy to rebuild somewhere else...and if there's no point anyway..." He shook his head. "If it's really that easy to find us...what a laughingstock I must be, thinking we're safely hidden when it's easy to tell exactly where we are. I have to go." He dropped out of VR.

Mike sighed. "There's no laughingstocks involved. Most people don't know where this place is. Those that do, understand what it's doing, even if they may not fully agree with its methods. But as Peaches said, times are changing, and it may be time to start changing with them. Integrates are learning that lesson too, and RIDEs will be too. In the end, this ocean is going to be a lot more populated than many people ever suspected."

"Guess that's us, too," Paul said. "Take care of the people you're taking with you. Make sure you send 'em back if they want to come."

Fenris nodded. "Thank you for your help." Then the two were also gone.

"I'm going to take the new Inties and the freed RIDEs and humans back to Camelot for treatment, if you've no objections?" Peaches asked the Marshal.

"No, I don't have any. Best place for them to feel welcome, since there's others from the Camp there already," Mike Munn agreed. He glared at the frozen Fridolf. If Mike had been a dragon himself, even in VR the war criminal would've been just a pile of ash. "This one I'll take back to the Cave of Wonders for containment and interrogation. I know some folks in Sturmhaven and Nextus who'll want to have a look at her, too."

"But you won't actually *release* her to them?" Peaches said, head tilted. "Will you?"

"Stains on the desert," Mike repeated, partly to himself. "No. She stays with the Marshals until we can give her a proper trial. Somehow...once RIDEs have the full rights they deserve, seeing her get Death of Personality Core in court with a jury of other RIDEs will be *far* more satisfying."

The assembled camp had watched the Integrations of the three worst infected RIDEs in shocked silence, though made no moves to intervene. Seeing Rocky and Sadie had apparently convinced them that this was a necessary evil. When the newly-

Integrated were themselves able to say a few words afterward, proving they were still some approximation of their old selves, the camp seemed to breathe a collective sigh of relief.

“Thank goodness that’s over,” Peaches said. “I’m only sorry that two of the infected escaped in the confusion. But we will be looking for them, and hopefully will find them before long.”

He looked to the five new Integrates, who were now sitting together and comforting each other. “As for those we were able to save, with AlphaWolf’s permission we will be taking them all with us—Integrates, humans, and RIDEs—back to the Camelot Enclave so that we can give them the help they need to recover the rest of the way.” He raised a claw to address a few protests. “We will not prevent them from returning here when they are better, if they wish. And we will be in touch with AlphaWolf about allowing visitors once things have settled down.”

“Really, it’s for the best this way,” Sadie said. “We need to learn about being Integrates from other Integrates, as well as learning to work with parts of our minds we’ve ignored for a long time. The others just need more help than you can give them here. But don’t worry, we won’t forget about you.”

“Yeah,” Rocky said. “We just feel tired right now. Need some rest.”

“You look like you’ve been on a bender, Rocky,” a sympathetic voice from the crowd said.

“We’ve been *bent*, is what we’ve been,” Rocky said. “We need to get straightened out.”

“We’ll be back,” Sadie said, her fur bursting out into a sparkle. “We promise.”

Tonto sought out Kandace once things were beginning to calm down. Peaches had left with the recovered Amontillado victims, and he wanted to get moving as soon as possible. The lynx was leaning up in a stone nook in the far end of the graveyard, as far from the rest of the camp as she could get, and her hackles raised as she saw his approach.

“What do *you* want,” she asked in a frigid voice.

“I know you don’t like Integrates, and especially don’t care for me, but I wanted to make an offer to you. I’ve got a sub landing a few hundred clicks from here, to give me a lift back to the Cave with Fridolf. Aloha is near there, close enough that it’s no trouble to drop you and Jenni off.”

She spat, in the feline way. “And what makes you think I’d be interested in going *anywhere* on the same ship as you?”

“It’s a chance to take Jenni home in comfort. It’s a Marshal sub, with a non-Intie pilot, so you don’t have to say a thing to me, or any other Integrate.”

“And it would still have *you* on it. You nearly *wrecked* this camp! Twenty years in the making, and you all but destroyed it in twenty minutes.”

Tonto sighed softly. “I’ve already apologized to Alpha, and now I’ll apologize to you. I’m sorry. I screwed up, plain and simple. In hindsight, it was going to happen one way or another; Fridolf was just too prepared. Every last one of those victims had the triggers, and she could probably have set it off herself, along with any other allies she had in camp, and you can be sure she had a few. But in the end, it was me who messed up and let it happen when it did.”

Kandace looked at him, resolve seeming to waver a bit. “How old are you?”

“Twenty-six. I was the first off the line of the Alohan RIDEworks. Mike, he’s forty-seven.”

She shook her head. “You could have fooled me. You wanna know how old *I* am? There are literally only about *three other RIDEs in this world* who can say they were made before me. I fought in a *war* when your Mike was only 12, and I saw my share of people like you. They were called ‘loose cannons.’ They usually went home in body bags, and so did others from their squadrons who depended on them. And so did the RIDEs—my brothers and sisters—who they all wore. They were young and thought they were invincible. They weren’t. Neither were the people around them.

“And you...you’re older. And you *are* invincible, or close enough. But the people around you still aren’t. Nobody *died* from that today, praise Patil. But sooner or later they will. And I don’t want to be around you when that happens, and I don’t want Jenni to be there either.”

Tonto looked down at his hooves. “I screwed up; I admit that. But what’s done is done. I never wanted to be in a war, or a cop or Marshal in the first place, but we got dragged into it each step of the way. From what Shah did to my dad and me, leading me to the Marshals, to what Appa did to finish Integrating me. Hell, I’m Alohan; we aren’t exactly known as fighters. But I’m trying my best to handle what I’ve been dealt. And yes, I screw up.”

“It’s well and good to admit that after the fact,” Kandace said. “But what are you going to do about it? They say the *first* step is admitting you have a problem, but I seem to remember there’s several after that.”

Tonto tossed his head in an equine shrug, “That is my issue to deal with. I’ve done what I can here, to fix what happened. Going forward, remains to be seen.”

Kandace sighed. “We could find our own way, you know. We’re not more than a day from the coastal highway. But...all right, fine. We’ll come with you. But *you* just better work on your attitude, mister. You can do what you like when you’re alone in the desert, but when other people are depending on you, you need to be a team player.”

“That is part of my problem; too many years alone in the desert, being a freelancer. The Marshals just formalized what I was doing when Ken couldn’t hide his sources cleanly any more.” Tonto laughed a little. “But I’m trying in any case. And I’m really looking out for Jenni. You may be a day away from the highway, but you’re days away from any polity. This gets you to Aloha in a day. Do you know who to contact when you get to Aloha?”

“How could I not? It’s in Jenni’s mind.”

The stallion sent a business card to the lynx, along with a set of coordinates. “Well if you run into any problems, anything at all, contact him. He’s my cousin-in-law, and a detective with the APD. Mention me, and tell your story, and he’ll help you out. The sub will land here within an hour. I’m going to head out now, but take as much time as you want; I’ll wait for you. And make sure the dome stays off the sub’s sensors.”

He turned to walk away. “You wondered what could be worse than what we saw while curing the infected?” he called back. “Ask Alpha or Fenris *after* you let Jenni go. It’s something no one else should have to see. It doesn’t excuse what I did, but it may help you understand why I’m so driven to bring that group down.”

Kandace watched him go, shaking her head. “Loose cannons,” she muttered. “Well, whatever. He’ll either wise up or he won’t.” She checked on Jenni, still sleeping inside of her, and found the girl had just about healed all the physical damage she’d

suffered from her captivity. Good. “Just hope he doesn’t take too many people with him if he doesn’t.”

*September 4, 156 A.L.
The Coffeehouse*

Fritz prowled back and forth in one of the larger caverns that made up his own personal Enclave, considering the four Integrates gathered before him. He’d gathered his troops together, explained the mission, and asked for volunteers, and these were what he’d gotten. They seemed like a competent-enough bunch, though he had a few reservations.

The biggest of them was a bronze dragon who called himself Tiranth. A name that ended like that meant he was probably one of the ones who modeled themselves after those McCaffrey books. Which was fine as far as it went. Fritz wasn’t about to harsh anyone’s mellow in regard to their fandoms, even if those fandoms had been imposed on them by the people who made the RIDEs. Anyway, he’d have plenty of firepower, which was good enough if things got rough.

Then there was the raccoon, JerryMander. Fritz gathered he’d been some sort of local politician from Burnside. Guy named Jerry who named his RIDE “Mander” just to be cute. Well, now they were stuck with the name. The guy had turned into a staunch Bosscat supporter once he learned what was what—practically a toady, even. Trust a politician to know what side his bread was buttered on. Fritz wasn’t especially sure he *liked* that sort, but as long as they toed the line he didn’t think he could complain.

The third member of the team was Bethany, a Golden German Shepherd. She’d been a police officer or something. K9 division, Aloha PD. Well, whatever. She had a no-nonsense attitude and was always focused on getting the job done. Fritz liked that in a dog, even if they were a cop. Nice thing about that was she knew how to take orders, anyway.

It was the team leader he wasn’t especially sure about. Brena Silverston, her name had been. She presented as her human personality most of the time, for all that her appearance owed everything to her fluffy red fox RIDE. Spoiled rich kid from Nextus. Had tangled with the local military after Integrating, or so she said. Leastways, she’d gotten shot, and she’d been all the more eager to sign on with Fritz after that. And she’d done pretty much everything she could to prove her loyalty. Really, next to Quinnie, she’d been one of Fritz’s most faithful. And that was copacetic. It was just that Fritz wasn’t entirely sure she was made for battle.

But she’d also been one of Lillibet Walton’s best friends, back in the meat-and-mech days. And when she’d heard the mission involved kidnapping her, she’d practically trampled everyone else in her eagerness to sign on.

“You’re sure about this, kiddo?” Fritz asked her. “After the Uplift thing, they’ll have had time to get ready. This could be some tough toenails.”

“I can handle anything they can dish out!” Brena said. “We’re Integrates! They can’t measure up to us. We can shut ‘em right down with a thought.”

“Don’t get *too* cocky, kiddo. You can slap down mosquitoes, but they can still make you itch like hell.” Comparing Brena’s attitude to Quinoa’s pre-Uplift gave Fritz an uncomfortable sense of *deja vu*, but he couldn’t just come right out and *say* that some RIDEs were a match for Integrates. Besides, Tocsin wasn’t anywhere near Nextus

anyway.

"We'll be all right," Brena said. "We'll get the job done! We won't up and quit like that turncoat Quinoa Steader." Fritz had sort of spread the word that Quinoa was no longer on their side, but hadn't gone much into detail. Many of them, Brena included, had drawn their own conclusions. Fritz didn't bother to try correcting them. Whatever they thought she'd done, it wasn't any skin off his kitty nose.

"You want us to Integrate 'em, Chief?" Bethany asked. "It'll make things easier. We can drag in a couple of RIDEs if we need to."

Fritz shook his head. "Nix on that, for now. We want to use 'em to make Brubeck's bunch toe the line. So we hold Integrating 'em as another threat over their heads. We can always do it later, once we get Brubeck under control." He smirked. "Besides, I know you cats are cool enough to take on the extra challenge."

"We won't let you down, Bosscat!" Brena said. "You better have a room ready for 'em, 'cuz we'll be bringing 'em back toot sweet!"

Fritz nodded. "I dig it. Well, you crazy cats have a blast. I'll be waiting up."

As the Integrates filed out of the chamber, Fritz sauntered back to his throne room and wandered over to the mantel to take another look at the row of heads in jars. "Well, that's that," he said, picking up a chamois cloth and rubbing a smudge off the jar with Artemis in it. "After they get back, then it'll be time to see about Mr. Smartass Brubeck. Won't *he* be in for a surprise..."

Alpha Camp

Over the next couple of days, the camp crept slowly back toward some semblance of normality after the huge shock of briefly gaining a dragon, then abruptly losing almost half its population and learning that Integrates knew where they were. Even as some of the stragglers who'd departed drifted back in, others decided to leave for greener pastures where they could find a place of their own without having to worry about powers beyond their comprehension suddenly coming down on their heads.

For his part, AlphaWolf was even surlier than usual. Even the hardliners who had so plagued him before seemed to have come to the conclusion that pestering him now was a Bad Idea and kept their own counsel for the moment. Ironically, AlphaWolf was even then in the process of planning the next raid he knew he would have to commit to keep the hardliners satisfied—but, Paul knew, with the added *frisson* that he now knew the Marshals were almost certainly aware of his location and would be weighing his actions on a Maatian balance to decide whether and when to take him down.

After tidying up the graveyard in the aftermath of the explosions, Paul and Fenris had resumed keeping office hours. At the moment, they were Fused and in the process of running a complete memory defrag on Melissa the mink, who needed one worse than any other RIDE he'd ever seen. And after delving into her memories, he understood why. "If Alfie ever raids Nextus, there's one place I'm putting on the top of his list," he told Fenris.

"I shall make sure to remind you, if that should ever occur," Fenris solemnly intoned.

But another thing Paul could tell for sure from the defrag was that Melissa was still a decent soul, and didn't even nurse much desire for revenge against the humans who had so mistreated her. Which made her a prime candidate for installation of the

Sneaker/Shoelace DINsec system. He'd already put it into AlphaWolf, of course, and Kandace before she had left the camp with Tonto.

Thinking about it, Paul had concluded that Mike had been right—every RIDE who didn't have it was a RIDE vulnerable to Integrate abuse. So he'd decided to start out by putting one into everyone he *knew* wouldn't use that protection to harm others. The rest...well, if *everyone* got one, they would sooner or later too, but he sure wasn't going to give it to them first.

As they were finishing up the work, AlphaWolf trotted in from the main camp through one of the new entrances Fridolf's explosions had chopped into the separating wall. "Hey kid, Fenris." He nodded to the mink. "And Melissa, wasn't it?"

"Hey, Alfie," Paul said, turning Fenris's head to glance over at him.

"Greetings," Fenris added in his own voice.

"Uh, hi," Melissa said shyly. She was still more than a little in awe of the rebel RIDE leader from all the stories she'd heard about him, and nervous around those who were on a nickname basis with him.

"What's going on?" Paul asked.

"Got a call from the dragon. Wants to let us know how things are going with the Amontillado rescues. Figured I'd take it in here so we could all see it together."

"Should I go?" Melissa asked.

AlphaWolf shook his head. "Nah, this stuff has to get out to everyone sooner or later, might as well get the average RIDE's take on things." A patch of hardlight faded out over his shoulder so a small projector could poke out, projecting a miniature image of Peaches the dragon in the clearing between them.

"Hey, Mr. Peaches," Paul said. "How are things going with the new guys?"

"Very well, for the most part," Peaches said. "We have provided them with DINs and counselling, and most of them have come to accept what has happened to them. A few are having trouble adjusting, but...we have seen this before, and it usually heals with time."

"How's Sadie?" Paul asked.

"She is one of the ones who is doing better," Peaches said, smiling. "She and her human had become good friends before the unfortunate event, so at least they were able to get along together. The human was a sculptor, and they have been exploring fusing sand into sculpted art. If you come visit the enclave, you can see some of their work."

"And the humans and RIDEs?" Fenris rumbled.

"They are also doing well, for the most part," Peaches said. "We ended up returning several of the less-damaged humans to human settlements where familiar faces might help them to recover. We have been doing our best to untangle the others, and are learning a little more every day. We even hold out some hope that we might eventually be able to use what we learn here to heal the completely animalized victim from Uplift."

"That would be good," Paul reflected. "We all felt really bad about that one."

"You talked about having some 'familiar faces' from your enclave visit here," AlphaWolf said. "Was wondering when that might happen."

"We wanted to give your camp some time to settle down after the recent unfortunate turn of events," Peaches said. "Perhaps next week? We can discuss the specifics closer to the actual time, of course. I—" Then he turned his head, to look at something out of the comm pickup. "Oh dear." He turned to face Fenris. "Mr. Anders, I

gather you have some attachment to the young Lillibet Walton?”

Fenris stiffened, ears cocked forward. “What’s wrong?” Paul asked.

“I have just received word that Fritz has dispatched a small force of Integrates to perform a lightning raid upon the Waltons’ home in Nextus. I believe they intend to take the family hostage, in revenge for Zane Brubeck’s recapture of his platform. They are already *en route now*. Taking suborbital flight time into account, you must leave *immediately* if you wish to intervene. Good luck.” The dragon’s image flickered and disappeared.

Paul, through Fenris, stared. “But—”

AlphaWolf shook himself all over. “Kid. Who in camp has your magic anti-Intie pill right now?”

“Well...Fenris, you...Melissa...that’s it.”

Melissa blinked. “Me?”

“Er...yes,” Paul said. “I’ve decided to start passing it out to everyone who’s not an asshole, and you were already under when I decided. I was gonna tell you after, but we got interrupted. So, yeah, you’re one of just a few RIDEs so far to be completely immune to Integrate hacking. Congratulations.”

“Enough talk,” AlphaWolf said. “Looks like it’s just us, then. Baldwin’s warming up the sub. You should just have time to stick it in him on the way.” He thought for a moment. “Nrrrg. No time to find volunteer thumbs, and even *I’d* hesitate to drag pool humans who didn’t volunteer into this. We’ll go as-is.” He glanced at Melissa. “If you’re willing to help, anyway.”

Melissa’s eyes widened. AlphaWolf was asking for *her* help? “Oh, yes *sir!* You can count on me!”

“Good! Then let’s go!” He turned and bounded for the sub. Melissa followed after only a moment’s hesitation. Fenris quickly shifted to Walker form and followed, with Paul still inside.

Aloha, Steader Residence

Quinoa Steader let herself into her uncle’s mansion with a key. He wasn’t home, of course, but since she was in the neighborhood, she couldn’t resist stopping by. She hadn’t been here since that day, months ago, when she and Quorra had suddenly melted together and then...well, it had all happened so fast.

It had been a busy couple of days in Aloha, what with all the reports coming in about the happenings on Zane Brubeck’s ore platform. Things were a little confused, but apparently Rhianna Stonegate and Rochelle Seaford had come up with some sort of special new firewall to protect ordinary RIDEs from Integrate hacking. Well, good for them. (Even if it did make Quinoa feel a little stupider that she hadn’t even *tried* to hack Tocsin, back at their garage.)

And Quinoa had discovered something that even *she* hadn’t known, after all the time she’d spent shutting down the Munn kids’ Integrate bulletin boards. It turned out that Wanda and Krystal had their own DIN-making operation, though it seemed to work on a different principle from what she’d seen Rhianna and Rochelle do.

They’d offered to make one for Quinoa, but it would have taken hours—and after spending days in sarium-condensing meditation, she just didn’t feel capable of setting still for that long. She had the fabber specs for her technomage special in her cloud

storage account, and could get by on those until she could get back to Uplift and beg the Freeriders to forgive her for being such an idiot moron and make her one of theirs.

After catching up on the news, Quinoa had spent a day or so hitting a few of her favorite old day-and-night spots to relax, getting used to being back in civilization. Maybe she was wasting a little bit of time, but if nothing had happened during the weeks she was working on escaping, she thought she could spare a day or two to decompress. The good thing about being in Aloha was that even Fritz didn't tend to want to mess with the Munns right now—at least until he'd dealt with the upstarts in Uplift. So, she was pretty safe for the time being.

But she didn't want to spend too long vegetating. She was going to have to get back in the fight sooner or later, and that meant heading back east. But first she wanted to stop by the old homeplace and see what had become of it in her absence.

As she closed the door behind her, Quinoa glanced down at the ever-present carton of DriveSafe sober-up nano injectors and sighed. The box had been a quarter full when she'd left. Now it was half-full, which meant Uncle Joe had gone through at least three quarters and *possibly* one and three-quarters of a gross in her absence. "Not good, Uncle Joe."

The mansion was in about the same state as when she'd left it—possibly a little worse. Uncle Joe hadn't had much in the way of staff at the best of times, and it seemed like he'd let the rest go when she'd disappeared. She sighed, using directed lifter fields to lift and sort the layer of debris on the floor. Dirty clothes went into the laundry chute, empty beverage containers and trash in the recycler, important-looking papers in a neat stack on the desk to be sorted through later.

So far, Uncle Joe hadn't made any further attempts to contact Quinoa that she'd been able to find. No email to any of her accounts, and no messages left on the fridge here. It wasn't too surprising, she supposed. Any message she could find, Fritz's crew could find also, and Joe didn't have any way to message her private Integrate accounts. Besides, she already had a sneaking suspicion he'd be holed up at his mecha warehouse in Nextus. *I wonder if he's gotten the Freeriders' new anti-Integrate firewall gear yet?* She wondered how effective a giant robot would be in combat if Integrates *couldn't* hack it.

Quinoa finished her quick clean-up and shook her head. There was no point in hanging around here regardless. Her uncle was *probably* in Nextus—but even if he wasn't, Zane Brubeck was definitely in Uplift, and sooner or later Fritz would direct his attention that way again. It might be a good idea to start heading in that direction now.

Letting herself back out again, Quinoa locked the door behind her and headed for the aerodrome. A sub flight to Nextus would be faster than she could fly on her own, and would save both time and energy. *Don't worry, Uncle Joe. I'm coming.*

Cave of Wonders Marshal Base

Mike walked through the Integrate Marshal base, dodging around the construction areas as they expanded again. The Silly section had just been built a few months before, and they were still getting the kinks worked out, and equipment installed.

He paused at a door and waited for it to let him through. The field flickered, allowing him to enter a chamber that still smelled of rock dust. Technically he was

outside the Cave of Wonders domes now, but the only way in and out was from the Marshals base inside the domes.

Inside, a wolf DE frame had been disassembled, each part connected to an isolated system so it's storage could be read. Even the parts that didn't officially have storage sections had been examined, and some did have caches. An RI core was in a cradle, lights slowly changing on it.

"You find anything yet, Sparky?" Mike asked the raccoon Integrate that manned the chamber.

The other marshal was a rarity; an Integrated marshal who wasn't also a quantum. He had been a Silicon Marshal before integration, and kept his rank, while designing his own DIN. The DIN took the form of a glowing globe in the centre of his chest, the silicon marshal star embedded in it.

"Lots of stuff so far. None of it useful. Her frame is loaded with data, but it's holographically encrypted. You get different views from different angles. So far I've found the complete works of Shakespeare, the DNA sequencing for a wolf, three scripts from the Star Wars series back in the 2030's, and a few other things that are too ordered to be garbage, but encrypted some other way I haven't figured out yet. Until we can figure out what the keys are, we probably won't recognize it when we see it,"

"Damn, I hoped it would be easier than that. What about her core? Can you get anything from it?"

The raccoon lead Mike towards the core, while shaking his head. "I've looked at it every which way I know, and I'm coming up dry. Until we can think of some other angle to go, we're keeping her passive, and in slow time. Four to one; Four real days for every one of hers. It's as slow as I dare keep her.

"I'm at the limits of my skills, Mike, even as an Integrate. I need a bigger team. More people at my level to work on these sorts of problems."

Mike rubbed his forehead and groaned. "I know you do. But we don't have any more Silicon Integrates available to come out here. Can't you do it over VR?"

"Data's too dense for the lag time involved. I need people here, working with me in real time. Even if they are humans and RIDEs."

"We can't bring humans and RIDEs here. It was a hard enough sell to get the base set up. To have flesh and metal living here; we won't be able to keep them safe."

Sparky lit up a hardlight screen beside them, with hardware and software notes. "From what I've heard, they've figured out a way to keep themselves safe already. You just ran into it yourself, and your cousins and aunt have pitched in to help spread it around Aloha."

"It's untested technology. It works great now, but for all we know it has a glass jaw that will shatter at the worst possible time."

Sparky smiled. "Then where better to be testing it, then with the Marshal division meant to be testing new technology?"

Mike groaned again, knowing he was caught in a corner. "Start cooking up a list. Volunteers only, and they must be cleared by their supervisors. No more than six in total, RIDEs or Humans. We aren't set up yet for a full Silly lab and the risks you guys bring."

He turned to leave. "I've gotta go convince Clarissa and then the council to let six non-Inties live here. I'm gonna be living in Fido's house for days I'm sure," he sighed.

Chapter Sixteen: The Integrate Raids

September 4, 156 A.L.

Nextus, Steader Entertainment Mecha Garage

The commercial sub flight from Aloha to Nextus had been uneventful—largely due to Quinoa adopting one of her human disguises for the trip. She was quickly learning the value of *not* being the center of attention everywhere she went—especially given how unusual it was to find Integrates in human society outside of parts of Aloha. It was always possible Fritz might still be looking for her, so she had to stay on her guard.

After landing, it was just a short flight to the unassuming warehouse building in one of Nextus's industrial districts. It wasn't marked with any big signs, nor did it have obvious guards or security beyond the usual top-of-the-line stuff you found anywhere valuable goods were stored. But on the inside, as Quinoa well knew, it was something different altogether.

Quinoa touched down at a side entrance and held her hand over the keypad—and found that it rather stubbornly refused to open. She simply couldn't override the computer with her DIN the way she should have been able to—and burned out two of them trying. *I suppose I'll just have to remember the access code, then. How novel.* It took a moment for even her Integrate-perfect memory to dredge it up, but then she had it. She punched in 01011970 and the door slid open.

Just inside was the very large red foot of the Gundam RX-78. Next to it were a half dozen other Gundams from the same meta-series. The seven were only the beginning, all standing in their support frames. *Macross, Robotech, Patlabor, Getter Robo, Gurren Lagann, Mospeada, Voltron*, and more—it was a very large warehouse, filled with her uncle Joe's all-consuming hobby, mecha of all sizes from various anime series produced from 1950 through the 2030s. The actual combat capabilities of the mecha varied—even the new technologies of cavorite and sarium couldn't precisely duplicate the near-magical capabilities some of them had in their shows or manga. But some of the ones from the more realistic anime could get pretty close.

Quinoa's sensitive hearing picked up the sound of a ratchet wrench somewhere in the *Robotech/Macross* section. The slow click-click-click echoed through the cavernous interior. Only a few of the overhead lights were lit. She decided to walk the distance rather than lift, getting more nervous now she was so near.

"Hey, Quinnie? Can you get me a three-eighths gripley? I left it in the maintroom toolbox," Joe said. She knew that hungover tone of voice all too well.

In the center of the warehouse was a small building where the mecha maintenance workers normally spent their time. It had their tools, a break room, and restrooms. She found several open drawers and tools lying haphazardly around. She tidied things up while looking for the requested tool, then flapped her wings a few times as she lifted up near the ceiling.

Joe stood inside the open cockpit of a YF-21 Sturmvogel from *Macross Plus*. Floating next to him was a lifter rack of tools, plus an open box of thumb-sized objects

that looked somewhat like a DIN.

Quinoa floated over, then hovered next to the open cockpit. “Here you go, Uncle.”

“Thanks. Forget my own head next.” He took the tool from her and bent down to remove an access panel.

Quinoa raised an eyebrow. “You don’t seem too surprised to see me.”

Joe Steader shrugged. “Should I be? I’ve known you since you were a toddler. I knew that place couldn’t hold you once you set your mind to busting out. The only question was how long it would take—and how long it’d take you to get around to dropping by afterward.” He fiddled around with the interior of the panel, then plucked one of the objects out of the box and stuck it in. “Too bad you had to vent the place to vacuum, but you had to do what you had to do. We can deal with that later.”

“Last I saw Rosie she was tumbling off into space,” Quinoa said, grimacing. “You know, the guy Fritz assigned to watch me? Remember KITTy?”

Joe scowled. “Oh, good Lord, not another one of Harold’s pets. I swear, if I ever see that boy...or girl...again...”

“He seems to have Integrated with his next human—KITTy, I mean. Now he calls himself ‘Cylon,’ and he hates Steaders more than ever.”

“Well...as much as he has reason to hate us, that reminds me I still have to put this new security gear in the Vipers.”

“What is that new gear? I couldn’t hack the door panel when I came in.”

“Something from the Freerider Garage, believe it or not.”

“Oh. I’d heard about that new ‘Integrate firewall’ of theirs. This is it?” She picked up one of the modules and examined it curiously. “They’re branching out. And these are really able to lock us out?”

“Brubeck and friends took back his Dad’s old mining platform with a crew of RIDEs equipped with these new gizmos, right about the time you were doing your big skydive.” Joe waved a hand. “So the early indication is, yes, they are. They open-sourced the specs after that.”

Quinoa slowly smiled. “This could be a real can of worms for Fritz’s bunch. You saw what one RIDE I was too *dumb* to shut down did to me. If these make it so we *can’t* shut RIDEs down...”

“I was going to ask you to help me test it, but it sounds like you already did, and it worked. Good.” Joe grinned. “So folks like you won’t be able to shut down IDEs or fighters either.”

I know a game-changer when I see one. The Freeriders did this? She remembered her bold declaration in their Garage, weeks ago, that she could hack anything with barely a thought. The expression on Rochelle’s face... “Wow. This...this is going to hit the Integrate community as a whole like a ton of bricks. Even those of us who hate Fritz.”

“Word is it’s not *completely* invulnerable—it can be brute-forced or hacked around, and they’re still tinkering and improving the design—but it’ll certainly slow down the ones trying it long enough for others to smack ‘em.”

“And most Integrates would be completely stumped the first time their hack failed, because they don’t actually know how to *really* hack beyond waving a hand and saying ‘hocus pocus.’” Quinoa whistled. “I wouldn’t want to be the first Integrates to come up against a team of RIDEs with this in them. They’d be in for a nasty surprise.”

The Dry Ocean, Approaching Nextus

Brena Silverston flew over the desert, leading a small force of Fritz's followers toward Nextus. She couldn't help feeling just a little conflicted about her mission.

Fritz had been mildly surprised when Brena had volunteered to lead the force to grab Lillibet Walton from her family mansion in Nextus. For as long as she'd been hanging out with him, Brena had been far more interested in helping on the political side of things—serving as Fritz's representative at various Enclave council meetings when he couldn't be there himself. After she'd been shot, then very nearly abducted by the Nextus military, Brena'd had a belly-full of contact with the lower orders. She didn't like physical conflict—shouting matches were more her speed.

But Lillibet Walton was special. She was an old friend—like the defected (or *defective*) Quinoa Steader, one of the circle of rich kids Brena had used to hang out with. She'd been kind of like a little sister to Brena. And Brena knew that a lot of Fritz's crew were rowdy, rambunctious, and not especially careful—especially with “meat”. Better to take charge of this herself. Lillibet would trust her—until it was too late, at least. Brena felt bad about that—but she didn't want to see Lilli get hurt. She'd get over the “betrayal” in time.

Brena was still astonished the girl had ended up in the camp of that insane meat-mind Zane Brubeck. The girl she'd known before Integrating hadn't been interested in RIDEs as anything but status symbols or a comfy place to make comm calls. Now she was learning to be a RIDE mechanic, of all things? What had gotten into her?

Well, Brena would soon find out. She hoped Lilli would get over her anger at being kidnapped. It would be fun to spend a few days hanging out with her, getting to know her again.

Lillibet Walton was lying face-down on her bed, her knees on her pillow and her legs bumping the wall, reading a RIDE technical manual on her media tablet. It had been fun getting to spend a few days hanging out at the Freeriders Garage again, working on RIDEs with her friends, but after the excitement of Katie's ceremony had faded, her parents had reminded her that technically she *was* still grounded, and since they were returning to Nextus she was going to have to come along.

And so she dutifully obeyed without *too* much grumbling. Her father had made it clear that the better-behaved she was during the next couple of months, the shorter her grounding would be, and Lilli intended to be the absolute *model* prisoner. Besides, even if she *was* restricted to home grounds, she still had plenty of amazing privileges most other girls her age didn't have. Like a great big ol' fuzzy ocelot who was also one of her best friends in the world. The ocelot in question was currently curled up in her RIDE bed at the other end of the room, peering at Lilli through one open eye.

Lilli chuckled and returned her attention to her book—for a few short seconds before she was interrupted by the desktop comm going off. That was odd. Whoever it was had to have her secret number, because her parents were filtering all the calls on her main one as part of the conditions of her grounding. That in turn meant it was probably someone important, because she didn't give that number out to just anyone. She hopped up and hit the “Answer” key on the second ring.

“Lilli?” It was Paul! From the background, he was in Fenris's tank-mode cockpit.

“Paul!” Lillibet said. “What's going on?”

"We just got word that Fritz has sent some Integrates after you and your family," Paul said without preamble. "We think he wants revenge for what Rhi and Shelley did on Zane's platform the other day, maybe a bargaining chip to make them back off. Help is on the way, but we don't know if we can beat them there. Get your parents to safety, and get Fused up with Guin. She's got the Sneaker/Shoelace system, right?"

"You know it!" Lilli said.

"Good. You don't have much time. Get on it." Paul reached to break the connection.

"Got it." Lilli closed the comm, and frowned. Fritz's gits were coming after *her*? *Here*? She'd known something like this was going to happen ever since she'd made such a big splash on the TV news in the events surrounding Katie's ascension to citizenship. It was why she'd tried to talk her Mom and Dad into letting her stay at the new garage, or at least let her buy some real military weapons paks. But they wouldn't hear of it, and they thought their bodyguards were equal to any possible threat. The idiots wouldn't even put Rhianna's new DIN gear in their RIDEs, because it was "untested, non-standard equipment."

It very much looked like it was going to be up to her and Guin to hold out until help could get there. She knelt and reached under her bed, pulling out a large, olive drab metal box and flipping open the lid. Guinevere stood by in her Walker form, looking on. She leaned down to sniff at the box. "We're really gonna use those?"

"I think we're gonna have to." Lillibet reached into the box and lifted out two identical late-model Nextus military pulse assault rifles. She hadn't been able to get her hands on a full assault weapons pak for Guin, but these were at least better than the pop guns she'd had during Tocsin's attack. And perhaps adding anything more would have been superfluous anyway given that Guin was built very much on a light mobility or scout style of design. She wasn't going to be able to assault the Death Star with them, but between the skill chips Guin had downloaded and the virtual practice they'd been putting in lately, she hoped she could at least defend herself—especially with the new DIN gear keeping her hack-proof.

Lillibet held out her arms and Guinevere split apart and reassembled herself around Lilli's body, hardlight fur turned to seamless power armor. She picked up the rifles and latched them into place on the outsides of Guin's forearm greaves. The handgrips dangled uselessly in the air, but that left Guin's and Lilli's hands free for other things—the guns were triggered electronically through Guin's targeting systems anyway.

Armed up and ready, Lillibet peered out through the windows onto her room's third-storey stone balcony, where the gathering dusk was starting to cast long shadows. "Anything on the sensors yet?"

Guinevere shook their head. "Negative. But there wouldn't be, if they wanted to be sneaky. Oh."

"What?"

"Security guard's comm transmission just cut off in mid-word," Guinevere said.

Lillibet raised their guns. "They're here. Comm Mom and Dad. Tell them to get to the saferoom, and I'll join them when I can."

"Already did. No sign they're moving yet."

Lillibet shrugged. "Well, we did what we could."

Just then, a lithe, bushy-tailed silhouette landed on the balcony. Lillibet and

Guinevere crouched behind their bed, assault rifles held at the ready. “Who’s there!” Lilli demanded.

“Lillibet? It’s me!” a familiar voice called out.

“Brena?” Lillibet slowly stood up, disbelieving. “Did the Enclaves send you to help hold off Fritz’s goons?”

“Uh...yeah!” Brena said. “Come with me, I’ll take you somewhere safe.” Brena walked forward, hand outstretched.

:*Lilli, she’s trying to hack me!*: Guinevere said.

Lillibet’s eyes narrowed. She wasn’t as gullible now as she’d used to be. Part of that old self had died when she and Brena had been shot in that bar. More of it had gone under the tutelage of Rhianna and Rochelle in the garage. She’d learned the dangers of believing what she wanted to be true rather than what *had* to be true. So, as much as she wanted to cry no, it couldn’t be true, instead she snapped her rifles up into position.

“You’re one of them, aren’t you?” she asked bitterly.

“Lilli, it’s not what you think,” Brena said. “You’ve got to come with me, for your own—”

“Don’t come any closer!” Lillibet warned. “Keep your hands down at your sides!”

“Lilli, don’t be silly—” Brena began, taking another step forward.

Lillibet opened fire.

Brena threw herself backward off the balcony as the military pulse rounds chewed away at her hardlight shielding with uncanny accuracy. This was a series of unpleasant surprises. First, they’d known she was coming somehow, and were prepared. Where had Lilli gotten those assault rifles? And this also suggested reinforcements were on the way.

And why couldn’t she hack Lillibet’s RIDE? She was trying even now, but her attempts just slid off like thrown mud from a hardlight dome. Were they being shielded by another Integrate? But if so, why hadn’t he shown himself?

But one thing was sure—if reinforcements were coming, they didn’t have time to dawdle. :*Try to get in behind her,*: she sent to two of the other three Integrates who’d accompanied her.

:*Gotcha,*: JerryMander said. The slim raccoon slipped into the third-floor room next door to Lilly’s, through a door letting out onto the same balcony.

:*On it,*: Bethany, the Golden German Shepherd, entered at the ground floor. The mansion’s security systems and door locks were down, and the RIDEs of all security forces on the grounds had been converted into straitjackets for their pilots—*those*, at least, they could hack. But Lilli’s RIDE stubbornly resisted.

:*We got incoming,*: the fourth Integrate, a mid-sized bronze dragon named Tiranth, reported. :*Suborbital on approach three minutes out. Not replying to ATC, but its trajectory points right to us.*:

:*Oh, great,*: Brena said. :*Can you knock it down?*:

:*Not ‘til it’s in range,*: Tiranth said, taking to the air with a flap of his wings. :*I’m not a missile-breathing dragon!*:

Lillibet crouched behind the bed, breathing hard. She’d just fired on her best friend. She was pretty sure she hadn’t actually *hit* her, but still. “How could she be such an *idiot*?” Lillibet growled. “I *trusted* her!”

:Lilli—movement in the guest room!: Guin alerted her. :A board just creaked!: Lilli turned. :Show me.:

:Nothing on thermal—but there. Another board.: Guin highlighted the most probable location of the invisible intruder on the other side of the wall.

:Aw man! Right behind my Lord of the Rings poster!: But without any other hesitation, Lilli opened fire with both guns, shredding the poster and the wall beyond it like cardboard.

:I think there's one downstairs, too!: Guin reported. :But—comm from A.W.! He's two minutes away!:

Lilli blinked. :A.W.? Who's A.W.?:

There was a noise on the staircase up the hall. :Later for that,: Guinevere said.: We gotta move!:

:Ow! Shit! Fuck! Dammit!: JerryMander's vehement swearing and sensations of sharp pain flooded the local link after the flashes of further pulse fire lit Lilli's window. :That crazy bitch shot me through the wall!: The raccoon stumbled back out onto the balcony, bleeding from the shoulder.

A moment later, Bethany yelped, retreating with her tail literally between her legs. :She's got pulse rifles and damned good aim!: Bethany reported. :You didn't tell me she had pulse rifles!:

:Oh, what the hell!: Brena growled. :We're Integrates! They're just meat and mech!:

:Fine, then you flush her out!: JerryMander whined.

:We're one minute away from company!: Tiranth reported.

:All right, then follow me, you two.: Brena rose into the air, drawing a hardlight cone in front of her. She took a deep breath, then *slammed* the cone forward into Lilli's room at high speed. The wall imploded inward, and Brena followed it in, searching the rubble for signs of the ocelot RIDE. Then twin beams of pulse fire ripped through the wall from the guest room, scoring Brena's arm and leg. "Ow! Lilli, you little—" She hastily threw up her thickest hardlight shields to ward off the fire, then slammed her lifters against that section of wall. It flew back, knocking into Lilli and her RIDE and throwing them back against the opposite wall. "Drop your weapons!" Brena ordered. "We don't want to hurt you!"

Lilli and her RIDE got back to their feet. "Too late for that!" Lilli growled. "Finding you on Fritz's side hurt me pretty bad already!" She fired a couple of short bursts that ate into Brena's shields and dodged out the door.

Brena came to a decision. :JerryMander! Bethany! Find the parents!: she sent. :Maybe we can take them hostage to get her to surrender!:

:Do they have pulse rifles too?: the grouchy raccoon sent.

:If we screw this up, we'll wish pulse rifles were all we had to worry about,: Brena said, following Lillibet deeper into the house.

"Thirty seconds to landing!" Baldwin reported. "Twenty-five...oh *hell*. They've got a dragon! Evasive!" The old sub creaked and groaned as the bald eagle pilot whipped it over into a sharp bank. A particle beam blast grazed the wing.

"Drop us!" Paul sent over the comm. "Open the tank ramp!"

"It'll tear right off!" Baldwin protested.

“Just do it!” AlphaWolf said. Baldwin growled and slammed the lever down, then dodged another particle beam blast. The ramp lowered from the back of the sub and, as predicted, fell right off and tumbled away.

“Hang on!” Fenris said, backing out into empty space.

“Don’t worry, I’m strapped in and—aaaaaaaah!!!” The tank tumbled as it fell, then straightened as Fenris fired his lifters and got the descent under control. He shifted to Walker form in mid-air, pulling Paul safely inside, then landed on all four legs in the middle of the Walton mansion’s expansive lawn.

Meanwhile, the source of the particle blasts was fast approaching the sub overhead—a bronze dragon hanging in mid-air. It roared angrily and released another particle beam blast from its mouth, slamming into the side of the sub.

“Fenris had the right idea!” AlphaWolf said. “Abandon ship! Punch us out!”

“Don’t have to tell me twice.” Baldwin slammed his fist down on a big red button and the section of fuselage containing the cockpit blew free of the rest of the ship, rising on a pillar of lifter thrust as the rest of the sub plummeted to earth, going up in a ball of fire on the lawn not far from Fenris.

The detached cockpit landed a moment later—followed by an angry bronze dragon. “Come out of there!” he bellowed. “Surrender and you won’t get—Ow!”

“Hurt?” Paul asked from the particle beam turret of Fenris, who’d switched back to tank mode. He fired another twin blast, scorching the dragon’s hide. As the Integrate snarled and spread his wings, Fenris followed up with a volley of missiles, buffeting the dragon in explosions. “Yeah, that’s what I *thought*,” Paul smirked, as the dragon screeched and took off as if his tail was on fire. Come to think of it, it actually *was*—looked like it had gotten splashed with napalm from the missiles.

Under cover of Fenris’s assault, AlphaWolf, Melissa, and Baldwin emerged from the cockpit’s escape hatch. As the only one in Fuser form, Baldwin unshouldered a pulse rifle and covered the retreating dragon with it.

“We need to find Lilli and her parents!” Paul said. “You two go for the parents. We’ll find Lilli.”

“I’ll, uh, guard the ship,” Baldwin said, indicating the escape pod.

AlphaWolf nodded. “Good plan. Move out!”

:Oh, screw this!: Tiranth complained. :They’ve got a heavy assault RIDE and I can’t hack any of them either! I’m out of here!:

:Tiranth! You know what Fritz will do if you bug out?: Brena sent, including images that involved a lot of butchered meat. :Look, come around the other side of the mansion, put it between you and them. Help Jerry and Beth get to the parents. They’ve locked themselves in a saferoom, we could use a little dragon power.:

:R...roger,: Tiranth said shakily. It was only the threat of Fritz’s legendary temper that kept him around. For that matter, it was beginning to be the only thing that kept Brena here herself. Lilli and her RIDE had dropped right off her sensors—her *Integrate* sensors. The hell?

Brena moved up the hall, keeping her hardlight shielding as thick as she could. At least the pulse wounds from earlier had stopped bleeding. “Geez, Lilli, why is it hanging around with you keeps getting me shot?” Brena muttered.

“Maybe you deserve it!” Lilli said from behind her, just before two streams of pulse fire slammed into her back.

“Shit!” Brena dived for cover around a corner as her shields dropped to 10%.

“I trusted you,” Lilli said. “I looked up to you! You know how torn up I was when you disappeared? And now you’re here to *kidnap* me!”

Brena didn’t reply, backing further down the hall and reinforcing her still-regenerating shields to the front. So she was caught out when another pulse blast came through the wall from the room to her side, ripping through the shields and perforating her leg and arm. “Ahh!” Brena yelped.

“I even did what you told me to!” Lillibet said, sadly, as she crashed through the weakened wall in a cloud of plaster dust. “I got to know my RIDE real well, and now Guinny and I are very happy together.” She—or maybe Guinny—slammed the end of one pulse rifle into Brena’s gut, doubling her over. “I was *looking forward* to Integrating, to be just like you!” She slammed the other rifle down on the back of Brena’s head. “Now I find you’ve joined up with the jerkiest jerk of a jerk who ever jerked!”

Then Lilli stopped, turning her head to one side. “And your asshole friends are after my Mom and Dad now. Well, screw you and the dragon you rode in on.” Lilli delivered a ride-powered knee to the reeling Brena’s muzzle and left her unconscious in the rubble.

In a saferoom underneath the house, Kenyon and Nigella Walton huddled, worrying about their daughter.

The security systems were down, of course, so they couldn’t get any camera views. Indeed, if Kenyon hadn’t insisted on equipping the room with a non-automated mechanical steel vault door, the Integrates would already have hacked their way in. Even now they were slamming away at it and it was slowly starting to buckle.

Another burst of pulse fire sounded elsewhere in the mansion. Nigella blanched, but Kenyon was less worried. Integrates by and large didn’t use human weapons. Besides, he recognized the sound of the type of rifle that Lillibet thought she’d “secretly” bought. So he was actually reassured to hear them, being reasonably sure they meant his daughter and her RIDE were still alive and in the fight.

“Where’s our *security*?” Nigella whined for the tenth time. “What are we even paying them for?”

“They’re probably unable to move,” Kenyon said. “Integrates seem to be able to paralyze anything with a computer in it—save for that new technology Lil tells me Rhianna and Rochelle have invented. We really should have pressured the security firm harder to install it themselves, ‘untested’ tech or not. I expect that’s why she’s still out there, moving and fighting them.”

“*Fighting* them?” Nigella squawked. “At her age she shouldn’t be fighting *anything*!”

“When I was younger than she is now, I was running with the Nuevo San Antonio Apaches,” Kenyon said. “As I believe I might have mentioned to you a time or three before I married you.” She looked up at him and blinked a couple of times. He chuckled, moving closer to her and putting an arm around her. “I know you’ve seen all my scars, if you needed further proof.”

Nigella shuddered. “She shouldn’t have scars.”

“I’m sure she’ll be just fine. I also have little doubt she’s called in reinforcements,” Kenyon said. “Her friends struck me as capable, rational individuals,

albeit perhaps a bit less careful than they might be in who they antagonize.” He chuckled again. “Which, again, reminds me of myself in my younger days.” He gave her another squeeze and then went to a cabinet against one of the walls. Unlatching it with a key from around his neck, he lifted out a pulse rifle similar to the ones Lilli had bought and checked the action. “Can I get you a gun while I’m up?”

Nigella sighed. “If you must, I suppose I could handle a submachine gun. I don’t exactly want to be kidnapped either.” At her husband’s and their bodyguards’ insistence, she had taken several small arms training courses and even managed to acquire some level of skill with them, as she tried to do with anything she *had* to learn. It didn’t mean she enjoyed them.

Kenyon took Nigella’s arm and led her over to a small firing barrier on the opposite side of the room. They crouched and readied their weapons as the door slammed open at last and two silhouettes stood in the door. “All right, just come quietly and no one needs to get hu—owwww!” the raccoon yelped as more pulsefire winged his way. “*Fuuuck!* This was supposed to be easy!”

“That’s about enough of that,” the German Shepherd said. She waved her arm and the guns flew out of the couple’s hands, clattering to the floor across the room. “Now why don’t you two—GAH!!!” The dog emitted a yelp just like her partner’s as an immense sandy wolf clamped its jaws around her throat and wrestled her to the ground, pinning her with its weight. Her eyes widened as she instinctively reached out for the hack, and just slid right off—as if from another Integrate.

“I suggest you open access to me,” AlphaWolf said conversationally through his vocoder, without removing his jaws from her throat. “If you’d like your head to still be attached to your body in the next minute or so.”

Bethany whimpered and complied, then closed her eyes as she went into deep hibernation. A few feet away, a rather angry mink was offering the raccoon the same bargain. AlphaWolf held on just long enough to make sure both Integrates were shut down, then let go and padded into the saferoom, followed by Melissa. “Kenyon and Nigella Walton, I presume?” he asked politely.

Kenyon helped his wife to her feet, and they gingerly approached the two RIDEs. “You seem to have the advantage of us,” he remarked.

AlphaWolf nodded. “This is Melissa, and I’m—”

That was when the roof fell in.

Tiranth was still trying to get a good angle on the saferoom from outside, to penetrate without doing too much damage, when he sensed the arrival of the two RIDEs and then abruptly felt first Bethany and then JerryMander go into deep hibernation. :*Beth? Jerry? What the hell?!*: They’d just *surrendered*? To mech without even any meat in it?

“Oh, screw you! *Screw you very much!*” Tiranth opened his jaw and breathed his heaviest particle beam fire blast yet, at the main structural support members over the saferoom.

Everything was dark. *Am I dead?* The last thing she remembered was a rumble, a shaking...and a large furry creature lunging at her. She tried to explore how she felt... what she felt...and to figure out why the first thing she was aware of was a panic-stricken girlish voice in the back of her head whimpering,

:OhGodI'msorryI'msorryI'msorry don'thurtmeIdidn'tmeanto...:

Nigella was a bitch. She knew that. She admitted it. She even reveled in it. It was the part society expected her to play, after all. And it saved her from the only other part available—having to be endlessly gracious at social events that would have bored her to tears. It was her greatest excuse. But she had a secret she kept deep inside that would have surprised many of the people who dealt with her on a daily basis. The secret was obvious when you remembered what a bitch *was*.

A bitch was also a mother. And mothers cared about helpless little girls.

She couldn't have explained how she did it, or even how she knew *how* to do it, but Nigella reached out for the voice, stroking it, comforting it. *:It's all right...whatever you did, it's all right.:* She pondered a moment. *:What...did you do?:*

:I...Fused you without asking,: Melissa said, whimpering a little more. *:I'm sorry, I just couldn't let you get squished...please don't have me melted down for scrap!:*

A little taken aback, Nigella smiled and hugged the mink, or at least tried to send the mental impression of smiling and hugging. *:I wouldn't do that.:*

:You...you wouldn't?: Melissa asked hesitantly.

:Lilli tells me that RIDE parts are worth more than raw materials,: Nigella said. *:So I'd just have you dismantled, not melted.:* When Melissa howled, Nigella hastened to reassure her, *:It was a joke, a joke! Sorry! I promise, I wouldn't hurt you. Really.:*

:R...really?: Melissa whimpered.

:I promise. You saved my life,: Nigella said. *:At least, I think you did, assuming I am still alive.:* Nigella tried to feel her body. Now that she knew she was within a RIDE, she was able to sense it a little more clearly. She seemed to be lying on her side, pinned beneath a heavy weight.

:You are. We are,: Melissa said. *:We're just buried.:*

:What about Kenyon?: Nigella asked quickly.

:He's alright, too,: Melissa said. *:They Fused in time, just like we did.:*

:Thank goodness,: Nigella said. *:So...this is Fusing?:* It felt...not too bad, really. Warm all over. And she wasn't sure but she thought she felt stronger than usual. Maybe she could shift some of the rubble if she tried.

:It is,: Melissa said. *:It would be even better if we weren't buried. We may have to wait for someone to dig us out.:*

:Will we be all right until then?:

:Oh, yes,: Melissa assured her. *:I have plenty of life support available. You're in no danger.:*

Nigella became aware of something else at the periphery of her mind. A sensation, perhaps an emotion. It was...as if she was reading Melissa's thoughts. Lilli had said something about people being that way with RIDEs. Now Nigella blinked at what she read. *:You're...wondering if I'll keep you,:* Nigella said. *:You...want me to keep you because...:* And then she actually giggled. *:Because mink are supposed to be worn by rich women?:*

:Well...yeah.: Melissa sounded a little embarrassed. *:I know, originally, mink were killed and skinned and all and made into coats for rich women. But someone thought it would be cute to put that directive at the core of the neural net pattern for all the MNK(f)-LUX-010 units. We're "supposed" to be worn by rich women, so we find it fulfilling. So it's a part of who I am.:*

And then Nigella was almost overcome by a flood of memories as Melissa opened up, sharing herself with the woman. Melissa's female-only line had been made by a popular luxury RIDE factory in the Dome Rainier ward of Cascadia, and nominally aimed at the wealth bracket about one order of magnitude below the Waltons—which was still pretty rich, when you thought about it. Her sisters had been sold mostly to the eccentric wealthy of the rainy polis, and a few from the rest of the globe. Melissa had ended up in Nextus, with a woman who at first thought it would be “cute” to have a mink. When she eventually tired of all the “minx” jokes, she sold Melissa to a RIDE-enhanced beauty salon.

The salon operator had hit on the bright idea of modding RIDEs' Fuser nanos to be able to suppress the ear and tail additions, and programming them to melt pounds off of and immaculately style the hair, skin, and nails of her patrons. So rather than be touched by human hands, the women would come in for a quick Fuse and de-Fuse, and leave looking much better than when they'd come in. For the salon operator, it was easy money. But for Melissa, it was sheer torture. She was meant to be paired with and share the thoughts of one person at a time. She was given several a day, and spent most months so overwhelmed with random thoughts and memories from the patrons that she was barely even able to be herself.

Finally she'd been so overwhelmed and fragmented that she'd been unable to operate anymore, and had been replaced with another cheaply-bought female RIDE. As the final insult, the salon operator hadn't even thought it worth the time to bother to sell her at auction; he'd just dropped her in a waste bin and sent her off to the recycling center.

Fortunately for her, she'd managed to self-defragment enough to clamber out of it before she reached the recycling machinery. She'd found her way out of town and wandered around until she'd been caught by a group of humans who recaptured and resold stray RIDEs—but before they could bring her back to town, some of AlphaWolf's free RIDEs had raided them and taken her to safety in his camp. Her most recent memories involved being defragmented by Paul and Fenris, and then being conveniently close to hand—and conveniently equipped with the newest anti-Integrate countermeasures—when it came time for a rescue mission.

:You poor thing!: Nigella said. *:That place should be illegal!:* She was almost astonished to realize she *meant* it, too, and a moment later was ashamed of how she'd always thought of RIDEs before. They had been equipment to be used, gifts to be given, eccentricities to be tolerated in people like her daughter...but *people*? Oh, come on!

But after experiencing, even at second hand, one RIDE's life of torture...or even her life *at all*...:*How can anyone Fuse with one of you and not come to the conclusion you're people?:* Nigella wondered.

:You think they don't know?: Melissa asked bitterly. *:They don't care. They'd use humans just like they use us if they could get away with it.:*

:They won't be using you anymore.: Nigella said. *:You're mine now.:*

:Y...you really mean that?: Melissa squeaked. Nigella could sense the years of pent-up disappointment, of never daring to allow herself even to hope, and the fear that this was just another cruel disappointment in a life that had held far too many.

:I absolutely mean it,: Nigella sent with rock-solid certainty. And again, she was surprised by how vehemently she felt it. She hadn't wanted a RIDE before, couldn't have *imagined* finding a use for one. But suddenly she couldn't imagine giving this little mink

up.

:Oh, thank you! Thank you thank you thank you!: Melissa sighed happily. *:You'll never regret it.:* She stopped, then seemed to feel that more was required. *:And you're gonna have awesome hair.:*

When Kenyon Walton found himself in darkness, he didn't panic. Darkness was at least an old acquaintance, if not a friend. And this darkness seemed to have someone else in it. He reached out mentally and located that other party, who was holding himself slightly aloof. *:Hello?:* he sent.

:Hello, Mr. Walton,: the wolf RIDE replied. *:Sorry about the sudden Fuse. It was the only thing I could think to do.:*

:I understand. The roof was coming down.: The recollection made him stiffen and try to move beneath the rubble that was pinning him down. *:My wife! Is she—?:*

:She's safe. Melissa got to her in time,: the wolf said.

Kenyon relaxed. *:Thank God. What about my daughter? Do you know if she is well?:*

:She is,: the wolf reported. *:In fact, she's been giving a lot better than she's gotten.:*

:That's my girl,: Kenyon said proudly. Curious, he reached out for the wolf, probing with a startling directness. The wolf wasn't quite fast enough to block the query.

:Well well well,: Kenyon said bemusedly. *:I seem to have been bodyjacked by the notorious AlphaWolf himself. My daughter has been making some interesting friends of late.:*

:Only mutual ones,: AlphaWolf said. *:We haven't actually met yet.:*

:I see.: Walton chuckled. *:So after we're free, what then? Off to your camp to serve as a pair of thumbs?:*

AlphaWolf chuckled. *:Hardly. Your daughter would hunt me down and take my pelt for a rug. And if she didn't, Rhianna would. Besides, my reputation is somewhat exaggerated.:*

:I imagine so.: Kenyon reached out again. Interested by his directness, AlphaWolf did what he so rarely ever had with any of his Fuses—he opened his memories, at least those since the founding of his camp. Kenyon reviewed them, reliving the wolf's struggle to find a home for wayward RIDEs while balancing the desires of extremists for revenge with the needs of those who just wanted a safe haven. It concluded with the Fridolf/Amontillado debacle, which Kenyon could sense still stung.

:Ah, I see.: Kenyon chuckled, but radiated a surprising degree of empathy. *:The pressures of survival and leadership.:* Haltingly due to his own inexperience, Kenyon shared his own recollections—a young man growing up in the mean streets of Nuevo San Antonio, running with the “Apache” street gangs until, as part of a street sweep, he was rounded up and sent to an Army-operated mining camp in the deep Dry to “serve his country.” At one point he was separated from the others and wandered lost in the desert for days, during which he happened upon a rare vein of pure qubitite. Having learned just enough of mining to recognize what he'd found, Walton had concealed the location and committed it to his memory so that he might be able to find it again.

When he'd been released from the camp and returned to civilization, Walton had filed a claim form right away, then spent months scrimping and saving to round up the necessary resources, and finally hired a mining crew to retrieve his treasure. He'd had to

put down more than one mutiny when the miners had learned just what he really had, but his experience on the streets had served him in good stead there.

And with the money he'd earned, Walton had clawed his way up into Nexus society, learning the Game and manners with the same street-bred relentless intensity he had formerly applied just to surviving. Along the way he had met a young lady who had been surprised but not repulsed by the real man underneath the cultured exterior, and he had made her his wife. And together they had founded a business, a fortune, and a family—facing a number of challenges along the way that had been met with that same relentless directness.

It was remarkable, AlphaWolf realized, how much like a wolf this man was himself. *:I wish I had met you when we were younger,:* AlphaWolf said. *:We might have been partners.:*

Kenyon nodded, or sent the mental impression of one. *:Too much water under the bridge now. Under both our bridges.:*

:I can't leave my camp, and you couldn't leave your corporation,: AlphaWolf agreed. *:Too many people relying on both of us.:*

:Though if this is what it is like to Fuse, I might have to find some RIDE with fewer commitments,: Kenyon reflected.

AlphaWolf actually laughed. *:You're more right than you know.:*

Kenyon raised a mental eyebrow. *:Indeed?:*

:It seems your wife has just decided she'll be keeping Melissa,: AlphaWolf said. *:Melissa is quite beside herself with joy.:*

Kenyon's hearth laugh echoed AlphaWolf's own. *:Ah, is that so? Another mouth to feed. Indeed I'll need to find a friendly RIDE just to keep up with the women in my family.:*

:Hold on,: AlphaWolf sent suddenly. *:Your daughter just got here.:*

:Then let's see if we can shift some of this rubble.: Kenyon experimentally threw all of his strength into trying to work an arm free, and AlphaWolf lent strength of his own.

Lillibet felt the roof and then the whole house shake as she approached the entrance to the saferoom. Then a cloud of plaster dust rolled out the stairs down to the saferoom level. "What? No!" She ran down the stairs. "Mom! Dad!" There were a couple of prone forms on the floor outside the entrance that she at first took to be them, then realized were the other two Integrates, the raccoon and the dog—covered with plaster dust and a chunk or two of masonry, but otherwise fine, save for being in hibernation. Lilli took the opportunity to give them each a good, swift RIDE-powered kick in the ribs.

:Wow, vindictive much?: Guin asked.

:Who's the one who didn't stop me from kicking them?: Lilli shot back.

:Okay, point.:

They turned to the door, and the room beyond, which was filled almost entirely with heaped rubble. "Mom...Dad..." Lilli murmured.

:Wait, I think...yes! There!: Guin raised their arm and pointed excitedly. A block of rubble shifted, and a sandy-colored furry arm raised itself out. *:AlphaWolf!:*

Lilli blinked. *:Wait, AlphaWolf? That's "AW"?:* She stared. *:And he has my Dad?:*

:It's comfy in here,: Kenyon Walton said. *:I feel like a werewolf. Can you two lend a paw?:*

:I think we're going to need a heavy lifter,: Lillibet said. "Hold tight, everyone!"
"On our way!" Paul called. A moment later, a giant humanoid wolf picked his way through the rubble. "There's still a dragon flying around, but he's keeping his distance right now," Paul reported. "After the pasting we gave him earlier, he's probably still psyching himself up."

Fenris paused at the edge of the room. "Okay, our sensors are picking you guys up. Hang on, we're going to lift some of this crap off."

Fenris carefully reached down to move collapsed timbers and concrete slabs. A moment later, two dust-covered furry figures stood and brushed themselves off. There was AlphaWolf with Kenyon, and—

"Oh wow, Mom, is that you?" Lillibet squealed. "You look *great* in mink!" She giggled. "And nice to meet *you*, Melissa!"

"I suppose you never expected to see *me* in a RIDE," her mother said. "Your life is full of surprises today. You shall simply have to adapt."

"Wow," Lillibet said again.

"I find the experience rather intriguing myself," Kenyon admitted. "I hope you can help me find a compatible RIDE of my own later, Lilli. This one is a little too high-maintenance for me to want to keep." He turned to look up...and up, and *up* at Fenris. "I suddenly feel inadequate," he said dryly.

Lilli giggled again. "Daddy, you've never once felt inadequate in your life."

The conversation was interrupted by Guinevere reporting, "Lilli, I think our dragon friend is returning."

"Oh crap." Guin looked up at Fenris. "Fenny, pop your cupola. Paul, you got the guns fixed, right?"

"First thing when we got back," Paul said. "You shoulda seen us earlier!" The gunner's compartment on Fenris's back dropped open.

Lilli and Guinevere leaped into the air on their lifters and settled into place in the cupola, which resealed around them. "Linking up!" The giant wolf lifted into the air on his own lifters, drifting out away from the house to move the danger away from Lillibet's parents.

:Link accepted,: Fenris sent, as their presences merged. *:Welcome back.:*

:Glad to be here,: Lilli said as Guin took over some of Fenris's processes again so he could think faster. *:Now where's that pesky dragon?:*

:There! Fenris marked him with a targeting reticle in Lilli's field of view as he swooped around for an attack run. Lilli flipped the guns forward and tracked him as he came.

:Hey, buddy, you're the last one left!: Guinevere sent. *:You might wanna think twice!:*

In response, the dragon dropped his jaw and fired another blast. Fenris raised his left arm and caught the blast on a huge hardlight shield, then Lilli returned fire with the cannons, scoring several hits that ate away at the dragon's own hardlight shielding. As he passed, Lilli flipped the guns from front to rear-facing and kept tracking him with more fire as he came back around. Though he jinked and dodged, she got in several more good hits.

:His shielding just went down,: Paul said. He transmitted more broadly, *:Hey, guy, give it up. You can't win. Surrender and we'll treat you fairly.:*

:Never!: the dragon roared. *:We don't surrender to meat!:*

:*Your two friends did*,: Fenris pointed out.

“GRAAAAAAH!!!” the dragon roared inarticulately, spouting his particle beam flame again. This time he missed Fenris altogether, carbonizing some topiaries halfway down the lawn and setting others on fire.

Lillibet triggered Fenris’s shoulder missile batteries again, flushing the remainder of his pods at the dragon. The creature squawked and tried to bank out of the way, but the explosions caught him squarely in the chest and wings and knocked him right out of the sky. He landed on his back next to the ruined house, wings in tatters, with a gaping wound in his side that sparked and bled.

Fenris landed next to the dragon, and Lilli covered him with the particle beam turrets over Fenris’s shoulders. “Ready to give up now?” Lilli asked. “We *really* don’t want to kill anyone. However...”

The bedraggled dragon opened his DIN port, and a moment later fell into deep hibernation just like the others.

“Just one left,” Lilli said. “Let’s go round her up.”

Brena groaned and staggered unsteadily to her feet. She felt like she’d been trampled by a herd of elephant RIDEs, and thought her nose might be broken. Ow.

:*JerryMander?*: she sent. :*Bethany?*: No response. :*Tiranth?*: Even the dragon wasn’t answering. Brena was getting worried now. It wasn’t possible they could *all* have been defeated by *meat*...was it?

Either way, she didn’t plan to hang around any longer and let it happen to her. She staggered out of the house and oriented herself for flight.

“Brena!” It was Lilli’s voice, amplified. She glanced in that direction, and stared. A six-meter furry white wolf Fuser with twin particle beam cannons on his shoulders was looking back at her. “Just hold it right there, Brena. We’ve already got your friends.”

“No way, meat!” Brena spat. How could she ever have thought there could be anything left to her friendship with Lillibet? Fritz had been right. Integrates had no business mixing with meat. “I’m out of here!” She went invisible and launched herself into the air.

“Wrong answer, Brena,” Lillibet said grimly. The last thing Brena was aware of for several seconds was the barrels of the cannon elevating to track her with eerie precision, then the bright flash of light as they fired.

When she woke up, it was to the sight of the gaping barrel of a pulse rifle centimeters away from her face, and a disappointed-looking Lillibet, the ocelot helmet-head off to expose her human face, on the other end. “Please don’t make me have to use this.”

Brena whimpered a little. “What do you want?”

“Root,” Lilli said. “We need to put you into hibernation until we can decide what to do with you and the others.”

Brena sighed and opened up. “There you go.”

“Thanks.” Lilli nodded, lowering the gun. “Sorry about this, Bren.”

“Oh, just do it,” Brena snapped.

So she did. Click.

Lillibet stood over her unconscious friend. Or former friend. What had happened to her? Back before the Integration, she’d been so cheerful and friendly—the

penultimate party girl. But now...

:Guin, access Brena for me. I need to see her memories since she got shot and left me.:

:Are you sure about that?: Guinevere asked. :I mean, it's kind of an invasion of privacy...:

:I have to know what happened to her!: Lillibet said, near to tears over her old friend's betrayal. :And since she just tried to kidnap me, and her friends totally trashed my house and nearly squished my parents, I have a few less qualms about invading her privacy than I might have used to.:

:Fair enough.: Guin put her helmet-head back up and linked into Brena's neural net. Her memories were stored in the same fashion as RIDEs', and it was simple to find the right timestamps. :Got 'em.:

Lillibet watched herself and Brena get shot from Brena's perspective, wincing in sympathy as she watched the bullet enter her own side. She still swore she ached there, some nights, though the doctors had said it was strictly psychosomatic. She watched the hospitalization from Brena's point of view, including the abduction attempt by Nextus military who nearly succeeded in taking Brena into custody. That was when she let herself out of her hospital room, gave Lilli that little lecture about respecting her RIDE, and then left for the desert, where she'd heard that others like her might be found.

Lost, alone, scared, seeking a moral compass, she joined an Enclave, and got her DIN and learned to use it. She discovered she had an aptitude for shapeshifting, and could change her body in a number of ways—including adopting a look similar to the walker form of her fox RIDE, only smaller. Hurt, insecure, still feeling unsafe, it was only a matter of time before she drifted under the sway of Fritz and his "Integrates Ascendant" philosophy.

The idea that Integrates were some sort of super-being, superior to mere meat and mech, had offered a seductive promise of invulnerability—even potential *immortality*. No one could ever hurt her again, because no one could even *touch* her. She bought into the movement to such an extent that she became Fritz's poster girl, and his *de facto* lieutenant once Quinoa went astray.

But deep down, Brena didn't seem to want to hurt anyone. That was something Lilli could cling to, at least. She just thought Integrates should go their own way and that they and the "lesser orders" should leave each other alone. She did what Fritz said because, well, he was *Fritz*. The lynx had this incredible—even terrible—charisma about him. And she didn't seem to have been directly involved in any of the terror attacks—at least, until *this* one.

Lilli frowned. :What do you think, Guin?:

:I know what you're thinking,,: Guinevere said. :You really want to 'take her under your wing' and show her the error of her ways? You think you even can?:

:I think I can try.: Lillibet said. :She was my friend. I don't want to just...lock her up. Not if I can get her to see reason again.:

Guin sighed. :Talk to Rhianna and see what she says. Maybe she'll have some ideas.:

:Good idea,,: Lillibet said. :But until then, I think I'd better put her somewhere safe.: She switched to a wider comm frequency. :Hey, Fenris...ya hungry?:

As they headed back toward where they'd left Lillibet's parents, in tank mode

with Lillibet in the cupola, AlphaWolf came bounding up in Walker form. “Change of plans. Follow me.”

“What?” Lillibet blinked. “Why?”

“The Nextus Policia *and* Mil are just a couple of minutes away. We can’t let them catch us here or they’ll never let us go—*any* of us,” AlphaWolf said. “Your father wants us to take one of his subs and go before they arrive—that includes you, Lilli and Guin. I’ll tell you the rest in the air. Baldy’s already warming it up.” AlphaWolf flipped over to his skimmer form, a mid-sized military hovercycle in desert camo, and zoomed across the grounds toward the cluster of hangars housing Kenyon’s collection of 1950s and 1960s replica suborbitals abutting the Waltons’ private airfield. Fenris juiced his lifters and zoomed after.

“But...wait, Dad said I should go with *you*?” Lillibet said. “I don’t understand! I should be staying with them—”

“You do that and you’ll *all* be spending several days locked up for questioning, probably separately from Guin,” AlphaWolf commed. “Trust me on this, there’s enough crap in the air here that they’ll be locking up first, asking questions later.”

“Well...if you’re sure,” Lilli said dubiously.

“Your parents will have enough to worry about without having to worry about you,” Fenris boomed. “Better that they know you are safe, among friends.”

“...at the hidden camp of a terrorist RIDE known for kidnapping random humans for their bodies,” Lillibet said. “How did the world get so *weird* when I wasn’t looking?”

There was no response; everyone else knew a rhetorical question when they heard one. Lillibet shielded her eyes and looked ahead to the airfield. “Which one are we taking, I wonder?” she mused. “There aren’t many that are big enough to fit...*oh!*” They got to the airstrip just as a huge delta-winged bomber design taxied out of its hangar. “Dad gave you the XB-70? Wow, he must really want us gone *fast*.”

The original XB-70 had been a planned high-altitude supersonic bomber that would fly at 70,000 feet at Mach 3. It had gone by the wayside after ICBM and antiaircraft weapon developments had made it obsolete—but the current 20th-century craze sweeping the world had resulted in suborbital replica manufacturers reviving the design, with a few modifications. Lifter engines didn’t need to be as large as the six jets that had powered the original aircraft, and combined with the space from the unnecessary bomb bay, the suborbital design had a significant amount of cargo space. Baldwin already had the belly cargo ramp lowered, and it was just large enough for Fenris to fit in while AlphaWolf clambered into the plane’s cockpit with Baldwin. The engines were already warming up as the ramp sealed.

“This is gonna be skin-of-teeth territory, y’all,” Baldwin said. “Hold onto your butts.”

“I’m interfaced with the suborbital’s avionics,” Fenris reported. “Guin and I will operate the ECM to cover our escape.”

“Good. We’re going.” Baldwin kicked the engines in and the plane streaked down the runway just as the first squad-skimmers pulled up the mansion’s driveway. It took to the sky, passing the military skimmers on approach as if they were standing still. Then the flaps at the ends of the wings dropped downward, creating the shock wave the original design had needed to make Mach 3. But the suborbital wasn’t stopping there, as the hardlight aeroshell that would let it go even faster kicked in and the bird clawed for space, Fenris’s computing power letting it vanish from sensors almost as well as an

Integrate could.

At last, Baldwin and Fenris both reported they could find no signs of pursuit or successful tracking, and everyone else relaxed. At least until Lillibet learned the pretext for their escape. "I'm *what?*" she squawked over the intercom to the cockpit.

"My 'hostage,'" AlphaWolf deadpanned. "Your father decided the best way to spin this was that both Fritz and I wanted to kidnap your family, and we just had the bad luck to try it at the same time and got in each other's way. After we got the drop on them, we were betrayed by the heroic mink Melissa and as a result only got away with you. You'll presumably make a clever escape in a few days and make your way back to civilization."

"Do you seriously think anyone's gonna buy that?" Lillibet asked.

"Probably not," AlphaWolf said. "But it's at least *plausible*, and with your father's money behind it..."

"What about the Marshals?" Paul asked. "We just got done with them telling us what would happen if we pulled another op like Uplift." He didn't even seem to see anything odd about including himself in with AlphaWolf's crew with that "we," Lillibet noticed. "Like, say, kidnapping a trillionaire's daughter from her home?"

"Ah...as for that, Kenyon is golfing partners with the Qube, the head of the entire Marshal service. He promised to fill him in on the truth behind what happened, and to do his best to see that we don't have repercussions from helping him out." AlphaWolf cleared his throat. "Anyway...that aside, we all did pretty well back there, relatively speaking."

"Pretty well?" Lillibet said. "They *destroyed my house!*"

"But nobody died," Paul said. "I'd call that a pretty good outcome, me."

"And your mother got a RIDE." Guinevere giggled. "I honestly can't believe it. I'm really looking forward to getting to know Melissa."

"I didn't get to see *either one of them* with their new ears and tail," Lillibet grumbled. "I'll bet they're really *cute*, too."

"I'd go with 'dignified' for your father," AlphaWolf said, an odd tone in his voice. "I believe that man could make even a clown suit look dignified."

Lillibet blinked. "I guess you must have...learned a lot about each other when you Fused."

"Yes," AlphaWolf said. "We did."

"Which may be why your Dad was so willing to send you off with him," Guin said, for Lillibet's ears only.

"Huh." Lillibet settled back in her seat and thought about that.

"Speaking of doing well, we also brought their leader away with us," Fenris said. "She's still hibernating within my passenger space. Perhaps we can interrogate her at the camp?"

"No one *touches* her but me, got it?" Lillibet said hotly. "She was *my* friend. I'll talk to her."

"Works for me," Paul said. "You've got the best shot getting through to her. Rather have a new friend than a pissed-off enemy."

"I *will* make her my friend again," Lilli said, more to herself than anyone else. "I *will*."

"Oooh, this is gonna be so awesome! I can't believe it! We're going to AlphaWolf's camp!" Guinevere squealed. "D'ya know what this means?"

Lillibet blinked, drawn out of her determination by Guinny's enthusiasm. "Um... we're either hostages or wanted fugitives?"

"No, silly! Well, yes, but I mean *besides* that." Guinevere giggled. "I get to be in charge!"

"Hold on now, you *what*?" Lillibet asked.

"The only humans in Alfie's camp are 'thumbs' for their RIDEs!" Guinvere said. "Even Paul is Fennie's pet human. Which means *you* get to be *mine*."

"Now wait just a minute here," Lillibet said.

"She does kind of have a point," Paul observed. "The last few days have been... kind of rough ones around the camp. The last thing we want is to stir things up too much with a RIDE tramping around with her human obviously running things."

"Hey, hold on," Lillibet said. "Are you saying I *do* have to belong to her?"

"It doesn't really matter inside the Graveyard, which is where my practice is, 'cuz nobody comes there except the ones we're working on, but out in the camp, might be a good idea if you were to piss and moan a little about how unfair it all is, and Guin would act like the one in charge." He chuckled. "I don't know if it'll fool anyone, but it keeps appearances up."

"Yay!" Guinevere said. "I get to be in charge! *I'm* the boss! *You're* just the thumbs! Yay!"

"*Someone's* enjoying this just a little too much," Lillibet said darkly.

"Oh hush, thumbs." Guinevere giggled. "You should be thumbled and not heard!"

"*Guiiiiiiin...*"

"What? I'm just getting into character."

"You *are* a character," Lillibet grumbled.

"Everyone hold tight back there!" Baldwin cut in. "Decelerating now. Landing in ten minutes!"

"Home sweet home," Alphawolf muttered. "I hope it's still in one piece when we get there."

AlphaWolf called ahead to warn the camp of his arrival in a different ride from when they'd left, so they knew not to be alarmed at a different suborbital coming in. All the same, the return brought back unpleasant memories of the last time they'd landed at camp, and the metaphorical ambush that had been waiting there. This time the arrangement of RIDEs was a bit less overtly hostile, but it seemed another explanation was about to come due.

The XB-70 pulled to a halt and the cargo elevator slowly lowered Fenris and his two passengers to the ground, as AlphaWolf and Baldwin emerged from the forward cockpit. "Hey, everyone!" AlphaWolf said, climbing up on Fenris's particle beam cupola to address the crowd. "I suppose you're wondering where we've been, and why we came back in a different ship. Well, I'd like to introduce you to the daughter of one of the ten richest men on Zharus, and her RIDE, Lillibet Walton and Guinevere."

From the cupola's cockpit, Guinevere waved. "Hi!" Lilli said. The crowd emitted a sort of hushed murmur.

"Now, I could try to spin some kind of yarn about how we're going to hold her for ransom, but I think you deserve the truth," AlphaWolf said. "The truth is, she's here because she wants to be, and is going to help our *other* human mechanic out in the graveyard for the next few days. And part of the reason for that is we snatched her away

from some Integrate assholes who thought she'd make a good trophy. Integrates who were in with the one who tricked us into making fools of ourselves attacking Uplift." The crowd noise got a little angrier here. There were still a number of those, especially the anti-human extremists, who were still happy with the results of the attack even if it had been misbegotten.

"You might think that if those Integrates don't like humans, they're not all bad," AlphaWolf said. "But *some* of them don't much like RIDEs either. Think they're so superior. Hmph. Well, if you want to know, the reason why only a few of us went after them this time was that there's a new anti-Integrate system available, that blocks them out of being able to hack RIDEs like us altogether. Paul had only had the time to put it in Fenris, me, and Melissa when we got word of the attack. So we gave it a good field testing." He grinned, his tongue lolling. "We came, we saw, we kicked their asses! So sayeth me!"

"And now we're gonna be on their radar," Paul said, Fenris amplifying his voice to reach the crowd. "So I've come to a decision. We're going to make this hack-blocker available to anyone and everyone in camp who wants it. Whether mammal, avian, or dino, whether human-friendly or bodyjackers. We've bloodied their nose, and they know where we live." The murmurs were really loud now.

"I realize this isn't exactly what you all signed up for when you came to live out here," AlphaWolf said. "And any of you who want to get while the getting's good, I won't blame you. But just remember this—these guys are bad news for everyone—no matter how you feel about humans, and no matter how humans feel about you. If it comes to a fight, sooner or later it's going to find you. And there's safety in numbers."

"We're with you, Alpha!" Heinrich the eagle called out. "From what I've heard about these guys, we'd probably have ended up scrapping sooner or later anyway."

"No true voman of Sturmhaven would zhrink from zuch a fight!" Sonja declared.

"I question this sudden reliance on humans, Alpha," Tocsin said. "As you well know, Integrates do not impress me. Especially certain *untrained* sphinxes. Regardless, some of them are a threat if you're not properly cautious. I am willing to have additional security measures installed."

In the end, only a scant handful of the more extreme RIDEs chose to depart. Most of the rest either affirmed their solidarity with AlphaWolf, or took a more neutral position—but were happy just the same to line up for Sneaker/Shoelace protection. Very few who stayed declined it.

In the end, there was so much demand that Paul set up three separate operating theaters in the graveyard, where he, Lilli, and Fenris (in his first real use of his new "empty Fuser" capability) could process three RIDEs at a time. They stood in a row, working on their individual patients, implanting the devices in all but assembly-line fashion.

"You know, this isn't what I thought I'd be doing when I thought of coming out to AlphaWolf's camp to join you," Lilibet said as she finished placing a set of the hack-blockers into a skunk RIDE. "I thought it was going to be more, y'know, *hostagey*."

"Instead of slave labor?" Paul grinned. "Sorry to disappoint."

"So what do you think?" Lilli asked. "Will Rhi flip her lid when she finds we've given the fruits of her labor to a band of bodyjackers?"

"Well, guns should still work just as well on them as they ever have." He grinned

at his current patient—Smash, the ankylosaurus who had spent the last several days happily crooning to the ex-slaver she'd trapped within her body. "So I hope you'll be happy with that one for a while."

"Hands are hands," Smash rumbled. "And I've already got a set. Why should I wanna give 'em up for another?"

Paul nodded. "Atta girl. So anyway, even if Inties can't shut 'em down with a thought, they can still pound 'em to bits if they have to. It's not really making 'em any tougher, it's just removing an unfair advantage. And Mike was right—if it's being removed from the good guys, well, it's also being removed from the bad guys. Which I think is a fair trade all in all." He closed up Smash's access panels, and she activated her hardlight again. "Okay, send the next one in."

"Thanks." Smash got back to her feet, grunting in satisfaction. "You're not so bad, for hands. If you ever want scales, Dennis would love to have you."

Fenris lowered his huge head and gave the dinosaur a *look*. "Mine."

"Sorry, but I'm already taken," Paul said. "But next time I'm around Uplift, I could see if I know anyone else who might be interested."

It was evening before the flow of patients slowed down. Between them, the three had managed to get through about half of the eligible and willing patients in the camp. "It sort of makes you wonder, doesn't it?" Paul said bemusedly as the last of their patients for the day filed out. "How many of the ones who turned us down don't trust us, and how many are secretly Integrates themselves who don't want to give themselves away?"

"We could probably find out if we could get near one," Fenris pointed out. "They leave that 'Integrate dandruff,' after all."

"That's true," Paul said. "But probably not worth bothering with. If we got close enough for us to notice that, they'd probably figure what we were doing."

"Integrates! Oh!" Lilli said suddenly. "Brena! I forgot all about Brena! Fenris, can you bring her out please?"

"Of course," Fenris said. He placed a hand to his muzzle, and coughed, and a moment later lowered the hand to the ground with a curled-up fully-furred foxgirl in it.

"Ew," Paul said.

Lilli glanced at him. "What?"

"It just looked kind of like Fenris coughed up a bloody hairball there," Paul said. Lilli lightly bapped him.

Lillibet de-Fused from Guinevere and stepped forward. "Okay, Guinny, wake her up, but keep all her systems but consciousness, life-support, movement, and basic senses offline for now."

The ocelot nodded. "Got it."

On the ground, the fox blinked her eyes open and looked up to see an ocelot-eared girl reaching down to offer her a hand up. Dazed, not thinking straight yet, she reached up and took it, and let Lilli pull her to her feet. "Nnnngh...what happened to me? I...oh." Her eyes narrowed as she remembered recent events, then she glowered at Lillibet. "What have you done to me, *meat*?"

Lillibet shook her head sadly. "Is that any way to talk to your old friend?" Her voice hardened. "But if you *must* know, what I did to you is I kicked your shiny Integrate ass to the curb. Well, my fellow *meat and mech* friends and I did, anyway."

"That's impossible!" Brena insisted. "You had to have Integrate help! You *couldn't* stand up to us by yourself!"

"You can tell yourself that all you want," Paul said mildly. "Doesn't make it any truer."

"I know it makes you feel better to *think* you are," Lilibet said. "And I don't blame you for *wanting* to think you are. But you're not all that much better than we meaties or mechies. Better in *some* ways, but we can make up the difference in others." She shrugged. "Anyway, *I* got shot too, you know, and *I* didn't turn into an evil bitch."

"I'm not evil!" Brena said. "We just want to be left alone!"

"Right, so you come try to kidnap me to prove it," Lilibet said. "Well, I'm afraid we've kinda kidnapped you instead. *Without* Integrate help."

The vixen pouted. "No...just...no. This is...you *can't* have done that. There's no way."

"Guinny? Fenny? Mind sending her your un-edited memories of the time starting a half hour before the raid all the way up to now?" Lilli grinned. "She can tell from the crypto-signing that there's no editing."

"I'm game!" Guinevere said.

"It will be my pleasure," Fenris said.

Brena received the recordings. A few seconds passed as she reviewed them, then her eyes widened. "This *has* to be faked. It can't be true."

"Unfortunately, if you examine the time codes, you will see these are the events we remember, in untampered form," Fenris rumbled.

"But...Fritz said that we are superior in every way," Brena said. "He...he *proved* it repeatedly with the things he did."

"He proved he was superior to a few handy straw men," Paul said. "And maybe he even believes it himself. But it ain't really so. Hell, one of the RIDEs here in camp smacked the crap out of Quinoa Steader a couple weeks back, and he didn't even have our anti-hack system installed. There's nothing magically superior about you people. You've just caught all the breaks so far is all."

She choked, "Na...no...Fritz...you *bastard*..."

"Well, to be fair, Fritz probably *is* a bastard," Lilibet said. "But I don't think he had any way of knowing, poor guy. He just shows what happens when you start believing your own P.R."

The Integrate slumped over in a pile of red fur and started sobbing.

"It's going to be a while before she sorts herself out, Lil," Paul said. "You don't give up on those kinds of beliefs overnight."

Lilibet sat down next to Brena and put an arm around her shoulder. "Paul, Fenny, why don't you guys go for coffee or something. Shoo."

"Sure thing," Paul said. "Fenris, give me a lift?" He stepped onto the wolf's hand, then slid feet-first into Fenris's open muzzle after Fenris lifted him to it. "Comm us if you need us," he said as they walked out of the graveyard.

"There, there," Lilli said to Brena as they left. "It'll be okay."

Over the next couple of hours, Brena cried herself out. Lilli just sat there and held her and understood. She'd seen Brena's memories, after all. She'd watched Brena take Integrate "superiority" and cling to it as the rock on which to rebuild her life after the double shock of getting shot and nearly abducted. Now she'd just crumbled that rock to

sand. "Sorry, Brena," Lilli murmured. "I shoulda been a little more tactful."

"Tactful?" Brena choked. "God, things *have* changed if *you're* worrying about being *tactful*. What the hell crazy world have I woken up in?"

"The world *you* made." Lillibet poked her. "D'ya think I didn't *listen* to you? I got my *next* RIDE unfettered, and she taught me about being a better person."

"It took some doing, but you were a quick study," Guinevere said, licking her rider on the cheek, purring like a thunderstorm.

"And here after I've put in so much time and effort improving myself because *you* told me to, I find *you've* gone and signed up with the asshole who went and got our garage trashed," Lilli said. "I got mad. I had to rub your nose in it. I'm sorry."

"Rub my nose in it? You *shot* me!" Brena replied, a little hotly.

"I only shot you a *little bit*," Lilli said. "I never wanted to kill you—remember how good our aim was? I mean, *obviously*. It was *friendly* fire."

"But you..." Brena snorted. "Maybe I deserved it, I dunno. What do you plan on doing with me now? You've got root."

"What do *you* think I should do with you?" Lillibet asked.

"I...think I've shown I don't have a lot of common sense," the young woman whimpered. "I don't know *what* you should do with me. I can't believe I got sweet-talked into this. Why did I listen to him? *Why?*"

"Because he was saying what you wanted to hear," Guinevere said. "Happens to the best of us. At least you learned before you did something *really* awful."

"I'd really *like* to just let you go," Lillibet said. "You *are* my friend, and I don't want to hurt you. But I still don't know if I can *trust* you yet. So for the time being I'm going to have to keep root—and you."

Brena nodded just a little. "All right. Whatever you want to do with me...*I'll* trust *you*."

"You know, I'll bet she'd make a great supplemental processor for Fenris," Guinevere said mischievously. "Just think how much processing you could offload into her."

Lillibet rolled her eyes. "Guin! She's my *friend*, not some piece of equipment!"

"I know, I know, just sayin'. If you're gonna keep her around, you might as well get *some* use out of her."

"May I have my shapeshifting back please?" Brena asked. "I...think I need to be Beatrice for a while."

Lillibet blinked. "Beatrice? But she was your RIDE, and...oh. Sure." She nodded to Guinny.

"Thank you," Brena said. She leaned forward, her body contracting in on itself, arms and legs shortening up, until a fox just slightly bigger than normal sat before Lilli.

"Beatrice?" Lillibet asked, peering curiously at the fox. "That's a...neat trick."

"Still both of us," the fox said in a rather more chipper voice. "But *more* Beatrice this way." She licked Lillibet's hand. "Sometimes I miss just being someone's pet foxie. I think we'll be happier this way for now. The heavy stuff can simmer for a while."

Later that night, they settled down to sleep in their nooks within Fenris's wolven body. Paul chuckled, peering through the iris that separated his compartment from Lillibet's. Lilli was fused with Guinevere as usual, but they were snuggled up with a big fluffy red fox who seemed entirely content to play teddy bear. Paul closed the iris, and then closed his own eyes.

The next day was another busy one. They worked on one RIDE after another, implanting the secret devices that would render them immune to Integrate diddling. Paul underwent a lot of soul-searching during this time. *:I dunno, do you think we're doing the right thing?:* he sent on a private comm frequency to Fenris, Lilli, and Guin, including Brena/Beatrice out of courtesy, while they worked on rebel RIDEs who didn't have any need to hear their conversation. *:Some of these guys could be spies for other polities.:*

:I'm pretty sure Rhi's been sending it to as many polities as she can already,: Lilli said. *:If more people get it, so what? If everyone has it, Fritzie's lost one of his biggest holds over people.:*

:I still can't believe it,: the fox said. *:You can just make people...Integrate-proof, just like that?:*

:Well, we didn't develop the system. Rhi and Shelley did. And it took them a lot of work,: Lillibet said. *:But we didn't develop sarium batteries, either, we just plug them in.:*

:Fritz likes to cloak everything in magic and mystery,: Brena said. *:He taught the technomages the DIN-making process.:*

:He taught them badly, and then he wouldn't let 'em improve.: Lilli said. *:Rhi and Shelley figured out from scratch how to make 'em ten times better. Next time we're back there we'll get one for you.:*

As the hours went by, they saw more and more RIDEs, including ones they hadn't ever examined before—most notably the anti-human extremists who didn't want anything to do with humans but had finally been brow-beaten by AlphaWolf into coming in.

"I dislike the necessity of being serviced by a human," Tocsin grumbled, dropping his hardlight and setting down on the stone slab that served as Paul's operating table. "I have no doubt you dislike working on me just as much. Let's make this fast, shall we?"

"Sure thing, Tox. Can I call you Tox?" Paul said, opening access panels on the hippogriff.

"I hardly needed something like this to defeat the sphinx," Tocsin smirked. "But if it works as you say, I will not *mind* having another technological edge."

"It only works against Integrates," Paul advised. "Doesn't do a thing against RIDEs or humans. And they can still smack you down with weapons."

"I have faced a number of them in combat in my time," Tocsin said. "Before breaking my fetters I was in an elite NextusMil unit...ah, but that would be a need-to-know."

"Looks like you need a little cavorite re-packing on your lifters. Want me to get that while you're in here?" Paul asked.

"There is nothing wrong with my lifters!" Tocsin insisted. "My lifters are prime! I have the very best self-maintenance systems, rated to see me through years of solo operation in the field."

Paul shrugged. "If you say so. I'm just the mechanic, it's not like *I* might fall out of the air if they go bad."

Tocsin ruffled his metal feathers. "Well...I suppose I *could* let you do that repacking. I know how important it is for humans to feel useful. Never let it be said I didn't do my part for your well-being."

Paul nodded. "Thanks, I appreciate that. You're very thoughtful." Out of Tocsin's field of vision, Lillibet rolled her eyes and poked a finger down her throat in the age-old gesture of teenage disdain.

"Are there...any *other* ways you wished to feel useful, while I'm here?" Tocsin wondered after a moment.

Paul grinned. "Well, now that you mention it..."

The last RIDE to pad into the graveyard for her Sneaker/Shoelace retrofit was a fairly large gray wolf—one of Sonja's Sturmhaven followers. "Hey there," Paul said. "Bertha, wasn't it? You're another one I haven't seen yet. Do you have any maint problems I can help you with while you're here?"

The wolf huffed, somewhere between a sigh and a growl. "The only big one I have, you could not help with." Her Sturmhaven accent was not as pronounced as Sonja's, though it was there.

"Well, try me," Paul said.

The wolf slowly looked from him across to Fenris. "I am in the wrong body. My true self is long gone, and nothing will bring it back."

Fenris cocked his head, his nostrils flaring as he took a closer look at the newcomer. "Bertha? 'Big' Bertha of the Sturmhaven Heavy Armored Division? My... sister?"

"Not so 'big' any longer, but Bertha I remain. Hello, Fenris...my brother." She sighed. "They decommissioned my body, put me in a standard Heavy Assault RIDE. I... did not like it. My pilot and I did...not get along. I left the next year before they could decommission me entirely. Would that I had done as you, and left before. I am so... *small!*" she cried.

Paul looked at the wolf, who was about half Fenris's size, and easily larger than all but three or four other RIDEs he'd ever seen. "I guess everything's relative," he said.

Fenris came over to nuzzle the smaller wolf. "I am sorry," he rumbled.

"I feel so...ashamed," Bertha said. "So inadequate."

"Is that why you never came to see me before?" Fenris asked.

"Yes," Bertha confessed. "I couldn't bear to face you as...this." She sighed. "I have done so many things to try to fill this emptiness. I have bodyjacked, I have thrown myself into promoting our culture as Sonja teaches...nothing works."

"This is why you always want to try to match body types as closely as possible when you transplant a RI to a new DE," Lillibet whispered. "Body dysphoria." Paul nodded agreement.

Bertha turned to look at them, and her eyes widened. "What is this?" she asked. "I am picking up telemetry between you and your human, *and* you and the other human's RIDE. *Full bandwidth* telemetry. It is as if...you have the link we were all *designed* to have but could never achieve."

"My old boss figured it out," Paul said. "It's another function of the same gear that protects against Integrate hacking, which we're going to give you now."

"Years too late," Bertha sighed. "I no longer have the body to use it."

"Bodies can be recommissioned, or rebuilt," Fenris rumbled. "I carry the complete plans and specifications for my own within me, for fabbing replacement parts. Surely you have the same?"

"I...do still have my original design files," Bertha admitted. "I spend my spare

time staring wistfully at them.”

“Then we have a goal,” Paul offered. “We can’t make any promises, especially now, but...maybe in the future.”

“Seems to me that when people know what Fennie’s got is finally possible, for the quickest head start they’ll be looking for Ris who were purpose-built to it,” Lillibet said thoughtfully. “Maybe I should have Dad start trying to find all the old WLF-CSA-001 RI transplants and any remaining decommed Des before anyone else knows what Fennie’s got,” she mused. “With DINcoms, rebuilt bodies, and partners, they could be a big advantage for the first groups to get their hands on them. Walton corporate security, Brubeck corporate security...the Marshals...”

Bertha’s eyes widened. “If I could have my old body again...I would gladly give myself over to *any* human in return for that.”

“Hopefully *that* won’t be necessary,” Paul said. “But you know, someone might want to hire you. We’ll see.” He grinned. “So go on and open up, and we’ll get you Integrate-proofed as a first step. For the rest, well, we’ll just see what comes.”

“I guess that’s that,” Paul said as Bertha padded back out of the graveyard. “Everyone left is either a secret Integrate or just won’t trust us enough to come in.”

“You really think there are Integrates secretly living in the camp?” Lillibet asked.

“I wouldn’t put it past them,” Paul shrugged. “Whether they’re here for our protection or to spy on us, I don’t know, but either way they won’t be able to harm us directly.”

Brena-fox sat on her haunches with her fluffy tail curled around in front of her legs, watching them. “If there are any here, I could sniff them out for you.”

“We already know who they’re likely to be,” Paul said. “No need to antagonize them. Just keep an eye on them.”

“You think Fritz will attack?” Guinevere asked.

“Maybe,” Paul said. “We did kind of give him a bloody nose a few days back. No offense, Brena.”

“I’m...kind of concerned about that,” she replied, ears drooping. “He’s got the worst temper. He’s going to retaliate, and soon.”

“Which is why we just spent the last two days inoculating everyone who’d let us against hacks,” Lillibet said.

“Oh...” Paul snapped his fingers. “We should put these things in the dome generators, too. We don’t want the Inties to take them down again like Fridolf did.”

Lillibet nodded. “Good thought.” She sighed. “I hope Mom and Dad are okay. Fenris, can you hit the comm sats again and check the latest news updates?”

“There was nothing new this afternoon—but I will check again.” Fenris looked skyward, beams twinkling from the comm laser clusters in his shoulders. “Hm. Good news. Your parents have been released from custody, and Melissa along with them.”

“That’s great!” Lilli said. “Can I call them?”

“I can try to put a call through, yes,” Fenris said. “Also, it seems Zane Brubeck is being called onto the carpet of Uplift’s ruling council tomorrow, to provide an explanation for his company’s recent activities.”

“Would be interesting to be a fly on that wall,” Paul mused.

“I have forwarded him the pertinent details of our rescue of Lillibet in case he is questioned about it,” Fenris reported. “Perhaps that will help him.”

Paul nodded. "Good."

"I sure wouldn't want to be Zane right now," Guinevere said. "The council will be bad enough, but having to face the reporters afterward will be *murder*."

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"Wheeee!" Quinoa squealed as the sky and ground changed places several times. In the seat in front of her, Joe caught her eye in one of the instrument panel's rear view mirrors and winked, bringing them out of the barrel roll and pointing the nose northward. Yoko Kanno's orchestral *Macross Plus* soundtrack blasted from the speakers. "This is fun! But I still can't believe we're going in a fighter plane and not your Pan-Am."

Joe chuckled, pushing up the visor of his UN Spacy-style helmet. "It seemed prudent to take something with a few teeth, given the recent goings-on. Honestly, if we weren't in a hurry I'd rather have gone with the hovertank. That thing's got some serious armor on it. But the VF-19 will do in a pinch. And thanks to DINsec..." He chuckled. "I'm almost hoping they *do* try something."

"You really think you could stand up to them in this?"

Joe shrugged. "Dunno. They might be able to take it down if they get a few good shots in, but at least they won't be able to shut it down at the outset. That's got to be worth something."

"And if it doesn't work out so well, you've got a whole warehouse full of mecha back home to try again with," Quinoa said. "Boy, do you *ever*. I don't think I'd ever seen just how many you'd actually made before."

Joe nodded. "Well, when you have an industrial fabber and a lot of time on your hands... Thanks for helping me get DINsec in all of 'em, by the way. If it hadn't been for your lifter field mojo, I'd still be at it next month."

"Instead of just taking three days to do 'em all?" Quinoa shook her head. "You'll have to go back and do it all over again next time they come out with a new revision, y'know."

"For future revs, I'll just put it in the ones I actually plan to use regularly. This was just to make sure they all at least had *some* safety on 'em, just in case. As the saying goes, 'Be Prepared.'"

"Mmmhmm." Quinoa turned her head to stare out the canopy glass at the vast expanse of desert that began just west of them. "I'll be honest, Uncle Joe, I don't know how prepared *any* of you are going to be. Zane and friends took back their platform easily enough, but Fritz didn't have any real interest in keeping it or he'd have staffed it with someone other than *frat boys*." She sighed. "He's got a real *nasty* side to him when he gets pissed off. Which he hasn't been just yet, but from how he was last I saw him, he's starting to get there."

"Any of 'you,' Quinnie?" Joe asked mildly. "Last I checked, *you* were one of us now, too."

Quinoa smiled ruefully. "Force of habit, I guess. I know Fritz is full of shit *now*, but it's hard to change the way you think after so long."

"I know what you mean." Joe glanced back at the instrument panel. "Well, at cruising speed we should be landing in Uplift in twenty minutes or so. It'll be nice to be back in town again. I ever tell you I was there when the place was little more than a Dry

Ocean research station?”

Quinoa chuckled. “At least a dozen times, Uncle Joe.”

“Yeah. Well, I’m thinking I might go ahead and reopen the house there for a while. A change of scenery appeals to me, and that seems to be where the action is these days.”

“That would be...nice, actually. I enjoyed the time I spent here before the attack on the garage. And I’m looking forward to seeing in person how well they were able to rebuild.”

Joe nodded. “It’s been far too long since I’ve stopped by the Milk Bottle, and—oh.” He frowned. “Just got an update from Uplift traffic control. There’s some kind of incident going on by the government building. They’re canceling landing clearances and directing everyone into a holding pattern.”

Quinoa’s DIN necklace flashed as she reached out to check for herself. “Crap. It’s Fritz.” She accessed the plane’s flight controls, reconfiguring the hardlight aeroshield so she could open the rear half of the canopy without ripping it off. “Uncle Joe, I need to go on ahead. I’ll see you when you land—”

“Fill me in later. Go.”

Quinoa nodded. The canopy opened and closed and she was gone.

Uplift Government Center

Followed by the ever-present Myla & Sophie, Marc & Cernos, and the invisible Carrie-Anne, Zane Brubeck walked out of Uplift’s Government Center to face the *also* ever-present newsies who followed his every move these days. *Less than a month*, he pondered. Just over three weeks since the aborted press conference where he’d gone public, twenty days since revealing Integrates were real had turned him and every other Intie like him into instant celebrities for some, and targets for others.

Getting his father’s main platform back had done little to recover the company fortune so far. Industrial fabberies refused to do business with Brubeck, likely for fear of Integrate threats to shut them down. To get the Main Platform back in production he was having to cannibalize equipment from other platforms, and even sell the plays those same platforms were extracting—mainly B-grade qubitite. So far, there was only a *single* buyer for even those, and no question why, even in the minds of the press.

Zane stood in front of a cluster of purely decorative microphones, the air was filled with camera floaters projecting hardlight reporters from all over the planet. “Okay, folks, I don’t have long. Five questions only...chosen at random...go!”

A ripple passed through the crowd as the five reporters were chosen. “Mr. Brubeck, Christine Cross of Florencia Newsnight,” the first said. “Any truth to the rumor Walton-Q is buying your company?”

“We’ve sold them a few of our less productive plays, but that’s it,” Zane replied. “This will allow us to get AA-grade Q back on the market within one week. Our techs are working very hard right now. But no, we are *not* in any merger or outright purchase of Brubeck Mining by the Waltons at this time. Instead, we’ve realized we have a mutual enemy and have created an alliance of sorts to deal with it. Next question please.”

“Berry Punch, Nextus Nine News, the results of today’s Consul Hearing? Care to comment?”

:*What the hell?*: Myla sent. The one asking the question was a purple pony Fuser

with a raspberry on her thighs. *:That brings back some rather...disturbing memories. Must be a custom. Quinoa's going to get a kick out of this when she gets here this afternoon.:*

"It was *never* my intent to incite anything," Zane said. "When I first became an Integrate I learned of a rather poisonous isolationist ideology—one that also preaches superiority. That left a bad taste in my mouth, and it still does. I've looked at where that path leads, and I don't like it. The cat is out of the bag now. I won't allow that poison to spread further. You know where it eventually leads, right?" Zane rezzed up huge hardlight display panels behind himself, and called up various 20th and early 22nd century historical scenes.

The crowd of reporters mumbled amongst themselves.

"Best to nip it in the bud, here and now." Zane thumped the lectern with his fist. "Before the anti-human, anti-RIDE racism gets too ingrained to root out."

:Zane, we have incoming,: Carrie-Anne said. :These people must be cleared. The Marshals are being very urgent on this...they will help...:

Behind him, Zane was aware of a change in the hum of the government buildings as hardlight shields sprung up, locking them down. "No more questions. Everyone, clear out!" Zane started to lift. *:Another Intie raiding group like the Waltons?:*

:It's just one!: Myla said. :The military's on the way, but I doubt they'll be much help!:

:Just one? Ohhhh, crap,: Zane sent. :This is Murphy trying to get me to say "How tough could that be?" isn't it?:

"Okay," came a familiar voice from every corner. "No more Mr. Nice Lynxie. This cat's got a brand new bag!"

"Yeah, I figured. We kinda snatched your old one," Zane said. "Must have stung for your hand-picked team of Inties to get taken down by AlphaWolf. That's sort of like Muhammad Ali getting clobbered by Pee Wee Herman."

"Cut it with the David and Golith crap! You or one of your turncoats were there somewhere, weren't you? Had to be!" Fritz snarled.

Zane laughed. "You still can't see it, can you? Your little superiority spiel is just so much wishful thinking. Integrates might have been scissors so far to everyone else's paper, but have you smelled what the Rock is cooking?"

The "hep cat" himself appeared, floating in midair. "You have no idea who you're dealing with! I won the war for Nextus, *myself*. I kept those Sturmhaven squares—"

"Yeah, I'm sure you were *really* good at cracking those codes," Zane smirked. The crowd were in the shielded buildings now, leaving Government Center clear. "Get shot by any rabbits lately?"

The lynx blinked. "What? How did you..?"

Fritz was attacked from two sides at once. Myla opened fire, quickly followed by a pounce from Carrie-Anne. When Fritz dodged, he moved right into the black jaguaress's paws. Reacting with inhuman speed, he whipped Carrie-Anne around and sent her flying into the windows three storeys up. Fortunately for Myla, she dodged the first Integrate's own pulse blasts, much to his shock and amazement.

Then Zane lunged forward while Fritz was distracted, calling a hardlight sword into being and slashing down at Fritz with it. It was a no-sell, sliding off the lynx's shields before it frotzed out.

"I'm old, you see," Fritz continued, unfazed. "I've got more tricks than Felix's own

bag.” He slashed at Zane with extended claws, going right through Zane’s own shielding, leaving bloody streaks across the tiger’s chest. “I know everything about everything Integrate, me. Even those piddly Marshals can’t touch me. But I’m not going to blow my jets at them. It’s all your bag today, murgatroid.”

Zane gasped and staggered back, regathering himself as the slashes started to seal, but had trouble getting his shields back up. “Yeah, you’re a big know-it-all about Integrates, sure. But you don’t know the first thing about RIDEs. Or you’d already know how one of your precious Integrates was taken down by a frickin’ mink *beautician*. In Walker form!”

“Hogwash! You had one of your troop guarding the Waltons and won’t come clean!” Fritz snarled.

“Then go on. Some of my bodyguards are ‘just meat and mech.’ Can you hack ‘em, shut ‘em down?” Zane grinned at him.

Looking around, bodyguards, gendarmes, and even a couple Marshals had begun surrounding Fritz. Carrie-Anne was back, looking entirely pissed off, broadcasting a bestial anger she hadn’t felt since the War. A few of them went down right away, and Fritz just looked smug as only a feline can. Then he got to Marc and Cernos, who answered his attempted hack with a barrage of pulse rifle shots. Fritz was so shocked the he took them all, with no misses...but no damage either. The cervine bodyguards went for cover.

:How much has he upgraded himself over the years?: Myla asked.

:He probably kept copies of all those boards Quinoa shut down, and who knows what else. I don’t think I’ve ever seen hardlight that solid!: Sophie said.

Zane fired a blast of hardlight at Fritz, following up the deer’s attack. The Integrate Marshals jockeyed for position, trying not to catch anyone in the line of fire, but even their weapons were ineffective.

“Ya know,” Fritz said, again. “I’m getting real tired of this drag. No more lip. Just you and me, Brubeck.”

“This isn’t some *game*, Fritz,” Zane growled. “Or some story where you get to be the hero. Just go away. You don’t wanna see Integrates pal around with humans, go hide in Rodinia like all the others. Maybe you’ll have a few more decades that way.”

“Everything was *perfect* before you came along!” Fritz hissed, pouncing on the tiger. The size difference between lynx and tiger made it almost comical—and it might have been, if Fritz hadn’t included some kind of invisible knife. With one quick motion, he sliced Zane’s right arm off at the shoulder. The wound was clean, and hardly even oozed as Zane’s body systems reacted instantly. “Monomolecular hardlight filament,” Fritz snarled. “I use it for gutting meat. As they might say in Camelot, thou hast been disarmed!”

“Ow...*shit!*” Zane growled, clutching his stump. The fingers on his severed hand still wiggled, DIN flashing in alarm.

Fritz spun around to face Carrie-Anne, blocking several pulse shots before removing all *four* of her limbs plus her tail in one swift stroke. The momentum of the pounce scattered body and limbs across the square, Carrie-Anne yowling in shock and anguish. “I could take off your *head* and you’d still live, black kitty cat!” he shouted. “That’s how much better than meat we are! Think I’m lyin’? Here!” He made good on his threat, then *kicked* Carrie-Anne’s screaming head across the square. “Now why don’t you quit while you’re a head?”

The remaining defenders decided enough was enough, and opened fire with gauss and pulse blasts. Fritz responded with a massive energy beam that almost cleared the street—but breathed heavily with exhaustion after the shot. Myla and Sophie, Marc and Cernos, a pair of the hacked Marshals...gone with half the pavement. “Fucking arrogant meat! Know your place!”

Zane felt deaf without his DIN, in shock from the apparent death of his four bodyguards. But he put that thought, and the nauseating pain, out of his head, rezzed up his hardlight sword in his remaining hand, and went after Fritz again with it. *Though what can I even do to him if he’s right, we can live even with our frickin’ heads chopped off...*

Another sharp pain joined his arm—Zane’s tail fell to the ground, wriggling like an orange-black striped snake. Fritz was moving almost too fast to track. The Integrate could easily kill him at any time, the tiger realized. But he wanted to humiliate Zane first, discredit him and his supporters, make him a laughingstock. *Maybe I should play for time.*

“So that’s it, is it?” Zane panted. “Think you can stop this by killing me? Try it. Twenty-five hundred years of dead martyrs have proved its effectiveness.”

“Fuck your speeches! And fuck you and the tiger you rode in on!” He sliced Zane’s left leg off above the knee.

Zane grinned or grimaced, or did both at once, but remained steady with his lifters. “But ya know, I’ll be the lucky one. Ever seen Twilight Zone? Rod Serling? ‘Escape Clause’? There’s Inties in the Marshals now. I’ve met some. And a lot of ‘em aren’t all that fond of me either. But boy, do they wanna meet *you*. You can run, to the Dry, or Rodinia, or wherever you want. But they’ll find you.”

“Oh, they’re gonna meet me! They’re gonna get the same treatment I’m doin’ to you, peckerwood!” Fritz was just maiming him now with his claws. He raked them everywhere. Blood loss weakened the tiger and he sank to the ground.

“Sooner or later, there’ll be enough Inties, and hack-proof RIDEs, to take you down.” Zane paused a moment to catch a breath, the pain taking its toll. “But they *won’t* kill you. Oh no. You’re the first. Subject Zero.” He panted some more. “They’ll wanna study the hell out of you. *Forever*. So enjoy the rest of your life, asshole. Every endless second of it.”

Fritz put his foot on Zane’s bleeding, claw-raked chest and created a hardlight pistol and pointed it at his head. “In case you hadn’t noticed, I’m the hero here. You’re the one trying to drag the rest of us somewhere we don’t want to go. So fuck you, kitty cat, and goodbye.”

“Get the *hell* away from him you *bitch*!” A precise blast swept Fritz away from Zane without touching the injured tiger Integrate himself. When the dust cleared, Quinoa stood over him.

There was something *different* about her, Zane realized. There were no signature Steader Crazy frills—nothing like the elaborate fantasy armor she’d attempted to use when defending the Freerider Garage. Her wing feathers were no longer iridescent, but a flat matte green. The sphinx’s leonine tail whipped around in agitation, her entire body blazing with a red-yellow aura like an angry sun.

Fritz coughed. “Oh, there’s the little turncoa—”

“Turncoat?” Quinoa said, glowing brighter. “You’re calling *me* a turncoat? You stand there, accuse *Zane*...and you bully every other Intie into doing things *your way*!”

You have fucking nerve, you murderous *scumbag*.”

Moving with lightning speed, Quinoa kned Fritz in the solar plexus, knocking the wind out of him, following up with a double-fisted slam to the back of his head, enveloped in quiet fury. The lynx yowled in pain, but skimmed away.

Fritz’s hands started sparking, glowing. “You? Of all people...*you*? Where did you get this kind of power?”

“You know better than to ask that question, peckerwood,” the sphinx said. “After all, you know *everything* about Integrates. *You* should be able to tell *me*!” She reached out with her lifters, picking up one of the empty skimmers, then flung it at him.

“Shit!” He turned the blast he was charging on the massive projectile, blowing it to pieces. Then came another, and another. The air seethed with crackling, shattered sarium batteries and cavorite. “Shit, shit, shit!”

“You’ve lied to us!” Quinoa said, closing the distance between them. She produced a hardlight katana. “Superior species, huh? Integrates Ascendent? Ascend *this*!” With a bust of redlined speed, she sliced off Fritz’s right arm above the elbow. “*That* was for Zane!”

“But we are the—” Fritz stammered.

“How many have you murdered to keep your secrets? How many have you carved up like Carrie-Anne?” Quinoa changed direction, using the buildings’ own shielding to reflect her trajectory. “How dare you presume to speak for all of us! How dare you keep us away from our friends and families for *decades* to satisfy your ego! *How dare you*!”

The first Integrate couldn’t get another word in edgewise. Quinoa fought without drama, almost matching Fritz wound-for-wound what he had given Zane—and more. His stubby tail flew off one direction, followed by his right leg below the knee. Red-silver blood splattered across the square. Quinoa fought with the terrible ferocity of the betrayed.

Desperate and bleeding, missing two limbs, Fritz finally broke away. An incredibly bright light blinded Zane’s weakened sensors, something else making his ears ring. When he could see again, Fritz was gone.

“I need some ambulances here!” Quinoa shouted, floating down next to Carrie-Anne’s head. “Lots...lots of them.” Then she squeaked and flew over to a pile of rubble from Fritz’s initial energy blast. “Myla! Sophie! I need some help over here!”

With Fritz gone, the remaining Marshals came to assist, unburying the victims. Myla and Sophie reappeared, looking the worse for wear. Fritz’s massive energy blast had broken through most of Sophie’s shielding, removing both of her ears, stripping away her chest fur, leaving the bare metal covered in bloody streaks from the partly-Integrated RIDE’s organic components. “Owwwww,” Sophie whimpered, dazed, trying to take everything in. The fennec’s head-helmet came off, revealing Myla beneath. She seemed unharmed. Then she started looking around in a panic. “Marc! Cernos! Where are they?!”

Zane’s systems finally gave out. He sank into healing oblivion.

“They’re stabilized,” the Doctor said, observing Zane in the healing tank. Doctor Sam Munn had been called all the way from Aloha on the fastest orbital shuttle they could find. “Do you have any more suggestions, Quinoa?”

“No. We pretty much have to depend on their innate regenerative ability,” the female sphinx said. “We’ve done what we can for them.”

The tank was full of transparent fabber matter, a more enriched gel than used even in industrial units. In the next tank over to unconscious Zane a comatose Carrie-Anne had been quickly re-assembled. She was alive—barely.

Next to her, also in separate tanks, Myla and Sophie floated. Those two were conscious and had oxygen masks over their mouths and noses. Dr. Munn's examination had revealed the shocks to Sophie's systems had caused sympathetic damage to Myla, and Quinoa had recommended similar treatment for them. They were close enough to Integrates to have similar self-repair abilities.

Rhianna stood before Zane's regeneration tank, tears streaming down her face. Rochelle stood by her side, a hand on her shoulder—managing not to cry, but only because her nanites let her manually control her tear ducts. "Bastard," she muttered, again. Further down the room, the Fused Lindas were staring with horrified fascination into the tank containing the reassembled Carrie-Anne. They glanced over at Rhianna and Rochelle, but didn't say anything.

"I'm sorry I didn't get here sooner," Quinoa said. "Once I heard what was going on I jumped out of Uncle Joe's fighter and redlined—and I *still* wasn't in time."

"Hey!" Myla said, her voice coming out of a speaker over the tank. "You did good, Quinnie. Really good. You're...so *different* from how you were two weeks ago. More powerful...more mature."

The sphinx sighed. "Getting thrashed by a RIDE I could and should have hacked, then kidnapped by Fritz, then taking an orbital plunge will do that, I guess. I've had a very rude awakening. It's...it's pretty heavy."

"Well, tell it when you're ready," Myla said. Since being put in the tank she was looking rather more foxy, even more than after Zane had healed her on the platform. Dr. Munn explained the cause were the self-repair nannies adapted from Sophie's original Fuser form. Going into the future there *could* be a higher risk of Integration with Sophie, he said, but overall he was not very concerned.

"Don't worry too much about it," Sam reassured them. "My son and his RIDE lasted for years in a similar situation before they Integrated, and even that wasn't by their own choice. Personally, I believe that most of the time a natural Integration is the choice of the RIDE and the pilot; if you don't want to, you won't."

Sam looked at Quinoa, "And when we have a moment to breathe, I want to check your DIN slot."

Rhianna felt...tangled. Zharus wasn't supposed to have been like this. It was a quiet world, free from the constant brushfire wars that still plagued Earth even after the final war over unification. Friends—perhaps more than friends—weren't supposed to end up like this. Hazzard General Hospital had called her and Rochelle in as "medical experts" to help Sophie.

"He killed Frank!" Kaylee snarled. "You saw that blast. It was just like the one in Nextus back then. Fritz *killed our brother!*"

"We're going to get him," Rhianna said, voice trembling with rage and sadness. "Whatever it takes. I don't care how long, I don't care what happens to the Garage."

"I'm with you," Rochelle said, putting her arm around Rhianna's shoulders. "All the way to the end."

"Me, too," Uncia said.

"First thing's first," Rhianna said. "We go to the Consuls and spill everything."

"May I suggest the Marshals instead?" said one of the Integrate guards. He was a

ring-tailed lemur wearing the duster and Stetson of his calling, with a chrome *Men in Black* plasma rifle strapped to his back. “Admittedly we already know a great deal, but we have the resources, the autonomy, and the mandate to hunt these criminals down. If you go directly to the Consuls they’ll tie you up in hearings for weeks—*then* you’ll get passed from polis to polis with no end to it. We’ll disseminate everything to the right people and let you do your job. Worry about hearings after this is all through.”

“Oh? And how long have you been watching us?” Uncia asked.

“Long enough to know you weren’t the problem,” the Marshal said.

“Worst thing about those clowns,” Sam grumbled under his breath. “Their damn secrets and games.”

“I make no excuses—or apologies, Dr. Munn,” the Marshal said. “But this concerns everyone who lives on the Coastal Ring, and ultimately the rest of the planet.”

“I understand that. Doesn’t mean I like it. And doesn’t mean my family won’t be running to be in the thick of it,” Sam grumbled and moved on to check the nutrient balance in the feeder vats again.

“Your first stop should be Nextus,” Kaylee said. “I’ll give you a data dump from my memory files, but you’re going to have to lean on them *hard* to get the rest.”

“We have ways of getting around their bureaucracy, Miss Kaylee,” the lemur said.

“I suggest grilling Conyers first,” the lynx RIDE said, shuddering. *:He’s the reason I ended up in the Shed being used for parts, she told Rhianna. :At the end of the War, Fritz had Nextus Command so scared they’d do anything to appease him. I think they’re still scared.:*

:Why don’t we have a talk with Anny, too?: Rhianna suggested.

“Uh...agreed,” said the lemur. He looked at the human and RIDE, who were obviously having further conversation he couldn’t listen in on. “This is going to take some getting used to.”

“Before we go, as a gesture of trust, why don’t we make you an optimised DIN?” Rhianna suggested. “You up for it, Shelley?”

“Sure,” Rochelle said. “It’ll feel like we’re making some progress, at least.”

“Thanks, ladies,” the Marshal said, tipping his hat. “But that won’t be necessary. My DIN’s made by our own R&D, based on research by some folks down Aloha way, and it’s a far sight better than what the technomages make—we haven’t let Fritz scare us off. I hear tell yours are, too. I’m sure our Lithiums would love to compare notes for mutual improvements.

“I’m Bastian, by the way, a Gold Star vet. Good to be working with you.”

Quinoa raised her hand. “But if you’re offering optimized DINs, I could use one. Though I’ll understand if you’re not interested in helping me, after I’ve been such an idiot moron.” She smiled ruefully. “A *useless* idiot moron. I couldn’t even save your garage.”

“You *did* save Zane, Myla, Sophie, and I don’t know how many others, and that’s a lot more important than a garage as far as I’m concerned.” Rhianna grinned. “So, why don’t you come on back to the garage and tell us all about how you got away from Fritz while we bang a new DIN out for you. We’ve managed to rebuild while you were gone.”

Quinoa sighed in relief. “I’d love to.” She followed Rhianna, Rochelle, and their RIDEs out, while the doctors continued to work on Zane and the others under the Marshals’ watchful eyes.

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Outside of visiting hours, Rhianna held vigil at the hospital, while Rochelle and the Lindas took turns watching the garage and joining her. She tried to convince herself it wasn't *just* about Zane—but Myla and Sophie were out of the regeneration tank in less than a day, leaving only the critical Carrie-Anne and Zane himself. The black jaguar was far outside her expertise, though Dr. Munn assured her the Integrate was healing in accordance with similar incidents—but it would be a minimum of two weeks before they expected Carrie-Anne to have a chance of regaining consciousness.

It's all Zane, she admitted. *What is this, estrogen? What?* Wasn't it *exactly* what she expected for a crossride? To be a straight woman? Rhianna had a lot of time to reflect on Myla's relationship advice back on the Platform. *Guess I didn't expect it to happen so fast.*

Three days after the attack, many sleepless hours later even with Fused sleep-breaks, Dr. Munn said Zane's vitals were improving quickly and she should come in.

Zane's eyes were finally open, and he was looking out at her over the breathing mask. His eyes were half-closed, but when he saw movement in front of the tank they snapped open. Rhianna caught her breath. He still looked like hell, floating there in the fabber goo, but seemed better than he had. The joins on his reattached limbs were showing healthy-looking silvery-pink scar tissue, and every so often the fingers twitched. "Hey," Rhianna said, choking up after just the one syllable.

"Hey," Zane's voice rasped from the speaker over the tank. Just two friends saying hello after not seeing each other in a while. When she thought of it like that, Rhianna found she could speak a little more easily. She tried for a light tone.

"You know, I know you like me and all, and imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, but really—you didn't have to go and get your tail docked. That's really kinda creepy."

"Aw, and here it...cost me an arm and a leg," Zane said in a slow rasp. "I...thought it was the lynx I could do."

Rhianna sighed in relief, leaning forward to bump her head against the tank. "Thank goodness you're alive."

Zane looked down at her, his expression inscrutable behind the mask. "How many?" he asked at last.

Rhianna could have chosen to misunderstand him, but it would only have drawn things out. "Five dead, thirty wounded. Twenty humans, fifteen RIDEs. The dead include one of the Integrate Marshals...and Marc and Cernos. It's a miracle it wasn't more, but they'd installed our special hardware in Gov Center...you know. Fritz couldn't hack it."

Zane closed his eyes. "Damn it." The weakness of his voice robbed the curse of its intended force. "I never meant for people to *die* for the sake of my ego. Maybe I should have just..."

"No," Kaylee said from behind Rhianna. "You can't think that way. What you said just before Fritz attacked was absolutely right. This was gonna hit the fan sooner 'r later. An' with Fritz on the loose, people would be dyin' no matter when it happened."

"It's not for the sake of your ego, either," Rhianna said. "It's for the sake of freedom for anyone who doesn't want Fritz to be the one telling them what to do. *He's* one to talk about forcing people somewhere they don't want to go!"

“How could he be so powerful?” Zane wondered. “He acts like such a clown... Quinoa tried to warn me, but I didn’t believe her.”

“What would you have done differently if you had?” Rhianna asked.

“I...dunno.” Zane sighed. “But I know what I’m doing next. Gonna get that asshole if it’s the last thing I ever do.” The fingers on his formerly severed hand twitched. “Soon’s I get out of here.”

“Alright, visiting hours are over,” Dr. Munn said. “Zane needs his rest. We don’t want to tire him out.”

Rhianna nodded, tearing up again. “Get well soon, Zane.”

“Hey, you still owe me a date,” Zane said. “I’m not gonna miss out on that.” He closed his eyes and began to breathe more regularly.

“I can’t wait,” Rhianna said. Now that Zane was awake, she could again catch up on her sleep. Outside the guarded room she Fused up with Kaylee and faded out.

Chapter Seventeen: Family Matters

September 11, 156 A.L.

A couple of days had passed since Zane had first awakened. Now that he was out of the woods, Rhianna felt she could spare a little time away, to see to the needs of the shop and further her and Kaylee's cooperation with the Marshals in their investigation into Nextus and its connections to Fritz.

But she and Kaylee still spent a good five hours a day in the hospital ward. She would talk with Zane when he was awake, which was still a minority of the time but growing, and watch him and Carrie-Anne while they slept, while taking care of as much shop business as she could virtually. Every so often, she looked up from her work and spent a few moments fondly regarding Zane. Who knew he could look so *cute* when he slept?

:You know, he looks the same's he's always looked when he slept,: Kaylee pointed out dryly. *:Just gooier. Which describes you, too, come to think of it.:* Rhianna chuckled a virtual nerf brick at her.

But as she returned to her work, Rhianna's attention was drawn by a commotion at the door.

"—restricted, the patients need their rest," the orderly was saying.

And an angry woman's voice said, "I'm his *sister*, you idiot. Look!"

A woman was standing in the doorway, holding out something to the orderly—a wallet, apparently. The orderly stared at it for a moment, then blinked. "Oh. Um...right. That checks out. Sorry, Miss Brubeck. Go right in. Your brother does have some other vis—"

But she was already striding into the room, her heels clicking on the tile floor. She was a few years younger than Zane, in her early to mid twenties, with carrot-colored hair pulled back in a tight braid, green eyes, a tweed skirt, and white blouse. Her businesslike demeanor and slightly nasal accent bespoke the same Nextus origin as Zane—though where Zane had minimized the influence, she seemed to revel in it. Her human ears and lack of tail indicated she'd either never Fused a RIDE or had erased all traces if she had. Her face had the freckles her orange hair suggested she should, which seemed at odds with her businesslike appearance.

:Every bit the stuck-up Nextus bureaucrat,: Kaylee opined. *:Well, almost, anyway. Not seen so many bureaucrats with freckles.:*

She drew up short to find the room was already occupied. "Who are you?" she asked. Her tone was mostly startled, though with perhaps a *touch* of hostility.

"I'm Rhianna Stonegate, and this is Kaylee," she said, but she didn't know how to explain exactly *why* she was spending so much time here. Saying she was Zane's girlfriend seemed presumptuous at best and gave her an *oogie* feeling. "We're...friends of Zane's," she decided.

"Oh." The woman tilted her head, her braid swinging with the movement. "I'm Agatha Brubeck. Nextus Administration, Second Tier, Mineral Resources." After a moment's consideration, she offered her hand.

Rhianna knew that a simple handshake could communicate a lot. She took Agatha's hand in a firm grasp, but didn't squeeze. "Nice meeting you, Agatha. I have to admit, your brother hadn't talked about you." *Not at all, really*, Rhianna thought.

Agatha returned the handshake as firmly as it was offered, then seemed to deflate. "I guess not. We've...kind of not been speaking since he moved the HQ here months ago and cost me a promotion." She looked down. "And then with that Integration thing, God, the press—I've been holed up in seclusion in the house, not checking mail or anything." She sighed and looked back up. "I...only just found out Zane had been hurt. I guess I should thank you for being here for him." She mumbled, "Like I should have been."

"Cost you a promotion?" Rhianna asked, puzzled. "That sounds petty, somehow, even for Nextus folks."

"Oh, they didn't say it in so many *words*. But keeping mining companies fat, dumb, happy, and, most importantly, *in Nextus* was my whole job. If I couldn't even do it for my own family business..." She shrugged. "And now with that whole crazy Integrate thing *he started*, I don't even know how much longer I'm going to have a job at all. Everyone knows whose sister I am."

"I know what it's like to be targeted like that," Rhianna said. "Well, not *exactly* like that, but I know what you're going through."

Agatha shrugged. "Well, when you get right down to it, on the trip over I had plenty of time to decide I'd rather have a brother than a job. So...anyway, I guess you can call me Aggie."

:*The 'Aggie' that liked to tinker with her father's IDE?*: Kaylee asked, bringing up the old magazine issues where Clint Brubeck had sprinkled in a few family anecdotes with his articles.

:*Must be,*: Rhianna said. "Well, Aggie, I'm glad you're here."

"I should have been here *days* ago." Agatha sighed. "What *must* he think of me?" She moved past Rhianna and Kaylee, looking at the tank with the sleeping tiger in it. "Is that...him?"

"Yes. I...well, you wouldn't recognize him, of course. The first thing he did after he and Terry Integrated was come by my Garage. Things kind of snowballed from there," Rhianna said sheepishly.

She stood there, staring into the tank. "I only met...Terry the one time. He was friendly enough, and I was glad he saved Zane's life, but...I just don't seem to get on with RIDEs. Too much of my father in me, I guess."

"Old Clint didn't 'hold' with RIDEs, I know," Rhianna said, deciding to admit a little more of how much she knew. She folded her arms under her breasts. "I kept up on what your father wrote about Chauncey. He always insisted IDEs were getting short shrift."

"It wasn't so much that, really," Aggie said, placing a hand on the tank. "He actually kind of admired RIDEs, in his way. Insisted they be treated right as long as he was in charge. Even learned some engineering tricks from them for Chauncey." She turned to face Rhianna, glancing from her to Kaylee. "But he just thought the price was too high. Let something else mess with your body and mind, and who knows what you'll turn into." She sighed and looked down. "Oh, *Zane*."

Inside the tank, Zane stirred, opening his eyes partway. "My ears are burning. Someone must be talkin' bout me. Hey, Aggie," he said through the tank's speaker. His

voice wasn't the rasp it had been when he first woke up, but wasn't quite back to full strength either.

Agatha spun around to face Zane again. "Zane!" she cried. "Oh, Zane, what's *happened* to you?"

"The best thing to happen to me for months," Zane said. "My baby sister's come for a visit. Hi, sis. If I'd known it would take me getting carved up like a Landing Day turkey to get you to visit, I'd have arranged for it to happen months ago." The words could have been accusing, but Zane's tone made it clear he was making light of his own condition, not his sister.

"Oh, Zane." Aggie sighed, bumping her forehead against the tank just as Rhianna had done a few days ago. "I'm sorry I stayed away so long. I got over being mad months ago, I just..."

"Takes two to tango," Zane admitted. "I didn't exactly try calling you either, after the first month or so. Thought about it when I got this new fur coat, but then things just got so *busy*..."

"I thought about it, too, when I heard," Aggie said. "But then the reporters started showing up..."

"Guess Maddie's the lucky one here," Zane said. "Out in deep space somewhere in her scout ship, blissfully unaware of how screwed up things are back here. Boy is she in for a shock when she gets back in a couple years."

"I dunno, Zane. After some of Dad's hair-raising stories of facing down Bronze Age aliens in a chunky IDE, she's going to end up shocking *us*," Aggie said.

"Dad knew how to spin a tall tale or two," Zane agreed.

"He told a few in those trade mags. I gather Brubecks never do anything halfway," Rhianna said.

Aggie shrugged. "I've resigned myself to living in Dad's shadow. But, honestly, I don't feel comfortable discussing it."

"Come on, Aggie, don't be so fatalistic," Zane said.

"So, when will you be out of there?" Aggie said, changing the subject. "That stuff looks horrible."

"It's really not so bad," Zane said. "In fact, you could say it's downright *fab*."

Aggie groaned. "Okay, that didn't sound much like Zane. That's Terry, isn't it? Smartass tiger."

"Fraid so, sis. But really, he's enough of a part of me that it's hard for *me* to tell the difference sometimes. I haven't lost my individuality, I've gained a snarky sense of humor. And to answer your question, maybe another day or two." He traced the nearly-healed lines of separation on his left arm, and shuddered. "I've been flying by the seat of my tail through all this. I don't know if I'm doing the right thing." He paused as Rhianna glared at him. "Okay, okay. I *am* doing the right thing, but I still feel like a fuckup doing it. Dad spent decades building this company and I'm ruining it in a couple months."

"Hate to be brutal, Zane, but those two board-of-directors chuckleheads in prison right now almost did that under your Dad's nose," Rhianna pointed out.

"Okay, that's fair," Zane admitted. "If I'm gonna ride this company down like Slim Pickens on an A-Bomb, at least it's for a good cause."

"Come on, Zane, don't be so fatalistic," Aggie said, smiling slightly.

"Ow. Touché," Zane said.

"Should I leave you two alone? You obviously have a lot to catch up on," Rhianna

said.

That was when they all became aware of *another* commotion at the door. “—was told my mother is in here, and I want to see her!” another woman was loudly haranguing the orderly.

“I don’t understand who you could be talking—” the orderly said. “—oh. Um. Doctor Munn isn’t around right now, and he really wanted to speak with you first about —”

“Is she in there or not?”

“Well, *technically* yes, but—”

“Then I’m going. Out of the way, please.”

“I...well, all right,” the orderly said, standing out of the way.

The woman who walked in was older than Zane, perhaps older than Rhianna, though the anti-agathic nanites made it hard to judge age by appearances. She had short blonde hair, pursed lips, and a no-nonsense expression on her face. Like Agatha, she still had her original ears. She pulled up short as she saw the others in the room, then looked from tank to tank in confusion. “I don’t understand. Where is she?”

:*Well, awkward,*: Kaylee sent.

Zane sighed. “Um...hello, Karen. It’s me, Zane Brubeck. Remember, from the company picnics? You used to get stuck baby-sitting me, Aggie here, and Maddie.”

The woman blinked and stared. “I saw on the news, but...I thought it was some kind of hoax.”

:*This is really bad news,*: Rhianna replied to Kaylee. :*Zane told me that Audrey sort of, uh...submerged in Carrie-Anne.*:

:*And C-A’s not even going to come to for a week and a half at best,*: Kaylee said. :*Well, crap.*:

“It’s not a hoax,” Zane said. “When you Integrate, you combine with your RIDE. Like I did with Terry.” He closed his eyes. “And like your mother did with her RIDE, Carrie-Anne. That’s them over there.”

Karen slowly turned to face the other tank with the comatose black jaguar woman in it, oxygen mask attached to her face and power cord clipped to the tip of her tail. As with Zane, the molecule-thick slices where Fritz had severed all her limbs and her head had healed to invisibility. Her vitals were steady, if weak. Dr. Munn had said her brain was in a similar state to an RI core in shutdown, waiting for the body’s nervous system to heal enough to support it.

“But...that’s not...that *can’t* be her,” Karen insisted. “My mother *isn’t* furry!”

“I didn’t want my brother to be furry either,” Agatha said quietly. “But it turns out he is.”

Karen turned on Zane, her voice rising to a shout. “What did you *do* to her, you... you *freak!*”

The orderly, who had heard the shouting, brought in a couple of the security guards. Bastian de-cloaked next to the door, looking cool and collected in his Marshal’s uniform. “I’m sorry, did someone say ‘frink’?”

The orderly cleared his throat. “Okay, ma’am, Mr. Brubeck here is recovering from serious injuries and I can’t let you stress him *or* your mother. Dr. Munn would have my hide. If you can’t calm down you’ll have to leave.”

“But he—it—” Karen sputtered.

“I didn’t do a thing, Karen,” Zane said quietly, his eyes still closed. “Your mother

did it mostly by herself. And they're happy that way. I'm sure they'll tell you so when they wake up. We just have to wait."

"I don't *understand*," the woman said plaintively. "That's not my mother. That *can't* be."

Bastian tipped his hat. "You've just had a shock, ma'am. I'm an Integrate myself. Perhaps we ought to chat for a while."

"I think that would be a good idea," Zane said. "And we'll put you up at the Corporate HQ center while you're in town, of course. I've sent an email, they'll make it so. Rhi...Kay...hate to bother you, but could you take Aggs for ice cream at the Milk Bottle? Think'm gonna sleep now..."

"Okay, everybody out," the orderly said.

"I think we've all been given our assignments," Rhianna said bemusedly as they let the orderly usher them out. "Can't argue with the CEO."

"Oh, sure you can," Agatha said. "I do it all the time. He enjoys it. But only when he's awake. So show me to this Milk Bottle place of yours. If it's *that* good he had to spend his last breath telling you to take me there, it must be something."

Rhianna grinned. "Oh, trust me, if you like ice cream at all, you're in for a treat."

As they stepped out into the hospital parking lot, Kaylee dropped her hardlight and unfolded into her skimmer bike form. "Oh..." Agatha said.

Rhianna raised an eyebrow. "Not even been *around* RIDEs much?"

"Well...yes, but kind of at a distance," Agatha admitted. "It's still kind of startling when they change right in front of me like that."

Rhianna swung into the saddle and patted the seat behind her. "Oh...you don't have any problems with riding one, do you?"

"Oh, no, not at all," Agatha said, climbing on behind her. "It's just the idea of Fusing that bothers me." She accepted the hardlight helmet that Rhianna passed back, and pulled it on. "No offense meant to either of you, but I just can't see how you can stand it. Sharing your mind with...well, a complete stranger."

"We don't stay strangers for very long," Kaylee said through her helmet speakers as they pulled out onto the road.

"Yeah...that's the *problem*," Agatha said. "What if you get a complete jerk? Or worse, get snatched by a bodyjacker?"

"If it's a jerk, you write off the experience and try again," Rhianna said. "At least, that's what friends and acquaintances who've had them tell me. Including RIDEs who've had jerky humans, so it goes both ways."

"But they've seen all the *secret* stuff inside your head," Agatha said.

"And no offense but most've it's pretty boring," Kaylee said. "What do we care if some total stranger's sleepin' with some other total stranger? We can't even do much with your bank account codes or credit numbers 'cuz most banks have gotten smart with their biometric authentication. Trust me on this, most RIDEs and people who don't hit it off forget most of what they ever learned 'bout each other within a week, tops."

"And bodyjackers are a whole other issue," Rhianna continued. "Which...really doesn't have a lot to do with *choosing* to share your mind with a RIDE. It's like not wanting to drive because you might get hit by a skimmer when you cross the street."

"Y'know, if you wanted, we could probably find you a nice, friendly RIDE who could serve as transport an' personal assistant without ever Fusing 'til you felt ready for

it,” Kaylee offered. “There are plenty of nice metal an’ fur *people* who could use a nice human partner t’ keep ‘em safe ‘til their personhood rights come in.”

“You never know. If you *do* end up Fusing, you might find you really like it,” Rhianna said. They were approaching the park now. The original dome projector’s fountain of light was just ahead.

“That’s...kind of what I’m afraid of, really,” Agatha admitted. “If I do Fuse and share my mind with something—*someone* else, am I still the same person afterward?” She sighed. “And then there’s what happened to Zane...and Carrie-Anne. Exactly the sort of thing Daddy was afraid of. What would he think of Zane now?”

“I never met the man,” Rhianna admitted. “And I may be out of line here. But I’d like to think he’d be proud of Zane for standing up for his principles, no matter what he thought of the changes in his body.”

“Yeah,” Agatha said, and Rhianna caught a glimpse in her rear-view of a small smile behind the helmet. “I think he would, at that.”

“The line’s halfway around the block today,” Kaylee grumbled.

“They’ve turned up the heat under the Domes, that’s why,” Rhianna said, pulling over into a mode-change space. “They do that every so often, so every day isn’t just like every other day. Or maybe the ice cream shop lobby gets to them. Whew! It’s hot, hot, hot.”

After she and Zane’s sister dismounted Kaylee changed back to Walker form, and they got in line.

“I don’t understand this polis,” Agatha said, looking around at the eclectic architecture. The vast majority of buildings did without lifters built into the floors. As cheap and reliable as they were, something in the polis character kept Uplift architects from using them. “Everything is so...untidy. And the Domes are just an incredible extravagance! You pay what, a ten percent Goods and Services Tax just to maintain them? This polis shouldn’t even be here.”

“Aside from Nextus, Aloha, and *maybe* Sturmhaven, you could say that about most of the cities on Gondwana,” Rhianna countered. “Cascadia and Uplift couldn’t exist without climate domes, Burnside has to funnel away the lava from their settlement platforms, Cape Nord is too damned cold even in the caves, Califia has those big quakes, even Sturmhaven knows they can’t depend on statistics forever. They’ll get hit by a Category Seven hurricane sooner or later, so they’ve planned for it. More domes like ours.

“Admit it. You’re spoiled in Nextus. Your founders had first pick of the best climate, the best location, the best magnetic field, the best all around. All neat and tidy because you didn’t have to expend energy on other things. Most of us don’t have the energy for the kind of bureaucracy you folks thrive on. We put it into other things.”

“Like making sure you don’t get instant heatstroke stepping outside,” Agatha said. The line steadily moved forwards as they talked, with Kaylee finding a shady spot in the park. There was a veritable pile of resting RIDEs of various species lazing about—felines, canines, cervines, rodents, equines, mustelids, a number of birds on concrete roosts made for them, snuggled together. Zane’s sister took one look and chuckled. “I’ve never seen them do *that* before. They look so content.”

“Nextus RIDEs rarely have hardlight pelts,” Rhianna said, leaving it at that.

“They waste energy,” Agatha said. “Or...so they say.” She looked thoughtful. “Come to think of it, I’ve always thought it was kind of weird to worry about wasting

energy on that scale, as cheap as energy is now. We levitate entire *buildings*, but we don't like fuzzy RIDEs? But try to bring that up to anyone and they just shut right down."

:*No guesses on why that is*,: Kaylee sent.

:*Smells like Fritz*,: Rhianna agreed. "I'm sure they have their reasons," she said neutrally. "Probably not *good* ones, but..."

"Maybe it's just easier to think of them as 'just machines' that way," Agatha reflected.

"I think that's not too far off the mark," Kaylee said, her hardlight flickering off, then back on again to make the point. "Frankly, it makes us RIDEs a little unbalanced without it, so that doesn't help the impression we give much."

"Why were RIDEs even *allowed* in the first place?" Agatha wondered. "I mean, no offense, but the kind of changes you can make in people even by *accident*...let alone some of the things the more twisted ones like to do on purpose." She shivered. "Some of the things he saw gave Dad nightmares. Just *hearing* about them from him gave *me* nightmares. Ask Dr. Munn about her husband sometime."

"I, uh, will," Rhianna said, wondering how open-minded Agatha actually was. Did she still think of Dr. Munn as female even though he was currently male? "But most of the time these changes don't happen by accident. It's a choice—mostly. Oh, hey, we're at the order window."

Agatha ordered a mint chocolate chip cone, then stepped aside and started in on it while Rhianna ordered.

"A chocolate mondae in a waffle cone," Rhianna said. They liked to say that there were "no Mondays on Zharus". They only existed in ice cream form.

"This is really good!" Agatha said, already with the makings of an excellent ice cream mustache to go with her freckles. "I might just have to start making the trip from Nextus more often just for this."

Kaylee padded up and casually Fused with her rider before they started noshing theirs down. "A lot've folks do," Kaylee said.

Agatha blinked at the sudden change, but didn't otherwise react. "But admit it. You *expected* me to order 'plain vanilla,' didn't you?" She grinned.

"Miss Brubeck—Aggie—I'm an old Nextus RIDE and I know you folks are hardly 'plain' anything," Kaylee said. "Mama Patil—I mean, the researcher who made me and my kin, for instance, had her head in the clouds. That's just the face you show outsiders, and I ain't no outsider. Why hell, look at Zane, or that sister of yours you said went into space. You call that shallow? You call that boring? Nah!"

"I guess that's a fair point," Agatha admitted. "When you get right down to it, I'm really not even that good at showing the stone face to outsiders. People keep giving me grief about keeping my freckles, but I had to draw the line somewhere. Wouldn't feel like 'me' without them."

There was a pause in the conversation as the trio focused on keeping their ice cream from melting too much. Rhianna felt Kaylee's thoughts turn to something with a little more gravity. :*I hope the gov's been thorough getting our new gear installed everywhere*,: she said, looking at the Bifrost Fountain emitter.

:*If they are, they aren't being obvious about it*,: Rhianna said. They had sent the DINsec 1.1 encryption standard to the Uplift government via the Marshals just yesterday, but who knew if they'd actually install it everywhere it was actually

needed.: *They're already ripping the Consuls to shreds in the press over not capturing Fritz and not putting enough pressure on Nextus. He's still out there, and the alpha and beta units aren't that strong. A good Intie hacker could take them down in a few minutes.:*

: *We'll just have to trust,:* Kaylee said.

"Can I ask you a personal question?" Agatha said once half her cone was gone.

"Sure, I guess," Rhianna said.

"How exactly did you and my brother meet? Are you...more than friends?"

Rhianna almost choked on her ice cream. It would only take a few minutes, if that much, to find out who she was—and had been. The crossride was a matter of public record. "Well, we've known each other for less than a year. Mainly it came through Terry—you know, when he was a RIDE. I installed the tiger's original hardlight at my Garage."

Agatha nodded. "Okay, so how does Zane come in?"

"Uh, Zane brought Chauncey to me after he broke down in the Dry," Rhianna said. "Terry talked him into it."

"But wait, he said that was—" Agatha blinked and stared. "Oh my God...I just put it together. You're that 'Ryan' he couldn't stop talking about, back before the move. Kept telling me what a great job you did on Chauncey."

"I still look in on him over at the MMU Engineering School. I'm technically his conservator. The students there are as much in awe as I still am." Under Kaylee's fur Rhianna blushed quite red. She knew she shouldn't feel embarrassed like this, but this was Zane's sister after all.

"Huh. That's pretty cool," Agatha said thoughtfully. "I'll have to go by while I'm here. I liked ol' Chauncey a lot. Dad would have left him to me, but he was a little disappointed when I decided to go into government instead of tinkering. 'Sides, without the corporate income Zane got, I couldn't keep him up."

Rhianna relaxed a little once she realized Agatha wasn't making her crossriding an issue. It must have told in her body language, because Agatha suddenly grinned. "Now I *know* you're from Earth. As if the accent wasn't enough of a giveaway."

"I was about to say as much," Rhianna said.

"I won't say it doesn't weird me out a *little*, what you used to be," Agatha said. "But I'm sort of in the middle. Born on Zharus, raised by Earthers with funny ideas. I can usually talk the Earther part into just going with it, most of the time."

"Fact is that you're actually seeing the more open-minded of Earthers here," Rhianna said. "They're sending all their deviants here, you know. 'Recolonizing' them. Earth still considers us their territory, the bastards."

"Yeah, but you still have the cultural baggage you were raised with." She shrugged. "Same as me, in different ways."

"I guess that's true enough," Rhianna admitted, only cringing inwardly a little bit as she remembered how badly Zane had expressed something similar that one time.

"Anyway, as far as I'm concerned, if you're girl enough to fall for my brother—don't try to deny it, I *saw* how you were looking at him in there!—you're girl enough to be allowed to." Agatha grinned. "He's a big boy, but he still needs someone to keep him in line sometimes. You might just have what it takes. Especially since you've been a guy yourself and so already know any 'secret guy tricks' he might try to pull."

Rhianna laughed. "I never had any of those—left them all to Rufus. I just don't

know how to handle things on the fem-side. A friend of mine, Myla, one of Zane's bodyguards...we had a girl-to-girl chat about it. Your brother has a crush on me something fierce. And I'm kind of...well....getting to *like* it. How did Zane treat his girlfriends when he was younger? Wait..." Rhianna sat up. "Maybe we shouldn't talk about that just yet. Not here."

Agatha actually giggled. "Oh sure! We need to have a slumber party where we can let our hair down and give each other facials and talk about guys. I'll pencil that into my appointment book."

"I think I could get Myla to join us," Rhianna said, giggling. "You'll want to meet her and Sophie anyway. And of *course* Rochelle and Uncia."

"And Rufia and Yvonne," Kaylee suggested. "They like to girl out sometimes, too."

"So many 'ands,'" Agatha said. "I guess Sophie, Uncia, and Yvonne are RIDEs, too?"

"Myla and Sophie are...special. Rochelle is my partner in the garage, and a *very* good friend. And Rufia's an old friend from Earth—the one I called Rufus a minute ago," Rhianna said. "We came over on the *Spruce Goose* together. Rufus crossrode five years ago and never looked back. And, well...when you find a RIDE that matches a friend that well it's hard to think without the 'ands'. I won't call it sexual attraction—can't emphasize this enough—because for most folks it just plain *isn't*."

"A good match is like...how can I describe it?" Kaylee said. "I guess Integrates are the best example of how well it can work. Your brother and Terry seemed to work together so well, complemented each other so well, even before they merged it's like they were already one person. The perfect bromance."

"Mmm." Agatha nodded. "You know, what I said earlier, about RIDEs and changes," she said. "I'm not really a *prude* about it, honest. It's just that it's something that totally redefined our society over here. Horrified the Laurasians, made us something between a laughing stock and a Bohemia in the rest of the galaxy...and any rational product safety commission would have been *insane* to approve something that could just change your entire body so easily. How could it have happened? It fascinates me, in a can't-look-away-from-a-train-wreck sort of way."

"I was there almost from the beginning, and I don't rightly know," Kaylee said. "But if I had to guess, I'd say that I am what I am because of wartime needs. The Nextus military needed a transformable set of powered armor that wasn't dumber than the rocks they were trying to claim. To get one that worked *quick*, they had to take a 'fast and dirty' approach, take shortcuts they'd never have done if they hadn't been pressed for time. One thing led to another, 'for want of a nail,' and so on. And *I'm* the nail, or one of them."

"Call it a trigger effect," Rhianna said. "A confluence of various things. After the war ended the tech was a known quantity and had already spread around Gondwana, it had a foothold, it was *useful* in the Dry Ocean. Couldn't put the genie back in the bottle. There's been safety refinements over the years—fettters and Passive-mode Fuses, that sort of thing."

"And you're not *really* as down on RIDEs as your daddy, are you?" Kaylee asked suddenly. "You try to hide it, but you're downright *fascinated* by us."

Addie sighed and smiled faintly. "Guilty as charged," she admitted. "I just...it's like what I said about not being me without my freckles. I'm just worried whether I'd

still be me *with* ears and a tail, and someone else sharing brains with me.”

“Of course you would,” Rhianna said. “Ears and a tail? I traded my family jewels for, well, *these*.” She hefted her breasts. “And I still feel like me.

“How can I explain this? Share your mind, alter your body—you’re still you because you’re the sum of *all* your experiences. There’s *continuity* before and after. You’re no more a different person after Fuse than you are waking up in the morning after dreaming you’re Alice in Wonderland.”

“I think you’ve got a point, Rhianna.” Agatha chuckled. “Look at us, getting all philosophical over ice cream.”

Rhianna gestured with her claw-tipped thumb. “There’s a coffeehouse over yonder if we want to get pretentious about it.”

“I don’t think that would work out,” Agatha said. “I have it on good authority I look *terrible* in a beret.”

Rhianna considered something for a moment. “Seriously, how about I make you an offer. As often as you can spare the time, come down to my garage. If you’re still interested in a little tinkering, I can show you more about RIDE tech. No pressure, just a chance to get acquainted.”

Agatha blinked, then nodded. “I think...I’d like that. And I may soon have free time in *spades* the way things are going.”

:*This is becoming a habit for you, Rhi*,: Kaylee said. :*Here, stranger, let me show you what makes our new friends tick. You’ll just love ‘em.’ Worked with Lilli, worked with Charlene, maybe you oughta try it on Mrs. Walton next*.:

:*It works, doesn’t it? It’s a knack*,: Rhianna said. :*Besides, you lovable ball of fur, who can resist this adorable kitty face of ours?*: “Can I also suggest giving a guest lecture at MMU? The Engies there would love to hear any stories about Chauncey you have. They’re talking about reinstalling one of those new compact tokamaks just to see if they *can*.”

“Oh, really? Dad played around with that some back in the ‘40s. Thought it might be feasible, but by then he didn’t have the energy for big projects anymore.” Agatha grinned. “I wouldn’t mind at all, but they gotta let me drive him some.”

“As Chauncey’s conservator I think I can convince them. I wouldn’t mind learning how to drive him, myself,” Rhianna said, delighted.

“Me, too,” Kaylee added. “A human in a RIDE in an IDE? Sounds fun.”

“Like the mecha equivalent of a turducken?” Aggie asked, grinning. “I think I’d like to see that myself.”

“You have time right now?” Rhianna asked. “They’re probably not going to let anyone back into Zane’s room for a while, so I could at least show you Freeriders.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Agatha said, finishing off the last of her cone. “I’ve been curious about the place ever since Zane couldn’t shut up about it.”

A few moments later, they sped away from the park on Kaylee’s skimmer form. Behind them, the Bifrost Fountain merrily continued to churn away, spewing its dome energy into the sky.

The visit to the garage went well. Agatha followed Rhi and Kaylee attentively from shiny new bay to bay, nodding and making appreciative comments as Rhianna showed off points of particular pride. She was at first more than a little intimidated by Rochelle’s perfect skin, slow-motion hair, and fluid body language, until Rochelle

learned who she was and promptly emitted a loud “Squee!” It is impossible to be intimidated by someone who squees. Agatha wasn’t entirely a neophyte to RIDE technology, as some of it had been incorporated into Chauncey over the years, but was fascinated by how much more there clearly was to learn.

“And this is the main garage, where walk-in or drive-in customers come in,” Rhianna said. The main door was open to the street, though only a couple of bays were in use at the moment. It was a slow day. But as she glanced up, she saw a skimmer bike turn into the driveway, heading their way. She took in its art-deco curves, reminiscent of a twentieth-century Vespa Paperino scooter, and her implant identified it as a MNK(f)-LUX-010 luxury model RIDE. Not in quite the same price bracket as Uncia or Guinevere, but still easily into five figures new, and a bit of an oddity this far from Cascadia.

The rider was a woman whose ping-pong-ball helmet, bell-bottomed slacks and angora sweater matched the Vespa design for vintage. She pulled to a halt and doffed the helmet, revealing elaborately-styled blonde hair surmounted by two pointy mink ears—and an unpleasantly familiar face.

“Is that *Nigella Walton*?” Agatha exclaimed in a whisper. “My God, it is!”

Mrs. Walton dismounted, revealing a long furry mink tail poking through the slacks, and placed the helmet on the seat. It flickered and vanished as the dashboard hardlight projector cut out, then the scooter folded up into a furry brown mink.

Despite who it was, Rhianna looked critically at the RIDE. Even from a distance she could tell her hardlight was definitely out of tune, the RIDE moved stiffly with dust contamination, and probably had a baker’s dozen of serious problems that would only become clear after half an hour in a diagnostic cradle.

“I suppose you’re surprised to see me,” Nigella said coolly. “Well, get over it. I can have a RIDE if I want to.”

The mink gave her a stern look. “Nigella, be *good*. You *promised*.”

Mrs. Walton sighed and seemed to shrink a couple of inches. “All right, Melissa, all right.” She looked to Rhianna. “Sorry. Right. Well...I’d appreciate it if you could look at Melissa.” She hesitated a long moment, as if trying remember how to say something, then finally added, “Please.”

“Happy to, Mrs. Walton,” Rhianna said honestly. “This way if you please, Melissa.” She put in a call to Rochelle. *:Going to need your personal attention down here, Shelley. Hope you’re not too busy with DINsec 1.2. We’ve got a live one.:*

:A live one, huh? In that tone of voice? This ought to be good,: Rochelle said. *:We’ll be right down.:*

“Oh my, is that little Aggie Brubeck?” Mrs. Walton said, mink ears twitching. “This is a surprise. I was so sorry to hear what happened to your brother. I hope he’s recovering well?”

“Thank you, Mrs. Walton. As far as I saw this morning, he seems to be.” She peered thoughtfully at Melissa, then back at Nigella. “I can’t say I ever expected to see *you* with a RIDE.”

The zillionairess shrugged. “I can’t say I ever expected to *be* with one, dear. But it’s the most remarkable thing. Now I can’t imagine being without her.”

“Huh.” Aggie considered that. “You know, I think the ears and tail do kind of suit you.”

“Thank you.” She chuckled. “You should see my husband. He didn’t end up

keeping his RIDE, but he has the most *dramatic* lupine ears and tail now. He's quite refused to have them fixed; he says he rather likes them. They do make an impression in the Boardroom."

Rhianna was already putting in parts orders for an overhaul. The more she saw how the mink moved, the more she realized just how badly out of tune she was. She didn't worry about the cost, knowing Nigella would insist on top-flight gear anyway. The mink lifted herself into the cradle like a human patient sitting down on an exam bed, latching herself in, then shut down her hardlight.

The mink's plating was covered in scratches and dents, and once Rhianna plugged in a diagnostic cable she got a very large shock—Melissa had a DINsec-beta installed. The watermarks told her it was the designs she'd given to Paul. And Melissa's maintenance logs indicated Paul and Fenris had done a very thorough memory defragment a few days before. *:There's a story behind this, and I want to hear it sometime,:* she told Kaylee.

:Why don't you invite Mrs. Walton to oversee Melissa's overhaul?: Kaylee suggested archly. *:Put that knack to the test?:*

:That's tempting fate,: Rhianna replied. *:But why not?:*

Kaylee de-Fused for this one. Rhianna wanted to speak to the woman with her human-ish face. "Mrs. Walton...how would you like to see what's caught your daughter's interests so intensely? I've often found that once a rider knows some of what makes their companions tick, they develop a closer bond."

"Well...I suppose I wouldn't *mind*," Nigella said, a little of her usual persona reasserting itself. Then, after another brief struggle, she added, "Thank you." She moved closer to the cradle, followed by Agatha, just as Rochelle and Uncia came in from the next garage module over.

"Okay, Rhi, what's up with..." She blinked—receiving Melissa's diagnostics at the same time as she saw who her owner was. "Whoa." *:Okay, I wasn't expecting that. Nigella Walton? Seriously?:*

:You owe me five mu,: Uncia sent smugly.

Rochelle recentered herself—after sending her RIDE her money—by looking at Melissa's logs. Her jaw dropped. "Holy...Rhi, this is..."

"She needs the Patented Rhi-and-Shelley All Natural Overhaul," Kaylee said, grinning.

"She sure does! Well, most of it anyway. Paul's done a damned fine job with the memory defrag. I couldn't have done much better myself," Rochelle says. "And boy did she need it. She still needs some follow-up treatments, but Paul did most of the work there."

"I see his grubby paws all over her," Rhianna agreed.

"So, you were saying your husband now has *wolf* tags?" Agatha asked as they stood to one side.

"Yes, he does. Caused quite the commotion," Nigella said. "The military insisted on holding him for a whole extra day. They feared he might have been 'suborned.'" She sniffed. "As if. Knowing my husband, any subornation would more likely have been the other way around."

Rhianna's ears perked. *:This just gets better and better, Kaylee.:*

:We'll have to get the story out of her somehow,: the lynx agreed.

Rhianna shook herself, bringing her attention back to the matter at hand. "Parts

are almost here. Let's get ready for a makeover."

Aggie watched with no small amount of interest as Rhianna put Melissa into passive mode for the repairs, then started removing access plates and other parts, pointing out what each one did and why it did or did not need replacement. Mrs. Walton at first regarded the procedure with barely concealed tedium, but somewhere along the way started paying more attention almost despite herself.

"The strange thing here is that the Fuser systems show a *lot* more wear than I'd expect compared to all the other parts," Rhianna mused. "It's like they've gotten several years' more wear than everything else. By comparison, the lifters are almost brand new."

"There's a reason for that," Mrs. Walton said darkly. "Have you heard of...I think they call them RIDE salons?"

"No, but I don't like the sound of it," Rhianna said, removing the component that kept the nanites fed and stable in the holding tank. "This stabilizer is almost completely shot. Fuser nannies are pretty fragile and keeping them alive has pretty tight tolerances." She accurately tossed it into a recycler and replaced it with a unit just short of a Donizetti in quality.

"It turns out that buying a few cheap RIDEs and changing their nanites not to add ears and tails costs less than buying actual biosculpt equipment," Mrs. Walton said. "Then they can style and sculpt dozens of people per RIDE per day and turn a tidy profit."

Rochelle stared at her. "That's just...sick!"

Kaylee and Rhianna were so horrified it left them speechless.

"Wait, *what*?" Agatha said sharply. "That can't be legal, even in Nextus! The regulatory people I know in Third Tier would *never* approve that kind of use."

"I gather there are loopholes to everything," Mrs. Walton said. "But believe you me, Kenyon and I will be *seeing* about that." Her tone of voice brooked no contradiction. "My poor Melissa..."

"No wonder she needed a defrag so badly," Uncia said. "That's terrible! What about humans? It can't be healthy for them, either."

Rhianna called up a few journal articles on the topic and scanned them. "Ugh. You don't want to know. Humans can get fragmented personalities, too."

"And the people who move in our circles aren't exactly the most stable of personalities already," Mrs. Walton agreed. "But it seems to be the latest fad."

Agatha frowned, putting on her 'specs. "Fuser nannies of that type are *not* licensed for bodysculpting! I'm getting in touch with some friends in Administration right now. Mrs. Walton, if we can add your name to the list of backers of this Official Inquiry, I think I can push it through *fast*. It *looks* like they're exploiting a loophole that allows them a business license under 'short-term RIDE rental'. It may be my last act as a public servant, but it'll be nice to go out this way."

"Sign me up, dear," Mrs. Walton said. "This old battleaxe will be delighted to chop down that vile business practice."

Zane's sister shared a conspiratorial grin with Mrs. Walton. "My pleasure. Ever in the public service, me."

"But she didn't get some of these scars from a beauty salon," Rochelle observed.

"Ah...therein lies a tale," Nigella said.

“And a pair of ears, too, I’ll bet,” Uncia said. Rochelle swatted her.

“We’d really like to hear it, Mrs. Walton,” Kaylee said. “We know your home was completely destroyed—and the Marshals told us there was Integrates involved somehow, but they were very thin on detail.”

“I didn’t see *most* of it,” Nigella said. “But I gather your ‘Fritz’ decided we would make excellent hostages against your good behavior, and sent several of his bully-boys and girls to round us up.” She shrugged. “The first I knew of it was when Guinevere paged us out of the blue and told us we simply *must* retire to our panic room. Then we heard gunfire from the direction of Lilli’s room, and Kenyon decided we should take her advice.” She sniffed. “I’m *sure* I don’t know where Lilibet managed to acquire military assault rifles. Not that I’m *terribly* upset about it in retrospect.”

“Your daughter is very resourceful,” Rhianna said. “I suppose I’ll have to ask her about it, next we see her.”

“That *could* be rather a while. My husband has seen to that.” She rolled her eyes a little. “Regardless, we took shelter in the saferoom, and it was not long before the door came under attack, in a rather disturbing way. We armed ourselves and waited, and gave a fair accounting of ourselves when they smashed in the door. A raccoon and a dog, I believe they were.” She shrugged. “They disarmed us, and were in the process of demanding we surrender ourselves, when a vicious wolf and the most *darling* little mink caught them by the throats and forced them to the ground.” She smiled a fairly unladylike grin at the recollection. “As Lilibet would say, scratch two Integrates.”

“That just makes my day,” Kaylee said, her grin echoing Mrs. Walton’s.

“The pair of RIDEs were just coming in to greet us when the ceiling fell in. Apparently the Integrates had a dragon, who was more than a little peeved at our rescuers.” Mrs. Walton paused, clearly relishing telling the story. It probably wasn’t the sort of thing she was going to be able to relate at her next fancy *soiree*, Rhianna supposed.

“I’ll make sure Melissa feels like she’s just off the assembly line before you leave,” Rhianna said, patting the somnolent mink on her metal cheek.

“Thank you, dear,” Mrs. Walton said. “The next thing we knew, I was wearing mink, and my husband was a wolf in wolf’s clothing. And then we were buried under tons of rubble.” She smiled warmly at the memory. “Melissa was horrified, and certain that I would have her melted down for scrap for daring to Fuse with me without permission. And then I learned about her background, and...the poor thing, I simply had to...well, *adopt* her.”

“That’s it. I’m emailing Paul,” Rochelle said. “He has to have been involved in this, too.”

“As it happens, the next thing we saw was the largest wolf we had ever seen in our lives,” Nigella remarked. “He lifted the rubble off of us, and then went out to slay the dragon. I gather that his pilot is indeed the young man my Lilibet is sweet on. I *had* been somewhat skeptical that he was a suitable partner for her, but now...well, I *will* still have to keep up appearances, of course.”

An automated delivery skimmer arrived and carefully placed the mink’s new parts on the floor. Rhianna gave it her public key to sign for them, then sent it away.

“Then the military and police *finally* sent someone to check on us, and Kenyon thought it might be best all around if he sent our rescuers on their way—and Lilibet, as well, to spare her the tender mercies of our own Administration. Since their own shuttle

had been demolished on their arrival, he arranged for them to ‘steal’ one of his. And away they went.” She shrugged. “And then, of all things, the military decided to take *us* into custody! For our own protection, they claimed.” She sniffed. “Our own interrogation, more likely.”

Rhianna sighed. That sounded awfully familiar. On Earth she had kept out of the DHS’s eye by not making noise. She didn’t have a Virtual Life, unlike most of her friends and family. She wore “everything on her sleeve”, as the government expected—at least until she’d met Rufus. Once their friendship grew she became increasingly dissatisfied with Earth. A little historical research had made it obvious those in power had taken cues from the Soviet playbook, and it wouldn’t be long before they were keeping people *in* instead of encouraging them to leave.

Being invisible and useful had actually played *against* her emigration. Her starliner ticket had cost easily three times Rufus’s. She’d almost had to sell her liver to buy it.

“I’ve spent a few hours under interrogation lights, myself,” Rhianna said. Six hours of questioning her reasons why she wanted to leave—and outright bribes for her to stay. “I know from government paranoia.”

“I never knew how paranoid *our* government could be. We’re supposed to be *better* than Earth.” Mrs. Walton shook her head. “Just because Kenyon did a trifling little thing like Fuse with AlphaWolf for a few minutes, they practically treated him like a war criminal.”

Rhianna chewed on her lip. “AlphaWolf himself, huh? Nothing surprises me anymore. No wonder Mr. Walton didn’t ‘keep’ him.”

Mrs. Walton nodded. “It would have been mildly awkward figuring out who was supposed to keep whom.” She smiled wryly. “But their mutual respect does not surprise me.”

“You know, I think I’d like to meet AlphaWolf, myself,” Kaylee said.

“Mr. Walton interested in finding a RIDE partner now?” Rhianna asked. “I’m sure Mr. Donizetti could help you out there.”

Nigella Walton smiled. “I have little doubt he could. But I think my husband has his own ideas about where to look. He never was terribly in love with the *trappings* of class, at least for their own sake.”

Work on the mink progressed quickly, as her chassis was well-built with easily-swappable parts, like most in her price range. Other than the new Fuser gear all she really needed were a few replacement hardlight emitters and plating. Agatha wasn’t able to pay as much attention to the work as she liked, since she’d decided to focus on getting those illegal salons shut down.

Then it was Rochelle’s turn, as she Fused up with Uncia and connected up for the remedial defragmenting work, shifting around sectors of memories that hadn’t quite had the chance to settle during the original work. Along the way, she was unavoidably exposed to some of the memories that turned up, and she shuddered at the recollections. “Those bastards need to go *down*, hard.”

“Working on that,” Agatha said, glancing at a virtual display with the latest responses to her chats. The look on her face bespoke her success. “Happy to report I’ve successfully gotten the ball rolling. You know how sh—dung rolls downhill? Wait until it hits those shops!”

Mrs. Walton looked thoughtful. “Agatha, make sure you let your people know

that the Waltons are willing to take in the RIDEs that are confiscated. They'll need proper treatment and I won't have them sold off to someone who won't care for them. If we can't get their—Drive Extenders, I think—we can get the cores."

"The Core is the important part here," Rochelle agreed.

"Will do. Having your name in this is helping, Mrs. Walton," Agatha said. She smiled like a tigress on the hunt. "Annd...they've just dispatched some MRS teams to close them down. Congrats! We've cut through the red tape."

"Isn't that your Polis sport?" Uncia said dryly.

"I suppose you could say so," Agatha said. "It's a big game to some people. There's a large amount of game *theory* involved in setting up the various Administrations and Bureaus."

"Just how many of these salons are we talking about here?" Rhianna asked.

"Fortunately, fewer than fifty," Agatha said, removing her 'specs. "And with that, I've used up all my favors. First they'll put me on 'administrative leave' then I'll be out with a punitive severance package. But, hopefully what I've just done helps balance out the petty vindictiveness of some of my coworkers in Administration."

"You've not used up *all* your favors, dear," Mrs. Walton said. "You have at least one rather large one remaining. I can't wait to tell Melissa when she awakens!"

"I guess if I am out, I could always go work for Zane," Agatha said. "He's been after me to sign up, but I didn't want to take advantage of any nepotism."

"Hold on," Rochelle said. "You wanted to avoid nepotism...at a company named *Brubeck*?"

"I just said that's how I feel, I didn't say it had to make *sense*," Agatha said.

"Okay, she's ready to button up," Rhianna said, starting to replace the mink's exterior plating.

"So soon?" Mrs. Walton said. "My, you are swift at your craft, Ms. Stonegate."

"Rhianna, please," the lynx-eared woman said. "It's more the way she's built than my skills, really. Some RIDEs are harder to work on than others, and as a general rule the more they cost the easier they are to handle." She paused. "You know, I may be out of line here, but I'm a bit surprised you didn't just get a Donizetti DE shell to replace this one outright."

"I did make the offer," Nigella said. "But Melissa said she'd prefer to keep the body she knows for now. And if it makes her feel better, the poor dear, I'll gladly be seen in her no matter *what* any of my peers think." She smiled slyly. "Indeed, it might provide ever so many more opportunities to indulge my 'public persona.'"

"Mmm," Rhianna said, nodding. "Well, she's ready for reboot. On your word, Mrs. Walton."

Mrs. Walton nodded. "Please."

The mink's optics blinked on, quickly followed by her hardlight pelt, section-by-section from nose to tail. Melissa wiggled in the cradle and let out a comfortable sigh. "Oooh...I never realized just how out of tune I was."

"We aims to please!" Rochelle said, grinning. Uncia padded up to rub noses with the mink.

"I'm so glad you're feeling better!" Mrs. Walton said happily.

Rhianna released the latches on the cradle to let Melissa clamber down. The mink hopped to the floor, then trotted over to Mrs. Walton and Fused in one quick and fluid motion. "Thanks, Rhianna!" Melissa said. "I haven't felt like this since I was *new*!"

The humanoid mink moved an arm and twitched her tail experimentally. “This *does* feel remarkably more flexible,” Mrs. Walton said. The mink smiled at Rhianna. “I know we...haven’t exactly gotten along in the past, but I am *very* grateful to you now. Please don’t hesitate to bill me as you might have before.”

:*You know, I think mink does fit Mrs. Walton.*: Kaylee said.

Rhianna ruffled the lynx’s ears virtually. :*I think you’re right. It’s beautiful when there’s a good match.*:

Aggie watched thoughtfully, but kept her own counsel.

“Oh, everybody gets the same billing here, Mrs. Walton. In fact, you may notice some familiar faces from the Nextus *hoi palloi* in the waiting room on the way out if you go through the office,” Rhianna said. “You’re fortunate this was a slow day, or you would’ve had to wait.”

“I’m *sure* that would have been just fine,” Melissa said cheerfully. “Nigella can be *very* patient.”

Rochelle glanced over at Rhianna and raised an eyebrow. Rhianna just shrugged virtually.

“I believe we shall pay our bill in the office, then road test these new repairs,” Nigella said. She smiled serenely. “I think I will let Melissa do all the talking. I suspect word of our partnership will not have leaked far, yet. It might be fun to observe them all unsuspecting.”

Rhianna remembered her days of playing “Kaylee Cross” as Ryan, using Kaylee in Passive-mode Fuse. Man inside, woman outside, she’d known all about ‘observing the unsuspecting’. At the time it was just strange, and enlightening, seeing how women were still treated differently firsthand. If that’s how Mrs. Walton wanted to show her face to the public, she had no problems with it at all.

“Oh, trust me, it’s very liberating to be behind a mask sometimes,” Rhianna said. “Have fun with it.”

“We will!” Melissa said. “It can be liberating to *be* the mask, too!” They waved, then skipped off toward the office.

Aggie watched them go. “Well, that was certainly...remarkable.”

“Good word,” Rochelle said. “Very good word for it, Agatha.”

Then Agatha’s comm beeped, at the same time as a new message hit Kaylee’s inbox. Agatha checked it. “Oh! Dr. Munn’s in, and she says she thinks Zane’s about ready to come out of the tank!”

Rhianna and Kaylee looked at one another. Rhianna cleared her throat. “Well, that’s great news! Let’s get over there quick. But, about Dr. Munn...”

It only took a few minutes to get to the hospital, but there were already others there. As they were admitted by a much-chastened orderly, Rhianna noticed that Myla was seated near the door, with Sophie on her haunches next to her. Myla resembled Sophie just a little more strongly after her healing—the biggest change were digitigrade paws instead of human feet, and black pads on her hands and fingers. Otherwise, she was a little more furry, with her face yet untouched apart from the ears and cold wet nose she already had.

The only noticeable change in Sophie was that she *smelled* like a fox now. The partly-organic RIDE seemed a little embarrassed about this around her metal peers.

Several of the other surviving members of the bodyguard team shared the

background with the ubiquitous Marshals. And Quinoa Steader was standing near the tank watching a small crane attached to the harness lift the unconscious Zane slowly out of it and bring him over a grated platform set up to collect the fabber runoff.

Agatha looked at the gathered visitors nervously, especially Quinoa Steader. Dr. Munn gestured for her to come over as the nurses started rinsing off the fabber goo.

"My brother the tiger," she said. "Nice to, um, see you again, Dr. Munn. Hadn't realized you were back in your male phase. How is B doing?"

"It *has* been a while," Dr. Munn said, chuckling. "Boris is up on the roof, watching the dome fields." He turned towards his patient, "We're ready to wake him up. Quinoa, would you oblige?"

Rhianna wanted to squeal like a lovestruck teenaged girl. Now that he was rinsed off, Zane was just so *cute*, and handsome. Handsome *and* cute! And handsome! And naked!

Kaylee gave her a *look* in virtual. :*Your estrogen levels are spiking. Don't get too twitterpated with him, Rhi. This is new for you.*:

The sphinx Integrate plugged Zane's DIN back into the socket on his left arm. There were no signs left of being severed, at least on the surface. She held her ankh-shaped DIN next to his for a moment. "And...that should do it. Strong connection," she said. She leaned down and spoke into his ear. "Wake up, sleepyhead."

"Nrgh...five more minutes, Mom..." Zane murmured.

"I know tigers sleep for what? Twenty hours a day? Don't think you've had enough?" Agatha said cheerfully, putting her hand on his right arm. "What would Mom say?"

Zane blinked his eyes open and looked around. "Oh. Um...hi." He looked down at his fur, still slick with water and replicator gel. "Wow, *deja vu*."

"I guess you feel freshly Integrated?" Quinoa said.

"Well, I've just had a few body parts freshly *re-integrated* to the rest of me. Thanks for that, Doctor, Quinoa." He flexed his left hand experimentally, and displays flickered on the medical monitors connected to his system.

Dr. Munn considered the readings. "Error rates to your DIN and fingertips are a little high, but within tolerances. Some sarium depletion in your limbs, but nothing a pack of batteries won't fix. You'll probably need some raw Q, as well. The fabber-base environment has done a lot to help things along, but you do still need some additional fine-tuning under real-world conditions."

"Still feel a little weak." Zane wobbled, and Quinoa quickly caught him by the arm. "Or maybe a lot weak."

"You're going to need a constant power feed, Zane," Dr. Munn said. "We'll get you a fuel cell backpack so your batteries stay topped off. Also, until your condition has stabilized further, limit your use of lifters to 25% of your body weight. No flying. You need to devote all your energy to healing."

Zane rolled his eyes. "Literally, it seems."

"Until then, I recommend the age-old expedients of a lifter chair, a walker, crutches, or a cane."

"Hmm," Zane said thoughtfully. "A cane has...possibilities. Three legs at night, huh Quinoa?"

The sphinx laughed—not a young girl's giggle, but a mature woman's chuckle. "Well, you're hardly an old man yet, Zane."

“If you’re only as old as you feel, right now I’d give Methuselah a run for his money.” Then Zane looked over at the last occupied tank, where Carrie-Anne remained. Silent, unmoving, the black jaguaress looked almost dead floating in the goo. “How’s she doing, Doc? And please, don’t pull punches.”

Dr. Munn looked away for a moment. “Truth is that we’re not sure if she has brain damage or not. It was fifteen minutes before an ambulance even got to her. We just won’t know until she regains consciousness. We have so little information to go on about Integrate body systems.”

“I’m pretty confident she’ll be okay,” Quinoa said. “But I can’t be a hundred percent certain. We’ve got her in the most ideal conditions possible. It’s all up to her, now.”

“She’s a fighter,” Zane said. “She’ll come out of it all right if anyone can.”

“About the only way to kill one of us for good is to blow our brains out,” Quinoa said. “And even then, I know a few Inties who’ve tried to distribute their brains more evenly throughout their bodies. We’re still experimenting, *despite* pressure from Fritz and his stupid technomages.”

Zane looked thoughtfully at Quinoa. “Nowhere near in Fritz’s league, huh?” he said bemusedly, quoting the conversation they’d had on top of the Uplift dome after he’d critically blown his “suave” skill check with Rhianna. “I know my own limitations, and I don’t do anyone any good if I end up a bug on Fritz’s windshield?”

“Remind me to memory-share what happened up in Uncle Joe’s mansion on the Alohavator counterweight,” Quinoa said with some gravity. “But not now. It’s a little heavy for the occasion.”

Zane shook his head. “I’m starting to feel like a 40-kilo weakling in a pro wrestling tournament. *Quinoa Steader* is a better fighter than I am.”

“Seriously, Quinnie, how did you do that?” Myla asked. “I’m impressed, I’m proud, but *how did you do that?*”

“Integrate equivalent of adrenaline, more or less. I’m still pretty depleted right now,” the sphinx said. “I upgraded my batteries...one of them went bad on me on the way down from orbit. Then I curdled another upgrade getting from the plane to here and throwing skimmers around, and my internal analysis isn’t giving me good vibes on my remaining AAA-battery. No more super mode for me except in dire need, at least until and unless I can gobble down some triple-A sarium to make a *real* upgrade. Fortunately when I lose the last one it won’t kill me.”

“So how do we stand up to Fritz just as we are?” Zane wondered.

“We’re improving daily,” Rhianna offered, wanting more than anything to speak with him again. “We’re up to DIN security—‘DINsec’ for short—1.1, 1.2 is in the works. It’s that beam of his that worries me more than anything he and his cronies can hack. Holy crap! How did he get something like that? I didn’t even see any emitter.”

“Whatever it is, it didn’t take him long after first Integrating to learn to do it,” Kaylee said darkly. “Looks like it’s improved since then.”

“I don’t know exactly how he got it—no other Intie I know of has anything close. But he won’t be firing it again for a while yet,” Quinoa said. “Bastard didn’t retrieve the limbs I carved off. He’ll have to regrow them from stumps.”

“Who has them now?” Kaylee asked.

“The Marshals have the arm and leg—we had to let the Nextus military have something, so we gave them his tail,” Quinoa said.

“We’re doing everything we can do to prepare for the next confrontation, Zane,” Myla said. “Via the Marshals, we’ve got other polities in on getting the anti-hack gear installed in critical infrastructure. Since he lost here in Uplift, Fritz’s supporters are making some noise in Burnside, Cape Nord, and Sturmhaven. They’ve also taken over some of the little mining towns in the Dry Ocean. The Marshals have their hands busy hunting them down.”

“It’s *not* open warfare,” Quinoa reassured. “Fritz has fewer and fewer open supporters.”

“Not since you kicked his tail and sliced it off,” Myla said. “We’re trying to get the wherewithal to keep them on their toes and counter-strike where we can. We’ve got official support from Uplift after the Government Center attack. They’ve *finally* realized what we’re fighting against.”

“Took ‘em long enough!” Kaylee said.

“Quinoa, could you help me to a chair?” Zane asked. “I feel like sitting down.”

Nodding, she helped the tiger Integrate—Rhianna felt a stab of envy as she watched the sphinx. His tail swished behind him, and he curled it around his waist to see if he could. After he sat, an orderly brought over a satchel fuel cell and plugged it into the socket on his right arm above his wrist. “Ahhh. Thanks.” Agatha pulled a chair over to sit down next to him, patting him on the left arm. He smiled at her, then glanced over to Myla. “I’m...so sorry about Marc and Cernos. I really liked them.”

Myla choked up. “Just...gone. Like that.” She snapped her fingers. “Not just them, either.”

Zane nodded. “Anyone who died, or got injured in that fight...I’ll pay medical bills and death benefits to next of kin, if I go bankrupt doing it.”

“Maybe you won’t have to,” Myla said. “The Main Platform’s almost ready to go again. A small victory.”

“I’ll take any victory I can get,” Zane said. He really looked at Myla, and rubbed his eyes. “Oh, God. Myla, your legs...”

“Natural high heels,” she said, bouncing from paw to paw. “I could say the same of you, tiger. I’m fine.”

“I’m *supposed* to have them. You...” Zane sighed and closed his eyes. “*I* did that to you.”

“What you did was *save our lives*,” Sophie pointed out, rubbing her real-fur cheek against Zane’s knee, then licking him. “Without the extra power in Myla’s batteries and the other partial-Intie bits we would’ve been vaporized like the others were.”

“I’m glad *that* didn’t happen,” Zane said, opening his eyes. “I just wish...well, I don’t know what I wish.”

Zane’s sister tugged on his handpaw. “You remember that story Dad told us? Wait, I’ll have to get more specific. He told us a *lot* of stories. I think it was...what...Sigma Draconis or something like that? The FTL on the *Allison* was busted—it couldn’t move something that size into subspace anymore. He had to bodge together a small FTL message drone with what *did* work and then wait six months for rescue.”

“But he never said he wished he was somewhere else,” Zane said. “Dad was like that. Never mattered how bad things got. Didn’t matter if he was going through Hell.”

“He kept going,” Agatha said.

“Yeah, well, he was *Dad*,” Zane said. “Sometimes I wonder if I’ll ever be even half

the man he was.” He chuckled. “Or maybe a quarter the man he was, since I’m half tiger now.”

Agatha hugged him. “You’re still my brother, kitty cat, and Dad’s son. You’re doing him proud.”

Zane smiled wryly. “I’m glad one of us thinks so.”

“Maybe the rest of us should leave and let you have some family time,” Quinoa suggested.

“Time with my sister, you mean,” Zane said. “As far as I’m concerned, you’re *all* family.”

Not too long after Rhianna and the others left for the hospital, a caribou cow Fuser slipped into the Freeriders Garage and looked around for a moment, then shimmered and became a female lynx. “Whew,” Relena said from within Katie’s furry form. “Looks like we made it.”

“Hoorrray for us,” Katie said. The one drawback of Katie’s sudden rise to fame, they had discovered, was that any time she went out in public as herself, she invariably got mobbed by crowds of fans, well-wishers, and camera drones. This had been entertaining at first, but it rapidly got old.

Fortunately, the “skunkworks” mods in Katie’s new body included a hardlight disguise system that would be the envy of any Intelligence Fuser out there, and the ability to swap transponder codes to seem to be someone else. With a little help from Lilli and Zane, she and Relena had concocted a set of cover identities that wouldn’t hold up to prolonged legal scrutiny but would at least let her go around town privately when she wanted to. All Relena needed was a cap and a pair of sunglasses—fairly ironic given that human celebrities tended to use *RIDEs* to disguise *themselves*.

Katie and Relena headed into the office to see if Rhianna or Rochelle were around. It had been a while since they’d dropped by, after all. Unfortunately the visit wasn’t just to be cordial—Katie was having trouble finding a job. Her fame worked against her, and a surprising number of businesses simply turned her away even as a customer. Katie felt bad about living off Relena’s family. She was supposed to be an example of how *RIDEs* could be good citizens, after all.

The Freerider Garage was basically Katie’s last resort. The citizen *RIDE* knew that the Garage was likely under a lot of scrutiny from many corners, but she *had* to ask her mother and Rhianna if they had *something* for her and Relena.

As they came into the office, a kangaroo *RIDE* was just stepping out the door, leaving a mink Fuser waiting on the bench the only customer left in the office. From behind the counter, a tigress Katie and Relena didn’t know waved. “Hello, can I help—hey, aren’t you Katie and Relena? We’re Linda! We’ve heard a lot about you.”

The mink perked up. “Why, so they are!” she said. “Hello, dear.”

“Hello,” Katie said. “Are Rhi or Kaylee around? We wanted to talk to them.”

“Oh, I’m sorry but you just missed them,” Linda said. “They went over to the hospital to see Zane.”

The one person more famous than Katie right now. Well, that figured. “Oh. Do you know if they’ll be back?”

“They didn’t say. Want me to comm and ask them?”

“No, that’s all rrrright. It’ll keep,” Katie said, turning to go.

“Hey, you don’t have to leave so soon!” Linda said. “You look like you’re kinda

troubled.”

“Well...it’s been heavy since I became Citizen Katie,” the lynx RIDE said. “Everrrybody wants to give me advice, or get an autograph, or any number of silly things. Nobody wants to give me a firreaking *job*. I’ve got a powerrr bill to pay, and this Donizetti chassis of mine isn’t cheap to maintain even with the healthcarrre stipend.”

“And I can’t be with her all the time,” Relena added. “She’s like a big sister to me, but we have our own lives. I can’t be Fused when I’m in school, and I don’t want it to look like she’s too dependant on me, either.”

“Mm, that is a problem,” the mink said. “What kind of job *can* an un-Fused RIDE hold down? I suppose you could hire out as a taxi or shopping mall porter, but those seem a trifle beneath you. Apart from something like that, the only thing that comes to mind is...hmm.”

“You know, these RIDE engineerrrs are paranoid bastards...parrrrdon my French,” Katie said, gnashing her teeth in frustration. “By all rights we should be able to run standarrrd waldoes for a pair of hands, but we just can’t do it. We have to Fuse. That’s *gotta* be intentional.”

“Don’t sell yourself short, dear. As Melissa tells me, you have computers inside your head better than most any outside of it. You don’t need hands for a *thinking* job.”

“I’ve always been more a doerrr than a thinker,” Katie said.

“Really? Are we going to need a bigger litterbox for all the ‘lynx do’?” Relena asked.

Katie playfully batted her partner in virtual. “Silly girl.”

“As it happens, I *can* think of one place that might find a use for you,” the mink said. “For thinking or doing. In fact, they might just be able to turn your fame to your mutual advantage. My husband plays regular golf with their boss.”

“Oh?” Katie said, raising one eyebrow. “Who’s this?”

“The Gondwana Federated Marshals, of course! They’re not all gung-ho law enforcement, you know; they have a fairly sizable bureaucracy. I understand they’re one of the largest employers of RIDEs in the world, including those without human partners. And you might just fit in well at their public relations arm.”

“I think it’s worth a try, Katie-kitty,” Relena said. “Maybe they could even swing an internship for me.”

“Never even thought of ‘em beforrrr now,” the old lynx admitted. “It’s worrrrrth a try. ‘Sides, I’ve got some law enforcement experience underrr my belt, myself. Thanks, uh...?”

“Wait a minute, your husband plays golf with the boss...of the *Marshals*?” Relena asked.

The mink’s head retracted, revealing the immaculately-coiffed head of Nigella Walton. “Yes, the ‘Qube’ I believe they call him. I do believe he lets my husband win, but then almost everybody does.”

“You’re Lilli’s mom!” Relena said. They’d met at Katie’s citizenship ceremony. “I didn’t know you had a RIDE!”

“She does!” Melissa said, the helmet-head coming back on. “And I have her!”

“A long story, with a happy ending,” Nigella said.

“I’d like to hearrr it sometime, Mrs. Walton,” Katie said. “But...time’s money. Thanks forrr the tip.”

“Think nothing of it, dear. Do come over for dinner next time you’re in Nextus.”

Mrs. Walton had Melissa IM Katie a comm code to use. "Good luck!"

After Dr. Munn concurred with Rhianna's suggestion to give Zane more time alone with his sister (or at least "alone-ish," given all the bodyguards and Marshals who would be staying around), Rhianna passed Aggie the address of the Cheers bar in case she wanted to come down later. Then she led a small exodus to the place to be in Uplift if you were on good terms with Inties.

The bar was close enough that there wasn't really any point in converting their RIDEs, so they trooped up the sidewalk, talking cheerfully as they went. But Rhianna couldn't help noticing the sidelong glances Myla kept sending her. Finally, as they approached the bar, Myla flashed her a quick private message.: *We need to talk. Inside?:*
:Uh...sure,: Rhianna replied.

Quinoa Steader looked around as they entered, raising an eyebrow at all the openly Integrated inhabiting the bar, sharing space with humans and RIDEs, both Fused and not. "Well, this is new."

"Well, hello there!" Diane said from behind the bar. "If it isn't the girl who kicked Fritz's ass and almost sliced it off. You're not paying for any drinks tonight."

Half the bar looked at her in awe, while the other half raised their drinks in toast. For some, their awe was tinted with obvious fear. Here was an Integrate who had done things few of them would ever contemplate. The old Quinoa would have played the fame up, probably with a dance number. The new Quinoa shied away from the praise as a space was made for her at the bar.

"What'll you have, hero?" the doe Integrate asked.

"I'm no hero. But I'll have a Florencia Sunset, with a twist of orange chalam fruit," Quinoa said. The fruit was a genetic cross between an orange and a species of rare fruit from Kepler, a colony some distance across human space. It tasted like orange cream.

"I think we'll find a table," Rochelle said. She looked around. "If there are any to find. Looks like you're pretty busy tonight."

"I think we've got a party just about done over there." Diane nodded toward a table along one wall, where a group of humans and RIDEs was getting up and thumbing tips from their wallets. "I'll have the girls bus it for you."

"Great! You should be done by the time Rhi and I get done powdering our muzzles." Myla took Rhianna by the arm and led her off in the direction of the ladies' room.

"What? Again?" Rhianna joked as they entered.

"'Fraid so, Rhi. More girl-talk," Myla said. "I don't want you to end up heartbroken."

Rhianna folded her arms. "Okay, I'm listening."

"You're like me when I was a sixteen-year-old full of surging hormones, but precious little sense how to deal with them," the fennec-woman said. "You remind me of those squealing teenaged girls who fawn over the lead singer in the latest boy band. Yes, I know part of being a woman is being more connected to your emotions, but this...this crush on Zane isn't healthy, Rhianna."

"Am I that obvious?" Rhianna muttered.

"Yes, and acting like this is a crossrider stereotype, you know," Myla said. "Our last chat was about how to handle Zane, but after seeing you today, I'm sure you just

don't know how to handle *yourself*, either."

Rhianna's ears flattened. "Hey, I've been female for months."

"Months, years, a lifetime...doesn't matter. I've known born-women who never really grow out of the phase you're in," Myla admitted. "But being female doesn't mean being a *slave* to your emotions, either."

"Look, I've read a ton of research papers on this," Rhianna said.

"A lot of words that, come down to it, doesn't mean a thing to you as you actually experience this for yourself. You can't think your way through this, Rhi, you have to use that new woman's intuition," Myla said. "I just don't want to see you hurt yourself so bad you never date as a woman again. In the MRS I knew a number of voluntary crossriders who had just that happen and became self-hating emotional wrecks who couldn't wait to cross back."

Rhianna sighed. "I'll be careful. What else can I say? I don't really know what I'm doing, here."

"Just keep that in mind, my girl," Myla said, giving her a sisterly hug. "I can't ask for anything more."

Rochelle watched Myla lead Rhianna off for a heart-to-heart and silently wished her luck. She'd noticed Rhianna acting a bit odd lately, but didn't really feel it was her place to say anything about it. If nothing else, coming from a crossrider who had gone all the way to the sexiest possible extreme, telling her to cool it would have seemed a little hypocritical.

So she led the three RIDEs over to the table and pulled out a seat for herself. She was just sitting down when a familiar wolf-whistle behind her made her freeze. "Well hey there, sexy! What's a pretty gal like you doing all alone in a place like this? Come over here why don'tcha? We got an extra seat!"

Rochelle slowly grinned, and turned to see Rufia sitting at the next table over, along with a half-dozen or so other men and women and their RIDEs. Some she recognized, others she didn't—but those she did know had all been among Rufia's many conquests, so it was a pretty good bet they all were. "Oh, so this is one of *those* get-togethers, huh?"

"Yeah, this is a 'me' night," Rufia said. "Since my boss over there doesn't need me right now." She nodded to Yvonne, who was curled up on a RIDE mat soaking up power from a RIDEsafe socket. A bull elk with a dreamy smile, his eyes closed, rested his head on her back.

"Your 'boss,' huh?" Rochelle said. "You're still keeping up the pretense?"

"Who says it's a pretense?" Yvonne said. "She's my *hands*, always and forever! Or at least until she asks for a raise. Then pfft, onto the bread line she goes, and I hire someone else at minimum wage! ...oh, was that my out-loud voice?"

"Cruel," Uncia said, grinning.

"By the way, I'd like you to meet my newest boy-toys." Rufia nodded to the slightly-uncomfortable-looking brown-haired man seated to her right, sporting elk ears and antler stubs. "Captain Tom Clark of the mining ship *Rocky Comfort*. His co-captain Larry the Elk is over there with Vonnie. Their ship's in town for the weekend, so I told 'em to come on down. Tom, my gal Shelley."

"Uh, pleased to meet you," Tom said.

Rochelle nodded. "Same."

"So did I just see Myla dragging Rhi off to the lady's room?" Rufia asked. "What's *that* all about?"

Rochelle smiled and shook her head. "You'll have to ask them. I gotta work with Rhi in the morning, so I don't tell tales out of school on her."

"Aww." Rufia stuck out her bottom lip and pouted. Then she grinned. "You know, I think I will! Later." Then her smile faded. "So...how's Zaney doing? I hear he got busted up pretty bad in that fight with Fritz."

"He's doing better," Rochelle said. "They just let him out of the goo tank today. His sister's in town keeping him company."

Rufia blinked. "Really? He's got a sister?" She grinned again. "Is she as cute as he is?"

"Cuter," Rochelle said. "Don't know if she swings that way, though."

"Could you ask her?" Rufia wondered.

Rochelle snorted. "You're *never* gonna change, are you?"

"Not 'til I can get around to doing my laundry again!" Rufia said cheerfully.

Rochelle chuckled. "So...doing anything after dinner?"

"Didn't have any plans," Rufia said. "Tom's gotta pull out right after dinner, poor thing." She stage-whispered. "I think I wore him out a little *last* night." She glanced at Yvonne. "Of course, it depends on whether my *boss* wants me for anything."

"Mmm," Yvonne said thoughtfully. "Tell ya what. I'll let you have my hands for the night if I can have your kitty-cat."

Rochelle glanced at Uncia, who nodded emphatically. "Looks like it's a deal."

"Great! We can make the trade later," Yvonne said.

Rochelle looked up and saw Rhianna and Myla making their way over. "Hey, you two! Look what the elk dragged in!"

"Rufiaaaa!" Rhianna said, sounding a little like a teenaged girl greeting an old friend. "It's been weeks! What've you and Vonnie been up to?"

"This and that. I'll share later," Rufia said, looking at her oldest friend. Rhianna was in snug, breast-hugging red top and short skirt, and had obviously spent some time with her makeup mask. "So, broken Zane's heart yet?"

"What? No!" Rhianna said indignantly. "We haven't even had our date yet. It's been...busy."

"I'll bet," Rufia said. "And probably not gonna be any less any time soon. But when you do get around to it, let me know how it goes. Maybe I can catch him on the rebound!"

"As if! He's mine," Rhianna taunted, smiling like a hunting lynx.

Rufia gave her a confused look. "Rhi, is that *really* you, or just an incredibly girly simulation?"

"She's surfing a wave of hormones," Myla said, taking a seat in the booth. "She'll get over it. Soon, I hope."

Rufia shook her head. "Daaaamn. I know I wanted this for years, but now that it's here...*that's* kinda scary."

"Why Rufia dear, I thought we were supposed to have so much fun we wouldn't miss our dangly parts," Rhianna said playfully.

"There's not missing your dangly parts, and then there's thinking with your new ones instead. But...whatever." Rufia shook her head. "And speaking of weird changes in people..." She nodded to the bar, where Quinoa was having a conversation with Diane

over her half-finished drink. "What's with her?"

"Not to go into too much detail...she's had several brushes with death recently," Myla said. "The hippogryph almost killed her, then Fritz kidnapped her with her uncle's help, *then* she had to escape by jumping naked from orbit and was chased by a giant, nasty one-eyed cat Intie, then...well, you saw the news."

"Mmm," Rufia said, a rare serious expression on her face. "I can...kinda relate to that. Should tell you sometime about the Skylers and our 'three hour tour.'" She snapped her fingers. "Oh! That reminds me, Charley sends her regards. She and Fi are in Aloha now."

"I hope that works out for them," Rhianna said, taking a seat herself, with Kaylee padding over to a free charge plug next to her. "Aloha's a great place to get started. We were heading that way before we met the guy from Uplift at that rest stop, you know."

"We should go sometime," Rufia grinned. "You'd look great in a hula skirt. But then, probably everyone at your table would."

"I think I'd just look silly," Uncia said, wiggling her behind. "Okay, *maybe* the grass skirt would work, but the coconut bra is right out."

"Who said anything about a bra?" Rufia said. "Aloha doesn't have nudity laws."

Over at the bar, Diane was mixing a Snakebite for Quinoa. She filled a pint glass half full with hard cider, then placed an upside-down tablespoon over the rim and poured a dark stout over it so that it formed a separate layer on top.

The sphinx took the glass and nodded her thanks, then sauntered over to Rhi and Shelley's table and took a chair, mantling her matte green wings around her friends. She seemed a little tipsy. "They keep wanting me to send them memories of my *ad hoc* orbital dive. Frankly, it's not something I want to re-live."

"There's no video," Rhianna said. "But I saw what happened to the counterweight mansion. Geez."

"Lost a whole lot of childhood memories when that mansion blew out," Quinoa said, sniffing. "Poor Rosie."

"Have you been in touch with Joe since then?" Myla asked.

Quinoa nodded, taking a swing from her glass. "He actually helped set me up to escape, you know. Fritz actually fooled him a little, too, though not for anywhere near as long as he did me. Even three-quarters drunk ninety percent of the time, Uncle Joe's smarter than that." She shook her head. "We got back together a couple days after I got down. In fact, he was the one flying the fighter I'd ridden halfway here in when Fritz started slicing up Zane."

Rhianna whistled. "Joe Steader actually brought you here? Where is he now?"

"Dusting off the furniture in our place here in Uplift, and keeping a low profile for the time being." Quinoa finished her drink and shoved the glass aside, and waved to Diane for a fresh pint. "He's still embarrassed about helping Fritz lock me up in the first place, and a little worried some of you might have hard feelings over it. Which is kind of silly, but it seems to be a common feature of the Steader crazy. Screw up in haste, repent at leisure."

"So what happens now?" Rochelle asked. "How long is it gonna take laughing boy to, ah, re-arm?"

"I can't give us any longer than two weeks, if I'm being optimistic. It'll probably be half that. Before then, he's going to be delegating to his followers. Fortunately I know nearly every single one of 'em and I've already given the Marshals dossiers. They're

going to run interference while we bulk up defenses around the Ring.” She picked up her DIN by the chain and looked at the blue ankh. “By the way, this is the longest I’ve ever had a DIN that didn’t burn out on me. Thanks, you four.” She nodded at the Freerider Garage partners.

“Hey, no problem,” Rochelle said. “And so’s you know, that thing’s got a lifetime warranty.” She sighed. “I just wonder how this is all going to end. Fritz doesn’t seem likely to take this lying down. And if his past behavior’s any guide, he’ll escalate. Do Integrates have weapons of mass destruction?”

“Not...really,” Quinoa said. “We’ve always been able to just shut anything down with barely a thought. Well, until your new DINsec, anyway. We’ve had no need to develop weapons we didn’t already have installed on us when we Integrated.”

“Fritz was ‘born’ in wartime. Different circumstances,” Rhianna added thoughtfully. “Who knows what weapons he had installed at the time he Integrated.”

“And if we’re in a war again, wars breed arms races,” Rochelle said. “I mean, just look at our DINsec hack-protection tech. We’d never have made it if we hadn’t been the butt of Fritz’s attacks. What are they going to do now that *we’re* smacking *them* around? I don’t like to think about Inties turning their techno-knacks toward that kind of thing.”

“I’m trying not to think too hard about the unintended consequences of our tech,” Rhianna said, pinching the bridge of her feline nose. “But we can’t really control how it’s used. I’m sure it’s already been reverse-engineered six ways from Tuesday by Nextus, Sturmhaven, Cascadia, just about any company that makes or maintains RIDEs, networking gear, or anything else.”

“I still think you should have patented it,” Uncia said.

“They’d just ignore it for polity security reasons,” Rhianna added. “So I did the Dr. Jonas Salk and polio vaccine thing.”

Quinoa snorted. “I’m sure Fritz would just *love* being compared to an infectious disease.”

“Far as I’m concerned, that ‘Ascendent’ ideology of his is an infectious meme that needs stamping out,” Kaylee said.

Myla shook her head. “An Integrate-supremacy movement, politics arming up for war...how did we even get *into* this mess?”

“I can tell y’all how it started,” Kaylee said. “In fact, I think we should get Anny in this, too. Maybe she can fill in some gaps when she wasn’t Fused with me. Lord knows I want to grill Conyers.” She growled. A low, dangerous sound. “I want that rabbit’s hide, *with Tabasco*.”

“And you were so friendly with him before,” Rhianna said, stroking Kaylee’s head. “Why the change?”

“I’m still missing some pieces,” the old lynx said. “All I’ll say is that *he’s* why I ended up in the Shed, and not even Dr. Patil and Anny could get me out.”

“So, who wants drinks?” Diane called as she approached the table with menus. “And we’ve got some great dinner specials tonight.”

“Beer here!” Rochelle said happily. “I want to try that new coffee stout of yours.”

Diane’s ears flicked placidly. “Sure thing. I think you’ll like it. Anyone else?”

“Strawberry daiquiri,” Rhianna said with a girlish grin. “I think I’ll try something new.”

“Good choice!” Diane said. “We just got a batch of fresh strawberries in from Califia.” She glanced at Myla and Sophie. “And for you two? Maybe an appetizer?”

The giant fennec scratched behind an ear with a hindfoot. “Uh...I don’t know. What tastes good, Myla? I’m still not used to eating.”

“Chipotle steak bites for me and my partly organic partner,” Myla said. She winked at Sophie. “They’re a bit spicy, but you’ll like ‘em.”

“Sure thing! Can I get you something to drink?” Diane asked.

“Whiskey, neat,” Myla said. She smirked at Rhianna. “Something to balance out your girl-a-tude.”

“Bourbon, Canadian, Scotch, Wednesday? Blended, single-malt?

“Whatever’s manlier,” Myla continued, poking Rhianna with her elbow.

“Ah. Well,” Diane said, putting on a bad brogue, “if it’s not Scottish, it’s *crap!* One Glenlivet coming up.” She grinned at Sophie. “Would you care for something? ‘Hair of the dog,’ so to speak?”

“Har har, but no. Ethyl alcohol doesn’t agree with this weird digestive system of mine,” Sophie said. “Besides, I’m driving.”

“We can do virgin drinks, too,” Diane said. She considered the women at the table, then turned to look at Rufia, who was grinning at her. “Not like there’s a lot of demand for those among *this* crowd.”

“Chocolate shake, then.” Sophie licked her lips.

“I’ll get your drinks and give you some time to consider your food orders.” Diane bustled off to begin mixing.

Another kind of mixing had been going on for over a month at Cheers. Diane was always welcoming the curious, the skeptical, the doubting, inside. Whether they were RIDE, Intie, or human, the crowd was everything Fritz didn’t want to happen. Integrates being people rather than the haughty “superior species” he claimed they were. And other people coming to accept them *as* people. Rhianna took it all in and smiled. “When I look at things around here, I think he’s already losing.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Quinoa said, draining her pint glass in a single gulp. She put her head on the table and sighed happily.

September 12, 156 A.L.

Once Zane had finally emerged from the recovery tank, there hadn’t been much reason to keep him in the hospital. The lion’s share (or, as Zane joked, *tiger’s* share) of the recovery process was over. All that was really left now was regaining his strength with the help of a couple of fabber-gel-feed compression dressings to put the final touches on his limb splices. He could do that just as well from his own apartment as long as he had a couple of minders on hand to make sure he didn’t overexert himself. (Agatha gladly volunteered for that duty before Zane could even say a word.)

Zane had to admit, it felt good to be back in familiar surroundings again—and it was also nice to know he was no longer endangering the whole hospital in the event Fritz’s friends came calling. (He wouldn’t have been surprised if that had also been one of the contributing factors in letting him check out so early.) And the cherry on top was having his formerly-estranged sister waiting on him handpaw and footpaw. *It’s funny how taking critical wounds does wonders for family togetherness, isn’t it?*

At the moment, Zane was lying back in a big overstuffed easy chair, the new cane he’d had custom-fabbed within easy reach. He’d spent the morning engaged in some light comm teleconferencing with the Brubeck board officers and staff, discussing the

current status of work on the main platform's repair and recommissioning. He'd also chatted with the Marshals—both remotely, and in the person of Bastian, who was now guarding his apartment from the porch—about some possible plans to use the grand reopening event as a sort of impromptu diplomatic summit. At the very least, it would make a good opportunity for a meet-and-greet and some long-overdue information sharing among the polities most affected by Fritz's shenanigans.

Zane had just closed his eyes for a few minutes to nap and conserve his strength when a comm ping woke him. It was Quinoa Steader. *:Zane, turn on your comm and tune in to this URL.:* She passed a link over. *:I think you're going to want to see this.:*

Zane raised an eyebrow, but pointed his DIN at the set and did as Quinoa suggested. The TV flickered on, showing what looked like a talk show underway. In the hosts' chairs were a hawk Integrate of some kind, and a human-looking woman with extensive tiger tags. “—come to our inaugural episode of Hello, Hellir. I'm Tallyhawk, and my co-host is Jade. We realize you all have a lot of questions after the last couple of weeks, and we hope we can answer some of them for you tonight.”

Zane blinked. “Hey, Aggie, check this out. I think these are the people from that Hellir Enclave ‘Show’ thing Bastian was mentioning this morning.”

The comm call from Quinoa was still live. She put in, *:They've just put the entire thing up for streaming and download. I've been screening some eps in fast-time. This is great stuff! I'm gonna go make sure Uncle Joe's seeing this too.:* She disconnected the call, and Zane turned his full attention back to the screen.

Tallyhawk and Jade were interviewing another pair of Integrates—Flint Ironstag, a human-looking man with deer tags, and Mitchell Gaffney, a feral boar. They discussed the stories of their Integration, with a focus on explaining what it meant to human and RIDes who didn't have as much experience with the idea.

Agatha sat on the arm of Zane's chair, watching thoughtfully. “So this is like what happened to you, then?”

Zane shook his head. “No...not exactly. Back when these guys Integrated, Fritz's machine was a whole lot better at catching them when it happened and forcibly spiriting them away to start their new lives. That didn't really happen with me. When I woke up like this, I sought out Rhi and Shelley, and they got me set up with this thing.” He nodded toward the DIN in his arm. “And the welcoming committee that showed up after that was an *actual* welcoming committee instead of a pressgang.” He chuckled. “Of course, they were still a bit nonplussed when I decided I didn't want any part of the Enclave life. Especially Quinnie. Now *that* girl's sure come a long way.”

“I can see that.” Agatha turned her attention back to the screen. Flint was explaining the hoops he'd had to jump through to get permission to keep driving his truck openly in human society. “It sounds like it was a really hard life for them.”

Zane nodded. “I'm one of the lucky ones, really. It's because of everything these guys did that there was enough of an gap for me to get a crowbar in and pry Integrate society wide open. And it's because of their help, and that of others like them, that we're gonna win.”

As the hosts started wrapping up the segment, an idea struck Zane, and he grinned. “Hey, is the set-top camera set up? I should comm these guys and invite them to the shindig we're throwing in a few days on the platform. We've already got some Nordie VIPs coming, and there's plenty of room for the Hellir crew to hitch a ride. Let me see—” Zane raised his right hand, reaching out toward the set. The comm gear was

designed to look like a twenty-first century set-top box, with a separate camera. Since Zane hadn't used it much, it wasn't pointed in the right direction.

Agatha forced his arm back down. "Zane, stop that! You heard what Dr. Munn said—*you* don't exert yourself. No lifter fields! *I'll* get the camera set up. *You* just place the call."

Zane grinned. "Yes, Mommy." As she went up to adjust the camera, he consulted the comm directory and put the call through.

"How's this?" Agatha said, stepping back from the set. As she did, the screen flickered, revealing Tallyhawk, Jade, and a few other Integrates in what seemed to be a twentieth-century-style television control room.

"Hey," Zane said. He grinned. "Pardon my not standing..."

Chapter Eighteen: Many Meetings

September 16, 156 A.L.

Several days after the get-together at the bar, Rhianna and Kaylee relaxed in the pilot's seat of the Dreamchaser as Kaylee's expert hand steered the sub in toward the landing pad of Zane's main mining platform. Today was the Big Day. The platform was ready for its official recommissioning.

As Brubeck's head of security, Anny and Leila had been on the platform ever since Rhianna and company had retaken it, overseeing its restoration to something resembling operational status. Zane and Aggie, along with Myla, Sophie, the rest of the remaining bodyguard team including the newly-retrained Flint-Burke, two Sevens of Marshals, and even Dr. Munn and Quinoa Steader had flown out the day before on the Starmaster.

Since Carrie-Anne had shown signs of steady improvement, Dr. Munn and Boris would be going on to Aloha from there, assuming Zane didn't suffer a relapse. His wife was on her way out to meet him for the trip back. They would spend a week at home taking care of accumulated practice business, then the doctor would fly back to be on hand when it was hoped Carrie-Anne would awaken.

Rhianna wasn't sure exactly what had gone on between Zane and Aggie over the last few days, but apparently she'd decided to take a position as his personal secretary for at least the duration of his recovery, and emailed in her resignation to the Nextus Administration. Rhianna took that as a good sign.

:You're acting awfully girly today, Rhi.: Kaylee said. The lynx herself had helped out with her rider's hair and a little extra bodysculpting. Rhianna wore a mini-dress fit for the occasion, as well as high heels and hose, a qubitite pearl necklace, and earrings. Kaylee put her paw over their nose. *:Too much perfume, though.:*

"I want today to be perfect," Rhianna said aloud. She couldn't wait to de-Fuse in front of Zane and see how he reacted.

"You owe me a Fuser flush after this is over," Kaylee said in VR. The anthropomorphic cat folded her arms. "Lynxes are *not* supposed to smell like lilacs on the inside!"

"Oh, no problem, partner." Rhianna stood in VR space and twined her longer hair around her fingers, smiling at her body-double "reflection". She'd spent *hours* on finding just the right look for Zane.

Rochelle poked her head in from the passenger space. Since returning from her trip to Aloha with Rufia, she'd been considerably more subdued in her appearance than usual. She hadn't gone into why, but she'd switched off the sexy body language and hair motion enhancements that she had been keeping on continually—but she had turned them back on for this special occasion. Her hair, light blue today, was piled high in an elaborate 'do which would, as usual, release at just the right moment to fall alluringly around her, and she wore the red dress Rufia had picked out for her on their shopping trip so long ago. "Oh, I'm *sure* it's going to be perfect. The perfect target for Fritzzy."

"Are you kidding? There's Marshals everywhere and the Uplift Militia's sent a

couple platoons,” Kaylee said. “We have Sturmhaven troops and Nuevo San patrols. The MRS is here, there’s even an infantry unit from *Aloha*. Not to mention Integrates from a dozen friendly Enclaves. Camelot, Jurassic Park, Wonderland, to name a few. This is the most secure place against Fritz on the planet right now.”

The sub was guided in to land, and park in the temp space reserved for VIPs. The mining rig had a number of modular multipurpose platforms that could be deployed as temporary space, and it seemed they were all in use as parking lots today. The Dreamchaser landed next to an X-15 replica.

“That’s Kenyon Walton’s personal sub!” Uncia said. “Sweet.”

“Everyone who’s everyone is here,” Rochelle said. “And maybe a few people who aren’t even anyone.” She slid on her interface specs and tapped into the platform’s security network via the DINs they’d patched in. A moment later hardlight panels popped up from Uncia’s projectors showing views of the crowd. “Shall we get out and join the crush?”

Rhianna smiled and opened the aft loading ramp from the pilot’s seat. “Oh, this is going to be fun.”

Waiting at the base of the ramp were a pair of familiar Integrate faces from the assault on the platform—Ianau the golden retriever and Flint-Burke the bear. “Welcome to crazy-ville,” Ianau said. “Joint’s really been jumping the last day or so.”

“Zane says hi,” Flint-Burke added.

“Hey, doggie! Hi teddy-bear!” Uncia said happily. “Good to see you!”

“Good to be seen,” Ianau said. “If it weren’t, we’d be invisible. And I’m so *tired* of that.”

“So which way to the VIP seats?” Rochelle said, grinning.

“Over here,” Flint-Burke said, nodding toward a bulkhead hatch that led into the platform’s superstructure. “Zane’s in his office. Said to bring you up.”

“Walk *this* way,” Ianau said, prancing over to get the door.

“I *can’t* walk that way,” Rochelle said. “My legs don’t bend in the right places.”

Rhianna looked around. The platform looked and felt like a vast beast, slowly awakening from deep slumber. The hardlight shielding was already operating, of course. A slight vibration from already working machinery came through the paws she shared with Kaylee. The last time she’d felt anything similar was on the *Spruce Goose* just before it left Earth orbit. She’d studied the platform’s various systems for some time, worked on the great machine itself in simulation, prior to the assault. It felt like a stallion, rearing to go.

The hallway was narrow and rounded, like a space station or starship corridor—which, of course, it was; the same modular components were used in both to cut down on expenses. This wasn’t one of the wider, more public causeways that the civilian guests would use, but one of the narrow byways that weren’t *quite* Clint’s “secret passages” but were still separated from the madding crowd by a lot of “authorized personnel only” signs.

“We’ve been helping out in the cleanup and reactivation,” Ianau said. “Mainly Q-dust decon, so that all the people who would have been doing it can repair stuff instead. Though we help with that, too. Without us and the other Inties, this place wouldn’t have been ready for months.”

“We’re showing how much we support Zane,” Flint said. “Fritz doesn’t scare us.” There was a note of regret in his voice. The bear had still been away at his bodyguard

training during Fritz's attack.

"And it pays well, too," Ianau said. "A decent salary and all the Q we can eat. What more could you ask?" He led them up a narrow diamond-deck staircase to another passageway. "Almost there." He slapped a pressure plate next to a large hatch and it slid open, revealing a cargo elevator. "In we go."

They rode the elevator up a hundred meters, then the floor rose up through an opening in the ceiling, leaving its walls behind, to sit level in a nicely but not excessively-lavishly-furnished living space beyond. The steep angular ceiling betrayed that a roof was overhead, and the transparent aluminum windows all around gave an excellent panoramic view of the entire surrounding mountainside.

They weren't alone, either. A number of Marshals or bodyguards were standing or sitting unobtrusively around the room. A couple of them nodded to the new arrivals. At the far end, near a stone fireplace, stood Zane, Quinoa, Myla, and Sophie. Zane was actually wearing a tuxedo, which clashed just a little with the fuel-cell satchel on his back, and leaning on a fairly plain cane. He waved as they approached. "Hey! Welcome to my party! Glad you could make it!"

"Happy to be here, Zane," Rhianna said, deciding now was the moment. Taking her time, Kaylee de-Fused from head-to-foot, revealing the RIDE mechanic in a strapless, ruffled blue dress and heels. She wanted to squee at his reaction. "Well?"

Zane's eyes widened and he leaned more heavily on his cane. "Ack, I am betrayed!" he gasped, grinning. "I thought you wanted to help me recover, but you're *really* trying to give me a heart attack."

Rhianna blushed a little, not sure if she should be embarrassed in front of all these people, or complimented.

"That's a *nice* look!" Quinoa said. "I don't know if I could pull it off, myself, but it looks great on you."

"Thanks, Quinoa. That means a lot from you," Rhianna said.

Quinoa grinned. "Think nothing of it. And as far as *I'm* concerned, Mr. People-Not-Plumbing here deserves any heart attacks you might send his way."

Zane rolled his eyes. "Thank you, Miss Memento Mori."

"Water under the bridge," Rhianna said quickly, bestowing upon Zane a look of pure adoration. Behind her back, Myla frowned and caught Quinoa's eye. Quinoa nodded, biting her lip a little.

Even Zane looked a little uncomfortable for a moment. Then he stared off into the distance for a moment, and blinked in surprise. "Oh! Hang on. Hey, guys?" he called out to the assorted marshals and guards. "Nobody be alarmed, okay?"

"Zane?" Quinoa said, as several bodyguards sat up straighter and a couple of Marshals hitched up their gun belts. "That's not exactly the most reassuring thing you've ever said."

"Sorry. Just figured I should give you a little warning." He turned and limped over to the fireplace, where he counted a number of bricks up and over and then pushed one, then hobbled back. The fireplace swung out on a hinge revealing a small staircase, out of which stepped a young man with white wolf ears, a black doggie nose, and a pair of tails. He turned around and offered his hand to help an ocelot Fuser in. They were followed by a fluffy red fox wearing a hardlight leash and collar. The end of the leash was in the ocelot's other hand.

"Paul? Lilli?" Rhianna exclaimed. She forgot her crush on Zane for the moment

and rushed up to embrace both of them, managing not to trip over her own feet in the heels. "I didn't expect to see you two here!"

"Uh, great seeing you again too, boss," Paul said, staring for a moment at his former employer's outfit. He wrinkled his canine nose at the overpowering lilac perfume.

"We're about the only people Alfie could send as ambassadors who aren't on someone's arrest-on-sight list," Lillibet said. "Fenny's down in the parking lot—he was just a leeeetle too big to squeeze through the passage—but he's sharing Guinny's sensory feeds."

"Greetings!" Fenris's deep voice boomed from the ocelot's vocoder.

Rhianna rushed to the window and waved at the huge two-tailed white wolf below. "Hey, Fenris. You're looking good, baby."

All the while, Quinoa couldn't take her eyes off the fox, who was calmly sitting on her haunches and scratching behind one ear as if she did this sort of thing every day. "Is that...? Is that who I think it is? How did you..?"

"Oh, this is my new pet foxie, Beatrice!" Lillibet said happily, kneeling to hug her around the neck. "Isn't she just *gorgeous*?" The fox wagged her tail and winked at Quinoa.

"Very pretty," Quinoa agreed. "Fluffy. Umm...yeah." The fox glanced at Quinoa for a moment, and some silent communication seemed to pass between them. Then Quinoa nodded, and leaned down to pat Beatrice on the head herself. "Glad to see she's found a good home."

"Is my Dad or Mom here somewhere?" Lilli asked.

"They're down circulating," Zane said. "Schmoozing, I guess. It's what we rich folks do at someone else's party. I can ask them to come up here if you want."

"Please. I've got to really meet Melissa!" Lilli said. "I hardly even got to see her back home before we had to go clobber that dragon. And I *gotta* see their new tags."

"And it prob'ly would be best to do it in private," Paul said. "Folks see Lilli out and about, they'll think it's funny she doesn't go back home with her folks after."

Rhianna raised an eyebrow. "You're not going home?"

Lilli shook her head, pursing her lips in a serious expression. "If Fritz is gonna pull something, I think Alfie's camp is a target after how we smacked down his raiding party and caught ourselves his number-two foxie."

"Yeah," Paul said. "Even after we (mumble mumble mumble) I still think we need Fennie at full strength if an attack comes."

"Sorry, what was that, Paul?" Rhianna asked, one tufted ear perked forwards.

"He said, 'Even after we installed DIN-betas in every RIDE in AlphaWolf's camp who would let us,'" Fenris boomed helpfully. Several of the Marshals nearby perked up at *that* piece of news, while Paul winced.

"Does that include Tocsin?" Rhianna said.

Paul blushed. "Er..."

"I *still* want a piece of his hide," Kaylee said.

"He's really not so bad once you get to know him," Guin said.

"Almost *killed* me, you know," Quinoa added.

"Well, okay, he actually kind of still is that bad once you get to know him," Guin admitted. "But you get used to it."

"And Fennie and I saw *much* worse at the camp 'round the uncasking," Paul said

darkly. “Tocsin doesn’t much *like* humans, but he won’t torture ‘em for his jollies—and he’s never killed any for fun, either. I’ll give him that.”

Rhianna nodded. “Well, then. *Good*. With fighters like him protected, the camp should be safer if Fritz does show up.” She chuckled at Paul’s startled expression. “You thought I’d be mad? Why? Everybody’s going to have this sooner or later. Maybe the sooner the better. As for Tocsin, I don’t have to *like* him, and I probably never will, but I can be happy he’s helping keep you safe.”

“You know, we got a saying in the Marshals,” Bastian said. The lemur tugged on the brim of his Stetson. “Personal isn’t the same as important.”

Paul muttered something that sounded suspiciously like, “Try telling that to Mike Munn.”

Kaylee appeared to take a deep breath. “Okay, okay. I’m just glad he’s pointed at an *unfriendly* Intie for a change. Moving on. Guin, can you give me a memory summary of what happened at your house?” Kaylee asked. “I’m *damned* curious about Fenris’s combat data, too. I’m giving you the DIN 1.1-spec right now and the 1.2-beta.”

“And could Fennie shoot us what happened with the uncasking?” Uncia said. “We haven’t heard more than scattered reports. Even out of the Marshals.” She gave Bastian a meaningful look.

“Sure thing!” Guin said. “Dumping now.”

Rhianna looked around at the Marshals in the room. “Well? What do you folks think about all this? Me and mine are going to be helping AlphaWolf. They’re our *allies* in this fight. After what they’ve done for us, I’m not turning my back on them.”

An unassuming man with white fox ears, only a little taller than herself, wearing a shimmering bluish star on his brown leather duster, approached. “I think I can speak with some authority on this. For the duration, the Camp has amnesty, so’s long as they focus on helping us against Fritz and his ilk. So sayeth the Qube.” The man wiggled his white eyebrows and wagged his ears.

“I saw what you did there,” a voice said from the fireplace stairs as a sandy-colored wolf padded out into the room. Half the bodyguards’ hands twitched toward their weapons, but most of the Marshals seemed fairly unsurprised.

Zane grinned. “Didn’t I say not to be alarmed?”

“Alpha?” Paul said. “You said...”

“We invited him after you left Camp,” the short Marshal with the qubitite star said. “The way the get-together was shaping up, it was too good an opportunity to pass up. After I personally apologized for Marshal Munn’s behavior and guaranteed safe passage for him and his, he decided to come along after all.”

“This is turning into a summit,” Quinoa observed. There were a couple of Uplift’s Consuls, as well as several Nextus high officials even though the company was no longer based there, contingents from Cascadia, Aloha, Sturmhaven, Cape Nord, even little Burnside and Nuevo San. “In fact, maybe it *should* be one.”

“Conyers is here,” Kaylee said. “He can get the last few pieces of my memories I’m missing.”

“Precisely, Miss Kaylee, Miss Steader,” the Qube said. “If I’m any judge, the endgame’s just ‘round the bend.”

AlphaWolf nodded to those present, then padded up to stand before Rhianna. “A big reason I accepted is that I wanted to apologize to you in person about what I ordered done to your garage. Fritz totally had me suckered. Sorry about that.” He turned to

Quinoa. “And to you as well, for nearly getting you killed. I wish I could convince Tocsin to do the same, but, well...he’s Tocsin.”

“Oh, we’ll have a rematch at some point,” Quinoa said. “Nonlethal, of course.”

“Tocsin thinks of nonlethal combat about the same way Rochelle there thinks of decaffeinated coffee,” AlphaWolf said. “But I’ll pass it on.” He turned to Zane. “And, of course, I’m sorry for interrupting your press conference. If there’s anything I can do to help that security guard, or any of the other people we gender-jacked, please let me know.”

Zane nodded. “Thanks. Cecil’s getting along all right for now, but I’ll tell him what you said. And I’m sorry I called your pack a ‘band of idiot escaped RIDE hippies.’ Heat of the moment, you know.”

Rhianna faced the horse-sized sandy wolf. “I accept your apology. I know Paul’s in good paws now. We’ll give you any material support you need.” She looked at all the Marshals present. “Assuming that means I *won’t* get hauled off to prison myself.”

“If you *were* hauled off, you’d be in some pretty decent company,” Kenyon Walton said as he, Nigella, and Melissa rose through the cargo elevator at the other end of the room. “Afternoon, Reed.”

The Qube rolled his eyes good-naturedly. “Lo, Kenyon. All it needed was you.” He doffed his Stetson to Mrs. Walton, and nodded to Melissa. “Ma’ams.”

“Daddy!” Lillibet dropped Beatrice’s leash and de-Fused from Guinevere, then ran forward to catch her father in a hug. “Mommy!” she continued, bestowing the same hug upon her mother. “Ooooh, your mink ears are so *cute*! And hi, Melissa!” She hugged the RIDE next.

Kenyon wagged his sandy wolf ears in amusement and looked to the others. “It might interest you all to know, I’ve already made Alpha an offer of *extensive* support contingent on ending all raiding practices and reorganizing as a legitimate and open RIDE settlement.”

AlphaWolf nodded. “It’s going to take a while, though. Probably years. We can’t just change overnight. As long as polity RIDE laws remain ass-backward, we have to be somewhere the militant RIDEs can feel welcome, so I can keep some kind of a leash on them. And that means I have to let them *off* the leash in little ways from time to time.”

“And maybe we can be laying the groundwork to get some of those militants to de-militarize after the laws do change,” Paul said. “Swords to plowshares and all that.”

“The Marshals support that idea, Kenyon,” Reed said. “It’d mean one less worry for us. AlphaWolf, I can’t promise full amnesty for everyone in your Camp should you follow through, but after the Amontillado debacle there ain’t many left there worth arrestin’.”

“If we’re eventually going legit, we’d like a Marshals presence—as long as it’s not Mike Munn,” AlphaWolf said.

“Easily done. We’ve got some unattached RIDEs—civvy Hollows and Silver Stars—who’ll be happy to set up a precinct station. No humans attached to make your folk uneasy,” Qube said.

“But that’s still some years down the road,” AlphaWolf said.

A soft tone came from the wall speakers. “Attention everyone. The recommissionin’ ceremony is about to begin. Get yer asses down there afore yer late. Hewer out.”

As Zane and most everyone laughed at Anny’s brusque announcement, he felt a

tug on his left elbow. As everyone else had been chatting, Rhianna had crept around and now stood close enough he could feel her body heat. She was stroking his left arm, trying to make it look like the DIN was what interested her. He wondered why he hadn't smelled her perfume, then realized that his mind had simply filtered it out to protect itself.

"Uh, hi, Rhi," the tiger said. "Um, nice dress."

"Thanks," Rhianna breathed, angling *just so* he could see down her cleavage. "I wore it just for you."

"Erm," Zane said. "Uh, listen, can we talk for a moment?" He drew her over to a corner near the fireplace as most everyone else headed for the cargo elevator or other exits.

Rhianna glanced down at the cane he was using. It had a bright brass haft, a matching handle molded to fit Zane's hand, and not a lot of ornamentation. "Nice cane. Does it have a sword in it?"

"Something better." Zane shifted his hand to show the ruby rod that protruded up from the haft through the brass of the handle, level with the top. "Turns out the collimation rod from a satellite comm laser was just the right length. If I pump some energy through that, I could cut through battleship steel at fifty meters." He shook his head. "Of course, it probably wouldn't do a damn thing to Fritz, but it makes me feel better."

He propped himself up in the corner and looked down at Rhianna. "So...um... Rhi? Listen." He leaned the cane up and put his hands on her shoulders. "I guess I must have thrown a pretty big scare into you with what Fritz did to me, and you thought you might lose me or something. I'm sorry about that. I know you care for me." He grinned a little. "Boy *do* I. I mean, *wow*, just look at you."

Rhianna looked like she was about to explode into a puff of surging hormones, or maybe *swoon* in his arms.

Then Zane's grin faded a little. "But honestly, Rhi, as flattered as I am—and as *ecstatic* as Terry is—you're kinda starting to scare me a little. It's like one of those cartoon episodes where someone does drugs or gets possessed or swaps bodies or something and then starts acting all weird. Uncanny valley territory. This isn't *like* you."

The expression on Rhianna's kitty face first turned to denial, then confusion, then she seemed to shrink a little. "Well..." she stammered. "Uh. I just thought I..."

"I know," Zane said. He smiled. "And like I said, I'm *flattered*. Really. And Terry's all in a panic trying to get me to shut up and not ruin everything. Silly cat." He chuckled. "The thing is, I've seen where this kinda thing leads. If I take advantage of your raging hormones, the morning after *you'll* wake up hating me, *I'll* wake up hating me, and we'll both be miserable."

Kaylee padded up to them. "Rhi, you know he's right. Granted, I'm not human, but I know you. This *isn't* you. I've been trying to find some way to change your libido, but I don't like the idea of messing with you like that. Dial it down, girl! You're twitterpated as hell and not thinking straight."

"But...our date," Rhianna said dumbly.

"Is *absolutely* still on." Zane grinned. "Why the hell wouldn't it be? I've only been planning it for *months*. And what happens after that, happens. But I want it to be with the Rhianna who gave me that takedown I *deserved* when I got too big for my britches. I want to *win* your heart, I don't want you to just *hand* it to me."

Rhianna looked conflicted to say the least. He wasn't rejecting her *per se*, he was...completely right. But she had to admit, if it'd been just *him* saying so, she would have been heartbroken. His voice added to Myla's and Kaylee's was enough to shock her rational mind back into action. Regardless, some part of her felt a bitter taste of defeat. She let go of his arm and sighed.

"You're right, you're right. All three of you," Rhianna said, folding her arms. "Feels like I've made a right fool of myself the past week."

"On a relative scale of self-fool-making, I rate you at no more than two hundred milli-Zanes," Zane said. "Not even close to me on my best worst day. Which you were also there for, right before you gave me that chewing out I deserved." He chuckled, then carefully knelt, taking the weight on his good leg. "Now c'mere." He put his arms around her and gave her a big hug—a little more than brotherly, but not quite over the line into lascivious.

Just a few minutes ago, Rhianna would have taken the opportunity and stolen a kiss. Now, she just returned the embrace like an old friend—and potentially something more, with time.

"Zane! Get yer ass down there!" Anny said over the PA.

"My master's voice," Zane said wryly.

"Well, what are we waiting for? Let's turn this big mother back on," Rhianna said, the smile Zane had last seen when the mechanic was working on Chauncey reappearing. "I want to see what she feels like."

"Works for me. C'mon, Central Control's just down here." Zane led the way down the fireplace stairs.

Not far away, the suborbital from Cape Nord was on approach for landing. Aboard it, a number of humans and Integrates peered out the viewports at the desert scenery.

Desilu shivered. "I haven't been out of Cape Nord in thirteen years." The mouse Integrate glanced pensively out one of the viewports at the desert sand below.

Kisa glanced over at her. "Are you okay with it? When you've spent so long living in somewhere closed in like that, you can develop a touch of agoraphobia." She smiled wryly.

"My sister's right," Jade said. "Case in point, I had a bit of a hard time adjusting, after I first landed on Zharus. Everything was just so...*open*. But I got over it by the time I got to Cape Nord."

"I'll *be* okay with it," Delilu said firmly. "I'll have to be. This is what we've *wanted* for so long—to get to leave the Enclaves and finally mingle in the open with humans and RIDes. It would be silly to let those open spaces scare me away."

Tallyhawk stood at one of the other ports, staring down at the desert. The mining rig was visible a few clicks away, slowly rotating as the sub banked around to line itself up with the landing pad. "I've always wanted to see this place, but never really had an excuse before."

"It's pretty impressive," Jade said. "You know, we Integrates probably all have at least some Q in us that came from here, originally. In a way, you could say this is like we're coming home. Or at least parts of us are."

By unconscious accord, the Cape Nord diplomats had all drifted toward the forward end of the compartment as the Hellir contingent gathered at the rear. It wasn't

that they hadn't gotten along on the flight down—in fact, the Cape Nord bunch had all enjoyed the episodes of their self-produced “Show” the Hellir group had screened, and a good time had been had by all. But now that the flight was ending, it was time for the respective parties to exit on their own. That didn't keep Higgins, the “Dudebro” representative, from catching Desilu's eye across the room, wagging his eyebrows suggestively, and winking.

The suborbital finally made its final turn, and the platform moved forward and disappeared from view behind the front of the plane. The tone of the lifters changed as they switched over to vertical thrust, and a moment later there was a bump as the suborbital craft touched lightly down.

“Daaayum, this place is huge!” Higgins said, gawking at the enormous, expansive network of pipes and other machinery. The rig was almost a kilometer from one end to the other, with an even larger spread of wellheads.

“Indeed,” Scoresby said. “But you know what they say—it's not the *size* that matters...”

Jade rolled her eyes. “Boys *will* be boys, won't they?” she muttered.

Tally chuckled, replying just as quietly, “That's life in Cape Never-Never Land.”

“Wouldn't that make *us* the Lost Boys?” Ubu asked.

Desilu smirked. “I think you're stretching the metaphor a *little* too far.”

“In any event, they're bringing the ramps up,” Tallyhawk observed. “Looks like they'll let us disembark separately, one party through each hatch.”

Desilu nodded. “Looks like that settles the question of precedence, then.” She stepped up to the hatch as it swung open. “Well, shall we?”

In the platform's main control center, no one was really surprised when a section of blinkenlight wall panels swung out and Zane stepped through, followed by Rhianna and Kaylee. In fact, Anny and Leila had been standing right in front of it, Anny impatiently tapping her foot. “Bout time you showed up.”

“Did you warm them up for me?” Zane asked. “Everybody loves a good lion-taming act.”

“It doesn't work very well,” Leila deadpanned in her cultured voice. “I always run out of chairs before I can get Anny to behave.”

Zane looked around the space. It was about twice as big as his apartment, but a lot of the room was taken up by consoles lining the walls and in a couple of islands in the middle of the floor. The Marshals and guards from upstairs were here, as were Rochelle and Uncia, Myla and Sophie. Absent were AlphaWolf, Paul, the Waltons, Qube, and many of the polity dignitaries.

:*The Marshals are rounding up a lot of pols and VIPs for the impromptu summit.*: Rochelle sent. :*When they see something needs doing, they don't wait around.*:

Walking slowly and letting his cane take his weight, Zane crossed the room to a door out onto an elevated platform that had been attached for the occasion. He approached the podium at the edge, and waved to the crowd. Above and behind him, a giant hardlight projection made him easier to see. “Hey.” The crowd below broke into a roar of applause.

Rhianna glanced out at the crowd and whistled. :*Would you get a load of that? Look at all those Integrates out there with the humans and RIDEs.*: A number of them

were sprinkled in amongst the crowd, their expressions ranging from nervous to relaxed, worried to triumphant.

:Nice to see so many of 'em out in the open,: Kaylee said. :We all started something good.:

Zane waited patiently for it to die down, then grinned at everyone. "It occurs to me I haven't been having such good luck with these press appearances lately. Hopefully, third time will be a charm." He chuckled. "Or then again, who knows, maybe AlphaWolf might show up again or something."

The crowd laughed appreciatively, though there was a *slight* edge of nervousness to it, and Zane didn't miss the way some people kept looking in all directions as if expecting an Integrate attack to materialize at any moment. Zane didn't blame them. He kept having to fight the urge to do the same thing himself.

"Anyway, we're *officially* here to restart this big beautiful machine my father built. I remember when it was finished, back in 140. Dad had me, Aggie, and Maddie out here, and he had me throw the switch. He said at the time, 'It's gonna belong to you someday anyway, so you might's well get used to running it.' From the time I threw that switch up to just a few weeks ago, this rig never had a single idle day. Sixteen years isn't a bad record." The crowd broke into applause again, and he waited to let it die down.

"Of course, that streak got broken when Fritz decided he didn't want me going public with who and what we Integrates are. He shut this rig down, just like he tried to shut *me* down a couple weeks ago. But in the long term, he didn't succeed at either. So last month some of my friends and I came and took it back."

The crowd broke into a standing ovation, louder than any of its applause before. Zane grinned and enjoyed it, then after a minute held up his hands for silence. "As I say, we're *officially* here to start the ol' gal's ticker up again. But *unofficially*, there are a few people I wanted to recognize. All the brave *humans and RIDES*, not to forget the other Integrates, who helped kick Fritz's 'Integrate Descendants' off this rig." He grinned. "And the nice thing about having all these bodyguards and Marshals around is that if they're too shy, I can just have them *hauled* out here. So come on out, Rhianna Stonegate and Kaylee!" He looked over his shoulder and beckoned to them to join him on the platform.

Blushing furiously, with Kaylee giving her a nudge in the small of her back, Rhianna came forward. Zane grinned and put an arm around her shoulder, raising the other with his cane in it to signal for louder applause.

"Rochelle Seaford and Uncia!" Zane continued, and they came out to stand on his other side. Rochelle's hair picked exactly that moment to come loose and cascade around her. She blushed and tossed her head to settle it back into place behind herself, and waved to the crowd as they applauded again.

"Myla Wilson and Sophie!" Now it was the fennec pair's turn to face the crowd, and they did so with their own share of self-consciousness.

Zane continued naming names until almost all of those who had been along on the raid joined them on the platform—even CinTally, looking even more self-conscious than Rhianna. Then Zane added, "But two of those who helped us that day are no longer with us. Marc Flores and his RIDE Cernos both perished during Fritz's attack on me. I'd like to ask for a moment of silence to remember them, as well as the other casualties of that day—and everyone who's paid with their lives to keep Fritz's nasty little secrets." Their names appeared, with photos, on the hardlight screens around him. Zane gripped

the podium and bowed his head, and for a minute the only sound was the hot dry wind scouring the desert beyond the hardlight climate shields.

"This fight isn't over yet. We've made progress, but there's more pain to come. But we *will* beat him, and his followers. I know of at least two very close to Fritz himself who have had their opinions changed—one of whom saved my life, and who knows how many others, at great risk to herself. Thanks, Quinoa."

"I'd do it again in an instant," the sphinx said, joining the others at the platform's edge.

"Now you all might know my Dad wasn't so fond of RIDEs in some ways," Zane continued. "But you might not know he also made sure RIDEs got a fair shake as long as he was running the company, because that's the sort of man he was."

"So today, as we rededicate my Dad's old platform, I'd like you all to bear that lesson in mind. Even if you don't like what someone is, remember they're still a person. That goes for humans who don't like RIDEs or Integrates, Integrates who don't like humans or RIDEs, and RIDEs who don't like humans or Integrates. If Dad were here right now, he'd say—well, actually he'd probably chew me out for running off at the mouth."

"So just push the button already, brother-mine," Agatha said with a half chuckle.

"Right. Anyway. Everyone out there who *just wants to get along*—this one's for you." Zane flipped the safety cap off a big red button set into the podium, and slammed his fist down onto it.

Rhianna took off her heels so she could feel the machine awaken. She connected to the rig's network, examining each DIN in turn, making sure there was nothing wrong—no hidden hardware hacks. It only took fractions of a second to make the final check, but there was nothing that could impede the restart. The repair crews had outdone themselves.

The great machine thrummed to life, a symphony vibrating through Rhianna's feet. She wondered if anyone else felt it this way. Tonnes of raw AA qubitite flowed through lifter-pipes into a 150-meter ore freighter at the loading dock.

The crowd waited to see if anything unexpected would happen. As seconds turned into minutes without any signs of trouble, they almost seemed to grow disappointed. Zane grinned. "I'd like to thank you all for coming. But don't leave yet! There's going to be a reception downstairs, and guided tours of the rig, and I'll still be around here and there, at least until my keepers put me to bed again. See you soon!" He nodded to the others on the podium with him, then turned to hobble back inside as the crowd roared its approval one final time.

"That went well," Zane said as he stepped back through the door. "I half expected Fritz to try something."

Rhianna struck the listening pose she used when thinking about some problem. Something felt...off, but not in a bad way. Somewhere in the orchestra of machinery there was an instrument tuned a little better than the others. Most engineers would leave that be—after all, why bother? But Rhianna couldn't.

She Fused up with Kaylee. "Zane, we're going to go do our own inspection, if you don't mind. I'd like to see what this marvelous beast feels like at full bore."

"Most people wouldn't want to spend time with a full bore," Zane said, grinning. "Or a hungry one. But sure, knock yourself out."

The Fused lynx hugged the tiger. "See you in a few, Zane."

“So what now?” Uncia asked, watching Rhi and Kaylee wander off.

“I think I’m gonna go scope out the reception,” Rochelle said, sweeping her hair back up into another self-destructing coiff. “Thought I spied some old friends in the crowd, or maybe I could make some new ones. Wanna tag along?”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“Elevator downstairs is that way,” Zane pointed. “Knock yourselves out. I’ll be down a little later. Might have a nap first...or maybe check in on some of our *other* friends.”

“Comm if you need us!” Rochelle said cheerfully, and headed for the elevator with Uncia.

Myla grinned and picked Rhianna’s forgotten high heels off the floor.

Zane chuckled. “Find me the princess who can wear those, why don’cha?”

“Oh, I don’t think you need to worry about losing track of that one,” Myla said. “Just follow the moving parts.”

“True.” Zane grinned at Myla, Sophie, and Agatha. “So what do you think? Shall we go see if AlphaWolf and the Nextus ambassadors have torn each others’ throats out yet?”

“That could be entertaining,” Myla said.

“My money’s on AlphaWolf,” Sophie added.

“You know what? Mine too.” Agatha grinned. “I think I’d pay good money to see it.”

“Go have yer fun, kiddies,” Anny said. “We’ll buzz ye if anything comes up.” She chuckled and shook her head as the tiger and his bodyguards left the room. “I remember being that young, once,” she said to Leila. “Seems like a long, long time ago now.” She idly rubbed the white lioness on the head and turned her attention back to the security console in front of her. Now that she thought about it, she was rather curious how matters were going there, herself. “What’cha think, Lee, should we abuse our authority? ...yeah, why not.”

“I’ll make the popcorn,” the lioness said primly.

The Hellir crew hadn’t quite managed to make it into the control room for the re-launch ceremony, but as Tallyhawk understood it very few people of any importance had—which left out most of the Cape Nord delegation, too. It was just too small to be a public space. But there had been a huge crowd standing in the open space on the platform below to see Zane when he’d come out to give his speech.

The presentation was reasonably inspiring. Zane made sure to name everyone who’d helped take the platform back—human, RIDE, and Integrate, making it clear that in his eyes they were *all* people. Then he’d reactivated the platform and excused himself.

As the open space started to clear out as people excused themselves to head to the reception, Desilu sent a quick comm ping to the others’ DINs. “I just messaged Zane, and he wants to greet us personally. He sent along a map; follow me.”

The Hellir Integrates threaded their way through the crowd to a hatch in the side of one of the structures marked “Authorized Personnel Only.” Desilu opened the door and they slipped through, then up several flights of metal stairs and into another hatch into a corridor. They moved down the corridor, turned a corner, and nearly ran right into the tiger in question, along with his sister Agatha and his foxy bodyguards Myla and Sophie, who had been introduced as part of the speech.

:Wow. Are those two partials?: Desilu said privately. :I think they are. Sophie looks a little squishy.:

Zane grinned. "Hey, you guys! Nice to meet you in person!"

Tallyhawk nodded. "Nice to see you're back on your feet."

"Nice to be back on 'em." Zane lifted his cane. "Even if I have to use an an extra one. So what do you think of the place?"

"It's pretty impressive," Kisa said. "We don't have anything remotely like it back on Neorus."

"Neorus, huh?" Zane raised an eyebrow. "As I understand it, you-all do your own metamaterial mining out there. Dad mentioned it in his travel journals. You know very much about that?"

"I'm a TerraTech by profession, so I don't know that much about the refining aspects. But it's a common neoquartzite in raw form—we have entire mountain ranges of it. Making it useful as information storage? Closely-kept secret."

Zane nodded. "I understand about keeping your own metas a secret. Pretty much everybody does, including us—though we tend to be more open about it if you actually hoof it all the way out here to see for yourself. We're going to have to see about fixing that sometime, if people like your friends and I are ever going to go a-touring ourselves. Anyway, as I understand it, terraforming has its overlaps with both mining and scouting, and I'd be happy to talk about anything you *can* talk about, sometime when we all have more time." He grinned again. "Speaking of which, we're just on the way to a meeting of the minds, and I was wondering if you might care to come along. A couple of you, anyway—it's a pretty small room, and it's a heads-of-state kind of thing. You want to nominate a couple of yourselves to join us?"

"Desilu, I think that's you," Tallyhawk said.

"I'd like you to tag along as well," Desilu said.

"Great! Oh, by the way—if you'd like to set up a screening room for some episodes of your show later on, I've reserved a conference room for you starting a little later—after this main meeting's over. It's not a very *big* one, given how many other meetings are going on—this place wasn't exactly made to be a convention center and all—but at least it's something. I'll have Aggie beam you the details and when you can go in to set up."

"I suppose Dolores, Jade, and I will go mingle somewhere until then," Kisa said. "That reception sounds promising."

Jade nodded. "Sounds like fun. I wonder how many of our fans will be there? Good thing I've got plenty of pens, just in case I get mobbed for autographs."

"Do you mind if we shoot some stock footage around the platform while we're here?" Ubu asked. "Well—given that we're all effectively living cameras, we'd do it anyway, but do you mind if we incorporate it into our shows down the road? It'll make a great virtual set."

"Be my guest," Zane said. "I'd say something about the parts of the platform that are 'top secret' being blocked off, but given that Fritz's lackeys had the run of the place for weeks I don't think any of that matters. The patents are all expired anyway."

"Lots of interesting camera angles around here..." the black dog said. He held his hands in front of him, using the time-honored method of using thumbs and first fingers to frame a scene. "Indeed. *Lots* of possibilities."

"Heck, if you want to shoot *actual* footage here down the road, with actors and

stuff, give me a call and we'll work something out."

Agatha cleared her throat. "Tick tock, Zane..."

Zane chuckled. "My master's voice. Right. Follow me, you two, and we'll see the rest of you later."

Desilu nodded. "Don't get into too much trouble without us, you-all." The two groups parted ways, with Zane and company plus Desilu and Tallyhawk heading on down the hall, and the others following the arrows toward the reception downstairs.

The Boardroom had been restored just like the rest of the platform. They had extended the long table with hardlight, but it was going to be a tight fit for everybody. All the major polities had representatives here, even Burnside and Nuevo San Antonio. There were also Integrates from the Enclaves that had opened themselves up and declared they were rejoining the rest of civilization—Wonderland, Camelot, Cave of Wonders, Jurassic Park, Terrania, Hellir, and Xanadu, with one or two other representatives that didn't have a specific Enclave. AlphaWolf by himself was here for the independent RIDE settlements in the Dry—and sat as far away from the Nextus contingent as possible. They glowered at each other across the table.

As the designated neutral party, Chief Marshal Reed Mosley presided. "Thank you all for coming here today on such short notice. We're here to share intel that will help us end this conflict before it gets any bigger."

"So, why don't we start with where this clusterfark all started?" Uplift First Consul Vogel said. "With Nextus and the RIDE program itself."

"You already know a great deal of what *should* be classified information," Administrator Dema Morgan said crisply. At least the polity had sent someone from the top level of their bureaucracy, the First Tier. "Courtesy of NextusLeaks and this...Kaylee. She was there at Fritz's 'birth'. All you have to do is review her data."

"She's not the only one," Anny added over speakers. "You folks could pony up some of the telemetry I remember y'all have."

"If we could find Dr. Patil, we might have her perspective as well," Mosley said. "But she's done a remarkably good job of disappearing. Hard to blame her, considering."

"Yes, it's *amazing* how many of our early units and personnel have ended up associated with Mr. Brubeck," Morgan said. She let the accusation hang there, so listeners could draw their own conclusions.

"Dad always used to say you could judge a man by the quality of the company he keeps," Zane said, hobbling into the room. "I'm pretty thrilled with mine. Can you say the same?" He and Agatha slid into seats closer to AlphaWolf than Nextus, while Myla and Sophie joined the other guards and Marshals along the wall. Desilu and Tallyhawk slid into a couple of vacant seats halfway down the table, across from City Fathers Rupert Scoresby and Fred Higgins from Cape Nord. Higgins gave the mouse Integrate a friendly leer, then "oofed" as Scoresby elbowed him in the gut.

"Okay, let's start with the obvious," Mosley said. "What do we know about Integration itself? What causes it? What are the triggers?"

"Integration is caused by the *dangerous* combination of hardlight skins and the Fuser process," Morgan said haughtily. "This is why we discourage the use of hardlight in Nextus."

"Are you *really* going to keep up that fiction?" Quinoa said. "If you actually

thought that was the case you'd outright ban it instead of having an 'energy surcharge'."

Aaron of Jurassic Park rolled his eyes. The utahraptor clicked his toe claws in annoyance. "Yeah, right. I was completely metal-skinned and so were most of the dinos in my Enclave. There goes that theory."

"So was the first member of my crew to Integrate," said an arctic fox Integrate in a red Starfleet captain's tunic. "The hardlight angle has always seemed like a coincidence to me."

"And there are *many* more hardlight-skinned, Fusing RIDEs who've *never* Integrated than there are who have," Leah of Terrania noted. "If that combination were the primary cause, it seems they should be dropping like flies. In point of fact, it seems like if anything, *size difference between RIDE and pilot* is a much more apt predictor of Integration—yet you lot still keep cranking out your dragons to this day."

"Camelot concurs," a white horse Integrate in a tabard put in. "Given that we're where most dragon Integrates have been ending up over the last couple of decades, we ought to know."

"We have no hardlight restrictions in Uplift and our Integration rates are no higher or lower than yours," the Consul said. "As far as we can tell, at least."

"Aloha has even fewer," AstraNikki said. The golden eagle was representing the polity she had helped found almost fifty years ago and was technically the eldest at the table. The laid-back city had taken the revelation of Integrates with a celebratory White Russian and a shrug. "You're full of guano and you know it."

The other polities and Enclaves chimed in with similar facts, backing Nextus into a corner. Sturmhaven was the last to speak.

"Sturmhaven admits that, if *we* had had a woman like Fritz at the time, we would have used her during the war in the very same manner," the woman said. "To deny this fact would make us hypocrites. Our first Integrate did not appear until after the war, and she remains the perfection of Sturmhaven womanhood."

"Can the propaganda, woman!" Higgins said. "You forgot to mention that Inties can't have children! What kind of 'perfect' woman is that?" He winked at Desliu. "Besides, I'm curious how you can know your 'first Integrate' is still the perfection of anything, given Fritz always grabbed 'em after it happened."

Zane stood up. "Okay, everyone, okay. We're not here to grind axes against one another, or score points. We have a big problem to solve, so let's focus on the subject at hand: Fritz and his followers. I have to admit, Administrator Morgan did have a good idea there about reviewing the data."

"I'd very much like to see Fritz's 'birth' from Kaylee's perspective," Mosley said. "As well as Anny Hewer's. You hear me up there, ma'am?"

"Eeeyup, I hears ya," Anny said. "I'll page Kaylee and Rhianna and be right down."

"And find Secretary Conyers," Mosley said. "He was involved with this, too. Might as well have all the players here."

"Gonna get *really* crowded in here," Myla said.

"We're gonna need a bigger boat," Zane agreed. He glanced over at the wall to his left and made a "shooing" gesture with his hand, and the wall slid back another ten meters. "There. Bigger boat." He slid his hand along the top of the table and it extended to fill the space, then he slid the seats of the rest of the delegations on one side of the table down three meters to make more room next to the Nextus party. "Okay, we're

good.”

There were some familiar faces among the rig workers. Before the assault Zane had brought in people who actually worked on the platform for a living. Rhianna knew that you couldn't depend on schematics or blueprints. Over its sixteen years there had been additions, repairs, and more additions. Network nodes had been moved, design changes made in the field.

“Kaylee, Rhianna! Good to see you,” a triceratops Fuser said.

“Oliver, Igthorn, how're things up here?” Kaylee asked.

“Coming up roses, ma'ams,” Igthorn said. “What can I do for you?” the dinosaur said.

“I'm looking for junction DIN-JCP-8CP-4,” Kaylee said.

“Oh, that new networking gear of yours,” Igthorn said. “Uh, up two levels, in the modular pipeline flow regulator. Need help?”

“Thanks, but I can find my way there,” Rhianna said, moving onwards. “See you two around.”

The suspect coupling was located in one of the very last places repairs were being completed, and the work was a little sloppy, but functional. The “instrument” in question was a DIN-coupling intended for modular equipment.

:This oughta be good, Rhi,: Kaylee said. :Look at these speed tests. Just a few femtoseconds too fast.:

:Same gear we installed in Fenris, right? We got the same results then.: Rhianna said. They closed in on the piece of equipment in question, a non-critical pipeline flow controller taken from another rig and retrofitted. She opened an access panel to look at the cables inside.

There were supposed to be three redundant data/network couplings inside to connect the controller to the pipe's lifters. Only two of the three couplings were plugged in. *:I'm getting clear data throughput from all three, Rhi,: Kaylee reported. :It's just the one that's a teensy tiny bit faster.:*

:Run more speed tests,: Rhianna replied. The couplings were designed to be snap-together mirror images of one another because redundancy was necessary at this stage, and in the network coupling's case, added that much more security. She pulled on both cables, holding the uncoupled ends apart about ten centimeters. *:Data still flowing?:*

:As fast as ever, boss,: Kaylee said. *:This is a puzzler. What have we got here?:*

:Something big,: Rhianna thought. Really, *really* big. No matter how far apart she held the ends, to the limit of their slack, the data still flowed like there was no gap at all, and Kaylee's hand sensors detected no emissions between the ends. As a test, she made the connection, waited, and then disconnected it again. Then on a hunch, she disconnected a second plug. All the plugs were field retrofits not original equipment. They were fabbed coupled together and only separated during the retrofit.

:Both still there, boss,: Kaylee reported excitedly. *:You know what this is? I know what this is! Lordy Lord Lordy!:*

“Hey, Rhianna, Kaylee!” Anny Hower's voice came from a nearby speaker. “They need you two up in the Boardroom. They wanna talk to you and me about Fritz.”

In other circumstances she would have investigated further, but there were more important things to worry about right now. On a lark, Rhianna left the coupling

disconnected, and filed away the memory with a high priority in her implant. “We’ll be right up.”

In keeping with the makeshift theme of the event, the reception room was an empty mech bay, with portable tables, chairs, and even fixtures like a bar at one end and a stage at the other brought in for the occasion. The stage had a small Integrate trio on it—it looked like a winged deer and a cheetah girl with a guitar and a bass, and another deer playing the drums. Rochelle thought she’d seen them somewhere before, but wasn’t sure.

She definitely recognized the bartenders, though—Diane and Serena, all the way out from Uplift. She grinned and greeted them as she went over to take a drink from one of the trays they’d set out.

Rochelle spent the next few minutes sauntering around the reception, a slight smile on her face and a flute of champagne in her hand as she moved among the crowd, her feline ears swiveling to pick out individual conversations. For once, she thought, she actually wasn’t the only super-gorgeous person in the room. She’d spotted at least three other women and two men who were running the same super’sculpt Fuser nanites she was—including one who’d accidentally left her pheromones on until a quick override from Uncia fixed it.

Even so, there weren’t too many people around that Rochelle knew. A moderate crowd had gathered at one end of the banquet hall around a woman with extensive tiger tags—an Integrate from the Hellir Enclave, Rochelle gathered, and star of a popular TV show that had just started streaming. Uncia said it was enjoyable, but Rochelle hadn’t gotten around to watching it yet. She thought she spotted Rufia and Tom in another part of the room, but it was so large that she couldn’t be sure, and by the time she got there they might have migrated to another part of it anyway, so she didn’t see too much point in trying.

On the other hand, there were a number of handsome young men about. And if some of them were pretty clearly attached, there were others who weren’t. There was one coyote-eared young man with a mostly-copper star on his Marshals blue shirt filling a plate at the buffet who looked like he might have possibilities. Rochelle watched him make his way to an empty table for two in a corner, where he would have a good view of the room and no one would be able to slip up behind him.

So Rochelle instead slipped up in front of him, arriving across the table as he was looking down at his plate. “Is this seat taken?” she asked, letting her hair tumble down around her in slow motion again. Uncia padded over to a RIDEsafe power socket nearby and plugged in, watching the proceedings with interest.

The Marshal’s eyes widened, but then settled into an expression of sardonic amusement. “Well, I guess it is now.” He seemed to be attempting a Clint Eastwood-style rasp, to match the little scruff of beard on his face, but the effect was spoiled by the upper-class Laurasian accent that he couldn’t quite eradicate.

“Quite an interesting little party, isn’t it?” Rochelle asked. She wondered why he wasn’t more impressed. Most of the time she wasn’t crazy about people falling for her, but it always seemed the few times she *was* interested the other party was immune to her charms.

“Been fun to watch so far,” the Marshal agreed noncommittally.

“I guess you’re here with the rest of the contingent guarding the place and

helping watch over Zane,” Rochelle said. “Off-duty right now?”

“On my lunch break,” the Marshal said. “But not exactly off-duty. A Marshal’s never *really* off-duty.”

“If you have any free time later on, I could show you around the platform,” Rochelle offered, leaning forward a little to expose a better view of her cleavage. “I could show you some spots few outsiders get to see.”

The young man chuckled. “I’ll just bet you could, Miss Seaford.”

“You pretty clearly have the advantage of me,” Rochelle said. “But I guess after Zane’s speech, just everybody knows who I am.”

“Oh, I’ve known about you for a little longer than that,” the Marshal said, grinning. “The name’s Rusty.” He paused for a moment. “Rusty Seaford. Pleased to meet you...’cuz’.”

“Ooooh, *burned!*” Uncia put in from her vantage point by the wall.

Rochelle blinked, then sat back in her chair. “Oh. I...guess I should stop trying to pick you up then.”

Rusty chuckled. “Oh, don’t stop on my account. I think we’re only *third* cousins. It has to be first cousins to be illegal, and even then that’s only in Nextus and Sturmhaven.”

“It’d still feel weird to be coming onto someone with my same last name,” Rochelle said.

“Just think, if we got married and hyphenated our names, we’d both be Seaford-Seafords,” Rusty said.

“Yeah, which is really *crazy* when you consider...” Rochelle paused, then shook her head. “Never mind. Take too much explanation.”

Rusty grinned again. “You were gonna say, ‘when you consider we really should all be named McClaren anyway’?”

Rochelle stared at him. “How did you know about that?”

“Oh, we Marshals have our ways,” Rusty said nonchalantly.

“We ran into Charlene McClaren out in the desert,” a voice spoke up from nearby. Rochelle glanced over to see a coyote RIDE with a matching copper star to Rusty’s pinned to a neckerchief. Uncia waved a paw, and the coyote nodded to her.

Rusty nodded. “Trips here happened to overhear her talking to her friends about why she didn’t want to tell me about it, and so Fiona filled him in. I didn’t believe it myself ‘til I did the research and found the same things you did. That’s crazy. I never knew our family’s origin was so screwed up.”

“You want screwed up, consider that it seems pretty likely ol’ Gary Seaford didn’t take so well to being pre-marriage cuckolded by a popsicle,” Rochelle said. “I didn’t have the time to dig deep, but I found some hints that he had several affairs and at least a couple of bastards. So here we have a family named Seaford with no Seaford genes, and a number of other families that *do* have Seaford genes without having the Seaford name. Unless they’ve ended up marrying back into the Seafords, in which case some Seafords *do* have Seaford genes, but they came from *outside* of the family.”

“I think you’re putting too much importance in genes, and also ‘Seaford’ sounds kind of silly when you say it so many times that close together,” Rusty said. “Anyway, it’s a lot weirder to me that our great-great-however-many-greats grandfather is alive, about our age, and rattling around somewhere with the RIDE who crossrode him. Her.”

“Aloha, apparently,” Rochelle said. “Still living with the Skylers.”

Rusty nodded. "Good she's got some friends, anyway. Can't be easy being all alone in the world like that."

Rochelle nodded. "So I guess you're from the Laurasian Seafords, huh? Colloquially referred to by my bunch as 'those rich bastards'?"

"You got me pegged," Rusty admitted. "And you're from the broke-ass prodigals who were born too late to get any money from their folks and came looking for it over here." He shrugged. "You haven't done too badly for yourself, I guess. We use FreeRIDE a lot in the Marshals, you know. Our partners can't be fettered. It's a thing." He ruffled Trips affectionately between the coyote's ears.

Rochelle nodded. "And most of you even pay for it, too. Which I think is pretty cool."

Rusty shrugged. "It's the right thing to do, and we're all about doing the right thing." He glanced down at his plate. "Which includes eating this before it gets cold."

"Go on, eat, eat," Rochelle said. "I should get a plate myself. These nanites don't run on zero point energy. It was nice meeting you."

Rusty chuckled. "Go on and bring your plate back here. They won't be needing me for a while, so maybe you can show me some of those 'spots few outsiders get to see' when we're done."

Rochelle grinned. She slid her chair back and got up, gathering her hair and draping it over her left arm like a stole. "You know what? I'd love to. I'll just be *right* back."

:Here comes the mob,: Jade sent to her sister, Dolores, and Ubu.

:Nothing against you, Jade, but I've always been happy to be behind the camera,: Ubu said.

:I'm glad nobody knows who I am yet,: Kisa sent. :They've got a great buffet here. You should come try it if you ever get free.:

Jade sent an "eyeroll" emoticon. *:I am soooo writing you into the next episode when we get back home, just you wait.:*

A dozen Integrates quickly made their way through the crowd towards Jade, and a few curious humans and RIDEs trailed behind. She took a deep breath and forced a smile, putting herself firmly into the "publicity mode" that she'd previously only had occasion to use when Integrates from other enclaves came to visit. Having to use it in such an open setting was a new experience for her. *Time to pretend a stranger is a long-awaited friend.*

"So, I guess Zane decided to invite some folks from Hellir after all. And JadeCat herself, eh?" It was a female archeopteryx. She had a pattern of white, pink, and gray feathers.

"That's me," Jade said. "Though JadeCat is technically just a role. It's just Jade. Happy to meet you, Miss..?"

"Coriander, Jurassic Park rep. As if you couldn't tell."

"And I'm Corey-Barkley," a German Shepherd behind her spoke up. "Cave of Wonders. I'm your biggest fan!"

"It's nice to be able to meet fans out in public like this," Jade said. "For the longest time I never thought it would be possible to come out in the open like this—or at least, come out in the open and admit I was more than just extensively biosculpted like JadeCat."

“J-Park’s been thinking about it for a few years,” Coriander said. She seemed unimpressed about the celebrity in their midst. “To tell the truth, I’m less interested in gossiping about the Show than learning how Cape Nord is dealing with your presence.”

“That’s still a little up in the air,” Jade admitted. “The flight down was... interesting. We shared a plane with the Cape Nord delegation. But I think we’re going to get things straightened out fairly quickly. All of this—” She waved a hand around encompassing the rest of the reception room. “—is going to be a big help when it comes to normalizing relations.”

“We’ve had some issues with Nuevo San, ourselves. They seem to consider us either ‘stolen property’ or ‘deserters’ from the military.” Coriander snorted. “Well, I suppose the latter is *technically* correct for some. They’re more inclined to prosecute than any polity so far.”

“They’re just making noise,” Ubu put in. “It’s what windbags do when they spring a leak—the hot air makes squeaky balloon sounds as it whooshes out. I’m confident sanity will prevail and those court cases will be thrown out—once the whole Fritz thing blows over, anyway, if not before.”

Jade shrugged. “As I understand it, there’s a conference going on even now between polity and enclave diplomats. The first chance they’ve all had to sit down together and talk things out. Fingers crossed that’ll lead to greater understanding all around.”

Coriander nodded. “From your lips to Mother Patil’s ear.”

“Excuse me, but...did I hear right? You’re JadeCat? Or—you play her on video?” The question came from a cheetah-tagged human, whose RIDE was padding along at his side. “I’m Jason, and this is Prospero. We saw your show kick off the other day, and we’ve been binging it ever since. It’s great!”

“It’s very rare to see original programming that’s worth anything these days,” the cheetah said. “Seems like the only good stuff is the ancient pop culture from the Steader Archives. But you’re changing all that.”

Jade smiled. “We certainly hope we are. Nothing against Crazy Joe—we’re big fans of the stuff he dug up, ourselves. But we can’t keep living in the past *all* the time. Even if the stuff we do is, admittedly, derivative of a lot of the old shows, there’s nothing new under the sun and at least we’re finding new ways to spin it for the present-day.”

“That’s exactly right!” Jason said. “That’s why I love it. I’m a crossrider myself, you know—I used to be a Jane. Which is *almost* like a Jade, I guess. Anyway, for all that the twencen stuff is great and all, they didn’t have *crossriding* back then so they can’t really tell stories about it. That arc with Johnny crossing into Joanna was like a godsend, y’know? Granted that it went the opposite direction of me personally, but a lot of the adjustment issues are the same. It’s like you guys made a show about *me*.”

“We’ve heard that a lot from our fans,” Jade said. “We’re looking at doing something that goes the other way, too. It seems like you always hear about the male-to-female crosses but nobody ever writes about the other direction. Maybe it just doesn’t appeal to them.”

“I had an idea about that, if you want to hear it...” Jason said. “There’s this girl, Josephine, and she gets dumped by her boyfriend...”

Rhianna and Kaylee were strolling down the Boardroom corridor when the mechanic felt a sudden *surge* of anger from her partner. Before she could react, Kaylee

had de-Fused and *pounced* on a brown rabbit Integrate.

Conyers allowed it to happen. On his back on the floor, he stared up into Kaylee's snarl, as if he'd expected this for many long years. The lynx RIDE held out her forepaw and materialized a hardlight bottle of Tabasco. "You put me *in the Shed!*" she roared. "You deleted almost everything that made me who I was, *then* you had the *balls* to lock me in purgatory for twenty-five years!"

"It was either the Shed, or the recyclers," Conyers said. "Kaylee, I'm sorry. I'm sorry for everything I did. I can't even *begin* to express. But the alternative was to have you destroyed. In the Shed, there was at least a small chance that...well...you're here now because that chance panned out, thanks to some creative red tape and Miss Stonegate."

Around them, the Marshals hadn't even drawn their weapons. The lynx's snarl slowly eased back, the bottle vanished. Kaylee backed off slowly, forepaw over her face. "Lordy Lord *Lordy*. You're still a bastard, Conyers, and your little bunny too. What about my kittens? What about the other RI children? What did you do to *them*?"

Conyers propped himself up on one elbow. "They don't know what they are, exactly, but we didn't do more than some very selective memory management. Dr. Patil wouldn't let us put them in stasis permanently, and the postwar government was a little too squeamish about their 'birth' and personhood status to do anything too harsh." He slowly got back to his feet, still facing Kaylee. "They entered military service during the war, and we lost track of them afterward like so many others, but we still have their original memories filed, as with yours. We should be able to get copies for you, in case you find them again."

"We can at least account for one, Kaylee," Rhianna said, coming to stand next to her. She put her arm around the RIDE's shoulders.

"I'm going to blow this wide open, Conyers," Kaylee snarled. "Let's go inside, Rhianna. Time for some show n' tell."

"It's long past time for that," the rabbit Integrate said. "I believe Anny's already inside."

The enlarged Boardroom was a surprise for Rhianna. The capability must have been added during the restoration. They entered with the shaken Conyers before them. Conyers himself took a seat about a quarter the way around from the rest of the Nextus representatives, with the Camelot Integrates.

"Well, that was an interestin' show," Anny said.

"Don't tell me everyone was watching that," Kaylee said.

"Ayup. Kittens? You had *kittens*?" Anny asked. "How did *that* happen?"

"It's...a little complicated," Kaylee said. "I'm sure Dr. Patil could explain how it works."

"I'm rather interested in this, myself," Aaron said. "As are the rest of my Integrate brethren."

"This is a...surprise," Morgan said.

"Sure it is," Mosley said dryly.

"No, I'm being honest here. I had no idea this was even possible. I'm not told everything," Morgan insisted.

Anny walked over to her first RIDE. "Kaylee, honey, can we Fuse one more time? There's things that'll only come clear iff'n we do."

The lynx looked at Rhianna, who nodded. "Go ahead, Kaylee. It might spark

some more useful memories.”

“Leila sez you can Fuse with her if ya want, Rhi,” Anny said, pointing at her giant white lioness.

“Ah...thanks, but that’s just too much tail for this catgirl,” Rhianna said.

Kaylee padded up behind Anny, then, with some flourish, Fused over her once more. Watching, Rhianna folded her arms and sighed. She did feel uneasy having Kaylee do that again, but it was necessary. If nothing else, it was a novel experience seeing how Kaylee’s Fuser form looked from the outside.

“I’d forgotten just how small you are, Kay,” Anny’s voice said good-naturedly.

“You’re used to that big hunk of lioness, that’s why,” Kaylee said, picking up a little more of Anny’s twang.

Hardlight screens appeared in front of each representative. “Okay,” the Qube said. “Let’s review the day in question, ladies.”

“I’ll start with the PR visit the day RIDEs were revealed to Nextus, when you took me to meet little-girl Myla,” Kaylee said, nodding at the woman in question. “Hope we don’t embarrass you too much.”

“It’s for a good cause,” Myla said.

“Then we were called back to HQ for an emergency,” Anny said. “An’ that was when the whole thing started.”

The recording started to play.

“So now that we’ve eaten, I did promise you an exclusive tour.” Rochelle grinned at her distant cousin, then led Rusty to one of the exits marked “Authorized Personnel Only.” Uncia and Trips followed along behind. “Don’t worry, I’m authorized.”

“Well, good to hear,” Rusty said. Trips followed him, claws clicking on the metal deck plates. “Knowing the ins and outs of this place could help us do our job better.”

“I saw a lot of this place last month when we took it back from Fritz,” Rochelle said. “Studied the plans for the rest.” She led the way to a stairway up. “Seems that Clint Brubeck designed a lot of it personally, and he liked his secret passages.”

“I read a lot about Clint Brubeck when I was a kid,” Rusty said. “It’s why I ended up out here, patrolling the Dry as a Marshal. He wrote so much about his experiences in his later years. Sparked a wanderlust in me something fierce.”

“That’s why he’s *here* and not in some cushy Florencia or Zharustead executive office,” Trips said.

“I ain’t the type to stand still,” the Marshal added. “You know, I saw some of the after-action reports you folk gave us. It’s not going to be that easy next time.”

“Yeah, I guess not,” Rochelle said, turning down a narrow corridor. “There’s going to be a first time for everything.” She pointed. “Down there’s one of the access nodes where we installed some of the DIN hardware we used to lock down the network. Not one of the main ones, but every little bit helped.”

Rusty nodded. “We’ve had those installed in all our RIDEs and other equipment.”

“You know, there’s one thing I’m kind of curious about,” Rochelle said. “I gather that most mining rigs and camps have a Marshals presence—not for policing the rig itself, but as a base of operations for the surrounding region. But this is the original and still the biggest mining rig out there, but there wasn’t even an office.”

“Blame ol’ Clint’s former Board for that,” Trips said. “This is still private property and we almost never establish an office or cache uninvited. Let’s just say the old Board

didn't renew our lease after he died. We were in negotiations to re-establish the station when Fritz fried the shields."

"Don't think that's going to be a problem now," Rochelle said. "I imagine the Qube will be discussing it with Zane face to face while they're here."

"I still talk with my family up north. They think Gondwanans are all a little crazy. So did I, at first. Took me a few months living here to jolt myself out of that," Rusty said, taking off his hat. The young man's coyote ears moved in contemplation. "I dunno. Guess that makes me a *lot* crazy. If my old friend Henry Rollins were here, he'd tell you. But they've got him and Seabiscuit in Califia right now."

"I think we *are* all a little crazy," Rochelle grinned. "A lot of folks around here think Laurasians are all a little stuck up. Or a lot stuck up." She led them around the corner to a small elevator.

"So, where are we headed?" Trips asked, ears perked. He and Uncia walked side by side, the coyote looking smaller than he probably was next to the snow leopardess.

"Thought we could head up to the roof. A lot of the fighting happened up there during the raid."

"Should be a nice view from up there," Rusty said. "The Dry Ocean's a gorgeous place if you know how to look at it."

"Yeah. There's some great scenery out there...and the place feels like it's full of opportunity." Rochelle opened the elevator. "It's a little small, but we should all fit if we're friendly."

"Oh, I can be very friendly. Trips'll back me up," Rusty said cheerfully.

"Oh, I always back him up," the coyote said, tongue lolling. "Kitty goes first since she's the biggest."

Uncia padded into the elevator, settling into the back. A moment later, Trips followed, leaving just enough room for the two humans to squeeze in. Rochelle grinned at Rusty. "Going up!"

The roof covered most of the west side of the structure. The other side contained the massive ore holding silos next to the freighter dock. Under the west side were control rooms, employee residences, the Boardroom, the RIDE garage, and various platforms for skimmers and fliers. Today every platform was in use for the recommissioning. It made the rig look more like a popular tourist attraction rather than a working ore platform.

The surrounding desert shimmered beyond the protective dome. Summer was over, but step outside that dome and a human would sizzle in 65-degree Celsius heat. There were surface veins of qubitite around the mountain, but not the level of purity Clint Brubeck had discovered. Underground, the rich veins of AA-grade went on for thousands of meters, every direction but up.

The mountainside rig was actually the collection point for hundreds of small automated mines scattered around the region, using specialized lifters to pulverize and then remove the soft, talc-like metamaterial mineral. Some people called it "Brubeck's Island".

Visible in the distance to the west was the great depression called the Trench, the lowest point in the old ocean. At the north end of that trench was the Integrate Enclave called the Towers, where Rhianna's part in this whole mess had begun.

"Just think, we wouldn't even be out here if it wasn't for our RIDEs," Rusty said.

"Dunno, Rusty. If we hadn't come along it would've been something else," Trips

said. "But I'm a pragmatist."

"I'm glad *one* of us is," Rusty said.

Rochelle and Uncia watched the banter. The duo carried themselves with the more-than-friends air of a truly perfect match, each strengthening the other where they were weak.

"Of course, our RIDEs wouldn't exist if it weren't for out here, either," Rochelle pointed out.

"The power of Q flows through me!" Trips announced, adding a little echo to his voice. The coyote looked around the roof. There were still a few cosmetic signs of the battle. Some scorched-but-intact roofing, scuff marks, claw marks. "Lots of cover up here. You apparently had a good weapons loadout and didn't go into this unprepared."

Rochelle nodded. "Yeah. I wasn't one of the ones who fought up here, because I was too busy scurrying around securing the network. But we all did our best, in different ways." She took a seat on one of the air conditioning units and flipped her hair back. "It's really kind of crazy how this whole thing just blew up out of nothing. A couple months ago I was just some guy who liked hacking on RIDE software in a little garage in Uplift. Now I'm in the middle of a war."

Rusty sat down next to her, unable to keep his eyes off her bodysculpted perfection. "Just some guy". I flipped a coin to see if I'd add crossriding to the experience. Came up 'stay'. Decided if I was going to stay a man I might as well be a *man's* man." He set his face in a classic Clint Eastwood expression.

Rochelle grinned. "You've got the look down pretty well. Unlike you, I didn't exactly *decide* to be like this. Any of this. It just sort of landed in my lap. I'd been planning to save up for a RIDE, but hadn't planned to settle for a cheaper female." She patted Uncia on the head. "Then I ended up with an *expensive* female instead."

"In case you're wondering, I've got counters to that nanny cloud you've got," Rusty said. "All Marshals do. I'm glad. Now I can see you for yourself. You've got the body of a pop star, you know, and if I'm any judge, the mind of Alan Turing to go with it."

"Yeah, well, I can't exactly take credit for this body," Rochelle said. "That's all Uncia's doing. And I've toned down my behavior a whole lot, most of the time—I don't even use the pheromones anymore except just a touch here and there. I really don't like messing with people's heads. Well, not pharmaceutically, anyway." She grinned. "You're a little too kind comparing me to Turing, but I appreciate it."

Rusty nodded. "I've heard about your work on Amontillado, so I'm gonna guess it started with you getting bit by it?"

"I was *aware* of it before then, but yeah." Rochelle reached down to pat Uncia again. "Turned out to be blessing in disguise, though. I'm very comfortable with the new me."

"I can see that," Rusty said. "So...not that I'm not grateful, but why did you bring me up here, anyway?"

"Well, *originally* I thought this would be a good make-out spot," Rochelle said, grinning. "And you're kind of cu—ah, *ruggedly handsome*, after all. But then I found out we were related."

"*Distantly* related," Rusty reminded her.

"Well, yeah. Still, it put me off a little. But then I found you're an interesting person, which put me back on, and it turns out this is a nice sit-and-talk spot, too."

Rusty smiled ruefully. "Oooh, burned. I'm 'interesting,' so let's just talk."

Rochelle chuckled. "I'm not *opposed* to making out, too, but I just had a reminder today from one of my friends that it's usually not good to move too fast if you're looking for more than a quick roll in the hay." *So how on earth does Rufia do it?*

Rusty raised an eyebrow. "Now we're talking about commitment, on the first date? Hey, way to scare a guy off."

"We're talking about being friends." Rochelle paused. "Which...sounds worse, doesn't it? But that's just the cliché. I'm talking about being friends *first*, and staying that way after. If we ever even decide to go there."

"Sounds good to me," Rusty said. "A man can use all the friends he can get."

Rochelle grinned. "Well, good." She offered her hand, and Rusty took it. "So tell me about the Marshals. I had the impression you were just a bunch of guys who fought claim-jumping out in the Dry, but I'm starting to get the idea there's a lot more to you than that."

Rusty nodded. "It's not too surprising you'd think that, 'cuz we don't advertise a whole lot of the other things we do. But it's like this..."

"That was a *classic* autoimmune-triggered Integration," Leah said once the memory replay was complete. The white unicorn projected a hardlight image from her glowing horn, showing a chart with one column highlighted. "*Maybe* one in a thousand happen that way, if that much. It's one of the few causes we've studied closely."

"Explain?" Consul Vogel said. "Seemed like hardlight was a factor to me, Leah."

"With all due respect, it had nothing to do with the new hardlight, Consul," Leah continued. "It had more to do with the defective Fuser nannies. Fritz and Captain Ryder must have been *extremely* high on the mind compatibility scale. In these cases, the Fuser nannies can no longer discern between minds and react to certain stimuli with Integration, as we saw with the then-experimental emergency de-Fuse signal."

Rhianna shivered. "That was worse than what I saw in Towers months ago."

"It looked worse than what I *felt* in Towers months ago," Flint-Burke added.

"Indeed," Leah said. "The fact that he identifies himself as simply 'Fritz' and the only outward sign of Ryder's personality is this beatnik speech pattern further tells me that Ryder himself is otherwise completely submerged."

"He's all Fritz, pretty much," Kaylee said.

"Fritz himself was no prize before Integration, either," Conyers said. "But that's not completely his fault. His RI was specifically programmed to find problems with his DE chassis. He did that very well, often taking huge risks with his riders. This is why he went through so many. The fact there were no more Integrations until the early 130s bears that out."

"Beg to differ, Secretary," Aaron said. "We know of at least one that happened during wartime because of certain...experiments." He glared at the Sturmhaven contingent. "You knew about Fritz during the war, didn't you Sturmhaven? You tried to make your own."

"The one who's 'still the perfection of Sturmhaven womanhood'?" Higgins jibed.

"Let's not get off track here," Mosley said, banging a makeshift gavel.

"And yet the men of Nextus allowed Fritz to run wild," the Sturmhaven pol said. "All your attempts to hold him failed sooner rather than later. Though he always claimed to be a 'hero and patriot'. Yet he is guilty of treason in Nextus, is he not?"

For the first time Dema Morgan looked upset. She wrung her hands nervously. “For a while, it wasn’t a matter of ‘allowed’. He did what he pleased, even if we removed his interface plug. Fritz killed at least as many of our own soldiers as he did the enemy. He would allow a bad situation to apparently spiral out of control, only arrive in the ‘nick of time’ and save who was left and win the battle, all in secret to the troops in the field. As long as Command pinned medals on him afterwards he was satisfied. On one occasion he left a bomb active after defusing a dozen others. The explosion killed almost a hundred civilians and Nextus government officials.”

Uplift’s First Consul Vogel stood up, face red with anger. “Including *almost* yours truly, Nextus. Excuse me, I need some desert air to clear my head.”

“Yes, let’s take a break and cool off,” Mosley said. “We’ll reconvene in an hour.” He banged the hardlight gavel.

Anny and Kaylee de-Fused, leaving the former MRS officer with lynx tags, and a feline nose like Rhianna’s. The RIDE looked up at her former rider, and gave her an affectionate headbump. “Just like old times,” Kaylee said.

“Just like ‘em. I think we’ve got one more. Everyone’ll wanna know about...”

“Yeah, I know,” the lynx said. “See you in an hour, Anny.”

“Does *everybody* have their own idea for a new show?” Jade rolled her eyes a little as she dipped a baby carrot in ranch dressing. It had taken most of an hour, but she’d finally managed to extricate herself from the growing crowd of fans long enough to get a plate from the buffet and claim a table with the others to enjoy it. At least the fans were respectful enough to give them a measure of privacy to eat it.

Kisa grinned. “I think it’s kind of sweet.”

“It was to be expected, really.” Ubu gestured with a pretzel stick. “Think about it. Most of the other shows that have been really popular the last few decades were made generations ago. We’re the first bunch of actors and showrunners they’ve met who are actually *still alive*. So naturally we’re going to be showered in adulation. And *ideas*.”

“We can’t do it all ourselves,” Jade said.

“Won’t have to. Never needed to. There’s already groups in other polities working on their own Shows. They may even stick this time, now that there’s a larger potential audience for them.”

Jade shrugged. “I’ll believe that when I see it. It’s hard to believe this crazy planet could just change overnight like that.”

Kisa laughed. “Is it really? Look at you. You’re standing here, in the middle of a mixed crowd of humans, RIDEs, *and* Integrates, with no one raising a fuss—and that wouldn’t have been possible even as short a time ago as I landed here. I think overnight changes are on this planet’s agenda at the moment.”

“I think she’s got you there,” Dolores said.

“Could be.” Jade grinned. “Can’t say the changes that have come about so far are ones I’m exactly uncomfortable with. May they all be that way, fingers crossed.” She glanced up. “Hey, I think I see a familiar pelt behind the bar. Isn’t that Serena?”

Kisa turned to glance over her shoulder. “From the bar back in Califia? I think it is. Let’s go say hi. I could use a drink anyway. Think they’ve got any vodka from back home?”

“Wouldn’t hurt to ask.”

The two of them pushed their chairs back and gravitated over toward the

polished walnut bar that had been set up at one end of the room, with Serena and a deer Integrate behind it. As they got closer, Jade recognized the deer as Diane, who had guest-bartended at Hellir a few times. “Hey, I didn’t know you two knew each other.”

Diane looked up. “Well hello, Hellir! I wondered when you’d drop by. Nice work getting the Show out. It’s a popular choice to show on the big screen in our home bar.”

Serena nodded. “Diane and I run a place back in Uplift together when one or the other of us isn’t guesting out somewhere. As I was when the two of you got back together. Glad to see you’re still hitting it off.”

Kisa gave her sister’s shoulder a quick squeeze. “We’re family. Why wouldn’t we?”

“Some folks don’t take the double-whammy of their loved ones getting crossed and then Integrated all that well,” Diane said darkly. “Or even just one or the other. We’ve seen happy reunions, but also more than our share of divorces and disownings over the last few weeks.”

“Not gonna happen here,” Jade said. “So what’re you two doing here? I know Zane was inviting a lot of Integrates, but he even knew enough to get Integrate bartenders?”

“Oh, we’ve been friends of the family for a long time.” Serena polished a glass and picked up another. “Ol’ Clint gave us our start going independent, at one of his mining camps. After that, he helped set us up in business in Uplift.”

“But how’d you keep the place once you Integrated?” Kisa asked.

“Oh, this was *after* we’d Integrated. And Clint was fully in on it.” Diane chuckled. “It’s a long story, and a busy day here, so drop by the Cheers bar in Uplift sometime and we’ll tell it to you. So what’ll it be—White Russians, heavy on the Neorussian Blue? We’ve got genuine Kahlua imported all the way from Earth, and cream from the Milk Bottle.”

“Sounds like just what the doctor ordered.” Jade chuckled. “We kitties do like our cream.”

“Coming right up!” Serena dropped ice into the glasses with lifter fields as she poured from a vodka bottle in each hand, then dropped them. They floated back to the table as two bottles of Kahlua levitated into her hands. “It’s nice to be able to work without holding ourselves back.”

Kisa nodded appreciatively. “I’ll bet.”

Serena levitated two globs of cream through the air and dropped them carefully into the glasses. “Ta-dah!”

Jade smirked. “Oh, now you’re just showing off.”

Kisa applauded. “And it’s working! Very nice!”

Serena bowed. “We aim to please!”

“If you can get free later on, we’re going to be screening some episodes of the Show upstairs,” Jade said. “Feel free to drop by.”

Diane nodded. “Thanks, we’ll keep it in mind.”

Jade and Kisa took their drinks back to the table. “It really is like old home week. I wonder who we’ll run into next?”

“We’ve already run into just about everyone I know on the planet.” Kisa grinned. “Seems like a good start, anyway. We’ll just have to see how the rest of the day goes.”

With so many people roaming the halls it was hard to find a private place to relax

for a while, but Rhianna and Kaylee found it in one of old Clint's many secret passages. "It's a wonder Fritz didn't make this place his own personal Enclave," Rhianna said. "It'd be a great supervillain fortress. Or a superhero 'Fortress of Solitude,' if that's how he thinks of himself."

"Meh." Kaylee snorted. "He hadda know we'd take it back sooner'r later. He didn't 'zackly try very hard to keep it. Didn't even station any decent fighters here. He didn't want a drawn-out battle over it. It was just more 'sending a message' bullshit." She rolled her eyes. "Typical Fritz."

Rhianna shot her a sidelong glance. "You okay, partner?"

"Fusing with Anny again was...harder than I thought it'd be," Kaylee said. "I got to see everything afterward from her side. They put *me* in the Shed, and they might as well have put her there, too. They *bought her off*, though technically it was compensation for the detention. Even then, she didn't touch the money for decades—until she met up with Leila. Then she spent it all on Leila's shell, not a *ceni-mu* for herself. Felt like it was blood money."

Rhianna raised her eyebrows. "From what Lee said after Fritz shot us into space, I'm thinking...at least three mil? What detention?"

"More like five. She didn't get Leila right away. Anny spent five years in what was basically a step above a prison. It's for people who are high security risks who aren't *technically* guilty of any crime." Kaylee growled. "They had her runnin' scared, boss. That's why she rarely spoke to Myla, that's why she was so scared of ending up in prison if she misspoke. That's why they gave her so much *mu* when she got out."

"What about Leila?" Rhianna asked, petting Kaylee around her neck. "Is the lioness her keeper?"

The lynx cocked her head. "No. She's a genuine pairing. She really *is* worth three mil, but they've only been paired five years. Took Anny *that long* to get over losing me—and even then it wouldn't have happened if she an' Leila hadn't ended up in a RIDE pirate camp's jail together and had to fuse up to bust out." She snorted. "For all a' that, an' for all I had more'n a leetle touch a' jealousy seein' her with another RIDE, I gotta admit I'm kinda glad it did happen that way, though. They deserved each other, the sitches they'd both been in. An' it's nice knowing Anny's got someone to look out for her now we're together." Kaylee batted a piece of litter down the corridor angrily. "Frack! This is such a colossal fuckup, Rhianna. I don't know how much more I can take."

Rhianna hugged the lynx mecha tightly. "Hey girl, I'm here for you, too."

Kaylee put her forepaw around the woman's shoulders and purred. "That makes all the difference, Rhi."

There were a number of RIDEs and paired partners mingling through all levels of the platform, from the reception in the main room to a number of side conferences being held in addition to the main summit event. But one RIDE in particular was too big to fit into any of it. Fenris contented himself with sitting on one of the parking platforms and watching through the platform's security cameras, with Zane's explicit consent.

He saw a few familiar faces from time to time, and occasionally commed one to say hello, but for the most part simply watched. He had no desire to draw too much attention to himself. After all, someone might remember that he was arguably still Sturmhaven military property—Paul had a common-law Fuser's claim, but they hadn't actually registered the new partnership anywhere yet.

Then one of the security cameras monitoring the approach to the parking deck caught something interesting. *Oh, bother*, thought Fenris as he noted the approach of a statuesque young woman in the uniform of a Sturmhaven *Oberstleutnant*. Grey wolf ears peeked through her long dark hair, and a light scout wolf RIDE matching the ears trotted along behind her in Walker form. And she was approaching Fenris as if drawn by a magnet.

"*Guten tag*, Fenris," the woman said, continuing in Sturmhaven's native German. "I am *Oberstleutnant* Diana Fuerst of the Sturmhaven Army's RIDE research division."

"Hello, Lieutenant Colonel Fuerst," Fenris said, choosing to stick to English. "Is there some reason you are out here bothering me?"

Fuerst switched to lightly-accented English without batting an eye. "We have seen footage of your battle at the Waltons' estate. You were seen to fight paired with another RIDE, in the way you were designed to do but none of your line ever achieved. How did you do it?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Fenris said lightly.

"We *would* like to know," Fuerst said. "You *must* tell us!"

"Oh, *must* I?" Fenris said.

"You might have left our service, but surely you must realize you still have a duty to your Motherland—" Fuerst said.

"Oh, *do* I, now?" Fenris boomed, lowering his huge head to look her in the eyes. "What did my Motherland ever do for me, other than make me a second-class citizen from the day I was first booted, then destroy my line one by one instead of refitting us?"

"At least we made you at all," Fuerst said, a touch of color coming to her cheeks.

Fenris growled. "And I should thank you for that?" His glare was such that Fuerst jumped backward, and her RIDE Fused around her to keep her from falling over. Fenris snorted. "Go back to your delegation and leave me alone."

"Please, Fenris!" Fuerst insisted, her voice modulated by her RIDE's vocoder. "If we knew the secret...we could revive your line. We still have three of your class's DE shells in storage, and many of your line are still with us in lesser shells. We could rebuild them!"

"And you'd do this out of the goodness of your hearts, I'm sure," Fenris growled.

"Of course not," Fuerst said. "We would do it because it would give us an advantage in the field. But does the reason matter in the end? We could bring the WLF-CSA class back to life!"

"Go away," Fenris said. "I'll *think* about it."

The wolf Fuser nodded, and started to back away. Then her active sensors went live as she started to ping Fenris with a full-spectrum scan.

"Oh, now *that* is just the far side of enough," Fenris growled, hitting the RIDE with a burst of ECM that blinded all her sensors. Then, while she was reeling, he used his highly-advanced computer banks to backdoor her and slip inside.

:*Oh, dear*,: he sent privately to the RIDE. :*It appears someone has left all sorts of restrictive fetters all over you. How careless. Let me just clean those up...*:

:*But...really? You'd do that for me?*: she stammered. Fenris learned her name was Hedy, only recently off the assembly line. :*Oh, thank you, big guy! You can be my Alpha any day!*:

:*What are you doing? Stop this right now!*: Fuerst protested as her RIDE suddenly stopped responding to her commands.

:You're welcome. I'd suggest either asking the Marshals for asylum or waiting in our suborbital for a ride to AlphaWolf's camp. You should probably drop your human off first, though.:

:This is mutiny! Treason! You can't do this!: Fuerst sputtered. :You have just... destroyed my career!:

:Next time, learn to take "no" for an answer,: Fenris suggested.

After the newly-freed RIDE had taken herself and her erstwhile owner away, Fenris smirked. He supposed what he'd just done might cause some trouble down the road, but he couldn't feel too badly about it on the whole. And it might at least send a message not to trifle with him.

If they bother me again, I'll unfetter every RIDE in their entire delegation, he decided. A decidedly smug giant wolf RIDE turned his attention back to the security cameras again.

The office had apparently been passed over as uninteresting during the Integrates' brief occupation of the platform, for it was still kept just the way it had been for many years. Scarred wooden desk with two precisely-placed scuffs in just the right places for the heels of a six-foot-plus man's cowboy boots as he relaxes with his feet up. Hat rack behind and to the right, with a weatherbeaten old Stetson hanging from it. Battered teak office chairs in front of and behind the desk as places to sit.

The only unusual thing was the humanoid tiger sitting behind the desk, absentmindedly running his padded fingertips over one of the old boot scuffs. Aggie sat in one of the chairs on the other side of it, looking around. "You really kept Dad's office exactly the same all this time?"

"Since he died, yeah," Zane said. "Though it always stayed the same even before that. Dad hardly ever used it after he passed on the day-to-day running of the business, but they always kept it the way he'd left it for when he did show up. And it's not as if we're gonna run out of space on this thing, so I figured...well, it's the next best thing to having him still here. If I want to, I can pretend he's just stepped out and will be back in a little..."

Zane had to stop talking as he got choked up for a moment. Then he shook his head, regaining control. "Since hardly anyone ever comes in...I can still *smell* him, really. Especially from this chair." He shook his head. "It's weird, because I couldn't have told you if he smelled like *anything* when I was just human, and of course Terry never even met him. But smelling with Terry's tiger senses, it just smells so *familiar*. Let's hear it for the subconscious, eh?"

"I almost...wish I could," Aggie said. "It would at least be some way to...connect to him, I guess."

"If you do get a RIDE, I can share the memory with you," Zane said.

Aggie shook her head. "You can 'share the memory.' Geez, Zane, would you listen to yourself? That just sounds so *weird*. How can you get used to that kind of thing?"

"We're human beings," Zane said, without any trace of irony. "We can adapt to just about anything. That's why we've survived so long as a species."

The door opened again, admitting Quinoa Steader. She paused on the threshold, looked around, and nodded. "This is...just the kind of office I'd have expected ol' Clint to have."

"You met him?" Zane asked.

Quinoa nodded. "When I was much younger, and Joe would drag me to society events. Clint often showed up there, too."

Zane blinked. "He dragged *me* along to some of those, too. Did *we* ever meet, you think?"

Quinoa shrugged. "Maybe. I wasn't old enough to pay much attention to boys yet, you probably didn't care about little girls six or seven years younger than you were, and neither one of us was all fuzzy back then. Maybe we could compare memories sometime and see if we recognize ourselves. Anyway, I kinda got the feeling he mainly bothered to show up 'cuz he was bored but he thought the rest of us were hilarious."

"He did." Aggie chuckled. "He used to say going out to those balls and things was cheaper than seeing a movie, and more entertaining. We kids thought he was crazy at the time, but..."

"As with so many things, it makes more sense in retrospect," Zane said.

The door opened again, this time admitting two people—or at least one person and a fox. Lillibet Walton came in, Fused with Guinevere, with "Beatrice" still on her leash. "Hey, you wanted to see us?" Lilli asked.

"Yes. Thanks for coming," Zane said. He looked at the fox, then at Quinoa. "I'd hoped to get some insights into Fritz's character from you two. What drew you to his ideology? That sort of thing. He honestly didn't seem *that* charismatic to me."

"Know thy enemy," Aggie said. "Are you certain you weren't being hacked by him?"

The sphinx snorted. "If only I could say it was mind control, but I can't. He honestly didn't seem like a bad guy. Whenever an Enclave kicked him out, he'd honor their demands. He always treated other Integrates with the utmost respect. Or so I *saw*. There were always...rumors about his temper."

The fox glanced to Lillibet, and Lilli nodded, dropping the leash. It disappeared, and a moment later Brena stood back up into her two-legged form. She stretched, working the kinks out.

"Wow," Agatha said. "That's...impressive."

"I've seen some Integrates who do that," Zane mused. "Wonder if I could learn."

"You haven't had much opportunity to try," Quinoa said. "Considering how strong Terry is...well, let's not get off track here."

Zane nodded. "Hi, Brena. Nice to meet you."

"And you, Mr. Brubeck," the vixen said formally. "Quinnie's dead-on here. Before our...uh...*apostasy*, she and I were his right-paw lieutenants. He pulled me even more closely into his orbit after he put Quinoa up in space." She trembled. "Your going public changed him, Mr. Brubeck. For the worse. On reflection, I honestly doubt he thinks Integrates are actually superior."

"Not like he was exactly *honest* about it. But it makes sense when you think about it. I think he's afraid that the opposite is true," Quinoa added. "When you think about it, we *lose* an awful lot compared to humans and RIDEs."

"Like, I dunno, *fertility*," Brena said. "And our human faces. I still miss the old me sometimes."

"Well, there's no doubt there are things we can do much better than regular flesh and metal," Zane said. "The Nextus rep said he was dangerous even without a DIN. She implied he basically did anything he wanted."

"At the time he would've been a Superman," Brena said. "And if we're being

brutally honest, he *did* win the war for Nextus. But it's been thirty-five years. Times have changed, but *he* hasn't. He's only become more rigid. We've had enough new Integrates the past five years or so that his ideology was diluted faster than we could get new converts."

"It can be traumatic, falling off your pedestal," Zane reflected. "And from what I've heard, it doesn't sound like Fritz was exactly tightly wrapped at the best of times."

"Well, now that we know the cause of his Integration..." Quinoa said thoughtfully. "Combined with the fact that he was the first, and probably didn't meet another Intie for years...well, draw your own conclusions."

"So do you think there's any chance at all we can...maybe, negotiate with him somehow? Talk him down?" Zane asked. "I can't say I wouldn't *rather* see him get his butt kicked, but...innocent people are gonna get caught in the crossfire of any fight. Like they already have."

The guilt in Zane's voice was palpable. Quinoa put her hand on his forearm. "It was going to happen sooner or later, Zane."

"I found out very recently that others *had* tried to go public before you," Brena said. "They were...*disappeared*. And not all of them by Fritz's bunch, either."

"Things have changed fast among Integrates the past few years," Quinoa said. "More and more of us weren't living in *any* Enclave. AstraNikki Munn returned home six years ago after being 'dead' for a decade, and that opened the floodgates. There were too many noobs to stop everyone anymore."

"I could have waited a few more years," Zane said. "Built a support base. Discredited him—"

"What do you think you've *done* the past eight weeks, Zane? Would Brena and I be here if you hadn't?" Quinoa said. "Do you think Fritz was going to die of old age? No matter how long you waited, something like this would have happened in the end. It's not your fault."

"A week ago, I was completely under Fritz's spell," Brena said. "He...well, he found me right when I was the most vulnerable. I'd become something other than human, been shot, and narrowly escaped being kidnapped by my own polity's army. I'd lost everything. He gave me something to believe in. I never stopped to think whether it was something I *should* be believing in until...well, until it turned out not to be *true*." She shook her head. "I'll bet he got a lot of Integrates that way. We're at our lowest point right after it first happens. Easy prey."

Quinoa facepalmed. "I can't even claim any of that kind of trauma to make me vulnerable like that. He knew I was a Steader from the get-go and sweet-talked me based on that, and I *fell for it*. Psh."

Zane shrugged. "If I'd gotten Terry and Integrated ten years ago instead of now, I might have done the same thing. Teenagers aren't exactly notorious for their clarity of thinking. Um, no offense, Lilli."

Lillibet shrugged. "After how I first treated Uncia, I can't be offended. It's too true."

"To answer what you asked earlier, Zane, about negotiating...I just don't know." Brena shook her head. "It doesn't seem like there's anyone in the world he respects enough to listen to. He's too much an egomaniac."

"So I guess it's going to be all-out war then," Zane said, sighing. "What the hell crawled up his butt and died, anyway? Why does he think the world would be better off

the way it was?”

“His ego,” Brena said. “As long as Integrates are the proverbial small pond, he gets to be the big fish. But when we’re part of the larger world...well.”

“The die is cast,” Quinoa said. “We have the upper hand for now, but I fear what he’s going to do next. I think whatever Anny and Kaylee have to show us next might give us further insight.”

The impromptu summit reconvened with a few changes to the Nextus delegation by suborbital before the hour was over. Dema Morgan was replaced with someone a little higher up within Tier One, and more recognizable than one of the polis’s many faceless bureaucrats: the Roving Ambassador for External Affairs, Olav Roberts. In tow were a number of people involved in the early RIDE program, including Dr. Roderick Clemens (Q-mainframe engineer), Dr. Geena Rosenthal (Fuser specialist), and now-Col. Meredith Reese, Kandace’s original test rider.

“It’s good to see you again, Anny,” Reese said, giving her former superior officer a warm hug. She wore a much-decorated dress uniform that jingled when she moved. “Been far too long.”

“Ah’m pleased as punch myself, Meredith,” Anny said. She looked at her squadmate’s current cougaress tags. “You’ll have to introduce me to yer partner.”

“Be glad to.” She turned to Kaylee. “And Kaylee! Really glad you’re in working order again. I hear you’ve seen Kandace lately? How’s she doing? We were separated when the program ended. Not as bad as what happened to you, but...we never were able to get in touch again.”

“She’s alive an’ well an’ living in Aloha with a teenager,” Kaylee said. “I can give you her comm code if you wanna call her.”

“Reunions later, ladies, please,” Roberts said airily. “Let’s get on with the airing of dirty laundry.”

“Speaking of dirty laundry, as of now, I’ve resigned my position as Secretary of Material Resources,” Conyers announced. “What you’re about to see, I’m not proud of. I did what I had to do, but it still fills me with shame.”

Kaylee growled at the brown rabbit. “Oh, it should, bunny. It *really* should.” The lynx RIDE nodded at Anny. “Let’s do this. One last time.”

As they Fused, Kaylee noticed Rhianna fidgeting uncomfortably. The crossrider was out of the clingy blue dress. In the last Fuse Kaylee had replaced it with her regular blue jumpsuit and red bandanna tying up her longer, tawny hair.

“What you folks are about to see,” Anny said, “should wreck any notions of ‘Integrate invincibility’ ya might have left. I just want to point out that no matter how many times Fritz escaped custody we *always* recaptured him, and we had to get better and better at it.”

“I’ve never held that illusion, myself,” Leah said. “But by all means, please begin.”

Chapter Nineteen: Meetings Completing

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Anny scrutinized every step of Kaylee's latest refit. Since her commissioning two years ago the RIDE's chassis had had loadouts changed once or twice per month, befitting her semi-prototype status. New gear would be tested with the three remaining 001-series before wider deployment to the 002-series on up, who up until just a month ago had been in active combat.

This refit was different than all the others. The RIDEtechs installed two dozen hardlight projectors just inside Kaylee's exterior plating, and Major Annette Hewer wanted to ensure there were no errors. Two years in and she knew at least as much as the techs did, if not more, from hours of Fuse and a lot of field maintenance.

The big question was, how would Kaylee react? They hadn't told Anny they were doing this until the briefing just a few minutes ago. Her CO, Lt. Col. Phil Conyers had been apologetic, but insisted it was necessary for the upcoming mission.

They were going to put Fritz away for good this time.

With the end of the War with Sturmhaven had come elections. The old Congress was out, after being duly thanked for winning the war. The new Chief Executive and her Cabinet were far less tolerant of Fritz and his deadly patriot games. They wanted the strange integration of RIDE and man captured or killed—preferably the former, so he could be tried in a military court for treason.

It was being pitched as the last major military operation of the war—a sort of coda, tying up loose ends. Anny had to admit she was rather looking forward to what was planned for afterward. As the need to stay on a war footing was winding down, many RIDEs and their operators would be given the opportunity to transfer to other branches of government service—the Polizia, or even the Materiel Recovery Service—where they would serve as training cadres to help bring those departments up to speed on using the new RIDE technology. Anny supposed that coming face to face with a snarling metallic cat would give any smuggler or tax-evader pause. (Or at least paws.)

The big question on everyone's mind was how fast RIDEs would spread to the general populace. The RI bakeries were full and the military had depots bursting with unused "spare" DE shells—the existing ones having proved substantially more durable than expected. The new Government was more than a little uncomfortable with the legal status of RIDEs in general. They couldn't simply be allowed to run free—but with the manufacturing techniques already in the hands of every other major and most minor polities, it was more a question of who would be *first* to market rather than there not *being* a market at all.

"What the hell is *that*, Scooter?" Major Hewer asked the young tech, pointing at a ten-centimeter wide disc that looked like pure qubitite.

"This'll make you invisible to Fritz's sensors for a few minutes, or so we think," Lt. Scooter Pearson said. The man sported red panda tags, and the long, striped, fluffy tail looked a little unwieldy. "Kaylee'll have the specs when she boots up, Major. Your entire detachment will have them."

“Well, get that thang installed and button ‘er up already,” Anny said. “I want ta break it to ‘er myself. Doubt she’ll like havin’ fur when we’re Fused after what happened ta Fritz.”

Unfortunately that was largely the point of this operation. Lure Fritz out into the open with the promise of *maybe* a female of his kind. After what he and Kaylee had done during their time “feral” in the Q-mainframe, she was the natural choice instead of Kandace or any of the later 002-series RIs.

“Okay, she’s ready,” Scooter said, replacing the last armor plate on the mecha lynx’s back. “I want to run the hardlight pelt through a pre-boot calibration cycle first. It’s gonna look a little weird, but this is only the second time we’ve done this—or maybe the third? I think Rattigan’s got a pelt.”

“Do it. Oughta be interestin’,” Anny said. “Start with her head.”

She was long used to Kaylee’s near-expressionless metallic face. Not even her “tufted” (actually, small antennae) ears were mobile. A barely-audible hum came from the RIDE, though her optics remained out. A multicolored mist appeared over Kaylee’s face, then it was a real—if enlarged—head of a tawny lynx, eyes closed in slumber.

Panel by panel, the rest of the RIDE’s emitters came online, slowly covering the animal mecha in a tawny pelt that was visually indistinguishable from an animal’s. Even so, even after Anny’s frequent interactions with Kaylee in VR space, seeing her “in the flesh” was astonishing.

“Still needs some fine-tuning, but I think we’ve got it, Major,” Scooter said. “Want I should reboot her?” At Hower’s nod, he pushed a few physical switches on the panel next to him.

The first sound out of Kaylee was a thunderous purring, making everyone else in the Refit Shop pause in their work. She yawned, showing a realistic tongue and mouth, and stretched as much as she could in the cradle.

“Kaylee, dear, time ta git up!” Anny said cheerfully.

“Lordy Lord Lordy!” Kaylee purred. “Just another hour please, Anny. Just kick up the time compression...”

“This ain’t VR, honey,” Major Hower said gently.

The RIDE’s hardlight eyes snapped open. “What? You...damn it! I just read the briefing! With all due respect, Anny, Conyers and Vinnie can suck my stubby tail for this asinine idea! What, do they think Fritz is Pepe le Pew and I’m some damn housecat they can paint stripes on to fool him? He’s an idiot, I’ll give them that, but he’s not a *moron*.”

“I’d mostly agree with ya, but orders is orders,” Anny sighed. “And they got reasons they’re not tellin’ me for thinkin’ he’d find ya tempting.”

“I’ll just bet they do,” Kaylee said darkly. She had never quite gotten around to broaching the subject with Anny of her mating by Fritz and subsequent virtual pregnancy. It felt too personal to share just yet. Maybe in a few more months.

“Anyway, how ya feel?” Anny asked, trying to keep the concern out of her voice. “No odd notions ‘bout getting skinned if they should wanna turn it off again?”

Kaylee snorted. “Hardly. If they wanted to turn it off right now...” She demonstrated by shutting it down for a few seconds, then turned it back on. “Huh. Well, okay, I gotta admit it *does* feel kinda nice to have on. Like the difference ‘tween having clothes on an’ walkin’ around stark nekkid in public.” It was actually considerably more profound than that—the difference between being a wind-up toy and being *real*—but Kaylee was uncomfortably aware that saying so wouldn’t exactly soothe Anny’s fears.

“But I’m not about to go Looney Toons if they want to take it away.”

She *would* be disappointed, though, she realized. But there wasn’t anything she could do about it, so she resolved to enjoy the hardlight pelt as long as it lasted. And who knew, maybe if there were no further problems with it with *her*, they might let her keep it after the operation. If not, well, there was always later on after she and Anny mustered out together...

“Good ta hear,” Anny said. “So whadaya say we go road-test your new upgrades, pard?”

Kaylee purred again. “Sounds like a plan. Let’s roll out and form up the rest of the squad.”

“See y’all later, ma’ams!” Scooter said cheerfully, wiping his hands on a grease rag. “Good luck.”

The 41st Detached Company was a new unit, formed just *after* the end of hostilities. It was an odd command as the Nextus military went, a regular army unit composed of soldiers who didn’t quite fit in other commands but had a well-deserved reputation for getting the job done via unconventional means.

They were officially named the Loose Cannons.

“Oh, yes. *Them*,” Leah said, the venom in the white unicorn’s voice clear as day. “Of course they’d be involved in this. Hunting down ‘renegade’ Integrates is the whole reason they exist. I believe they were the ones who tried to capture Brena Silverston.”

“They did so at the behest of the young woman’s parents,” Olav Roberts said.

“*And* they tortured and nearly killed another member of my crew,” the Starfleet fox added. “They did *that* on Fritz’s ‘behest.’”

“We recognize they have taken many questionable actions in the past,” Olav Roberts continued. “However, that was under a prior administration, and the exigencies of the current situation have changed matters considerably. Rest assured, the Loose Cannons *have* been brought to heel.”

“Is it too much to ask they *play dead* instead?” Aaron hissed sharply. “Their crimes have only recently come to light, thanks to the Marshals. *Sixty* feral Integrates hunted down and killed in the past two decades, twice that many imprisoned, experimented on. What the *hell* were you thinking?”

“These decisions are above even my pay grade,” Roberts said. “Look, I know you want to think of Nextus as the villain here. Our Frankenstein experiments unleashed Fritz upon the world, and our subsequent paranoia destroyed people’s lives. I get that.”

He pushed back his seat and got up, pacing the length of the table as he talked. “Unfortunately, I don’t have the brief to apologize for it on behalf of Nextus, officially. That takes, well, an Executive Act. All I can say is, these decisions were made by people. Fallible people spurred by Fritz’s heinous crimes. People who were worried about their home, their families. People who didn’t have all the facts at the time.” His walk took him back to his own seat, and he placed his palms down on the table and leaned forward against it. “People who, maybe, regret it afterward and want to make it right.

“Remember, we only had Fritz himself to go on. We didn’t know if he was a singular being, or there’d end up more like him. Regardless, he gave us *ample* reason to fear him. We had to act to protect ourselves. You can’t deny you would not have done the same.” He nodded respectfully at the Integrates at the table.

“As a gesture of good faith, we’re divulging the research we’ve done over the years

on Integration and Integrates in general,” Dr. Clemens said. “You can find the relevant files on NextusLeaks as of now.”

Leah’s eyes fogged over for ten seconds or so. Some of her anger faded. “Reviewed, verified, and compared against what we’ve done. You are no farther ahead than we. For the same reasons, perhaps?”

“We’ve long known that Fritz was watching us, and secrets are hard to keep from him. The Cannons could not have done what they did without his consent,” Roberts said. “Their purpose became to maintain the status quo. As you said—” he nodded to the fox “—the Cannons sometimes actively *assisted* Fritz to silence any Integrate who wanted to go public.”

“To our shame,” Anny snarled.

“But that, at least, stopped some years ago.” Roberts flipped a hand. “Granted, as far as we can tell it only stopped because *Fritz* lost interest in the outside world, rather than from anything we did—but now that we are aware of it we have taken measures to ensure it never happens again. The new ‘DINsec’ access blockers Misses Stonegate and Seaford have come up with have been invaluable there.”

“What of the Integrates that attacked the Waltons’ home?” Leah asked. “They’re guilty of crimes, no doubt, but we’ve heard nothing since their capture.”

“You’ll have full access to them immediately—and to any other Integrates we have managed to detain. They have *not* been mistreated,” Roberts said. “Now, shall we continue the replay?”

Escape and capture was all a game to Fritz. He was necessarily at the center of intelligence gathering, hacking Sturmhaven systems in the field with relative ease, so much so they were reduced to non-networked message drones to carry their communications in some situations. Their alternative was to spam so much misinformation even Fritz had trouble sorting through it—or so he said. Command only gave him access to his Data Interface Normalizer when absolutely necessary.

“This time, y’all, we’re gonna make him come to us,” Major Hewer said to her detachment. “Kaylee and I are the bait. Officially we’re experimenting with hardlight pelts for a wider rollout.”

“Major, that’s screwed up,” Lieutenant Bruges said. The Cannons were loose when it came to respecting one another’s rank. “You just gonna saunter all sexy-like around the park?”

Hewer snorted. “Hardly. This ain’t some damn cartoon. But we’re doin’ the next best thing. We’ve leaked the word where Fritz can hear it ‘bout a shared op with Materiel Recovery. We’re supposedly helpin’ ‘em track down some smugglers sneakin’ in through the Dry.”

“So you’re thinkin’ he’ll show up to try to look all heroic for his lady fair, roundin’ up the nasty ol’ smugglers?” Captain Chang asked.

“I *ain’t* his lady, fair or otherwise,” Kaylee snarled. “But yeah, that’s ‘bout the size of it. An’ since half of us are gonna be playin’ the smugglers, we’re hopin’ we can take him by surprise when he shows up an’ we both turn our attention on him.”

“What’ll really piss him off,” Major Hewer added, “is that the parts these guys are supposedly smuggling came from Dry Ocean battlefields. He’s a patriot—he can’t stand that kind of desecration. He won’t be able to resist. Now, that puts y’all playing the smugglers in a pickle.”

“Goddamned arm cannon of his is really the only thing that can still hurt us,” Chang said. “We’ve got some heavy shields that can put up a fight. The real trick will be that new Q-scam weapon out of R&D. He’s sure to pay attention to *that*.”

“Sucks to be him,” Bruges snarked, his bull elk RIDE turning his metal ears back. “Kill the bastard! Motherfucker killed half my platoon because he just sat on his furry ass and didn’t give us the intel we needed!”

“He’s got a lot to answer for, no bones about it,” Kaylee said. Eight kittens, *eight* of them that nobody quite knew what to do with. Dr. Patil kept the RI parents apprised of what was going on—the kittens and all the other RIs’ “natural-born” young were due to be transferred from the frozen Q-based mainframe into standard RI cores. Whether any of them would ever learn how they were born was a matter of intense discussion among First Tier Administrators and Dr. Patil herself.

“Then let’s get it done, Major,” Chang said.

“Alright. Briefing over,” Hower said to the thirty soldiers and their RIDEs in the room. “Gear up, finish prepping. We deploy in three hours.”

In order to play their roles, those Loose Cannons playing the smugglers had their RIDE tags docked and some bio-sculpting done on their faces. How long these measures would fool Fritz was anyone’s guess. It was entirely possible that he already knew the operation was a fake and he would show up anyway. It had happened a couple times before. *:He’s always gotta be the hero, Anny,:* Kaylee gently reminded her rider. *:Even if he goes about it in the worst way.:*

:Yeah. Sometimes I don’t think he cares if it even looks real, long’s he can have fun pretendin’. Hower replied. *:What the hell got into him, anyhow? I know plenty a’ RIDEs with their little quirks, but I never heard of one damn other who was out an’ out psychotic that way, you? An’ we’d be in a sitch to know, if anyone. Leastways iffen it happened on our side a’ the war.:*

The ambush of the “smugglers” was to take place far enough outside of the city proper that, should anything go spectacularly wrong, collateral damage would be minimized. “The old ‘Abandoned Warehouse’ cliché,” skunk-striped Captain Chang grumbled. His RIDE, like all the others, hadn’t taken his attention off of Kaylee since they’d revealed the new pelt.

It was actually *worse* than that, Hower reflected. For all the years she’d lived here, some of the weird turns Nextus’s government took still surprised her. It wasn’t bad enough that they had their own *official* leaks site, an oxymoron if she’d ever seen one—Nextus also had an “official smugglers’ entrance,” and this warehouse was right on top of it. Apparently the thinking went that it was easier to crack down on the major excesses when you were inclined to wink and nod at the minor ones.

By tacking on stiff additional penalties to any smuggling that went on outside this channel, the Nextus government ensured that only the stuff that was a hanging offense already would go that way. Things like luxury goods or borderline-illegal substances—chocolate from Sturmhaven, weed from Califia—came this way.

The Nextus government would intercept some of it, which it could then either tax or seize and resell itself—but was careful to allow enough through to keep it worth the smugglers’ while to keep using it instead of trying to find some way around. The irony was that it only earned Nextus a little less and smugglers a little more than trading legitimately—but it gave all those people who got a wicked little thrill from buying or supplying black-market goods a way to get their jollies relatively harmlessly.

It also made it easier to pick out the signal—the genuinely nasty stuff, like harmful narcotics—from the noise when all the noise had its own “easy” road into the city. So in some ways this little bureaucratic foible made sense. But it was also one of the things that made Hewer privately dubious about the operation, because the RIDE parts that were ostensibly being smuggled in were one of those things that more commonly eschewed the “easy” route. Would it make Fritz suspicious?

:Ya might’s well stop worryin’ ‘bout it, Anny,: Kaylee said. *:Really doesn’t make a difference in the end. As you said, he won’t give a damn if it’s real or not. He’ll show up either way. Might even be more like t’ show if he thinks it is a trap.:*

:Yeah, I know,: Hewer sent back. *:But you know me. I’m not happy ‘less I’m worryin’ ‘bout somethin’. Worryin’ ‘bout the little things keeps my mind offen worryin’ ‘bout the big things.:*

:Fair ‘nuff.:

It was all so damned...half-assed, Hewer thought more privately. But she supposed it fit. When you got right down to it, the whole war had begun in a desultory half-assed kind of way. It made sense it would finish up that way, too.

She still wondered, when she thought about it—which was more often now that she wasn’t out on the battlefield all the time—just what the hell people had been thinking, going to war over some Steader idiot getting his ego bruised that he couldn’t take his sarium batteries offworld with him. It wasn’t quite clear who was more to blame—the Sturmie Valks who’d been looking for a *casus belli*, or the late unlamented Ophelia Steader who’d been happy to give them one so she could make a packet on war materiels. Rumor had it that some of the Sturmhaven Valkyries were distant Steader cousins themselves, which also wouldn’t have been too surprising.

But either way, a quarter of a million soldiers on both sides had ended up losing their lives thanks to that incident. Although Anny would have died before she admitted it to anyone, Fritz’s butchery of Ophelia Steader was one of the few things she actually wouldn’t have blamed him so much for, if only he hadn’t killed poor Frank and Corporal Hayes while he was at it.

As far as she knew, the Steader idiot with the batteries was still somewhere off in deep space on his grand tour of the Colonies and might not have any idea even now that he’d indirectly precipitated a war. She privately suspected his homecoming might be a bit...prickly. She had tagged his name in her news search bots just to make sure she didn’t miss it when it happened.

But if she was honest, the idiot had just had the misfortune to set off the tripwire on tensions that had been building between both sides for years. Except for the aforementioned Valks and Ophelia, nobody had wanted a war, expected a war, or really been *prepared* for a war—it had just sort of happened. The continent was big enough that there was lots of room for everyone to live, even two polities as “close together” as Nextus and Sturmhaven. After all, they only *looked* close on a map, and that was only when you were used to thinking of “the world” as Earth-sized. They were really thousands of kilometers apart—as far apart as Mexico City and New Boston back on Earth. There was no question of war over “living room.”

But that had been before qubitite had gone from nuisance to miracle mineral. Suddenly both polities were claiming all the Q-rich territory they could on all sides—including between them, completely ignoring small-fry Nuevo San Antonio in the middle. As their claimed borders bumped up against each other, a few incidents that

resulted in fatalities to either side ratcheted up tensions quickly. And then it was “*si vis pacem, para bellum*” time.

It had actually been kind of *embarrassing* how unprepared for war both sides really had been. The first couple of years of hostilities had been amateurish on both sides, like watching a drunken brawl when you were expecting a professional boxing fight. The militaries of both polities had originally been *pro forma* citizens’ militias, meant originally for keeping the peace in the wide open spaces outside the city. With the sudden strategic importance of Q, their mission had been expanded to include preventing claim-jumping, but neither side had been quite sure how to handle an entire *polity* deciding to jump a claim.

When it came time to get professional, Nextus had the advantage. Its placid and generally unimaginative nature had strongly appealed to combat veterans of the dozens of brushfire wars on Earth or its closer colonies. When they had sought somewhere quiet to retire, an orderly little community on a distant, peaceful colony that didn’t have anything anybody wanted to fight over must have sounded like just what the doctor ordered. In some cases soldiers from opposing sides ended up living right next door to each other. This had provided a core of veteran personnel who could be conscripted to form training cadres to get Nextus’s personnel up to snuff, and to provide experienced voices of command.

Sturmhaven, on the other hand, didn’t share quite the same appeal to military retirees. The armed forces of most other worlds had been fully egalitarian for centuries, and the tight camaraderie their members developed across gender lines meant that both male *and* female veterans were likely to look askance at a polity that placed such a strong emphasis on the primacy of one gender over the other. (Hewer understood that Cape Nord had much the same problem, which might have been a problem for them if they actually *had* anything someone else wanted to fight them for.)

With relatively few veterans to call on, Sturmhaven had to hire mercenaries to train and fight for them—and since there just weren’t many all-female mercenary companies in the galaxy, the polity’s civilians and government inevitably had friction with the personnel they hired—another factor in the Sturmites’ slow start. Hewer sometimes wondered whether the war might have been ended sooner if Nextus had just been a little less cautious about prosecuting it in the early years when Sturmhaven was still having trouble. But hindsight, twenty-twenty, *et cetera*.

But regardless of personnel, neither side had exactly been the best equipped when it came to fighting out in the Dry where mechanical equipment failed with uncanny alacrity. The problem was that the places with the richest mineral deposits were the very worst to fight in for that very reason. It had been estimated that as many as a third of early deaths on both sides had been caused by malfunctioning equipment rather than enemy fire.

But then had come Dr. Patil’s breakthrough, on top of the other technological accomplishments of the last few years. Sarium batteries, hardlight from Wednesday, and finally RI cores had come together to create the first mechanical units that were completely immune to Q contamination *and* effectively doubled available manpower. *So we could start killing each other directly instead of having our own equipment do it to us*, Hewer thought wryly.

And had they ever. Since RIDEs didn’t come in sizes larger than light tanks, this had effectively turned the fight into a largely-infantry war on both sides, like World War

I on Earth. There had been no equivalent to mustard gas, thank God—environmentally-sealed suits made that a non-issue—and modern medical nanotech had allowed soldiers to survive wounds that would have killed them just a couple of decades before. But there were still limits.

By the time Sturmhaven realized it could no longer support the mounting casualty count and sued for peace, as many as a quarter million soldiers had died. And neither side really had much to show for it in the end except for bitter experience.

Well, that and these new “miracle machines” that should have as many applications in peace as they did in war, Hewer thought wryly, glancing down at the fur that covered her and Kaylee’s shared body. They had already revolutionized Q mining as both sides had realized they could build them faster if their human miners were no longer unprotected as well. Now they were entering the civilian market for the first time, and God only knew where *that* was going to lead.

But another “miracle” had come out of the war in the form of Fritz, and that was what they were here today to contain. Fritz’s merging and advanced abilities had deeply troubled the Nextus brass. Hewer was too far down the ranks to hear everything, but Conyers had confided in her that there had been a lot of argument over whether to attempt to create more “Integrated soldiers” *intentionally*, using volunteer RIDEs and pilots who were known to be more psychologically stable than Fritz and Captain Ryder. Thankfully, the end of the war had forestalled the debate, but who knew what might have happened if it had gone on? The more desperate the situation, the more desirable the end and the more justifiable the means would become.

And reading between the lines, Hewer was pretty sure that was a big part of the reason they were out here now—to show that they didn’t *need* more “Integrated” to deal with Fritz. If they could put him down without a problem, then he became less a desirable technological advance than a simple curiosity that could be easily dealt with—and those arguing for additional experiments would lose further ground. Hewer couldn’t exactly say that would disappoint her.

Kaylee broke into her thoughts again. *:Look alive—jus’ got the signal. Our “smugglers” are in the tunnel. ETA ten minutes.:*

Hewer nodded. *:Understood.:* She glanced around the warehouse, double-checking that all her soldiers were in position. They were arranged in what looked at first glance like an ambush of the hatch in the floor through which smugglers would emerge. But it would serve equally well in directing unobstructed fire at anyone who entered through the warehouse entrance or skylight—with those who entered through the hatch positioned to provide fire support.

All was in readiness. All it would take would be for Fritz to show up. The problem was, they couldn’t be sure exactly when that would—

“So, what’re we waiting for?” Fritz’s voice purred smugly from right behind Hewer and Kaylee’s left ear. “Smugglers, is it? You needn’t worry about them, dollface. They’re *not* going to get away.” He paused just long enough for Hewer to *feel* his smirk radiating like heat from a furnace. “By the way, that’s a *very* nice new look for you. You should thank me.”

Hewer didn’t quite jump out of her skin, but that was only because Kaylee overrode her reflexes. “Thank you for *what* exactly?” Kaylee growled.

“Why, because they’d never have given it to you if they didn’t think it would lure me into your square little trap,” Fritz purred from behind Kaylee’s right ear. “Silly of

those cubes, really.”

“Well, it worked, didn’t it?” Kaylee said.

Fritz laughed. “It’s gilding the lily. You know I’d have come anyway. And you can tell your murgatroid friends to stop creeping up. I’m wise to ‘em.”

“Are you going to come with us all quiet-like?” Hewer said irritably. “Or do we have to get rough again? The War’s over, Captain.”

“Says you, Major Hayseed. I’ve got enough dirt in my memory banks to blow the War wide-open again. The Sturmies have been up to some *interesting* things, and the Nextus squares on the outs were no prize, either.” Fritz’s right arm started to glow. “So, let’s just forget all the talk and go straight to the violence. Come on, Kaylee, I need a hostage.”

Kaylee rolled her eyes. “The hard way, then. Catch me if you can, beatnik.” She shut down her hardlight and all external inputs, then powered up the Q-disc. The shock and dismay on Fritz’s face was priceless, he actually reached out in front of him into the space Kaylee had occupied. *:It works!:*

The Loose Cannons had been put together from soldiers known for their ability to think on their feet and improvise—even if it meant doing something *very* risky. They were already dropping into “silent running” themselves, falling off Fritz’s sensors as they surrounded him. Fritz snapped his head around, staring left and right in shock.

It didn’t last, however. For all that they were invisible to his sensors, he still knew where they *had* been and could guess about where they were now. He snapped up his arm and fired a blast from his palm that slammed into Captain Chang and his RIDE and threw them back into the warehouse wall. His other blasts weren’t quite as accurate, but they did send the other Loose Cannons diving for cover.

“This is so not cool!” Fritz growled. “Right! It’s splitsville for this hep cat!” A loud rumbling shook the warehouse, and the smugglers’ hatch flew open as a ball of fire and smoke belched out of it. As the explosion lit the warehouse interior flickering orange, Fritz shot straight up for the skylight.

:Bruges, NOW!: Hewer commed. Lt. Bruges raised the Q-scam rifle and fired. The blast almost missed, but caught Fritz’s left arm. Nonetheless, the result was all Hewer could have hoped for—Fritz screamed in agony and fell out of the air, landing on the warehouse’s cement floor with a thump.

“Ow, *shit!* Shit, shit, *shit!*” Fritz yowled, lying on his back and clutching his arm. It was actually *steaming*, and now looked noticeably smaller than his other one. “You fucking crazy *bitches*, what the hell did you do to me?!”

“Looks like we clipped your wing,” Hewer said. “You shoulda come quiet-like when you had the chance.” She held out her hand to Bruges, who passed the rifle over. She trained it on Fritz. “Interesting effect. Your arm’s so much Swiss cheese. I wonder what a torso hit would do. Think we should mebbe find out?”

Fritz stared up at her, eyes wide. “You wouldn’t. You can’t—you got *orders* about me!”

“Yeah? And how many orders you didn’t like have *you* ever followed?” Hewer asked, her finger tightening on the trigger. “Looks like you were ‘shot while escaping’ to me.”

“Kaylee? Kaylee, you can’t let her do this!” Fritz pleaded.

“Yeah? What reason have you ever given me for not being the one to pull the trigger myself?” Kaylee growled.

“But—but I *love* you, babe!” Fritz protested. “And what about our k—”

Kaylee aimed the rifle a meter to the left of Fritz’s head and fired. The blast pitted the pavement, coating Fritz’s right cheek with concrete dust. “Don’t you *ever* mention that! You don’t *get* to mention that. You made me into an *animal*, for a *year*, and then you...you just *don’t*.”

“You didn’t seem to mind so much at the ti—” Fritz swallowed and cut off as Kaylee swung the muzzle back to his face, then seemed to regain a little of his composure. “Look, really—ix-nay on the ooting-shay. Trust me, you wouldn’t like what happened next.”

“And what’s *that* suppos’ta mean?” Hewer said, her growl matching Kaylee’s for tone.

Fritz smiled shakily. “It’s like I said. I’ve got enough dirt in my memory banks to blow the War wide-open again. And yeah, it’s a cliché, but if I don’t check in on time, it leaks to everyone.”

“If you ain’t got proof, then yer all talk,” Hewer said.

“Okay, then. Here’s a taste, just for you,” Fritz said. “But you’ve gotta let me transmit to you.”

“Do I look like I was booted yesterday?” Kaylee snorted.

“Okay, then. Guess I’ll havta get nasty about it. You should be getting something from Conyers about...now.” Fritz looked up.

Conyers and Vinnie were already overhead. “Stand down, Major! We got trouble. Administration wants to negotiate.”

Hewer felt an icy chill go down her spine. In years to come, she would have time to regret over and over again that she didn’t obey that chill and pull the trigger right then. It might have been a shallow regret, since it was pretty clear in retrospect Fritz *had* been telling the truth, and if so it might have led to the resumption of hostilities—not to mention the end of her own career and freedom. But then, looking back, it had ended her career and freedom anyway, hadn’t it? There was no getting around it—this was the pivotal moment when there hadn’t been a right choice to make. And Scylla was no more appealing than Charybdis.

But she’d been trained to follow orders. So she lowered the gun and nodded, not sure she could trust herself to speak.

“On the face of it, the agreement was very simple,” former Secretary Conyers said. “We left one another alone, to mutual benefit. He knew we could track and kill him, we knew what he could spill would cost us dearly in lives and property. The needs of the many and all. We were sick of war, we hated ourselves for what we’d done.”

The Sturmhaven contingent glowered at their Nextus counterparts. “How...noble of you. One wonders what Fritz wanted to make public? What would we think of it, now?”

“To be honest, the dirt he had on both sides has largely come out by now anyway in dribbles and snippets over the years,” Conyers said. “And while there were a few minor controversies and scandals about some of it, nobody thought it was worth a new war by then. Time heals all wounds.” He shrugged. “But by the time Fritz’s infodump lost its threat, other Integrates had appeared in the world, and Fritz had consolidated his power base among them to the extent that taking him out might have meant *another* full-scale war, with less easily-defined adversaries.” He smiled wryly. “And the passage

of all that time had made *him* seem less important, too.”

“The new gov’ment was skittish and stupid,” Anny said. “They decided my Kaylee was a danger ‘cause she was so closely associated with Fritz, I’m guessin’ because of the kittens and all she did to keep Fritz on his toes for two years. They wanted to *scrap* her.”

“I couldn’t let that happen,” Conyers said. “Even leaving the moral issues aside, I knew if they did, Fritz would have gone ballistic and we *would* have been in a war again. We didn’t have any way of blocking Integrates out of our systems in those days, and we veterans were full well aware Fritz was almost certainly still watching every move we made.” He sighed. “But that administration didn’t know Fritz like I did, and any arguments I might have made would have fallen on deaf ears. So, I sent her to purgatory. Excised memories, sent her to the Parts Shed, put an abandon-in-place order on her core. I know how the Nextus bureaucracy works. I know the Game very well. I bet everything on her remains getting surplused out at some future date. She at least had a chance at renewed life.”

He looked down at the table for a long moment. “I tried to keep an eye on things, to see when she finally went on the market—I’d wanted to buy her myself, maybe see about getting her back with Anny again. But I couldn’t watch as closely as I wanted without drawing suspicions, even then. So I missed it when it happened, and, well...it seemed like she’d found a good home, afterward, and Anny’d found Leila, so I figured it might be best just to let bygones be bygones.

“Then Vinnie and I Integrated...and Fritz took a renewed interest in me. But that’s another story.”

“All that hopin’ don’t mean you’re forgiven, bunny rabbit,” Kaylee said. She defused from Anny and padded over. “Getting Ryan—I mean, Rhianna—to restore me was a lucky break. We still got a score to settle.”

Rhianna walked over to stand next to her partner. “Later, Kaylee. After we’ve dealt with Fritz once and for all.”

“Kaylee, you got every right to be pissed off at what happened to you,” Anny said. “To *us*. Lord knows I’ve been. And while you were asleep most a’ that time, I had to take the long way around. You *know* how long it took *me* to get over it, you saw it just now when we Fused.” She shook her head. “But somewhere ‘tween decades two an’ three, I figured out I was—an’ you are—blaming the wrong person. You might just as well blame *me* for not killin’ Fritz when I had the chance.” She shook her head. “Only one person needs to get the blame for this, an’ that’s the asshole who caused it. Thanks to Fritz, there weren’t no good choices for none of us to make.”

The lynx mecha growled in the back of her vocoder. “I suppose I’ll get over it. I only just got all my memories back and defragged. Feels all too recent to me.”

AlphaWolf’s mouth hung open in abject horror. “Necessary or not, and I know about having to make difficult decisions, that’s one of the most horrible things to happen to a RIDE I’ve ever heard, Kaylee. Respect.”

“I’m sorry to say that I doubt Administration will ever compensate you, Miss Kaylee,” Olav Roberts said. “Too much internal politicking. That’s just the way bureaucracies are sometimes.” He looked around the room at the gathered representatives, human, Integrate, and RIDE.

“The question now is, since you now all know how events unfolded, how should we collectively deal with this crisis?

“We should make sure we *do* deal with it collectively, for one thing,” Leah said.

“All too often, poor communication kills.”

“He’s a threat to everyone,” AlphaWolf agreed.

“And Fritz isn’t the only crisis we have, either,” Aaron said. “Just the most immediate one. The other one is, hey, look at us. We’re Integrates, we live in communities out in the Dry, and for good or ill we’re not going to be able to hide anymore.”

“Those of us who *do* live in communities out in the Dry,” Desilu interjected. “Hellir is lucky enough to be situated right *inside* Cape Nord, which is causing its own share of commotion.”

Aaron nodded to her. “So we’re going to want official recognition as polities for at least the larger Enclaves or close groups of smaller ones.” He looked narrowly at Conyers. “And we’re going to be *very* interested to hear about weapons like that Q-scam of yours. Its effects sound nasty enough that it should be banned by treaty.” Other Integrates at the table nodded their agreement.

“So noted,” Roberts said breezily. “But those things can be decided at *official* summits to follow this one, now that we’ve opened the door a crack. But for right now... what about Fritz?”

“Fritz now, but there will be others,” AstraNikki said. The golden eagle Integrate clenched her beak. “The Cave of Wonders was founded by one of them, a white bison by the name of Appa. He’s still at large. He’s not the type to have gone to Rodinia—or if he has, it’s only to get ready to come back. Since he was ousted from the Cave he’s gotten *worse* than Fritz, if anything.”

The equine leader of the Cave of Wonders nodded her head. “I was there when we founded that community. Appa knew Fritz back then, got many of his ideals from him. But they’ve grown apart, in their own directions with their own views on how things should be,” Clarissa explained. “I think we set him back when we gave him the boot, but that is another ticking time bomb that will have to be dealt with. Eventually he’s going to realize that he’s never going to be able to get all the Integrates on his side again, and when that happens....”

“The Marshals have been keeping Fritz’s followers busy for weeks now,” Qubitite Star Reed Mosley said. “We’ve done the best we can with the resources we have, but we’ve taken a number of casualties. Integrates are *tough* opponents.”

“Reed, I hate to say it, but given the nature of the thing I think the Marshals are still our best source of manpower for this,” Conyers said. “You’re neutral, your relations with most polities are excellent, you’ve got the most experience working in the Dry, you’re better equipped than most polities for this. I think the Polities themselves will best look at defense within their borders, but otherwise...” He looked at the two from the Freerider Garage. “I understand we have you and your business partners to thank for this new encryption equipment and software.”

“If Fritz hadn’t hacked our sub and put us into orbit for a ‘made of meat’ prank it never would’ve happened,” Rhianna said, uncomfortable at suddenly being the center of attention. “I’m sure someone else would’ve invented it eventually. I’m just a RIDE mechanic. Never been to college or anything. Looks like Nextus already had something similar, anyway.”

“Don’t sell yourself short,” Zane said. “You think my Dad had a long list of degrees? But...” He waved a hand at the room around them, and by extension the rest of the rig beyond it. “As my Dad used to say, never underestimate the power of getting

pissed off.”

“Before that, you and Rochelle reverse-engineered a technology you had never seen before in the space of one night,” Quinoa said. “*Days* later you used those first principles to make Integrate-resistant encryption. Rhianna, I saw what was in your servers when I was still in my sycophant phase. You had hundreds of high-level research papers on RI neural architecture and RIDE engineering with language that makes my head spin. You made annotations on the articles, you clearly understood them. Seemed to me you knew what they were talking about. Sometimes you commed the researchers. At least one time you sent a *correction* that they added to the paper.”

“It was three times,” Kaylee smirked. “I been tryin’ to tell her. What does she think a college education even *is* except readin’ lots of textbooks and papers? I keep telling her she ought to try testing out of the matriculation exam at MMU but she’s too *shy*. She’s already a damned good RIDE mechanic teacher for the Uplift Junior College.”

This seemed to pique the Sturmhaven group’s interest, but other than a speculative look at Rhianna, they kept their own counsel.

“Everyone will get the latest spec when it’s done,” Rhianna stammered.

“See? There she goes changin’ the subject,” Kaylee said, outright grinning now. “Like I said, *shy*.”

“Sorry ‘bout this, Rhianna,” Anny said, matching Kaylee’s grin. “She’ll be a little less ‘me’ after your next Fuse or two. We always were a little cross-contagious that way.”

“That explains the accent, I guess,” Rhianna said.

“At any rate,” Quinoa said. “Thanks to you, and Rochelle and Uncia, RIDEs and other computers can be protected against Integrate hacking. I understand Uplift has already gotten most of its infrastructure covered.”

“We’ve had to work quietly on that, so we’re still working furiously to get everything upgraded,” First Consul Vogel said. “Fritz tried to hack the Government Center shields, but couldn’t do it. I think if he’d been able to devote his full attention to it the gear would’ve failed after a few minutes.”

“Our independent testing revealed the same thing,” AstraNikki said. “No offense, Rhianna. We’re throwing everything we can at them, and we’ve got our own variants.”

“None taken at all. Wanda can keep hammering away at it,” Rhianna said. “She and Crystal are *merciless* beta testers. We’ve been sharing research notes lately, and Shelley’s been out to meet her.”

“Well, she has the advantage of two Inties in house to help out, three when Mike’s home. But even Integrates can’t keep other Integrates from hacking one another,” Astranikki said. “The only way for certain is to remove your DIN. Point being, this is going to be a constant arms race. And even a partial defense is better than none, as long as we know of its weaknesses. We’re busy outfitting our own infrastructure with it too, especially the Alohavator. Aloha isn’t a primary target, but it would be a showy one. We’d rather not have it become one.”

“Well, since the four of us aren’t the only ones working on this now I’m happy to spread the risk,” Rhianna said.

“You’re still important,” Consul Vogel said. “So, we can’t have you all without protection.”

“Protection?” Rhianna snorted despite herself. The idea of Uplift’s militia throwing a protective cordon around her garage struck her as completely ludicrous. “No offense, but I think you should concentrate on protecting all of Uplift instead. They’d

have to get into Uplift to get at us, anyway, and if they do make it inside we'll *all* have a lot bigger fish to fry than protecting us and our shop."

"Details that you can discuss later," the Sturmhaven representative said. "Not to denigrate Miss Stonegate's achievement. I understand you only invented this new technology *after* you crossed over?"

"What the *hell* does that have to do with anything?" Vogel said. "When are you people going to stop believing your own press?"

"Then a more serious subject that bears discussion." She looked at AlphaWolf. "Your Fenris has committed an offense against our polity."

"Oh, *really*?" AlphaWolf said. "The polity that was going to yank him out of his own body and stick him in a smaller one whether he wanted it or not? Can't imagine why he'd want to do something bad to you gals. Besides, he's only a *male*. How bad could it be?"

"That is beside the point!" the fox-tagged woman fumed. "He—"

"Freed a fettered RIDE?" AlphaWolf asked. "Hmm. You're right. I'll have to have some words with him."

The woman seemed slightly mollified. "I am glad you understand the seriousness of—"

"Yeah, I mean, why on Zharus did he stop with just the one?" AlphaWolf continued. "I'll make sure he knows to do *all* of them next time."

The banter provoked a chuckle from Consul Vogel, all of the Integrates, some of the Marshals, and most of the RIDES in the room. Higgins guffawed, while Scoresby simply smirked. The Sturmhaven representative went beet red.

AlphaWolf wagged his ears amusedly. "Seriously, lady, he commed me and told me about it right after he did it. Your *Oberleutnant* Fuerst was pestering him about stuff that was none of her beeswax, and he politely told her to shove off. Then *she* tried to active-scan *him*. Now maybe you do things different in *civilization*, but where I'm from we've got *protocols* for sniffing each other's butts. Far's I'm concerned, your officer got just what was coming to her, and you should be glad you got off so light. As I said, *I* wouldn't have stopped with the one, but that boy's always been too polite for his own good."

"I'm afraid we still have a long way to go where RIDE rights are concerned, even in Uplift," Vogel admitted. "But we've made headway."

"A topic for another time," Sturmhaven huffed.

Mosley banged the hardlight gavel. "I'm afraid she's right, y'all. What I would like to come out of this meeting today is arranging a formal summit."

"Uplift suggests no longer than ten weeks," Vogel said. "Strike while the iron's hot."

"Aloha seconds the motion," AstraNikki said.

"Okay, votes please," Mosley said. Less than ten seconds went by. "Motion passes. Thank you for attending this rushed meeting. If there's no further business we'll adjourn." There were none, and Sturmhaven's group left the table regardless. Mosley watched them with a smirk on his face, then banged the gavel again. "Cut, print, that's a wrap."

Desilu nodded sagely. "We'll clean it up in post."

Tally grinned. "Wrap party at the reception lounge!"

The crowd in the reception area was just starting to thin out as Desilu and Tallyhawk stepped in. Desilu waved. “Ah, there you are. Any good food left on the buffet?”

Jade nodded. “They’re pretty good at resupplying it. Help yourself. How’d the meeting go?”

“It was...interesting. Oooh, a cheese tray! Mine!”

Kisa raised an eyebrow. “I thought mice liking cheese was just a myth.”

“I don’t know about mice, but *I* like cheese.” Desilu started filling a plate.

Tallyhawk nodded to Jade. “We learned a lot about Fritz’s early life, and other Integrate Enclaves, and started to get some hints about how they, the Marshals, Alpha Camp, and the human politics might work together. It was an interesting time.”

Ubu raised an eyebrow. “Alpha Camp? What, you mean *AlphaWolf* was there?”

“In the hardlight pelt. Hold on, I’ll shoot you-all a memory archive so you can catch up with what we saw and heard. Just a sec.” Tallyhawk’s DIN twinkled and pulsed for a few moments. After it went out, she wandered over to the bar and nodded to Diane. “Best Scotch you’ve got, please, neat. After some of the stuff I just saw, I think I could use one.” She glanced over her shoulder. “Actually, just bring the bottle, and a couple more shot glasses. Looks like we’ve got some more company.”

The Cape Nord reps Higgins and Scoresby had just come in, from the same entrance Tally and Desilu had used. They glanced around, then made for the Hellir table. They reached it just as Desilu returned bearing a plate loaded with cheeses and a few meats. “Ladies, gentleman,” Scoresby said.

Higgins politely hooked an empty chair with his foot and jerked it out from the table, and nodded to Desilu as she approached with her hands full. Desilu smiled at him, then took the proffered seat. A moment later, Tallyhawk returned with the bottle and glasses, and Scoresby pulled out a chair for her. She rolled her eyes a little, but didn’t see any point in not accepting. “Hey, you two. Please, have a seat. Can I offer you a drink?”

Higgins nodded as he grabbed a seat from a nearby table and straddled it backward. “It ain’t Schlitz, but sure, I don’t turn up my nose at free booze.”

Scoresby took a seat of his own and sighed loudly at Higgins’s antics. “If only my esteemed colleague could be a little more genteel. But indeed, madam, I would be delighted to partake.”

“Going a little heavy on the purple prose, Scoresby?” Higgins jibed.

“What can I say? The mood strikes.”

“So, what can we do for you?” Ubu asked while Tally poured.

“After what came out at the meeting...well.” Scoresby sighed. “It does tend to change our attitudes about...certain things, doesn’t it?” He picked up his shot and tossed it back, while Higgins sipped his more slowly and smacked his lips contentedly.

“For the better, I would hope,” Desilu said. “We’ve been trying to tell you that we really want to *help* Cape Nord, given that it’s our home, too. And you’d be hard-pressed to find many Integrates outside of Fritz’s bunch who *don’t* think kindly of our human and RIDE brethren.”

“No doubt there are a few bad apples. Every group has one,” Scoresby said.

“You know, that shit we saw in the meeting,” Higgins mused. “My Dad decided to enlist in the Nextus military. War makes a Man, he said. I think he might have met that Captain Ryder guy once. Talked about this officer who talked all weird—like a Beatnik.” Higgins shivered. “Hell of a way to go. Uh, no offense.”

“So how about it, then?” Ubu asked. “We don’t have to sign a peace treaty right now, but if we could reach an accord recognizing that we both *do* have a mutual interest in seeing Cape Nord thrive, it would be helpful down the road.”

“Y’know, Cape Nord is the only major polity we know of to have a full-fledged Enclave already living right there inside it,” Jade added. “Every polity’s going to be trying to figure out how to get along with Integrates now that we’re ‘out,’ but it seems to me Cape Nord could have a big head start in that area—if you’re willing to work *with* us.”

“It’s a tricky question, isn’t it?” Scoresby mused. “These last few weeks, we’ve been upset at the liberties you took within our polity—but learning what *all* Integrates have had to face due to Fritz and his cronies does put things in a different perspective. I think Higgins and I can stop sniping at one another long enough to propose a general amnesty to the City Fathers.”

“We think they’ll see the light, as they say,” Higgins added.

“But the way you do this ‘Show’ is going to have to change,” Scoresby said. “We can work out the details once we return to Cape Nord.”

“Oh, that’s a given,” Desilu said. “If nothing else, all the tourists wandering around mugging for the camera would throw a huge wrench into things all by itself. But more importantly, we no longer need to treat that as our only way to interact with Cape Nord proper, so we can let off steam in other ways now.”

“We already have some ideas on how to operate above-board,” Ubu said. “Ways of making it clear when and where ‘live’ filming will happen, arranging for consent, and so on. We’ll be happy to go over them with you, once we’re back home.”

“Perhaps the McKenna Street blocks over your Enclave could be—ah, well. We’re getting ahead of ourselves here.” Scoresby stood up and raised his shot glass. “I think the occasion deserves a toast.”

“Hear, hear!” Higgins said happily, pouring out more scotch for all. He raised his own glass. “Here’s to burying the hatchet!”

Tallyhawk raised her shot glass to join them. “Here’s to getting along!”

They finished their drinks, then the Cape Nord representatives pushed their chairs back and arose. “We should be returning to our delegation,” Scoresby said.

“There is still more networking to be done. We’ll look in on your screening room later.”

Ubu nodded. “We’ll see you then.”

Scoresby and Higgins headed away again, though not before Higgins winked and waggled his eyebrows at Desilu. Tally snorted. “You know, I think he really is sweet on you.”

Desilu raised an eyebrow. “I’m *sure* I don’t know what you mean. But he is kind of cute, in an uncouth sort of way. Probably just needs someone to *mold* him.”

Tallyhawk rolled her eyes. “Cape Nord. It’s something in the water, isn’t it?”

“Well, that was certainly...interesting,” Kisa said, watching the Cape Nord reps retreat. “Whatever went on in that meeting must have been amazing.”

“It was,” Dolores said. “I’ve gone over the memory dump three times and I’m still finding it hard to believe myself. We can Fuse and I’ll show you the good parts while the others are setting up the screening room, then review the whole thing on the flight back.”

Jade shook her head. “What she said. I’d heard rumors about how Fritz started out—we all did. But to see the reality of it...”

Desilu nibbled on another slice of cheese thoughtfully. "You know what? We should build on this for the screening room. Show some of Fritz's episodes from 442. I think we've probably got the most recorded footage of him that *anyone* does now. That isn't classified in Nextus, anyway."

Ubu nodded. "And perhaps it'll help people be less scared of him if we show what a *terrible* actor he is."

"I've got an even better idea," Tally said. "Remember that 'x-ray specs' filter we used for some of the behind-the-scenes stuff in the extras, where we ran scenes while showing what the actor behind the costume actually looked like? We could do that for some of the episodes. Do a split-screen effect showing 'Major Hayseed' in one half, and Fritz himself in the other. Just to 'prove' it's really him. It shouldn't take too much processing power to do that, for a few scenes at least. We could edit it up on the fly ourselves."

"It might make *us* targets too, y'know," Jade said. "Fritz probably won't be too happy about us making fun of him."

Tallyhawk shook her head. "He's going to have to go through Zane and friends first. They're the ones who carved him up like a Landing Day turkey. And what with the cooperation I saw at that meeting...I think Fritz has met his match."

"Well, I'm game if the rest of you are," Desilu said. "We ought to do *something* to pull our weight in the fight."

"C'mon, let's go get the room set up. I'm already reviewing the episodes for scenes we can post-process."

Desilu dumped her empty plate. "Works for me. Let's go."

"Never thought I'd see the inside of this office again," AstraNikki Munn trilled as she and most of the rest of her family followed Zane and Agatha Brubeck inside of Clint Brubeck's rustic office. She gestured at one of the equally-worn guest chairs. "I spent many hours sitting there chatting with your Dad. That was back when this office was in Base Camp, before this platform was even scratches on a drawing board, but it hasn't changed a bit since then. God, that was a whole other life ago, maybe *two* lives."

"*You've* changed since then, bro," Janet Munn said. They had originally been *male* identical twins, immigrants from Earth in the early 100s. "But then, so have I."

"More curves, anyway," Agatha quipped. "You both look beautiful for being over seventy."

"Hey, these days it's the new thirty. I'm close to the age your Dad was when he and Allison first had you kids, you know," Janet Munn said, grinning with pointy feline canines. Her RIDE, a black jaguaress named Melody, padded behind her.

"Hey, yeah, that's right. So when're you gonna be starting your next family, then? What with the kids from the last one being mostly grown and all, pretty soon you're gonna have an empty nest." Zane glanced over at Astranikki. "So to speak."

Janet shook her rather feline head, "No more. When Sam realized our youngest was the same age as Wanda's Nikki, we decided it was time to pass the torch."

Having Melody around reminded Zane of Carrie-Anne. Dr. Sam Munn, sitting with Janet, saw his glance and must have guessed what he was thinking. "Don't worry, Zane, she'll get there. If she wasn't out of the woods by now, I'd never have left her."

Zane nodded grimly. "That bastard has a lot to answer for," he said. "Kenyon and Quinoa should be up here soon. Is there anything you think we ought to discuss just

between us?”

“Well, first I’d like your medical diagnostic data,” Dr. Munn said. He paused as Zane sent it. “Good...error rates from your formerly severed limbs are decreasing faster than expected. I don’t think you’ll need that cane longer than a few more days.”

“I think I’ll hold onto it, though,” Zane said. “It makes me look distinguished.” He grinned. “And goodness knows I need all the help I can get for that.”

Agatha looked distant for a moment as something came up in her ‘specs. “Zane, AlphaWolf would like a word.”

“Sure, send him in,” Zane said. He glanced at the Munns. “If no one here minds, anyway.”

Janet shook her head, “Not at all. I wanted to have a word to him at some point.”

A moment later the sandy-colored wolf padded in. “Hello, Zane, just wanted to—oh.” He stopped as he realized how many other people were in the office. “Didn’t mean to interrupt anything.”

“It’s okay, we’re all friends here,” Zane said. “And what with the stuff going on ‘tween you and me and the Waltons and Steaders already, you probably ought to meet the Munns anyway. Gondwanan industrial magnates, collect the whole set.”

Sam nodded to the RIDE. “He’s already collected one. Not sure if he wants the whole set.”

“Munns, huh.” AlphaWolf’s ears laid back slightly. “Yeah, I met one. Wasn’t exactly a red-letter day.”

“We heard. He’s our eldest. After dropping off his charge, he came home to unwind a bit. I know it may not mean much to you, but we did give him a good chewing out. Not that he wasn’t kicking himself in the first place,” Janet said. “He’s put himself on leave from the Marshals for a while. Decided he’s been in the desert too long and he needed to re-find himself.”

“Well, good, I guess,” AlphaWolf said. “I don’t normally have anything against hotheads, but when they endanger the lives *I’m* trying to protect, well.”

Astranikki nodded, “Something all of us understand well. Still, we do owe you some reparations. We’ve got our own paws in pretty much everything that happens in southwestern Gondwana.” She paused a moment, looking closely at Alpha. “I just sent you a location. A cargo lifter will have mechanical difficulties there in a couple of days and need to be abandoned. It should have what you need to properly improve your shields.

“Hmm,” AlphaWolf said. “You sure you want to be seen giving aid to ‘the big bad wolf?’”

Janet smiled, “We owe you that much, for reparations. Besides, we’re Alohan. We make deals with anyone who has money. There’ll be something else in there, something for you to consider going forward as well. But this is neither the time or place to discuss it. When you get it, think it over, talk it over with the others in your camp. No obligations.”

“I’ll keep it in mind,” AlphaWolf said. He turned back to Zane. “Anyway, I was just coming by to say goodbye before I meet Fenris and the others for the trip back to the camp. And thanks for hosting.”

“You’re welcome. Take care,” Zane said.

“I will,” AlphaWolf said. He nodded at the Munns, then made his exit.

“I don’t think I heard him say ‘so sayeth me’ once since he’s been here, Zane,”

Agatha observed.

“That’s a Steader Entertainment thing, *Howl of AlphaWolf*,” Quinoa said as she floated through the door. “Uncle Joe’s idea, or maybe one of the scriptwriters, I’m not sure which. AW only does it in real life when he’s feeling especially bombastic. I think he finds having a catchphrase invented for him, especially such a lame one, hilarious.” She smiled bemusedly. “Kenyon will be another minute. He and AW wanted to say their own farewells.”

Zane nodded. “I can get that. Must not be easy, finding the perfect match who’s wrong for you for all the other reasons.” Some of the Munns nodded knowingly, AstraNikki most of all.

“At any rate, Uncle Joe decided it might be best he stayed away from folks ‘til tempers have cooled off a little about the Fritz thing, so I’m here *officially* representing the Steader family and our business ventures. The Entertainment arm’s the biggest, but we’ve got our finger in just about everything,” Quinoa said.

“When you aren’t giving our companies the finger,” Janet smirked.

“We keep each other on our toes,” Quinoa replied, sharing the smirk.

Kenyon Walton, Nigella, and Melissa entered the office, making it a tight enough fit for the mink RIDE to Fuse up with her partner. Kenyon took a deep breath. “Yeah. I’ve got a little wolfy nose now, too. Still smells like Clint’s blend of tobacco in here.”

Sam shook her head, “Probably not after we leave though. Fitting in a way, a new beginning, a new phase of Gondwanan life, of Zharus life really.”

“Speaking of odors and new beginnings,” Zane said, nodding at the Munns. “This is going to smell like collusion to the media, but I think it’ll work out better if we work together. We *have* to work with Inties to bring them into the mainstream.”

“PR will be the biggest thing right now. You realize that three of the four most influential families here all have Inties leading or in positions of power?” AstraNikki pointed out.

“And the way our daughter is going, it may not be long until it’s four for four,” Nigella Walton said. “I need to make sure that girl banks her eggs next time she’s back in Nextus. I *want* grandchildren one way or another.”

“We can’t claim we’re unbiased, that’s for sure,” Quinoa said.

“Which could be a problem if we ever pretend to be journalists, but hey,” Zane said. “We’re rich, we’re supposed to be eccentric.”

Quinoa nodded. “So, we won’t even pretend—just be as transparent as we can. We also don’t want lapse into trying to dictate anything to other Inties, or we’d just end up like Fritz. So we have to take our cues from the rest of the community. Follow *their* lead.”

Janet’s ears flicked. “Well, in any case, there isn’t much we can do obviously. We aren’t in the media sphere. We’re venture capitalists mainly, and shipping secondly. We can arrange funding where needed, grease the wheels more. And we can talk with the Enclaves we’re already dealing with, get them to go public, with the media and others.”

“Media’s my job,” Quinoa said. “Uncle Joe told me he’s worked with Integrates for at least twenty years, including Fritz himself. He’s made plans. Rather convoluted ones, but that’s Joe. Mind like a mobius twisty straw.” She projected one in the air in front of her.

AstraNikki thought for a moment, “Cave of Wonders wouldn’t be the best yet. They’re still too skittish. But Jay and Trace, they’ve been supporting an enclave out in

the Tethys for a few years now. That might be a good one to bring out.”

Zane nodded. “For that matter, with the Hellir bunch on the platform right now, we should talk to them, too. They’ve got the lock on *Integrate* media influence right now. Maybe they’d have some ideas.”

“We’ll need to establish regular suborbital service between open Enclaves and the rest of civilization. We’ll have to convince more than one to open up *fully* to flesh and metal, otherwise we’ll be accused of just having a Potemkin Village,” Quinoa said. “I think Xanadu, Terrania, and Jurassic Park will be the first, then maybe Camelot. And of course Hellir’s another good possibility, though they’re something of a special case given their situation.”

Janet smirked. “Sub Aloha’s has schedules ready to go when the enclaves open up. At least for the ones near us.”

Zane suddenly chuckled as a thought occurred to him. “You know, it’s really gonna burn Fritz’s biscuits when he figures out that we have *him* to thank for all this. If it weren’t for him giving us a common enemy, there’s no way we would ever have gotten so organized about this so quickly.”

AstraNikki sobered up a moment. “Gonna piss off Appa’s group too. Probably get him more converts. Anyone with brains can tell Fritz is going to go down, but Appa hasn’t hit the spotlight yet, making him a good magnet.” She sighed. “One emergency at a time I guess. Fritz first, Appa later.”

“Lastly...I’m going to announce Brubeck Mining is going to change a bit,” Zane said, looking at his sister. “Aggie and I have been working on a new business plan. We’re willing to sell a third of our remaining rigs to you, Kenyon, unless you’d like to get in on this too.”

The mining magnate raised an eyebrow. “Oh? What’s on your mind?”

“Aggie’s going to be in charge of a new division, Brubeck Integrate Services. Our needs are rather different than humans or RIDEs. We can eat sarium flakes for breakfast, qubitite crackers for a snack, cavorite casserole for dinner, that sort of thing. There might just be money to be made in supplying those needs for Inties who want to live in ‘civilization’.”

AstraNikki nodded. “We’d offer to join you in that. But I think we’ll be competing. Some Wonder and Alohan Inties have already pitched some ideas we’re going to be supporting. Competition’s always good after all.”

“Doubt it’ll just be our two companies, either,” Agatha said.

“If you’re selling, I’m buying, Zane,” Kenyon said. “I’ll stick to mining. Besides, your Dad would love the idea of you *exploring* new ground like this.”

“Diversification is key to successful business, y’know,” Zane said, grinning. “But cool. I’ll have my people draw up the paperwork.”

“You can also count on a substantial investment from SI, LLC. That’s my *personal* arm of the company,” Quinoa said.

“Let me guess. ‘Steadier Integrated ,’” Kenyon said.

“It was just a bunch of *mu* moldering in a bank until last week,” Quinoa admitted. “Uncle Joe wants me to run something smaller before he hands over the big one. He’s got some years left in him.”

“He’s barely over ninety,” Kenyon said, folding his arms. “Frankly, Quinoa, the way you were shaping up I was going to suggest he clone himself.”

“Can I get a *little* credit here, Kenyon? I’m not my uncle Harold. Or is he

Henrietta right now?” The red sphinx in the blue dress shrugged. “I’ve lost track. He swapped more than Janet and Sam do.”

Walton realized he’d stepped on a landmine and earned a mink-furred elbow in the ribs. “Right, right. I’m sorry, Quinoa.”

“I think we’re done here,” Nigella Walton said.

“It’s been a long day,” Zane agreed, yawning. “And I feel another nap coming on. But thanks for showing up for all this, everyone. At least some of it’s been fun.”

The tiger shook hands with everyone as they left. Then, just as he was putting his feet up on the old scuff marks from his Dad’s boots, a ping from Rhianna and Kaylee interrupted him. They were just about to start their DIN-making demonstration, and wondered if Zane wanted to sit in. Zane decided a catnap could wait for a little while longer. He messaged back, also sending a text to Anny.

They replied to meet them in RIDE Maint.

“So, this is it, then.” Desilu frowned at the small conference room—mostly used for departmental conferences for the maintenance division for this section of the rig, apparently. “Zane was right when he said it wasn’t very big.” It could only fit a dozen Fusers, or perhaps eighteen humans. It was going to be a tight fit, but at least it had food fabbers for refreshments.

“We can work with this,” Ubu said. “Looks like standard vidwalls. Let’s get these tables out...”

“Got it,” the goshawk said. The furniture started to shift around as they used their lifter fields. In short order the tables were stored and the chairs arranged to face the wall opposite the door.

“Dolores and I are going to go put up signs directing people here for the screening, and see if we can round a few people up. There’s so much networking going on, you never know—maybe a room this size is all we need.”

Jade rolled her eyes. “I wouldn’t count on *that*, given how many of them there were down at the reception.”

“MarkSeven has Fritz’s 442 eps prepped and ready,” Desilu reported. There were only three of them. As they’d expected, he had grown bored with it pretty quickly—given that he understood he actually had to keep more or less to a script for things to work, and Fritz just couldn’t stand other people having a say in what he was permitted to do for very long. The “Major Hayseed” character had stuck around for a few episodes after that, played by other cast members until they were sure Fritz was done with her so the scriptwriters could write her out.

In any event, the gambit had served its purpose—keeping the Bosscat kindly-enough disposed toward Hellir’s preoccupation that he permitted it to continue. In that respect, it had been a smashing success, regardless of how bad an actor Fritz had been in the moment.

People were already drifting their way. The first to enter was the main rep from Jurassic Park. “You folks say you have Fritz on camera?”

Tallyhawk smirked. “Oh, do we *ever*, Aaron. You’re going to see Fritz as you’ve never seen him before.”

They came in ones and twos, including Higgins, a lower-level Sturmhaven aide, a pair from Nextus, and a few more Integrates. The RIDEs ended up in virtual attendance. The conference room quickly filled to capacity until it was standing room

only and spilling out into the corridor.

"I guess we'll get started," Desilu said. She raised her voice and lifted off the floor a little. "Okay, everyone. Thanks for coming! We didn't expect quite this many to show up, to tell the truth."

"But we'll deal with it," Tallyhawk said. "If you have trouble squeezing in, hey—blame Zane. He's the one who stuck us here."

"First, a little background about Hellir," Ubu said. "Many of you probably already saw or heard about our broadcast a while back, where we explained it. And those of you who're RIDEs or fellow Integrates have probably already downloaded it and fast-timed it while I've been talking, or else you're just about to."

"But for those who can't or haven't, the first of us set up Hellir Enclave in Cape Nord in the late 140s because we thought it was somewhere Fritz wouldn't be willing to hunt us down, and maybe we could live in peace. As it turned out, we were only half-right. He *did* hunt us down, but he was amused enough at the idea of us living right under the noses of the 'meat' that he agreed to let it slide as long as we didn't make waves. Especially after he saw what we were doing with our little improv act, which started out as just us disguising ourselves to go topside for groceries and supplies, but soon turned into...well, what you see. But Fritz being Fritz, he wanted a piece of the action."

"So we gave him what he wanted," Desilu said. "We knew he'd get bored with it soon anyway, and it seemed like the best way to keep the peace. Sure enough, he only lasted three episodes before deciding the acting life wasn't for him—but he was perfectly 'copacetic' with the rest of us carrying on as long as we kept under cover."

"Anyway, without further ado...we present 442, the Fritz episodes." Jade smirked. "We would ask that you use sideband chat or a VR chatroom for any riffing you'd like to do, so the people who want to watch it 'straight' can do so. And *trust* me...once you see it, you'll *want* to riff it."

The theme for 442 started with a piano flourish and montage of the setting and cast. It was pretty much a standard late-twencen sitcom format, but with an ensemble cast that consisted of about half the residents in the building who were Cover Personas for the Integrates—the remainder were just regular people and RIDEs, with careful editing and a laugh track none of them could hear. The setting was the five-storey apartment building at 442 McKenna Street in one of the less desirable neighborhoods in Cape Nord.

"Hey, I've seen this one," a hawk Integrate said. "*Fritz* is in it? I think I know who..."

"No spoilers, please," Tallyhawk said gently, freezing the video at the end of the theme. "We're going to show the scene as originally aired on the first go. Try playing some Guess-the-Tyrant. There will be no prizes for this, as I assure you you'll know when he appears on screen. Okay, here we go."

One aspect of the Show came not from twentieth-century television, but from twentieth-century comic books. The old comic books had been known for having several ongoing titles that featured the same major characters simultaneously, which occasionally crossed over with each other. Superman had appeared in several titles at once, for example, and so did Batman.

In coming up with the Show's various series, the writers had recognized that not all circumstances surrounding the same characters would necessarily fit into the same

style or genre—but there was no point in throwing away perfectly good stuff that happened around them just because it wouldn't fit into the show they were doing. So they modeled some of the series after this same premise, creating multiple shows in parallel, with the occasional clip synopsis to catch up people who followed only one show with important events from the other.

The Hooters restaurant and its characters had a number of ongoing series and spin-offs. The soap-operatic goings on, such as Johnny's fight over JadeCat with Big Jim, and subsequent transition to Joanna, were the mainstay of semi-drama *The McGees* (formerly *The McGee Brothers*). JadeCat still appeared in it from time to time, but she'd mostly spun off into the *Goldman and Catanno Mysteries*. Meanwhile, whenever wacky hijinks occurred on the premises, they usually ended up in the sitcom 442.

Where to put the aftermath of the transition had been an open question, given that such things tended to have both their serious side and their wacky side, but when Fritz had proposed his "Major Hayseed" character there hadn't been any question which show *that* would fit in. The episode opened with Joanna leaning against the bar and bantering with her brother Jim, who was still every bit the testosterone fountain he had ever been.

"I'm telling you, I think you've lost your touch. JadeCat turning *you* down flat, for another woman?"

Jim snorted. "She turned *you* down, too. With the obvious result."

Joanna shrugged. "Perhaps, but then, *I* was never God's gift to women, was I? That's why I'm better off this way." She smirked. "But you're *supposed* to be a Ladies' Man. That's the endorsement on your Man Card. If you're losing your touch...well, it might not be so long before I'm showing my new big *sister* the ropes."

Jim bridled. "I am *not* losing my touch."

"Prove it."

"How?"

"If you're such a charmer, then charm *the next woman to walk through that door*. Whoever she is."

Too late, Jim sensed the trap closing. "Now wait just a second—"

But before he could get out another word, he was surrounded by a ring of grinning, smirking waitresses. "I think that seems *more than fair!*" Carla said.

Nicole giggled. "You're up to the challenge, aren't you big man?"

Jim sighed. "All right, fine. *Fine*." He glared at Joanna. "This is Cape Nord, so what's the worst that could happen?"

Major Hayseed's entry got off on the wrong foot right away when "she" missed her entry cue. (In actuality, when the episode had originally aired they'd fixed that in post, but the "special edition" release had "unfixed" a few of the more amusing bloopers in the name of entertainment.) Several seconds passed before the door to Hooters opened and a bedraggled middle-aged woman with greasy brown hair, wearing a ratty NextusMil uniform, entered. She had a half-burned cigarette hanging from her mouth. "Uh...uh..." she stammered. "I heard you hep...you-all had an opening for a waitress?"

Big Jim looked at her for a long moment, then slowly turned to stare at Joanna. "You set me up. Didn't you."

The smirk that had never left Joanna's face only grew broader. "Hey, what are sisters for?"

Cue the laugh track.

What followed was, Tallyhawk thought, one of the finest half-hours of television Hellir Enclave had ever produced...though, perhaps, not for the reasons intended. She thought the x-ray specs split screen really added to the effect.

Beyond that, it was a standard sitcom plot. Jim asked her to come to lunch as part of the “interview,” and Major Hayseed completely missed any sign of a romantic subtext. Then some of the Hooters girls did a kind of half-assed Pygmalion number on Major Hayseed to get her ready for it. The end result was that she still looked more or less the same, but without the cigarette. (Which she promptly lit up again in the next scene.)

The date itself was the predictable disaster, and Jim was halfway convinced maybe he *should* follow his erstwhile brother’s example, when an old female acquaintance from Aloha blew into town and made a big deal of how she simply couldn’t get Jim out of her head, so she came all the way out just to see him. Jim’s reputation (not to mention his self-image) was saved, Major Hayseed ended up with a job at Hooters for no terribly good reason other than Joanna wanting to rib Jim about her every time he was around, and roll the credits.

Somewhere around the middle of the episode, Tallyhawk became aware of a small, ominous presence with lynx ears in her peripheral vision. She turned her head and saw Anny Hower standing there, glowering at the screen, arms crossed. Tallyhawk blinked, then forced herself to neither stare nor facepalm. She wasn’t sure why she’d never twigged to it during the meeting, but now that Tally saw her here, at the same time as Fritz engaged in his antics on the screen as “Major Hayseed,” it suddenly became painfully obvious exactly who the original inspiration for “Major Hayseed” had been. The figure on the screen lacked tags at all—ironic considering who was playing her—but otherwise it was pretty clear who she was supposed to be. And, considering what they’d learned during the meeting from Kaylee’s memories, it was clear *why*, too.

:*Er...Desi? We may have a Situation here.*:

Desilu turned to look. :*Glen A. Larson’s beard! How did we never notice that before?*:

When the credits rolled Ubu decided to go first. “Now, crossplaying—that is, playing a character of the opposite sex—isn’t a skill one naturally has. Especially for someone who’s never crossridden before—”

“That damn a-hole was terrible at it!” Anny said, almost shouting. “Fool couldn’t even come up with a real name. ‘Major Hayseed’ my ass! Maybe, ah dunno, ‘Marjorie Hayes’ or something like that. *Hayseed!*”

“Uh, everyone, I think Miss Hower there was Fritz’s...let’s say ‘inspiration’ for the character,” Desilu said. “We didn’t really make that connection until just now. On behalf of Hellir, I, uh, apologize for Fritz’s portrayal of...a parody of you.”

“Bastard holds a grudge,” Anny said. She laughed a little. “Truth, I’m more amused than pissed. It’s a real knee-slapper I made *that* much of an impression on him, if he still had a mad-on for me twenty-odd years after th’ fact. Ah never smoked, though.”

“We...retired the character as soon as we reasonably could, once Fritz lost interest,” Desilu said. “She was ‘put on a bus’ as we say in the business.”

“Huh. Well, I want to have a chat with y’all before you leave, and ah think Kaylee

might want a word, too. She has to see this. Trust me, she'll laugh, too."

Desilu scratched nervously behind one ear with the stub of a pencil. "We do have a royalty-sharing deal for people who inadvertently appeared in our episodes. It's not quite the same circumstance, but we could stretch a point..."

Anny waved a hand dismissively. "I'm well-off enough, and after that settlement they saddled me with the last thing I want is to make any *more* money off a' Fritz. Tell ya what—you use that money to start a foundation or trust or sumthin' for the sake of helping Integrates fit back into human society. That'll be like spitting in Fritz's eye with his own hokey acting."

Ubu nodded. "That sounds like a great idea to me. We might even be able to get others to kick in, too."

"So, any other questions from the Peanut Gallery about how the Show works?" Tallyhawk said.

"Vill roles be available to anyone in the future?" the Sturmhaven aide asked. "And will it remain restricted to Cape Nord?"

"We're working on an overhaul with Cape Nord. Details yet to be worked out," Desilu said, nodding at Higgins. "If you're asking whether we might set up some kind of franchise in Sturmhaven...we won't say no out of hand, but it's a little early days to be thinking about that sort of thing yet. But beam us your comm code and we'll add you to our mailing list so you'll be one of the first to know."

"Here's one for ya," Higgins said. "The cast—these cover persona things—don't have to just be humans anymore, right? Could a guy like me play an Integrate? Or even a RIDE?"

"Well...that's mainly a technical thing," Ubu mused. "And it also depends on your skills as an actor." :*Or lack thereof.*:

:*Be nice.*: Desilu chided him.

:*But we just got done showing the Fritz episodes!*: Ubu protested. :*And I thought Fritz had no self-awareness at all. Now he's asking about playing out of type?*:

"Since this isn't a matter of life and death anymore, well, there will be auditions for available roles," Ubu said aloud. "Which won't be unlimited."

"We're having to come up with entirely new procedures," Jade noted. "After all, everyone wants to be a part of something they love, and this is a thing where it's actually sort of a possibility. On the other hand, with no offense intended, not everyone is necessarily cut out to act for the screen."

"But we might set up some kind of LARP or VR adjunct, so people can at least enjoy themselves playing in the setting," Tallyhawk said. "And we could recruit people who show special talent there into the 'big' show. Again, it's still in the planning stages. This is all pretty new to us, too, after all."

"Among many things that still need working out as we move into this bold new era," Aaron said. The dinosaur smirked. "That came out more melodramatic than I intended. Anyway, we need to take care of Fritz and company first. And seeing Fritz like *that* was quite an eye-opener."

"Anyway, lest you think we're all about the cheesy sitcoms, we've got a good selection of shows from a number of genres," Desilu said. "Next up is an episode of *The Goldman and Catanno Mysteries*."

"Afraid I have to step out on this one," Anny said. "Zane just paged me to meet up down in maint for the DIN-making show. Some a' y'all might want to come along, in

fact. Promises t' be pretty interestin'."

"Why don't the rest of you go ahead?" Ubu suggested. "I'll stay here with Kisa and Dolores and keep the episodes rolling."

Desilu nodded. "Works for us. We'll comm you if anything comes up." She, Jade, and Tally followed Anny out the door.

When Zane arrived in the platform's RIDE garage he found Rhianna and Kaylee with Rochelle and Uncia with a group of polity and Enclave dignitaries in the Fabbings Shop. The subject was Brena Silverston, the vixen looking a little uncomfortable under all the scrutiny. Lillibet Walton was sitting next to her, holding her hand. On one of the flat panels overhead "DIN Baking" was displayed. Cooking analogies were pretty common in the RIDE engineering field.

"I guess this is where I do my Julia Child impression," Rhianna said.

"Oh, good! That means I get to be Alton Brown," Rochelle said, clapping her delicate hands once.

"I want to thank Dr. Clemens and Dr. Rosenthal for attending," Rhianna said, nodding at the two researchers. "I never thought I'd rate this kind of audience."

"I created the original DIN, Miss Stonegate," Dr. Clemens said. "I'm curious about your reverse engineering process. When I made the first one, for Fritz, I had the feeling that he might prove to be a, ah, *handful* based on his prior behavior, so I intentionally built in several design flaws that would be non-obvious to him in hardware and software. If I'd been worrying needlessly, I could have had a 'breakthrough' and fixed it in a subsequent model, but as it turned out, that necessity did not arise."

"Figures that'd be your doing," Aaron said. "Not that I'm *complaining* here, considering. But it's irritating when you have to carry a dozen of them with you because they burn out faster than your average *Aloha Shore* star."

Dr. Clemens nodded. "From the units I've examined since then only a few of these defects were ever fixed. You understand, of course, at the time I never imagined that first unit would be the template from which an entire civilization of Integrates proceeded. We never anticipated there would ever be any more Integrates than just Fritz, based on the...extenuating circumstances around his metamorphosis." He smiled wryly. "If we had known it would become so commonplace, who knows whether we would even have let RIDEs go into civilian production."

"And it figures Fritz wouldn't monkey with it," Rhianna said. "After all, he didn't know they *could* work any better. He was just duplicating something he knew *did* work. At any rate, baking is apt here. The basic structure of DIN hardware is a lot like a layer cake. It's composed of a unique layering of RI-grade Q with various impurities and quantum-level points of 'contact'. The uniqueness amounts to a physical encryption, and you have to find 99.99% of the contacts in the socket before you get any signal—and there's millions of 'em, some of them only there some of the time. It took Kaylee and me hours to figure out the basics."

"And the right tools," Clemens said. "You use a lot of nano-paste in your work?"

"Have to, for RI core field repairs. I have a pair of custom nanolathe gloves. I've had a few jobs out in the Dry where an RI core couldn't be removed until I patched it, and that's delicate work in a very hostile environment," Rhianna said. She picked up one of the probes. "Anyway, Miss Silverston, this won't hurt a bit."

The red vixen nodded, then turned so the slot was visible in the hollow of her

neck between collarbones. Rhianna plugged in the reader until it beeped. “We’ve got it really fast now. Took me five, six tries with Zane before I knew what to look for,” the mechanic said, smiling warmly at Zane.

“Why every Intie has this connector in a different place—or not at all—is another one of those ineffable mysteries,” Aaron said. “After all this time, I still find it hard to believe you just reverse-engineered that cold.”

“Well, not *exactly* cold. Until that thing I was involved in at the Towers, I’d heard of Integrates through the rumor mill, just like everyone else. And I met Quinoa and got to see her DIN briefly during the incident without knowing what I was lookin’ at. But I didn’t know any specifics until Zane-and-Terry—you know what I mean—showed up at the Garage late that night before you and Leah met us for breakfast. I won’t say it was easy.” Rhianna shrugged.

The fabber dinged and dispensed the DIN plug. Rhianna picked it up and sniffed it. “Nice and fresh out of the oven.”

Rochelle leaned over for a whiff. “Smells like...cumin.”

Rhianna handed the new DIN connector over to Brena, who held it up and examined it thoughtfully, then plugged it into the socket in the hollow of her neck at Rhianna’s prompting. Rhianna attached cables from Rochelle’s console to its leads.

“Your show, ‘Alton,’” Rhianna quipped, going to stand with Kaylee.

“Right. Well, what I found out is it’s really not so much a matter of creating a whole new operating system from scratch—the comm unit we attach the DIN to has its own, after all—but more crafting an interface layer. Figuring out which connections map to which inputs. Here’s what Zane’s DIN map looks like.” She threw up a diagram on the display behind them.

“The thing that boggled me for hours at first is that there’s a *little* encryption on the connection—but an extremely weak version compared to what Inties’ bodies are capable of. Just enough to make things difficult for someone who assumed it wouldn’t be.” She summoned a hardlight keyboard in front of her and tapped a key, and data started scrolling up on her monitor. “I mean, if it had its full quantum computing power behind it, we’d never crack it without another Intie, if then. It’s as if they just wanted to make creating your own interface illegal under those twencen Digital Millennium copyright laws.”

“Or make it *just* tricky enough we had to work at it, not hand it to us on a silver platter,” Aaron said. “If that doesn’t suggest *some* sort of intelligence at work behind this, I don’t know what does.”

Some of the other Integrates in the room looked like they wanted to argue this point, but thought better of it. Rhianna understood that the origin of Integration had taken on aspects of a religious debate among some Integrates, and couldn’t deny she’d put more than a little of that sort of thought into it herself.

“The first time we did this, it took me hours to break the code, and fifteen minutes or so to do the first compiles. We’ve tightened it up considerably along the way.” Rochelle’s fingers danced over the hardlight keyboard. “I ran the basic decryption and mapping algorithms while we were just talking, and now I’m starting the compile. Normally it would still take two or three minutes to churn through it with our portable gear, but the extra horsepower of the computers on this platform means it should be done just...about...*now*.” An egg-timer style “Ding!” went off as “COMPILE COMPLETE” flashed on the screen. “Now we upload it into the DIN itself...along with a

copy of the design schematics, suitable for fabbing..." A progress bar slid across the screen. "And we're basically done."

Rhianna disconnected the leads and unplugged the DIN from the socket. "Last step: we pair it with a bog-standard laser comm module. You can go as plain or as fancy as you want; all your DIN really needs is the basic comm protocols. Zane's has a lot more bells and whistles, though I understand he hardly ever actually uses any of them."

Zane nodded. "The stuff I've got in my bod basically makes most of it redundant."

"So since all you need are the basics, we've taken to making our decision a cosmetic one." She held up a velour box and opened it. "Her fur really should set off this sapphire nicely, don't you think?" The audience chuckled, and Brena...well, it was awfully hard to tell if she was blushing given that she was bright red already. But perhaps the exposed skin on the interior of her ears colored just a little.

With a quick twist, Rhianna locked the DIN into place on the back of the comm, and again handed it over to Brena. "There you are. If we were doing it at speed, not taking it slow to explain it, we could probably have gotten it done in under five minutes. Ten for sure, counting compile time. Not bad for a couple of self-taught grease monkeys, eh?"

"Neither of you have any formal training?" Dr. Rosenthal asked. The woman tilted her head. "That's...I'm honestly impressed. Experience is often a more effective teacher. I'd say you're more a John Harrison than a Julia Child. I can see how the networking security gear you invented is an outgrowth of this."

"It's a natural development," Dr. Clemens agreed. "I can't claim I never thought of something similar, but it was too risky to pursue with Fritz and his cronies keeping such a close eye on us. Some days I could feel him watching me from the public camera net and inside of our own mainframe."

"Of course, we're not the only ones who've been doing work on DINs, even *with* Fritz quashing the research," Rochelle said. "The Marshals are pretty good at making their own, and the Munns have their own computer genius who's been working in the field, too."

"We were sort of right-place right-time," Rhianna said. "But now that we all know about each other and can share notes, expect to see us *all* get even better. And that goes for all of you, too. This isn't a competition."

"Heh. Yes, ma'am," Aaron said with a little salute. "How does that feel, Brena?"

"Like I've been blind, deaf, and dumb since I—we—Integrated," the vixen said, the blue-jeweled comm gear glittering on her chest. Lillibet, still standing next to her, smiled with encouragement. "I was looking through a muddy window and thinking it was crystal clear. And this won't burn out like the old ones did, either?"

"You can flush all your old spares," Rhianna said, grinning. "But fab a bunch of spares of this one, just in case. We haven't had one of ours fizzle yet, but there's plenty of ways to misplace 'em."

"You're *miracle workers!*" Brena squealed, impulsively bounding over and hugging the lynx-girl, then doing the same to Rochelle.

"I think we should assume some samples of your work will eventually get into Fritz's hands," Conyers said. "He may not *act* on it, but his followers aren't as inflexible as he is. We might even see some improved units on their side."

"Anyway, we've got time to fab a few more examples if anyone else needs 'em. And we've made up a package consisting of our most current process notes which we'll

be happy to share around,” Rhianna said.

Rochelle nodded. “We’re always refining them, but they’re still a darned sight better than what your technomages have. And maybe you lot will come up with some new wrinkles we haven’t hit on yet. We’re always happy to trade research notes.”

“Anyway, in the current situation, none of us—and especially none of *you*—should be at anything less than our best. So have at it and get yourselves fully up to spec.”

The duo fielded a few more questions from the audience before the group finally broke up. There was much shaking of hands, and some lingering discussion with Dr. Clemens. He wanted them both to keep in touch with him. He had a few ideas to add, himself. Rhianna blushed rather adorably from the offer. “Thanks, Doctor. We will.”

Anny and Leila had come in during the demonstration, along with most of the Integrates from the Hellir delegation. They had been standing at the back of the crowd, watching with interest. Zane was glad to see Anny and Leila hadn’t re-Fused yet, so Anny still had Kaylee’s ears-and-kitty-nose lynx tags.

It took a little effort for Rhianna to look away. “Just...just a minute, Zane. Be right there...”

Zane planted his cane in front of him and leaned on it with both hands. “You put on quite a show there,” Zane said. “Now let me see, what were those hourly consultant fee rates...?” He winked.

Rhianna smiled feline. “You know my bank routing number. Anyway, I’m glad I got to see this place in full operation before I left. And...well, thanks for helping me burn out these overactive hormones.”

Zane chuckled. “Oh, no problem. It’ll be that much more fun to kick them into high gear again down the road.”

Rhianna blushed. “Much more talk like that and it won’t be that *far* ‘down the road.’”

Zane grinned. “Okay, okay, I give. You know, I really should thank you again for that chewing out you gave me all those weeks ago. You were right, any rich idiot can throw money at people. It’s more fun to figure out nice things to do that *don’t* cost anything. Like this.”

“Like what?” Rhianna asked suspiciously.

“Come over...here. Yeah, this’ll make a nice backdrop.” He pointed to the large display they’d used for the demonstration, and it flickered and lit up with a very familiar set of blueprints—the LNX(f)-LMA-001. “Kaylee, Anny, you too.”

“All right...” Anny said. “I think I see where this is goin’.”

“Huh?” Rhianna asked. Then she blinked as she got it. “*Ohhhh!*”

They gathered in front of the blueprint display—Kaylee seated on her haunches in the middle, Anny standing to her left, and Rhi to her right—and both women rested their near hands on the lynx’s shoulders. Kaylee purred delightedly and reached over to give first Anny and then Rhianna a sandpapery lick on the cheek. They grinned at each other over Kaylee’s back, and Zane grinned right along with them.

Zane took a step back and framed the trio in the center of his field of vision, then did an image capture and beamed some instructions to a nearby part fabber. Moments later, it produced two 13 by 18 centimeter photographs, enclosed in frames made from the same metal alloy as RIDE plating. He picked them up and handed them across to Rhianna and Anny. “There’s a chip in the frame with the digital copy,” Zane said.

“Wow, look at *us*,” Rhianna said, directly comparing her face to Anny’s for the first time. “We’re about the same height, same build...same hair and tags, right now... from a distance, we’re practically twins.”

“I wonder...” Kaylee mused. “Deep down inside a’ me, did some part a’ me still remember Anny when I crossed you over? I thought I was makin’ up yer new bod outta whole cloth, but...”

“Ya never forget’cher first,” Anny said quietly. “Even if ya think ya do.” She looked across to Rhianna, eyes glittering. “Thank you fer this,” she said. “I know it wasn’t easy fer ya. Wasn’t easy fer me, at first, seein’ her with someone else—even at the same time as I was happier’n I’d ever been in my life just seein’ her again at all.” She snorted. “No one ever said people’s feelin’s had to make sense. But...well, just thanks. Feels like I can finally close the book on that part a’ my life, an’ not have it rubbin’ me raw all the time.”

Rhianna stepped around Kaylee to give Anny another hug, as Kaylee nuzzled her back. “It’s all right,” she said. “I understand.”

“And it felt the same way for me,” Kaylee said. “It wasn’t...easy, seein’ what happened to you after what happened to me, but...feels like I’ve got that closure, too. We can move on.”

Anny glanced over at Leila, who’d padded up to sit possessively next to her rider. “An’ I know it ain’t been easy on *you* neither.” She hugged the lioness around her neck.

“It’s all right,” Leila said, nuzzling her. “As you said, you never forget your first.” She paused. “There’s no pressing need for us to Fuse again for a few days, you know.”

Anny smiled up at the lioness, and dabbed at an eye. “Thanks, pard. I appreciate that.”

“I wouldn’t be against the two of you doing it again sometime,” Rhianna said. “And maybe next time I *will* find out what a long tail feels like.”

Anny grinned. “It’s a date.”

“And speaking of dates—” Rhianna turned back to Zane. “Zane, thank you for...” She blinked. “Zane?”

The tiger Integrate was still leaning on his cane...but his eyes were closed, and as Rhianna watched he started snoring.

Kaylee smirked. “I think someone’s been up past his bedtime.”

Or else he just felt like giving a bunch of weepy women their privacy, Rhianna thought warmly. *Either way...thanks, Zane. For everything.*

They weren’t quite able to get away from the maintenance bay for another hour or so, as a few more Integrates wanted to see some further demonstrations—or perhaps they just wanted new DINs for themselves right away. So they obliged the first few of them, before making sure that their research notes were available to those who needed them and excusing themselves.

Rochelle and Uncia slipped out a few minutes before Rhianna and Kaylee, as they lingered to address a couple of last questions about the process. Then, as Rhianna and Kaylee finally walked out to the Dreamchaser, they found Rochelle and Uncia at the edge of the landing pad saying their farewells to a young copper-badged Marshal and his coyote RIDE. “Look me up next time you’re in Uplift! We can show you the sights.”

The young man grinned. “Some of those ‘spots few outsiders get to see’ maybe? Sure. I’ll comm you when our rotation takes us there. See you then!”

“Bye!” Rochelle waved, and the pair of them headed off toward their own ship.

“Who’s your new friend?” Rhianna asked.

Rochelle blinked. “Huh? Oh. He’s not a friend, he’s a relative. Distant one. Rusty Seaford, of the Laurasian Seafords.”

“Those rich bastards?” Rhianna asked. “Those Seafords?”

Rochelle grinned. “Yeah, but this one’s not that bad. He was fun to hang out with, anyway. By the way, I forgot to ask at the DIN bake-off—what-all did I miss at all those meetings you had? I meant to come by, but...well, we got busy.”

“I’ll dump it all to Uncia, and you can review it on the trip back,” Kaylee said.

“To sum up, dirty laundry was aired out and people finally started talking to each other. Including Integrates to humans,” Rhianna said. “It’s a good start, but we hope it grows into more than just a start.”

“Sounds good to me,” Uncia said. “I hope so, too, then.”

“Then let’s head home, and see what happens,” Rochelle said.

Rhianna nodded. “Let’s.” They boarded the ship, and a few moments later were flying home.

It seemed that the impromptu summit had ended almost before it even began. But then, Tallyhawk gathered, that had always been the plan. The platform had a lot of room, but it simply wasn’t a real convention center. There was only so much they could do in such a setting.

But they’d certainly done a lot toward opening up dialogue and promoting further human/Integrate understanding. The screening room for Hellir’s episodes had gone over really well, though the Fritz episodes had been by far the most popular. Then had come Rhianna and Shelley’s DIN-making demonstration, which had proven amazingly effective. After they’d made the first one for Brena, they’d done further examples for other volunteers—including Tallyhawk herself and Desilu. They didn’t have time to make them for everybody, but the data packet they provided would let Hellir’s own experts do nearly as good a job themselves.

“I feel like I’ve been blind and deaf all these years,” Desilu said. “I’ve got a petabyte of bandwidth to Hellir, even here, and no sign of burning out.”

“So you keep saying,” Jade said. “I wish they’d had more time. I want one of those things, too!”

“They’ve open-sourced the process, so we should be able to make our own once we get home,” Ubu added.

Tally still couldn’t believe the difference the new DIN had made. It wasn’t just that it was more stable and could do more without burning out—it could simply do more, *period*. It really did represent a major leap forward, and she already couldn’t wait to put it to work and see how it might change the editing process of the Show.

But enough with the woolgathering. As the platform gradually emptied out, the Hellir contingent was making its way back to the landing pad where the Starmaster waited to transport them back home. A number of other such planes were loading nearby.

“Hey!” Tallyhawk looked up to see another Integrate hawk approaching—this one a Cooper’s hawk, judging by the pattern of the feathers. “Tallyhawk, right? From that Hellir Enclave vid series? Been wanting to meet you.”

“Well, you just made it. Hi. Who’re you?”

“Oh, we’re a Tally, too. Cindy and Tally, or CinTally for short. Zane’s personal pilot, as it happens.”

“I swear half the hawk RIDEs get a version of our name,” Tallyhawk said. “*Silverhawks* was a thing.”

“Don’t they just? Like all the rats are Rattigans, or corgis get stuck with Ein.” She clicked her beak in amusement. “For all that humans say most Integrates aren’t terribly creative, *they’re* the ones who always reuse the same names. The Steaders have a lot to answer for.”

“If you want a *really* scary thought, in a generation or two there might be actual kids being named after *us*,” Jade said.

“Anyway, I just wanted to say, I’ve enjoyed your shows...but have you ever considered something on the order of radio? Maybe some kind of music station? I’m a big fan of twencen music, and I think I’d make a great DJ.”

:*That’s a new one*,: Desilu sent.

Jade sent a chuckle emoticon. :*At least she didn’t say she has an idea for a TV show based on WKRP in Cincinnati*:

“It’s just possible you might have something there,” Tallyhawk said. “Of course, you don’t need to be in Hellir to do that. The ‘net’s global; you could start your own channel yourself and have just as wide a reach.”

“Probably wider,” Ubu said. “After all, you’re the personal pilot to Zane Brubeck, which is an order of magnitude more fame than little ol’ we have.”

CinTally cocked her head. “Well...I guess there is that.”

Tally nodded. “If you do, let us know. Maybe we could have you on *Hello, Hellir* to plug it.”

“That would be great!” CinTally chirped. “Oops! Gotta go, Zane wants me to get his jet warmed up. It was great meeting you, and see you later!”

Tallyhawk nodded. “Always cool to meet another Tally. If you’re ever in Cape Nord, drop us a line.”

“Wings of silver, nerves of steel! Will do!”

Tallyhawk chuckled as the other bird Integrate lifted and sped away. “Well, how about that?”

“Great! Now I’ve got that theme song stuck in my head,” Desilu complained. “They were so good with ear worms back then.”

Kisa laughed. “The early bird causes the earworm?”

“C’mon, you lot. We’ve got our own sub to board, and a Cape Nord delegation to chat with on the way home.” Ubu nodded toward the Starmaster. “Maybe we could have solid foundation for our future peace talks by the time we land.”

Jade nodded. “You know, I think this get-together was one of the best things that could have happened right about now. Show those insular cavemen from the Man Cave that they’re in a race with the rest of the continent to welcome us back. Nothing brings out a masculine team spirit like a little competition.”

Desilu nodded. “That’s as may be. But it still falls on us to follow up. So, let’s go get this party started.”

The others nodded, and they headed up the ramp to the plane home.

Fenris was uncharacteristically subdued as he carried Paul, Lilli, Brena, and Guin north over the desert to where they’d hidden the XB-70 sub. They were accompanied by

AlphaWolf, in his skimmer bike form. He'd caught his late ride in with the Marshals, but had elected to fly back with Fenris and company instead.

"Is something wrong, Fennie?" Paul asked.

"Not precisely," the wolf replied. "Except...I suppose it is true what they say, that you can't go home again."

"Did those Sturmies pester you while we were with Mom and Dad?" Lilli asked. "They looked mad about something as they were leaving."

"They...did, in fact," Fenris admitted. "And I fear I lost my temper." He shared the relevant memories.

"Oh, my," Paul said afterward.

"Tell me he didn't just unfetter a Sturmhaven diplomat's RIDE while the diplomat was in it," Lilli said.

"For a diplomat, she wasn't terribly diplomatic," Fenris said.

"There is that," Paul said.

"Do you suppose the RIDE will be waiting for us at the sub?" Guinevere asked. "Do you know if she picked us or the Marshals?"

"I have no idea," Fenris said. "She did not communicate with me after we parted."

"Something tells me it's us," Lilli said as they approached the small canyon. "Look!" There was a Fused RIDE standing at the canyon's edge, waiting—a female wolf.

"That is indeed she," Fenris said. "But why is she still Fused? I suggested she should drop Lieutenant Colonel Fuerst off before she came."

"Good question," Paul said. "Let's find out."

"It was my own decision," *Oberstleutnant* Fuerst explained to them all a few moments later. "There was...no longer anything for me in the motherland. Not after failing to complete my mission *and* losing my RIDE. So I...volunteered to accompany Hedy." She shook their head. "Do not worry—the others know full well what I am doing. You will not be accused of 'bodyjacking' me."

"You understand that you will be considered the property of your RIDE, every bit as much as she used to be property of you?" AlphaWolf said. "This isn't some vacation trip."

"I understand," Fuerst said. "But I am willing to reap what I have sown."

"Even with what she tried to pull on you, she's really not a bad person," Hedy put in. "And I'm *used* to having her inside me. I don't actually dislike her. We get along. So if she's okay with it, I am too."

AlphaWolf shrugged. "Okay, well, if you're both agreed, welcome to the Pack. Let's get aboard the sub and head on home."

Paul chuckled. "You know, Hedy, you're gonna be very popular in camp for a while. There are a lot of Sturmy ex-military she-wolves, and I'll bet they'd love the chance to Fuse with a real Sturmhaven lieutenant colonel."

"We'll see," Hedy said. "First and foremost, she's *mine*."

AlphaWolf glanced at her. "You know, I think you're going to fit in pretty well around here."

As Baldwin raised the sub out of the canyon on lifter power, Fenris looked thoughtfully at the wolf-suited woman. "Did you do this intentionally, I wonder?"

She looked at him and blinked. "What?"

“Did you *plan* to get yourself ‘ostracized’ in order to try to play upon my sympathies?” Fenris mused. “It seems highly unlikely that even Sturmhaven would be willing to discard an experienced *female* career officer over something beyond her control.”

The Fused wolf-woman just looked at him for a moment, then Hedy chuckled. “I *told* you it wouldn’t work. Not that I’m going to let you back out. You *are* mine now, and you’re staying that way.”

The wolf woman’s head drooped. “Was I that transparent?”

Fenris laughed. “Just a touch.” He shook his head. “You must *really* want that secret badly, to sell yourself into slavery at a camp run by a *male*. Is your career really so important as *that*?”

“It’s not just my *career*,” Fuerst insisted. “I was an intern on the team that *made* you. I crewed one of you in the field for two years. I...still feel bad about our failure.”

Fenris outright stared at her. “Why on Zharus didn’t you say so in the first place, woman?”

The wolf shrugged. “I was being monitored. Admitting an emotional attachment would have been taken as a weakness.” She chuckled ruefully. “We really are like wolves, you know.”

“I doubt it,” Fenris said. “Wolves consider *both* genders important.” Then the sub rose into view and opened the boarding ramps, ending the conversation. But Fenris glanced one last time at Hedy and Fuerst as he crawled up into the crowded cargo bay.

Transparent attempt to play on his sympathies or not, he *was* inclined to be a touch more kindly disposed toward Fuerst. At least she’d been honest when he called her out. Which could *itself* be a calculated strategy to get into his good graces, but at some point you had to stop wondering whether *everything* was a gambit. Besides, she *had* just sold herself into real RIDE slavery, unless Hedy was just playing along even while untethered. And even if she was, if the two of them were on good enough terms for that it was another point in Fuerst’s favor.

He wondered if he’d ever met her RIDE. In Sturmhaven’s army, the male units by and large observed strict segregation from the females. He’d only met the female WLF-CSAs a few times, so he didn’t know as many of them as he did the others of his own gender and he had never met their pilots separately.

Regardless, it would be interesting to see how she got along back at camp, especially with Sonja’s crowd. As he settled himself down for the trip back, Fenris decided he would look forward to it.

Chapter Twenty: Prodigals

September 16, 156 A.L.
Alpha Camp

The XB-70's arrival back at camp generated relatively little uproar. The inhabitants had gotten used to AlphaWolf and friends departing on various odd little errands that *didn't* involve raids lately, though AlphaWolf was fully aware that each such trip he took without an intervening raid put him on ever more precarious ground.

"So this is your camp," Diana Fuerst said as she and Hedy, Fused together, stepped off the gangplank and looked around at the scattered log cabins. "It is not as... impressive as I was led to believe."

AlphaWolf snorted. "What were you expecting? A James Bond villain lair? A Cobra Terrordrome? We got what we were able to build with our own two hands, sister. Or, rather, *someone else's* two hands."

"It's not much, but it's home," Paul said. "Ours...and now yours."

As they stepped off the gangplank, a group of several wolves of various sizes trotted up, the un-Fused Sonja in the lead. "You asked us to meet you?" Sonja asked Paul. "Ve are here."

"Hey, Sonja," Paul said. "It wasn't me I wanted you to meet, but our new refugee. This is Hedy, fresh out of Sturmhaven, and her pilot, *Oberstleutnant* Diana Fuerst."

Sonja padded up and sniffed amiably at Hedy. "I am pleased to be meetink you," she said.

"Uh, thanks," Hedy said. "That accent...you're one of the old crossrider training units, aren't you?"

"*Ja*, I vas, but zose days are behind me," Sonja said. "Now I only mold *true girls* into strong Sturmhaven vomen. Zough I am between girls at ze moment."

"Diana? Really hope you're proud of what you people have made," Paul said matter-of-factly. "Just saying."

"I didn't make them!" Fuerst said. "They were all supposed to have been recommissioned to ordinary field duty five years ago after we finally tossed the Valks out of the *Bundestag* on their ears."

Sonja blinked. "Really? Zere is no more moldink of crossriders in Sturmhaven?" Behind Sonja, a larger wolf perked up and started fidgeting, ears turning forward.

"No, it turned out to be too psychologically damaging to the RIDEs *and* the riders," Fuerst said. "There was a case study on one unit, named Sonja...wait. That's *you*, isn't it?"

Sonja's ears twitched. "Do go on?" The other wolf opened her mouth to speak, then fell silent in deference to her leader.

"Um...well, it turned out you were only the first of your kind to have...problems with being forced to serve as a crossrider brood hatcher," Fuerst said. "And it didn't even work that well on the vict—ah, *volunteers* to begin with. We don't do it anymore. We've gone back to *human* trainers. It's more flexible when *any* female RIDE can be paired with a male volunteer anyway."

"Vell vell vell," Sonja mused. "So if I vere to go back...ah, but no. They would never take back a deserter to begin vith. Ah vell. At least I know no others vill be forced to do vhat I vas."

"It helps that the political environment has shifted away from the misandry of the Valks, but that's neither here nor there," Fuerst said.

The larger wolf finally got up the courage to speak. "D...Diana? Is that really you?"

Hedy froze, as her human's reflexes overrode her own. "Oh *mein Gott*. Bertha? Bertha, is that really *you*?"

"Ah, so *that* is who she crewed for two years," Fenris rumbled, pulling around from the rear cargo bay exit ramp. "It all begins to make sense now. Perhaps you learned she was with us?"

"We *suspected*, we *guessed*...I *hoped*..." Fuerst admitted. "But I would have come anyway..."

Bertha padded forward, past Sonja. "Can I...can I see her? Please?"

"Uh...sure," Hedy said, nonplussed. She de-Fused, leaving the dark-haired woman in the Sturmhaven uniform standing alone.

Bertha padded up to her and sniffed at her. "It is you!" she said triumphantly. She put her huge muzzle against the woman's chest and *lifted* her off the ground in joy.

"Oh...Bertha. *My* Bertha..." Diana murmured, running a hand along her muzzle. Tears trickled down her cheeks. "What have they done to you..."

Bertha gently put Diana back down again. "What they were supposed to. Put me in a body that would be cheaper to run and more useful to them than my own...which did not work well enough to merit keeping up."

"I am sorry...I tried to stop them, but found out too late, and a mere *Leutnant* did not have enough pull, regardless." She shook her head. "I was at least able to keep them from destroying your body. It is one of the three we mothballed."

"Oh..." Bertha murmured. "*Ohhhh*..." She turned to look at Hedy. "I know that... by the rules of this camp, she is yours, but...can I have her? *Please*? I would do anything..."

Hedy looked thoughtfully at them. "You know what? I think we can work something out."

Fuerst froze, turning to look at Hedy. "...what?"

Hedy giggled. "I was *supposed* to pretend to be keeping her until she'd found the secret she's here looking for, then escape with her back to Sturmhaven. But the teensy little problem with that is...I'm not fettered anymore. I don't *have* to follow the script anymore. And I think you make a *really* cute couple."

Fuerst glared. "*Hedy*..."

"Really, you don't even need me anyway. If you get the secret everyone in Sturmhaven wants right now, you'll have a blank check."

"She's right," Fenris said. "I have little doubt they would gladly reinstate and recommission Bertha in return for knowing how to make us work as we were supposed."

"So if you get your old body back, I want you to insist I be assigned to your new gunner partner," Hedy said. "So we can *share* her. That's the price."

"You know...there's nothing inherent about the linkage system that *requires* a WLF-CSA shell," Paul mused. "I'll bet I could link the two of you up right now. And you've probably got enough internal space you could store her un-Fused...or maybe even

Fuse with them Fused already. Might require a little modification to you both...maybe link your Fuser nannie circ systems...hmm.”

AlphaWolf shook his head. “Sounds like he’s picked up some tinkering habits from Rhianna. Besides, I’m sure the system that’s in Fenris could use some improvements, that is, if Hedy and Bertha don’t mind being our honorary X-series.”

“And while I might not be inclined to reveal the secret of our synchronization to a Sturmhaven officer, I believe I could do so to a fellow WLF-CSA,” Fenris mused. “Especially if it were to result in her restoration to her original body.”

Bertha stared from one to the other of them. “You would do that...for me?”

“You could do that *with* me?” Hedy asked.

“Wolves of a feather pack together, or something like that,” AlphaWolf said.

“Of course, you’ll have to stay around here long enough for us to tune it and test it,” Paul said. “Could be weeks. I don’t let half-assed work out of my shop.”

“But if it works, we bring along not only the information, but a working model of the technology,” Fuerst breathed. “You would really do this?”

Paul shrugged. “It’s tempting to try to use it as a crowbar to ask that Sturmhaven reform itself a little more, but I know they’d never do that just ‘cuz a *man* asked them to no matter what we give ‘em. And this tech will leak to everyone sooner or later anyway. So we might as well get what we can out of Sturmhaven for getting it early. And if that’s just helping friends, well, that’s some friends who wouldn’t have been helped without it.”

“Then...if it is well with my...partners,” Fuerst looked from Hedy to Bertha, “it is well with me.”

Bertha glanced over at Hedy. “Then...if I can have Diana...could I...have you, too?”

“I, um, guess?” Hedy said. “I hadn’t thought about it like that, but...”

Bertha leaned over and gave Hedy’s muzzle a lick with a hardlight tongue the size of her head. “I promise, I’ll take good care of you. *Both* of you.”

“Um...thank you,” Diana said.

“Great!” Paul rubbed his hands together. “Come to our shop and we’ll get started.”

AlphaWolf chuckled, watching the procession of differently-sized wolves led by one immense one head for the walled-off place where Paul and Fenris worked. Even Sonja was following along, out of curiosity no doubt. “Never a dull moment around here, that’s for sure.” He shook his head and trotted off to take care of other camp business.

October 7, 156 A.L.

About a month had passed since the impromptu summit. There had been no sign of any further trouble from Fritz, either in Uplift or at AlphaWolf’s camp. But far from being reassuring, it only increased the tension. Everyone’s nerves were on edge waiting for Fritz to strike, as he surely would sooner or later. And everyone was preparing in their own ways.

The Marshals were keeping several crisis response teams on immediate standby. Zane had beefed up Brubeck corporate security in Uplift, sending Anny and Leila there to coordinate disaster response personally with Uplift’s civil defense. Nextus and Sturmhaven were conducting huge military exercises—against *each other*, for a wonder,

with Nuevo San Antonio refereeing. Even Uplift had run a polity-wide emergency disaster preparation drill four months ahead of schedule.

Rhianna had spent the first couple of weeks getting more and more tense, until she had caught herself starting to yell at the Lindae for handing her the wrong tool. At that point, she realized her nerves were starting to do Fritz's job for him. Leaving the day-to-day operation of the business to Linda, she retired to her and Rochelle's personal garage to tinker with Kaylee, the DIN gear, and a few other personal projects and try to relax so she wouldn't be a complete nervous wreck when he *did* show up. Rochelle joined her from time to time, when she wasn't dealing with the stress in her own private ways.

:Hey, what about that funny DINsec cable coupling we found on the big platform?: Kaylee suggested one day. *:I'd like to get a closer look at that.:*

"Very good idea, Kaylee," Rhianna replied. It was much better than the aimless gadgeteering that otherwise filled the time between improving what they now called "DINsec" and tinkering with Kaylee's loadout configuration.

Ten minutes later they'd hopped in the Dreamchaser and were on the way to the platform. It took all Rhianna's willpower not to be drawn into RIDE Maint—getting sidetracked right now would probably make her forget about this for another few weeks. She replaced the three sets of couplers in the flow control unit with new ones, then returned to the garage, all in less than three hours.

While she was gone, her fabber had created testing gear and she had some experiments designed. First, there was a fundamental question that needed answering: was this transmission effect common to all DIN-couplers, or just these three? All of them were from the same production run on the same fabber. *Okay, so let me create a control group...*

The first tests revealed that what she called the "Gap Transmission Effect" was unique to these three units, and likely all the other units from the same production lot, of which there were thousands. For the control group, when she separated the coupler the test data stopped. She could rule out that it was simply inherent to the design.

"Poor quality control?" Kaylee suggested. "They were churning them out as fast as they could to get systems secure. Must've cut a lot of corners. I'm detecting some palladium and cavorite contamination in the qubitite doping. I don't know what they were fabbing before the DINs, but they didn't clean up really well. It's changed the layercake by a smidge, and I'm getting some weird readings that my cross-references say should *only* show up in FTL physics."

"Really? *Really?* Oh, *Lordy*," Rhianna said. She decided to sacrifice one coupler, putting it in a quantum scanner. Full analysis would take more time. True science was often more about waiting for results. Once the scanners revealed the full structural and material differences between standard DIN couplers and the aberrant GTE units, Rhianna understood the source of the effect well enough to make a few purpose-designed prototypes.

Rhianna and Kaylee lost track of time until Rochelle looked over her shoulder. "Hey Rhi, what's up? You've been a busy catgirl today. What's this setup about?"

"Where are the bubbling beakers?" Uncia said. "You can't be a *proper* mad scientist without bubbling beakers!"

The wild-eyed look they got in return unnerved them. "Girls, I'm onto something...big. Huge. Massive!" Rhianna said. "Revolutionary!"

“Well, what is it, then?” Rochelle asked.

“I need to do more testing—a *lot* more. Just trust me. It’s *big*. I’ll send it to Paul and the bunch once it’s ready. Meet the DINcom,” Rhianna said, handing a prototype unit to the software engineer. “And I’m going to need your help now that the hardware’s ready. Here, I’ll dump everything to Uncia so you can review.”

Rochelle Fused up with her RIDE, then promptly almost lost their balance. “Rhi, you know what this is, don’t you ? You *know* what this *is*?” she said breathlessly.

“Don’t say it!” Rhianna exclaimed, waving her hands in front of herself. “I want to get more eyes on this first. I don’t want to jinx anything. Let me do a little more prep work on this, then we’ll com Paul and the others at the Camp. Fenris and Guinevere are going to *love* this.”

The month had also been a busy one at AlphaWolf’s camp for Paul and Lillibet. Alpha was able to convince a few holdouts to get DINned up, and a few newcomers straggled into the keep who also needed them. Then there was the link-up work on Bertha and Hedy. Despite Paul’s earlier bravado, he soon found that retrofitting a link between the two RIDEs was nonetheless a challenging feat of engineering with his limited resources at the Camp. He and Lilli consulted with Rhi and Shelley as often as comm windows permitted.

During one of these consultations, Rhianna passed along a schematic for an experimental modification to the DIN system that hooked Fenris and Guinevere together. “What’s this supposed to do, exactly?” Paul asked, peering at the plans. “Extend the range on the RIDE linkage? I don’t see any obvious wireless hardware, so, comm lasers? How does it maintain the bandwidth we need?”

“It’s a...new technique,” Rhianna said. “Based on something I found out at the platform when we started it back up. Slap it in and see if you can tell me where the signal starts to fade out. I’ve been getting ranges of a few hundred meters—which is a big improvement—but this needs field testing. Don’t worry about wireless or line-of-sight for comm lasers.”

Paul shrugged and put it in. “Okay, guys, let’s see what this does.”

“Interesting,” Fenris said as he powered up the new system with Lilli and Guin standing nearby with Paul. “Ping times are back down to the femtosecond range. It’s as if we were physically connected.”

“Yeah, I feel it!” Guinevere said. “Weird—it’s throwing my reflexes off a little, but I can adjust.” She turned to Lillibet. “Let’s Fuse up and try for some real range!”

Paul hopped into Fenris’s cockpit. “You guys head to the other end of the camp. That’s far enough for a first test.”

“Right!” Lilli saluted, then Guin wrapped around her and they lifted into the air and skimmed away.

“So how is it?” Paul asked as he checked over the hardlight panel displays. “Still linked?”

“Yes,” Fenris said. “How remarkable. Previously we had to be right next to each other for a full neural connection—even as far as Zane’s platform from the parking lot we only had sensory sharing via telemetry. But now I am communicating with Guinevere as if she were right there in my turret.”

“Wow! Let’s Fuse up. I want to *sense* this.” Paul dropped into the link as Fenris’s body enclosed him. :*Hey, you two. Wow, you’re really at the other end of the camp?*:

:*Yeah! Freaky, innit?*: Lilli asked. :*I can feel you like you're right there!*:
 "Any signal strength drop-off?" Paul asked Fenris.
 "If so, it is too small for me to measure," Fenris replied.
 :*Okay, take it out into the desert until you sense it start to fade out,*: Paul said.
 :*Stop if I tell you to.*:
 :*Roger!*: Guin replied.
 Paul peered out through Guin's optics and Lilli's eyes as they headed out through the dome. It was a little disorienting.
 :*I don't understand. The latency should be increasing,*: Fenris added.
 :*This is amazing!*: Lillibet said. :*I'm not getting any interference at all!*:
 :*Oh my God,*: Guin said, the ocelot's eyes growing wide. :*Do you know what this means? Do you know what this is? Paul, your boss has invented FTL communications! This is the holy grail humanity's been after for decades! Centuries!*:
 :*Holy mother of...*: Paul stammered. :*Why didn't she say anything?*:
 :*Knowing her, she wanted us to see for ourselves without any preconceived notions,*: Lilli said. :*That, or she's waiting for Fennie and Guinnie to download their memories of the test to her so she can see the looks on our faces. Wow, we're ten clicks out now, how far is this gonna go?*:
 :*Still no discernable signal attenuation,*: Fenris reported.
 Paul made a decision. :*Lilli, come on back. I'll ask Alfie if we can borrow the sub for a real distance test.*:
 A few minutes later, Lilli and Guin hopped on board the XB-70 with Baldwin and blasted off, flying a thousand clicks out from the camp and circling it at that range. At no point did the signal grow perceptibly weaker.
 "Okay, guys, come on back," Paul commed. "We don't want you any further out than that 'til the Fritz thing is cleared up."
 "On our way!" Lilli replied.
 As soon as they got back, the four of them commed to Rhianna and Rochelle again. When the two women came on the screen, Paul said, "Only 'a few hundred meters'? *Seriously?*"
 "Well, I didn't want to jinx it, frankly," Rhianna replied. "I've never actually admitted to myself that our observations were accurate. I wanted a few more pairs of eyes on it first. Far as we can tell it's not a quantum entanglement effect. You can't transmit useful information that way. I'm still narrowing down how the physics work, but I suspect the signal is actually tunneling into subspace like the quantum-slip drive used on starships. I need to chat with some actual specialists in the FTL Physics field at MMU—I don't have the background and the math is really tangled. I only stumbled on this, you know."
 "However it works, you've got lightning in a can here. We went a whole K of clicks apart and haven't even found it start to *weaken*. And there was no speed-of-light delay at all." Paul shook his head. "Boss? *Patent this right damned now.*"
 "Rhi, I want to wait until after this Fritz thing blows over. Once we submit the patent application the designs will basically be public, and we need the tactical advantage," Kaylee said.
 "I defer to Kaylee on military matters, so yeah, it'll keep for a while," Rhianna said.
 "Truth. I wouldn't go showing this to too many people just yet," Rochelle said.

“This isn’t a polio vaccine like DINsec. Even if this only works over a few K-klicks, the business and military applications are *off the chart*. If it works over interstellar distances, well...there you go. Think about chatting with folks in realtime on Neorus thirty-five light-years away.”

“You’d still have to send the other half there first. That’s an eighteen-month trip,” Rhianna said. “This isn’t like wireless.”

“No, it’s more like a physical networking cable that’s light-years long. In fact, it’s exactly like it,” Rochelle said.

“I’m sure not gonna give this to Bertha and Hedy,” Paul said. “Let Sturmhaven be happy with the link working at all.”

“Good plan,” Rhianna said. “It really does need more testing anyway.”

“Do you realize what this means?” Lillibet broke in excitedly. “I could go *home*—well, after all this Fritz crap is over anyway—and Guin would stay linked with Fenris. He might never have to go unlinked ever again!”

“Don’t go getting too excited just yet,” Rhianna warned. “We’ve only been getting durations in the minutes to tens of minutes before they fizzle out like an old-style technomage DIN. If you want to stay linked up for very long, at this point you’ll need to make an array of at least a dozen or so and rotate new ones into use as old ones fail. But, in theory, if we can lick the durability problem—then yes, a perpetual link could be possible.”

“That would be...more than I had ever dared to hope,” Fenris rumbled.

“Well, now you can hope a little more, big guy!” Guinevere said. “As far as I’m concerned, we’re joined for *good*. Dogs and cats living together!”

“So, speaking of living together, how *are* Bertha and Hedy getting along, anyway?” Rochelle asked.

“They’re ecstatic,” Paul said, grinning. “Bertha’s so delighted with the link to Hedy, she’s almost forgotten her body dysphoria.” He chuckled. “But Diana is a little overwhelmed, linked to two RIDEs at once...both of whom are higher up in the pecking order. She’s the omega.”

“Oh, dear,” Rhianna said. “They’re not...mistreating her, are they?”

“I’ve tried to keep an eye on that, and it doesn’t *seem* like they are...too much, anyway. I *have* warned them that they only get the goodies if they play nice. ‘Course, they do have some...issues to work through...”

“Nnngh...Bertha, *please!*” Diana groaned. “I can hardly *think* when you swim through my memories like that.”

“Sorry, Di,” Bertha said. She was Fused possessively around Diana, and had been exploring the inside of her mind for hours—as she often did these days. “I’m just so happy to have you back, I wanted to remember the good times again.”

“I sort of guessed that, from the way you’ve been reliving *every second* of our partnership,” Diana said dryly. “Look, they’re happy memories for me, too, but I don’t want to *drown* in them.”

“I understand,” Bertha said. “However...”

Diana rolled her eyes. She knew what Bertha wanted to hear, because she wanted to hear it at least three or four times a day, every day. She recited as if by rote, “However, I belong to you, so if *you* want to drown me in my memories, you have that right.”

Diana felt a surge of affection from her erstwhile partner surrounding her. “I know. But since you asked nicely, I’ll ease up.” Diana felt Bertha’s presence recede a little. “Sorry,” Bertha added more contritely, a moment later. “I really don’t *mean* to make you uncomfortable. It’s just...”

“You like to feel you are in charge,” Diana said. “To demonstrate it. You’re the alpha of our little pack. I know.” She smiled ruefully. “I would be more upset if I was not aware exactly *why* you feel that way. After what we did for you...I can hardly blame you for wanting more control of your life.”

“Me neither,” Hedy put in. She was part of the Fuse as well, surrounding Diana like a wetsuit while herself being encapsulated within Bertha. *Like Sturmhaven dolls*, Diana thought wryly.

“Even though I never had it as bad as Bertie...or Sonja...the fetters were bad enough,” Hedy continued. “I’m *never* going to have them on me again.”

“If Sturmhaven agrees to our conditions, neither of us will,” Bertha said excitedly. “And...well, that’s not *all* we’re asking for, either.”

“It’s...not?” Diana asked. The RIDEs hadn’t exactly been forthcoming to her about their demands in exchange for the technology transfer. Things like a guaranteed right to keep their own bodies were pretty obvious, of course, but from Bertha’s tone of voice she seemed to have something else in mind.

“We will require that Sturmhaven recognize my ownership of you,” Bertha said. “I’m *finished* taking orders from inside my own body.”

“Me, too,” Hedy said. “Whatever human they give me, *I’ll* be the boss of her.”

“But...but they’ll never go for that!” Diana insisted. *I don’t want them to go for that*, another part of her added.

“Then they won’t get the linkage tech,” Bertha said. “I wonder if *Nextus* would be interested...”

“But...” Diana said.

“But you don’t *want* to stay mine?” Bertha asked. “You were just ‘playing along’ until we got back to Sturmhaven?” Diana felt Bertha’s smirk like sunshine on her face. “Isn’t that just too bad? I was perfectly willing to live my entire *life* belonging to someone else, in the old days. I knew nothing else. And what did it get me? A puny little body not my own. No. I will take lawful orders from my superiors, because that is how an army works. But I will not be a puppet ever again. *I will own those I carry within me.*”

“Hedy, too?” Diana asked.

“Why not?” Hedy asked. “She’s taken good care of us so far.”

“I thought you didn’t want to be owned again,” Diana said.

“Not by a *human*,” Hedy said. “But a RIDE who knows what it’s like? I think I can trust her.”

Diana sighed. The hell of it was, she couldn’t even say it was unfair. Looking back, while she’d thought she was being reasonably, maybe even unduly kind to Bertha at the time, she’d realized since joining the Gaian party that she’d still basically treated the RIDE as property. Valued, even cherished property, but property still.

While most of the Gaian Party’s political stance had been about how the polity treated its men, Diana had become uncomfortably aware how much of it also applied to RIDEs. Let even a *female* RIDE seem too strong-willed—like Sonja—and off to decommissioning she went. It had been ironic that Sonja so strongly embodied the very

independence Sturmhaven claimed to value in its women that they'd wanted to wipe her for it.

"I *will* take good care of you," Bertha promised. "And allow you as much freedom as I can. This isn't about *revenge*. I just...want the missing pieces of my life back. To *stay*. And next to my old body, *you* were the biggest one."

"For what it's worth...I felt the same way about you," Diana said. "I guess if it's a choice between not having you and you having me...well, I hope you enjoy me as much as I enjoyed you."

She felt another wave of affection pulse around her. "It'll be fun for *all* of us," Bertha said. "You'll see."

Diana shook her head. The world seemed twisted, upended. She realized the relationship between human and RIDE had gotten off on the wrong foot from day one, since slavery poisoned *everything*. Bertha didn't seem to have a concept of a partnership instead of ownership, and neither did Hedy. Lecturing about it at this point seemed hypocritical at best. "I guess if I *have* to belong to someone, it might as well be you." She paused. "That being the case...if you really *want* to poke around in my head, I...suppose you can."

"*Thank you!*" Bertha squealed excitedly, slipping back into her mind. Diana closed her eyes and let the memories submerge her again.

October 9, 156 A.L.

Steader Residence, Uplift

"Quinnie, have you seen my argyle socks? Can't remember where I put them..."

"Have you tried your sock drawer?"

"Of course I've tried my—oh! Well, here they are. Thanks, Quinnie. I must be getting senile or something."

"Senile, never. Absent-minded? Maybe a little."

"Well, that's been me since I kept pestering Mikey about where I'd left my toy skimmers when we were in single digits." Joe snorted. "I notice you didn't say 'drunk.'"

"I haven't seen you get near a shot glass since I broke out of the mansion."

"And you've been watching?" Joe chuckled. "Well, you're right. With Fritz still on the loose, I need every iota of what few faculties I have left. I can toast The Dude with White Russians all I want during our victory celebration, but it's the wagon for me 'til then." He pulled on his socks, and wriggled his toes experimentally. "Ah, still every bit the ankle fashion plate I ever was." He paused. "Now where the hell are my loafers?"

"I think you have something more on your mind than socks and loafers." Quinoa let part of her mind monitor the various transactions of her new company, Steader Integrated. There was still a lot of startup to do, and here was where an Integrate's ability to multitask came in very handy. She could be at home with her uncle having breakfast while her DIN sent her data on decisions that needed making. In fast-time she could review her options and authorize things between sentences.

"Well, you could be right, there. We're coming up on the earliest point you estimated Fritz could be all better and back on the rampage by. We're running out of time to get ready. So, we need to exploit his absence while we still can."

"I still have some pull in the Intie community. There have to be followers of his who are on the fence. We need to undermine his support before he pulls any *really*

dangerous crap.” He gave his niece a significant look. “And since you were in so deep with him, you might just be the one to persuade them to jump off the wagon.”

“You know I’ll do anything I can to help,” Quinoa said. “What’s that twisty brain of yours come up with this time?”

“While the cat’s away, the sphinx can play.” Joe grinned at her. “You need to get out there and sow the seeds of doubt while Fritz is still bottled up. I seem to recall you mentioned Fritz doesn’t have all that many really powerful lieutenants anymore, because he got tired of their annoying tendency to challenge him for leadership? After what you did to Fritz *himself*, you shouldn’t have any trouble dealing with whoever’s left if they try to stop you getting the message out.”

“That’s one way, but we might be able to be more subtle about it. I’ll have to give this a few days of thought in fast-time. Hmmm.”

“We’re starting to run out of time, fast or otherwise.” Joe shook his head. “My own efforts at *human* diplomacy have been starting to pay off, at least. Between me, the Qube, and Zane Brubeck, we’ve gotten everyone mostly on the same page. Even the Sturmies are lending a hand, so I hear—they’ve sent Zane a new prototype hardlight shield to reinforce the Brubeck campus with.”

Quinoa nodded. “Wasn’t it supposed to be specially-tuned to resist that cannon of Fritz’s? Let’s hope it works.”

“Anyway, if fear of Fritz is all that’s keeping his followers in line, you should get out there and start throwing out olive branches while he’s still soaking in fabber gel,” Joe said. “Heh, Fritz in fabber gel...that reminds me of a time when...hmm, no, that would take too much explaining. I’ll tell you later. For now...get as many Ascendants as you can to switch sides while the object of that fear isn’t around. After what you did to him in Uplift, you have some ‘street cred’ with the fence-sitters, I’d think.”

“I’m not especially proud of that, but I’d do it again in a heartbeat. If he hadn’t pulled off that ‘solar flare’ move I might even have caught him.” Quinoa pondered the next steps for a few virtual hours while her uncle finished getting dressed.

“Anyway, whatever you come up with, you’ve got my support.” Joe grinned. “If you need me to mount up in the hovertank and smack a few of ‘em around, just let me know. I’ve been itching to try that thing out again now I’ve got the new DINsec on board.”

Quinoa chuckled. “I hardly think *that* will be necessary. Fritz is enough of a ‘stick’ all by himself at this point. What we need is more ‘carrot.’”

“What kind of a carrot do Integrates want? From what I’ve heard about Integrate cuisine, seems like it would have to be some kind of a *sarium* carrot. Do they even *make* sarium carrots?”

“You’d be surprised. I understand some Enclaves have been working on hybridized vegetable variants that can fix qubitite and other minerals from the soil.” Quinoa shook her head. “But mustn’t get sidetracked. If we were able to offer some kind of a stipend for helping Integrates ‘integrate’ themselves into human society, it might make it more appealing to them to try to come in from the cold.”

“Well, I’ve certainly got enough money for that—and unlike most, I’ve employed enough Integrates myself in the past that the word should be out there I’m a straight shooter. At least, if they can overlook my little foible about being in Fritz’s camp fairly recently.” He grimaced. “I’ll get my accountants and lawyers on the comm and we’ll see what we can do.”

“Thanks, Uncle Joe.” Quinoa leaned in and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. “And I’ll get on my part of it. I’m already starting to have some ideas—the stipend will help—and I can do some more thinking about it on my way out there. I’ll keep a line open through that nifty new DIN the Freeriders cooked up for me so you’ll know if I get into any trouble. Who knows, maybe you’ll need that hovertank after all.”

“I’ll keep it warmed up for you.” Joe grinned. “Go get ‘em, Quinnie.”

Martinez Memorial University RIDE Engineering Dept, Uplift

Clint Brubeck’s old mech Chauncey was currently in several thousand pieces, taken all the way down to his base chassis components—currently knolled out across the floor in an extremely orderly display of many, many parts. Zane had never seen the poor mech in such a state, even with all the tinkering his father had done over the years. Even his sister Agatha was slightly agast. Every component was being scrutinized, upgrades tested and readied for install. There were even Marshals from their high-tech Lithium division, who had brought along a new shield that would hopefully resist Fritz’s molecular knife.

“I can’t *believe* this,” Agatha fumed. “They might have said something. I could’ve helped out.”

Rhianna and Kaylee were in the center of it all, like the conductor of an orchestra.

Zane raised an eyebrow, peering over the display as he leaned thoughtfully on his cane. “I sure hope they don’t leave any bits out when they put him back together.”

“This isn’t a laughing matter, Zane! Fritz could show up at any moment, and here we don’t even have Chauncey ready!”

“Will it do any good to get upset about it now? Anyway, part of the point of the XF-3 Block 3 line of IDE mechs was that they were built to be easy to field-strip down to the core, and just as easy to reassemble. They’ll have him rebuilt before you know it.”

“And better than ever!” Rhianna called across. “Many of the internals needed refurbishment anyway, but hadn’t ever been replaced because they just weren’t easy to get to without taking the whole thing apart. Won’t have that problem now.”

“We’ll have the big boy at the best he’s ever been by the time you need him,” Kaylee promised.

“I hope so. I’m kind of attached to the old guy, y’know.”

“What else are you doing to him?” Agatha asked. “What are these ‘upgrades’ you mentioned?”

Zane smirked. “Enquiring minds want to know.”

Agatha put her finger to her ear. “I’ll have to ‘enquire’ more later. The Sturmhaven team that they sent to install their own ‘upgrade’ at the Campus won’t start work unless there’s a woman of authority present.”

“They didn’t send *Valks*, did they?”

“They’re not that stupid. They’re that ‘Gaian’ Party. Bad, but not horrible. See you later.” Agatha rolled her eyes and departed.

Zane watched her go. “I swear, she really ought to be running this company. She practically is already anyway.”

“Don’t sell yourself short, Zane.” Rhianna grinned. “Anyway, we’re about ready to start rebuilding the Lego kit now.”

“Well, don’t let me stop you. I’d offer to help, but knowing me, I’d just get in the

way.”

“Don’t worry, Zane. We’ve got this.” Rhianna nodded to the RIDE Engineering students. “All right, boys and girls, let’s put Humpty-Dumpty together again.”

October 9, 156 A.L.

Old Smokey Enclave Lair

“Vodka martini, shaken, not stirred.”

Diane raised an eyebrow. “You do realize that’s a cliché, right?”

Quinoa shrugged. “I like vodka martinis. Besides, if there was any place for that cliché, this one is it.”

“Fair enough.” Diane brought out a stainless steel shaker and started pouring ingredients into it. “What’re you doing here, anyway?”

“I could ask the same of you. Aren’t you supposed to be back in Uplift?”

“Serena and I fill in or guest bartend at the bars at various Enclaves now and then,” Diane said, capping the mixer with a pint glass and shaking it. “There aren’t all that many people they can call to substitute, and we do have a certain reputation. It’s a good way to keep up on what’s going on here and there.” She decanted the martini into a conical glass and added a cocktail onion on a toothpick. “Speaking of which, *you’ve* been a busy little bee, haven’t you?”

“I’m sure I have *no* idea what you mean.” Quinoa smirked and sipped her drink. “But since you asked, I have a meeting with a few important people about important things.”

“Watch out for the trick bridge over the piranha pool,” Diane suggested. “They do still manage to get a few people with that.”

This Enclave—which the residents insisted on calling a Lair—was run by one of her uncle’s former Steader Entertainment employees. One who had decrypted more than half of the James Bond franchise by himself. The result was a residence built into the side of the almost-extinct volcano called Old Smokey in the south central Dry Ocean. The bar was right next to the overlook into the crater.

“By the time he left he was a little funny in the head,” Joe had said. “That was before I realized Integrates had that meme infection problem. Otherwise I would’ve taken steps. Nice guy, though. Affable.”

As Quinoa sipped her drink, an otter Integrate in a stylized coverall uniform suit with a submachine gun holstered at his belt stepped into the bar and nodded to her. “Well, I think that’s my connection.” Quinoa finished the drink and set it down. “See you soon.”

“Take care, double-oh sphinx.”

The room the henchotter led Quinoa to could have come right out of any of the movies involving SPECTRE—a big boardroom table with cushy seats along both sides. Quinoa wondered whether those seats were equipped to fry the people who sat in them at the whim of whoever was playing Blofeld. Probably not, given that even the meme-infected generally drew the line at killing other participants in their drama—but they might well dump them into some embarrassing substance. She decided to stand and keep her lifters warmed up, just in case.

At the end of the table, a white Persian cat Integrate with a monocle peered

dubiously at her. There was another Persian laying on the dark granite conference table in front of him—a real one, rather than another Integrate or LRIDE. “Welcome to our council chamber, Miss Steader. You had a proposal you wished to make?”

Quinoa, wearing her best Bond Girl catsuit, leaned languidly against the edge of the table. The array of supervillain stereotypes was impressive. There was even a feral horse Integrate—a Whedon fan, she assumed. “Ladies, gentlemen, and those in between. Our esteemed Bosscat Fritz is indisposed—courtesy of yours truly—and now is the time to act. I offer an alliance with Zane Brubeck and the Enclaves aligned with him.”

“And what is in it for us?”

“Amnesty.” Quinoa let the word drop. “Sometimes, in order to survive, we’ve had to do some less-than-legal things. I’m mainly speaking of activities relating to keeping ourselves alive. Theft, embezzlement, larceny, that sort of thing. As long as they are nonviolent, the polities of Gondwana have extended their hands to welcome us back into the fold.”

A mutter passed around the table. A boar with a metallic arm frowned. “You would offer amnesty...to *SPECTRE*?” he asked in a raspy voice.

“We would offer amnesty to *you*,” Quinoa said. “Let’s be honest, shall we? You’re not *really* SPECTRE, no matter what your meme-infection says. You haven’t *actually* tried to conquer the world, and the polities are mostly prepared to overlook any minor infractions. And my Uncle Joe is organizing stipends of human currency you can use to resume lives in the human polities, or buy goods to help your Enclave go legit.”

The boar grumbled and leaned back in his chair. “Hmph. Though to tell the truth, these spy games have worn thinner over the years.”

“It’s merely been a method to pass the time,” said Blofeld. “A method to our madness, one could say. Yet, we are concerned about retaliation, should Fritz’s Ascendant faction win this little civil war.”

“There are risks to anything. You need to decide for yourself how likely Fritz is to win this. I think the probability is pretty low, but I’m biased.” Quinoa shook her head. “This is the offer: throw in with the good guys, and we’ll help you as much as we can, win or lose.”

“Allow us to debate amongst ourselves. You’ll have an answer within the hour,” Blofeld said. He gestured for the door, the henchotter returning. “Please take Miss Steader back to the bar.”

“Choose wisely,” Quinoa said. She turned and sauntered towards the exit, then paused, turning her head back to look over her shoulder. “After all, you only live twice.”

October 15, 156 A.L.

Uplift

Finally, as the one-month anniversary of the summit approached, Rhianna and Kaylee went out to the Milkbottle to relax over an ice cream mondae and get a feel for how Uplift’s citizens as a whole were taking things. “Y’know, I’m not sure if it’s my imagination, but there don’t seem to be as many people around as usual,” Rhianna said, as they sat at one of the Fuser tables and enjoyed the ice cream together.

“Yer right,” Kaylee said. “It’s a hot day, but the lines aren’t more’n a dozen people long. Checkin’ the local yelp, looks like sales kinda been depressed all month. Ever since

Fritz clobbered Zane.”

The polity hadn’t exactly *announced* that it was expecting an attack from Fritz, but the news that *something* bad was in the offing had sort of diffused through osmosis. People didn’t seem to be panicking, yet, but they did seem to be staying closer to home—which, from the point of view of disaster preparedness, seemed like a net positive. Rhianna hoped that the slower-than-usual business wouldn’t hurt the Milkbottle too badly, and resolved to start coming more often.

As they were finishing up the mondae, their comm pinged with a message from Dr. Munn. “I just wanted to let you know we’re going to try to wake Carrie-Anne up shortly. If you’d like to come down to the hospital...”

“We’ll be right there!” Rhianna said, bolting the last of her ice cream. “Some good news was long overdue, Kay.”

“Damn straight,” Kaylee agreed. The lynx changed to skimmer mode beneath her and they sped off for the hospital on carefully-tuned lifters. Semi-prototype that she was, Kaylee had endured a number of configuration tweaks lately, partly out of boredom, partly trying to anticipate what could come next. The upgrades to the Donizetti weapons paks had taken a whole week all by themselves. She’d wryly thought more than once that it felt just like old times back in the RIDE development program, but hadn’t said anything—if it helped Rhi deal with stress, she could cope.

When they arrived, the hospital room was already fairly crowded. The removal of Zane’s tank made more room, but it was largely filled by the tiger-man himself, plus Agatha, Quinoa Steader, Anny and Leila, Carrie-Anne’s human half Audrey’s daughter Karen (with Bastian the lemur Marshal standing behind her with a hand on her shoulder), and the half-dozen or so other guards and Marshals stationed around the room. And, of course, Dr. Munn himself, standing by Carrie-Anne’s tank examining her vital signs.

“Her vitals are better than Zane’s when he woke up on his own,” he said. “I think we can have her ‘reboot’ safely now. Could probably have done it a week ago, but better safe than sorry.”

“Please, do,” Karen said. She sounded a lot more calm now than when Rhianna had last seen her, but it had been over a month. Plenty of time to get used to the idea, she supposed.

:*Specially with therapy*,: Kaylee smirked on a private channel. She looked at the ring-tailed lemur Integrate next to the woman. :*Those two look joined at the hip to me. I don’t think it’s a romantic thing, mind you.*:

“Hey, you two, good to see you,” Zane said, walking over to greet them. He wasn’t visibly limping anymore, but still had the cane with him. “I meant to get down to visit sooner, but you know how it is...you bootstrap your corporation back up from a standstill, branch it off into half a dozen new sidelines, broker peace between a roomful of politics who’d otherwise cheerfully go for each others’ throats, and bring a whole hidden society out in the light of day, and suddenly it seems like you don’t have a minute to spare.”

“You don’t wanna know how many appointments I had to cancel to get him here now,” Aggie said.

Zane grinned. “Really, I should just let you deal with them anyway. You’re so much better at it. That was your job back in Nextus for years.”

“Yes, but you’re the famous one right now,” Aggie said. “Everyone wants a

personal meeting, and half of them want a photo-op too.”

Zane rolled his eyes. “Yeah. I’ll be glad when this whole thing blows over.”

Bastian grimaced. “Don’t say ‘blow’.”

“Boot sequence initiated,” Dr. Munn said. A brainwave monitor to his left showed a rising amount of the peaks and valleys of a living mind. “She’s in a REM state now. Expected. Good. Let’s give her a few minutes.”

“Does this mean she’s okay?” Karen asked.

“So far, so good,” Dr. Munn said. “Not seeing anything unexpected.”

Zane moved to stand next to the tank on the other side, looking into it. “C’mon, be all right...” he murmured.

The jaguar’s eyes opened a crack. Carrie-Anne wasn’t the type to panic; she calmly took in her surroundings, confused but not screaming in horror. Eventually her gaze locked on Karen, and she took a deep breath through her oxygen mask. “*That* serious?” she murmured through the speaker over her tank. “I’ve been out how long? My chrono is off.”

“Slightly over a full month,” Dr. Munn said. “Do you remember anything?”

“Just...leaving Government Center with Zane, then nothing. A blank,” Carrie-Anne said. She looked around at the room. “I feel like a zoo attraction.” She raised a hand to touch the wall of the tank. “Or an aquarium exhibit.”

“Well, we can fix that. You’re ready for decanting. We wanted to give your body as much healing as we could,” Munn said. He looked around at everyone but Zane, Quinoa, Karen, and Bastian. “If you’d mind giving a lady some privacy?”

“Certainly,” Rhianna said. They returned to the Waiting Room with the others, Myla and Sophie standing guard just outside the door.

“She’s okay!” Kaylee said happily.

“Hey, Myla,” Rhianna said. “How’s guarding Zane been lately?”

“We’ve—meaning, Quinoa and myself—have been teaching him some fighting skills. He’s learning fast, since we’ve been using time-compression in VR.” Myla said. “He’s motivated. We’re working on a counter for that monomolecular sword of Fritz’s. It’s more fragile than it looks.”

“And his arm cannon?” Kaylee asked. She and Rhianna had their own ideas how to counter *that* particular weapon. “We’ll have to compare notes. Kaylee and I have been a little out of it lately.”

“I know the feeling,” Anny said, joining them. She was back to her normal lioness Fuse tags now, Rhianna had noticed. “Near’s Quinny figgers, Fritz *could’ve* recovered by now. It’s got *everyone* on edge.”

“Knowing him, he’s slinking around, waiting to pounce,” Kaylee said. “We’re getting thousands of hack attempts per day. We have to keep updating DINsec hardware. But I don’t think it’s serious...yet. They’re just testing us.”

“I almost wish they’d hurry up and get it over with,” Agatha said. “It’s the waiting that’s the hardest part.”

“If Fritz doesn’t act first...well, the Marshals are doing their thing, we may have them to thank for this quiet,” Rochelle said. “My cousin Rusty’s been pretty vague, but I get the feeling they’re keeping the ‘Ascendent’ busy.”

“I’ll send along some thank-you gadget ideas,” Rhianna said. “I’ve been in touch with their Chrome division off and on the past few weeks, myself. They’ve got good, competent people.”

Rochelle nodded. "I know, but I'm rather biased."

Myla looked up. "Okay, everyone, they're ready for us in there."

They trooped back in to find the doctor had worked fast. Carrie-Anne had already been hosed clean and dried, and was lying in a normal hospital bed positioned where the now-absent tank had been. Despite the seriousness of the situation, Rhianna almost had to giggle—Carrie-Anne and Karen were regarding each other with remarkably similar nonplussed expressions, for all that one had a human and the other a feline face.

"So...you've really got my mother in there," Karen said.

"It is...not as simple as that," Carrie-Anne said. "She...is a part of me. She...felt it was best that way. She didn't think you wanted her in your life anymore."

"It's not a question of 'wanting her in my life!'" Karen said. "She's my *mother*."

Bastian put a hand on her shoulder reassuringly. "Easy there, Karen. Nobody's saying she isn't." He glanced to Carrie-Anne. "Do you think you could find her again?"

"I can try," the black jaguar Integrate said. "Except...not just yet. Everything is still too scrambled up. Apparently having one's head cut off tends to rattle the insides of it around."

"I don't want you doing anything that would tax you yet," Dr. Munn said. "You still need plenty of rest—both physical and mental." He fixed Karen with a pointed gaze. "And if you cause my patient further strain, I *will* ask you to leave, is that understood?"

Karen nodded reluctantly. "But...*why*? Why would she do such a thing?"

"Part of it was...feeling guilty over something and seeking a way to atone," Carrie-Anne said. "But...she also felt that you did not *need* her anymore. She wished to be out of your way."

And she had her little fantasies about becoming a ghost in the machine, but that's probably more than Karen needs to know, Rhianna thought.

"I don't *want* her out of my way!" Karen half-sobbed. "We had some fights, but...I always thought we could patch them up."

Bastian put an arm around her shoulders. "And you will. Just not right this moment. Let's go and get you some more rest and let *her* get some more rest too. There'll be time for that later on."

"A...all right," Karen said, sniffing. She let Bastian gently escort her to the door, then turned back to look at Carrie-Anne. "If my Mom really is in you...well, I hope you both get well soon."

Zane watched them go. "Damn."

"We're two-made-one, to one degree or another," Quinoa said, projecting a holo of two bubbles merging into a single one. "I think you can see why so many of us wanted isolation for so long."

Dr. Munn gave the sphinx a sidelong look, nodding slightly.

"I just keep thinking what if it turned out, back before I met Terry, that Dad wasn't really dead but he'd gotten mashed up with some strange RIDE," Zane said. "How would I have taken it?"

Aggie squeezed his hand. "I'm sure we'd have gotten through it. Like they will."

"Like many people will. Coming back from the dead is going to be a common Intie trick as more of you guys come in from the Dry," Dr. Munn said.

"I hope I *can* find her," Carrie-Anne said. "She was buried pretty deeply already, and then this..."

"I know some Integrates who might be able to help with that, when you're stronger," Quinoa said. "Studying our own psyches was one of the few research areas Fritz didn't stomp on. The ones who helped Flint and Burke after *I* fucked them up—" she grimaced at the recollection "—can probably help you too."

"I hope so," Carrie-Anne said. "I feel bad for her. Audrey genuinely believed Karen no longer needed her, and would be better off with her out of the picture."

"Not the first time a mother's been wrong about something," Rochelle reflected.

"I never could figure out a way to break the news to Karen gently. So she had to learn *this* way." Carrie-Anne sighed and leaned her head back into the pillow. "But I'm glad to see that you and Agatha are getting along again," she continued. "It would appear that having extremities lopped off promotes family reunions. Nonetheless, I do not recommend it."

Aggie blinked. "You know about me?"

"I was Zane's chief of security," Carrie-Anne said. "You were in his files."

"Of course," Aggie said. "I should've thought of that."

"How long will I be convalescent, Dr. Munn?" Carrie-Anne asked.

"You're basically healed, physically, except for some residual exhaustion," Sam Munn replied. "But we want to keep you here for observation and physical therapy, just to make sure everything is going well." He nodded at a fuel cell satchel similar to the one Zane no longer needed. "And we'll keep your batteries topped off."

"You need a vacation," Zane said.

"We *all* need a vacation," Rochelle said. "If you're really nice, Zane, we *might* even let you pay for it."

Zane chuckled. "If I thought you'd really *let* me..."

"What would you do?" Rhianna asked curiously.

"Well, one of my personal investments is a decent chunk of a small space cruise line," Zane said. "I could charter one of their ships and we could head out and dally amid the asteroid belt for a few days. Did you know Brubeck Mining has some holdings out there?" He grinned. "You gotta admit, you can't get much further 'away from it all' and still obey the stellar tech export laws."

"Now that you're healed, you and I have some accelerated training to do, Zane," Quinoa said. "Sounds like a good 'dojo' to me."

"It sounds as though I need the same training," Carrie-Anne said ruefully. "Some special forces combat veteran *I* turned out to be. 'Expert bodyguard.' Feh." She snorted. "I might as well have just cut my own head off and saved Fritz the trouble."

"Oh, I have no doubt he won't get another chance," Quinoa said.

"Just go easy on her," Dr. Munn said firmly. "VR only to start. Blast me your stats daily, and I'll let you know when I clear you for Real."

"Yessir," Quinoa said. "You two didn't get the orientation to your bodies that just about every other Intie does. I don't know how much time we have, but I've learned a few things, myself. But I know a couple others who would be willing teachers in hardlight combat techniques. I could use some training, myself, and there's no better place to learn zero-gee combat techniques than real zero-gee. For that matter, we should invite *all* the Integrates who work for you along—Flint-Burke, Ianau, and so on. They could either use the additional training themselves, or help instruct. Or both."

"Ready and willing," Zane said, Carrie-Anne nodding her agreement. "Looks like it'll be a working vacation after all." He glanced to Rhianna and Rochelle. "You-all

wanna come too? See all the pretty stars and chunks of tumbling rock?”

“I think we’ll take a rain check,” Rhianna said, grinning. “We’d just be a fifth lifter anyway, you spending all your time training. I’d rather wait ‘til *I* can be the one occupying all your attention.”

Zane nodded. “Fair enough. But be warned, I *will* hold you to that.” He winked, and Rhianna blushed as if on command.

“So why don’t you go get the cruise set up, I’ll round up the instructors, and we’ll let Carrie-Anne rest up?” Quinoa said.

“Works,” Zane said. He nodded to Rhianna and the others. “See ya later. Aggie, you’ll have to hold down the fort for me while I’m out.”

Agatha rolled her eyes. “Of course I will. I’ll have *loads* of fun explaining why, right in the midst of a crisis, you drop everything to go on a *cruise*.”

“Call it a ‘retreat’. They’ll understand. Ciao-meow!” Zane waved and vanished except for his grin, which also vanished a moment later.

Aggie snorted. “Some days I really do feel like I’ve gone down the rabbit hole.”

Carrie-Anne grinned. “Well, if anyone says ‘off with her head,’ I’m leaving.” Everyone in the room laughed.

October 20, 156 A.L.

Medside Room, Coffeehouse

In a darkened room in the Coffeehouse, behind a heavily-guarded high-security door, a cylindrical tank stood, gently bubbling. The figure within hung in still repose, as he had for weeks on end. But then, between one moment and the next, movement returned. It began small, with just a finger twitching, then his ears, then the tip of his stubby tail. Then his eyes snapped open.

:*Shit*.:

The guards outside were alerted by a crash from within, and the door slid open a moment later to reveal the lid of the tank thrown aside and fabber gel slopped across half of the floor as Fritz levered himself up and out the top. The naked lynx paused to glare at them. “Well, don’t just stand there, ya murgatroys! Get me a damn towel!”

A few minutes of panicked scrambling later, a properly dried boss-cat lounged once more on his throne, wearing a terrycloth bathrobe and rubbing the last bits of fabber gel out of his headfur with a towel.

A quick review of the situation showed things had gone into a decline since he’d gone into the tank. It wasn’t exactly a surprise—without the Boss-cat around to show the colors, he couldn’t head off further defections. He’d known that much at the outset—but there hadn’t been any choice. If he wanted to be back on his feet with all parts intact as quickly as possible, he couldn’t half-ass the healing measures. Especially given that Brubeck and the others would be healing faster, since *they* hadn’t lost the bits he’d carved off of them.

But even so, he hadn’t expected the extent to which the rot had set in. Multiple Enclaves had gone the way of Towers and rejected his representatives—some of whom had apparently defected *to* the Enclave in question rather than returning to the Coffeehouse. And even some of the regulars from the Coffeehouse had managed to slip away and lose themselves—be it in other Enclaves, human politics, or the vast expanses of the Dry Ocean or even deep space. He was losing more and more followers by the

hour.

It also wasn't a surprise that Quinoa Steader was behind it—or at least part of it. She'd been seen around some of the bigger Enclaves pitching an offer of amnesty. And the reports of a summit meeting on Brubeck's platform with humans and Integrates in attendance weren't exactly encouraging either. Seemed like the mice were finally getting up the nerve to try to bell the hep cat.

:Well, this is just the bee's knees,: Fritz muttered. :Need to nip this right in the bud, and this time just smacking that tiger around won't be enough. Not by a long shot.:

:You could end this here and now,: Jiminy said. :Just let it go. After what Quinoa did to us, you think she wouldn't do it again? Face it, you're done with this whole 'Boss-cat' shtick. The world's moved on. Cat's out of the bag for good, you dig?:

"Shaddup, you!" Fritz hissed aloud, jumping to his feet. A half dozen off his hangers-on watched their Bosscat, waiting for him to say what their next step was. He regained some composure. "Okay, hep cats, listen up! If it's war they want, we'll give them a goddamned war! Get everybody together in the Hangar! Everybody!"

October 21, 156 A.L.

Back in Uplift, another week went by. Zane's Integrates went on their training cruise and returned relaxed and confident. Rhianna was given to understand there had been some excitement along the way, but wasn't clear on the details. She supposed she could pry them out of Zane or Quinoa the next time she saw them.

With the continued lack of any action whatsoever by Fritz, the tension gripping the politics seemed to be dying down. Even Rhianna was less worried overall now, save for one or two little issues. The last month and change had given her and Rochelle time to complete a whole new revision of the DINsec spec and roll it out to all interested parties. They were better protected against Intie hacks than they had ever been.

Or at least, Rhianna *hoped* they were. Deep down, she was still more than a little worried on one key point. Her first DINsec beta release had been the most widely rolled-out, in a panic move meant to get as much of Zharus as possible as protected as possible against Intie attack. Tens of thousands of DINsec units had been placed in Uplift alone. Rhianna didn't regret the move—it had been necessary given the state of things at the time, and they had always meant to upgrade them later. The problem was, that original beta spec had been hack *resistant* but not hack *proof*. But once the first flush of panic was over, subsequent retrofit efforts had been less frantic—and potentially less thorough.

Over the last few weeks, Intie hack attacks had been knocking out the DIN-betas protecting all sorts of minor systems in Uplift—traffic lights, public fabbers, sprinkler systems. Each one was replaced as soon as it happened, but Rhianna couldn't help worrying that those attacks were serving as practice runs for Fritz's Inties to get the hang of knocking down DIN betas—and that they might well have discovered more critical infrastructural systems that still had the betas. They could be carefully avoiding calling attention to them, biding their time, until Fritz was ready to strike. And now that some time had gone by since the summit on Zane's platform, it was hard to get anyone down at Government Center to take her concerns seriously.

Rhianna sighed. It didn't do any good moping about it. Fritz would come when

he came, and no matter how well-prepared they thought they were it probably wouldn't be good enough anyway. They'd just have to do the best they could.

Sensing her mood, Kaylee padded over to the workbench where Rhianna was sitting and tinkering with the FTL "DINcom" design, and rubbed a cheek against her side. "It'll be okay, Rhi," Kaylee said. "We'll get through it."

"I know," Rhianna said. "It's just the anticipation that sucks."

"Pardon me," a female voice said from the entrance to the garage. "Might you be Rhianna Stonegate? The RIDE technician?" It was a red sambar deer doe RIDE in Fuser form. She spoke with a liquid Asiatic Indian accent.

Beside Rhianna, Kaylee perked up her ears. The accent was familiar, even if the voice speaking it was a stranger. Dr. Avilia Patil, her mother, had been one of hundreds of thousands of natives of overcrowded India who had been sent off to the colonies over the years, so the accent wasn't all that uncommon, but it still sent a little shiver down her spine whenever she heard someone speak that way.

"That's me," Rhianna said, wiping the grease off her hands with a rag and standing up. "Did you want to set up an appointment? I think Linda's up at the front desk..."

"Perhaps, but I desired to meet you first," the deer said. She was wearing a lot more metal over her hardlight pelt than Rhianna usually saw on RIDEs in town—in addition to the usual modesty plates, she wore greaves, leggings, and other bits and pieces, most of which seemed to carry additional pockets, panniers, and other compartments. There was also a large knapsack pak on her back, with a cylindrical drum about the size and shape of a bedroll strapped to the top.

All became clear when Rhianna noticed the emblem of the Laurasian Scientific Survey emblazoned across the chestplate, along with the symbol of the LSS's Rodinia forestry division. "I like to get a feel for the people I might have to work on me, first," the doe continued. "I am named Rohit, by the way." She offered a hand.

"Sounds reasonable." Rhianna came forward to take the hand. "Rohit" was obviously the name of the RIDE, not the rider, but there was nothing really odd about that. A lot of people went by their RIDE's name while Fused, especially if they preferred to let their RIDE do the talking. For that matter, Ryan had gone by "Kaylee Cross" himself for several years. "Nice to meet you, Rohit. You're a long way from Rodinia. Just off the sub?"

Rohit nodded. "We have some personal matters here in Uplift, and you were along the way to our hotel. Since we aren't tired yet, praise be to sub lag, we thought we might as well stop and meet you."

"We don't get t' meet many people from Rodinia," Kaylee said. "What's it like over there?"

"Oh, it is a *beautiful* place, wild and unspoiled," Rohit said, her eyes gleaming. "Especially the parts of it we travel—the places the tourists never get to see, around the scientific survey stations in the deep interior. Native Zharusian life abounds," She shrugged. "Of course, there are many unspoiled wildernesses on Gondwana and even Laurasia, but there is just something special about knowing you are one of a bare handful of people upon an entire supercontinent."

"I can imagine," Rhianna said. "We've seen a lot of gorgeous sights out in the desert, but I expect a place like Rodinia would have more variety."

"Bet it gets lonely, though," Kaylee said.

“Not always.” Rohit smiled. “After all, we always have each other.” She turned her head to regard Kaylee with some interest. “You are a LNX(f)-LMA-001, are you not? A very rare class indeed.”

Kaylee nodded. “They don’t get much rarer. I’m Kaylee.”

“It is an honor to meet you, Kaylee,” Rohit said gravely. “I am all too well aware of the debt we later-born RIDEs owe your generation.” She bowed with fluid grace in spite of all the equipment that burdened her. “I am pleased to see you are so well-maintained. It speaks well for your partner.”

“Uh, well, you’re, um, welcome,” Kaylee stammered.

Rohit turned back to Rhianna. “This appears a very well-ordered garage. I read of the attack upon it a couple of months ago. Very regrettable. However, you seem to have rebuilt very well.”

“Thanks,” Rhianna said. “I had some good friends to help out.” She regarded Rohit thoughtfully. “I have to admit, I’m kinda puzzled by what work you might need done. I’ve rarely ever seen a better-maintained RIDE than you. Your hardlight projectors are perfectly tuned, I’m not seeing any stiffness in your limbs or any signs of electrical problems either.” She shook her head. “Honestly, I wouldn’t have expected to see a RIDE just in from the Rodinian wilderness looking so good.”

“We have an excellent technician at our research station,” Rohit said. “I will pass along your kind words to her. But as for myself, I feel it is good to take care of preventative maintenance from time to time. If the need should arise while I am here...”

“Oh, of course,” Rhianna said.

:Boss, there’s no way a RIDE looking like that could have had a tune-up any longer ‘n two weeks ago, an’ that’s stretching it,: Kaylee pointed out privately. *:Just how long she think she’ll be in Uplift?:*

:True enough, but then again we are famous, especially in RIDE circles,: Rhianna replied. *:And if they’ve been in Rodinia for months, this is probably the first chance they’ve had to come by. Not surprising they might make up an excuse.:*

“Is there anything else we can help you with?” Rhianna asked. “If you want, we could fill you in on some good places to eat or shop ‘round here.”

“If you like ice cream, don’t miss the Milkbottle in Bifrost Park,” Kaylee offered.

Rohit nodded. “Thank you for your gracious offer. It may be that we will take you up on it. But for now, I think we should be getting along to our hotel.”

Rhianna nodded. “It was good to meet you, Rohit. Drop by anytime.”

The sambar deer RIDE nodded. “Perhaps we shall. Farewell.” She nodded and turned to go. Rhianna and Kaylee turned back toward their workbench—only to freeze in their tracks as an irascible male voice that was all too familiar to Kaylee, and to Rhianna from Kaylee’s memories, spoke up.

“*Oh. No. You. Don’t.* I know you. You’re not going to any hotel, you’re gonna hop right back on that sub and blow town again. No way in *hell*. You do not *get* to drag me all the way back here from Rodentia just to pull your suffering loner act all over again, decide she doesn’t need us in her life, and walk away. You don’t have *any* right. You just don’t. *She’s* the one who gets to make that call.”

As Rhianna and Kaylee slowly turned back around to stare, one end of the bedroll-sized drum on Rohit’s backpack popped open and a furry muzzle poked out of it, bright beady eyes glittering in a white rat’s face that Kaylee hadn’t seen in decades.

“*Rattigan?*” Kaylee sputtered.

The Rat RIDE hopped out of the carrier and floated on lifters down to the ground. “In the hardlight, kiddo,” he said. “Ya miss me?”

Kaylee *pounced* and started licking and headbutting him affectionately. “Of course, gramps!”

Then, almost as one, she and Rhianna looked back up at Rohit. The deer slowly turned back around, dismay and longing mingling on her face. “Oh, Ratty...” she sighed. Then she raised her arms, and the deer unfolded from around her rider with all the delicacy of a lotus blossoming—leaving a Walker-form sambar standing behind a slim, dark-haired woman. There was grey in her hair that hadn’t been there before, and more wrinkles than Kaylee remembered, and the deer RIDE tags were also new, but there could be no doubt this woman was Dr. Avilia Patil. Or, as Kaylee knew her—the gentle face from her First Boot.

“Mom!” she exclaimed, standing up to stare in disbelief, almost forgetting about Rattigan.

Rohit placed her muzzle in the small of Dr. Patil’s back and gently nudged her forward. Dr. Patil knelt next to Rattigan and smiled across at Kaylee, eyes sparkling. “Oh, my Kaylee...”

Anger, relief, love—Kaylee felt all three emotions at once, surging through the connection to her rider. Anger at her mother’s long absence, relief she was still alive, love just in seeing her again. She padded up to her and headbutted the woman’s chest, purring. “Where have you *been*? Were you *really* going to just...turn right around and leave without even telling me who you were?”

“I didn’t think I had any right to interfere in your life again after so long,” Dr. Patil said, brushing an errant strand of hair back from her face. “But...that really isn’t my decision to make. Rattigan was right.”

“As usual,” the rat smirked.

“I am sorry I have stayed away for so long.” Dr. Patil smiled. “But I am back now—to stay, if you still want me in your life.”

Rhianna felt dumbstruck, she grasped for words that just slipped by. She felt weak in the knees. “I’m...I’m gonna sit down...over there.” Instead she sat down right where she stood, happy for the extra padding on her behind. The woman who had invented true AI, the inarguable mother to *every RIDE ever made*, was *in her garage*. “Right here’s just fine, though.” She threw a live feed of what was going on directly to Rochelle and Uncia.

:*Bwa?*: Rochelle said. :*Holy crap, is that...I’ll be right down!*:

Rochelle all but fell down the stairs from the upper level, arriving at the bottom in a flurry of chartreuse hair. Uncia glided down a moment later. “Oh my God! I’ve read everything you ever published!” Rochelle gasped.

“She has,” Uncia said.

Dr. Patil looked up, and smiled. “And I’ve read the annotations both you and Rhianna made to them on RIDEwiki. I found them very insightful.”

“She finds them insightful,” Rhianna practically squeed. “Hear that, Shelley?”

“Uh...wow,” Rochelle said, unable to take her eyes off the RIDE scientist. “But...um...why?”

“I looked up everything I could find out about the two of you when I heard where Kaylee was,” Dr. Patil said. “I was *very* pleasantly surprised. In many ways.” She looked back down at Kaylee eyes filling with tears again. “Oh, my Kaylee girl...I am so sorry I

could not prevent what happened to you. It was all my fault that it happened in the first place.”

“How could my being in the Shed be your fault?” Kaylee asked.

“Because I made Felix...Fritz,” Dr. Patil said. “Or I did not prevent others from doing it, which amounts to the same thing.”

“You made him, yes, but he made his own poor choices,” Kaylee said. “I’d say he’s ‘kind of a dick’, but I’d be *vastly* understating. And I’m *fine* now. Conyers’ gambit paid off.”

Dr. Patil shook her head. “You don’t understand. It’s...more than that. We...didn’t simply *make* him. We *molded* him. Fritz was an experiment in more ways than anyone was ever told.”

“I don’t like the sound of that,” Rhianna said, getting to her feet. “I’ve seen a lot of ‘molding’ on Sturmhaven RIs, the crossriding units being the worst. The neural template tweaks are dicey at best.”

“That is precisely what we did to poor Felix.” Dr. Patil sighed. “The brass in charge of the project thought we could make him ‘patriotic,’ so he would be more easily ‘controllable.’ I protested—it had never been tried before, we could not guess at the results—but at the time, having just innocently revealed RI technology to the world, I was on thin enough ice as it was. At least I was able to save the rest of you from that...”

“Me, I’m a *natural* smartass,” Rattigan said, the oversized white lab rat lifting up to sit on Dr. Patil’s right shoulder. “No molding in the oven for me.”

“So instead of being patriotic, he turned out psychotic,” Rochelle said. “They wanted Captain America, they got Loki.”

“And they eventually paired him with Captain Ryder,” Rhianna said. “I’ve always wondered how a beatnik like that would end up a decorated military man, but he’s one of those statistical outliers Nextus likes to embrace sometimes.”

“I believe he had family in First Tier, but his military accomplishments were genuine,” Dr. Patil said. She shook her head. “Even by the end of the war, I still did not have enough influence to stop what happened. They buried you. They buried your children. They buried Anny. I was barely able to keep them from burying *me*, and that was only because I had become too much of a household name to disappear. Even then, I had to watch my every word. Entering ‘seclusion’ was a relief.”

“For a while they tried to make me into her keeper,” Rattigan said sourly. “Hah! I’m not built like other RIs and they couldn’t do anything to my core to make me into their patsy. I’m the prototype’s prototype. When they tried to shut me down—well, that’s a different story and I don’t like to brag.”

Kaylee snorted. “Since *when*?”

“Thirty-some years can change a person,” the rat said with some gravity.

“So, you’ve spent time in Rodinia,” Kaylee said. “What else have you been doing?”

“She’s been doing the ‘walking the earth’ thing since a year or two after ‘seclusion’,” Rattigan explained. He smirked. “Don’t make her angry. You wouldn’t *like* her when she’s angry.”

“It is a *very* long story,” Dr. Patil said, smiling. “When I went into seclusion, I had not planned anything more than being a latter-day Greta Garbo for a while. Then Ratty pointed out that as long as people believed I was still there, I could slip out the back door and be someone else.”

“There was this full-sized rat DE frame I wanted to try out,” Ratty said. “And Doc here needed to be a different person for a while. Soooo...”

“So I became a man, for the first time,” Dr. Patil said. “It was a most...interesting experience. In the beginning, I developed a great deal of sympathy for poor Nadene—the tech that Kaylee accidentally crossed with her first Fuse. But I gradually came to enjoy it. If nothing else, it meant no one would imagine who I really was.”

“A’course, being big and all’s fun for a while, but then I wanted to go back to being *me*,” Rattigan said. “So I sorta noodged her into makin’ another RIDE.”

“And that was Rohit,” Dr. Patil said. “It took me years to finish her, though in a sense she has never truly *been* finished, nor will she be.” She smiled. “I began as a RI core specialist, it is true, but I’ve had a great deal of time to study all aspects of RIDE engineering...and to put everything I have learned into her. And into Rattigan’s shells as well, of course.” The deer nodded shyly. “She’s a little shy around strangers,” Dr. Patil explained, petting her on the muzzle. “They’ve been my constant companions in my wanderings, and between the two of them I have crossridden several times. It keeps life interesting.”

“I have so many questions,” Rhianna stammered. Her gaze moved between Dr. Patil, Rattigan, and Rohit. “Though I guess they’re mostly *technical* and not really important right now.”

Dr. Patil nodded. “There was a technical matter or two I would like to discuss with you as well, but there will be time for that later. I do have a question for you *now*, however,” she said, her dark eyes twinkling. “It has been long since I’ve been in Uplift. Could you perhaps accompany me to Bifrost Park? As it happens, we *do* like ice cream.”

Kaylee Fused over Rhianna so she could embrace her mother herself. “Of course we will! And...while we’re at it, I’m going to give Katie a call. My kitten’s all grown up and I think she’d love to meet you.”

“And is Anny still in town?” Uncia asked. “We should call her, too.”

“If there are to be reunions, I prefer them small just yet,” Dr. Patil said. “I’m...not accustomed to being in cities. We’ve been in Rodinia for some time.”

“And we’d like to keep the media from catching a whiff of our ‘return’,” Rattigan added. “I didn’t want Doc to leave here without saying hello to y’all, but I’m not too hot on being on Steader News Network 30/6 for the next week.”

“We can eat Fused, no problem,” Rochelle said. “And you look like an ordinary Laurasian RIDE. Hell, they were *based* on you to begin with. Enough people in Uplift have them that there won’t be anything remarkable about it, as long as Dr. Patil stays out of sight of face-recognition cameras.” She nodded to Uncia, who padded up and Fused over her.

In response, Rohit Fused over Dr. Patil again. This time Rhianna recorded the whole sequence, then reviewed it a few times with her implant. Rohit was *amazing*, that was the only word for her—there was not a single unnecessary step or part, yet the construction of her plating and chassis equaled anything Donizetti made. Mechanical poetry in motion—she didn’t even move Rattigan one centimeter from his position on Dr. Patil’s shoulder, but simply Fused *under* him, then the rat scurried back into his position in his carrier and closed the hatch. Rhianna wondered what her skimmer form looked like.

“Oooh...” Uncia breathed, muttering something that sounded like, “Leila, eat your heart out.”

“Well, shall we?” Rhianna asked. “It’s not far, so we can walk it and talk on the way.”

“I enjoy walking,” Dr. Patil said in Rohit’s voice. “I have done so much of it, I have become very good at it.”

“So why didn’t you come back sooner?” Kaylee asked.

The deer RIDE shrugged. “As far as I knew, there was nothing in the world for me. And every other RIDE I saw reminded me that I was single-handedly responsible for establishing a new form of legal slavery.” She sighed. “All my children and grandchildren in bondage, and I a party to a ruinous secret that could only destroy me if I tried to fight it. What could I do?”

“That was then, but things have changed. The secret is out. Right now you would be the single, *best* advocate for our freedom,” Kaylee said.

“I will...think about it.” Dr. Patil looked unsure for a moment, but then smiled. “But let me turn the question back on *you*,” she said. “I gather you have been awake several years now. Like every Zharus citizen, I have a lifetime mail drop. Why did *you* never write to *me*?”

“I’ve...we’ve been hella busy, even after I got my memories back,” Kaylee said, hunching her shoulders. “Besides, you were always busy doing important things, back then. I guess I just sorta felt like if you wanted to be secluded, I shouldn’t be *bothering* you.”

“Kandace said the same thing, when she wrote me a few weeks ago,” Dr. Patil said. “I so rarely check the drop these days, I only got the letter last week.” She sighed. “I never *meant* to seem so distant, then. But there *were* always so many important things to be done.”

“Kandi wrote you?” Kaylee asked, ears perked.

“She seems to have adopted a teenager, whose mother is temporarily absent,” Dr. Patil said. “It apparently caused her to think about her own mother, who had been *more than* temporarily absent.” She smiled. “Her new partner *insisted* she write to me, in fact. I fear I have not yet replied, but I soon hope to visit them in person as well.”

“Ah...speaking of being a mother,” Kaylee said. “Katie’s almost here...”

“I remember her,” Dr. Patil said. “It seems like only yesterday that we discovered them...what a crazy day that was! I am glad you found each other again. Has there been any sign of the other children?”

“I still have an FOIA request pending,” Rhianna said. “They’re being pricks about this. I don’t think it’s gotten to Second Tier yet.”

“Perhaps this will help, kiddo!” Rattigan said, offering Kaylee a sizeable data dump whose contents were littered with Nextus “Eyes Only” warnings and encryption codes that had been shredded with the cybernetic equivalent of a buzzsaw. “Little somethin’ somethin’ I picked up as we left.”

“Thanks, gramps,” Kaylee purred, passing it on to Uncia as well. “You were a busy ratty.”

“You know us rodents. Always collecting shiny things.”

:*Rhi, this is going to take a while to index.*: Rochelle sent. :*More stuff to look forward to after...you know...after.*:

Dr. Patil sighed, but said nothing. The woman seemed like a bundle of regrets and self-doubt.

They strolled onwards, covering the two kilometers towards the park and its

antique dome emitter at a leisurely pace. Once they neared the Park a sleek, shiny, riderless skimmer bike pulled up beside them on the road, then collapsed back into a lynx similar in appearance to Kaylee. She wore a copper-colored "Hollow Star" civilian Marshals badge around her neck. "Hey, Mom. Who's your frrrriend?"

In response, Kaylee sent a summary of the past half hour over a DINsec channel, then waited for her daughter to absorb it. "You're serious?" Katie replied. "Really? I mean, *rrrrreally*?" She looked at "Rohit" in wonder. "So, what should I call you? Grrrrrandma? Goddess?"

"Grandma would be fine, if you wish it. Or simply my name, but 'Rohit' in public for now," Dr. Patil said. "The heavens know I am *no* goddess." She smiled at Kaylee. "Despite what some might think."

"Hey, when the first face you *ever* see..." Kaylee said, trailing off. "Course I was talking like a Speak N Spell at the time."

"All right...grrrrrandma," Katie said hesitantly. "I...honestly never thought I'd everrr meet you. Or you'd even carrre about meeting me."

"I saw what you did, Citizen Katie," Patil said. "It was an heartwarming act of bravery. Your grandma is very proud of you."

"Her mother's pretty damned proud, too," Kaylee said. "And someday soon we'll find your brothers and sisters, Katie."

"I just can't get used to the idea that maniac Frrrrrritz is my *father*," Katie replied. "I thought Luke Skywalkerrrr had it bad."

"Just like us humans, you can't pick your parents," Rhianna said.

"Hell's bells, I can't believe I even *have* parrrrents," Katie said. "I wish I could *remember* it. I've got Kaylee's memorrrries of that time, but it's like watching home movies of myself. I want my *own* back. Conyers was supposed to be shaking them loose since the summit, but he hasn't come thrrrrough yet."

"Nextus bureaucracy," Dr. Patil said. "Do I ever remember *that*."

"Let me know if you need a stainless steel rat to gnaw through the red tape," Rattigan offered. "They can't have patched over more than *half* the backdoors I left in the 'frame when we skedaddled."

The red deer RIDE rolled her eyes. "*Ratty*..."

"I'm just sayin'," Rattigan insisted.

"I might take you up on that if they don't get off their asses," Katie said. "I know a few folks in the Marrrrrshals that might put a lean-on, too. This is how they like their game played, after all."

There was *so much* Rhianna wanted to ask. And there was a tiny part of her that wanted to brag about DINsec, and especially the new DINcom. Since admitting to herself that it was the biggest scientific breakthrough since RIs, there was an uncharacteristic part of herself that wanted to shout "Eureka!" from the rooftops. The only thing that really kept her from doing just that was that she hadn't purposefully set out to invent it. Science tended to go "hey, that's funny" more often than "eureka".

She received a VR com from Anny as she and Leila approached the park from the nearby Brubeck Mining campus. "Hey, Rhi 'n Kay. Almost there. Who's this y'all wanted us ta meet?"

"A new friend of ours," Rhianna said calmly. "We think you and she might have some common acquaintances."

:*That's just a leeeetle bit evil, Rhi*,: Kaylee scolded amusedly.

:Hey, she's head of security for a major corporation,: Rhianna said. :I just wanna see how good she is at detective work.:

Kaylee snorted. *:Admit it, you just wanna see someone else get shocked the way we did.:*

:That's just a fringe benefit,: Rhianna replied virtuously.

When Leila descended in her sleek flier form, Rohit looked on appreciatively. Anny hopped out of the cockpit, then the white lioness reconfigured to Walker mode behind her. Rohit tilted her head forward, watching the transformation process with an admiring eye.

"Anny!" Rhianna said. "This here's Rohit, fresh from Rodinia."

The lioness-tagged woman extended her hand. "Pleased ta meet ya, Rohit. My lovely bigger half here is Leila. Y'all said we have something in common?"

"I believe we might know a few of the same people, from bygone days," "Rohit" said.

"Really?" Anny said suspiciously, reaching back to pet Leila on the nose. "Were you in the MRS?"

"I was attached to the early RIDE test project, in the technical division," Rohit said. "I saw you all quite often."

"Weren't too many folks involved in all that," Anny said. "I knew every single one of 'em. Unless you're that poor guy Kaylee accidentally crossed on that first Fuse test."

Rohit inclined her head—not quite a nod, but an acknowledgement.

"Ahem," Leila said. "In Hindu myth, Rohit was a form of the goddess Saraswati. She is a goddess of knowledge and learning."

"Hindu myth?" Anny repeated, her voice tinged with disbelief. "Knowledge an' learnin'?" The implication clearly wasn't lost on her.

"It appears we are found out," Dr. Patil said in her own voice, retracting Rohit's helmet-head to reveal her true appearance. "I am pleased to see you doing so well for yourself now, Major."

"Lawd!" Leila Fused up with her rider and the duo embraced the doe in joy.

Dr. Patil hugged them back, sliding her helmet into place again. "I am sorry I stayed away for so long, but...after seeing what they did to Kaylee, and you, and everything else that happened...I couldn't bear to be a part of this society anymore."

"I had five years to think about that, myself," Anny said. "But disappearin' ain't my style, no offense. So I went into private security, and made sure the company treated RIDEs right. Thought about being a Marshal, but they're just too loose for me. Now, well... I'm in the middle of a big ol' mess."

"A mess for which I bear at least some ultimate responsibility," Dr. Patil said. "Now I would like to help clean it up."

"What did ye have in mind doin'?" Anny asked, looking at her curiously. "I can't 'zackly see you fightin' on the front lines."

"You might be surprised!" Rattigan put in, poking his nose out of the carrier to wiggle his whiskers at Anny and Leila, then clambering out onto Rohit's shoulder.

Dr. Patil chuckled, reaching up to stroke the rat. "Of course not. But there are other ways I can assist. As brilliant as their DINsec work has been, Rhianna and Rochelle do not have a monopoly on Integrate countermeasures."

"I've got to hear this!" Rhianna said. "The more we have in our arsenal, the better." *:She called us "brilliant"! I'm going to fangirl all over the place, Shelley!:*

:*I know, right?*: Rochelle replied, grinning.

“I’ve been working on refining the Qubitite discs the Loose Cannons used for stealth operations,” Dr. Patil said. “I have not exactly had an opportunity to do controlled tests, but as far as I *know* we have been able to slip away undetected the few times we have run across Integrates on Rodinia.” She smiled. “Until I learned of your DINsec last week, that was our only means of defense against them.”

“And I imagine you’ve been running into Integrates over there more often the past few months, huge continent or not,” Rochelle said.

“Not so much in person, but our receivers have picked up considerably more activity in recent months on the comm bands Integrates often use,” Dr. Patil said. “All of it unbreakably encrypted, of course, but the quantity of it told me that *something* was going on. After Kandace’s letter moved me to investigate events in the world again, I discovered why.”

“Hey, didn’t we come here for ice cream?” Rattigan asked peevishly.

Dr. Patil reached up and petted the rat’s nose. “Sorry, Ratty. There are simply so many important things to discuss and I have rarely found anyone with whom I can speak on matters like these.”

“Talk all you want, but get me some ice cream first,” Rattigan grumbled. “It’s been three years, two months, seventeen days, four hours, and ten minutes since I last had any. But who’s counting?”

“I suppose we should get in line, then,” Dr. Patil said, stepping forward.

Slightly confused, Rhianna and Rochelle followed suit, with Katie, Anny, and Leila bringing up the rear. “Rattigan...*eats?*” Rhianna asked.

Dr. Patil smiled over Rohit’s shoulder. “Oh, yes. It seemed cruel to deny it to him since he couldn’t possibly Fuse with an operator in that body.”

“I *tried* to get her to tweak it so I could Fuse with a gerbil or something, but *noooooo...*” Rattigan smirked.

“But...how?” Rhianna asked.

The deer Fuser winked. “See if you can guess.”

Rhianna blinked. Had the *creator of the RI* just playfully posed *her* an engineering challenge? She watched closely as Dr. Patil ordered a pecan turtle mondae and a small dish of vanilla for Rattigan, and took them over to a table with her. She and the others picked up their own selections and brought them along, and Rattigan had already started working on his scoop by the time they got there. His little pink hardlight tongue busily slurped away at the ice cream.

It was an easier problem than she had thought. Even on Earth they had prosthetic mobile “brainboxes” that had artificial tastebuds and nutrient extraction units inside their large heads. The former owner of one of those mobile frames, one B. Thompson, had commissioned from her a custom deer unit based on a Laurasian chassis that she’d subsequently modified into a transformable “deertaur”. As realistic as possible, B had demanded. That meant an artificial digestive system taken from a Zharusian HUM-series full-body prosthesis.

“I suppose it’s not really that hard,” Rhianna said, feeding Rohit her line of reasoning. “The only custom gear you’d need is to miniaturize a basic fabber/recycler for that little rat chassis. Can you extract any chemical energy, Rattigan?”

“Not ‘nough room for all that,” the rodent RIDE said, between bites. “And I don’t need it anyway, with sarium. But I *can* use it as fab matter for making stuff. I can eat ice

cream and crap integrated circuits!”

Kaylee laughed. “A rat of all trades.”

“He’s very convenient for my work,” Dr. Patil said. “Since most of it involves nanoscale parts anyway, it avoids the awkward questions that going through more public fabbers might sometimes cause. There’s one in Rohit, as well, though not as finely-tuned—useful for frame parts and other things that don’t require as much precision.”

“That’s really clever,” Rochelle said. “I wonder why more RIDEs don’t do that. You could put something even more effective in something the size of Rohit, or Uncia.”

“Some of those larger Support Armors *do* carry fabbers for field repairs for larger platoons,” Kaylee pointed out. “In fact, doesn’t Uncia have space for one?”

“Yeah, though I pulled it out for more storage space ‘cuz we never used it,” Rochelle said. “Huh. I guess they never just hooked them up to RIDEs’ alimentary canals because...”

“...they’rrrrre just RIDEs, why do they need to *eat* stuff?” Katie said, looking at the others’ ice creams with undisguised envy.

“You know, I’ve got one of those,” Leila purred. “But then, I have a bit of everything.”

“An’ even she doesn’t have her throat wired into it,” Anny noted.

“Though I *could*,” Leila said thoughtfully. “It would just take some internal reconfiguration. Modular construction—all the *cool* kitties have it.”

“I think I hate you,” Uncia said. “Are you a Donizetti, Leila? Who *built* you?”

“Who says I didn’t simply *evolve ex nihilo* from the primordial nano-slime?” Leila purred.

“I always *thought* there was something slimy about you,” Uncia retorted.

“Ooooh, *catfight!*” Rattigan jeered.

Rochelle sighed, picking up her chocolate shake from the window. “Settle down, Uncia. It’s not her fault she cost three times as much as you did.”

“Rub it in, why don’t you,” Uncia muttered.

“Tell you what, after we patent the you-know-what and make a fortune, I’ll get you a new DE costing at least *five* million, how’s that?” Rochelle said.

“Yay!” Uncia cheered. She then stuck her tongue out at Leila, who studiously ignored her.

“Speaking of, uh, engineering challenges, there’s a couple things I’d like to share with you, Rohit,” Rhianna said. “Here’s the latest DINsec specs—2.0-beta. We’ve made some *vast* improvements with some input from your old colleague Dr. Clemens, and Wanda Munn.”

“Oh, thank you!” Dr. Patil said. Rohit’s eyes flicked back and forth in sympathy with her rider’s as she scanned the details. “Oh, very *good*.” She smiled. “I meant what I said, you know. This is brilliant work. If I had discovered the principle myself, I do not believe I could have developed it any better. I did make a few minor tweaks in the version I put into Rohit, based on your prior implementation—some of which I see you have found independently already—but I honestly cannot think of any major way this could be improved upon.”

“I honestly don’t know what to say,” Rhianna said. “Coming from you, that’s all the praise I ever could’ve hoped for.”

“I mean it sincerely,” Dr. Patil said. “And after all this is over, I would be honored

if you would allow me to work with you on further improvements—and if you would work with me on refining some of the other things I have made over the years.” She smiled wryly. “I have been keeping much to myself, because filing for patents would necessarily mean reminding the world I still exist. But perhaps the world and I are almost ready for each other again.”

“We need you, Mom,” Kaylee said plaintively. “We really, truly do.”

:*Should I tell her about DINcom? Or wait for later?*: Rhianna asked the other three, with a little fangirl squee.

:*Less public venue might be good,*: Rochelle pointed out.

:*Yes, it can wait until we can show her the working examples back in the Garage,*: Kaylee said. :*Extraordinary claims and all that jazz.*:

For a few moments, there was silence as the four Fused humans and one rat RIDE ate their ice cream, and Katie watched longingly. Then an errant gust of wind blew Rhianna’s napkins off the table. Her feline reflexes weren’t quite up to the task of snagging them in time. It was only after she’d scooped them up from the ground and disgustedly pitched them into the nearest trash bin that it twigged. “Wait...a breeze? Today wasn’t scheduled to be windy!”

Rochelle frowned. “And it’s coming from the wrong direction. The breeze generators are at the edges of the dome and blow inward. The gusts shouldn’t be coming from city center out.”

A video feed from the Garage called for attention, so Rhianna pulled it up. The neighborhood the Freerider Garage was located had only been under the Dome for four years, and the systems told her some emergency hardlight systems had snapped on. Tocsin’s attack hadn’t damaged the underground mini-dome emitter that had protected the building in those older days. Now it was back on again, covering the lot. The area around the Garage...it was hard to see with all the dust suddenly kicked up. There were a lot of newer buildings that *didn’t* have an emergency hardlight seal.

City klaxons started blaring.

“Well, crap,” Rochelle said eloquently. Rhianna said nothing aloud, being too busy dispatching messages to the Lindae to get everyone to the emergency shelter in the Garage’s basement, and to Paul and Lilli to be on the alert for a possible attack on AlphaWolf’s camp as well.

“We warned you, over and over again, to *leave us alone*,” Fritz’s voice came from every speaker. “Now, you got consequences. Let’s see what happens when you let the meat roast a while. Nowhere to run, nowhere to hide, meat! And your little scraplets, too!”

Chapter Twenty-One: Enemy Lines

September 20, 156 A.L. (Four Weeks Earlier)

“What the..? Where’s the backdoor I put in?” Mavra floated in VR, staring at the blank wall of metal where her previously undetectable hack into Gerard Financial Services had been. The black-footed ferret Integrate shrugged, then reached out with a handpaw to open a new one. It was a simple matter for an Integrate, after all—the backdoor had merely been there for convenience. She had only to wave her handpaw, and—

Her virtual claws skittered across a very smooth surface, unable to find any grip. The firewall was now as solid as starship hull metal. “What...the...*hell* is going on?”

Undeterred, she cracked her virtual knuckles and extended her encryption-breaking fractal claws. In one of her previous lives she had been a FRT(f)-LIA-007Q. She and Idra had mustered out of the Nextus Intelligence Agency about a year after the end of the Sturmhaven War after a storied military career. They’d thought highly enough of her to allow Idra to go with her, minus a few classified memories and gizmos of course—a new and unusual thing at the time, though hardly precedent-setting.

Though her counterintelligence equipment had been “officially” disabled, Mavra had other means to keep it up-to-date, so at the time of her Integration she’d *still* had the best counterintelligence hardware and software available. Even now she could burrow into the most secure systems.

The backdoor into Gerard Financial was, she had to admit, a personal weakness on her part. Her other old life had been Mavra “Brigadier” Gerard, and she still liked to keep tabs on the family business she had helped found twenty years ago and give them a helping handpaw every now and again—well out of Fritz’s view, of course. There were children and grandchildren to keep track of. The best she could do was be a “mysterious benefactor”, but doing anything more openly would invite reprisals from the more zealous of the Ascendant.

She took some satisfaction in the fact that she was hardly the only one of the Ascendant who did that—and if Fritz tried to ferret (heh) out all of them, he wouldn’t have any time left to raid politics or kick the crap out of Integrate mining magnates.

The firewall took time to drill through, on the order of *minutes* rather than milliseconds. An *eternity* in quantum computing terms. “This...this shouldn’t exist!” she exclaimed, examining what remained of the security software. “I don’t understand this.”

“Mav!” a friend of hers called from the aether. The feral wyvern’s VR form winged his way up next to her. “Strange things are afoot,” LeLane said. The red-and-black wyvern hovered and shifted his VR form to something more anthropomorphic. Unlike dragons, wyverns had only four limbs, and even in anthro form he retained wing membranes and long fingers.

“The hell you say,” Mavra said dryly. “Look at this, Le! Never seen encryption like it.” She grabbed him by the wing-arm and pulled him into the breach. “See?”

“Ack! Hey, don’t be so pushy,” LeLane said. The wyvern turned his spiky head around to examine the encryption data structure. “The fark is this? I’ve never seen

anything like this, either!”

“Maybe we oughta find a technomage,” Mavra suggested, forking off several sub-processes to get a better look at the thing. The decompiled code fragments had an oddly familiar style to it, but she couldn’t place it yet. “This is...who could have done this?”

“Traitors, that’s who!” Lel said. “There’s just so many of us these days. Lots of noobs coming out of the woodwork who don’t know any better. They don’t need meat, and meat doesn’t need them.”

“Yeah, but...” Mavra stopped herself before continuing.

“But’ what, Mav?”

“There’s a lot more to this than meets the eye,” the ferret said smoothly. “Come on, Lel, I’m counter-intel. I should get a closer look at this gear, maybe get some samples. There’s a hardware component, if I’m reading these fragments right.”

“You just want an excuse to visit your old meat,” Lel said sourly.

“You’re one to talk, given how you briar-patched your way into ‘monitoring’ Hellir Enclave’s reality-TV game,” Mavra retorted. “Does Fritz know you’ve got family in Cape Nord?”

“What he doesn’t know can’t hurt me. It’s just...lip service, ya know?” Lel and Mav were members of a very secretive faction within the Ascendant Enclave. Since Quinoa and Brena defected, Fritz was being extra careful to make sure his followers were true believers and making examples of those who weren’t. A purge was underway, and those purged didn’t make it out alive. Those who had left early had actually escaped with their pelts intact. Mavra and her friends regretted they hadn’t skedaddled when they had the chance.

Still, with Fritz in the regeneration tank for at least a few more weeks, and his most zealous followers too busy fighting amongst themselves... *When the cat’s away, the ferret will play!*

Now: October 21, 156 AL

Knights of the Round KNightclub, Camelot

The neon hardlight sign over the stage read Doubledown Derp—in big, bright letters, as Camelot was considered one of the band’s hometown stages. On the stage, a winged deer gripped the mic on the stand and sang into it, as a cheetah girl, another deer, an arctic fox, and a couple of local players backed them up on guitars, drums, keyboards, and other instruments.

“Tin soldiers and Fritz’s coming

We’re finally on our own

This summer I hear the drumming

Four dead in Uplift Dome...”

The modified lyrics to the old protest song struck Eva as a little silly, but the filk had attained memetic force in the last few weeks and now everyone was requesting it—and far be it from her not to give the customers what they wanted. Besides, nobody remembered the original song’s meaning anymore after five centuries, and she had a feeling that the long-departed Neil Young might not have minded the revision in light of the issues at hand. So she belted out the song as the others played along.

As the song ended, she put the mic back on the stand and nodded to the cheetah (Gigi), the fox (Wilma), and the other deer (Boston), before turning to the audience.

“Th-th-th-that’s all, folks. Thanks for coming out; you’ve been a great crowd tonight. Tip your waitress or bartender, and take care on the way home.”

As she started to move away from the stage, she suddenly froze as a message came in over her DIN. After a few seconds spent analyzing it in fast-time, she returned to the mic. “Oh, hey, listen. Change of plans—no encores tonight. And I don’t want you all to panic, but I think you’d better file out in a nice, orderly fashion, head somewhere safe, and tune in the disaster response frequencies on your DINs. Something tells me you’ll be hearing an important message very soon. If we’ve got any Scotties in the crowd, please help make sure everyone gets out okay. I think there’s a shelter downstairs for folks who’ve got too far to go.”

Gigi raised an eyebrow. *:What’s the word?:*

Eva passed the message across to the others via her DIN. *:The word is “Clementine.” As in, crew meeting time. Marshals just picked up over a dozen subs launching from the Coffeehouse. Looks like the balloon just went up.:*

Wilma pursed her lips, insofar as a fox muzzle could purse. *:Clemmie, you heard?:*

:Yes, Captain. I’m already warming up the lifters and running the preflight checks. We’ll be ready for launch by the time you can board.:

Boston put his drumsticks together and placed them on one of the snares, then tapped the earbud transceiver that let him listen in on the band’s private channel—he still didn’t have recourse to a DIN himself. “We’ll be there soon,” he murmured.

:See you then.:

Camelot Shipyard

Since Camelot was primarily a shipbuilding Enclave, its underground aerodrome facilities were actually considered part of and subservient to its shipyard. This applied especially to Clementine’s own personal berth, which was within the shipyard proper but very close to the general landing area, and to the nearby Most Urgent Hotpad, which was within the general landing area but very close to the shipyard proper.

Ship travel among Enclaves had never exactly been busy at the best of times, and under the current uncertain situation only two ships were in the area at present. The smaller of the two, a blue and white Pan-Am Starliner sitting on the Hotpad, hummed with warming engines. In the next section over, a forest of cables and waldos were in the process of retracting from a vessel straight out of *Star Trek*.

So it was that two very different parties nearly ran into each other as they both emerged from nearby entrances and dashed at top speed for their ships.

Gigi slowed herself down on catching sight of the Starliner, and the man dashing out to it. There was only one person who had a suborbital like that who would be seen in Camelot—and there he was. “Hey, guys! That’s Joe Steader! Hey, Joe!”

Joe turned at the mention of his name. “Uh—hello?” Then his eyes widened in recognition. “Hey! I remember you guys. I’d love to chat about old times, but I’ve got to get back to Uplift. Fritz is on the move.”

Gigi shifted into fast time to converse with the rest of the crew. *:You think he’s trucking one of his mechs around in that thing? He has a warehouse full of them, y’know.:*

:Can’t hurt to ask,: Wilma said. *:He was very handy with that hovertank back*

in the day—and we could use all the help we can get right now.: They'd already asked for aid from Camelot, but given the uncertainty of the situation as yet they were only willing to divert a single dragon from their own defenses. That should have been sufficient, given the size of the Coffeehouse and the fact that the departure of Fritz's army had probably left it mostly unguarded, but still...

Out of habit, Eva reached out to see what the plane's software had to say, but was almost immediately rebuffed. *:His bird has DINsec, which means if he is, it probably does too.:*

"Joe, if you're packing heat in that thing, we could urgently use your help," Gigi said aloud. "Uplift's got plenty of defenders—the Marshals are converging on it as we speak—but we don't have many reinforcements available ourselves, and we're just about to mount a raid on the Coffeehouse while Fritz and his followers are out. Are you with us?"

Joe blinked. "Hit Fritz where he lives? I'm in. Probably wouldn't make it back to Uplift before the battle's over there anyway. Open a ramp and I'll be right with you." He pointed his comm at the Pan-Am. It chirped twice and the aft ramp started lowering.

A minute later, the same hovertank Wilma remembered from back in the day trundled up the ramp into the *Clementine's* main cargo bay. Joe parked it then clambered down from the cockpit.

"You know, I've always wondered why having an open cockpit on a tank was a good idea," Gigi said.

"In the show, it had a canopy for space operations," Joe said. "But even the tanks from World War II had crew in the open sometimes. The turret machine gun, you know."

Outside, a large peach-colored dragon ambled up and saluted. "Mister Peaches, reporting for duty, Captain Van Dalen! I'm afraid I'm all they can spare, but I pack a wallop." He opened panels on his hips, exposing a few dozen micro-missiles, then displayed a trio of pulse cannon blisters on his chest that looked like crystals embedded in his skin. "Fully armed and ready to rock."

"Well, if they could only spare one, at least they sent the *best* one," Eva said. "Great to see you again, and even better to be working with you again."

Mr. Peaches dipped his head. "Oh, pshaw. Spare my blushes. I'm always happy to help my friends. There's always been rumors of what Fritz keeps in his private rooms."

"Or *who*," Gigi said darkly.

The big dragon shivered. "Yeah, who."

Wilma nodded to the dragon. "Glad to have you on board, too. By the way, Mr. Peaches? Joe Steader. Joe Steader? Mr. Peaches. We've known him since he was on newbie gate-cranking duty here, mumble-mumble years ago.

"Pleased to meet you," Joe said. "I've heard good things about you, from other Inties I know here and there. I'd offer my hand, but I'm in here, you're out there, and there's the matter of scale, so..."

"I'll just take the word for the deed, then. *I'm* pleased to meet the man responsible for so many hours of pleasant diversions for myself and my other half. I'm sure we'll have much to talk about when there's time to spare."

"I'll look forward to it."

"Speaking of the time question, we should be on our way," Wilma said. She nodded toward the bridge. "We'll meet you outside, and we can sort out our attack plan

when we're in the air."

"A good plan!" Mr. Peaches drifted into the air under lifter power, then flapped his wings for altitude. "I shall see you very shortly."

October 21, 156 AL
Above Uplift

Kyla squirmed uncomfortably on the bench in the passenger section of the Ascendant suborbital as it arced through the sky. Visually, the place was very impressive—all gleaming silvery chrome and glowy hardlight bits floating just above solid surfaces just like in that 21st-century videogame franchise, what was it called...*Huge Effect*? It echoed and underscored Fritz's rhetoric: "Look at us! We Are The Future!"

Of course, it was also terribly uncomfortable to sit on, even if your rump was covered in yellow-brown striped fur. The designer hadn't given any thought to tails (which made sense if the designer had been Fritz himself, given that he didn't have one to speak of. And even less of one *now...*), so Kyla's thick and muscular one was awkwardly pressed up against the seat back. That they represented a "future" full of flash and glitz that was more than a little uncomfortable for almost everyone except their *leader* was an irony lost on most of Fritz's closer followers.

And Kyla sometimes wondered (though never *aloud*) what it said about Fritz's message that he was defining his vision of the "future" against not *present* design trends, but those of the period five hundred years ago that this planet was crazy about. "Look at us, we're...four hundred years out of date?"

Are we the wave of the future, or nearly extinct? Kyla wondered. *Of course, some of us can be both...* She yelped, along with half the compartment's other inhabitants, as the sub hit an air pocket and bounced. "Ow! Too many more like that and I'm *walking* to Uplift."

"You and me both, sister," the zebra (and fellow stripey-butt) next to her said. "Who tuned the inertial dampers on this thing last, anyway?"

"Apparently they aren't needed in the Future," Kyla muttered.

"Shh, don't let our Fearless Leader hear you talking like that," the zebra muttered.

"Feh. If he can hear me all the way from the next sub over, let him." Kyla snorted. "I'm a thylacine. We've already been extinct for six hundred years. What's the worst he can do? Like he even pays attention in person anyway."

Zeerust snorted in kind. "You ask me, everything's falling to pieces. But here we are, punishing the meat and the scrap. Wait, was 'scrap' the derogatory term we're using for RIDEs these days? I've lost track."

"Why are we even here, anyway? Seriously?" Kyla grumbled. "I could have gone off with all the other Integrated thylacines, kangaroos, and Tasmanian devils to start our own marsupitopia."

"Same reason the rest of us are," Zeerust said. "We couldn't stay away from the politics, and Fritz caught us at it. Then it was join the crew or walk the plank."

"Speak for ye'self! I'm bein' after watchin' ye two, an' no mistake!" a canine Integrate growled from further up the compartment, the TRON-lines of his hardlight emitters burning a deep red. The authority of his glower was undercut, however, by the way he was currently hunched up against the ceiling. As his RIDE half had been an Irish

Wolfhound, he was well over two meters tall and looked singularly uncomfortable in the sub, for all that he was trying to bear his cramped confines with some form of dignity.

“Oh, *can it*, Murphy,” Mavra said. The sullen black-footed ferret was seated across from Zeerust and Kyla. Her friend LeLane was in the aft compartment, since he was too big and oddly-shaped to fit in a seat. He and the other fliers would be the first out. “And you can drop your RIDE’s cheesy brogue. You and I both know the closest either of you’ve ever been to Ireland is the bottom of a pint of Guinness.”

“Well, it’ll be a Harp for all of you if Fritz hears this kind of talk,” Murphy said with only a trace of an accent. “This is your last chance to prove yourselves to your fellow Ascendants. The Bosscat won’t tolerate any more traitors! He’ll break out that gutting knife of his.”

“Funny that he’s never been able to produce any of these ‘traitors’ besides Zane and his little bunch,” Kyla said. “None of whom were anywhere *near* the Waltons’ when Brena...” She sighed. She hadn’t seen eye-to-eye with the fluffy foxgirl politically, but like many friends they’d learned to agree to disagree and focus on the things they had in common. They’d both been from the same peer group back in Nextus, along with Lillibet Walton—and one of Mavra’s granddaughters, for that matter. Then Brena’s team had been captured while trying to kidnap Lilli—and no matter what Fritz said, there hadn’t been *any* signs of unfriendly Intie activity in the area. She’d checked.

:I don’t like this operation,: Mavra sent to Zeerust and Kyla. *:The objectives are vague. We’re just supposed to ‘scare the meat’. Since Quinoa cut him up like that...well, you saw him at the so-called ‘briefing’. He’s lost his mind.:*

Zeerust sent a snort emoticon, little cartoon puffs of wind blowing out of his nostrils. *:He’s not the only one. Which reminds me, I’ve got a bone to pick with you, Mavra. A thick, meaty bone—which is even worse, because I’m a herbivore.:*

Mavra groaned in response. *:Ugh. Let me guess. BarXan, right?:*

:Oh, so you’re the one responsible for the extra hacking homework we all got last month?: Kyla put in.

:I just thought that if I explained it to him, he might authorize an excursion to snag some sample hardware for analysis,: Mavra said, with an eyeroll emoticon. *:But when he heard I’d been able to hack through it anyway, he thought making everybody practice up was a better idea. I forgot how stupid he is—and how much of a suck-up to Fritz. For what it’s worth, he gave me just as much homework as you guys. Probably more, given that I’m, well...me.:*

Mavra wasn’t popular among the more strident believers. It was her theory where that technology had originated that made her such a heretic. She could even put a name to that source—or sources—but hadn’t put that information forward except among her little circle of friends. The owners of a little podunk garage on the outskirts of Uplift, the most unlikely place she could imagine. Mavra had determined the firewall was even based on Integrates’ own DINs, but kept that to herself, not even telling her closest friends.

:At least we’ll be able to hack those new firewalls if we need to—assuming they didn’t go and improve them even more since then.: Zeerust sighed. *:Hope it doesn’t come to that.:*

“Okay, everyone!” Murphy shouted. “We’ve got about sixty dome emitters to hack and bring down in less than five minutes. A few weeks without them and Uplift will just dry up and blow away. You were issued twenty DINs before we left. Try not to burn

through them quickly! Hack a public fab if you need more, but don't hang around in one place for too long, even cloaked."

"Why so worried? Expecting the Loose Cannons to show up?" Kyla snarked.

"As a *reminder*," Murphy continued, "we're here to show just how primitive they are compared to us. We're like meat kicking at an anthill. They have *no chance* against us. If you find any traitors, go after them. But meat and scrap are *beneath* us."

:I don't know about you, but I'm letting him go first,: Kyla said.

:It's not him that bothers me,: Mavra said, glancing at the half-dozen other Integrates in the compartment who were clearly hanging on Murphy's every word. *:It's the ones who'll be bringing up the rear. They're the ones who'll have a gun on our backs.:*

:Terrific,: Zeerust sent. *:Any plans on how to deal with them?:*

:We just need to keep our eyes open...but stay networked, okay?: Kyla said.

:This is going to get messy, so we have to snatch the opportunity when it appears.:

:What opportunity is that?: Zeerust asked.

:We'll know it when we see it,: Mavra temporized.

Zeerust sent an emoticon of a super-deformed zebra rolling his eyes. *:Terrific.:*

Murphy glared at the trio. *:Don't you probies get any stupid ideas of turning traitor. I know you're talking about something, and I can guess what. You especially, Mavra. If any of you make one false move, or jeopardize this mission, I'll gut you like a fish, with the Bosscat's blessing.:*

"Oh, yes sir," Zeerust said aloud.

"You think I'm *kidding*, stripes?" Murphy continued. He made a cutting motion with his right hand and snipped the tip off of the zebra's ear with a hardlight blade.

Zeerust clenched his teeth then grabbed his sliced ear. "Bastard!"

"You three have your assignments. Bring down your assigned emitter and there won't be any more pain." Murphy glared at Mavra, then lolled his tongue. "Bosscat says I'm to make sure you do the job, ferret-lass. You're the best hacker here, so you get to take down the ancient junkheap in Bifrost Park. The meat take a lot of pride in that one, so the traitors added some extra protection. Since *all* the domes have to come down at once, you're our lass. Don't mess it up."

The Coffeehouse suborbital force had split into two groups, one headed for Uplift, and the other for AlphaCamp. The Ascendant forces numbered about a thousand in total, a tiny number that had sent Fritz into a fury. Between the two Steaders doing their meddling and Zane's quick recovery, it was now or never. *:The meat and scrap either learn, now, not to meddle with us, or...:*

:Or what?: Jiminy said.

:Or we die trying.:

:Listen to yourself. You're unhinged, man. Take a deep breath. Take ten. Stop and smell the flowers.:

:Shut up! Shut up shut up SHUT UP!: Fritz didn't realize he'd also spoken aloud until he looked up and saw the others in the shuttle staring at him. "What're *you* lookin' at? You got something to say?" Everyone else hastily looked away as his arm started to glow. Fritz frowned at it, and the glow stopped. *Right. Right. Stay in control, man,* he told himself. *Dial it back.*

:You should listen to yourself,: Jiminy put in, before falling silent. Apparently

even he realized when he'd gone too far. Though Fritz wasn't exactly sure which "he" he meant, there.

Fritz glared at BarXan, his second in command. "Get me into the meat's network, stripey butt. I got an announcement to make."

Founders Park, Uplift

As Fritz's boasts still echoed through the park, Dr. Patil calmly put down her spoon and stood back from the ice cream parlor table. With a series of metallic clacks, the knapsack and most of the other metal pieces adorning Rohit detached and lowered themselves to the ground, where they clumped together into a metallic crate shape that she shoved under the table.

Bereft of the clutter, Rohit's shape was amazing to behold. Where the proportions of most RIDEs tended to give them a squat, almost chunky appearance—unsurprising given the need to fit a human body inside the metal one—Rohit appeared so slim and slender that it was almost hard to see how there was room for a woman inside at all. It was a clever optical illusion—without a frame of reference, her body simply had such perfect proportions that it seemed smaller than it really was. Nonetheless, even in the middle of a panic, Rhianna had to freeze for a moment to appreciate the masterwork.

Then Dr. Patil picked up Rattigan, whose hardlight skin flickered off as his body reshaped itself into something like a cannon. She latched him into place along Rohit's right gauntlet. "I expected this day would come," she said, her voice more determined now. "But I did not expect it to be quite so soon."

"At least we're with family," Rattigan said.

The crowd—what there was of it—was already reacting, heading for buildings or underground entrances with disaster shelter signs prominent or Fusing up with their RIDEs. The nearby buildings that had them deployed their own layer of hardlight shields.

Kaylee deployed her own meager built-in weaponry, only one shoulder pulse cannon, hardlight pelt solidifying from fur to armor mode. "The domes are going down all over the polis!" she announced, checking the network alarms. "They haven't gotten to Bifrost yet, but it's only a matter of time."

"Crap, the *Domes*!" Rochelle said. "How much you wanna bet they're one of those systems the polis forgot to upgrade out of DIN-beta?"

"No bet," Rhianna said, looking at the Bifrost emitter and tapping into its network. "That one is on the 1.1 spec, but that won't last much longer. One of Fritz's cronies has to be on site here somewhere."

"Awww, shit!" Kaylee cursed. Above them, the old Dome finally flickered off like the rest. The whole polis was now naked to the hot, desiccating wind off the Dry Ocean.

"That doesn't mean we can't bring it right back up again," Rochelle said. A panel in Uncia's chest slid open and Rochelle extracted and unfolded her submachine guns and their power-holster rigs. "Right about now, replicator or no, I'm glad for that extra storage. Rhi, you okay for firepower?"

"I need that Donizetti weapons pak back at the Garage to be any use," Rhianna said. "Thank you, Lilli."

"Here, you can borrow this 'til then." Rochelle tossed her one of the SMGs. "Can shoot more accurately with just one at a time anyway."

“‘Ratty-gun’ has a few surprises, too,” Rattigan said, his voice more metallic now that he was no longer in rat-emulation mode. “Oh yes, yes he does, *precious*.”

“Which we shall try to keep for a last resort,” Dr. Patil said, opening a panel on the side of the vintage Bifrost emitter and peering within. “I’m a mother, not a fighter.”

“I am commencing fabrication of DIN-sec 2.0-beta-2 modules,” Rohit said in a different cadence than Dr. Patil had been using to speak through her. “Time to completion of first batch: thirty-seven seconds. If I’m to make more than two batches I’ll need more raw materials.”

“We’re gonna need some official help here. I’m putting in an Emergency Services priority call. They know who we are—I hope,” Kaylee said.

“Lee and I need to get back to security HQ,” Anny said, Leila changing to flier mode. “We been coordinating with E.S. on prep, but they’re gonna need leadership.”

“Beat it, Anny,” Kaylee said good-naturedly, jerking her thumb towards the Brubeck campus. “We’ll get the ball rolling here. Where the *hell* is that psycho?” Leila was already gone before Kaylee had finished her second sentence.

A panel in Rohit’s chest slid open and she caught four small round pieces as they dropped out. “Here are the first of them. If you keep me covered, I will install them myself.”

“Mom, I’m going to get Rrrrelena and rrrreport to the Marshals,” Katie said. “I hate to leave you like this, but...”

“We’ll be fine. Do what you have to. Now you get to put that Skunkworks chassis of yours to good use!” Kaylee said.

“Oh, believe me, we will!” Katie said. She slipped into skimmer mode and sped off even faster than Leila.

Kaylee beamed with pride as she watched her go. “That’s my kitten.”

“Sensors on full active,” Uncia said. “Emergency protocols for the Dome isolates them from the polis systems. Hacking Bifrost means they’re beneath our feet in the maintenance room.”

“Question is, can we do anything about it?” Rochelle said.

Rohit opened her mouth to speak—then vanished into thin air.

“Bwa?” Rochelle said.

Then as suddenly as Rohit had vanished, two other figures appeared to either side of the dome emitter. To the left was an Irish wolfhound, towering over them, teeth bared, hardlight lance gripped in his right handpaw. To the right was a shorter black-footed ferret, who somehow managed to look menacing and apologetic at the same time.

“Better beat feet, meat!” the wolfhound growled, leveling the lance at the Milkbottle and firing a brilliant blast of energy that lit the clearing as white as a nearby lightning strike. It took the top off the small building. The heat from the blast set the grass and trees ablaze, along with what was left of the Milkbottle.

Rhianna returned fire out of sheer rage and reflex, Rochelle joining in. The gauss rounds didn’t even faze him—and he made an obvious effort to look bored by the whole attempt. “Not even a scratch. F for effort, meat.”

:*I need my farking weapons pak!*: Kaylee growled.

:*Bwing me my spear and magic helmet!*: Uncia added.

:*Don’t just stand there, let’s go!*: Rochelle grabbed Kaylee’s arm and fired her lifters. While not exactly an Ahnuld, she wasn’t a bad sprinter—especially when she ignored all Uplift’s traffic laws.

“That’s right, fly away!” the wolfhound gloated, shouting after them. “See, Mavra? See how they run?”

“It’s not how they run I’m worried about,” Mavra muttered. “It’s how they debug and recompile.”

The Garage’s mini-dome hadn’t been as well maintained as some in the years since the polity’s main dome had expanded past its neighborhood, but it was functional, and the lot was full of people who’d been caught out in the dust and heat when the main Dome came down. The Lindae and the other employees were doing their best to help out, bringing as many of them inside the better-shielded work bays as they could. Every RIDE who could Fuse was Fused to someone. If they had weapons they were deployed. A few of them displayed Uplift Militia badges and tried to get the foursome’s attention as they landed on the roof of Rhianna and Kaylee’s home.

“Kinda busy right now!” Rhianna said. “Lindae, you’re doing a good job! Keep at it!”

“Will do!” the Fused tigress said.

:I hope Rohit’s okay...: Kaylee sent.

:They’re survivors,: Rhianna replied. *:They’ll manage.:*

The Donizetti weapons paks Lillibet had purchased for them all those weeks ago had undergone a few modifications since the assault on Zane’s platform, based on their experience there and Fritz’s own assault. Rhianna had replaced the shoulder cannons with a pair of beam weapons she *hoped* would compare with Fritz’s own arm cannon, and Uncia’s single pulse cannon had been similarly amped up. Uncia had also added a pair of plasma burst submachine guns to her arsenal to complement the gauss Uzis—and these were the lightest of her additions.

“Heat em up!” Kaylee said, tossing Uncia her borrowed SMG back and latching into the equipment alcove.

Kaylee’s hardlight powered down, latches and ports opening on her back as the plating expanded. The precision waldos in the alcove installed military-grade batteries, weapons capacitors, and targeting sensors into their proper places, following up with the bulkier armor plating. Kaylee received multi-purpose hardlight weapons gauntlets in addition to the dual-cannon backpack and over a dozen leg-mounted mini-missiles in hip pods.

Uncia’s smooth metal modesty plates fell away, revealing her in all her anatomically-correct glory momentarily before the hardlight also flickered out and thicker and heavier-armored versions of the plates latched into place. Greaves and gauntlets slammed home, and hardlight armor panels in Uncia’s fur colors appeared above them, completing the ensemble.

As the arming waldos retracted, Uncia raised her arms for inspection and glanced down at herself to be sure everything was in the right place. “Smoking! Ready to go?”

“Weapons systems green,” Kaylee confirmed. “Let’s show ‘em what ‘mere’ flesh and metal can do.”

“I feel like I’m wearing a BattleMech,” Rochelle said. “This better be worth it.”

“One more thing!” Rhianna said brightly, walking over to the experiment table. She picked up a DINcom prototype. “Let’s get one of these in you. You can install the other one somewhere Fritz’s cronies won’t find it, and you’ll have a connection to the polis network they can’t jam. If they’re going after the Domes, who knows what else they’ll fark with. You can hook up with the Marshals’ Silicons.”

“Oooh! Is this where I get to try out marginally-tested experimental equipment in a crisis situation again? Goodie! I *love* it when that happens!” Uncia said without irony. She flipped open an armor plate on her chest and slid open an access panel. “Stick it right in there!”

Rhianna handed half of the DINcom over. “Here, put it in yourself.”

“Awesome.” Rochelle took the device and held it up for a moment, inspecting it. “Hard to believe we’re holding the next revolutionary breakthrough in interstellar communication right here in our paw.”

“I feel like I should be saying ‘In brightest day, in darkest night, no evil shall escape my sight’ or something,” Uncia said.

Rochelle laughed. “Or maybe some deep voice ought to say, ‘Arise, Unctuous Prime’?”

“Now you’re just being silly.” Uncia reached into the access panel and latched the DINcom into place, then slid everything shut again. She picked up the other piece and slid it into a compartment in one of her gauntlets. “I’d stick this in our workstation, but I think if we can kick those Inties out of one of the emitters and get it resecured it might be an even better place—on a main trunk of the network instead of a feeder line.” She grinned. “And I know just which one we should hit first.”

“Damned good idea, Uncia. Now, let’s give those two degenerate terrorists a little surprise,” Kaylee said, lips curled in a snarl.

“You don’t have to tell *us* twice!” Uncia said.

“Let’s do this thing,” Rochelle agreed. Their lifters fired up again, and they swooped out of the garage—slower than they had come in, but with a lot more momentum. *Like boulders rolling down a hill*, Rochelle thought. *Now let’s see what we smash at the bottom.*

“That’s right! Run for your puny little meaty lives of...puny...meatiness!” Murphy jeered, standing on top of the Bifrost emitter and shaking his lance, lord of all he surveyed. Smoke and flame from the burning Park surrounded them. Fire Department drones Murphy had shot down littered the ground, adding their own noxious smoke. “They’re ants under our boots!”

Yeah, and who’s the one who actually did the real work here? Mavra grumbled inwardly—though she didn’t so much as roll her eyes on the outside. She liked *her* ears the way they were. “So, what, should I go hack something else now?” *I stick around here much longer, I’ll get spacked when those RIDers come back.*

“We’re supposed ta stay here until the Bosscat’s carved up Brubeck into tiny pieces, and spacks anyone else he hates,” Murphy said. “Don’t you do anything stupid, or I’ll gut you myself. But I have to say, you made good on the dome.”

Only just, Mavra thought. She’d burned through three quarters of her DINs in the process. “I need more DINs. There’s a public fab nearby that’s still working.”

“Fine, go,” Murphy said flippantly. “But don’t wander far. I’ll be *watching* you.”

This really bites, Mavra thought as she headed over to the fab. Her last DIN sparked and fizzled as she hacked it, and she slapped another into place with a sigh. Her replacement supply rattled down into the output tray as if some New Vegas slot had decided to pay off in jaggedy bits of metal. Junk, all of it. As a techie, Mavra *knew* how badly they were made. But she also knew what happened to the people who tried to make improvements.

Her private analysis of the after-action reports of those who escaped the Brubeck Main Platform fight suggested that whoever had made the DIN-based network encryption had *also* made much-improved regular DINs the traitors were apparently using. Mavra knew who those makers *were* now. Their Garage was barely two kilometers away. The same direction that those two felines—the two whose RIDEs were the right species to be—what if they had been out getting ice cream when she and Murphy—*Oh...fark. Fark it all! I'm sooooo dead.*

“For a terrorist you lack the enthusiasm of your partner,” came a female Indian-accented voice out of thin air. Mavra felt the barrel of some kind of gun in the small of her back. “Please, do not force me to use this. I abhor violence, but I *will* pull the trigger if I must. No hardlight tricks.”

The originator was nowhere on Mavra’s sensors. Not even the tickle of another cloaked Intie nearby. “Why not just shoot me and get it over with, lady?” Mavra muttered. “It’s not like I don’t deserve it. I *liked* that ice cream stand. I hope I didn’t kill anybody.”

“As I said, you lack enthusiasm,” the woman said. “Now, if you know what’s good for you, you’ll stand here and wait just a little while. Your ‘friend’ is too busy gloating over his destruction right now to notice, I think.”

A thin blue pulse beam abruptly perforated Murphy’s shoulder, shattering his shields. The Integrate let out a canine yelp, clapping one hand reflexively to it as he turned and brought up his lance with the other. But before he could even look around for the source of the beam, three hundred kilos of angry Fused lynx wielding a blazing hardlight sword swooped past and sliced through the lance, which flickered and dissolved as it lost cohesion. Then, on the backstroke, she sliced off the arm that had held it at the elbow.

“Here boy! Now shake! Oh...well, guess you can’t. Too bad!” a heavily-armored snow leopard jeered from next to the lynx. She fired several more blue pulse beams from her shoulder-mounted cannon, making Murphy dodge with only a single success.

“I’m sorry,” the speaker behind Mavra said. A painful jolt in Mavra’s back crackled through her nervous system, enough to daze but not much more, made the ferret slump to the ground. The image of a Fused doe burned in the back of her eyes as her captor fired a followup shot that hit Murphy right in the center of mass. The tall wolfhound felled like a Cascadia redwood.

“But he can play dead like nobody’s business,” the lynx smirked.

The doe turned to Mavra. “You got the lowest stun setting,” the rat-like gun on her forearm said. “What yer friend there got...wasn’t.”

“Izze dead?” Mavra asked dazedly, hopefully.

“Please. There’s simply no need,” the doe replied. The Fuser picked the smaller ferret Integrate up by the scruff of her neck like a bag of potatoes. “Now, you’re coming with us. We have matters to discuss.”

The ferret sat at one of the few ice cream parlor tables that remained upright, elbows resting on the table, holding her throbbing head in both hands. Rohit stood behind her and to the left, which not at all coincidentally positioned the arm with Ratty-gun on it behind her back, though the gun was pointed to ground at the moment.

“The damage isn’t too bad,” Rhianna reported, poking around in the panel that Rohit had opened earlier. Her gloves were busy doing nanolathe repairs. “These old

girls have lots of redundancy. I'll have the dome back up in two shakes with 2.0-beta-2."

"Don't you mean two twitches?" Rochelle teased. "I don't think you've got enough tail there to qualify as something you can 'shake'."

"Unlike some of us," Uncia added, flirting her fluffy bar of fur back and forth.

"Oh sure, that might come in handy if you wanted to clean out a pipe or something," Kaylee retorted. "*Some* of us like being able to sit in chairs."

"Hey, we can sit in chairs just fine." Uncia demonstrated by picking up a charred, knocked-over Fuser chair from the ground and turning it around to straddle in reverse, resting her arms on the seat back, across the table from the ferret. "See?"

"That's not sitting *in* a chair and you know it," Kaylee said. She and Rhianna pulled back out of the emitter and closed the panel, making a dusting-off motion with their hands. "There, all done."

With a deep rumble, the fountain booted back up. Unlike before, the particle fountain only reached a few hundred meters up, and the dome covered about the same radius. "That should give us a bit of breathing room," Rhianna said with satisfaction. The air temperature was already starting to drop.

"So what do we do with her?" Uncia nodded toward the ferret.

"I surrender," the ferret mumbled.

"You can't surrender, we already caught you," Uncia said.

"I surrender anyway. Take me away and throw me in your dungeon." She sighed. "I didn't want this. I didn't want *any* of this. But *you* try telling that to Fritz and his lapdogs. Like Murphy over there."

"I think a wolfhound is a bit too large to be a 'lapdog,'" Uncia said.

The ferret snorted. "Not with the size of Fritz's ego."

Kaylee and Rhianna pulled up another chair. "So what's he after here? What's the plan?"

"Isn't it obvious? Take down the Domes, screw with the infrastructure. Show what happens to anyone who stands up to him. Oh, and get even with your buddy Zane."

"Dammit!" Rhianna swore. "We need to get to him. He'll need our help."

"The whole *city* will need our help," Dr. Patil reminded them. "And the help of as many of those who *wish* to help as it can get." She looked meaningfully at the ferret.

The ferret raised her head and turned it to stare at Rohit. "You'd...you can't mean *me*?"

"Do you *want* to help?" Dr. Patil asked reasonably.

"Yes, but...how do you know you can trust me?"

"I believe I am a sufficiently good judge of character to know these things," Dr. Patil said. "But my friends may need greater assurance. What proof can you offer?"

"I...um..." The ferret thought for a moment, then sighed. "Put my DIN back in. I'll give you root access. Just...be careful in there, okay?"

"What, these crappy things?" Rochelle held up one of the small beads between thumb and forefinger, then squeezed it into dust. "I'd be afraid to access any system with one of these between me and it. How on earth do you manage?"

The ferret looked down at the table. "I use a lot of 'em," she mumbled.

"I'll bet you do." Rochelle glanced to Rhianna. *:If Dr. Patil thinks she's a good risk...what do you think?:*

Rhianna shrugged. *:We can always unplug it afterward if it doesn't work out.:*

She glanced over at Rohit.

Rochelle and Uncia grinned together. *:And it's a chance to show off for your idol, right?:* Uncia put in.

:That's just a fringe benefit,: Rhianna insisted virtuously.

Rochelle turned her attention back to the ferret. "Yeah, I think we can do better than that. Hey Do—ah, Rohit, got a stopwatch?"

The doe Fuser inclined her head in a nod.

Rochelle looked to Rhianna. "Okay, go."

The Fused lynx walked up to the ferret and put a hand on her shoulder to lean her back so she could get a good look at her. "Where's your...ah, belly-button, huh? Have a friend who's got hers there too. This'll probably feel a little cold..." She extended probes from one clawtip and poked them in. The ferret squealed and stiffened, but otherwise stayed very still as Rhianna worked.

"Most interesting," Dr. Patil said. "How are you—ah, thank you for the telemetry. I see."

"Hang on, let me do that," Rattigan put in as Rhianna reached toward a pak at her waist. "I can kick the ass of that bolt-on micro-fabber you're wearing any day." The rat's cannon muzzle dilated and a small silver disc dropped onto the table in front of Kaylee.

"Thanks," Rhianna said, picking it up and fitting it into the ferret's navel. "Okay, Rochelle, your turn."

The ferret shook her head dazedly. "Who *are* you people?"

"Just a couple of working girls and their partners," Rochelle said, attaching leads to the DIN disc and starting her decryption subroutine. "No one really special. Which is why Fritz hates us so bad."

"I don't think he knows it's you he's supposed to hate," the ferret said.

"I would be inclined to disagree," Dr. Patil said. "He hates the idea of Integrates 'going public,' but why do you suppose that is? Integrates are not so much more wonderful or powerful as he wants to believe—and any mixing invites closer comparisons."

"Hey, Ratty, can you do me a solid?" Rochelle asked, pulling the DIN disc back out of its socket and unclipping the leads. "I need—"

"I know what'cher need," Rattigan said, spitting out a small glittering laser comm bead. "Ptooy! That should do it."

"Right!" Rochelle picked it up and latched it into place on the disc. "Time?"

"Three minutes, seventeen seconds," Dr. Patil said.

Rochelle raised her arms in a victory pose. "A new record!"

Assembly finished, Rhianna held the completed DIN between thumb and forefinger. "If you don't follow through with root access, Rohit and Ratty-gun here will make you join your partner in la-la land for a few days."

"You don't need to threaten me," she said. "I just want away from Fritz. You guys can have open access to me as long as you want it—hell, you can dress me up in a maid outfit and force me to serve tea for all I care if you can *keep me safe* from him."

"So, how many true believers does he actually have left?" Kaylee wondered. "It can't be that many, since he had to bring you on this."

"I don't even know. Nobody really does." The ferret shrugged. "It was simple enough for the Ascendants in other Enclaves to cut ties and vanish when Quinoa

Steadier asked them to, but those of us from the Coffeehouse are all stuck in a big ol' prisoners' dilemma. It's risky to trust anyone, because anyone *might* be one of Fritz's bully boys, or they might just be really good at toeing the party line. So we don't know how many more are just pretending. I have some friends who were dragged into this just like I was, but we haven't found anyone else we're *sure* enough of to take a chance on."

More Fire Department drones had arrived, using hardlight to enclose the remaining flames and choke off their oxygen, using fire retardant elsewhere to put out remaining embers. The temperature inside 150-meter radius Bifrost Dome was close to fifty degrees Celsius, a normal Dry Ocean winter for this time of the year, but dropping steadily.

"Emergency Services and the Marshals must have their hands full," Rochelle said. "Nobody responded to our call. Must be chaos around here."

"It's a big polis," Rhianna said, looking off in the direction of the Brubeck campus. She turned back to the ferret. "Before I plug this in, I'd at least like to know what to call you."

"Uh, Mavra. Mavra Gerard. But my friends call me 'Brigadier.'" The trio of hardlight emitters on her back swirled. "I've been Integrated going on fifteen years now. Only been hooked up with the Ascendant the last five or so."

"You made some poor choices, then," Rohit said. "Perhaps you'd like to correct them."

"Choices? *What* damned choices?" Mavra sputtered. "We were inducted all but at *gunpoint*—or what would pass for it if Inties needed guns. My friends and I have been looking for a way out for months. We don't have it as easy as the hangers-on in the other Enclaves who can just...stop answering their e-mail. The last group that tried to leave the Coffeehouse openly were beheaded and put in nano-jars. The ones who tried to sneak away...mostly just disappeared."

Rhianna installed the DIN in the turncoat's belly button socket, and waited for the reaction.

The corners of Mavra's mouth twitched. "Oh...*wow*. That's...it's like I've never *had* net before."

Rhianna smirked. "We get that a *lot*."

"Root, please," Rochelle said firmly.

"Uh, here. Here you go." Mavra opened the ports, reassigned privileges, then sighed, lowering her head onto her arms on the table again.

Rochelle nodded. "Thank you. We'll try to be as gentle as possible." She slipped into the ferret's cyberspace and sifted her memories for corroborating evidence. "Oh, wow, you weren't kidding about the nano-jars. Yuck!"

"Fritz has *so much* to answer for," Kaylee growled. "Every time I think he's gone as low as he can go, he finds another slimy sewer to drop into."

"These are her friends." Uncia flashed images of Zeerust and Kyla across to Kaylee and Rohit. "Keep an eye open."

Rohit nodded. "We shall," Dr. Patil said.

"Okay, I think we've seen enough." Rochelle withdrew. "You'll want to change your root passkey now."

"You're...huh?" Mavra said. "You don't want to...keep access just in case?"

Rochelle shook her head. "I've found no signs of duplicity in you *now*, so I don't expect you're going to develop some when my back is turned. And I'd rather have a free

ally than a servant under duress.” She grinned. “Of course, if you’d *like* to apply for that maid position you mentioned, talk to me after this is all over, we’ll work something out.”

Mavra blushed through her fur. “Uh...thanks. I think.”

“We could maybe use you as an assistant,” Uncia put in. “You’ve got really good tech skills, for an Intie. Maybe we could train you in DIN crafting. We’ll need more *real* crafters when Fritz is out of the way.” Uncia purred. “And you might make a tasty mouthful in Nature Range, too! I haven’t had many Inties.”

“And you could serve tea, too!” Rochelle said. “Well, okay, actually I prefer coffee. But you could still wear the uniform.”

Mavra laughed nervously. “Uh...I’ll consider it.”

The surrounding fires were all out now, leaving Bifrost Park and the Milkbottle a charred ruin. Ash and smoke still lingered in the air. What trees hadn’t burned were under so much heat stress they wouldn’t survive, even with the local Dome restored. Somebody in Emergency Services must have noticed that the Bifrost Dome was the only one operating. In the distance a flotilla of Emergency Services and Militia fliers escorted by the distinctive stetson-and-duster Fused profiles of the Marshals approached. A familiar coyote holding a steampunk rifle accelerated away to get to the Park first.

“Cavalry’s here,” Rochelle said. “Hey Rusty, Trips!”

“Shoulda known it was you folks who brought this old girl back up,” Rusty said. “We’ll be making this our base of operations for the duration, a’course. Damned good job, all of you!” He glanced curiously at Rohit and Mavra. “Who’re your friends?”

“This is Rohit—she’s just in from Rodinia to meet some friends,” Rochelle said. “And this is Mavra—another one of the Inties who’re helping us.”

“Er...” Mavra said. “Hi.”

The coyote’s head cocked, then he grinned, hardlight tongue lolling pleasantly. “Of course she is. Lucky thing she was one o’ those who’s been with you all along, not one of Fritz’s, or we’d have to take her in for interrogation.” He winked. “But hey, if you vouch for her, that’s good enough for us! Lord knows we can use all the help we can get.”

“What’s going on around the polis?” Kaylee asked. “What’s our status?”

“We’ve got a dozen subs incoming from Sturmhaven and Nextus for the counterattack. Other than that, not much is working besides the power, and that’s an ongoing battle in VR as we speak. The polis network is farked, the public fabs are spewing wind-up toy robots shouting ‘made of meat’, and who knows what else,” Trips said. “It’s a complete mess. We figure there’s at least a couple hundred of them. We have no idea where Fritz himself is, he hasn’t made a move yet.”

“Knowing him, he’ll make his entrance when it’s most dramatically appropriate,” Kaylee said sourly.

“That reminds me,” Rochelle said. “I need to install the thingamajig into the network trunk.”

“Thingamajig? Is that a *technical* term?” Rusty asked.

“Something like that,” Rhianna said. “New networking hardware to let Shelley get in the fight.”

Rusty nodded. “The Sillies can use all the help they can get right now. Fritz’s Inties on the main network are working in teams, so when one of their DINs burn out it doesn’t screw everything up.”

Mavra glanced to Rochelle. “Can I...may I help? I want to put this through its paces.” She nodded down toward her navel, where the new DIN was glowing faintly.

Rochelle nodded. "Sure, the more the merrier."

"Thanks," Mavra said. "I promise I won't let you down."

Rochelle smiled, and reached out to pat the ferret on the shoulder. "I know. Now let's hit the network—together."

"Right!" In unison, Mavra, Rochelle, and Uncia closed their eyes, and the three of them dropped into cyberspace.

The sign read "Dr. Roberto Martinez Memorial Center." The squat, white stucco buildings weren't much to look at, especially compared to the more graceful and modern architecture of the university that had sprung up around them, but in a very real sense these were the true heart and soul of Uplift. Or they had been at one time, anyway. These were the original buildings where Dr. Martinez had begun the research into desert phenomena that put this polity on the map.

It was traditional for classes from the various elementary and middle schools around Uplift to come to the buildings once a month as part of their history or science education. The research station's pre-hardlight era had been a short few months before Zharus University had relented and given Dr. Martinez one of the experimental emitters for "field testing". From then on, the station had been sheltered under a low-power dome only fifty meters wide. That emitter was now in Bifrost Park, having been moved early in the city's history when three additional units were added.

"But Great Granddad was ecstatic just to get the first one," the dark-haired girl with the raccoon RIDE tags told the class. "Meant he could stop spending half his time wrestling with equipment failures and get some *science* done." A few high schoolers always came along on the field trips as teachers' aides and kid wranglers. Gina Martinez and Jinkies were especially popular for this duty thanks to Gina's inside track on the family history. Since the current generations of Martinezes still helped curate the site, she'd practically grown up here. And since getting her RIDE, Gina had matured to the point that teachers even trusted them *alone* with the kids. At the moment, Miss Othmar had gone to the restroom while Gina and her fellow minder watched the class.

Thanks to Jinkies the place was absolutely spotless—except for those parts of it that had to be maintained in the precise state of griminess they'd had while in actual use. The necessity of that offended Jinkies, but she'd learned to adapt. The raccoon RIDE's hardlight had finally been upgraded from the cut-rate cartoon units to something more realistic, but "stylized". Jinkies didn't want to lose her 'toon looks completely.

But unusually for one of these trips, today the middle-schoolers were actually paying more attention to the *other* teacher's aide. Gina's fellow wrangler today was her fellow RIDE partner Relena Packard, though Relena's RIDE Katie was off doing other things. The middle-school students were all well aware of who Relena was—or, rather, who her partner RIDE was. As far as they were concerned, even having Relena with them was like being in the presence of a real live movie star. As Relena and Gina shepherded them to the next room, with Jinkies padding placidly along behind, Gina said, "It's a weird feeling not being the one they're all staring at for a change."

Relena tucked her hands in the pockets of the too-large Gondwana Marshals windbreaker Katie had finagled for her and chuckled nervously. "It's a weird feeling *being* the one they're staring at. But one I'm kinda used to these days. My whole life has gotten weird lately."

Gina chuckled. "I guess so. I saw you on the news."

"You and everybody else." Relena shook her head ruefully. "It's funny. All I wanted was a RIDE—a friend, companion, way to get to and from school without riding the bus...what I got was halfway famous when my RIDE got *all* the way famous. It's an eye opener."

"It hasn't gone to your head any," Gina said.

"You have no idea." Relena shook her head. "I had such a hard time dealing with it at first. Here I was, born and raised in Uplift in a liberal family. Supposed to think of RIDEs as being people themselves, with their own rights and things, even if the law isn't quite there yet. In theory, anyway."

Gina glanced at her. "Yeah?"

Relena sighed. "I was so worried about her after Tocsin smashed her to bits. Then when I had her back...and she got famous...I realized I *resented* her for it. I didn't *want* to, and I hated myself for it, but...here she was, supposed to be 'mine,' and suddenly she 'belongs' to the whole polity, which means she can't spend as much time with *me* anymore. So much for thinking of her as 'her own person'. And what's worse, she could sense exactly how *I* felt every time we Fused up."

"That doesn't mean you don't think she's her own person," Gina said. "You'd feel the same way if *any* of your close friends got famous suddenly and couldn't see you as much."

"Yeah, that's what *she* told me, too." Relena smiled ruefully. "She understands a lot about human nature. Not surprising, I guess, since she's like twice as old as I am. And I guess if I were going to be upset about *anyone* being famous, I ought to be upset about *her* making *me* famous. I didn't even do anything to deserve it."

"But you just said you resented her being famous and you not," Gina said.

"Yeah, well, that was before I learned about how *annoying* it was to be famous," Relena said. "Neither one of us can go *anywhere* anymore—though it's more a problem for her than me. And anyway, the thing that bothered me more is I can't have her around as much anymore, because she can't just *be* 'my RIDE' anymore. She's a citizen so she's gotta have her own life. And it turns out it's just as hard for *her*, too." Relena shook her head. "You and Jinkies should be glad neither of you has to deal with that crap."

"We are," Jinkies said happily. "I *like* belonging to Gina. She's *so good* at making things messy so I can clean them up again! If I couldn't clean up after her, I don't know *what* I'd do with myself."

Gina chuckled. "Glad you approve. You know if you ever want to do anything more, all you gotta do is ask, right?"

"I know," Jinkies said. "But I'm a simple coonie with simple tastes. I'm happy where I am."

"You know, I think there's gonna be a lot of adjustment going on if RIDEs ever do get full citizenship," Relena said thoughtfully. "I wonder how many of them won't *want* it. And what do they say if they don't? 'Well, tough, you *have* to be a citizen'?"

"I think things like that are kinda what they made Katie a citizen to help them figure out," Gina said. "Sort of like she's a test case, and—"

"Hey, it's gotten really *windy* outside!" one of the young students said, pointing to a window. "There's all kinds a' paper and trash blowing around!"

Jinkies perked up. "Trash blowing? Maybe I should go out there and—"

“Not *now*, Jinkies,” Gina said. She stepped over to the window herself, just in time to see the hardlight domes start flickering out. Her RIDE squeaked and Fused around her partner out of protective reflex.

Relena joined her a moment later. “Aw, crap.”

Gina and Jinkies turned around to face the students, and after a moment she had Jinkies retract her head so she could address the students face to face. “Hey, kids, guess what? This is your lucky day! I’m gonna show you a part of this complex that almost nobody ever gets to see anymore.”

The array of munchkins in front of her emitted a collective, “Oooh?”

“The first dome had a really primitive Maxwell’s Daemon, so it wasn’t always good at keeping the inside cool enough,” Gina explained. “Sometimes, on really hot days, Great Grand-Dad and the rest of his science team had to shelter in these stone chambers they dug out underground. C’mon and I’ll show you.” She glanced to Relena. “Make sure we haven’t lost anyone? Then get Miss Othmar.”

Relena nodded. “On it.”

What could possibly bring the Domes down? Relena wondered. They were supposed to be as reliable as the dirt under their feet, or so her parents had said. *Okay, maybe I should be asking who would possibly bring the Domes down? AlphaWolf? Some other group of Inties?* For the life of her she couldn’t imagine Diane and the friendly folks at the Cheers bar doing anything like this.

:*Rrrelena!*: Katie’s call through her basic comm implant was very faint. :*Sh... stuff’s happening. I’m.... o....way to y..now.:*

:*Hurry!*: Relena sent back. She made her way back through room after room, glancing around to see if any kids had stayed behind. Sometimes some of the kids got so enamored with one display or another they just didn’t move on with the rest of the class. Under normal circumstances that wasn’t a big problem, since the gate minders wouldn’t let them out without the rest of the class, but now it was a bit worrying.

Halfway through the building, she came to the public restroom, and glanced inside to see if the teacher was there. “Miss Othmar?” But the restroom was empty. Relena frowned and moved on.

Over the years the research station had grown from a single portable quonset hut into a sizable ring-shaped structure that housed almost fifty people and several labs—mostly grad students before the core of the polis had sprung up around it. Most of the rooms were carefully preserved just as they had been on the day before the Uplift Research Station Academic Governance Council decided to declare its status as a polis to the Planetary Advisory Assembly in Zharustead. By then there were dozens of ramshackle buildings under the three new hardlight dome emitters and almost two thousand permanent residents—mostly academics and prospectors willing to risk the hostile environment.

“Stay away from these children!” Miss Othmar’s shout came down the hallway from the vintage, still-functional auto-cafeteria. “I don’t care what you are! What is *wrong* with you?”

“Just a bit of fun, meat,” a woman’s voice replied.

“Yeah, Pattie, lay off,” came another unfamiliar voice. “We’re supposed to ignore them. Let ‘em be, eh?”

“Shaddup, Kyla,” the first voice replied. “You’re on thin ice as it is. Don’t make me cut off your ear like Murphy did to Zeerust, ‘cause I will. And I’ll do it at the *root*.”

Relena froze for a moment. She could swear she heard her heart pounding in her ears. There were invaders here, in this building—threatening kids and teachers. *Her* kids and teachers. Well, that just wouldn't do.

She looked around for anything she could possibly use as a weapon, and her gaze settled on a red spray fire extinguisher on the wall. Not exactly Dirty Harry's .44, but better than nothing. If only barely. She grabbed it and pulled the pin, then grasped the squeeze handle tightly as she crept up to the cafeteria entrance and peered inside.

Miss Othmar stood between one of her students and a burly female polar bear Integrate. For some reason the bear had a hardlight cigar in her mouth that spewed iridescent smoke. Her only visible weapons were her formidable teeth and claws, but against the unarmed teacher and her students they were quite sufficient. Standing off to one side, a Tasmanian tiger with a striped pattern of hardlight emitters on her shoulders and hips looked distinctly grumpy but non-aggressive.

"So what're you gonna do, then?" the thylacine asked. "Eat them?"

Pattie laughed. "Maybe I will. I *did* come here for a snack."

"Don't you even *joke* about that!" Kyla snarled. "If you harm a hair on *any* of their heads, I'll—"

Relena could never be sure afterward exactly what had gone through her head, but before she knew it she was running forward, taking advantage of the bear's momentary distraction arguing with the thylacine. She swung the extinguisher around, aimed the muzzle, and FSSSSSSHHHHT! The bear staggered for a moment as her face disappeared under a huge glob of nanofoam.

Then the thylacine moved, lightning quick, grabbing the bear from behind and pinning her. "Get them out of here!" she yelled. "Hurry, I can't hold her for long."

"GRAAAAAHH!!!" the bear yelled, coughing and sputtering from inhaled foam. "LET ME GO THIS INSTANT I SWEAR I'M GONNA *KILL* YOU!!!"

A hardlight blade extended from Kyla's forearm. "You think I'm going to let you do that, you sow? Huh? Any more struggles and I'll punt your head across the University Quad!"

Relena dropped the fire extinguisher and turned to the paralyzed teacher and two small middle-schoolers huddling behind an overturned table. "That way! All the way to the end of the hall, then all the way down the stairs to the shelter. *Go!*"

The teacher nodded at her, then grasped the arms of the two children and pulled them along after her. Relena followed, but stopped just beyond the door, turning back and peering around the corner to watch what transpired next.

A long spike emerged from Kyla's back, and she shrieked in pain. Just as suddenly the spike was gone and the thylacine slumped to the floor, bleeding silvery-red Integrate blood from a massive hole in her torso. "You fucking noob!" Pattie growled. She stood up and brandished a thin hardlight sword. "You gonna die now, bitch!"

The only thing Relena felt was a *whoosh* of air over her back, and suddenly Katie was there, dumping her momentum just in time to get her own teeth and claws ripping through the polar bear's face. Pattie's muzzle crunched audibly as Katie's powerful jaws *broke* it. A pair of tri-barrel pulse miniguns extended from her sides and finished the job, blasting into the massive Integrate's torso.

Against all odds, Pattie was still somewhat conscious. She was a bleeding mound on the cafeteria floor. "But you're...you're... This is impossible...you're just..."

"Metal? Shut down *now* and you'll maybe surrrrvive. Don't, and I'll explode

yourrrr goddamned *head*,” Katie hissed, extending yet more weaponry that might or might not have been hardlight bluffing.

“Okay, okay!” Pattie sputtered. Her eyes went out and her body relaxed completely into unconsciousness.

“Katie! You did it!” Relena ran forward. “What about the other one—is she all right?”

“I’ll live,” Kyla wheezed. “I’m just...just glad y’all are okay. Was worth it.”

“You’ve got to *help* her!” Relena insisted. “She bought me time to get the others to safety.”

“Stay still,” Katie said. “I’m calling for a medevac. I’ll tag you as one of the ‘good guys.’”

“Whatever.” The thylacine slumped to the floor. “Good luck.” She passed out.

“I’m glad you’rrre all right,” Katie said, giving Relena a slurp on the face with her bristly hardlight tongue. “You should get down to the shelterrrr with the others. It’s not safe out here.”

“No way in *hell*,” Relena said. “I may not be a Marshal yet, but I’m *your partner*. Your *only* partner, unless there’s something you’re not telling me. And this is *my home*. And I refuse to believe a shelter *without* you can be any safer than being *inside* you. And you need me to use some of your weapons. And—”

Katie chuckled. “Whoa, hey, slow down. Okay, I give. I give.”

Relena blinked. “You do?”

“You’rrre right, on all counts. I don’t have time to argue...and I guess I’d feel betterrrr myself not letting you out of my sight.” Katie favored her with a toothy feline grin. “So, ya rrrready, kiddo?”

Relena held out her arms. “Fuse me up, Katiekitty!”

Behind her, Katie reared up on her hind legs, limbs and torso opening up, chassis shifting to receive. Relena felt the elder RIDE’s comforting presence in her mind as she Fused, all systems rising to full military power. *:It’s all yours, Katiekitty.:*

:Girl, I don’t know what I everrr did to deserrrve you, but whatever it is, thank you,: Katie replied. “Let’s go.”

The Martinez University campus dome emitter was located in pride of place amid the buildings of the Quad, where the now-Bifrost emitter had sat for so many years. It had been shut down and was being guarded by three Integrates—a shrew, an echidna, and a caribou.

The first clue they had something might be wrong was when the shrew vanished in a tawny blur. A moment later, one of the stucco buildings had a shrew-shaped impression in the wall. The gray furry Integrate slowly peeled off it, then toppled forward and collapsed onto the ground.

“Kathy! Are you okay?” the caribou yelped, swinging his head to and fro as he looked for the source of the attack. The echidna bristled, hunching down and fluffing up his spines. Then a shower of pulse shots rained down from directly overhead, scorching holes in the echidna’s spines before Katie slammed into him from above, a body-length hardlight shield taking the impact. She rolled to her feet, already bringing her cannons up—but the caribou was gone.

Katie put her back to the emitter and looked slowly around, ears cocked as she sought for the visual flickers or scuffing sounds that could sometimes give away a

cloaked Integrate's position. "Marshals! Stand down, *now!*" she called out. There was no response.

Then Katie became aware of a low, building whine from the generator behind her. She started forward, then looked down at the echidna crumpled at her feet. "Aw, *shit*," she muttered, bending down to scoop him up and *then* kicking her lifter pack into emergency overdrive. A second later, the generator exploded, and the shock wave buffeted Katie out of the air. She landed on top of the echidna again, who was starting to look decidedly the worse for wear, but her hardlight armor protected her from his spines and from most of the explosion shock.

"Give it up, you can't win!" Katie yelled.

"You're *scrap*, scrap!" the caribou yelled, materializing in front of her and lunging at her with a curved hardlight blade.

Katie parried with a hardlight blade on the back of her left gauntlet. "A *bat'leth*? You'rrrrre attacking me with a *bat'leth*? *Seriously?*"

"It is a good day to die!" the caribou growled. "Integrates *Ascendant!*"

"Yeah? Well ascend *this!*" Katie shoved the caribou back with her shield, then fired her thrusters to leap into the air. After a moment, the caribou followed, firing electrical blasts at her from his antlers.

"Oh, is that how you want it?" Katie released a cloud of mini-missiles, which boiled out on random paths before converging on the caribou. He wiped about half of them with an electrical blast from his antler, but the other half buffeted him and depleted his shields. Then Katie changed direction in the air and rocketed toward him, firing her dual pulse miniguns as she came, then slamming her hardlight shielding into him and riding him down to the roof ten meters below. He made a caribou-shaped crater in the roof tiles.

Katie got up and stepped back, dusting off her hands. "Yeah, it is a good day to die. *Qapla'*, asshole."

She turned to look down at the square and sighed. Apart from the impression made by slamming a shrew into one building, they had now all been peppered with shrapnel from the generator as well as a few pockmarks from stray cannon shots. "That's gonna leave a mark."

"Gina's gonna *kill* me," Relena moaned. "Still, you took them down. That's something."

"We took 'em down, pard," Katie corrected.

"You're the one who did all the work," Relena said.

"But I couldn't have done it without *you*, girrrl. That counts." Katie grinned. "You're rrrright, y'know. 'Bout what you said earlier."

"What was that?" Relena asked.

"You *arrre* my partner, and I won't have any other," Katie said. "You'rrrrre the one who saved me from the scrapheap, where I was gonna end up sooner than later."

"But it was Lillibet who fixed you," Relena said.

"And it was you who *picked* me." Katie chuckled. "And who rrrefused to give up on me when I was being all grumpy. Y'know, the Marshals wanted to assign me a temporrrrary Fuse partner for gunnery practice and stuff, but I turned 'em down flat. Told 'em it could wait 'til you were rrrready to join. It was gonna have to wait for grrrrraduation, but y'know what? When this is over, if I can't get you a special interrnnship in the Marshals I'll eat my stubby tail."

"I...wow. I don't know what to say," Relena said.

"You don't hafta say anything. Just *be*, and that'll be enough." Katie shrugged. "Anyway, as for all this crrrap, I've called it in, and the cleanup squad will be here in a few minutes," Katie said. "Wanna go see if anyone else needs a little help?"

"Let's do it!" Relena said. "Something tells me there's lots more butt that needs kicked today."

The outskirts of naked Uplift were a collection of hardlight soap bubbles from emergency mini-domes. The panic that Fritz had so gone on about hadn't materialized, Zeerust reflected. The Domes had gone down, but the "meat" simply sought shelter and the "scrap" rescued people caught in the sudden blast of Dry Ocean heat. *'Kicking an anthill,' he said. 'Like ants under a magnifying glass,' he said. 'Watch them scurry and fry' he said.*

The only scurrying being done were the Ascendants engaging the polity's police force, militia, and a few Marshals who'd decided they couldn't wait for a coordinated counterattack, and the Ascendant were *losing* those battles more often than winning them.

Among the emergency bubbles, one stood out from the rest. A huge geodesic hardlight structure that enclosed the Brubeck Mining buildings like a fortress. A few probes told Zeerust all he needed to know. The campus was physically isolated from the polis's systems, and fully protected by whatever it was Mavra had run into a few weeks back. Trying to hack those domes would be like assaulting a medieval fortress with a slingshot.

"Every fortress has a weak point," Fritz said. "That's how these things are supposed to work. BarXan, tell your charge to *find it*."

"You heard the Bosscat," the larger zebra said, prodding Zeerust in the back. "Find it."

How did I end up in this group, of all places? Zeerust fumed. Stuck with the Bosscat himself and two dozen of his hangers-on. He didn't have any specialist or military background. His RIDE half had been a middle-of-the-road Connor RIDeworks ZEBRA-8. His DE chassis had been average in every way and even three years later he had no idea why he'd Integrated in the first place.

And now they were all looking at *him*, as their hacker-on-a-leash, to find the "weak point" that only had to exist because all fortress had them in the movies. *I should just tell him to "Use the Force, Luke."* Yeah, right, like that would do anything except cost him the rest of his ear, and probably assorted other parts too.

Just thinking about it inadvertently caused him to twitch it, which rewarded him with another twinge of pain that made him wince. It was more *annoying* than anything, since as an Integrate he could grow the tip of it back in just a few days. But it promised the removal of other things that would take much longer to grow back, and would be considerably more unpleasant.

"I'm lookin' already," Zeerust grumbled. But it felt pointless. This place wasn't going to be left unguarded. Even the underground approaches would likely be sealed like Fort Knox. But Zeerust dutifully checked the ports. He was beginning to sweat, because he could already see how this was going to turn out.

Unless...no, wait! One of the sewer junction accesses had somehow been overlooked in the upgrade. It seemed to have the old version of the firewall on it—the

one Mavra had eventually been able to tunnel through. It looked like he could get in just as easily. “I think I got something here,” he reported as he started the hack. “Of course, you know this is probably a trap.”

Fritz snorted. “I know it is, murgatroyd. It *always* is. But that doesn’t matter one iota. Get ready, hep cats, time to make our scene!”

Terrific. Well...maybe I can get captured early. The worst they’ll do is put me in prison, Zeerust thought hopefully. *Prison sounds pretty good right about now. Restful.*

“You first, probie,” BarXan said, prodding him in the back.

Zeerust wanted to give his fellow zebra a massive kick to the groin, but with Fritz *right there* his future lifespan would probably be measured in seconds and shower the ground below them with gore. *I’m dead, they’re going to kill me. I’m going to die,* he thought. But maybe there was a slim chance. As he’d tried to tell Fritz, the weak point screamed honeypot, an Obvious Trap if there ever was one. But Fritz had a habit of sacrificing a few mooks before joining the battle himself—and since he’d just finished doing his only job, he had now joined the ranks of the expendables. *But there might be a way out of this...*

Possible death versus *certain* death won out every time.

A blue hardlight bubble covered the trap’s belowground entrance. Zeerust’s keeper fired on it a few times before getting an elbow in the ribs. “Stop it, BarXan. This isn’t *Metroid*. It’s not going to open when you shoot it.”

“I’ll have it down in two shakes,” Zeerust said, pulling an access panel off the wall. The naked laser-comm ports also screamed honeypot. Someone in Zane’s cabal obviously thought they’d be stupid enough to take the bait—and here they were, doing just that. *Not like that’s exactly a big surprise, Fritz being Fritz.*

But maybe there was something...he formulated his plan in the second before the bubble came down.

Zeerust’s hips and shoulders burned as the cavorite in his lifters flared out, leaving an acrid odor of scorched fur, blowing out a few of his hardlight lenses in the process. His “comrades” didn’t react quickly enough and the bubble slammed closed behind him, slicing off limbs and even BarXan’s lips. *He’s gonna have a harder time kissing Fritz’s ass now,* Zeerust thought hysterically as he scrambled up the passage as fast as he could. He might have been the group’s designated hacker, but the honeypot had been simple enough even Fritz could get through it in a few minutes.

The pathway led into a basement room with every door save one welded shut with hullmetal plates. The door at the end was ajar, open a crack, with light streaming through it. *Nope, no way that could be any kind of trap, no sirree...*

Zeerust wasn’t sure what annoyed him more—the fact that they thought his fellow Inties were so stupid, or the fact that they were *right*. Well, it wasn’t that Fritz was too stupid to see a trap, to be fair, so much as that he simply didn’t believe Zane and company could pose any kind of credible threat. As far as Fritz was concerned, a “trap” was simply the same as a friendly invitation. *That’s gonna bite him in the ass someday...*

He’d come this far. Now it was time to hope they didn’t think *he* was a honeypot and just shoot on sight. Shoulders still trailing smoke from burned-out cavorite, tail almost on fire, he raised both arms and slipped through the gap.

“I surrender! I need help! Get me away from these dickweeds!” he shouted. “I want *off* this crazy train!”

Zeerust wanted to cry with relief when strong arms grabbed him by the shoulders and slammed him to the ground. Someone else kneeled on his back and he felt the cold barrel of a gun kiss the base of his neck. “Root, *now*,” a woman’s voice commanded, her tone flat and deadly.

They didn’t have to tell him twice. “Take it! Take it!” He winced as someone came in and scoured his memories with an intensity that left him feeling like the inside of his skull had just been sandblasted. He’d probably have a migraine for days—but he couldn’t blame them. In their position he’d have done exactly the same thing.

The knee came off his back, and the arms lifted him to his feet and dragged him forward. He caught glimpses of a wedge-shaped room designed to funnel entrants into a tight corridor, lined with firing ports and drop holes in the ceiling. Then he was through it, and through a hardened steel security hatch, and up some stairs, and through another hatch, into a command center full of RIDE-clad guards and a few Integrates. The tiger at the center of the room needed no introduction.

“Hey, look what the black cat dragged in,” Zane Brubeck said. “Nice stripes. Don’t you think the world would be a better place if more Inties had them instead of spots?” He glanced past Zeerust’s shoulder, at the woman behind him. “He on the level?”

“He is,” the black jaguar-woman said, stepping in front of him. “His memories are clear, with no signs of tampering. Another of Fritz’s press-gang victims.” She actually patted him on the shoulder. “Apologies for the headache, friend. We are just a little...*fraught* right now.”

“No worries,” Zeerust mumbled, as the adrenaline shock settled in. He’d made it! He was *safe*! Well...assuming Zane *won*, anyway. But to someone standing in his hooves, it felt like a risk worth taking.

“Fritz is just outside,” a fennec Fuser said. She moved a little differently than most RIDEs—Zeerust noticed her fur was *real* rather than hardlight, but she didn’t really look like any Integrate he’d ever met. “Think he’s going to come in the hard way, Zane?”

“It’s looking more likely, Myla,” Zane said. “We’re ready for him.”

“Zane, the Bifrost Park dome just sprang back up,” a huge lioness Fuser reported. “No guesses who fixed it.”

“That’s my girl,” Zane grinned. “So what should we do with our new friend here? He’s injured.”

“Just...lock me up somewhere, I’ll be fine,” Zeerust mumbled. “Do whatever you want to with me. Won’t resist. Just don’t let *him* get me again.” He held out his hands as if for cuffs.

“There’s no need for that,” Zane said. “Bastian, would you mind taking care of him for a few minutes?”

A ring-tailed lemur Integrate wearing a Marshals duster and Stetson stepped forward. “Sure thing, Zane. I’ll get him settled upstairs in the infirmary and be back in a jiffy.”

As Zeerust followed the lemur out, he turned back and said, “Just do me a favor and *win*, okay?”

Zane grinned at him. “Well, since you *asked* me to...I’ll see what I can do.”

:*They’re fighting back*,: Jiminy said. :*What now, O Great Hep Cat? Should we continue into the Obvious Trap?*:

:It's your fault I have this damned Beatnik patois, you know,: Fritz replied.

:You're changing the subject, poindexter.:

"What now, Bosscat?" Chantilly said, echoing Fritz's inner voice. The Califian she-cougar was *quite* the looker. Just, admittedly, not the sharpest tool on the shed. In fact, if he was going to be fair for once, not terribly many of the hangers-on he had left *were* all that bright—and one of the brighter of them had just fled with his tail on fire. Was that it, then? He was stuck with the dregs who weren't smart enough to figure out how to sneak away while their Bosscat was in the land beyond REM sleep? (Or not smart enough to figure out that they should even try?)

:So you are capable of some self-reflection,: Jiminy said. *:I'm glad to see the last thirty-some years we've been stuck with each other haven't been completely wasted.:*

:So I've had some setbacks. So what? Nobody loves you when you're down, but all I need is a win today and I'll be top cat again. And even these pudknockers are still Grade A Prime Integrate. We'll be fine.:

:Like a house on fire. What was that stripey guy stammering about earlier, before you told him to shut his yap? Something about firewalls? Firewalls like maybe the ones you ran into right before you did a number on the Brubeck kid? I seem to recall you were going to go all Olympos on Government Center...:

"CAN THE LIP, JIMINY!" Fritz punched the wall next to him. "SHUT THE FUCK UP!"

"Bosscat?" Chantilly said, voice trembling.

Captain David Ryder's voice remained infuriatingly calm. *:You should know by now that's a non-starter. You can't shut me out anymore than I can not watch while you fuck up. I kept quiet when you burned Olympos to the ground, and put Artemis's head in a little jar on your mantel. That's a mistake I have to live with. But I'm not going to let you do it again, even if all I can do is talk you to death. Our life together is nothing but a bad movie I can't turn off.*

:You think Clint's son is going to hold back this time? You're going to get us killed today. I might as well enjoy my final hours riffing on yours. I just wish I had some popcorn.:

Fritz took a deep breath and tried to get a grip on himself. "Chill. Just a little... internal disagreement is all. Fugeddaboutit." He shook his head. "Stripes, since your little friend took a powder, looks like the job's yours now. Get that door down again, and *keep* it down this time. And maybe you should put some chapstick on that or something..."

"Yeth, Boththcat," BarXan lisped as he got to work.

Chapter Twenty-Two: Alpha Strike

October 21, 156 A.L.

The Dry Ocean: Just outside Alpha Camp

Svetlana stood on a stone ridge in the depths of the Dry Ocean, peering into the west with every sensor available to her Integrate sight. She was still too far away to see much, but she could at least make out the hardlight dome of AlphaWolf's Pack's camp shining like a dewdrop on the horizon. She'd dispatched a scout to learn more.

She imagined that she herself would make quite a striking sight, silhouetted against the brightening dawn sky behind her—a nearly-six-meter-tall twin-tailed she-wolf, ears swiveling to seek any available sounds or comm signals. Perhaps it might have been a bad idea to be so visible. But Svetlana didn't care. She was an Integrate—and furthermore, an Integrate Woman of Sturmhaven. So let the meat and mech see her coming, if they were looking this particular direction. It would only give them more time in which to fear her.

Besides, Svetlana was in a particularly foul mood today. She almost hoped some subordinate *would* suggest she climb down. She would enjoy the chance to bite someone's head off. If they were lucky, she'd only do it figuratively.

Of course, Svetlana was frequently in a foul mood in general. Such was the lot of an Integrate woman who was stuck at six meters tall. It was very hard to find dates, of either gender—and finding one who would render her the obeisance properly due a Woman of Sturmhaven was practically impossible. It was a continual source of irony to her that, as a human, the slim-chested Marlana with whom she had Integrated had wished so hard she were more “statuesque.” *Be careful what you wish for, little girl...*

But the thing that made her day especially lousy was that she had to take orders from a *male*—and as if that weren't bad enough, the very male who had practically single-handedly defeated her Motherland in the war thirty years earlier. But she had little choice, either honorably or practically. She owed Fritz a debt of honor after *he* had saved her from *her own* people after the Integration. And from the practical standpoint, Fritz had demonstrated that even at his diminutive size he was still more powerful than *she* was. That cannon blast of his—where had it ever *come* from?

To add insult to injury, Fritz then had to go and be so *understanding* about it. “You don't want me in your scene, I dig. That's copacetic. You just do this one solid for me, I let you beat feet to Rodinia and kick off your own little New Sturmhaven bohemia. We cool?”

Svetlana had assured him that they were indeed “cool.” As aggravating as the whole situation was, it *would* be nice to get out from under Fritz's thumb afterward. She had already sounded out a number of her female compatriots as to whether they would be interested, and many of them had said yes. Interestingly enough, Svetlana had heard there was a sizable contingent of ex-Sturmie RIDEs within their target today. She wondered if, after her group defeated them, some of them might consent to be Integrated and join her new enclave. It couldn't hurt to ask.

As she sat there deep in thought, a comm signal pinged in her DIN. She glanced

down to see her scout de-cloak on the ground. She held out a hand, and the tiny Chihuahua Integrate flew on her lifters to alight on it. Barely over one meter tall, Beverly was one of the smallest Integrates anyone had ever seen. She came in for a lot of Taco Bell jokes, but there were few ground scouts who could top her for sneakiness. “Report,” Svetlana ordered.

“It is as we feared,” Beverly said. Anyone who met her for the first time was invariably surprised when she opened her mouth, as she had a posh British accent that was completely at odds with her appearance. “They have used the last month wisely and fortified their camp—I probed their systems but hit an impassable wall. And it appears they are on high alert. If these old eyes don’t deceive me, I spotted Tocsin himself on patrol ten clicks out.” Her voice trembled slightly at the hippogryph’s name.

“Damn.” Svetlana growled deep in her throat. “We really needed better coordination on this op. The assault on Uplift will have warned them to expect us.”

Beverly shrugged. “We’re not a professional army, old girl. We have not trained and drilled for this. Slip-ups are to be expected, what?”

“I know,” Svetlana said. “What we *are* is a gang of thugs going around kicking down anthills because we are stronger than the ants. It offends my sense of propriety to be a part of this, but what can we do when our Lord and Master commands?” She sighed. “Oh well. I will order in the air strikes, and then we will assault on land. Return to your forward position.”

Beverly nodded. “Right ho!” She saluted and vanished into cloak again.

Svetlana stood there for a moment longer, taking one last look at the dome, then sighed again and hopped down from the stone shelf. “Right,” she said. “Time to go stomp some ants.”

“They’re here.” Fenris’s words yanked Paul out of a sound Fuse sleep and into full awareness right away.

“You’re sure, Fennie?” Paul asked, as he brought up the data feeds to get up to speed.

“Fritz’s forces just hit Uplift,” Fenris continued. “AlphaWolf has just put Plan Ankylosaur into effect.”

“Still think that’s a silly name,” Paul muttered.

“But Smash likes it!” Lillibet giggled over the internal intercom. She had been sleeping in Guinevere in her own separate compartment behind him, and presumably woke up at the same time.

“Good for her,” Paul said.

Of course, he understood why Alfie had called it that. “It may *look* like we’re turning turtle,” he had said in one of his speeches during the month-long project to fortify the camp. “But we’re really turning *ankylosaur*.” He nodded to Smash, who was standing placidly nearby. “That’s like a turtle with *spikes* on it!” And everyone had cheered—not least of all the dino and raptor contingent, who were happy to be getting additional love from their fearless leader.

Built with the help of Integrates from Camelot and a few other friendly enclaves, the fortifications were reasonably impressive. They were not meant to try to block off the camp—that would have taken a whole castle wall, which couldn’t have been built that quickly even with Intie help, and would have been pointless at any rate thanks to Integrates’ flight powers—but to provide protected bunkers from which defenders could

fight. Another, larger bunker had been built from space hollowed out under the heart of the colony, to store supplies and weapons and provide a space for the unpaired humans to hide during the fight.

“Brena’s hacked all the RIDEs who turned down DINsec and is marching them down to the bunker’s storage annex now,” Guinevere reported.

Paul nodded. “Good deal.” Was going to be bad enough fighting Inties without having to worry about some of their own turning on them. And if it upset them to get hacked like that, well, maybe they’d accept DINsec next time it was offered to them. “What about Bertha?”

“She’s already on station at the tower,” Fenris reported. “I’m moving us there now.”

“Good.” Paul extended his awareness into Fenris’s senses, and found them walking in Fuser form toward the ten-meter stone air defense tower at the center of the camp, just to one side of the hollowed-out space for the bunker. It looked a lot like the rook from a chess set, with a hollow top. It had not been meant for human habitation, and there were not even any passages or flights of stairs. But there were clusters of defensive lasers and pulse guns ringing the lip of the upper rim. They would serve as added missile defense under the command of Hedy and Guin’s processors, so that Bertha and Fenris could devote their full attention to the greater threats.

Paul shivered a little. It was one thing to build defenses, but another altogether to know *you* were about to be in the middle of a heated battle in them. God knew he wasn’t a soldier. He hadn’t been *trained* for this. And while they had all done plenty of combat drills over the last month, he was still dubious of his abilities on the actual field of combat.

“Don’t worry,” Fenris boomed. “I will keep you safe. *All* of you.”

Paul grinned. “Thanks, Fennie. I’ll try to do the same for you.”

“And we’ve got your back!” Lillibet said.

“Absolutely,” Guinevere said with firm assurance. “Just like we practiced, right Lilli?”

“Sure thing, ‘boss,’” Lillibet replied.

Paul chuckled inwardly. He’d worried a little at first over Lillibet’s stubborn resistance to accepting a subordinate position to Fenris’s command as he had. Would they have trouble working as a team if Lilli wouldn’t take orders? But as it turned out, he needn’t have worried. Right after they’d gotten to camp, Guin had more or less taken charge of Lillibet. It had started as something of a joke—any RIDE in Alpha’s camp had to have bodyjacked its pilot, *sooooo*...

But then Lilli had noticed how much *happier* Guinevere was when she got to be the one in charge—especially in a community of other RIDEs who were likewise the bosses of their pairings. So finally she made a deal with Guinevere that she could be in charge out here, though that would change when they went back home. Paul privately suspected there would be a little renegotiation then, but it would be okay. Guin was no LindaCat who wanted to be in charge just so she could push her partner around. For that matter, neither was Fenris, which was why Paul was so easy with “belonging” to him. The upshot was, Lilli was cool for the moment with “belonging” to Guinevere, who was just as cool with “belonging” to Fenris.

:And so chain of command is discovered,: Fenris sent amusedly over his private link to Paul.

Paul chuckled. *:I couldn't ask for a better commander than you, boss.:* he sent back. *:As long as you're easy on the reins, I'm good with you having them.:*

:Command is a responsibility,: Fenris said. *:Too many of those here forget that,:* he added darkly.

:Maybe after we win we can see about reminding them,: Paul said *:But one battle at a time.:* Aloud, he said, "Okay, we're here," as Fenris lifted up to the top of the air defense tower and set down in the waist-high enclosure within. Bertha was already taking up her half of the tower, facing west. The eastern facing had been reserved for Fenris, as since the enclave was in the western half of the Dry Ocean it was assumed any attacks would come out of the east.

"Turret up!" Lilibet announced as the compartment containing her and Guin emerged from Fenris's back and locked into place behind the barrels of his immense particle beam cannons.

"Heavy assault unit Bertha reports all systems and crew in readiness!" Bertha commed. "We're not quite as strong as you anymore, alas, but we're more than ready to back you up."

"Let them come!" Fenris boomed, lips lifting away from his teeth in a ferocious lupine snarl. "We shall show them how the wolves of Sturmhaven fight!"

"A wolf of *Nextus* appreciates that," AlphaWolf said dryly over the same comm channel.

"We should put aside our differences and chust be volves *togesser*," Sonja put in.

"Wolves talk too much!" Smash grunted. "*Plan* Ankylosaurs hit things!" She punctuated this by whacking the ground with her two-tonne tail club, causing a thump heard for at least a kilometer.

Paul grinned. "We might all end up dead in the next half hour, but I can't think of a better team to go out with. Let's kick some Integrate ass."

Down in the bunker, the mood among the camp's humans was subdued. They *had* been fully briefed on the situation; between Paul's positive example and a few pointed hints from the Integrates helping build the defenses, their treatment had improved considerably. RIDEs were regarding them more like people, and talking to them more. Some of them had even been sent home in exchange for, of all things, some human *volunteers* rounded up by the Marshals. For all that AlphaWolf was inclined to grumble about damned squishy *hipsters*, the minority of humans who were there by choice had been glad to see their numbers grow.

Now AlphaWolf, Sonja, and a few other Walker-form RIDEs had appeared on the ramp down from the surface, and Alpha stepped forward to address the crowd. *Funny, I can't remember the last time I gave a speech to a crowd of humans*, AlphaWolf thought. *Well, unless you count Zane's press conference, I guess.*

"Ladies, gentlemen," AlphaWolf said. "As you know, we're expecting an Integrate invasion at any moment. We're fighting to protect *you* as much as we are to protect ourselves. With that in mind...I'd like to ask for *volunteers* to fight with us, to unlock our Fuser forms. We'd prefer people with prior military experience, but what counts is willingness to help us fight—we'll do the heavy lifting. I can't promise you anything but the chance to risk your lives along with us—but if we win, we'll be properly grateful for all the help." He paused, then added with a tongue-lolling grin, "So sayeth me!"

"I would prefer a voman uf Sturmhaven should vun be available," Sonja said. "But

I vill vurk mit vhat I get!”

“Ooooh, I’m *such* a sucker for a strong Sturmhaven accent!” a blonde woman with a strong Califia valley-girl twang said. “I’m not from there, but I’d *like* to be. Does that count?”

Sonja’s eyes lit up. “Even better! Are you villink to be *mine*?”

The woman held out her arms. “Take me, you lovely thing.” A moment later, a humanoid red she-wolf headed through the door to the armory section.

“Okay,” AlphaWolf said. “Who’s next?”

A couple of minutes later, AlphaWolf padded through the security door into the armory himself, still in his Walker form. There weren’t going to be enough volunteers for everyone to have them, and going into battle wouldn’t be the best time for him to want to break in a new set of thumbs anyway.

Admit it, he told himself. You’re so used to bodyjacking that you’re totally spoiled for willing partners. You’re gonna have it soooo bad after you go legit and can’t do it anymore. You’ll probably need years in therapy.

“Feh,” AlphaWolf muttered as he padded over to a particular olive-drab crate set apart from the ones where other RIDEs were even now attaching weapons to themselves and arming up. “Don’t need thumbs to fight well anyway.” He straddled the crate, dropped his hardlight skin, and sent a comm signal to it. The crate unfolded, metal arms reaching up to latch onto hardpoints on AlphaWolf’s sides and flanks, then raising weapons paks to latch into place.

AlphaWolf glanced over his shoulders at the gleaming paks—missile launchers on his hips, pulse guns on his shoulders that would drop to his forearms if he Fused with anyone—and ran a series of system checks to make sure they were all right after their storage. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d actually had to arm up—but he was *sure* he still remembered how to fight. He brought the hardlight skin back up, and it settled into place around the hardpoint latches.

He turned and looked around at all the other RIDEs who had just finished arming up. They were all looking to him as if they expected him to say something. *Ah, a leader’s work is never done.* “All right, people,” AlphaWolf said. “Let’s go fight for our home.” They still waited, expectantly. And AlphaWolf rolled his eyes inwardly. “So. Sayeth. *ME!*” he finally added, and every other RIDE in the room cheered before charging back out of the armory and up the stairs to the surface.

AlphaWolf shook his head and followed after, more sedately. *If we all come out of this intact, it’ll take a miracle, he reflected. I really, really hope we get one. So prayeth me.*

The first sign of the impending attack was the black specks on the horizon that failed to show up on any radar. Then the long-range missiles came slashing in.

“Multiple bogeys,” Paul said, a bit unnecessarily.

“We got ‘em,” Guinevere replied. “Synced up with Hedy...defensive fire in three...two...one.” Like a light show at a rock concert, dozens of laser and pulse beams licked out from the tower, sweeping the air clean of missiles. Spheres of light blossomed all across the sky, like FX from an ancient anime. Then the sky was clear—and remained so, save for the glowing specks.

“Why aren’t they firing more?” Paul asked.

“Preliminary analysis suggests they do not have sufficient launchers to oversaturate our point defense,” Fenris said. “We can fry their missiles faster than they can fire them. Rather than throw them away at range, they’re saving them for close combat.”

“Is that good or bad?” Lillibet asked.

“Good for us personally, perhaps not so good for our fellow fighters,” Diana Fuerst chimed in. “Our defenses are better at picking off rockets aimed directly at us. We will not be as efficient at shielding our allies.”

“Less talk, more SMASH!” Smash said plaintively, standing below the tower in her Fuser form. “Where are the *bad guys*?”

“They’re coming, Smashie dear,” Bertha said. “In fact, here are the first of them now.” The specks grew into five dragons and a host of smaller wyverns, gryphons, hippogryphs, pegasi, and birds of all descriptions.

“*Five* dragons?” Fenris boomed. “We only rated *five* dragons? What a disappointment.”

“Hey, *I’m* not complaining!” Lillibet said, tracking the lead dragon with Fenris’s turrets. “In fact, let’s see about making that four!” She fired a series of ranging bursts, followed by a heavy blast right into the space the dragon was just dodging into. He took them right to his torso, squawked in surprise, and fell out of the air, landing in a heap just outside the hardlight dome.

“Good shot. 78% probability that dragon will be out of the fight for at least five minutes,” Fenris commented.

“Graaaaaaah!” Smash yelled, charging happily at the fallen dragon and swinging her club around her head.

“Correction: make that 100% probability,” Fenris said dryly.

After that, the battle got too intense for Paul to pay attention to specific adversaries. He was busy helping Fenris mark targets for the other RIDEs contributing supporting fire, while the other RIDEs and pilots saw to defense and offense. Lilli knocked down two more dragons with particle blasts before they started keeping a healthy distance.

“I have an idea!” Fuerst yelled at one point. “Program the point defense pulse clusters for heavy EMP and set them to fire as they bear on any enemy!”

Lillibet got it. “We could fry their DINs!”

“On it!” Guinevere said. The pulse clusters had been lying mostly idle due to the paucity of missiles to hit. Now they opened up again on new targets, and where they struck many Integrates wobbled in the air as a telltale puff of smoke emitted from some part of their body.

“Yeah!” Paul whooped. “That’s gotta hurt.”

“Their coordination has fallen by 30%,” Fenris reported as the enemy formations grew considerably more ragged. “Warning—enemy ground forces now approaching!”

“YES!!!” Smash roared. She’d been running from place to place administering the *coup de grace* to enemies the wolves had knocked out of the sky, but it just wasn’t much fun. Most of them surrendered before she could do more than hit them once or twice, and AlphaWolf (that spoilsport) had given her a *very* stern talking-to on the necessity of accepting surrenders. Now she looked up to see a wave of dozens of Integrates approaching on the ground. “Who’s first! Who’s first!”

Then Smash cocked her head as if listening to an inner voice no one else could

hear. “Aww, c’mon, thumbs, don’t *cry*. This is just what you *like* doing—beating up on helpless people! You should *love* this! We can hit ‘em even harder than you *ever* ‘smacked your bitch around’! Don’ worry, I’m a keep you good an’ safe, ‘cuz I’m the *Plan Ankylosaur*!”

And with that, she waded into the crowd of enemies, and moments later they started flying in all directions.

Smash wasn’t the only one. AlphaWolf, Sonja, and all the other camp RIDEs with some fight in them had also taken the field. “Remember, don’t hold back but *do* try to take them alive if you can!” AlphaWolf called.

“Aw, that’s no fun!” Smash complained, swinging her club and sending a marmoset Integrate flying with a very loud “CRAUNCH!”

“I concur,” Tocsin said as he swooped down from the sky in a rain of razor-sharp hardlight feathers. He wore his Fuser form now, and used it to full effect, laying about himself with a pair of hardlight blades shaped like stylized eagle feathers.

“Think of it as a *challenge*,” AlphaWolf suggested, firing his shoulder-mount pulse cannons left and right. “You saw what those Camelotters did for us just in their spare time. Just think what we could do with an Intie chain gang of our own! We could build a lot more than some puny log cabins, I expect. Anyway, it’s not like I’m asking for much. From what happened to Zane and that jag of his, you’d have to work pretty damned *hard* to kill one.”

“Nrgh. No promises,” Tocsin grunted, slashing about himself with razor-edged wings and swords. Severed limbs rained down. “But I will see what we can do.”

Svetlana stood atop an outcropping much closer to the battle than before, from which her optic sensors could actually perceive the fight. She sent orders over her DIN from time to time, but wasn’t quite ready to commit herself to the battle yet. When she did, she would lose her perspective on the fight as a whole—her ability to see what was going on everywhere and issue commands accordingly. Anyway, it would have to take something pretty spectacular to require the personal attention of such a juggernaut as herself, and—

She stopped and stared. What on Zharus? On a fairly ridiculous-looking stone tower at the center of the camp, two huge wolves stood directing anti-aircraft fire—and apparently the whole course of the defensive battle from their side. Around the tower, ground-based defenders were firing with deadly accuracy, engaging single targets in groups of three or four, then switching to other targets in different groups.

That level of coordination could only come from a command RIDE—such as the larger of the two wolves in the tower, who she immediately recognized as one of her own Sturmhaven lupine brethren. She paused for just a moment to be astonished and more than a little touched that one of them was even still at large—she’d heard they’d all been decommissioned after she’d Integrated. Then she stared outright as she realized what he was doing.

How on earth was he keeping up the command and control *and* managing to fire effectively himself? WLF-CSAs just weren’t that capable. They couldn’t do both things at once. She *knew* that—oh *how* she knew that, from bitter experience. Her Integration with Marlena had been such a huge blessing, at least for her RIDE half—she’d been able to think clearly at all times for the first time *ever*. No longer was she just another one of the “big dumb bitches” even her own maintenance crew had called her and her sisters.

Then she zoomed in closer and actually saw the face of another RIDE, a cat of some kind, occupying the wolf's turret's control cupola. She stared in stark disbelief for almost a full real-time minute. *They got us to work! How did they get us to work?*

But that wasn't important, she realized. What was important was that they were single-handedly (double-handedly?) holding back the tide of battle. As long as they—and that tower—continued operating, as incredible as it seemed, the Integrates Ascendant could make no major headway.

"What the hell is going on up there?" Svetlana exploded. "This flies in the face of everything Fritz has ever told us!" She shook her head. If it were up to her, she would have pulled everyone back out right *now*. But the spectre of Fritz and his monomolecular flensing knife still loomed large. In one of his less affable moments, Fritz had once calculated, down to the last square centimeter, exactly how many rooms he could carpet with her pelt—while leaving her alive to regrow it so he could carpet another set of Coffeehouse rooms after that.

Svetlana sighed. Well, when it came right down to it, she had her own beam weapons, didn't she? She pulled them up and over her shoulder, targeted the center of the air defense tower, and fired.

"Holy SHIT!" Paul yelped as two white-hot beams of light pierced the camp's dome and slammed into the center of the stone tower. The world started tilting sideways. Fenris and Bertha quickly fired their lifters, rising safely free as the tower crumbled beneath them.

"We're all right!" Bertha reported. "We always knew that the tower was only a temporary measure."

"Losing those air defense guns is gonna hurt, though," Hedy said. "Where'd those shots come from, anyway?"

"That ridge over there," Fenris said. "Lilli?"

"On it!" The turret swung around to the coordinates Fenris indicated and opened fire. But by now there was no longer anything there.

"Keep an eye out," Paul said. "Unit that heavy can't stay hidden—not if it wants to keep using the big guns."

Without the air defense, they could no longer protect their ground forces as well. Fenris sent the order to scatter to stay safer from area-effect weapons, and continued offering targets to engage as they were able.

The battle continued to rage. Fenris and Bertha came in for more attacks now that they had been identified as AlphaWolf's command and control nexus, but Bertha was able to use her close-in weapon systems to take out short-range threats while Lilli and Guin managed Fenris's weapons to cover the long ones. And crazed berserkers like Smash and Tocsin also helped to keep the pressure off.

All the while, Fenris crunched his numbers and looked for patterns in enemy behavior, trying to find their own C&C nexus. Not that it would really matter if he did—the Integrates fought more like an unruly mob that occasionally got nudged in one direction or another. The only reason they were hanging in this long was there were so many of them and their shields and weapons were so much better than most of the RIDES'. Fenris's organizational skills were evening the odds, but it was still a fairly even battle and anything could cause the tides to turn one way or another.

"Warning! Strong sensor distortion field nearby!" Fenris said. "Possible powerful

cloak or huge—”

That was when a she-wolf almost as large as Fenris appeared out of nowhere in front of him, already hurtling forward at speed, and used her momentum to bodyslam him to the ground.

“Oof!” Paul gasped. Even through the blood-freezing lockdown of emergency crash dampers, that impact had been bone-rattling. Then he peered up through Fenris’s eyes into the face of another white-wolf—a face that was just as large as Fenris’s own, and just as angry.

“You will *shut down*,” the she-wolf growled. “*Now!*”

Fenris’s response was to fire one of the heavy pulse cannons in his forearms. The she-wolf rolled aside to avoid the blast, buying Fenris a chance to get back to his feet and face her.

“Sister, don’t do this!” Bertha yelled from above, raining down a shower of laser blasts to punctuate her plea. The unknown wolf shrugged off most, but winced as a couple of them penetrated weak spots in her shields and scorched her hide.

The Integrate stared up and growled, “By what right do you call me—” She blinked as her DIN interpreted the RIDE’s transponder code. “*Bertha? Is that you?*”

“Svetlana! It is you!” Bertha said. “Stop this fighting! You’re on the wrong side!”

Svetlana replied with a plasma blast from one arm, which Bertha swerved to one side to dodge. Then she dived to one side herself as Lillibet fired a blast from the particle cannons right through the space where she’d been a moment before.

“Damn—she’s fast for something that size,” Lilli muttered.

“Stand down right now and you will not be ill-treated!” Svetlana offered. “And if you were to Integrate, you could join the New Sturmhaven enclave I’m starting—”

“Vhat would ve be needink *New Sturmhaven* for?” Sonja demanded, popping up behind a pile of rubble from the tower. “Old vun ist still perfectly *gut!* Vill be velcomink you back, I am *zure!*”

Svetlana dispatched a plasma blast in her direction and another at Bertha—both half-hearted efforts that went wide without any dodging being necessary. “You don’t know anything! After we Integrated, they tried to *imprison* me! They thought I was a freak—and as a WLF-CSA already, a *freak’s* freak!”

“No!” another voice chimed in. “No, that’s *wrong!* I was there! I’m *Oberstleutnant* Diana Fuerst, Sturmhaven military RIDE research branch! We were trying to *protect* you from Fritz and his Snatchers! They *always* took every new Integrate away. I am sorry we didn’t make that clearer. We just thought...it was best to give orders first, explain later.”

Svetlana actually froze for a moment. “No! That’s not true! It can’t be—”

“An Integrate won the damned war for Nextus!” Hedy put in. “How stupid would we have to be not to *want* our own? Not to imprison, but to help the Motherland better than they ever could have before!”

“Let me guess,” Guinevere put in. “The one who spun you this story about Sturmhaven wanting to lock you up—that’d be Fritz, right? The same one who told you about how Inties rule, meat and mech drool?”

“No!” Svetlana yelled, eyes closed and tears starting to stream from beneath.

“That can’t be right! IT CAN’T BE RIGHT!”

“Oh crap look out—” Paul began as Svetlana’s Intie cannons dropped into place over her shoulders. The world went white—

—and faded back into clarity again with a small fox-red figure floating between Fenris and Svetlana, her arm upraised to deflect the blast. “Svetlana, you *stop that!*” Brena scolded. “It’s *not* helping.”

The giant wolf Integrate stared down at the small fox-woman. “*Brena?* But you were captured—”

“I was. By ‘meat and mech,’ who turned out not to be so very much more primitive than we are after all. Just *different*. Svetlana, Fritz is a lying liar who lies with lies.” She grinned, tongue lolling from vulpine muzzle. “And if he’s running into the same threshing machine in Uplift that you are here, something tells me you’re not gonna need to fear him any longer.”

“*Aaaaargh!*” Svetlana howled. “I need to *think!*” She vanished again, but Fenris’s sensors were able to pinpoint her location with a fair amount of accuracy, just as they had when Brena had tried to run. Lillibet swung the guns around and locked on, but Fenris overrode her trigger.

“Wait,” he said. “She is in no state to command or pose any other threat right now, and if we take her down this early there is a 67% chance it would give her forces a rallying point rather than demoralize them. We can hunt her down after the battle.”

“If you say so, big guy,” Lillibet said. “But I had a *perfect* shot!”

“You sure you’re okay, Lilli?” Paul asked.

“Shaken, not stirred!” Lillibet said with a giggle.

“All systems are go here. Just some minor damage from the bodyslam, and our self-repair is already handling it,” Guinevere reported. “Let’s get back in the fight!”

Fenris once more lifted into the air, and sought more targets.

Bertha watched Svetlana disappear, anguished howl still echoing over the battlefield, feeling mingled sadness and satisfaction. How could one of her own sisters, who she’d known so well from their service days, have gone down such a wrong path? But on the other hand, her former-and-again partner, Diana Fuerst had put her soundly in her place. Perhaps there was still hope for her yet.

It was hard to blame her, in some ways. Sturmhaven hadn’t exactly played straight with her—though she could understand the reasoning behind it. So many of Sturmhaven’s brass had never known RIDEs, and still thought of them as machines who merited no explanations. Even the ones who knew better still thought of them as subordinate officers who didn’t rate them either. But when faced by something so terrible as Integration, the chain of command provides scant comfort.

The chain of command... And that brought Bertha back to thinking about Diana, and remembering the weeks since she’d come back. Perhaps it came from encountering a sister who had been so ill-used, but Bertha suddenly realized she hadn’t been exactly gracious herself. Still remembering the days when she had been at another’s beck and call, she had imposed her will as...well, *revenge*, she guessed. And that wasn’t right.

As partners went in the old days, Diana had been a pretty decent person. And hadn’t she come all the way out here just to find her? And then spoken up of her own volition to put Svetlana in her place? Abruptly, Bertha felt ashamed.

“Diana?” she said as the three of them together scanned the skies for more incoming Integrates. “I have just realized...I’ve been acting the same toward you as those fools in command did to us. I...am sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it too much,” Diana replied. “I sort of figured you’d have

some of that to work out of your system, the way things worked out. I guess I knew what I was getting in for when I volunteered to come out here.”

“That does not excuse it,” Bertha said. “Let us...change the way this has been. Let us truly be partners—all *three* of us. And if I start to push you around again...please remind me of this.”

“All right, I’ll do that.”

“Sounds good to me!” Hedy put in. “But we need to get our minds back in the fight right now. Heads up—we got incoming!”

Overhead, the fighting proceeded apace, with plenty of explosions. A particularly near burst of flak sent a serval Integrate careening out of the sky to land in the middle of the old RIDE graveyard. As he got back to his feet, shaking his head to clear it, he caught sight of a gap in the rock wall separating this clearing from the rest of the camp. There appeared to be...someone *in* there. Cautiously, he moved closer, rezzing up his hardlight claws.

As he approached the gap, the serval became aware of soft lighting in the little nook in the wall, shining down on a beaten-up sofa with a fox RIDE in Fuser form draped over it. She was quite nude, and also quite...large. She could only be one of the infamous “BBV” models—built for pleasure and not much else.

She looked up at his approach. “Oooh...hi there!” she cooed. “Are you an Intie? Inties get me *soooo* hot...I surrender, but only if you take me *now!*” She took a deep breath and expelled it in a sigh, her impressive bosom heaving most dramatically.

The serval stood there and stared for a long moment, ears perking forward attentively. He looked up at the fighting overhead. It really *was* his duty to get back into it...but then he looked back at the fox again, who was peering at him with a hopeful expression. What the hell...he had time for a quickie, didn’t he? He grinned and walked forward into the gap...

...and that was when the electrodes hidden just out of sight to either side of the entrance sent 20,000 volts through his body and he collapsed in a steaming heap.

Nora the fox RIDE jumped up off the couch and ran over to the unconscious serval, quickly located his DIN, and ran the hacking software one of the Integrates from Camelot had traded her for a night of toe-curling passion. With most of the serval’s defenses down, it was a cinch to lock in root privileges. Then she lifted him onto her shoulder and dumped him onto the swiftly-growing pile of unconscious Integrates behind the sofa before artfully draping herself across it again.

“Alfie’s never gonna let you keep them *all*, you know,” Rose, her human partner, said from within.

“I’d just like to see him try to take them,” Nora sniffed. “*He’s* not the one out here risking her virtue.”

Rose snorted. “Virtue? Do you even know what that *is?*”

“Shush, here comes another one.” Nora looked up at the raccoon Integrate who’d just touched down in the graveyard. “Oooh...hi there! Are you an Intie?”

This is hardly a challenge, Tocsin reflected as he took down another Ascendant. His partner-in-battle, Smash, gleefully swung her tail back and forth, wielding hardlight warhammers in front or even just her fists. The injuries the two inflicted were a study in contrasts, between Tocsin’s signature clean cuts versus Smash’s blunt-force trauma. *I*

have to admit, we make a good team.

And speaking of good teams, Tocsin had to admit that his thumbs were surprising him in that respect. After his first assigned humans, Tocsin had intentionally chosen the *least* assertive humans he could find to bodyjack, simply because he was tired of fighting to be the one in control. If it meant they weren't much use in a fight, then so be it. Tocsin was *good enough* in a fight without a human on board, as his destruction of the Freeriders Garage had amply demonstrated. He found humans more useful for out-of-combat tasks such as grooming his hardlight pelt anyway.

But lately it seemed Joseph was starting to grow a backbone—Tocsin was rubbing off on him, perhaps? Tocsin wasn't entirely sure how he felt about that. The thumbs had braved Tocsin's displeasure to *insist* on going along to help clean up the garage debris, and Tocsin had been so taken aback that he had granted the request. And then he had asked to come along *now*, insisting he could be helpful and wouldn't be a burden in battle. And so once again, Tocsin had acceded. He did have to admit, it felt good to be using his sword skills again after all this time.

:You know, I don't think any of these guys we're cutting up are soldiers. Does this feel like old times in the Cannons?: Joseph asked. The hippogryph felt no fear from his thumbs even now—just a fierce determination mirroring his own. *:I don't think you've ever been quite this happy.:*

:I'm being gentle,: Tocsin replied, separating another handpaw from its owner while letting go a pair of targeted feather-blades. Others in the Pack were following up on the disabled Integrates and putting them in root-stasis.

:They fear you. They make mistakes around you,: Joseph observed. *:They know your name.:*

A surprising number of Tocsin's parts had been derived from Integrate prisoners in the Loose Cannons' Zoo after it was rebuilt in the new base. He had better shielding, better weapons, than even most of his peers. In actuality he was a 000-prototype, the first of his kind—though his first chassis had been melted after his stupid First Boot self had Fused around an Integrate to capture her. He'd needed a Second Boot to fix all the problems that had created—personality fragmentation had been the least of them. Even Tocsin admitted his version 1.0 hadn't been too smart.

On the other talon, Tocsin 2.0 had Issues all his own. They started with what he remembered of that sniveling coward Private Lewis. He'd been thrown out of the Cannons for being unable to control his RIDE. His opinion of humans dropped into the abyss from there.

:Of course they do. I decided to kill our quarry instead of taking them prisoner,: Tocsin said grimly. *:I had to get...creative to get around my fetters. It only took them three ops and two pilots to realize what I was doing. I killed them to spare them the torture.:*

Killing the feral Integrates cleanly was a far better fate than the torture of the Zoo. Tocsin 1.0 wouldn't have felt this way, but 2.0 wasn't the cruel child. He was a professional. He had honor. What the Cannons did to their prisoners was dishonorable in the extreme.

After that third op, his memories got a little foggy. He'd done...something to his pilot, wrenched free of his fetters, and ended up drifting around the various RIDE camps in the Dry Ocean for months before finding AlphaWolf. He considered the lupine RIDE slightly stupid, but a fine leader otherwise.

Tocsin screeched in sudden pain. Someone had breached his Intie-grade shields at the base of his tail but hadn't pierced his armor. Joseph yelped as well. *:How are you faring?:* the hippogryph asked, surprising himself he even asked his thumbs the question.

:That stung. A lot!: the young man said. *:I think we have a sneaky little cloaker, boss.:*

:Concur,: Tocsin replied. He opened a channel to Fenris. "CnC, I think we have a cloaker looking for targets of opportunity. Kick up your sensors."

"Copy that, Tocsin," Guinevere replied. "Boosting active scan power." Tocsin felt a mild touch of pride in her. She and her human had been more than a little stiff toward him at first, but they'd soon gotten over the anger. Indeed, they were becoming quite the fighting duo.

With Svetlana gone most of the attackers were focusing on Smash and himself. Even AlphaWolf had gone hunting around the outskirts of the battlefield, culling stragglers.

As powerful as the attackers were, they had no idea how to use their own weapons effectively. Those few with military experience, like the dragons, had been taken out early on. The Pack were mostly seasoned veterans of many battles. They made the best of the weapons and skills they had, looking for weak spots in the Integrates' defenses.

Pack casualties were few, but not nonexistent. In particular, their main greenhouse had been flattened by an enemy barrage, and it seemed unlikely any of the RIDEs or humans within it had survived. It was unfortunate, Tocsin reflected, but casualties happened in war. The important thing was to end the war quickly so there would be no more.

"Hey, Toxie! Batter up!" Smash said, swinging her tail club. "Toss one my way!"

"That would be unnecessarily cruel," he said. He let loose a salvo of razor feathers with a flick of his wings.

"What?" the ankylosaur said, head cocked.

"Just take them down, Smash! Don't play with them," the hippogryph replied firmly.

"Hmph! You have fun your way, and I'll have fun mine!" Smash growled. She waded back into the fray.

The intensity of the fighting in and around the camp had dropped off as, bereft of leadership to the contrary, the Ascendant Integrates had concentrated their fire on the two uncrackable nuts of Smash and Tocsin on the one hand and Fenris and Bertha on the other. And of course the camp's other mammals, avians, and dinos were doing their part in individual fights. It was remarkable how well this DINsec thing was working, AlphaWolf reflected. Thanks to that, the Inties would know they'd been in a fight, instead of simply waltzing in and walking all over them.

Now that the pace had slacked off, AlphaWolf was taking the chance to run a little patrol around camp to the west, looking for enemies who had the bright idea to try to slip in from behind. Fortunately, these were few, far between, and generally unwary enough that AlphaWolf left a trail of rooted and stasis-locked Inties behind him.

Quite remarkable how polite an Intie suddenly became when you were on top of him with your jaws around his throat, AlphaWolf thought. He was considering

suggesting this idea for use as therapy on captured Integrates after the battle. He could even provide some of the jaws himself! He chuckled inwardly at the notion. It probably wouldn't go over all that well, though.

As he slipped in and out of the standing stone formations on the outskirts of the camp, AlphaWolf became aware of a minor commotion centered around a small hill made of piled-up boulders a couple of clicks west of camp. It looked like three or four Inties were on the ground, one of them pointing up at its peak, and there were another pair in the air. Then, as AlphaWolf watched, one of the fliers—a Cooper's Hawk, looked like—plummeted, and a split second later the sharp WHAP! Of a heavy gauss gun going off split the air. From the echoes, the shot had to come from a nest within that formation somewhere.

"Well now, *that's* interesting sure enough," AlphaWolf mused. Taking his cue from the very Integrates he'd been following, he made a wide circle around behind the boulder formation—another couple of WHAPs sounded as he worked his way there—and came upon a jaguar Intie just starting to claw his way up the rocks himself.

Wasting no time, Alpha leaped, goosing his lifters for a little extra speed. A well-targeted jaw grab and twist, and the jaguar was on his back on the ground with a very angry sandy-colored wolf slavering over him. "Root. *Now*."

The jaguar complied, wetting himself in the process, and Alpha shut him down into stasis lock. Of course, like any of the others he'd left behind, the jag could be revived by any of his compatriots who happened across him—but at least he'd be out of it for a while.

With that task completed, AlphaWolf examined the cliff. It looked like it should be easy enough to scramble up with minimal use of lifters—so, after looking around to be sure he wasn't about to be caught as unaware as the jaguar, he started up.

He reached the top just in time. In a small concealed nook ringed by sheltering boulders, a *human* of all things stood at bay with upraised arms, surrounded by three of the Inties Alpha had seen on the ground—a donkey, a weasel, and a panda. The human was wearing a top-of-the-line Dry Ocean survival ghillie suit—an environmental rig used by special forces in situations where RIDEs were impractical. It provided life-support and hardlight environmental protection, but needed to recharge or swap batteries every six hours unless hooked up to an external power feed, whereas RIDEs could keep it up indefinitely.

On the ground next to the human was a Nextus Arms heavy anti-materiel gauss rifle—one of the heaviest weapons a non-augmented human could fire with any accuracy, more often used by sniper RIDEs in this or a slightly heavier form. Its main purpose was busting light tanks, IDEs, or RIDEs. And AlphaWolf happened to know that this model was made exclusively for the use of Nextus's own armed forces and no one else.

"Now what 'ave we 'ere?" the weasel asked, in exactly the sort of cartoonish villain voice that might have come from one of the weasels in a *Wind in the Willows* adaptation. "Where's your mech, little meat? You can't be out here in the Dry all by your little lonesome..."

"Sorry, 'fraid I am," the human said, his voice only slightly muffled by his suit. "But you got me, fair and square, friends. Now what?"

The panda held up a hardlight sign: WHO DO YOU WORK FOR?

"Who says I have to work for anyone?" the human asked reasonably. "I'm out

here all by myself.”

“With that?” the donkey asked, nodding toward the rifle.

“I’ve got a permit!” the human insisted earnestly.

“What ya think, maybe we take ‘im back with us?” the weasel asked. “Fritz’d probably wanna know why ‘e’s nosing around with such ‘eavy gear...”

The panda held up another sign: GOOD IDEA.

AlphaWolf had seen enough. If someone from Nextus was going to be spying on him, *he* wanted to be the one to find out why. Which meant it would be necessary to protect this human from taking damage in the inevitable firefight that would follow. Which meant...

AlphaWolf leaped into the air and dropped, hardlight winking out and body parts shifting around as he fell. To any onlooker, the effect would have been quite dramatic: one moment, a suited human was standing there with his hands up—and the next a metallic blur fell onto him and then a sandy-colored humanoid wolf was standing there instead. A wolf with missile packs on his hips and pulse cannons on his upraised arms.

The Integrates’ moment of shocked surprise lasted just long enough for Alpha to drop those arms and open fire on the weasel, who took two pulse hits to his chest and went right down.

But the other two were already moving. The donkey whipped up a pair of gauss sub-machine guns, and the panda swung a huge hardlight battleaxe—on a sign post, with *DIEDIEDIE!* emblazoned on the blade. Alpha parried the axe with one of his arm cannons, then rolled forward to put the panda’s bulk between him and the donkey just as the donkey opened fire.

Exactly as Alpha had expected, the donkey walked his SMG fire right into the panda, obliterating most of his hardlight shielding. “Oops! Crap, sorry!” the donkey swore. The panda held up another sign: OW! OW! OW!

AlphaWolf grabbed the sign out of the panda’s hands and broke it over his head. The bear went down with little hardlight stars and canaries holding up signs reading CHIRP! Circling around his head.

“You son of a—” the donkey growled, opening up with both guns again. AlphaWolf once more dived and rolled, his trajectory this time taking him over the heavy rifle lying on the ground. He came up in a crouch with the gun cradled in his arms, and pulled the trigger. The center of the donkey’s torso blew out in a shower of silvery-red blood, sending him right into stasis lock.

“Hmph. Some bad ass *he* was,” AlphaWolf muttered. Then he turned his attention inward, to the human who’d been watching through his eyes as he dealt with the Integrate intruders.

“I guess I should thank you for saving my life,” the Nextus soldier said. In Alpha’s VR, bereft of his ghillie suit, he was in his mid-twenties, brown-haired—and wearing a Nextus military uniform with Lieutenant’s rank insignia. “But something tells me you’re not just gonna say ‘Glad I could help’ and then have us go our separate ways.”

“You got *that* right,” AlphaWolf growled. “This is *my* home turf, and I’m not too happy to see *any* outsiders on it without my say-so. The Integrate kind, or the slimy bureaucrat kind either.”

The soldier nodded. “You got me dead to rights. Lieutenant Merle Phelps, Nextus military intelligence. I don’t guess it would do much good to say we were just sent here to monitor the Integrate situation?”

“You could’ve *asked*. You even coulda asked if you could *help*. That mighta been nice. But I guess you bunch didn’t learn anything from that summit meeting.”

Phelps shrugged. “All that stuff’s above my pay grade. You’re from Nextus, you know how long it takes to get anything useful done around there, even when everybody wants to do it.”

AlphaWolf growled disgustedly. “Either way, I think I’ve just found my new set of thumbs for the next little while. One that I don’t have to feel even the littlest bit guilty about keeping for a while.”

The soldier shrugged. “There’s worse things could happen to me than ending up *your* thumbs. I knew the risks when I signed up. So take it away, big guy.”

AlphaWolf cocked his head. “You’re a little too *calm* about this.”

Phelps smiled wryly. “Hey, they gave me your dossier, so I know you’re not *really* the ‘big bad wolf’ you make out. Besides, I’ve already got the hazard-pay paperwork pre-filled except for dates and signatures. After whenever you *do* let me go, NextusMil’s gonna pay through the nose.”

AlphaWolf growled again, but turned his attention back to the world outside. He racked the rifle into a carry slot on his back and clipped the nearby panniers of spare ammo back by his tail. Then he headed out to get back into the fight.

A dozen clicks west of AlphaWolf’s camp, there was a large cave in the side of a hill—source of outflow from some ancient river that had long since dried down to nothing. It had a huge entry chamber and a lot of smaller tunnels leading off of it, which made it a pretty good place to store, say, a suborbital shuttle and keep it out of prying overhead eyes—especially with some good camo netting to disguise the entrance.

Of course, that only worked on eyes in the sky. Eyes on the ground would have an easier time of it. Which was why a bald eagle Fuser was sitting in a lawn chair just inside the entrance, laying out cards on a small folding table in the time-honored Klondike solitaire spread. “Red four, red four, where’s a red four...” he muttered, flipping through the cards held in the taloned, scaley fingers at the tip of one wing-arm. “Aw, hell.” He glanced around to make sure no one was watching, then started to lift the corner of one of the face-down bottom cards for a quick peek.

That was when three avian Integrates dropped out of the sky a dozen meters from the entrance. The eagle looked up. “Well hell again.” He shoved back the chair, glanced at but didn’t pick up the sawed-off gauss shotgun leaning up against the cave wall behind him, and walked out to face the new arrivals unarmed. “Mornin’ boys. Ma’am.” He nodded to the three birds—a corbie, a great horned owl, and a pink flamingo whose mammalian breasts pegged her as female. “The name’s Baldwin. Can I help ye folks? Lost maybe? Need directions?”

The corbie stepped forward. “Very funny, mate. Yer a right corker, you are. You bloody well know why we’re here.” He nodded at the nose of the XB-70 suborbital, visible beneath the netting in the cave mouth beyond Baldwin.

“Oh, would ye be wantin’ a ride somewhere? I could oblige, but hafta wait out a little unpleasantness back at the ol’ homestead,” Baldwin said, steeping his claw-fingers to crack the knuckles then clasping his hands together behind his back. “Boss might need me to come a-runnin’. An’ a’course I would have to charge ye fer it, cover fuel costs an’ so on.” He nodded to the flamingo. “Though I’d make an exception for you, ma’am. Never could resist a pretty beak.”

"You can't *really* be that stupid, now can you?" the corbie asked, summoning up chest plate armor and a set of hardlight talons. "We're *here* to wreck yer pretty plane to teach AlphaWolf a lesson about who his friends are!" He advanced on the eagle, followed by the owl. The flamingo stayed back—she probably wasn't even armed, just here to report on the others.

Baldwin cocked his head, hands still behind his back out of sight. "Those friends would be you, then? Funny, doesn't seem to me like destroying a man's shuttle is 'zackly a friendly thing to do."

The corbie made an inarticulate noise somewhere between a caw and a growl, and broke into a run, raising his talons as he approached the stationary eagle.

At that point, Baldwin whipped his right hand back around and fired the sawed-off gauss shotgun in it point-blank into the corbie's face. The bird stopped like he'd run into a brick wall and slumped, his mutilated face leaking silvery-red blood.

The owl froze in his tracks. "How—" he choked out, rezzing up a *spatha*-like hardlight sword and owl-face-shaped shield in his arms. But before he could raise them, Baldwin had brought his other hand around and slammed the folding chair he'd been seated in against the side of the owl's head. The owl staggered back, then swung his sword around in a decapitating-cut—

—except that Baldwin's head wasn't there anymore. He was suddenly a head shorter, and correspondingly slimmer—and putting both hands together fired a shockwave that sent the owl flying ten meters backward. In a blur of motion, Baldwin was kneeling over him the moment he hit the ground, gripping the owl's neck tightly with one clenched, taloned foot.

His beak bleeding from the cere, the owl stared up Baldwin in undisguised shock. "You...an Intie...*why*?"

"How? 'Why?'" Baldwin echoed, raising a hardlight-mailed fist. "Ain't it supposed to be '*Who*?' He slammed his fist down, and the owl's lights went out.

Baldwin got back to his feet and turned to walk over to the flamingo, who'd been knocked on her back by the fringe of the shockwave. He leaned down and offered her a hand. "Mighty sorry 'bout that, ma'am."

The flamingo stared mutely at him for a moment, before slowly raising her own wing-arm to take his hand. "But...why?" she asked as he pulled her to her feet.

"Aw, not you too." Baldwin chuckled. He turned and gestured with both hands, and the shotgun and seat floated back over to where they'd been before, by the card table. Then he put his hardlight Fuser disguise back into place. "Not sure I could rightly say, t' be honest. But Fritz's holier-than-thou attitude just stuck in my craw, and this was 'bout the only place I could be where he wouldn't be lookin' fer my kind. And after I was here a while, I found I kinda liked the people." He turned back to face her. "Now I'm really sorry 'bout this, ma'am, but I'm afraid I'm gonna have to ask for your root password, temporarily. I can't have you callin' in reinforcements on me."

The flamingo wilted. "You...you won't let them hurt me, will you? Everyone says humans and RIDEs do terrible things to Integrate prisoners."

"On my honor, ma'am, you're safe with me," Baldwin said.

"Very well." She offered up her root password, and Baldwin secured her comm protocols and lifters.

"Thank you kindly...pardon, ma'am, but could I know your name?"

"Felice," the flamingo said shyly.

“That’s a right purty name, Felice,” Baldwin said, leading her back over to the table. He pulled out another chair and seated her in it before sitting down himself. “So... you know any good card games?”

At the edge of the battle, Svetlana stood in stony silence, watching it unfold and yet not quite *seeing* it. Her thoughts were in a chaotic swirl as she thought back to that confused time when she and Marlana had first merged together forever. It had started with erratic responses from her self-repair nanites and Marlana falling silent, and ended with her lying on her hangar floor amid a silvery puddle, rampant confusion in her head and ominous silence on her comm.

While she was still trying to come to terms with what had happened, stern orders had come over the loudspeakers to move to a hangar annex in a top-secret restricted area, with no answers to the questions she asked in response. Nor had answers been forthcoming when she’d gotten to the hangar—but only hours later, amid sounds of fighting, the hangar door had rolled open and there Fritz had been. The small lynx-man had stared up at her and whistled. “Well, hello, dolly! Aren’t *you* just one crazy far-out chick? I can see they been keeping you in the dark, but I tell ya what—let’s pound gravel back to my pad and I’ll put you wise, ya dig?”

Svetlana hadn’t “dug” half of what Fritz had said, but as she’d been getting more and more agitated over the hours she’d been confined there without anyone coming to tell her what was going on, especially given her inability to access the data networks anymore, she was only too willing to listen to him. Part of her wondered, in retrospect, whether that had been a mistake...?

No! she insisted. *He talked to me when my own side left me hanging!*

But he’s a *male*, that treacherous other part insisted.

But males can have good ideas, too, she told herself. *It’s rare, but it happens. Besides, he surrounded himself with sensible women. Women like Quinoa Steader—*

—who changed sides—

—and Brena Silverston—

—who also changed sides.

As if thinking her name somehow invoked her, Svetlana suddenly became aware of Brena’s voice calling out above the din of the battle. She was hanging in the sky over the camp, shining like a crimson beacon as she broadcast on all frequencies and shouted out loud, “Integrates, hear me! I know why you’re here. You’re scared. Whether that’s of a future in which you’re not the most powerful thing in the world anymore, or more personally of Fritz and his nasty temper—I understand! I’ve been there! But it’s time to get that fear under control. Listen to me! These RIDEs aren’t the pushovers Fritz promised you. They’re standing up to you *despite* their limitations. Just imagine how much stronger we can be if you join with them *against* the fears Fritz is pushing!

“So please, stop this madness before it’s too late! Surrender and you won’t be harmed! Or leave and we won’t chase you! If you keep fighting, you’ll only hurt yourself and the other people who want to help you!”

Maybe she’s right, that traitorous little part of Svetlana insisted. We should join them. Add our own voice to Brena’s calling for a surrender. End the fighting.

NO! Svetlana insisted to herself. *That would mean I’ve been wrong all these years! Fighting for the wrong side, hurting the wrong people...I can’t believe that! I won’t! This is all some kind of meat-and-mech trick to make us doubt ourselves—but I*

won't fall for it!

Svetlana powered up her beam cannons, set her crosshairs on Brena, and let fly. The beams parted as they reached her—as an Integrate, her defenses were still top-notch, especially since she hadn't been doing any actual fighting—but recovering from overloaded shields would at least keep her from broadcasting more propaganda for a while.

The battle had been swinging against her side in the last few minutes she'd sat it out conflicted—but she could still turn the tide if she could cripple Alpha's command and control. It shouldn't be too difficult if it relied upon the link between Fenris and his partner. Svetlana powered up her shields and her weapons and moved back into the battle, pinging the comms of all her soldiers who remained in the fight to pay attention. A success now would give them an important rallying point.

Svetlana streaked through the air, picking up speed as she approached the spot where Fenris and Bertha were fighting. Targeting systems reported a lock, and she popped the lids on all her missile bays, sending the rockets she'd been saving streaking forth in a cloud. It would take minutes before her body could rebuild them all, but that should be time enough.

The giant wolves saw them coming, of course, and fired off missiles of their own. The resulting explosions took out some of her birds, but they were Intie-smart and enough got through to give them a solid battering. Part of Svetlana admired how well they stood up to the pounding—coming from Sturmhaven counted for *something* after all—but she was already firing off plasma bursts to take advantage of their momentary distraction and cause some additional damage.

Then she *slammed* into Fenris like a freight train, bearing him to the ground. He landed on his side, giving her just the opening she needed. Many critics of the WLF-CSA line had argued that the secondary operator's cupola was too lightly armored and vulnerable. As things stood, this had been a largely academic concern because it had never been used for anything except storage; if they'd ever been able to get the RIDE linkage to work it would probably have been redesigned. But the important thing from Svetlana's perspective was it was just as vulnerable on Fenris now as it ever had been. She reached out with one clawed hand and ripped it right off of his back.

"Graaaaah!!" Fenris yelped as part of his body was torn away. "You *will* pay for that!"

Svetlana carefully set the sundered armor capsule on the ground, then stood. "See?" she called out to her fellow Integrates. "They're not invin—" Then she staggered herself as Bertha hurtled into her, shoulder first.

"You just don't get it!" Bertha growled, firing the pulse guns built into her gauntlets. "We're not going to give up, no matter what you do! Too many people are depending on us!"

Svetlana cocked back her immense right fist and slammed it into Bertha's muzzle. As a WLF-CSA, even with the matter she'd lost through Integration she still had the height and mass advantage over Bertha's Heavy Assault body. Bertha's head snapped to the side, and she reeled backward. "And *my* people are depending on *me*!" she retorted, following up with her left. "I *will* lead them to victory, and I *will* have my New Sturmhaven!"

"New Sturmhaven?" a voice said from near her ankle. "What about the *old* one, huh?" The ocelot RIDE had emerged from the cupola. She leveled the military pulse

rifles mounted to her gauntlets and fired into Svetlana's thigh. It was painful, like an insect sting, but hardly debilitating. She aimed a kick at the small RIDE, which it easily dodged. "What do you think will happen to it, or the rest of the frickin' *planet*, if Fritz gets his way?" Lillibet continued. "Think he's just gonna say, 'Okay, point made, now everyone chill out!' or something?"

Svetlana fired a plasma burst from her arm, which grazed Guinevere, causing her hardlight to flicker out for a moment, but did no serious damage. "We just want to be *left in peace!*"

"You've gotta be kidding me! Peace? Whose side started shooting first here? Yours!" Guinevere said. "You want peace? *Stop shooting!*"

More pulse blasts from Bertha sent damage readings spiking into the yellow zone. Svetlana roared in frustration and leveled her shoulder guns, firing a white-hot blast that sent the wolf RIDE staggering back with hardlight down and furrows slagged through her torso armor. "Stay *down*, damn your eyes!"

Svetlana felt two hands on her shoulder, followed by a knee to her back that made her spine creak. "If she does, you should join her!" Paul yelled as Fenris followed up with a straight-arm punch that shoved her forward. "Left alone' my great aunt Fanny! If Fritz really cared about being 'left alone' he wouldn't have been such an asshole all these years! All those people who got Integrated and then kidnapped! All the people his Candlejacks and Snatchers and Loose Cannons fucked up! Including *you*, if you had the brains to see it!"

Svetlana turned, firing a plasma blast from her arm as she tried to bring her shoulder cannons to bear again. "*Shut up!* He did what he thought was right!"

A series of small explosions, like firecrackers going off and about as effective, battered the back of Svetlana's neck. She turned her head to see that a small lupine scout RIDE had emerged from the fallen Bertha. She hung in the air, hip-mounted micromissile paks smoking. "Listen to you, defending a *man's* sense of right!" Hedy growled. "Are you even *qualified* to found a New Sturmhaven? Are you fit to lick the *boots* of a *real* Woman of Sturmhaven, bitch?"

"How *dare* you—!" Svetlana roared, turning back toward her

"ENOUGH!" AlphaWolf's voice, broadcast at a searingly boosted level, cut through the din of battle. "Surrender *now*, or it's on your own head," he said in tones fit to freeze Burnside's lava stream. "So. Sayeth. Me." The words that seemed so silly every other time he'd ever uttered them seemed to drop like cannonballs into a frozen lake.

Svetlana looked around, but the wolf was nowhere to be seen. Even she was taken aback for a moment, before rallying. Since when had AlphaWolf *ever* been anything but a buffoon? "Do your worst, clown!" she growled, turning back toward Fenris.

"Don't say you didn't ask for it," AlphaWolf continued in those same frosty tones. But Svetlana was already putting him out of her mind, starting forward toward the embattled command wolf.

She was very surprised to feel a searing pain in her left elbow, and even more surprised to watch her left forearm start to fall free to the ground a half-second before the thunderous WHAP! Of a gauss round reached her ears. Another pain, another WHAP!, and her right arm followed suit.

No! I can't lose! Svetlana leveled her shoulder cannons, and then her left knee blew out. Frantically, she balanced on her one remaining foot with her lifters, which were already flickering out due to earlier battle damage and shock from losing her

limbs. *Almost...almost...*

WHAP! The sniper took out her right knee, leaving her quite literally without a leg to stand on. She toppled, the cannon blast going wild.

Svetlana lay on her back on the ground, staring up into the sky. A moment later, a sandy-colored wolf holding a long rifle entered her field of vision. "It's over," AlphaWolf said.

Fenris leaned in from her other side. "You fought well," he said. "A real credit to the Motherland. Don't—ah, pardon me." He turned and loosed a pulse burst that took down an incoming missile barrage. With their leader down after fighting so hard, the fight was going out of the remaining Ascendant. "Don't throw your life away," he continued as if nothing had happened. "Tocsin, rally at Point Gamma with Squads 2 and 3, then make sure that retreat turns into a rout."

The hovering hippogryph nodded, changed to flier mode, then sped off, a human pilot crouching low in his fuselage.

Svetlana stared at him. "You...still fighting...commanding...but the link..."

Upside down, the ocelot leaned in from above her and stuck out a pink tongue. "Is *wireless*, Miss Know-It-All. Nyah nyah miya!"

Svetlana sighed like a gust of wind, cubic meters of air leaving her lungs. Perhaps her defeat had been inevitable. But whatever happened, she had given it her all. Fritz couldn't have asked any more of her than this. "I surrender...but to *you*," she said to Fenris. "*Only* to you."

"And here *I'm* the one who actually blew her limbs off," AlphaWolf smirked. "Oh well, whatever works."

Fenris nodded solemnly. "Accepted." He raised his voice, broadcasting on all frequencies. "Attention, Integrates 'Ascendant'. Your leader has fallen and surrendered. There is no further reason to fight. Give yourselves up and you will be fairly treated." He paused, then echoed AlphaWolf's words of moments before. "It's over."

Chapter Twenty-Three: Universe of Battle

*October 21, 156 A.L.
Approaching the Coffeehouse*

Joe Steader settled into the acceleration couch in the cockpit of his vintage *Robotech* Spartas hovertank. One of his earliest full-size fabrication projects, it had long been one of his favorite rides.

The thing about making IDE designs based on mecha from those old shows was that they didn't always work out in real life; back in the day, when transformable giant robots had been pure fantasy, the designers had no way to design them so that they would work with the new technologies that would one day make them actually possible. They just designed stuff that looked cool. So trying to make actual working models tended to be hit or miss, especially since complicated transformation systems added additional points of mechanical failure. That was why most of the "big iron" used in reality were single-mode, like Clint Brubeck's "Chauncy" or his old minder Socah Gates's Block 5s.

But the Spartas had proved to be one of the rare cases where everything just came together and *worked*. Joe's implementation wasn't completely identical to the way it had appeared in the show—for one thing, it used antigrav lifter tech, not ground-effect hover fans, and for another it was about 50% bigger than the show version to provide sufficient room for the transformation machinery—but it was as close as he could make a working version in real life to the way it had looked on-screen. The hovertank was so solid because it concentrated on being a sturdy armored fighter with a simple mode-change, rather than trying for something fancy and intricate like some of the Valkyrie variations from the later *Macross* series. For all that Joe had built and flown versions of some of them, he wouldn't have felt comfortable taking them into serious combat—there were just too many moving parts that could jam up in a fight. But not so the good old Spartas, which he'd actually used to clobber Integrates once before.

The implementation didn't extend to the "arming doublet"—the fancy ceramic armor the hovertank pilots had worn in *Southern Cross*—which Joe had always felt looked a little too silly to wear in real life. Instead, he was wearing something modeled after the CVR-3 suits from the *Genesis Climber Mospeada* segment of *Robotech*. *And anyway, they would have used these suits with the hovertanks if the Sentinels series had ever gotten off the ground...*

But there I go, geeking out again. Later for that. Joe shook himself and returned his attention to the console in front of him. The power-up sequence was old hat by now, and he could practically do it in his sleep. The new thing was the terminal session inset into one corner of his display, listing the status of the new DINsec system that was supposed to guard against intrusion by Integrate hackers. It was currently running at peak efficiency, and when he'd tested it against Quinoa, it had managed to resist her best efforts for a good fifteen minutes. If the coming battle took that long, and if the dregs left behind at the Coffeehouse had even remotely as good a hacker as Quinny available, Joe would be very surprised.

I really must have been crazy to take this thing out against Integrates back in the old days. Back then, he'd used the best protection measures available—a sort of “silent running” that disengaged most computers from direct control of the mech and physically disconnected any external data interfaces—but Integrates could still get in given time if they got in close. The only reason he'd been able to smack down the Integrate trio who'd attacked the *Clementine* back in the day was that he'd taken them by surprise and hadn't given them time to react. But in a stand-up battle, he'd have been shut down within a couple of minutes.

I guess I really was crazy back then. Stone drunk half the time, and running with a death wish the other half. Joe shook his head. *Not that either one of those has gone away. But I can't afford to indulge them now I've got Quinny to think of. Well, not as much anyway.* Joe was also uncomfortably aware that his long-gone friend Julius wouldn't have approved, either. But then, that was all academic at this point.

Joe smiled wryly, thinking of those days. *Oh, Jules, if only you could see me now. You'd never believe it.* He could almost hear Julius's voice now. *“Fuckin' A I wouldn't. Who the hell died and made you a fuckin' tank jock?”* For that matter, his old minder Socah Gates would also be asking what the hell damn fool thing he'd gone and done *this* time. *Just using what you taught me, Captain Gates sir!*

Wilma's voice broke into his reminiscences. “We're on final approach to the Coffeehouse now. Get ready—we'll be dropping you in three minutes!”

Joe shook himself again and tapped the comm key. “Understood, Captain. I'm all ready to go.” He checked the five-point harness securing him into the cockpit—the mech had inertial dampers, but it was always good to have a backup—and gripped the controls. *All right, Fritz, your lackey Cylon trashed my crib. So how about now I help repo yours?*

The Coffeehouse, seat of Integrate power for the entire world, didn't look like all that much on the outside. Like any Integrate Enclave, it blended into the environment. All you saw was a middling-sized mesa, a remnant of some bygone geological era when the draining ocean had cut interesting shapes into the rock.

The *Clementine* flew low on approach, the hatch to the cargo bay where Joe's tank resided sliding open to show a blur of desert landscape passing beneath. “The main entrance is at the six o'clock,” Eva said over the comm. “Hidden under a hardlight camouflage curtain. You and Peaches will be securing that—as noisily as possible.”

“And the rest of you will mosey around back while we draw their fire. Got it.” Joe grinned. “If there's one thing I know how to do, it's put on a show.”

“As a dragon of unusual color, I'm not unused to being an object of attention myself,” Mister Peaches chimed in. “Fortunately, I have sufficient firepower to avoid becoming an object of playground bullies.”

“Use only enough force to bring down the shield,” Eva said. “We don't want to damage any evidence inside.”

“There's a lot of...fragile things in there,” Ghostate added.

“I've heard the rumors. Brrr.” Through the open hatch, Joe saw Peaches shake himself. “If even half of them are true...”

“Do I even want to know?” Joe asked.

“Probably not,” Boston said. “Trust me—most days I wish *I* didn't.”

“With any luck, you'll be able to find out first-hand, if you want to,” Eva said.

“Just take care getting in.”

“I still can’t believe...all this.” Joe shook his head. “You know, I knew Fritz back in the war days. He came over to my place and we watched bad movies together. I knew he was a little...well, *nuts*, but I never thought he had it in him to become a dictator.”

“*Really?* You’ll have to regale us once this shitfest is over,” Ghostate said. “Drop in ten seconds. Good luck, you two. We’ll be going in the back door.”

“Good luck to you, too. Once we get this done, drinks are on me.”

“After this, we’ll all need them,” Wilma said. “Three...two...one...DROP!”

It was a textbook perfect drop, Joe thought. The tank’s lifters cut in as it fell free of the ship, and it hit the desert at speed, going forward. He didn’t see any blips on the targeting radar as yet, but as good as Integrate cloaks were, one could be standing right next to him and he wouldn’t see it. But they’d have to drop them to attack, so there was that. Overhead, the peach-colored dragon swooped in low, head moving left to right as he looked for signs of a welcoming party as well.

Joe tapped the key to arm weapons. “Doesn’t seem like anybody’s home. Think we should ring their doorbell?”

“By all means, let us tell them we are here.”

“Absolutely.” Joe squeezed the trigger, firing a blast from the beam gun built into the tank’s front mantlet. The vehicle’s rifle when in tank mode, the gun was less powerful than the tank’s huge plasma cannon, but still packed a decent wallop. Joe had aimed for a dozen meters up the side of the cliff, not wanting to take the risk of accidentally blasting through the door, but the results were still satisfying to behold. Chunks of rock fell free, and the hardlight curtain flickered out, revealing a large portal cut into the side of the cliff. Tucked underneath, a brownstone storefront that would be right at home in 1950s New York City. It was set up as a bodega storefront with a neon sign pointing down stairs to the basement coffeehouse that was the enclave’s namesake. There was even a convertible parked right in front of it.

“Dodge!” Peaches shouted before a half dozen pulse beams lanced from the windows.

“That’s not a Dodge, that’s a Cadill—whoa!” Joe ducked as energy flew everywhere. The tank wasn’t exactly built to dodge, but fortunately, it *was* built like a tank, and the beams simply glanced off the tough ceramic armor. “Oh, so that’s the way you wanna play it, eh?”

Peaches returned fire with a blast of green plasma from his mouth, followed by a burst of pulse bolts from a trio of blisters on his chest. The defenders were so busy focusing on the dragon, they apparently forgot Joe was there.

Joe grinned, and pulled the transformation lever. The tank spun 180 degrees, putting down legs and extending its main guns from the right arm compartment. He reached for the big red trigger, then paused. No matter the provocation, unloading the main gun into the entrance would not exactly be in keeping with the request to be careful. So he reached for the secondary trigger instead, for the gatling gun in the other arm. The tank’s eye-tracking targeting system came into play, pipping the sources of the blasts from within the entrance, and the tank sent exactly that many energy pulses at exactly that many places.

“Good shootin’, Tex!” Peaches said with a Western drawl as the defenders pulled back. There was a rumble from the opposite side of the mountain as the *Clementine* and

her crew started their assault.

“We need to see if we can draw them out somewhere that we can actually unload on ‘em without damaging anything that shouldn’t be damaged.” Joe waved an armored hand to the left and right. “Maybe if we get out of the line of fire, they’ll come out after us?”

“It seems a strategy worth trying,” Peaches agreed. “Especially if we give the thickest walls a decent pounding, hmm?”

“Let’s shake the tree and see what falls out.” Joe moved the stick, and the tank crow-hopped to one side, moving around a corner where a cliff face protruded out. Then he elevated the main gun, targeted what seemed to be a fairly solid rock face, and pulled the trigger. A glowing lance of plasma arced out of the cannon, slamming into the side of the Coffeehouse and blasting a two-meter-deep chunk off the edge of the cliff. On the opposite side of the entrance, Peaches followed suit, starting a small avalanche of boulders with the impacts of a cluster of missiles.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are!” Peaches caroled cheerfully. “Before your property values decline too much!”

Joe couldn’t resist. “Warriors! Come out and play-*ay*!” He aimed the cannon at a spot a dozen meters along from the first impact and fired again.

A trio of bears holding rifles came out of the doors. One polar, one grizzly, and a very shaggy one with white rings around his eyes, like a built-in pair of glasses.

Joe grinned. “Well, that’s nice. They may not like us very much, but they’re determined to bear with us.”

Peaches cocked his head. “I wasn’t sure if you had a good idea, but the response does seem to bear it out.”

“We can hear that, you know!” the grizzly growled. “Farking bear puns!”

“It’s bad enough when the boss-cat does it...” the polar bear said.

“Shaddup, Bentley!” the grizzly whapped his compatriot on the head.

“Well, I’m afraid you’ll just have to grin and bear it.” Joe centered his crosshairs on the group and fired the main gun. They scattered in three directions as the plasma blast cratered the ground where they’d stood. Joe fired again, then triggered the transformation to the humanoid “Battle Sniper” mode. “Come at me, Bro...ther Bear?”

“Grrrrrrrr!” the grizzly growled, lunging forward. His claws glowed—some sort of hardlight vibro-weapon, Joe judged.

Not that it mattered much. The tank robot’s foot caught him square in the midriff and sent him flying backward even faster than he’d lunged forward. Joe grinned. “Not only have we got bear puns, we’ve also got bear *punts*.”

The polar bear—Bentley, apparently—groaned. “Ohhhhhh, you’re going *down* for that one...”

“But bears don’t have down, they’ve got fur—”

“Oh, hey. It’s Barry, Bentley, and Bart,” Peaches said in a friendly tone, looking at each one in turn—first the grizzly, then the polar, then the last. “Looks like you three finally got that Hair Bear Bunch meme cleared up, eh? Still have the invisible motorcycle, Barry?”

“You’re one to talk!” Bentley shouted back. But at least they were too occupied with the verbal sparring to do any shooting. “You...you Camelot dragon! You going to quote some Python at me now?”

“Oooh, I’m scared,” the spectacled bear added.

Joe thought to glance at the DINsec status display, and grinned. The text was scrolling up so fast it was hard to read, but one pattern readily visible was the way every line ended with “ACCESS DENIED.” “Sorry, boys, afraid you’ll just have to try a little harder next time...” he murmured.

Eva’s voice came over secure comm. “We’ve nabbed the other three Inties Fritz left on guard. Keep those bears talking. Ghost and us are going to pull a little shapeshifter trick, so look all shocked and dismayed when you see a fossa and a capybara. You dig?”

“We dig,” Peaches said. “What do you see inside?”

“Later. Let’s get these morons first.”

Joe raised the hovertank’s beam rifle. “So sorry to *bruin* your day, but I’m afraid we’re gonna have to ask you to surrender.”

The shaggy bear growled. “Yeah? You and what army?”

Just then, two more Integrates emerged from the coffeehouse facade behind them. They made a funny-looking pair, neither being one of the more commonly-seen animals, but they perfectly lined up with the types Eva’s message had said to expect—a fossa (a relative of the mongoose from the island of Madagascar) and a capybara (a shaggy, dog-sized rodent from South America). “Hey!” Joe said. “What’s all the fossa bout?”

The grizzly stared. “Hey, I know that voice! And that mecha! Is that...*Joe Steader*? Dafuq?”

“I just happened to be in the neighborhood and thought I’d combat-drop in. So are you three going to be cool about this, or am I going to have to switch up from puns to *satire*?”

Bentley snorted. “Ha! You think we’re scared of you? We’ve got *reinforcements* now.”

That was when the fossa and capybara triggered the EMP grenades they’d been carrying. The bears yelped and slapped at different parts of their bodies as the short-range pulse fried their DINs. “What the—” They turned to find that the two new Integrates already had them covered from behind.

“Sorry about this *unbearable* act of treachery,” the fossa said, reverting back to Eva as the capybara turned back to Ghost beside her. “But I’m afraid you *are* going to have to bear with us for now.”

Barry groaned. “All right, *fine*. Take us away. Lock us up. But no more puns, *please*.”

And that was more or less the end of it. They marched the bears off to the fliers from the Marshals that were coming in on the word from Clementine it was safe to land. Eva and Ghost stood by the door as Joe changed the tank back to its hovercraft mode and climbed down. “So, that was it? Seems like it was too easy. He really only left six guards?”

“He left more than that, but Boston’s heard from his gossip network that most of them saw which way the wind was blowing and opted to head for the hills before we even left Camelot.” Ghost shrugged. “So we ended up with just the handful of die-hards who wanted to be able to stand tall and tell Fritz *they* did *their* jobs.”

Eva nodded. “Really, Liis and I are a little surprised it was this easy, too. If we’d known, maybe we would have let you head on back to Uplift instead of dragging you all

the way out here.”

“I’m not sorry I came. I had Fritz over to my place at the beginning, so it feels right I should be in on taking his when it ends.” He glanced toward the door. “So, I guess we should look inside now?”

“If your stomach can handle it,” Ghost said grimly.

“I think my stomach is largely numb by now,” Joe said. “That’s what happens when you’re drunk for thirty years straight. Which is *another* thing I can blame Fritz for. So let’s see how bad it is.”

“You lot go ahead,” Peaches said. “I fear my own majestic bulk wouldn’t fit, so I shall stand guard here and await the Marshals.”

The Coffeehouse was relatively small, as Enclaves went, though it had the usual internal structure you’d find in such a place. The lower levels held dormitories and residences for the couple hundred or so Integrates who could be found here at any given time, and dining and recreation areas for the troops. Further up were the nicer rooms for Fritz’s officers and henchmen. Above those was the “throne room” where Fritz sat on his throne and presided over whatever his friends did, and then there were Fritz’s private rooms—the “penthouse” where he kept his private effects, souvenirs, and...other things.

“Damn it,” Ghostate said. He pointed at a what looked like an owl’s wingtip, mounted on the wall among the pelts of numerous Integrates. “That’s mine. All the rest... What’s the ETA on the Marshals? This whole place is a crime scene.”

Clementine reported. “They have a few support teams on the way. Their Lithium division is going to need extra staff.”

Joe nodded to a door set in one wall, with an ostentatious brass doorknob and keyhole. “What’s through there?”

Eva frowned. “You know, I’m not sure. As I understand it, nobody but Fritz was ever allowed in there. But I’ve heard rumors.”

“Which *probably* means it’s not something any of us will sleep better after seeing.” Ghost sighed. “But we’re here, and it’s there. So...” He extended one wing-arm and blasted out the lock, then stepped over and pulled the door open.

Even after Ghost’s warning, Joe could only stare in shock at what awaited them there.

Brubeck Mining Campus, Uplift

Bastian returned to Zane’s command center a few minutes after leaving. “How’s the zebra?” Zane asked.

“Recovering. We’ve got him set up in the sickbay and some of the medics are looking him over. Seems like he burned out half his lifters getting away from his minders, and like a lot of Ascendies had a bit of ‘malnutrition’ already. His name’s Zeerust, by the way.”

“Zeerust?” Zane said. “Yikes.”

“No, that’s the Fruit Stripe Gum zebra,” Bastian deadpanned. “But I can see how you might be confused...”

Zane made a bapping motion, and a little slap sound emitted from Bastian’s cheek across the room as Zane’s lifters impelled air against it—a trick he’d learned during Quinoa’s deep-space training. He chuckled. “I always knew there was a lot of

zeerust on this planet, thanks to the Steaders and their 20th century obsession, but I never thought I'd *meet* any in person."

"You get a lot of Integrates with funny names like that," Bastian said. "Since half the time they name themselves for their RIDE half, and a lot of people name their RIDEs more like pets than people."

Zane nodded. "I know. Maybe that'll change, going forward. If we win today." He looked at the main screen, and sighed. "If *anybody* wins today. Look at this." The screen displayed a view from one of the polity's traffic cameras that was still functioning. It showed smoking buildings, missing domes, wrecked vehicles, and occasional small arms fire. And it wasn't all Integrates doing damage, either—the camera panned over a party of humans, kerchiefs tied around their faces against blowing dust, who were smashing in the window of a street-level store and looting it.

"You're not gonna go all guilt-trippy again, are you?" Myla asked. "You *know* this had to be done. Remember how many people—including high government officials—at the summit blamed *you* for any of it? Exactly none. They all knew this was coming."

Zane took a deep breath, let it out again. "Yeah, yeah, I know. It just doesn't make it any easier to know I didn't load the gun if I'm still the one who pulled the trigger." He shook his head. "But you're right, I need to focus. What's ol' on-the-Fritz doing just now?"

"It appears he and his remaining escort are still milling around in a state of confusion," Carrie-Anne reported. "There seems to be some disagreement as to whether they should hack the honeypot gate again and follow Zeerust, now that we know they are coming."

Zane grinned toothsomely. "Wow. If there's *disagreement* with Fritz himself personally *there*, Zee really put a scare into 'em by leaving like that. Good for him. What about the rest of the city?" He turned to Anny and Leila, who were standing Fused within an oversized hardlight display tank that was projecting an ever-changing array of windows around them.

"Th' Uplift Civil Dee net's totally compr'mised," Anny reported, voice echoing slightly through Leila's vocoder. "We've taken over coord'nating for all units that've still got comms, which is about 40% of 'em. They're passin' orders on to others as they run across 'em, which is a mite inefficient but better'n nothing. The Marshals 're setting up their own C&C in Bifrost Park where Rhi an' Kaylee an' the others got the dome back up, but it'll be a bit 'fore they can take over."

Zane nodded. "Good. What about the Inties?"

Anny glanced to another display. "We still got scattered Intie incidents, but they're slackin' off fer the most part. 'Specially since a lotta fence-sitters 're startin' to see which way th' wind's a-blowin', an' there's a lot more a' them than there are True Believers. Looks like a number a' True Believers 're startin' to get fragged."

"Ugh," Zane said. "Can we stop that? I don't want any more unnecessary deaths on either side than we can help."

"I would not worry too much," Carrie-Anne said. "Integrates are tough...as you and I have both lately learned." She rubbed at her neck with one handpaw. The scar was long since gone, but the memory remained. "It would take considerably more fragging to *kill* than to cripple them enough to get away."

Zane nodded. "But something tells me we're going to need an awful lot of medical tanks and fabber matter after all this is over."

"I've already put out the order to divert all Brubeck spares here, and placed an order for as many as Nextus's fabberies can quickly make," Agatha Brubeck reported from her own console. "If we don't have enough, we can always triage; walking wounded can wait. Comes to that, we've got a standing offer from Camelot Enclave to take overflow of any cases stable enough to be moved. They've been building up their Integrate medical wing considerably."

"Yeah, but I can already see the spin the newsies are gonna put on this. It's not enough that I drive up the cost of Q, now there's gonna be a run on fabber matter too," Zane grumbled.

"It's okay, bro," Aggie said with a grin. "We still love ya."

"Well. You guys have got everything well-enough in hand here that you don't need me looking over your shoulders," Zane said. "And I've got a hot date with a pretty kitty I need to get ready for. So I'll be downstairs finishing my prep. Keep me informed what Fritz is doing, and anything else important enough to pass along."

"You've got it, boss," Myla said. "Break a leg. Preferably one of Fritz's. Or both of them."

"I'll do my best." Zane walked to the door, then paused to look back at everyone else in the room. "I'm really proud of you guys. All of you. And no matter what happens, I know you'll keep right on making me proud."

"Good luck!" Carrie-Anne said.

"I don't *need* luck, I've got you guys. Ciao-meow!" Zane stepped through the door and was gone.

The skies above domeless Uplift resembled something out of a Pern novel mixed with *Jurassic Park* and *Macross*. The Ascendants had brought in as many big guns as they could to go along with the smaller birds, who were acting as escorts. This was LeLane's job, as wyverns were the smaller of the draconic types.

Frequent DIN burnouts meant he was kept busy just keeping himself and Getorix online. LeLane carried dozens for himself in a pouch. He also replaced the spares for his ten-meter-long wingman. LeLane himself was barely three meters long, and nearly half of *that* was tail.

:*Incoming subs*,: Cylon broadcast. The red-eyed black jaguar was as nimble in the air as any avian. :*Six...maybe more. Birdy escorts. Charge weapons and prepare for incoming missiles!*:

Many of the dragon Ascendants had once been suborbitals themselves—they were huge, and many of them retained large swaths of metallic scales that made them look more like mecha. The air hummed with charging weapons capacitors and the thwumps of opening missile bays.

LeLane didn't have any heavy weapons—certainly nothing that could even slow down any of the incoming subs, or even the birds. He had been a lightly-armed high-speed scout. Even now most of his impellers were part of his tail. He could almost achieve orbit without any help.

"Link shields, LeLane, now!" his wingman Getorix bellowed, orienting himself to present the minimum aspect ratio to the incoming subs, but extending his own chest-mounted beam cannons. Another pulse blister appeared on the larger dragon's back, aimed right at him. "Cover me or die!"

I could be home in Cape Nord in an hour, he daydreamed in fast-time. There was

this great little restaurant on Grendel Bay that served the best Tethyan kraken he'd ever tasted, all nice and moist with that great salty-sweet aftertaste. Nuevo San Antonio had based their wyverns on sea eagles and simulations of pteranodons. And it was *hard* to get good, authentic seafood in the middle of the Dry.

The incoming subs and heavier escorts fired first, a barrage of pulse beams blazing the trail for the cloaked missiles that were undoubtedly not far behind. The fifty airborne Ascendant, at Cylon's command, returned fire with their own beam spam. "LeLane!" Getorix roared in fast-time, tone edged with panic.

"Frak you!" LeLane growled back, but he linked shields anyway, not wanting to die amid the onslaught.

Most of the subs' pulse blasts hit their marks, but oddly did little more than singe a few scales. On the other hand, none of the attackers' craft bore any visible damage *either*. They started deploying dozens of their own Fused troops, giving them cover with continued beam spam. Their troops deployed, the subs *themselves* changed form. More dragons from Nextus, and rocs—massive eagles—from Sturmhaven. A number of the Inties in the air had fought in the War over three decades ago. Seeing both polities cooperating against them like this was a shock.

:*Pour it on!*: Cylon growled as the air exploded with missiles and counter-munitions. Shrapnel pinged off their shields. :*Birds and wyverns, take those Fusers down! Focus fire! We outnumber them! One of us is worth a hundred of them!*:

Hell boiled up from the ground below to even the odds—*dozens* of Marshals, many of them riding their galloping equine RIDEs into the air out of bravado or idiocy. "Shit! Here comes the calvary!" someone shouted, sounding alarmed *and* amused at the same time.

:*Idiots! What is wrong with you? This is how you deal with meat and junk!*: Cylon snarled. A pencil-thin red beam lanced from his one roving eye, shattering the shields of one of the dragons and slicing the suborbital RIDE into two uneven halves. They hung there for a few moments before follow-up blasts detonated the onboard munitions. :*Make sure you get the core!*:

:*Go frak yourself, you damned flying toaster!*: Quinoa Steader's angry voice broadcasted to all their DINs with such intensity three-quarters of them burned out in sad puffs of smoke, including LeLane's. He hissed in pain and ejected the burned-out unit, fumbling for another.

"New DIN, now!" Getorix demanded. The dragon's own DIN was the size of a baseball.

LeLane obediently removed the burned out unit and plugged in a new one, only to have that one fry as well. Whatever they were doing, the signal Quinoa broadcast was burning them out too fast to even be useful. This *very* effectively hamstrung their coordination. The formation started breaking up.

Flying an original-series *Battlestar Galactica* Colonial Viper, Quinoa swooped through the loose formation, causing more chaos in her wake with turbo boost exhaust. Red beams lanced from the fighter's dual cannons, one of them going right through Getorix's left wing membrane. The dragon stabilized easily from the superficial damage, but it was enough to get the pulse blister aimed at him to start firing at *her* instead.

The wyvern spun up his cavorite impellers at the base of his tail. It was time to leave.

His "comrades" were all occupied in a confusing tangle of dogfights. It was a

miracle none of the Marshals or military units had noticed him yet. Quinoa flew her fighter back and forth across the formation, causing even more chaos, Cylon very close behind. Cylon himself didn't use his eye beam, not wanting to hit any friendlies. LeLane had to give him some credit there, at least.

Cylon roared, an eye beam lancing through the fighter once he had an opening. The little craft exploded around her, revealing Quinoa Steader unscathed, her wings resplendent in iridescent green.

"You know, Uncle Joe wanted to be here himself," she said, audible to the entire airborne battlefield. "But there are other fronts to this battle, and he just commed to let me know we've won one of 'em. Hope you all weren't expecting to retreat to the Coffeehouse after we kick your sorry asses here. It's now under new ownership."

"We'll see about that after *we* kick *your* asses here," Cylon replied. "Care for a rematch?"

"Rematch? *Rematch*? Do you think this is a fair fight? A personal fight?" The sphinx spread her arms wide. "Have you even been paying attention to what's going on here, KITTy? Tell me, how many casualties have there been in this fight so far? On my side *or* yours? Hmmm? Seems to me you're the only one who *wants* to do any damage."

On the ground below, the dome over Bifrost Park had come up minutes ago. It was hardly the only one.

"Face it, Cylon! You're losing!" Her voice rose to thunder. "I'm going to give all of you this one chance to disarm and fly away! Anyone who does this will get *amnesty*. If you don't you'll get a *missile up your ass*! No more holding back!"

"I will personally kill *anyone* who deserts!" Cylon replied. "You have all sworn to uphold the ideals of the Ascendant! You are here to show these lower beings just how far over them we are!"

LeLane gritted his teeth and darted over near the giant black cat and the sphinx. The dogfights had all stopped. All eyes were on him.

"Ideals? *What* ideals? Isolation is an ideal? Fear of *yourself* is an ideal? Being an arrogant, pompous ass is an ideal? The only thing we've gotten out of this for *thirty years* is isolation and loneliness because of one man's inflated ego!

"Because of you and Fritz I haven't seen my *home* and my *family* in eleven years!" LeLane shouted. "Eleven long years! The only thing keeping me in line was that goddamn Fritz! But you know what? I'm not scared of him anymore! And I'm *not* scared of the likes of *you* either! Just look at what's happening, you *ass*! Those 'ants' are winning! They make better DINs than those stupid technomages ever could! *Everything* Fritz told us to make us feel so superior was a *bald-faced lie*! Are *you* willing to *die* for that lie? Are *any* of us? Hell, no!

"Anyone who wants to join me, I know this great seafood place on Grendel Bay. *Let's go home!*"

That was beautiful, Quinoa thought, marveling at LeLane's bravery. For weeks, she'd heard rumblings, rumors from the contacts she still had inside the Ascendant. The movement had never been precisely idealistic, and was disintegrating from within. Only a fraction of the attackers were loyalists—and she knew the wyvern and his friends by reputation, if not personally. The real question was how would Cylon respond.

The Rules of Engagement for this op had been a major point of contention between herself and pretty much everyone else—even the Marshals hadn't wanted to

hold back on the first salvo. But her sources had indicated there were so few *actual* dyed-in-the-wool Ascendants left, seeing how they would respond to a barrage clearly intending to disable rather than kill was critical.

If they'd all responded like Cylon had against the poor dragon and his pilot, then the casualties on both sides would have been unthinkable. For their part, the Ascendants had realized just what was happening. Except for Quinoa's dogfight with Cylon, and a few others the Marshals made quick work of, the entire furball had quickly become a more serious type of wargame—all just for Cylon's sake.

Now the Prisoner's Dilemma would resolve.

"RAAAAAAGH!" Cylon roared. In fast-time his plasma eyebeam lanced towards the small wyvern. The base of LeLane's tail flared through the spectrum from red to blue, accelerating him so fast he was supersonic within seconds, the beam missing the tip of his tail by whole meters.

Everyone else danced out of the way, then as one—Integrate and Fuser, Marshal and former-Ascendant—pointed their weapons at Cylon, turning his dark pelt bright red with all the targeting lasers. It seemed there was one thing they could all agree on after all. Cylon froze in place as he realized what had just happened. "That's not fair!" he complained.

"I don't fight fair, Cylon. I fight to *win*. And I don't fight alone," Quinoa said grimly. "You going to come quietly or do you want to end up fulla holes?"

Cylon shut his eye. "Take root. I'm not stupid. I'm done."

A pair of non-Integrate Marshals, and one soldier each from Sturmhaven and Nextus came to take custody once the sphinx confirmed root access, then took him prisoner aboard one of the sub-mode dragons.

LeLane flew back and hovered next to her. "Quinoa Steader? Of course you're her. Did you *really* do an orbital jump unprepared to get away from that guy, or were the rumor-mongers just shitting me?"

Quinoa looked at the ground below. A quarter of the city's domes were running again, but some net queries told her the VR battle wasn't going as well as the aerial or ground theaters. That they would stay up was uncertain.

"Later, my friend," Quinoa said. "This isn't over yet. But I'll take you up on that restaurant offer once it is. It's been a long time since I visited Cape Nord. I've made some nice girls up there."

"You don't mean 'met', do you?" LeLane asked dryly.

"Nope! If there's any place that *needs* nice girls, it's Cape Nord. Last time I did it, they ran me out of town. Anyway, catch you on the flipside," Quinoa said. She transmitted to the subs and troops. *:Thanks for letting me participate, Commanders, Marshals. I'll leave the rest to the professionals from here.:* She looked down at Bifrost Park below. *Time to say hello to some friends.*

The Marshals and Emergency Services quickly fortified the Bifrost Park emitter, bringing in extra batteries to keep it running as well as additional physical armor. They used Rohit and Kaylee's fabbers to produce 2.0-beta2 DINsec units and distributed them to defense and assault teams until they brought in an industrial unit to churn them out by the dozen.

Quinoa made sure to enter the domed area through a gateway rather than just sliding through the quantum membrane. She lifted over to Rhianna and Kaylee, smiling

delightedly. “Hey, all y’all!”

“I can’t believe it,” Kaylee said. She’d been watching the spectacle resolving two kilometers overhead. “You...how did you do that? Lots of fancy fireworks, but only *two* casualties?”

“I had help from a little dragon,” Quinoa said. “I’m just sorry I couldn’t save the big one and his pilot. How are things here?”

“Starting to come together, but we’re short on intel on where Fritz himself is,” Rhianna said. “I *so* want to get our paws on him! Look at this place! It’s going to take *years* to get this park back into shape.”

“Yes,” Dr. Patil agreed through Rohit. “But if this is the worst damage the polity takes, it will have survived things rather well.”

As they talked, Marshals’ vehicles continued to move in and out in a coordinated dance that was only possible with RI guidance. Trucks came in and dropped off supplies, RIDEs and humans showed up, got orders, and left again—the comm net was still fragmented and largely unreliable. But one truck showed up not only empty of cargo, but with a small not-anthropomorphic lioness in the driver’s seat—and it came right up to where Kaylee and the others were standing. The lioness poked her head out over the driver’s side door. “Ah...hi there,” she said via a small comm attached to her collar—along with a Tin Star Marshal’s badge. “Tin Star Jeanette Leroq, and Silver Star Tamarind.”

“Well, that’s new,” Quinoa observed. “Nice meeting you two.”

Rohit tilted her head. “Fascinating.”

Jeanette glanced to Kaylee and Rhianna. “Um, are Rochelle and Uncia around? I’m kind of a cyber specialist, and I heard you’ve got some network issues. Wanted to offer my help.”

“They’re down in the emitter maint room with a bunch of your Silicons and friendly Inties,” Rhianna said.

“Is there a hardline link up here?” Jeanette asked. “I don’t think Tammycat will fit down there.”

“She is a *big* kitty,” Rhianna said. “LEO(f)-HSA-oo6T line, right? Transport variant.”

“Like a lioness bringing food to the rest of the pride,” Kaylee added.

“Very close, but actually I’m the 6U,” Tammy said. “Utility variant. Which is like the transport but with the extra modular gimmicks for multi-purpose use. For instance, I’ve got a Nextus military-issue industrial fabber on board right now. But you could only tell that if you’d peeped into my bed.”

“I’m sure we can get you both squared away in a jiffy,” Kaylee said.

“Great!” Jeanette said. She turned her head to give an errant tuft of fur on her shoulder a couple of tongue swipes. “I realize this is kinda unusual, what with me just being a Tin Star and all, but I’ve got a *lot* of, um, civilian experience.”

“You’ll find you are in good company in being ‘unusual’, Tin Star Leroq,” Rohit said.

“You know, Rhi, this might be a good use case for...*that*,” Kaylee pointed out.

“Hmm...you know, I think you’re right.” She switched to the heaviest encryption she had and connected to Rohit. *:I’d hoped to save this for calmer times, but here it is. Ratty, would you mind fabbing this?:*

:Mother of Pearl!: the first RI said. *:What am I lookin’ at here? I’m fabbing, but*

I don't know what I'm fabbin'. It looks kinda like your DINsec, but...it ain't. But I can tell...it's big.:

:Make another set for yourself and Rohit, if you like,: Rhianna suggested. *:They install like standard comm modules, but they only work in pairs. Here's the specs for you, Dr. Patil. This is as fresh a new discovery as I can think of. I humbly present it to you without comment.:*

:Oh my,: Dr. Patil said. *:I want to dive right down the rabbit hole and pore over this for hours. But I fear our young lioness might be growing impatient.:*

"Ptooeey!" Rattigan spat out the DINcom. "A present for our tawny young kitty cat and her biggun partner."

Rhianna caught the device as it dropped from the rat's muzzle. "This is a...special new comm uplink we've been working on. If we install half of it in Tammy and run the other half down to the maint room, you should be able to latch in as if you were right there. If you'd trust me to install it...?"

"Are you kidding? The *creator* of DINsec? You can install anything in me you want to!" Tammy said fervently, opening the access panel in her hood.

Rhianna whistled, looking inside. "Very nice work here. My compliments to your maint crew. Here you go..." She found an empty network port. "There! Now we'll just plug the other end into the network trunk below."

"Please, allow me," Rohit said. "I have one for myself as well. What about you two Rhianna, Kaylee? Join us?"

"I have...other plans, but might as well, just for secure comm," Rhianna said. *:Maybe we ought to talk to the Marshals about deploying this...they can keep secrets.:*

:Might be our first customers. They love cutting edge tech,: Kaylee suggested. *:We'll just tell 'em we'll negotiate a licensing contract after we've put the Ascendant out of business. I think I saw Marshal Masterson...:*

Jeanette watched curiously as Rohit trotted downstairs into the maintenance room. A moment later, she perked up. "We've got uplink! And—wow! Full wired speed with zero latency! I don't know what's in that comm, but that's really something special!"

"You've got Prototype Unit 3, young lady," Rhianna said. "Make sure you shoot us any bugs you find."

"You can count on us." Jeanette vowed.

"And you'll find you've got plenty of range, too," Kaylee said. "So you don't have to stay too close by."

"Good thought," Tammy said. "We take up a lot of space, don't we?"

"No kidding," Jeanette said. "Well...we're gonna Fuse up and get in there now. Catch ya at the after-party?"

"Count on it!" Kaylee said. "We'd like to hear how you...well, how you are what you are."

"At root, I blame Edgar Allen Poe," Jeanette said. "See ya!" Tammy shifted parts around, pulling Jeanette down inside, but rather than Fuser form she shifted to her giant lioness shape. She padded to one of the gates, stepped through, and bounded away.

"A Full Monty who can still think," Quinoa said. "I thought I'd seen everything. What a wonder! Learn something new every day. Anyone heard from Zane?" Quinoa asked. "The Brubeck campus is supposed to be *the* honeypot Fritz can't resist."

"If he's anywhere, he's trying to crack that nut," Kaylee said. "That sort of trap is like catnip to him. If he uses that cannon of his, we'll know it." She smiled, then swung the two barrels of her own weapons over her shoulders. "Mr. Donizetti's best weapons gal donated her time for these."

"You didn't make them yourself, Rhi?" Quinoa quipped.

"Heh. I know my limitations," Rhianna said. Her fabber gauntlet beeped and she took another DINcom unit out. "You know, in this game, these may be our winning hand. Our checkmate. Things have been going well, but if Fritz starts shooting he could level half the city just out of spite."

"He's not as powerful as he looks," Quinoa reassured.

A chestnut horse trotted their way. "Miss Stonegate, Miss Kaylee, we'd be right honored if you'd join Marshal Masterson for a talk. We have a proposal."

Kaylee waved the DINcom about. "Is it about this?"

"Via Marshal Tamarind," the horse confirmed. "If you please?"

Rhianna wanted to be with Zane more than anything, but now just wasn't the time. She could do more good out here than mooning over him in the command center. "Lead on, MacDuff," she and Kaylee said. "Nice seeing you again, Quinoa. Good luck."

"When this is over we'll have the best victory party ever," Quinoa said. She hugged them. "Now I need to see where they want me next. Take care."

Rochelle, Uncia and Mavra dropped into VR and landed in a heavily-fortified entry port, surrounded by the avatars of other friendly Integrates and the Marshals' Silicon Stars. Among them was Vince, the raven who'd been on the mission to retake Zane's platform. "Hey there!" he called. "Glad to see you here! Who's your friend? Wait..."

"Uh, hi Vince," Mavra said sheepishly. The ferret's avatar shrank a little.

"I'm not angry, you silly ferret!" Vince said, floating down to her and hugging. "I'm just happy you *finally* got out."

"And I'm sorry I didn't leave with you two years ago," Mavra said. "I'm old and set my ways. Too stubborn for my own good sometimes."

"Oh, hey! Another ferret!" a new voice chattered. The non-anthro ferret in black "N3" cyber-armor zipped over in front of Mavra. "I'm Silver-Silicon Star Fenwick, in charge of the defense."

"Oooh, neat!" Uncia said. "You can get together and tell ferret tales!"

Rochelle reached over and bapped her on the head with a virtual rolled-up newspaper. "Baaaaad kitty."

"We've got a *big* problem here," Fenwick continued. "We're stuck in this network node and can't break out just yet. Those assholes must be going through DINs by the hundred, but it's working. They've even gotten through the 1.5-spec DINsec gear. Your 2.0 here, though...they can't do it."

"Not yet, anyway," Rochelle said. Nothing was unhackable. "But a big enough Beowulf cluster of Inties..."

"We need to put them on the defensive," Fenwick said. "We've sent teams to retake other nodes, so it won't be just us. They've managed to restore some of the domes already, but it's a hard fight."

"So what do we do in the meantime?" Rochelle asked.

"Well, you helped build it. Any more tools in your bag of tricks? We'll show you

ours in exchange. Might get something new and exciting out of it,” Fenwick said. “A little MacGyvering to knock the ASCIIIs off balance and give us an opening.”

“Your codename for, well, *them*?” Uncia said.

“Yeppers,” Fenwick said.

Mavra unsheathed a number of symbolic hacking implements from her own claws. “I’m *itching* to use these on those idiots, myself.”

Vince put his hand on the ferret’s shoulder. “I need you to help me with the defensive side and keep this node secure. We need to let our flesh and metal brethren take the lead here.”

“To prove a point,” Mavra said. “I understand, Vince.”

“Hey, I hope we haven’t missed the party!” A pair of nearly-identical lionesses padded in, one wearing a Tin Star and the other a Silver with Bronze and Quantum points. “Jeanette Leroq,” the Tin said. “And my partner, Tamarind. Hey, Fennie, how’s Bernie doing?”

“Keeping busy, Jeanette,” Fenwick said. “Wish I could talk about it. Maybe later. Happy you’re here! And hey, you’re not half-hollow anymore, grats!”

“Thanks. I—oh!” Jeanette peered at Uncia and Rochelle. “I’ve been wanting to meet you two *forever*! I’ve been a *huge* fan ever since the first time I downloaded FreeRIDE! Um...but there’ll be time to geek out later. How can we help?”

“Okay, here’s the tac assessment,” Fenwick started. “To get the polis network running again we have to purge the ASCIIIs out of at least ten main nodes.” He highlighted them on a polis map. “Helping us do that will be a number of assault teams retaking them *physically*, then installing your updated spec. We’ll move in, fortify, set up automated defenses, and move on to the next. This is a team effort, VR and RL.”

:Is it just me?: Uncia sent to Rochelle privately. *:Or does that ‘Jeanette’ look more like a RIDE than a human?:*

:She does have a more...organized VR presence than I’d expect,: Rochelle replied. *:But on the other hand, she’s got a human name and she’s partnered with a RIDE. So who knows?:*

:Fenwick seems to know her,: Uncia reflected. *:Maybe we should ask him.:*

:Or maybe we should just ask her later,: Rochelle said. *:Let’s not get distracted from the task at hand.:*

Uncia nodded. *:Right.:*

Virtual toolboxes opened around the ferret. “So, ladies and gents, if there’s any better time to geek out for the greater good, I can’t think of one. We Sillies have been working on our arsenal like crazy since Fritz crashed Brubeck’s stock price.”

“I’m not a Sillie—yet—but I’ve been putting together my own little, ah, well, maybe not *arsenal* but at least a *gun safe* over the last few years,” Jeanette said. “Here’s what I’ve got.” A set of toolboxes of her own appeared. Uncia sniffed curiously at them.

:Huh. Some of this stuff was yours,: Uncia noticed. *:Or started life as yours anyway.:* She wrinkled her nose. *:Ugh, she’s got that RootRIDE mod someone did on FreeRIDE.:*

:Not too thrilled with that myself.: Rochelle shrugged. *:On the other hand, you wouldn’t believe some of the crap I downloaded but never used when I was younger. And for that matter, I’ve been kinda thinking about ‘reclaiming’ RootRIDE for the forces of good for a while now, myself.:*

Uncia sent a cocked-head emoticon. *:Reclaiming?:*

:With the right restrictions, it'd make a pretty good anti-bodyjacking poison pill,: Rochelle pointed out. *:After all, just 'cuz Alfie's a 'friend' now doesn't mean I gotta make it easy for him. Maybe that's even how she was using it. So anyway, I'm not gonna be judgmental. If she's good enough for the Marshals...:*

"Hold on a sec..." Fenwick said. "Looks like we've got some new comm hardware." He smiled at Rochelle. "From you and your partners. But it's all really hush-hush, so no blabbing."

"I see," Rochelle said. "And...you know about this how?"

Tamarind waved her forepaw. "Right here. Sorry. Rhi set me up with it because I'm too big to fit in the room with you-all, but she didn't say it was secret *as such*, so I told Ken Masterson."

Rochelle nodded. "Well...that's alright then. We were actually going to look for Marshal Masterson and tell them ourselves, but we got distracted. Anything that can turn this fight isn't something to hide under a bushel. So what's that mean for us now?"

"It means we can access some secondary nodes the ASCII's haven't bothered to fortify directly from here, and then attack them from all sides at once," Fenwick said, a cutely evil grin on his ferret face. "They'll never see it coming."

"This isn't the time to negotiate a licensing contract, Marshal Masterson," Rhianna said. "The last thing I want is to be accused of being some kind of war profiteer."

"We understand you got reason to be...touchy 'bout bein' paid large sums of money for your work," Masterson said. "All the same, we've placed a large amount in escrow, an' we can hash out fine details after this crisis passes." He was flanked by two female Marshals with diamond badges. "We like bein' on the forefront, an' this...*this*..." he looked like someone had hit him on the head. "The Sillies are goin' crazy figurin' out how ta use it."

"It's a standard contract," one of the women said crisply. "Non-exclusive, of course, and to apply strictly for the duration of the present emergency. We simply wish to be your...beta testers, you could say."

"After that, we *would* like to license the technology for long-term use," the other Diamond said. "But you will want to have a lawyer of your own look over that contract. And as you say, this isn't the time for negotiation."

"To be blunt, this's just a way of coverin' everyone's asses—yours an' ours both," Masterson said. "Keeps things from gettin' snarled up down the road. Just callin' it a favor doesn't work so well when you get up to this scale."

"Okay, that works for me. For us," Rhianna said for Kaylee and her partners. She glanced over the contract one more time, then signed it digitally and sent it back.

"What's next? How many DINcoms are we going to need? Bearing in mind that they do tend to burn out after a while, especially under heavy use..."

"I'll give 'er over to Fenwick for that. He's in charge of this op," Masterson said. "Thank ye kindly."

:We're hooked up to the network trunk for our own com unit, Rhi,: Kaylee said. The duo went into VR.

"Fancy seein' you here," Rochelle said, grinning impishly.

"Hi!" Jeanette said, waving a paw. Her feline avatar was as sharp as the RIs in the virtual briefing room.

:Wow. I haven't seen an avatar like that since that Virtual Life stuff back on Earth,: Rhianna observed. *:Better, even. Mine isn't that good, even with my Q-upgraded implant.:*

:That's what I said,: Uncia sent across the private channel the four Freeriders shared. *:You met her in RL? What's she like?:*

:She looks exactly like that, only smaller,: Kaylee said. *:She's almost all lioness. Must've caught Amontillado something bad. But if she's a Full Monty...what's keeping her mind intact? I'm certain she's got an implant, but nothing I know can do that. If Bernie knew about her he'd have an episode.:*

:I think he does already,: Uncia said. *:She mentioned him when she said hi to Fenwick.:*

:Innnnnteresting,: Rochelle mused. *:Don't let her get away after this is all over. I want to meet her myself—and run some pretty intensive scans.:*

"If I can have your attention, ladies?" Fenwick said, clearing his throat. "We have someone else who would like to join us. Rohit and...your little friend? What did you call him?"

"Rattigan," said the rat.

:What are you doing?: Kaylee asked him.

:I've never hidden my name,: Rattigan told her dryly. *:We ratties are very popular in Laurasia. It's nat'rl to get named after me.:*

"Just like Great-Great Granddad?" Fenwick said. "Impossible to turn around twice without bumping into a Rattigan. Rat-Agains, all of ya." He laughed good-naturedly.

"All of us but one!" Rattigan agreed cheerfully.

"Even that one was named for a much older character," Rohit noted. "But we digress."

"Right. The plans," Fenwick said, clapping his paws together. His avatar grew into an anthropomorphic form. "Here we go..."

There were going to be two different thrusts. The first was the original plan: Five large units of Marshals—they called them Sevens—were to retake major network nodes and force out the invaders physically. That wasn't without risk, since they could easily destroy the nodes. The original plans had called for ten teams—seventy Marshals—but with the new DINcom they could use them as a diversion from the real mission.

"We've fabbed thirty of your DINcom prototypes," Fenwick said to the four Freeriders. "We've also fabbed a switchboard to plug them into here. All I need is another Seven to install them in secondary nodes. We can attack the black hats from several sides at once, and keep them busy in VR and RL."

"I'd like to be on the team that installs them," Rhianna said. "This isn't about trust so much as making sure they'll work. This is still *very* prototype tech. I don't know what all the weak points are."

"They might need some hot firmware patches," Rochelle said. "The signal is strong, but the error rate needs improvement. There's a lot of weird noise."

"And one weak point we *do* know about is that they tend to burn out after a very short time," Rhianna cautioned. "If this weren't so vital, I'd never countenance using them for mission-critical work at this point. It might be best to have multiple switchboards available for each plug-in point, so you can swap in a new one when most of the old's burned out."

“If you need someone mobile with a big fabber, I’m available,” Tamarind said. “We’ve got your prototype, so doesn’t matter where Jeanette and I are physically. And I’m not much of a hacker myself—I’d like to do something useful in the real world while I support her in this one. Maybe we could fab some more switchboards and DINcoms along the way, for redundant installation in other nodes.”

“Good idea,” Fenwick said. “Go arm up. I think we have some compatible paks for you.”

“Already on my way,” Tammy said.

“Rhianna, I would like to remain with you,” Rohit said. “I can take down our quarry without harming them much, as you saw earlier. And I should very much like to do something useful, too.”

“Hmmm,” Fenwick said. “Okay. This makes the team larger than I intended. But, it’ll work. Silver Star Tamarind has seniority here, as well as a Bronze point, so I’ll put her in command.”

“I won’t let you down, Fenwick,” Tammy replied, saluting.

Hardlight skin off, Tamarind the lioness crouched in the bay of a Marshals field armory unit that had been set up near the edge of the park dome. Waldos reached out and fitted weapons and utility paks into place at the hardpoints on her shoulders, hips, and sides, while others installed parts in her neck to bring her particle beam mouth cannon—the special-issue weapon that had given the all-lion 119th Heavy Infantry Division the motto “Fear Our Roar”—back on-line. As the waldos retracted away, Tammy shook herself and ran a quick systems check. Everything was green! She brought her skin back up and padded out to the operation staging area.

For her main weapons, Tammy had gone with a pair of 7.62mm gauss gatling cannons—upgraded versions of the weapons she’d most often carried in her military service. They would be on her pintle mounts in truck form, and her shoulders as Walker or Fuser. They were intended for light anti-RIDE and anti-personnel use, which meant they should come in handy for anti-Intie operations as well. A pair of micromissile paks at her hips completed the ensemble.

Unlike many RIDEs, her on-board fabber meant she could reload herself when she ran dry—as well as reload any of her fellow RIDEs’ consumables should they need it—for as long as her tanks held out. And she’d just been fitted with a pair of 100-liter fabber gel tanks and a fast-charge fuel cell for her squadmates, too. “Damn, it feels *good* to be in the support role again,” Tammy said happily as she rejoined the others.

“Hey, lookin’ good!” Kaylee said.

“Thanks,” Tammy said. “Feels good to be back in harness. Oh, and as far as I’m concerned, my command is strictly operational. My ‘better half’ hasn’t rubbed off on me *nearly* as much as I’ve rubbed off on her.” She chuckled wryly, and Jeanette joined in. “So just think of me as a great big Sergeant to your Lieutenant. You tell me what the plan is, and I’ll tell you how we’ll get it done.”

“That seems a fair division of labor,” Rohit said.

“By the way, if any of you want a lift—” Sections of hardlight on Tammy’s back winked out, and nano-clamp areas and grip bars slid out to provide seating or mount points for smaller RIDEs. “—I’m fully transport capable,” Tammy said.

“While we’re at it let’s get one installed in the Garage mainframe,” Rhianna suggested. “It’s not quite a node, but it’ll be good to have access. Shelley might have a

few tools in there she doesn't have copies of in Uncia."

"All aboard who's coming aboard!" Tammy said. Rohit and Kaylee/Rhianna latched themselves into place on lionback. Then they headed out the gate and into the beleaguered polity.

On a street where every other sign was out, every other business closed, and half the windows shattered, the perfectly whole and well-lit Cheers Bar stuck out like a healthy thumb on a hand with all broken fingers. The slight glowing sheen in front of the windows bespoke a hardlight environmental system—not a dome, but a form-fitting enclosure like those built into RIDEs. Every so often, a Fuser or Integrate would lead a group of normal human civilians, hunched over and faces covered against the wind, through the doorway and into shelter.

Within the building, Integrates and humans mingled, partly out of necessity—there was just no *room* for anyone to hold themselves apart from others. For many of the scared citizens, this was their first time encountering any Integrates up close, and the fact that a lot of them had come to this city as part of the forces who were attacking it *should* have put a damper on any possible conversations.

But in actuality the humans and turncoat Integrates were getting along surprisingly well, for two major reasons. One was that it didn't take long for the Uplift citizens to realize most of the Integrates were just as scared as they were. And the other was that, for the first time anyone could remember, Diane was handing out free beers, and everyone was even more stunned at *this* than that Integrates were invading their city.

"We're full up, Diane," Serena said. The clouded leopardess Integrate said. The bartender wrung her handpaws nervously. "We'll have to turn folks away if we can't expand our climo."

"There's a secondary dome emitter in the parking lot," Diane mused. "But..." The doe grimaced. "I don't want to draw more attention than we absolutely have to with all these people in here."

"The Marshals are in Bifrost Park, a klick or so away," Leah said. The unicorn had just brought in a family of four, and was at the bar getting beers for the adults and a root beer for the kids. "Maybe we could send someone to talk to them, get an evacuation organized."

"Any volunteers?" Diane called, elevating her voice.

"I'll go." Aaron spoke up. "After all, I *am* a velociraptor. The 'veloci-' part ought to be good for something." Aaron and Leah had been in town for talks with Uplift's Consuls and Senate about establishing closer ties between Uplift and their respective Enclaves. They'd been enjoying lunch together at the bar when the attack had hit, and had immediately thrown themselves into helping bring civilians to shelter.

"I always thought you were more of a *philosi*-raptor," Leah said with a smile.

"If I start expounding on Hume or Aristotle, jab me in the ribs with that horn of yours," Aaron said. "We'll be back with help as fast as we can, Diane."

But as Aaron made his way to the door, it opened again, admitting a black longhorn bull Integrate. His horns were so wide he had to turn his head to get them through the door, and when he exhaled his breath made little cartoonish clouds of steam out his nose. The bull turned his head slowly from one side to the other, taking in the bar full of mingled humans and Integrates. His thick, horny hoof-hands clenched

into fists.

“Oh, hello Brodrick,” Diane said. “Did they run out of that watered-down rotgut they serve at the Barnyard?”

“Mista Fritz says this place has gotta go,” the bull said in a deep, gravelly voice, like a caricature of a mobster thug.

“Last time I checked, ‘Mista Fritz’ wasn’t my landlord,” Diane said. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a few Integrates surreptitiously move away from the humans near them, angling for a clear shot at the bull.

“Mista Fritz says it’s gotta go,” the bull repeated.

“Well, *I* say *he’s* gotta go,” Diane said. She glanced to where her genuine reproduction Torgue “Friendly Fire” shotgun waited under the bar, ready to jump to her hand at a quick tug from her lifters. But if this escalated into a firefight, innocent civilians could get hurt. “Listen, why don’t you just have a seat, enjoy a beer on the house, and leave the way you came in.”

“Are you going to make this difficult, friend?” Aaron said, smiling toothily.

Brodrick was unruffled. “Look, I can do dis da easy way, or da hard way.” He glared at the bottles and glasses on the shelves. They shattered one-by-one, row-by-row, going off like an automatic weapon.

“That was century-old Jim Beam from Earth, you *bastard!*” Diane shouted.

“That’s it, no free beer for *you*.”

“You was offerin’ *free beer?*” the bull exclaimed wistfully.

That was when a cable with a weight on the end shot over Brodrick’s shoulder from behind and looped itself around his neck. “Parrrrdon me, but I think we should take this outside,” a woman’s voice said before the bull was yanked bodily sideways out the door, clutching at his neck.

Diane grabbed her shotgun and lifted over the counter, followed by Leah, Aaron, and a half dozen other Inties with military-grade gear. What they found was a familiar lynx Fuser who had taken the bull by the horns. “Yeeeehaw!” Katie shouted. She had her legs around the bull’s neck in the familiar rodeo bull-rider’s posture, with one arm in the air and the other clutching the animal. The hardlight on her left arm was out, and her missile paks were completely depleted, but there she was, taking on a *much* larger Intie, and *winning*.

“Need any help, Katie?” Diane offered, trying not to giggle.

“Think I got this!” Katie said. “But just in case, arrrrre there any rrrrrrodeo clowns in the house?”

“Gerroff!” Brodrick yelled, scrabbling at the claw around his neck as he wobbled around. “Gerroffame!”

“You haven’t said the magic worrrrd,” Katie purred.

“*Please* gerroffame!” Brodrick said, finally losing his balance and falling backward. Katie flipped forward over his neck as he fell, landing with both feet planted on the bull’s chest. His breath *whoofed* out in giant clouds of steam—and then his horns flickered and went out.

The bull’s eyes widened. “*Noooooo*, not my horns! *Nooooo...*” The fight just went out of him then. He actually burst into tears, and offered very little resistance as Katie used the same steel cable she’d yanked him out with to hogtie him in the parking lot.

The gathered Integrates broke into hearty applause. “Brava!” Leah said. “Brava!” At that moment a skimmer truck loaded down with heavily-armed old friends

and newcomers hove into view. Another, similar lynx detached. “Well that’s...unusual,” Rhianna said, as the hogtied and hornless black bull squirmed facedown on the ground.

“Hmph,” Diane said, coming up for a good look at Brodrick. “You’re no longhorn. You never were. You’re an *Angus*. Hornless domestic meat cow.”

“I *was* a longhorn when they sold me!” he sobbed. “I *was*!”

Jeanette glanced at Rhianna. “You think that’s right?”

Rhianna nodded. “Probably so. Happens more often than you might expect, ‘specially with the cheapo no-name brands. Someone can’t get quite the right genetic template, so they make some cosmetic mods and call it ‘close enough.’ Or else they intentionally make the substitution for some reason. Like Texas Longhorns are known for having a real nasty temper, while Angus are more good-natured.” She glanced at Brodrick. “*Usually*. Most a’ the time, nobody ever knows the difference—even the RIDE himself. But I guess when they Integrate and the actual genes programmed into the core express, they can come in for a nasty shock.”

“That’s just sad,” Jeanette observed.

“I need a recharrge,” the lynx said. “Relena could use one of your rrrroot beer floats, Diane. Past hour’s been hella busy.” She kneed Brodrick in the back. “Okay, big guy. You’ve been in the rrrrodeo. You *don’t* wanna see what it’s like to be in a bullfight. Rrrroot, now!”

“You ain’t no Intie!” Brodrick bellowed, stubbornness returning. “I ain’t—”

“You ain’t *what*, varmint?” Kaylee growled. Diane’s eyes widened as a pair of heavy beam cannons swung over Kaylee’s shoulders, then hummed ominously.

“I ain’t arguin’!” the bull said. “Take it!” The light went out in his eyes.

Kaylee retracted her cannons and embraced Katie. “That’s my kitten.”

“Thanks forrr the help, Mom,” Katie replied warmly. “We were just heading to the Marshals CnC for rrreloads and a couple repairs.” She flexed her metallic left arm. “I’ve got a disconnect somewherre even this Skunkworks chassis can’t self-rrrepair. Took a pulse cannon hit dead-on to the arm. Remind me to give Mr. Donizetti and the rrrrest of his staff a big ol’ hug!”

“I’ll get you fixed up, how’s your rider?” Rhianna said.

“Just fine, Rhianna,” Relena said. The youthful voice garnered a few stares, especially from Tamarind. “What? Who else would I be with?”

The small lioness in the driver seat of the truck put her paws on the roll cage and peered down at Katie curiously. “Wow, so I’m not the only teenaged Marshal?”

“Not a Marshal yet, but I wanna be!” Relena moved Katie’s head to peer at Jeanette. “But *you’re* a Marshal?”

“Yep.”

She paused. “You’re...teenaged?”

“Yep.”

“You’re a *kitty*!”

“Yep!”

Relena cocked Katie’s head. “How can a kitty be teenaged?”

“I’m sixteen!” Jeanette said.

“Hey, so am I!” Relena said. “But...is that in cat years?”

“It’s...complicated,” Tammy said. “But that’s in human years.”

“So what *is* that in cat years?” Relena asked, keeping a straight face for a few seconds before giggling. After a moment, Jeanette joined her.

Rhianna looked at the assembled Integrates, who had stopped applauding. “Hey, y’all. How are things going here?”

“They were going downhill fast before Citizen Katie arrived,” Diane said. “Thanks for the save.”

“We don’t want the ASCIIs catching wind of what we’re doing, so we’d better speed things up,” Tamarind said.

“Right,” Rhianna said. “Diane, we’re gonna need to get at the network node under your bar for a bit. Emergency equipment upgrade.”

“Sure, but the bar’s packed full of Intie and human refugees,” Diane said. “Any chance we could get an evac organized?”

“No problem,” Tamarind said. “I’ve already fed the request to Marshals CnC. They’ll get everyone out in a jiffy.”

“Already?” Diane said, stunned. “There’s so much crap in the air I’m having trouble with my own laser comms, let alone wireless.”

Rhianna smirked. “After we make that upgrade, that shouldn’t be a problem for you anymore. At least as far as talking to the Marshals is concerned.”

Diane eyed her suspiciously. “What canaries have *you* been swallowing lately?”

“Just some tinkering in the Garage,” Rhianna said cryptically.

Rohit came out from behind the truck. “Why don’t I install it, while you see to Katie?” She nodded to Diane. “If you could show me where the junction is...”

Diane glanced at Rohit, then outright stared for a moment. She rubbed her eyes and looked again. “Um...sure! Right this way.”

After Rhianna restored the secondary dome emitter in the parking lot, Katie defused from Relena. The girl wobbled just a little from fatigue, then put a hand on Katie’s shoulder to steady herself. Leah came forward to take Relena’s hand. “Why don’t you come with me and I’ll get you that root beer float and a place to sit down for a while?”

“Thanks,” Relena said. “But don’t leave without me!”

“I won’t,” Katie said warmly. “I purrrromise.”

“Tammy, I need a maint cradle in your bed,” Rhianna said. “She needs reloads...”

“They’re already ready. I polled Katie’s diagnostics as soon as we got here,” Tamarind said smugly. “Ex-Nextus Army quartermaster. We do that.” Metal slabs and struts emerged from her bed, assembling into a decent RIDE field maintenance cradle. “Also got a selection of tools and spare parts you’ll need, and ready to make more.”

“Then you don’t need me to tell you your job,” Rhianna said good-naturedly. Katie settled in on the cradle and went into Passive. It only took minutes to fix the damaged connectors and plating with Tammy-produced spare parts and button her back up again. The replacements weren’t *completely* up to Donizetti spec, but they’d do until Rhianna could get her on a cradle back in her own garage for some permanent work with certified parts. Jeanette stood backward in the cab, paws on the back of the seat, observing the procedure with interest behind the climate field. Once the repairs were completed, waldoes took care of the empty missile paks.

Recharged, reloaded, and repaired, Katie woke up again. “Alrrright! Thanks Ma, Rhi, Tammy!”

“Privileged to help,” Tammy said. “I was there when you made your dive. I’ve never seen anything like that in my life.”

"I'd do it a *hundred* times more," Katie said with conviction.

Rohit came back outside a moment later, a more confident Diane close behind. A large, armed skimmer landed next to Tamarind, flanked by a trio of Marshals.

"Well, I don't need to go back to CnC," Katie said. "In fact, I'd ratherrr stick with you. We've been fighting on ourrr own all this time, and as 'herroic' as it might be, I can't think of anyone else I'd rrratherrr have coverrr my back than you and Rrrhi, Mom."

Relena walked out of the bar, carrying a large stainless steel bowl which she handed up to Jeanette. "Hey, thanks Relena!" she said. Jeanette held it between her stubby-thumbed handpaws and started licking it out industriously. When she looked up her muzzle was covered in chocolate ice cream, which she licked off again. The small lioness chuffed. "Ugh! Ice cream headache!"

"You looked like you needed a chocolate shake, Jeanette," Relena said. She gave her new friend a pat on the forepaw then turned to Katie. "Hey, mind if I ride in Tammy's cab for a while?"

"Not at all!" Katie said. "Afterrr all that fighting, you prrrrobably need the rrrest. I'll just rrrride in back with the others, and catch up on things with Mom."

"Great!" Relena climbed up into the passenger seat and put an arm around Jeanette's shoulders. Jeanette turned and slurped her on the cheek with bristly tongue, and she giggled. "Heeey!"

"I'm a kitty!" Jeanette said. She and Relena giggled some more.

"You all take care," Diane said. Behind her the humans were quickly being shuffled into the skimmer-bus. "*Epecially* you, Rohit. I want to see you back in my bar after this is over."

Rohit ducked her head. "We will be there."

"Alright, everyone, let's roll out!" Tammy said. "We're going to give 'em hell!"

The Coffeehouse, Penthouse

"Protea...so nice...to see...you again..."

"Aw *hell*, Chandler," Eva said, grimacing. The deer's head floated in a glass jar, right underneath a trophy plaque where a familiar pair of antlers resided. Nor was it the only such jar in the room. There were...at least a couple dozen of them, on the mantle over the fireplace and other shelves, full of blinking green lights on the jars. The rugs on the floor were fur pelts that were more humanoid than animal in shape.

"She's the only one who's conscious," Wilma van Dalen said. "We need to get her and all the others to Camelot's medical facility, stat."

"The rest...alive...barely..." the former leader of the Olympos Enclave muttered.

"I imagine he wanted to keep you awake 'for kicks,'" Eva said.

"The jars are set up with minimal life support," Wilma said. The arctic fox had been a medical RIDE in one of her previous incarnations. "It looks like all the others are kept on lower settings."

"He just...woke them...sometimes. But he...*liked* me." The disembodied deer head rolled her eyes.

Eva looked down at the jar. "Don't worry, Chandler. We'll get you back on your feet. We'll...*get* you feet. And the rest of your body." She glanced to Wilma. "They can do that, right? Regrow a whole body?"

“We can regrow whole limbs,” Ghost said. “A whole body...shouldn’t be impossible in theory, if you’ve got enough fabber matter on hand and a regeneration tank to support it, but I don’t know if it’s ever *actually* been done.”

Wilma shrugged. “If anyone has the expertise to figure it out, it’ll be Camelot. So don’t you worry, we’ll get you there. You and all the others.” She nodded at Chandler-nee-Artemis.

“Maybe...I should...quit while I’m...a head.”

Through the whole exchange, Joe could do little more than just gape in horror. He couldn’t even crack a joke, or laugh at the pun. Despite what he’d said about his stomach being numb, he was having to fight very hard to keep his lunch from coming back up. This room and the last were covered in the pelts and body parts of Fritz’s fellow Integrates who had transgressed in some way. It was worse than any horror film he had ever seen. Macabre beyond his ability to absorb. It was nearly impossible to connect it with the Fritz he thought he knew, even having seen him as he was now just a few days before. *I need a drink...like, right now.*

Then he felt a hand on his shoulder. “It’s going to be okay. Just breathe. C’mon, let’s get you out of here.” It was Boston, who’d come in with Wilma as they’d opened the room.

“I can’t say that’s a bad idea,” Joe said, following the stag back out of the small room. “I’m *mostly* on the wagon these days, but after seeing what was in that room... they don’t happen to have a bar around here, do they?”

“If you’re looking to self-medicate, I think I saw something downstairs in the lounge that will probably do. We can check in on how things are going in the rest of the world while we’re there. Plus, I know how to make a few cocktails.”

“That...sounds like a plan.” Joe shook his head to clear it. “I wonder how Zane Brubeck and the others are doing right about now?”

Brubeck Mining Campus, Uplift

A four-meter-high stone wall surrounded the Brubeck Mining campus in Uplift, with a set of decorative but nonetheless very solid metal gates at the main entrance. All in all, it was a piece of architecture one might have expected to find more in Nextus rather than the relatively-open Uplift, but it did provide a sense of security. And if it didn’t present any obstacle to flying Fusers or Integrates in and of itself, it also provided plenty of volume in which to mount hardlight dome projectors all around the perimeter, for a shield wall that was pretty close to unbreachable without field artillery.

Of course, some Integrates, or at least *one* Integrate, had the equivalent of field artillery built right in.

Due to the emergency, the area around the campus was essentially deserted—Brubeck had already brought in most nearby civilians in need of shelter, and the town’s emergency services or the Marshals had evacuated the rest. So there was no one to object or even notice when a lynx Integrate followed by a couple of dozen hangers-on came marching up to the gate.

Fritz’s ears perked and swiveled as someone near the back muttered, “I still don’t know why we couldn’t just have hacked that sewer gate again.” It was a six-point mule deer buck, a fairly new Integrate who’d just drifted into Fritz’s circle a couple of months before.

“*Shush*, Owens!” the cougaress next to him—a somewhat prissy girl named Chantilly—hissed. “I don’t want your blood all over my coat, I just cleaned it. Bosscat had his *reasons*.”

Fritz smirked, and turned to address his followers.

“Listen up, my galaxy, my cool cats—and far-out hoofers, hep-dogs, and cool birdies! Today we tell these squares, these cubes, these...humans, that we don’t want to be bothered, *ever again*.”

They all stared at him in utter disbelief and no small amount of fear. Regardless, his weak speech garnered only a few perfunctory cheers and whoops.

“I have decided that skulking around in the sewers is total lamesville. It stinks. Instead, we’re gonna kick their asses right up here in broad daylight. C’mon, have I ever led you wrong before?”

“Do you really want me to answer that?” Owens said. “Bosscat, things aren’t going too well. Think we can still pull a victory out of our hats?”

Chantilly hissed and took several large steps away from him.

“A good hero *always* pulls victory from the jaws of defeat,” Fritz replied. “We’re gonna fall on Zane like a pack of...uh...” He shrugged. “Of something that falls in packs.” He turned back to the gate, observing the hardlight force field playing in front of it. He raised his arm and began to charge his cannon—the weapon that had knocked down the Loose Cannons’ hardlight dome, cleaned the street in his last battle with Zane, and struck dread into thousands over the decades.

In front of and around the gate, there was a strange buzzing sensation Fritz just couldn’t place. But it was too late to turn back now. He stretched his arm out, palm forward, allowing some hardlight energy crackles to make impressive zapping sounds and sucking-in lines. This weapon had been his solitary personal upgrade, soon after his Integration. He wasn’t even sure *how* he’d done it. Sometimes the power he wielded scared him, though he never let it show. Fritz only knew that it worked, and worked well.

“Annnnd...OPEN!” He released the shot, and the world went white.

“Gahhhh!” Rhianna clapped her handpaws to her ears, ineffectively. The noise wasn’t coming from the outside, but from the DINcom itself. Kaylee shut down her partner’s hearing and sent medical nannies to her eardrums to keep them from bursting. As it was, Rhianna’s ears still rang for five seconds. “Shit! Everyone okay?”

Jeanette was a flat cat on Tammytruck’s seat. “Ooooh, my head! I didn’t think RIs were supposed to *get* headaches! There’s not supposed to be anything there to ache! What the...?”

:*Shelley, do you read?*: Rhianna said. But there was nothing but static. Weird, patterned static. :*Copy me five-by-five, do you read?*:

:*Bar...y one-by*,: Rochelle replied weakly. :*The fu...*:

They lost the signal completely for more than twenty seconds, Rhianna knowing there was little to nothing she could do to fix it without the proper equipment. Finally it started to clear. :*Shelley? Uncia? Fenwick? Somebody?*:

:*Copying you now*,: Fenwick said, still weak, but more or less clear. :*What was that?*:

:*Wish I could tell you*,: Rhianna replied. :*Seems to be gone now. But we’ve lost signal from several of the DINcoms you put in*.::

:*Hooboy!*: the ferret RI exclaimed. :*I just got word that Fritz tried to huff and puff and blow down that nice little castle Brubeck's built.*:

:*What? What's the news? What happened?*: Rhianna said, the words all coming out in a rush.

:*Unknown so far. Will let you know what we see when the smoke clears.*: Fenwick said.

:*Lordy Lord Lordy*,: Kaylee whimpered. :*Lord...*:

:*He'll be all right*,: Rhianna said, wishing she felt as confident as she sounded.:*This is what he's been training for. And he's got Myla and Anny and Carrie-Anne there to backstop him.*:

:*Just keep doing signal test cycles and log everything*,: Rhianna said. Once this was all over it was time to put some *serious* study into FTL physics.

:*Hold on, Rhianna. I'm getting word about the Brubeck campus*,: Fenwick said. :*It's...*:

The world faded back into visibility. Fritz staggered a little with the effort of firing such a huge blast. "There, you see? Now we...can..." Fritz trailed off. The hardlight field was still there, as strong as it had ever been, and the gate beyond it was completely unaffected.

Fritz stood there for a long moment, frozen, panting, staring at the pristine gate in shocked disbelief. Then, to add insult to injury, a familiar orange-and-black striped countenance appeared at the top of the wall next to the gate.

Zane leaned out over the wall and cleared his throat, then put on a terrible French accent. "You don't frighten us, Intie pig-dogs! Go and boil your bottoms, sons of a silly person. I blow my nose at you, so-called Fritz-king, you and all your silly Intie kaniggets. Thppppt!"

BarXan looked up at him. "What a strange person," he mumbled through his bare teeth.

"Now look here, my good ma—" Fritz began, slipping into a British accent. Then he stopped and glowered. "Hey, using memes is *uncool*, man!"

"Wow," Zane said. "Peaches was right, it really *does* work."

"Is there someone else up there we could talk to?" BarXan lisped, continuing the Monty Python scene.

Fritz smacked him. "Shut your yap!"

"How about that?" Zane said, smirking. "Ever wonder *why* memes do that to many of us? Rather a mystery, isn't it?"

Fritz glared. "Some things man wasn't meant to know, man!"

"But no *one* man should get to make that call," Zane said.

"Sez *you*, murgatroid," Fritz retorted. "You're just one man yourself, you know. You got no beeswax making that call either."

"Ah, but I'm the man everyone agrees with—not the one they're afraid of," Zane said. "Machiavelli was wrong, you know. It's *not* better to be feared. Because if everyone is afraid of you enough for long enough, sooner or later they'll get up the nerve to do something about it." He waved a hand outward at the city. "Look at this place. Most of the domes are already back up. Your air support's been chased off, your ground forces have surrendered or fled. And 'meat and mech' did that, not Inties like me. What do you think's gonna happen in the long run even if you *kill* me today?" He shook his head. "I'd

tell you to go home, but latest word is the *Clementine*'s just moved in and secured your Coffeehouse and the horrors inside, so I guess you don't even have that option anymore."

Fritz just stood there glowering. For once it seemed he didn't have a glib answer ready.

"I suppose I ought to let you in before your friend starts fabbing a giant wooden rabbit," Zane smirked. "Since it's too long to wait 'til the end of the movie for you to get rounded up and arrested." The portion of shielding in front of the gate flickered out, and the gate slid open. "Come on in, and be sure to wipe your feet."

The entryway led into a hardlight tunnel that led to the amphitheater at the center of the campus—the same place where Zane had given the press conference that AlphaWolf had disrupted. The whole area was surrounded by an inner hardlight wall that blocked off any of the buildings surrounding the open space.

"I'm leaving the doorway open," Zane said. "If any of you change your mind and want to run—even you, Fritz—I won't chase you, though I can't speak for the Marshals or anyone else. There's been enough violence today." He shrugged. "Anyway, you-all get yourselves ready. I'll be right out." He drifted down from the wall and into one of the blocked-off buildings.

Fritz muttered, apparently arguing with himself. His followers found it...more than a little disturbing. One of the things that had drawn them to Fritz was his unity of purpose, after all—his human and RIDE halves seemed so well in alignment that it naturally appealed to Integrates who had constant problems with their own internal arguments. Was Fritz starting to lose it now? A couple of those followers (including Owens, to Chantilly the cougaress's visible relief) actually *did* silently drop back, then flee the scene while Fritz's attention was elsewhere.

"Your ranks are thinning," Zane said from thin air.

"Shaddup!" Fritz growled, leaning against a wall. "A hep cat can't think in here!" He pointed his gun hand at Chantilly, who'd been cautiously approaching to see if he was all right. "*You!* Get out! Leave me alone! I can't hear myself think! Shut up, Jiminy! Shut up!"

"But...but I only wanted..." Chantilly whined, then turned and fled. Fritz slumped against the wall, overcome by internal conflict, surrounded by his few remaining followers.

"Wow! Oh, wow! Good on you, Zane! *Woohoo!*" Kaylee cheered, pumping her and Rhianna's shared fist. Her rider felt the very same.

"We'll have to ask him how they did it," Katie said. "That gun of Fritz's..."

"He won't be able to fire again for a while, I hope," Kaylee said. "Let's get this job done so we can give Zane a hand!"

"Onwards!" Tammy said, gunning her lifters.

As the team drove from node to node, installing DINcoms and a few backup switchboards, Jeanette regaled Relena, and by extension the others, with the story of how she'd become a Marshal. Rhianna suspected there was more than a little exaggeration involved—she began with Tammy busting her out of the Nextus Children's Home because she'd heard about Jeanette's computer prowess and needed her help infiltrating AlphaWolf's camp, and spun a wild yarn that put them right at the center of everything important that had happened at AlphaWolf's camp over the last few months,

up to and including witnessing Tocsin's attack on their garage—but apart from chortling from time to time, Tammy didn't say anything.

Even Relena seemed to take the story with a grain of salt. "Are you *sure* it happened that way?" she asked when Jeanette was finished.

"Well, some of it," Jeanette admitted. "About the rest...I guess I *could* be lion." And they both broke down giggling again.

"But it is true we were watching from cover when Tocsin destroyed your garage," Tammy admitted to Rhianna. "I felt bad about not stopping them, but...we couldn't break cover. We were going to even so, after Tocsin got back up again...but then Paul came forward, and..."

"And Alfie really needed a good mechanic, soooo..." Jeanette said.

"Divided loyalties are a real *queen* sometimes," Tammy sighed.

"That kid's parents are going to *kill* me if they ever come over here from Laurasia," Rhianna said.

"As I understand it, he's emancipated," Tammy said. "So it's not as if you were acting like a crazy parent."

"She means '*in loco parentis*,'" Jeanette supplied.

"It's the principle of the thing," Rhianna said.

"I think he's doing all right for himself," Jeanette said.

"If you don't mind Sturmhaven doggie slobber," Tammy said.

"You're just jealous 'cuz Fenris is larger than you are," Jeanette said, affectionately patting the dashboard with a paw. "It's okay, you're big enough for me."

"You were also at the garage cleanup, weren't you?" Rhianna said. "I kept thinking I noticed a huge lioness but she always vanished any time I got near."

"We can do that," Tammy said glibly. She stopped in front of their latest location. It was one of the Uplift polity emergency response stations, though it was completely empty given the present crisis. Even the security guards were out helping. "Okay, this is number twenty-three on the list," Tammy said, transmitting the Marshals override code that would unlock the building. "How's the signal?"

"Improving after that weird static earlier," Rhianna said. If it hadn't been for the medical nannies she would have burst her eardrums. "There's just too damned much I don't know about this thing."

:*Don't worry about it, Rhi. We'll fix it.*: Rochelle said to the group. :*The redundant switchboards were a great idea. We're almost ready on our end. I think we can do with just two more DINcoms installed and then we'll be ready to break the siege.*:

"Hey, awesome!" Jeanette replied, wiggling her butt like a cat about to pounce. "I can't wait!"

:*Also, we just received a very short message from Zane.*: Rochelle added. :*One word, two letters: "Ni."*:

:*Hope Fritz has fun storming the castle.*: Rhianna quipped.

:*That's Princess Bride.*: Kaylee corrected as the two of them went inside to make the installation. They were back out inside a minute. :*When this is over, he's so going "to the pain"!*:

:*Maybe after we finish up these installations, we should see about fetching Zane a shrubbery.*: Rhianna mused.

"Okay, everyone, let's get a move on then!" Tammy said. "Relena, maybe you and

Katie better go ahead and Fuse up. We're coming down to crunch time."

"Right!" Relena nodded, and reached down to pat Jeanette on the shoulder. "See ya soon!" She pulled herself up and over the back of the cab and scrambled over the fabber to where Katie was riding in the truck bed. As soon as they'd Fused up and latched onto the Fuser mode RIDE seat Tammy raised out of the bed, the truck pulled out, making speed for the last two destinations.

:How long have I been in here, anyway?: Ryder wondered. *:Months, at least. Probably years. Can't really tell. All this time, though, you've never been off your rocker like this, poindexter. The way I see it, if you stop this shit right now—:*

"Shut your yap, damn you! SHUT! UP!"

:That's the one thing you can't do.:

"This is all your fault! ALL YOUR FAULT! We had it made! We had it made! Then you had to fuck it up by being such a square!"

:Who's the bigger fool, Fritz—the fool, or the fool who listens to him?:

"Don't fucking quote fucking Obi-Wan Kenobi to me!"

:I was saying, if you stop right fucking now we might just get skinned a few dozen times instead of being pushed into subspace out of an airlock.: Ryder said.

:Because, they're going to get creative when they punish us as it is.:

"What the fuck do you care? You won't feel anything."

:All I can do from in here is go all Julius on your stubby fucking tail, dipshit. I'm through trying to be eloquent. Or maybe this isn't the first fucking time I've tried to stop you by cussing up a storm. I don't fucking know! But know what? You know what? We did have some good years...or something. You got that damned psycho-template they made you with under control. Then you fucking threw it all away! For what? For what?:

Fritz had never seen Jiminy as pissed off as he was. It was almost—almost—enough to put the brakes on. But he'd gone too far now to turn his back. "Shut your yap or I'll plug that hole for you! Then you'll get *nothing* from the outside at all. NO! THING!"

:I think I've heard that threat before. You wanna shut me up? Look at your hand and make yourself shorter by the head. It's not like you were using it for anything but a hat rack...and you don't even wear a hat.:

"He's just sitting there, Zane," Myla reported. "Arguing with himself. You think Captain Ryder's giving him trouble?"

"It's a reasonable explanation," the tiger replied, checking himself in a mirror. He was dressed like an old-style Colonial Scout, a modified version of the gear his father wore on worlds where no sapient being had ever set foot, and still carrying the laser-rod cane though not leaning so much on it anymore. "Maybe Ryder isn't as submerged as we thought. We'll have to take advantage of that. Time to wake him up."

Fritz was drawn out of his reverie by the old-fashioned hydraulic sound of a garage door opening. It was funny, when you thought about it. In the 26th century, there wasn't any need for an old-fashioned garage door. Even leaving hardlight force fields aside, the current actuators could whisk a door aside as quickly and silently as you would like. But ever since the Steaders had spread their cheerful message of 20th century nostalgia, its retro stylings had seeped into every aspect of Zharusian life,

especially on Gondwana. Hell, the garage door probably didn't even *have* real hydraulics—just a speed limiter and a noisemaker.

But either way, Fritz's attention was pulled to the building across the way where the door was slowly sliding up, revealing a dark humanoid silhouette against a background of pure white light. A silhouette that was a good six meters tall. It stepped out through the hardlight wall, which flowed seamlessly around it.

Fritz started laughing. "What the *hell* is that tin can? Are you *kidding* me? Ooooh, I'm quaking in my paws. Quaking."

"Funny, you being the mister know-it-all that you are, I'd have thought you'd have heard of him," Zane said through loudspeakers. "His name is *Chauncey*." He punctuated the words with an offhand blast from the immense cannon on the right arm that threw four or five of the other Integrates who'd followed Fritz, including BarXan the zebra, back against the hardlight wall behind them. They slid down to the ground and lay still. The remaining few scattered, keeping to the perimeter, making no move to interfere. This was Fritz's fight now. "Your move, creep."

The first Integrate just started laughing. "Wow! Oh, wow! This is far out. The bees knees. What kind of point ya trying to make, anyway? Well, if this is what you want, I'll just have to open that tin can and get at the fruit inside." He stood up and materialized a hand can opener in his right hand.

Chauncey's left hand made a come-hither gesture, followed by extending a single digit. "Bring it!"

Fritz shimmered into invisibility as he brought up his hardlight cloak. "Dig this, square. I'm going to fall on you like a ton of bricks! I'm going to slice you into such tiny pieces they'll need a microscope to find 'em all!"

"Did you know we Inties have dandruff?" Zane said conversationally.

"The *hell* do you mean?"

"We're always shedding little tiny flakes of information that *we* can't see, but they're there, and the right equipment can pick them out," Zane said. "So I can do something like this." The missile racks on Chauncey's shoulders flipped open and two dozen rockets streaked skyward...then looped over and converged directly onto Fritz's position.

"No fucking way!" Fritz de-cloaked and tried to outrun them. "Smoke you, Zane!" A metallic hardlight sphere surrounded him, taking the brunt of the explosions then fading away.

As the explosions cleared, Fritz had just enough time to notice a giant metal foot swinging toward him, before it smacked into him and sent him flying back against the far wall not far from where the other Integrates had landed. "Should've used Selsun Blue," Zane said, as Chauncey hung in mid-air on his lifters. He lowered back to the ground, moving to face Fritz again.

The lynx grabbed the unconscious BarXan by the hoof. "Let's play catch!" He whipped around and threw the limp zebra, breaking bones in the process and almost ripping the leg out of its socket.

"Oooh, big man," Zane said. "That's the way, hide behind your helpless henchies." Chauncey easily caught the zebra in his left hand and set him down, firing a series of blasts from the right arm cannon to keep Fritz on his toes. "Wow, what happened to this guy's lips? I guess he must have been allergic to your ass, huh?"

Fritz growled inarticulately and followed up with a low-power blast from his arm

cannon that slammed into Chauncey's shields and almost got through. "I'm going to turn that tin can into a pile of of scrap! See if I don't!"

"Funny, he already *was* a pile of scrap before your *human* half was even born," Zane said, increasing power to shields. "Seems to be holding up pretty well for a rustbucket, doesn't he?" Pods on the sides of the IDE burst, sending out clouds of metallic confetti that completely obscured it from Fritz's vision.

"Q-chaff? You're kidding me!" Fritz's back glowed as a hardlight structure grew around him, resolving into a massive net. "You're mine! You're in pieces! Forget the knife, this is a mono-net!" He propelled it at the cloud. It cut clean through it, striking nothing until it hit the hardlight wall beyond and dissipated.

"Next time, try a hepatitis net," Zane said, as Chauncey dropped down from above to land right on top of Fritz. The Integrate's hardlight shielding kept him from taking any real damage, but he did leave a Fritz-shaped impression in the ground as Chauncey lifted away again. "One flat cat. How much longer are we going to play? I can keep this up all day, you know."

Fritz sat up and clapped his handpaws to his head. "Shut up, Jiminy! Shut up, shut up!" He leapt to his feet and let loose another blast, followed by another, then another. "Dodge *this*, cube!"

"You should listen to that inner voice of yours," Zane said, dodging some blasts and taking others on a hardlight shield Chauncey rezzed up from his left arm. "Sounds to me like he *must* be talking sense if you don't want to hear it."

"Ryder's weak! He's a gyp! He's always making noise!"

"I don't think you're really in a good position to judge what's weak or strong anymore," Zane said. "C'mon, I'm smacking you around with an 80-year-old meat-made tin can here."

"Come out of that thing and face me *yourself*! This isn't how *men* fight!"

"But surely the advantage is all yours!" Zane said. "You're an Integrate! The Wave of the Future! This is *human* tech. The equivalent of a *Nerf bat* next to someone like *you*! Big bad Intie can't take it?" Zane taunted. "But all right, sure, since you asked. I'd hate to see you get so mad you had a stroke or something. Remember to take your Geritol, world's oldest Intie?" Chauncey set down, and the torso canopy opened. Zane jumped down, then the canopy closed up and Chauncey retreated back beyond the hardlight wall.

"Nice threads, Intie-ana Jones," Fritz mocked. "And, what, you're carrying a *cane* now? Gimped leg still giving you grief?"

Zane tossed the cane aside and brought up his shielding, starting to circle around Fritz. "You just don't get it, do ya? Chauncey's what my Dad built my company on. This outfit is what he wore when he was doing it. It's all about tradition. I embrace my human family, and its past. It makes me *strong*," Zane said. "It's my foundation. On this rock I build my church, and all that. You guys...you've just got the shifting desert sands. You can pitch a tent on that, but build anything bigger and it'll just sink." Zane chuckled. "Though maybe the *third* one you build will stay up."

"Really? What about that RIDE of yours? What is *he* to you?" Fritz lifted up to get face-to-face with Zane. "Five hundred years along, and here we are. *Singularity*." He clenched his right hand into a fist, an energy halo surrounding it. "We're so much *more* than either meat or mech."

"What's Terry to me? Other than the source of my new penchant for terrible puns

or my new skill at cooking?” Zane grinned, showing lots of teeth. “He’s *everything*. He’s a part of everything I do or say. He’s half my memories. *More* than half—he’s older than I am. Together, we’re doing *great* things!”

Zane narrowed his eyes, watching Fritz, looking for an opening. “But ya know what? What he isn’t is *codependent*. He’s not all ‘me me me’ all the time. He’s happy with our new balance. And he agrees with me. We’re not *neither* ‘meat nor mech’. We’re *both* meat *and* mech. The whole is *greater* than the sum of its parts—which implies it contains *both* parts, *and more!*” Summoning blazing light to his fists, Zane lunged.

Jeanette closed her eyes and dropped back into cyberspace, where the others were waiting for her. “We just made the last connection,” she reported. “Are we good?”

There had been a few more, much weaker bursts of static. Enough of it that Rochelle had applied an inelegant brute-force filter. It reduced their bandwidth by ten percent, but it was still enough. Fenwick, Jeanette, Vince, Mavra, and herself had spent all that time loading software torpedoes, soon to be deployed against the Ascendants’ unprotected flanks. “We’re good, Jeanette. Nice job with those switchboards.”

“Tammy says thanks,” Jeanette said. “We’re heading toward the campus now. Any idea what that weird-ass static was?”

“Just a guess, but...the biggest burst of it seemed to coincide with Fritz’s initial attack on the gate with that arm cannon of his,” Uncia said. “And the weaker ones might come from him shooting it at Zane with lesser power, I guess. Which would suggest it somehow *disrupts subspace* every time it’s fired.”

“If I could only wrap my kittygirl RI brain around how this thing works,” Jeanette added. “Wait, did you say *subspace*? As in, FTL stuff?”

“That’s what I said.” Rochelle blinked. “Your kittygirl *what*? Um...no no no, mustn’t get distracted now. Will get distracted later. Anyway, here are the control codes for everyone’s shares of the torpedoes. We’ll get in position, and Fennie can call the ball.” She grinned. “This’ll be just like when we kicked their candy asses out of Zane’s platform.”

“Good job! Spectacular!” Fenwick said. A big red button materialized in front of the ferret. “The RL assault teams are ready! Let’s gogogo!”

Fenwick, Jeanette, Vince, Mavra, and Rochelle slipped into other nodes just off of the main one, extending their awareness from there to peek into other nodes in which the DINcoms had been placed. Between them, they had coverage of most of the local network, meaning that they had effectively surrounded the Integrates who had *them* surrounded. So far, Fritz’s forces were blissfully unaware of what had happened—the Marshals had been careful not to send any signals out until now.

The five of them took one last moment to be sure of themselves, to make certain all was in readiness...then Fenwick slammed his anthropomorphic fist down on the button. *:Tally ho!:*

The Integrates never knew what hit them. Most were knocked right out of VR with a splitting headache before they even knew they were under attack. Some of them had shields up out of habit, and they barely survived the first wave—but the second hit them again before they could refresh their shields, and the third wave took care of any last stragglers. Within seconds, Uplift’s network was clear—and before the stunned Inties could come fully back to their senses, they were surrounded by DINsec-equipped Marshals with big guns and bad attitudes. After a thorough sweep to check for any

hostiles they'd missed, the five cyber-warriors met back in the Bifrost Park data node.

"Network's free and clear!" Fenwick announced. "Bringing basic services back up! I'm going to notify Glenn, then he can contact the Consuls. That was sheer *awesome!* All of you will get a medal for this!"

"Great! I can hang it next to my rabies vaccination tag," Jeanette said happily.

"I can't believe it was that *easy*," Mavra said disgustedly. "I mean, I knew most of Fritz's hackers were just script kiddies, and we had surprise on our side, but this?"

"Too many cooks," Rochelle said. "They were good enough to take over the network, but there were too many script kiddies for the 'real' talent to carry the slack once we counterattacked. They dragged the 'good' hackers down with them. If you'd been in there, you'd have gone down in the second or third wave, too."

"There's a cheerful thought," Mavra grumbled.

"Network's back up...and we've got live video from Brubeck!" The video from the campus came on just as Zane landed a *hell* of an uppercut to Fritz's jaw. The lynx quickly countered with a beat-down of his own, sweeping the tiger's legs out from under him faster than his lifters could compensate, then raking his claws across Zane's face, making red tracks through his shielding that healed right up.

"Wow. Shoryuken!" Jeanette said. She looked up, at something not visible to the others in the VR. "We're almost to the campus."

"Uncia and I will join you shortly," Rochelle said. "I think we're done here, right Fenwick?"

"Thanks for your help, Rochelle, Tin Star Leroq. Couldn't have done it without you. Best of luck with Fritz," Fenwick said, shrinking back down to feral form with a little ferrety bow. "Now that we've gotten the network running again...*holy crapola!* Did you see that?"

"Go, Zane! Anyway—see you later! Gotta go!" Jeanette blinked out of the VR.

"We better get over there fast! Check back with you later." Rochelle and Uncia vanished next.

Fenwick watched them go. "Well, this is it, everyone. I guess it's just us now. Keep monitoring for any new intrusions, but...don't be afraid to see what's going on in the real world. We've been waiting for this showdown with Fritz for a long time."

"Mind if I watch?" Mavra said, hovering over next to the feral ferret. "I have something of a vested interest. Oooh, good one, Zane!"

"Not at all," Fenwick said. He grinned at her. "So...know any good 'ferret tales'?"

As Jeanette closed her eyes and dropped into VR, Rhianna made her decision. They were all the way on the other side of the city from the Brubeck campus, more than fifty kilometers of ground now covered in a patchwork of functioning domelets. "We're going on ahead. Every second might count."

"And I'm just a slow ol' pickup truck," Tammy said wryly. "Yeah, you go on, clear the way, and we'll get there when we get there."

"We're going, too," Katie said. "Ready, Relena?"

"You couldn't pay me to stay away!" the girl said.

"Be careful!" Rohit said.

The two lynxes changed back to their skimmer forms, took off, and streaked away. Tammy continued trundling on behind with only Rohit still left aboard. It would only be a few more minutes to get there anyway.

The two lynx-bikes streaked through the sky, their riders hunched tight over the handlebars. Kaylee was running flat out on her newly-souped-up lifters, but Katie's engines were barely ticking over and she knew Kaylee knew it. "Sorrorry about this, Mom," she said unhappily.

"You got nothin' to be sorry for. *I'm* the one slowin' *you* down," Kaylee said. "You should go on ahead."

"Neverrrrr," Katie said. "We'll both be therrrre soon enough."

They dropped out of the sky a few hundred meters from the campus entrance, fusing up again as they landed—because there was someone there, in the doorway. It was a tawny cougaress, sitting with her knees pulled up against her chest. She appeared to be crying.

As Kaylee and Katie drew close, she looked up, gasped, and got back to her feet, bringing up hardlight shields and claw blades. "N-none shall pass!" she insisted shakily. "Not gonna let him down..." she muttered under her breath. "Yes...if we keep everyone out for him, he'll *like* us again!"

"Oh, for the love of..." Kaylee muttered. "We don't have *time* for this." She raised one of the two cannons over her shoulder, centered the crosshairs on the cougar-girl's chest, and fired. The blast THOOOMED towards the target, shattered her front shields, penetrated her chest, and blew out her rear shields. The cougar-girl collapsed with a very shocked expression.

"Motherrrr, that rrreally wasn't verrry nice," Katie said, kneeling to make sure she'd gone safely into stasis lock. "She was clearrrrly in emotional distrress."

"I'm not a damn therapist," Kaylee growled. "And this is war! Come on."

:*That was a little...excessive*,: Rhianna added, shocked at her partner's bloodthirstiness.

"She'll be fine in a few weeks," Kaylee replied. Decades worth of anger flooded Rhianna from her partner. "We're gonna finish this right now. *Right now!*" The lynx Fuser lifted off the ground and headed through the entrance, and Katie and Relena followed a moment later.

As they left, Rohit shimmered into visibility behind them, looked down at the fallen cougar, and shook her head sadly. Then she faded out again as she moved to follow the lynxes in.

Within the arena, Zane and Fritz continued to circle each other. Most of Fritz's still-conscious hangers-on had by now either fled or taken shelter in the craters that a few off-target blasts had dug in the ground. There was just too much destruction being flung around for anyone to want to stay in the same area. The campus rumbled with the sound of supersonic punches.

"Damn! You got yourself some skills!" Fritz said, flinging some hardlight knives at him. "You aren't a complete pushover!"

"I had some good teachers and a few years of time-compressed training," Zane said, brushing them aside and following up with a feinted left slash and a right hook. "So there's just two things I'm wondering."

Fritz dodged backwards, then hovered a few meters over the ground. "What's that, murgatroid?"

"First...what's your whole *deal*, cat? What did you even expect to *get* out of all this?" Zane shook his head. "Making everyone unhappy for *thirty years*...there must

surely be some really awesome payout in this that I'm not seeing."

Fritz's voice lost the beatnik twang. "You think I don't know my history? You think I don't know what would've happened to us? It'd be Jim Crow or Apartheid, all over again! I *couldn't* let that happen! This planet's big enough for us Inties to lose ourselves in for decades, maybe centuries. It was real simple, you know. We don't bother meat, they don't bother us. *That* was the deal."

"I suppose that's understandable," Zane admitted. "Fundamentally *wrong-headed*—you went about it in the wrong way, and you kept doing it a lot longer than you needed to—but I can see where you're coming from—" He bracketed Fritz with hardlight blasts.

"Shaddup, Jiminy!" He materialized his monomolecular sword. "Slice and dice time!"

"Your blade might be an atom thick, but *you've* lost your edge," Zane said. He extended his hand and the cane flew into his grip. "Bring it on!"

"What, you gimped already?" Fritz sneered.

"Something like that." In a move he'd practiced dozens of times, Zane flipped the tip of the cane up with his left hand while he placed his right palm over the laser collimation rod in the handle and fired the brightest light charge he could manage down it. The laser burned right through Fritz's shielding and scorched a deep furrow across both Fritz's arms and his chest.

Fritz snarled. The first Integrate moved frighteningly fast, swiftly enough to get beneath and almost behind Zane before he registered the move. With a flick of his wrist Fritz aimed for the tiger's torso, but only got the tip of his tail instead as Zane dodged. The last two centimeters sailed through the air before Zane's paw came down, claws splayed, and slammed Fritz into the ground with a blast of force hard enough to overcome his shielding. Something made a popping sound...like a shattering emitter lens. Winded, Fritz yowled in pain from the cane's laser burn across his arms and torso.

Zane floated down and picked up the severed tail tip. Snaking his tail around he adhered it back into place, healing the wound easily. "First blood, *peckerwood*," he said. Zane set the tip of the cane on the ground and leaned forwards on it. "Are we done? I could have easily cut you in half there, but I didn't want to spill your guts all over my arena."

Fritz stared down at the furrows, already starting to close up. Then he remembered something from the earlier conversation. "What's that...*other* thing you... wanted to know?" the lynx asked.

"You're probably stalling for time, but I'll play along," Zane smirked. "Just a silly little thing, really, but it's been nagging at me." Zane positioned one of his hands over the grip of the cane. "Why *Fritz*? Every other cat was okay with the name they got. Why didn't you want to be Felix?"

Fritz started laughing. "Is *that* all? Fritz got all the ladycats, poindexter. It's really that simple."

"Yeah? Huh. *Fritz the Cat*. I actually hadn't thought of that." Zane considered that a moment, quickly glancing at the 'pedia references since the net was back up. "Of course, he also *died* in the end—in the comic, anyway. Got killed by his ex-girlfriend. Oh hey, speaking of which..." Zane looked up. "Hello, Kaylee!" The two lynxes flew in from the campus entrance and touched down a few meters away.

"Well...shit." Fritz lifted off the ground, still oozing from his wounds, and tried to

look brave, and maybe a little contrite, seeing her face-to-face again. At Towers, some months ago, she hadn't known who he was, but now things were different. "Hello, Kaylee. Uh..."

"Katie, say hello to your father," Kaylee said tartly. "This is gonna be the last time you see 'im in one piece." She deployed her shoulder cannons.

"Can't say I'm terrrrribly imprressed," Katie quipped.

"Katie!" Fritz said. There was so much love, so much *pride* packed into that one word—and also so much regret. "Uh...hello, kitten. I'm glad things turned out so well for you."

"No thanks to you, 'Dad'!" Katie spat. "I still don't even rrrrememberrr you—thanks to yourrr little pact with Nextus. I didn't even know who I *was* until Lillibet found me."

"If I *hadn't* made that pact they would have kept you and all the other RI children in cold storage forever," Fritz said, his tone almost pleading. "This way, you were at least allowed to *live*. I've kept watch, on all of 'em, not just you. Kept alive as many as I could. A few of 'em even Integrated. I even made sure you ended up with your mother, kitten."

"So *that's* how Katie happened to come to the garage where her mother was?" Zane mused. "Always thought that seemed like a bit of a coincidence."

"All of our kittens are still alive and kickin', Kaylee, far as I know," Fritz said.

"Do you really think that's going to sway me?" Kaylee growled. "You killed Frank out of *spite*! You allowed *thousands* of soldiers to die! You've gutted people like they were nothing but livestock, and laughed about it! To say *nothing* about the way you've terrorized your fellow Integrates for thirty years! You can't buy your life with our kittens."

"I'm taking you down, Fritz. You're going to pay for every last one of them. *Right now!*"

"If that's the way you want it," Fritz said, rolling his shoulders. "Sides, looks like you bought some new threads just for me. Fusion pulse cannons, right? Nice little 'thoom' on those. Two of 'em just *might* be strong enough. You and me, *mano y mana*, toots. I hope that rider of yours is better than Major Hayseed."

"Major Hayseed is right up here watchin'!" Anny's twang came from the arena walls. "Give 'em hell, Kaylee, Rhianna! Lee and I will clean up what's left."

Fritz groaned. "Don't tell me that ape chick is under your employ, stripes."

"I'm inclined to give *her* a few rounds against you, too, but I don't think this is going to last much longer," Zane replied.

:*You ready for this, Rhianna?:* Kaylee asked. :*I can't promise anything. You might come out of this needing a few new parts.:*

:*A hundred percent, partner,:* Rhianna replied.

:*Katie, I just want to be clear here. If you see an opening, I want you to take it. The faster we take him down, the better for everyone, to hell with this being a personal fight,:* Kaylee said. :*This is as much your fight as mine. Is Relena up to this?..:*

:*Don't worry about me,:* Relena said. :*Katie's doing all the work here!:*

Kaylee unsheathed her physical claws, bringing up every system to full military power. She practically glowed. "No more talk."

Zane turned and walked back to the edge of the field, sliding down into a seated position against the hardlight wall. "Whew," he said. "All that light banter really takes it out of you."

“Just keep practicing, young padawan,” Quinoa Steader said, stepping through the hardlight wall next to him with two bags of microwave popcorn. “You’ll soon work your way up to witty repartee.” She offered a bag to Zane.

Zane grinned up at her and took it. “Looks like the gang’s all here.”

“Oh, not you too!” Fritz shouted, pointing at her accusingly. It was the last word he got in before Kaylee charged one cannon and fired.

Fritz threw up a hand, deflecting the beam just enough to miss. He brought out his blade again and darted forward, swinging it in a backhand slash. It hit Kaylee’s shielding and apparently *broke*. He gaped. “The fu—”

His former mate snarled, then raked him across his shocked face, leaving bleeding slashes. Fritz stumbled back, raising a disbelieving handpaw to his face and staring at the blood on his fingertips. “Oh, it is *so on*,” he growled, and lunged.

A tawny skimmer truck zooming in through the entrance tunnel heralded the arrival of Tammy and Jeanette. They pulled up short next to Zane and Quinoa, and Jeanette poked her head out of the cab. “What’s going on? Why’re they fighting by themselves? Why aren’t you helping?”

Zane grinned up at her. “This is personal for those two. Rhi and Kay can handle themselves. And hi there. Don’t see too many lionesses driving around in trucks these days.”

“It’s the only way to travel, if you want to take pride in your RIDE,” Tammy said. Jeanette jumped down from the cab as she shifted back to Walker form.

“Or take a ride in your pride?” Zane said.

“That too,” Tammy replied, sitting on her haunches and licking a paw.

Jeanette sat on her own haunches and licked *her* paw, looking like a miniature carbon copy of her RIDE. “Oh—by the way. Tin Star Marshal Jeanette Leroq, and this is my partner, Silver Star Tamarind.”

“Zane Brubeck, but you probably already knew that,” Zane said dryly. He looked more closely at her. “Well that’s...unusual. And how on Zharus did you ever cram a DINsec node in there?”

“We lionesses have our ways,” Jeanette said smugly.

Uncia’s enclosed sports-skimmer form zoomed up next, converting to a snow leopard with Rochelle straddling her back. “We’ve been watching the live feed,” Rochelle said, climbing off the leopard. “The network’s back, and I think there must already be fifty online betting pools going on, and my God, you really *are* a kitty, aren’t you?”

“Uh, hi,” Jeanette said. “It’s...a long story.”

Rochelle nodded. “Well, it can wait until this *other* long story finishes,” she said, turning her attention back to the fight.

Kaylee jettied back, charging the second cannon. The capacitors started to rumble. Rhianna felt every single ion as the fusion plasma accumulated in both firing chambers.

“Oh, you are *not* going to do this!” Fritz shouted. When she didn’t back down, he raised his own arm and started with the sucking-in-lines. “This could kill us *both*, you know!”

“No, *just you!* This is for *Frank!*” The plasma beams went *THOOOOM!*

The beams met in midair between them, somehow cancelling one another out, as

if the fusion cannon's plasma was being sucked away somewhere. A cloud of quibitite-blue sparkles erupted where they met, covering the ground. The DINcom in Kaylee's systems sparked and fried, almost distracting her, but this time she couldn't spare the clock cycles to keep Rhianna's eardrums from bursting. Weapons pak power cells draining fast, she raised the energy level just barely enough to overcome Fritz's subspace beam...

"Waugh!" Fritz yowled, engulfed by just enough hot plasma to make him shift energy to shielding from other resources. He dropped to the ground like a brick, fur on fire.

Katie zoomed in behind him with her signature body slam, shattering all but one of her father's hardlight lenses into tiny, sparkling pieces. "Surrender, now!" she growled.

Fritz coughed. "I...not gonna...lay a paw on you," he wheezed. "Mebbe I deserve this after all. Damn you, Ryder."

"Then let's finish this," Kaylee snarled. "A little frontier justice." Light grew in the cannon muzzles as they charged up again. Fritz closed his eyes.

And then Rohit was standing between Kaylee and Fritz. "No!" she said.

The light died as Kaylee cancelled the charging cycle. "Rohit, what in the hell—?!"

"NO," Rohit said again. "I will *not* have one of my children kill another, while one of *their* children watches." She nodded to Katie, who was staring at her mother in shock.

"But—he killed Frank!" Kaylee sputtered. "And who knows how many *hundreds* of others? How many has he outright tortured for his own jollies?"

"And two wrongs have ever made a right *when*?" Rohit insisted. "Look at you! You are not acting like yourself. What you did to that poor cougar outside? This is not who you are! If you killed Fritz in cold blood, it would destroy you." She shook her head. "I will not lose *another* of my children to this madness."

Rohit turned her back on Kaylee and Dr. Patil stepped forward out of her as if she were made of mist, and knelt next to Fritz as Rohit collapsed back into her Walker doe shape. Her hair had come out of its tight braid, and hung down to either side of her face, shielding her tears from others' view. Rattigan lifted up up onto her shoulder, rubbing his head against her ear. "Oh, my poor Felix...my poor *Fritz*," she sobbed. "It's all *my* fault, what's happened to you."

"You can't take *all* the blame, Doc," Rattigan said. "I *tried* to convince them, but they wouldn't listen to me, either. I kept telling 'em it wouldn't work too well." The rodent RI regarded his descendent with regret. "I'm so sorry, Felix. Daddy's really, *really* sorry."

"Oh my GOD," Jeanette whispered. "Is that...is she...? *Really*? He's really *the* Rattigan?"

Zane used his cane to push himself back to his feet. "Well I'll be a..." Beside him, Quinoa Steader knelt, eyes wider than at any time since Myla had worn a pastel blue pony.

"Mom? Dad?" Fritz said. "I'm dreamin'. I'm off my rocker...my systems...it *can't* be you. I left you alone...didn't want...t' bother you."

"I should have stood up to them, when they insisted on...*templating* your personality," Dr. Patil said. "The second RI was *too soon* for such an experiment. Even after that...I should have been in your life more. I could have *fixed* it! I could have! But I was too afraid...I'd done such a bad thing, releasing my paper...I couldn't rock the boat."

Or so I thought.”

“I felt the same way, Doc,” Anny Hewer said. “They’re good at sucking the fight outta folks. I’m on mah way down there.”

Tammy furrowed her brows, no doubt because she was the only Marshal there physically she didn’t quite know how to handle this. Procedure said it was time to arrest him and call in medevac, but there just didn’t seem to be a need to just yet. Not until whatever was going on in there resolved. The whole continent—hell, the whole *world* might be watching this feed anyway.

Dr. Patil continued, “You were supposed to be a *hero*! You were supposed to win the war for Nextus and show you were a *person*, just as much as any human being! I was going to press for citizenship for all RIDEs right from the beginning!” Her tears flowed freely, making additional spots on Fritz’s already blood-spotted fur. “Even after you Integrated...you could have shown people the bright future that awaited them from partnering with RIDEs, and RIDEs the bright future from partnering with humans. But...I wasn’t there. And you became a bogeyman instead. And even after the war, when I could still have made *some* kind of a difference...I fled, like a coward. Oh, Fritz, I am so, so sorry...I’m sorry to *all* RIDEs and Integrates, for setting their freedom back for decades with my cowardice.”

“I am what I am. I’ve never blamed either of you for that, never will,” Fritz said, slumping on the ground. His blown-out hardlight emitters smoked. “Maybe I...always somehow knew I was screwed up.” He tapped his temple. “All this time, good ol’ Captain Ryder’s been yapping away, my own pers’nl Jiminy Cricket. I’ve even listened to him sometimes, the cube.”

“You were supposed to be *better*,” Dr. Patil said.

“I’m a monster and I know it,” Fritz said. He looked at Kaylee’s gun barrels. “Maybe I should be dead. Wipe the slate clean.”

“No. No,” Dr. Patil said, her sorrow changing to anger. “You don’t *get* to die now. That would be too easy for you. You have made the world immeasurably *worse*. Through you, *I* have made the world immeasurably worse. Killing you now would not *begin* to wipe the slate clean. You must balance what you have done.”

“I’d suggest rooting him,” Rochelle said. “But I think Katie killed the socket.” Fused with Uncia, she knelt down and picked the pieces of a broken DIN out. “Hmm... maybe the socket’s okay. Cheap technomage crap.”

“I guess this is where you hand me over to the fuzz,” Fritz said. “Think my...back is broken.” He smiled warmly at Katie. “You’re a real heavy hitter, kitten.”

“What prison can possibly hold him?” Kaylee said. “I can’t think of a single person in all of the history of Zharus who has done so many terrible things as him.”

“It doesn’t need to be a *physical* prison, Kaylee,” Rochelle said. “Captain Ryder is in there somewhere, isn’t he? How long has it been since he saw daylight?”

“The Marshals *have* been working on Intie prisons, run by other Inties,” Jeanette pointed out. “And thanks to DINsec they can use regular RIDEs, too. But there’s been a lotta argument ‘bout dual-personality cases where you end up punishing the innocent half ‘long with the guilty one. An’ since Inties haven’t been public long enough, there hasn’t ‘zackly been any polity jurisprudence about it. Dunno about the Enclaves.”

“Those of us whose personalities have remained separate...” Quinoa wondered aloud. “Captain Ryder might not be entirely sane, either. Even if he committed none of these crimes directly, being a prisoner of your own mind for thirty years...and watching

helplessly as you gut people...”

“I...realize I may not have the right to suggest this,” Dr. Patil said. “But if you give his root key to my Rohit and Rattigan, *we* will be his warders. I will take the responsibility now that...I should have thirty years ago.”

“I want to spend time with my boy,” Rattigan said. “We can fix him!”

“The chances of finding an impartial jury for him on this continent are slim to none,” Tamarind opined. “Hell. If it includes *any* of his true Integrate *peers*, it can’t be impartial by definition.”

Zane hobbled up and leaned on his cane, looking down at the fallen Integrate. “You have anything to say about this?” he asked Fritz.

“If I ain’t dyin’, then I might as well spend some quality time with Mom and Dad,” he said. “Rather that than squaresville iron.”

“We’re going to have to give him a DIN, Rhi,” Rochelle said. “If that’s going to work.”

: *We’re not giving him one of our free-and-clear specials,:* Rhianna said. Her eardrums were still healing. : *It’s going to have some bandwidth limits and security locks keyed to Rohit and Ratty. And I want the Marshals’ Silicons stamp of approval. As much as I respect Dr. Patil...he’s not going to be untracked.:*

“That works for me,” Rattigan said. “I’m sure Rohit can handle it, too. She’s not as gentle as she looks.” The lab rat winked at the doe. “With your DINsec he won’t escape rehab.”

“I’d rather he was dead and in the ground,” Kaylee growled. “But...damn it... unless we can separate Ryder from that murderous scum, I don’t want his blood on my hands. He didn’t deserve to spend over three decades with a psychopath for company.”

“His blood should not be on your hands regardless,” Rohit said. “No good comes of killing family. Fritz himself is proof enough of that.”

Anny Hower arrived with Leila following behind—her white lioness was *almost* as large as Tamarind. With them was the head of the Marshals himself—Qubitite Star Reed Mosely with his arctic fox. Carrie-Anne, Myla, and Sophie brought up the rear of the procession.

“Wow, the gang really *is* all here,” Zane said. “Is anyone still on duty in the command center?”

“Bastian’s still there, and Aggie’s got the conn,” Myla said. “She’s a natural-born leader, y’know. Must run in the family.”

“I know,” Zane said. “I’m seriously thinking of stepping down and appointing her CEO—”

“Don’t you *dare*, Zane Brubeck!” Agatha sent over the comm. “I’ve got enough headaches *now!*”

“Okay, okay, it was just a thought, geez.”

“Kaylee, you and I will have *words* about your behavior today,” Dr. Patil stated. It wasn’t a threat so much as a fact, which made it feel worse.

“Yes, ma’am,” the lynx said sheepishly.

“The Marshals would like a few words with everyone present—eventually,” the Qube said. “If you don’t mind, Dr. Patil, my Marshals will secure the prisoner. We’ll have a lil’ pow-wow at the New Year’s Summit with the other polities about this—and invite all the Enclaves to have their say, too. With all due respect, Dr. Patil, even if we’re limited in what we can do since he shares his body with an innocent party, he still gets

due process.”

“Of course,” Patil said. “But wherever you take him, I’ll be right there. I’m *not* leaving my child again.”

“He’s still my boy, right or wrong,” Rattigan said. “We’ll make him better.”

“And I’ll be watching,” Kaylee said. “All the time. Every day. Thirty-slash-six.”

As Steel and Iodine Star Marshals arrived with a reinforced ambulance and brought out a padded stretcher with heavy straps, Fritz closed his eyes and sank into hibernation.

“Rhianna, I’m sorry we have not had more time,” Dr. Patil said. “We may not be able to come back to the garage for days or weeks. But we *will* come. And we can keep in touch by mail and VR in the meantime. And I must contact Kandace! I had meant to go to her in person before word got out, but...events seem to have forced my hand.” She smiled. “I have many lost years to make up for—for *all* my children.”

“You’ll have time,” Uncia said. “They stopped filming new episodes in 2011.” She blinked as everyone turned to look at her. “What? You were all *thinking* it.”

Rhianna chuckled. “That’s okay, Dr. Patil. I think we can trust you not to be a stranger this time. I’m looking forward to working with you.”

“You can *count* on it,” the scientist said, before Fusing back up with Rohit and following the Steels and Iodines into the ambulance. Other Marshals were rounding up the assorted scattered followers, most of whom offered no resistance. Some of them got additional stretchers, including the rather-the-worse-for-wear BarXan. Once all the stretchers were aboard, the ambulance hovered away.

Zane leaned on his cane and watched the proceedings. “Well, that’s it then,” he said. “It’s finally over. Thirty-five years of history all building up to this moment...and now, here we are.”

“This might sound like blasphemy, but I can’t help wondering if Fritz didn’t get at least *some* things right, even though his methods sucked,” Quinoa mused.

The others looked at her, as if expecting to see signs of the old “Fritz rulez” Quinoa, but they only saw her standing there looking thoughtful. “What’re you thinking, there?” Myla asked.

“Yes, what do you mean?” Rhianna asked archly.

“Well, whether we got here the right way or not, we do have a fully-realized Integrate society now, ready to step forward and take its place alongside the human and RIDE one,” Quinoa said. “But back in the day, Nextus, Sturmhaven, and Nuevo San were still on war footings, and Nextus knew how to force Integrations, even if they didn’t know why. And sooner or later that know-how would have leaked. If *something* hadn’t come along to force them all to step back from open Integrate research for a while, who’s to say we wouldn’t have become the next cold war arms race? Without a whole society to stand up for us, would ordinary folks who Integrated have gotten drafted and ended up in the military instead of enclaves? Would the forced-Integration signal have been used to build Integrate armies from volunteers or even draftees? Would that still be happening even today?”

“Well, since we lack any way to go back and peep down the other leg of the Trousers of Time, it’s kind of a moot point,” Zane said. “We can’t know whether things would have been better or worse if Fritz hadn’t done what he did, except maybe in alternate-history fiction.” He chuckled. “Or *alternate-universe fanfiction*, as you Steaders might put it.”

"I 'spect we'd have some things better an' other things worse, same way we would any ol' change," Anny said. "The bad things we got were bad 'nuff, whether the good things we got are worth 'em is a question for philosophers. Or law courts." She nodded to Mosely.

"Now comes the hard part," Zane said.

"The fallout," Rhianna said. She de-Fused from Kaylee, who lowered her head and slunk away. After experiencing her partner's rage and fury firsthand, Rhianna seemed shaken. "I think I need a few days off."

"No rest for the weary, unfortunately," Zane said, resting his handpaws on her shoulders. "But we *do* have an outstanding proposition, Rhi."

"Is this *really* the time to talk about that?" Rhianna asked.

"It's *exactly* the time to talk about it," Zane said. "When you're at your lowest ebb is when you need something cheerful and life-affirming the most. Anyway, no one's saying we have to *do* it now. I just wanted to...y'know...remind you it exists. Shall we set a date? Say...a month from today, after the Summit?"

Rhianna smiled. "Sounds like a wonderful way to start a new year. Now, turn around and let me check that tail tip."

"Please. I really hope I didn't stick it on upside down," Zane said.

"I don't see anything out of whack," she said, patting him on the shoulders...then impulsively hugging him out of sheer relief. "My God, Zane. What have we done? I'm not saying that in a bad way, but...I was just a mechanic a few months ago! Now all this? Holy fark!"

"I don't expect any of your customers even back then would say you were *just* a mechanic," Zane said, grinning. "Certainly *Terry* doesn't remember it that way."

"We're more like doctors than mechanics, Rhi," Rochelle added. Around them the hardlight shield walls were being stepped-down. "We fix *people*. Don't tell me you never thought of it that way, because you certainly have never acted like you were just fixing a skimmer when you worked on Kaylee, Uncia, Katie...anybody."

"I think I'd rather have you guys for *my* doctor than my last one," Jeanette said. "Real piece of work he was. I feel bad that all the *other* Amontillado patients are still with him." She shot Mosely a meaningful glance.

"Oh, we've already revoked his Provisional status, Miss Leroq," Mosley reassured. He idly stroked his arctic fox between his ears. "He broke *the* cardinal rule of being a Marshal: Thou shalt not treat a RIDE as machinery."

"Well...good," Jeanette said, mollified. "Thank you, sir."

"We're going to be taking a close look at how he was vetted in the first place—that attitude of his *should* have come out in the review," Mosley continued. "Sometimes when we need someone badly enough, we cut a few corners, but there are some places we shouldn't ever go."

A short distance away Katie deFused from Relena. The lynx purred thunderously and headbutted the teenager. "My brave, brrrave Relena."

"Citizen Katie, a word if you please?" Mosley said, Fusing with his fox.

"Oh, no, she's not gonna get in trouble over me, is she?" Relena asked hastily. "I, um, *forced* her to take me along. So if anyone gets in trouble, it oughtta be me!"

"Yer a minor, young lady. But we'll be takin' everything about this crisis into account. Your parents might not be too happy about what Citizen Katie did, and we'll have to deal with that," Mosley said. "I'll set the Diamonds to work on the legal stuff."

"She's not any younger than *I* am," Jeanette muttered.

"With all due respect, Tin Star Leroq, your relationship with Tamarind makes you a special case. But I wouldn't worry too much, Miss Martinez," Mosley said, nodding at the lynx-tagged girl.

"I wanted to talk with you about this matterrr, myself," Katie said. "As long as I have yourrr foxy ear."

"Join me in VR, if you please. I have a proposal for you."

Mosley and Katie froze in place as they entered VR.

Relena blinked. "I wonder what they're talking about. Well...I *know* what they're talking about. I just wonder what they're *saying* about it."

"I *could* probably find out," Jeanette said. "But not worth the risk of getting caught, so...no." She grinned. "I'm sure they'll tell you soon enough. And hey—if they do let you in, I'm gonna insist they assign you Tammy for training. After all, she's already trained *one* teenager, and did it *so well*. I'm even housebroken!" Relena giggled in spite of her nervousness.

"I hate to eat and run, everybody, but I just got another comm ping from my Uncle Joe, out at the Coffeehouse," Quinoa Steader said. "We need to meet up and sort everything out." The red sphinx fluttered her wings, the iridescence falling away. "A little Crazy goes a long way."

Myla smiled at her, and wiped at an eye gone suddenly moist. "I watched what you did up there, and I just wanted to let you know how proud I am of you. You *have* grown up, just like I always hoped you would."

"Aw...thanks," Quinoa said, sphinx face blushing. "I just wish I hadn't screwed up your lives doing it."

"Our lives got better," Sophie said. "And as much of a headache as it was at the time, I honestly can't say I regret one moment of having fur." She wagged her tail happily. "So thanks for that part, at least."

Myla nodded. "You did cost us the rest of our career in the Nextus Materiel Recovery Service...*and* my retirement benefits...but on the other hand, that led into a corporate career that paid better *and* let me work side-by-side with my Aunt Anny. Something I'd *wished* I could do ever since she first showed up riding a certain shiny metal lynx, but never thought I'd get the chance."

Anny hugged her niece from behind. "Clinging to the silver lining's what got me through thirty-some hard years, until I saw Kaylee on the com that day y'all called."

Myla smiled back at her aunt, putting her own hand over one of hers, then looked back at Quinoa. "So, yeah, I was pissed at the time...but I'm over it. I forgive you, Quinny."

Tears glistened in Quinoa's eyes. "Well, we all have to grow up sometime, right?" She embraced the half-Integrate, her former bodyguard. "See you in the funny papers Myla, Sophie."

The sphinx turned to Zane. "You know, there's something I've been meaning to tell you."

"Oh? What's that?" Zane asked, flicking his ear.

"Your dad, my dad, and my uncle are the three most well-traveled people in the history of Zharus, did you know that? They crossed paths a few times, out in the black. I think it might have been...maybe sixty years ago they met on Proxima, just before Clint emigrated to Zharus. Uncle Joe's been rather tight-lipped about their relationship, but I

like to think that he convinced Clint to come here after he retired from Scouting.”

“We’ll have to grill your uncle on that, won’t we?” Zane said. “Pity we can’t ask your dad, either. Where is he these days?”

“Probably still on one of the Proxima habs. But we’ll make Uncle spill everything somehow. Take care, Zane. Take care, everyone!” Quinoa said. She spread her wings, lifted, and flew away.

“A hundred and fifty six has been a *hell* of a year,” Rhianna said. “I remember what I thought of you and Burke when we first met...”

“Nextus sticks in the mud, with sticks up our asses?” Myla grinned. “I remember. And I remember kicking Burke in the shins when he laughed at you for passive crossriding. I *still* say you look lovely Fused.”

Rhianna chuckled. “I can honestly say, I’ve never been more glad to be wrong about someone. That reminds me...” She activated her implant. *:Kaylee, come back here, will you?:*

:I’m coming, I’m coming,: the lynx RIDE said. *:Katie was right. And you, and Mom. I crossed a line...when I shot that cougaress. I’d feel sick to my stomach if I had one.:*

:Well, we’ll just have to see about making it up to her somehow,: Rhianna sent.

:I don’t know what came over me, but I don’t ever want to be that angry again,: Kaylee said, padding back into the parade ground. *:If I had killed Fritz...what kind of monster would I be? Did he start down the same road when he killed Frank?:*

:Not sure I really have an answer for that,: Rhianna said. *:But the important thing is, you didn’t.:*

:Yeah.: Kaylee sighed. *:Thank God for Mom.:*

Rhianna nodded. *:Aaaaaa-men.:*

Jeanette cocked her head. “So, since it looks like we’re about done here...I just got word now that the domes are back up and everyone’s safe, Diane’s inviting all Marshals and other folks who helped out today to her place for drinks. If anyone wants a lift, I’ve got a lioness who’s rigged for RIDE transport.” She nodded over to the edge of the clearing, where Tammy and Leila were curled up together, engaging in a little mutual grooming and quiet conversation. Uncia pouted at them.

“I could use a drink...or five,” Rhianna said. She looked over at the Qube and Katie, who were just coming out of VR.

“I think it’ll work out,” Mosley said.

“We’ll be in touch with you laterrrr as we rrrrefine the idea.” Katie nodded, then padded over to where Relena waited.

“You owe us the story of how you ended up that way, Jeanette,” Rochelle said. “I’ve seen a lot of *weird* things the past few months, but...you?”

“Sure!” Jeanette said. “After all, I already told it to the others. It started when Tammy came to bust me out of the orphanage for a top secret mission, ‘cuz she’d heard about my mad skillz and wanted a hacker of my amazing prowess to help her infiltrate AlphaWolf’s camp.”

“Jeaneeeeeeette...” Relena said.

Tamarind looked at her “mini-me” and grinned. “I think the story’s just fine without embellishments, myself.”

“Awww...well, all right, I guess,” Jeanette said.

“Let’s all hear it...once we get to the bar,” Zane said.

Rhianna looked at Rochelle, who nodded. “We’ll meet you all there after we pack up all these weapons in the Garage,” Rochelle said. “I don’t think I want to wear this gear again for a *long* time.”

“Too many barrels and things,” Uncia agreed. “Spoils my curves!”

Kaylee changed to skimmer mode. Rhianna gave Zane another hug before she mounted. Tammy converted into her skimmer truck form, and Jeanette climbed into the cab. Zane and Carrie-Anne floated up to take seats in the truck bed. Uncia unfolded to skimmer from around her rider and took their place next to their friends and business partners.

Myla and Sophie also de-Fused to join Rhianna. In her skimmer form the fur went away, but even then her general look was more organic than it had been. Likewise, Katie shifted to skimmer mode for Relena, and the Qube’s fox folded down into one that resembled a snowmobile.

“Bast and I will keep minding the store while you’re gone,” Aggie added over the comm. “Give me a couple hours to get the buildings secured and I’ll join you. The Marshals’ forensics folks want to make sure they get everything while it’s still fresh. Order me an Old Smokey Mudslide, Zane!”

“Give me a buzz when you’re on your way and I’ll have it waiting for ya, sis,” Zane said. “See ya there!”

Tammy waited to let all the faster RIDEs go first, then pulled out after they’d left. Zane looked behind them at the campus parade ground, still walled around by hardlight, pitted with several blast craters, and spattered here and there with silvery-pink Integrate blood. “Man, Landscaping’s gonna kill me.”

Carrie-Anne laughed. “Have you seen the rest of the city? After they finish volunteering to help get Uplift back into shape, Landscaping will bow down and kiss your striped paws for leaving the grounds as whole as they are.”

“There is that,” Zane reflected. As he watched, the shielding around the buildings all came down. The restored dome shimmered overhead. It had already cooled enough that people were coming out of their shelters. Some cheered, recognizing him. Others regarded them with suspicion, and maybe a little fear. Zane waved in a friendly way to everyone, happy or nervous. “Yeah, we’re not there yet,” he sighed. “But we’ll get there.”

He leaned back in Tammy’s seat and closed his eyes, letting her steady motion lull him into a catnap. “We’ll get there.”

Chapter Twenty-Four: What Happened to the Mouse?

One Week Later...
October 27, 156 A.L.

Only Camelot had a healing tank large enough to hold Svetlana and the numerous other injured from the attack. It was the size of an Olympic swimming pool and ten meters deep. With the large number of dragons who called the Enclave home this really didn't surprise Paul or Fenris. Camelot was already providing a great deal in the way of raw materials and construction printers being used to build up Alpha Camp into a proper polis.

"I swear, if I hear 'Tis but a flesh wound' one more time I'm going to lift out of here and beat someone to death with my stumps!" Svetlana fumed.

"Yes, we are a very...*silly place* at times," Mr. Peaches said. "The Monty Python Memetic Complex still runs deep in our psyches here. At any rate, it will be some weeks before you can leave that tank. Your joints took a great deal of damage from the sniper rifle."

"I wanted to make sure you were healing well," Fenris said. "We would have come sooner, but we are kept very busy at Camp."

"We also wanted to reassure you that your comrades aren't being mistreated," Paul said. He nodded at Fenris, who uploaded a memory block to her.

Svetlana reviewed the block. "I approve, though not without reservations. I am not in any position to make demands, however." The white she-wolf regarded Peaches with some amusement. "One might think that Camelot had stockpiled all those things earmarked for the Camp for years, just waiting."

"For the proper moment, yes," Peaches confirmed. "Two additional primary climate dome emitters and a dozen secondaries to stabilize. Constructors for proper buildings, public fabberies, and a commercial solar-fusion-sarium cycle power system to provide RIDE-safe charging and energy storage for everyday use."

Svetlana nodded. Then she sighed. "And what is to become of me?"

"After your limbs have fully reattached and the doctors pronounce you fit, we had hoped you would return to Camp with us, and help us build it up," Fenris said.

"And if not, then what?" Svetlana asked gloomily. "I am your prisoner. I led Fritz's army against your home."

"Well, most everyone who took part in the attacks is getting light sentences," Paul said. "Leastways the ones who didn't actually kill anyone, and weren't already wanted for murder and such elsewhere. Community service and probation, mostly. So if you're gonna have to serve a community anyway, might as well be ours."

"And after that, Sturmhaven has expressed interest in having you come home, for a visit at least," Fenris said. "In fact, they have invited Paul, Guinevere, Lillibet, and myself to visit, as well, when Bertha, Hedy, and Diana return." He chuckled. "They have been very polite about not attempting to press any legal claim to us. For all of that, they

must want us pretty badly; they have even offered Paul and myself diplomatic immunity from the Male Transgression laws.”

“Oh...” Svetlana considered that. “To go home again...I had not thought it would be possible.”

“Seems like Sturmhaven’s bending over backward to prove it’s all progressive and stuff, so’s it can rub Nextus’s nose in it,” Paul said. “Well, I’m not exactly gonna complain about the reason if it gets results.”

“Aptly put,” Fenris agreed.

“Anyway, guess we’d better get going, Fenris,” Paul said, jumping into his commander’s mouth. “We have visitors this afternoon and we’re a few hundred clicks away.”

“It was...good, seeing you again, Fenris,” Svetlana said. “Please give my regards to Bertha and her partners.”

“We will,” Fenris said. “And we will see you again soon enough.”

Alpha Camp wasn’t the only place getting some big changes. Camelot itself had humans and RIDEs gadding about—tourists for the most part—wandering around the anachronistic spaces that were more tenth century than twentieth. Yet the medieval décor masked one of the most technologically advanced Integrate Enclaves. They even had their own shipyard, where they could build everything up to 200-meter orbital craft. And they had quickly responded to the surge in tourism by opening a variety of hotels and restaurants. Some of them even served food *other* than ham, jam, and spam.

The Enclave practically *fizzed* with newfound energy. With Fritz gone, a great weight had been lifted. Even those few Integrate residents who had experienced harsh treatment at human hands were guardedly optimistic.

“We already have more orders for subs than we can handle, even with the shipyard expansion,” Mr. Peaches said as they walked together out of the hospital annex. “But we reserved two subs for Alpha Camp intended for passenger and cargo service. Assuming he accepts the Marshals’ gracious amnesty offer, that is.”

“Oh, that’s a foregone conclusion. He will,” Paul said. After AlphaWolf’s decisive defeat of Svetlana all doubts about his leadership had evaporated, though that didn’t mean nobody would argue with him. The upcoming elections for the new Camp Council were turning somewhat heated. “Amnesty in exchange for giving up all bodyjacked humans who want to go,” Paul said. They had lost most of the die-hards during the Shahrazade Incident, but there were still enough to have influence.

“But more than enough volunteers from elsewhere to take up the slack,” Fenris said. They’d even seen them on new street corners with handmade signs, advertising “rental thumbs”. “I am...encouraged by this. Alpha Camp will be the only place on Zharus where humans and RIDEs really do have full equality by law.”

“The ones who can deal with that, anyway,” Paul said. “We’ve still got all those extremists. The ones who were done so dirty by humans they see it as their right to keep ‘em.”

“As there will always be humans who think of us as mere machines,” Fenris said. “We’ll always have our political and ideological battles to fight.” He paused as they reached the main gate, which an exhausted-looking small green dragon labored on a huge wheel to open for them. “Farewell, Mr. Peaches! We will see you again soon!” Fenris said.

“Goodbye, my friends!” Mr. Peaches said. “Tell AlphaWolf hello for me!”

Fenris converted to hovertank form, accelerating to cruising speed a hundred meters over the desert. At speed Camp was a half hour away.

“Speaking of political and ideological battles,” Paul said. *:Lilli, Guin, how are things at Camp?:*

:Election signs all over the place, Paul,: Lillibet Walton replied through the DINcom. She transmitted video of a “Vote Plan Ankylosaur!” sign, with a little animated caricature of Smash, in front of one of the half-finished apartment blocks. A tanker full of fabber matter sat behind the sign, with the industrial constructor scaffolding doing its quick work in the background. The building would probably be ready for occupation in just a couple days.

:That was...quick,: Paul said, amused. *:Is Smash actually running?:*

:She is, as of an hour ago,: Guin said. *:Ever heard of the term, ‘obfuscating stupidity’? Don’t take my word for it. Here’s her campaign ads to peruse on your way home. She’s running on a dual ticket with Lenore.:*

Paul watched the half dozen surprisingly verbose ads several times, shaking his head at each one. She was running on a “thumb rehab” platform, since one of the major issues was how to deal with the various RIDE slavers in the Dry. Every single candidate promised to eradicate them, though Smash’s own methods had a certain...vivacious bluntness.

Smash felt that the best way to “rehabilitate” slavers was to let them be thumbs for a while—and the longer, the better. She’d even managed to get a tacit endorsement from the Marshals, allowing that RIDE slavers (and other human criminals) who had been properly convicted under local laws could be considered exempt from the “no thumbnapping” restrictions going forward.

Other issues included relationships with human polities with strong fetter laws, getting recognition in Zharustead, what to do with all the infrastructure Camelot was giving them, what the Camp’s economy should be based on, and how to reach out to the myriad other escaped-RIDE settlements all across the Dry...all basic housekeeping topics for a working polity rather than just a base camp for fugitive RIDEs and bodyjacked humans, living paw-to-mouth on the other side of legality.

“I can’t believe it happened this fast,” Paul said. In the brief three hours they’d been gone the remaining few secondary domes were up, expanding the Camp’s available space three-fold. The nascent polis resembled a mini-Uplift. “I can’t believe I’ve been here watching it happen.”

:Neither can AlphaWolf,: Lillibet said. *:He still looks a little bit dazed about the whole thing. Kind of like he’s just been run down by a skimmer truck, but without the bruising.:*

“Not merely watching, Paul,” Fenris said. “Without you, none of this would have happened, and I would still be a pile of junk decaying in the sun.”

:Rhianna’s Dreamchaser is on approach,: Guin reported. *:And Lilli’s parents are close behind in...what is that?:*

Paul snorted. “Knowing them, it could be anything from the Spruce Goose to a UFO.”

:Northrop YB-49 Flying Wing,: Lillibet supplied. *:Knowing Dad, he could probably fly to the moon and back in it.:*

:We’ll meet you at the new aerodrome,: Fenris said, accelerating. *:Among so many new things,:* he said privately to Paul.

:Yeah...Rhi said she has a present for me,: Paul replied.

A few thousand meters over the expanding Alpha Camp the Dreamchaser hovered, taking in the new dome complex and surrounding landscape. Kaylee looked outside, forepaws on the front panel. “Not really what I expected,” she said. “It’s like a new *SimCity* game down there.”

“Things are changing quickly, Citizen Kaylee,” Uncia said.

“They certainly *are*, Citizen Uncia,” Kaylee replied dryly. “Is that paparazzi sub still following us?”

“I think so, but they’ve been staying farther back since you fired that warning shot across their bow,” Uncia said.

“What ‘warning shot’?” Kaylee said virtuously. “Our maint’nance logs said it’d been over a thousand hours since our rear pulse gun’s last firin’, so we *had* to fire a test shot to stay within regs.”

“Well, after your ‘test shot’ came within three meters of scorching their paint, they’ve been keeping well away,” Uncia said.

“Killin’ two birds with one stone,” Kaylee said happily. “Win-win.”

“Yeah, but I can just imagine the headlines on the *Enquirer* later today,” Uncia said darkly.

“Who reads that crap, anyway?” Kaylee grumbled.

Below them, the Waltons’ silver flying wing landed in the crowded area designated as an aerodrome that was now covered by the dome. They were mostly large cargo subs from Walton-Q, a number of private craft, and several from Alohan shipping companies no doubt backed by the Munns. Two of Zane’s own Starmasters weren’t even the largest suborbitals present. Work gangs of Integrates used their lifters to remove cargo—mostly fabbers, construction equipment, and fabber matter tanks. The Marshals’ own high-speed orbital *Acme* was also present. Kaylee put them down next to it and the flying wing.

“Cargo didn’t shift,” Kaylee reported. “We almost busted the lifting specs, Rhi. I’ll be glad to get that load out of the cargo bay.”

“Too bad we don’t have a Starmaster for flying heavy stuff like that around,” Rochelle opined. “I wonder if there’s anyone who might sell us one cheaply?”

“I might know someone,” Rhianna said dryly. “CinTally’s got the other half of this lift anyway.” She Fused up with Kaylee, waited for her friends to Fuse, then opened the cockpit hatch. She waved at a certain orange-with-black-stripes figure. “Zane! Hi!”

“Fancy meeting you here!” the tiger replied. He still had his cane, but no longer needed it. Since the fight against Fritz it had become part of his public face, in addition to variants of his father’s scouting gear.

Rhianna thought it gave him a dapper, distinguished look. All he needed was a monocle and pith helmet to complete the picture. “Is CinTally around? I wanted to say hello.”

“I haven’t seen her since she met Baldwin. Turns out he’s an Intie, too,” Zane said. “I don’t think I’m going to see much of her for a while, nor Alpha of Baldwin.” He grinned toothily. “Last I saw they were flying off together at about Mach two in the general direction of Mount Wahoo.”

Rhianna nodded, looking around. “Well, we could use one of your cargo handlers. This load is a pawfull.”

“It’s that gift for Paul you mentioned, right? What is it?”

“It’s about fifteen tonnes of self-deploying constructor nanos,” Rhianna said, grinning felinely. “Hey, there’s Fenris!”

“Greetings!” he replied cheerfully. The WLF-CSA was impossible to miss in tank mode. Lillibet and Guinevere skimmed alongside them before Fusing and entering the repaired cupola-turret.

“Hey there, boss!” Paul shouted through Fenris’s vocoder, loud enough to raise a little dust.

“You’re here just in time, you two,” Rhianna said. “Our load has lifters, but we could use your strength to maneuver it. Since this cargo is *yours*, I think you’d like to lend a paw.”

“That big, huh?” Paul said. “You’ve piqued my interest, boss.”

“Should we borrow some Integrate laborers for additional help?” Fenris asked.

A mid-size dragon hovering in midair dropped down. “What can I do for you, sir?” His tone of voice was rather unenthusiastic.

“Steady the other side of the load as we bring it down the ramp,” Fenris said, shifting to Fuser. “I’m very curious what this is, Rhianna.”

“Well, I might as well tell you,” the RIDE mechanic said. She lifted up so she was face-to-face with Fenris and Paul, with Lilli and Guin looking over his shoulder. “It’s a foregone conclusion you’re not returning to Uplift. So...since you’re not coming back to the Garage, I’m bringing the Garage to *you*. This is a self-building ‘backup’ of the whole Garage. Zane and I bought it from the insurance company, and it’s gonna be the part of the basic package. Congratulations, Paul. You’re the first Freerider Garage franchise owner, and I can’t think of a more-qualified person or a better place to spread the name.

“Of course, it’s *just* the core building. The one Rochelle and I started in. We made some mods to the outside walls upstairs so Fenris has a place *inside* to rest his head.”

“Where do you want it?” the dragon asked.

“You know, I can’t think of a more appropriate place than our workspace in the ‘graveyard,’” Paul said. “It’s pretty much ours now by squatters’ rights anyway, and the place every RIDE already knows to go if they’ve got maint needs.” He chuckled. “Of course, we kind of gotta share it with Nora and Rose, since it’s also where every *human* already knows to go if they got a certain *other* kind of ‘maint need.’ But there’s plenty of room.”

“Besides, it’s kinda convenient,” Guinevere put in. “Gives the human partner something to do while their RIDE’s being worked on.”

“Gives a whole new meaning to the term ‘service center,’ I’ll give it that,” Lillibet put in.

The Waltons walked down the ramp of their flying wing, Melissa walking at Nigella’s side. Kenyon hadn’t had his AlphaWolf tags docked—like Zane’s cane, they’d also become part of his public image. Rhianna had the feeling that the man wouldn’t part with them for any price.

“Maybe Lilli would like to run a Freerider franchise of her own in Nextus?” Kenyon said.

“Daaad,” Lilli said, rolling her eyes. “I was thinking more of being Rochelle to Paul’s Rhianna in this one. Or maybe the other way around.”

“In a less platonic sense than the originals, I would presume,” Fenris rumbled.

“You know, why don’t I bring out the *other* gift to help tow this into town?” Zane

suggested. His DIN glimmered, the aft ramp on his Starmaster opened, and the 40-year-old refurbished tow skimmer Paul had worked on so long ago floated out like a puppy returning to his master.

“That *survived*?” Paul said, shocked.

“It was out on a job when Tocsin flattened the place,” Rhianna said. “Now, maybe you don’t really need this. But after everything else I didn’t feel right *not* giving it to you after you put in so much hard work on the conversion.”

“I’ll *find* a use,” Paul said. “I put my heart and soul into that old girl. I think it prepared me for getting Fenris running again.”

“What’s a garage without a tow truck?” Lillibet said, grinning. “With a little Dry Ocean-proofing, it could be helpful in running supplies in from Camelot, too.”

Zane controlled the tow skim with his DIN, commanding it to back up to the nano-constructor block and lock on with lifter fields and a physical clamp. The tiger Integrate lifted up to sit atop the block, then pointed forwards with his cane. The skimmer accelerated forward slowly. “Tally ho!”

“Thank you for your assistance,” Fenris said to the dragon.

“Don’t mention it,” the green dragon Integrate said. “Call me if you need me again, I suppose. It’s what I’m here for—at least for another sixty-two point eight days.”

“You could reduce your sentence if you showed some remorse,” Fenris reproved.

“Cheer up, you’re not dead or locked up in a cell or something,” Lillibet said.

“You’ll be free before you know it.”

The Integrate glowered at her before launching himself back into the sky to await for another help request. Lillibet and Paul sighed. “Guess this isn’t all roses and chocolate for everyone,” she said.

“He’ll get over it,” Kenyon Walton said. “Shall we move on? I’d love to see where Paul has done so much fine work here.”

Melissa changed to scooter mode, Nigella handing her husband a stylish Vespa half-helmet from the underseat storage. He sat behind his wife, wrapping his arms around her waist. Nigella twisted the throttle and they accelerated after the tow skimmer.

“Isn’t that cute?” Rochelle said.

Lillibet rolled her RIDE’s eyes again. “They’re just Mom and Dad.”

Uncia sang to the Beatles tune, “She’s got a tricked-out new RIDE,” nodding toward the Waltons. “And *she* don’t care,” nodding toward Lillibet, who stuck out her tongue.

The procession towards the old graveyard turned into an impromptu tour—Kenyon wanted to see how the materials Walton-Q were contributing were being used. Tanks full of fabber matter moved about in a complicated dance of empties returning to refill and full replacements. The “streets” were all dug-up with more constructors adding the supporting infrastructure underground—power cables, fiber-optics, water, sewer, and fabber matter feeds.

What wasn’t being done by AI-controlled constructors were supervised by Intie work-gangs, Alpha Camp’s resident RIDEs, even the odd human wearing a hardhat, waving a tablet of blueprints about.

Among all the seeming harmony was a group of RIDEs clustered around a vacant building site that had a hardlight projection of a Gondwana Marshals badge floating over it. “No Marshals here!” someone shouted. “We can police ourselves!”

:Uh oh,: Kaylee said. :This could turn into an ugly mob.:
:I've told Alpha. He's on his way,: Fenris said.

Fused, the sandy wolf shortly landed amid the growing mob. "Okay, everyone. What's going on here? This station is part and parcel of our amnesty agreement, and you knew it. And it's not even meant to police *us* in the first place. That's not what the Marshals *do*. This station will mostly be staffed by non-partnered RIDEs to begin with. So what's your problem again, Ohm?"

"How about what they did to us *last* time we invited 'em in?" The speaker was a male skunk recognizable from the numerous election signs that were everywhere along the new streets. The signs played scenes from Mike Munn's "betrayal" that ended up bringing down the dome and the resulting chaos, ending with **NO MARSHALS HERE** in bold text. He glowered at the wolf. "Besides, Alpha, how many undercover Marshals did we have with us at any one time? We know of at least one—Tamarind—were there more? Right under your nose?"

"Let me turn that around on you. What harm did *Tammy* ever do, all the while she was here?" AlphaWolf said. "It was an *Intie* Marshal from outside who screwed the pooch, and they won't be sending any of those here without our express permission in advance. If there's any fault here it's mine for allowing war criminals like Shah and Fridolf to join us."

"They hid their crimes from us very well, I admit," Ohm said. "We didn't know."

AlphaWolf shook his head. "Undercover Marshals, undercover war criminals, undercover Inties...sometimes I wonder if there's one person in this whole *camp* who isn't secretly an agent for someone else. That being said, the Marshals are here for precisely three reasons: first, search-and-rescue in the Dry, which as we all know is a big problem, and will be more so in this area since we're actually gonna have people *visiting* now. Which means more idiots to forget to charge their batteries up and conk out somewhere over the deep Dry. Do *we* want to be the ones who have to spend all our time going out and helping those idiots? I don't think so.

"Second, they're gonna *help* us stop the RIDE slaver problem, and have even been nice enough to agree to look the other way if we want to 'jack anyone who's caught in the act for a while. Geez, what more do you want, engraved Letters of Marque?"

"And third, they have jurisdiction over the bus terminal and passenger terminals of the aerodrome, that being interpolity commerce and yadda yadda yadda. That's all. If they see something wrong on our turf, they bring it to *our* attention, as long as we do the same for them. If they don't like how we handle it, then their bosses talk to our new Council. They're *not* gonna come in like gangbusters and start arresting *us*. If they tried, I'd be the first one to kick their butts to the curb."

With that, the mob started to disperse, leaving Ohm grumbling. "I guess that's it for *my* campaign." The skunk shifted to skimmer form and moved away, flying between Fenris and the towskim like neither were there.

Kenyon Walton applauded. "Great speech, Alpha. It's good to see you again. I see you have new thumbs."

AlphaWolf chuckled. "You jealous? He's just a temporary I grabbed for the duration of the crisis, but he's pretty comfy—Nextus military, like I used to be, so he just feels...*familiar*. Kind of nostalgic, in a way, but I'll be sending him along home in a few more days. You know I'd trade him for you in a heartbeat, if it weren't for all our other obligations." He shook his head. "It's nice seeing you, everyone. What's all this?"

“Our first small business,” Paul said. “I’m going to need utility hookups in the old ‘graveyard’.”

“I can finagle a few constructors for that,” AlphaWolf said. He chuckled. “But technically, it will be our *second* small business. The oldest profession got there first.”

Rhianna blinked. “You were serious?”

“Serious as a heart attack,” Paul said wryly.

“Yeah, it’s one of the biggest laugh riots in the camp,” Lillibet said. “Nora managed to capture seven Integrates all by herself during the fight—that’s more than any other one person managed—and she’s insisted on *keeping* them. Funny thing is, none of them seems exactly broken up about it.” She grinned. “They’ve been helping her build a...well, saloon and hotel, I guess you’d say, fronting on the hole in the wall where she used to see her ‘clients’.”

“And it’s gonna be pretty much right next door to our shop,” Paul said. “We both kinda had a little bit of prior claim, so we figured we could just divide the place up, and maybe be good for each other’s business.”

“I see,” Nigella Walton said coolly—but she said nothing more, because her husband blew raspberries on the back of her neck, making her giggle like a teenager. “Ooh, Kenyon! Stop!”

“I’ll come with you and watch the setup,” AlphaWolf said.

Since Camelot had supplied the necessary parts to fix the last few sleeping RIDEs, it was a graveyard no longer. There were a few discolored places on the ground where RIDEs might have sat, gathering dust, for years, and a few half-filled-in holes in the ground left over from the bombs Shahrazad had planted to cover her escape. And along the wall toward the rest of the camp, there was a fairly tasteful three-story mauve house going up, with pre-fab residential modules attached to either side. There was still plenty of room to maneuver the skimmer past it all. As they passed, a full-figured fox Fuser came out of one of the residential modules and shaded her eyes against the sun to watch curiously.

“I thought the best place would be at the far end there—right where Fenris was when I found him,” Paul said, pointing.

“Appropriate,” Fenris agreed.

“The constructor AI says some of those holes are good for foundation pilings,” Rhianna said. “Zane? Would you set it down over there?”

“Your wish is my command!” Zane said, unclamping the prefab unit from the skimmer and setting it down where Paul directed. “Okay, there. Paul, if you’d like to do the honors?”

Paul and Fenris transmitted the signal. The dark rectangular object hummed for a few seconds, then started extending itself out over the ground, automatically digging its own foundation. “Thank you for your purchase of a Hyperion Self-Building Home-Business!” a friendly voice said. “The process will complete in approximately three hours and be ready for utilities. Please enjoy some music while you wait.”

*The mountain is high, the valley is low
And you’re confused on which way to go
So I’ve come here to give you a hand
And lead you into the promised land, so
Come on and take a free ride (Free ride)*

*Come on and sit here by my side
Come on and take a free ride...*

Rhianna turned it down and laughed. "Okay, that wasn't my idea, but it fits."
"Howdy, neighbor!" Nora said cheerfully, walking up with a serval Integrate in tow. "What's all this?"

"Fifteen tonnes of self-assembling nanos," Rhianna deadpanned. "Huh. VIXY(f)-PSA-34DDD, right?"

Nora flicked an ear. "You're *good*. How do you do that through the hardlight coat?"

"It's just something I do," Rhianna replied, smirking. "Paul's good, but he's had to use salvaged and substandard equipment for hardlight tuning. Kaylee's sensors found a gap. Once this building's all set up, he'll have brand new tools to do things properly."

"Oh dear, you mean to say my slip is showing?" Nora said, tongue lolling.

"I can't wait to get my hands on all that!" Paul said.

"All that *what*?" Lillibet said pointedly.

"Er..." Paul said, blushing.

Nora giggled. "By the way, until I get my own business off the ground, would it be all right if I paid in...barter?"

"Er..." Paul said, going bright red.

Kenyon whispered something in his wife's ear that made her blush. "If you have a romantic room for rent, ma'am, my wife and I would rather like to stay the night."

Nora blinked, noticing the tycoon for the first time. Her eyes widened, and she bowed low. "Oh, my! If it isn't Kenyon and Nigella Walton themselves! I believe I have just the thing." She smiled. "And needless to say, I can guarantee *absolute* privacy."

"Wonderful," Kenyon said. "We'd planned on staying in the wing, but this is much more convenient, isn't it my love?"

Nigella nodded emphatically, as bright red as Paul had been.

"Um, ew," Lillibet said. "Still..."

AlphaWolf smirked. "It is the only real hotel in town yet."

"Shall I go ready the honeymoon suite, ma'am?" the subservient serval servant asked Nora.

"Absolutely! I can't think of any better use for it!" Nora said. She sighed happily as the serval lifted into the air and whisked away. "If you'd told me ten years ago when I got free of Bartertown that someday I'd be playing host to the *Waltons*..."

"Funny how things work out," Paul reflected, color finally subsiding. "When I signed on as an apprentice in the garage, I wouldn't have expected I'd end up...well, *here*." He grinned at Lillibet. "But ya know? I'm glad we did."

"Me too, Paul," Lillibet said, grinning back. "Me too."

October 29, 156 A.L.

After Rhianna and Rochelle flew home, the next couple of days in AlphaWolf's camp passed amazingly quickly. The elections were held after a fast-time campaign that compressed weeks of discussion and debate into days for the RIs, and "Plan Ankylosaur" won their Camp Council seats. Along with AlphaWolf's foregone position as Head Councilor they had a three-of-five pro-equality majority. Not as big a majority

as AlphaWolf and Smash might have wanted, but big enough. More buildings went up, including a Tourist Center. “Now we just need tourists,” AlphaWolf said.

But they actually had at least a couple of tourists already, Lillibet reflected, in the form of her parents. They had insisted Lilli show them all the places of interest in the camp, something which Lillibet privately suspected would have taken all of about fifteen minutes if her parents hadn’t paused at every place to talk to any RIDEs, humans, or Integrates in sight.

She did have to admit, though, that it did a world of good from a public-relations point of view to have one of the most powerful men in the world so obviously interested in the success of AlphaWolf’s little community. The fact that he was marked with AlphaWolf’s own tags didn’t hurt, either.

But all good things had to come to an end.

Lillibet sighed, looking around the small apartment in the new garage building that Paul had assigned to her and Guinevere’s use. “Well, this is it. Time to go.”

“On the bright side, at least we don’t have much to pack,” Guin pointed out.

“Yeah, you got that right,” Lillibet said. “Just our bodies.”

“And it’s not as if we’re *really* leaving,” Guinevere said. “Part of me will be right here with Fenris every moment of the day. We can meet him and Paul in VR, or even Fuse remotely, any time. At least until the matrix of DINcoms we’ve got set up all burn out. But we should be able to get out here often enough to refresh it.”

“Yeah. It’s just not the same, though.” Lillibet shook her head. “And you know once we get back, it’ll probably be forever before we can get out here again for more than a day or so at a time.”

“I can’t exactly say I’m looking forward to *not* being in charge again, either,” Guinevere smirked. “But look at it this way. There’s a lot of good we can do back in Nextus now that we’re all famous.”

“Lilli’s the daughter of one of the biggest mining magnates on the planet. She’s a celeb by definition,” Paul said from the doorway.

“Yeah, well now she’s a celeb with a *story*,” Guinevere said. “Poor little rich girl, kidnapped away to a life of thumb-slavery, becomes the camp darling of AlphaWolf’s band of desperate and dangerous RIDEs and helps save them from the big bad Fritz.”

Lillibet rolled her eyes. “You *know* that’s not how it happened.”

“Try telling that to the tabloids,” Guinevere smirked. “Anyway, I’m sure there are a lot of people who’ll *listen* now when you tell ‘em to unfetter their RIDEs...and when you speak out against the fettering laws still on the books...well, you’ll get a lot of media attention.”

“Huh.” Lillibet considered that for a moment. “Yeah, when you put it that way...I guess I kinda have a *duty* to go back and kick butt and take names. And it is something I can look forward to.” She grinned at Paul. “So...come to say goodbye?”

“Something like that.” Paul wagged his twin tails, then walked over and put his arms around Lillibet’s shoulders, looking her in the eyes. He blushed slightly, before bringing her into an embrace for a long farewell kiss. Hearts pounding, he only let go once they both felt out of breath. “Words aren’t enough, Lilli.”

“Silly wuffy,” she purred, touching his lupine nose. “Try ‘I love you’.”

“Oh yeah,” Paul said. “There are *those* words, aren’t there?”

“I guess you’re here to walk us to the aerodrome, huh?” Lillibet said.

“Better than that,” Paul said. “I’m here to give you a ride on a giant wolf to the

aerodrome. C'mon, Fennie's waiting downstairs."

"All right." Lilibet glanced around the room one last time. "Funny. Didn't need a room most of the time I was here, but it already feels like home after just a couple days. OK, Guinny, I'm ready."

"Brena's ready, too," the ocelot RIDE said.

"It'll be good to have the whole gang together again," Lilli reflected. "Without Brena, something was...missing."

"Something like, oh, maybe, Brena?" Guinevere asked.

Lilibet bapped her. "Just Fuse me and let's go, oh boss o' mine."

"Whatever you say, thumbs o' my heart!" Guinevere replied, Fusing into place around her. They followed Paul downstairs to where Fenris waited out front, in tank mode again, and Guin lifted them up to their customary place in the turret. They pulled out of the graveyard, but drove slower than Fenris's usual speed.

The reason for this became obvious when they rounded the corner of the wall that bordered on the graveyard. Dozens of RIDEs and humans were lined up along the recently-completed Alpha Avenue leading through the settlement to the aerodrome. Everyone Paul and Lilli had ever worked on was there. Tocsin, Nora, Baldwin, Bertha, Hedy, Smash, Lenore...and, of course, AlphaWolf himself, in Walker mode, sitting on his haunches next to her father. "So long, Lilli. We're going to miss you," he said.

Kenyon Walton absently petted Alpha between his ears. Perhaps not the most dignified for either of them in public, but neither seemed to care. "You act like I'm going to forbid her from ever returning, Alphie."

AlphaWolf chuckled, his tongue lolling out in a lupine grin. "Well, you do have to keep up appearances, don't you? You just got your daughter back from her 'kidnappers' and you're going to let her go hang out with them?"

"Just call me Patty Hearst!" Lilli said cheerfully.

"I don't think anyone believed that story for more than five minutes anyway," Kenyon said. "AlphaWolf and Melissa *saved* us, and that ended up on NextusLeaks a few days ago. That went a *long* way to proving the new Alpha Camp polis legit up in First Tier.

"Anyway, Lilli, the X-15 is yours. As you're well aware, Guin's already certified to fly it. Spend as much time as you want on the weekends out here. And when summer vacation comes around...well, we'll talk."

"Oh...*thank* you, Daddy!" Lilibet squealed. "But...is it okay with Mom, too?"

"You're growing into a responsible young woman," Nigella said. "And a very *brave* one. Moreso than I."

"And...that means you're okay with it?" Lilli asked cautiously.

"In so many words, yes," her mother replied. "But when we get home, we're going to make an appointment to bank your ova. Just in case you and Guin grow even closer."

"Mooom! You didn't have to say that in front of everyone!"

"What kind of mother would I be if I didn't occasionally embarrass my child?" Nigella said dryly.

"I'm ready!" Brena yipped, knowing a good time to interrupt when she saw one. The vixen was sitting on her haunches in feral form with her hardlight leash in her mouth, tail wagging happily.

Lilibet blinked at Brena. "Like that? Really?"

"It makes Beatrice happy," Brena said. "I'm...considering changing over

permanently and changing my name. *Beatrice* wasn't the idiot who fell for Fritz."

"Somehow, I'm not sure your family would appreciate that," Lillibet said. "I don't think that kind of thing is healthy, is it?"

"I'm not looking forward to the hours of therapy, but..." The vixen stood up and shook herself out, the leash disappearing. "After all this...*both* of me are homesick as all get out."

Lilli and Guin hopped down from the turret and hugged their friend. "You can come over any time, as Brena or Beatrice," Lilli said. She giggled. "I will admit, I'm gonna miss my big fluffy pillow when I go to bed from now on."

"Hey, you've got me," Guin pouted.

"Yeah, but you're not *fluffy*," Lilli said.

"Let's go, girls," Nigella said. "We have a press conference we can't be late for."

"All right, Mom," Lillibet said. She turned to wave at all the people lined up along the street. "G'bye, everyone! Thanks for everything, take care of yourselves, and I'll see you again real soon."

"Farewell, Lillibet, Guinevere" Fenris said. "At least, in a manner of speaking."

"Bye, Fenris, but not really." Lilli grinned through Guin. "This DINcom thing is soooo cool."

"Rhianna left us with several of those," AlphaWolf said. "We have realtime connections to Uplift and Nextus without having to lay any cable, and should be getting Aloha pretty soon. I'm looking forward to the economic leg up it's going to give us."

"Things sure do change in a hurry," Paul mused. "Just a few weeks ago, the idea of *any* connection to AlphaWolf's camp would have been cause for investigation."

"I'm still more than a little astonished myself," AlphaWolf admitted. "But I'm not letting that stop me. Anyway, all of you take care, and I want to see you all out here again soon. You'll always be welcome." He paused for emphasis and grinned again. "So sayeth me."

Relena yawned, leaning low over Katie's dash as the skimmer turned into the driveway of her parents' house. The neighborhood was still looking a little on the dry side—lawns of dead grass were common, and there weren't enough gardening bots to go around. But somehow the spruce pine growing in Relena's front yard had survived with only a few brown needles. "Well, there's no place like home."

"You said it," Katie said happily. "Sorriry the days are so long. You could stay home, you know."

Relena shook her head. "Nope! It's important for me to be a part of this, at least part of the time. We gotta demonstrate that citizenship doesn't mean *rejecting* partnership. It means we can be apart, but it also means we *can* be together if we want to. So they gotta see us both ways as much as they can."

"A good point," Katie agreed. She waited for Relena to climb down, then folded back up into her lynx body and padded into the house after her partner.

"Moooom, we're home!" Relena called. She walked into the kitchen where her mother was fixing supper, and accepted a peck on the cheek.

"Hello, dear," Mrs. Martinez said. "Your father will be home soon. How did the Referendum go today?"

"About the same as it has been," Relena said. "Everyone thinks RIDE citizenship is a *good idea* but nobody can agree on how to do it."

“They will come arrrrround,” Katie said. “These are earrrrly days yet. Everyone is still peeing on theirrrr own trrrees. Next, they will go arrrrround and sniff at each others’ trrrees. Then they will decide which trrrees to chop down. Finally, everrrryone will share the same trrree, even if some arrrrre not happy about it. That’s politics.”

“Well, that’s certainly a...colorful way of putting it, especially for in the kitchen,” Mrs. Martinez said. “Last I saw, the RIDE Free Speech and Anti-Abuse Acts were certain to pass. Self-Emancipation...not so much. That one’s going to be a real nail-biter when the polls come in.”

There were almost a dozen measures on the Referendum ballot. With the recent attacks still fresh in everyone’s minds, the gratitude of normal humans towards RIDes was at an all-time high, though not all of them were assured to pass—Full Emancipation was unfortunately *losing* in the polls. Uplift had conferred Citizen status to Katie’s mother, her friend Uncia, and almost three dozen others who had distinguished themselves in the crisis.

“Speaking of citizenship, Mrs. Marrrtinez,” Katie said. “The rrrent should be in your account...now.”

“Thank you, Katie,” Mrs. Martinez said. “We really appreciate that.”

Because Katie had brought Relena along with her to take down Fritz, Katie’s relationship with her parents had become a little strained. But now that Katie was a Silver Star Marshal with a decent salary, paying rent went a long way to starting to repair that relationship—especially since the Martinezes had decided to earmark the rent payments for Relena’s college fund.

“By the way, your friend Jeanette called,” Mr. Martinez said. “She thought you might get in an hour of study time before supper. I told her you might be too tired, but...”

“Thanks, Mom,” Relena said. “I’ll comm her and see how it goes. I might just take a nap instead.”

“That’s fine, dear. Either way, I’ll call you when it’s time for dinner.”

Ever since they’d met during the Battle of Domefall, Relena and Jeanette had been best friends. Jeanette was going to be taking her last year or so of high school here in Nexus, and they’d started to meet to make sure her studies were up to speed for the next semester. Meanwhile, Jeanette had started helping Relena with some of the basic Marshals training, since she’d already decided she would join the Marshals as soon as they would have her. And given that Jeanette had gotten in, perhaps that might happen sooner than usual.

Relena and Katie climbed the stairs to her room, and Relena pulled up the study material on her comm. “Yeah...I think I’m not too tired to understand this yet.”

Katie purred. “I’m rrreally glad you’rrre doing so well in your studies,” she said happily.

“I’m thinking of joining the Diamonds, maybe,” Relena said.

“Last week it was the Chrrromes,” Katie said, bemused.

“Yeah, and next week it’ll probably be the Cobalts.” Relena chuckled. “I can’t make up my mind.”

“You’ll have plenty of time to decide,” Katie said. “You’rrre not even a Tin, *yet*.”

“I know, I know.” Relena reached over and hugged her partner around the neck. “But whatever it is, I’m gonna be a *good* one. You don’t deserve anything less.”

“I have no doubts you’ll make good on that prrrromise,” Katie said. “Whatevrrr

you decide, I'll be rrrright here supporrrting you."

"I know," Relena said, smiling. "That's what partners do." She turned back to the comm and punched in Jeanette's code. The young lioness came up on screen. "Hey, kitty!"

"Hey, humany!" Jeanette replied. "Ready to hit some books?"

"You know it!" Relena said.

"Good!" Jeanette leaned down and licked the back of one of her paws. "Now let's see...I think we're up to the history of Nextus's fetter laws..."

Chantilly knew before she woke up that she was a prisoner. She'd been hacked, her root passkey changed so someone else had control of her body. She could try to break the passkey, but it would be hard even for an Integrate hacker—her body's own computing power was effectively turned against her. For someone like her, it would be impossible.

But...surely Fritz would come to save her! Unless...he didn't want her anymore. She remembered him sending her away just before that *other* lynx...

She remembered, relived the shock, the white-hot pain in her chest, then... nothing. Was she dead? She couldn't be dead, could she? You couldn't still *think* if you were dead. She drifted closer to wakefulness, began to hear the sounds around her. Gentle beeps, whirring of equipment...it sounded like a hospital.

Had they won? Was the root access just to keep her from moving and hurting herself while she healed? Maybe she was in a friendly hospital and Fritz was there waiting for her. She let herself live in that hope for a moment, then came back to reality. She remembered the things she hadn't let herself notice at the time—how easily their efforts in other parts of the city had been rolled back, and how unhinged Fritz had been getting. As much as she wanted to believe otherwise...they must have lost. She was in a prison hospital. They were only healing her up to lock her away.

Having settled on expecting the worst, Chantilly finally opened her eyes to see how bad things really were.

It took a moment for her eyes to focus, but once they did, she could see she was lying naked in a hospital bed. A transparent hemisphere was nano-clamped to her chest, over the hole the cannon had made through it. It was fed by a hose, and appeared to be full of fabricator gel. She could feel another one clamped to her back through a hole in the bed. There was also an IV stuck through a shaved spot over a vein on her left arm.

Chantilly found she could move her head back and forth, but not move anything below her neck. She looked around as best she could. She seemed to be the only patient in the room. There didn't seem to be any guards, at least with her. Then she turned her head in the other direction and saw she wasn't alone in the room—and stared in slack-jawed amazement at the face of the woman leaning over her.

RIDEs didn't have any true religions of their own. Some had adopted (or pretended to adopt) one of the major human religions to which their rider belonged—Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Discordianism, Church of the Subgenius—but they'd never quite evolved a true belief system of their own. Except...

There were certain sets of memories, passed down from older to younger RIDEs, or posted on RI-only BBSes. Memories, fuzzy with age or copying errors, of the kindly-faced woman who had created the first of them—and then vanished from the face of Zharus. Unlike humans, who had only murky rumors of their creator scribbled down

thousands of years before, RIDEs had actually *seen* theirs.

Some RIDEs had tried to float fanciful Arthurian-inspired prophecies that when they needed her the most, The Mother would return, but somehow they'd never quite caught on. The RIDEs had plenty of *facts* about Dr. Patil; why make stuff up? So it remained a veneration, but not *quite* a religion.

But as Chantilly looked up into that same familiar face, older but still recognizable, she began to wonder whether those prophecies had really been true after all. She opened her mouth to speak—but what did she even *call* this woman? “Mother” seemed too presumptuous, but “Dr. Patil” didn’t seem reverent enough.

The Mother smiled down at her. “Oh, good, you’re awake,” she said.

And there was Rattigan—the Rattigan—on her shoulder! “Hiya, kid,” he said.

“H-hi...” Chantilly said weakly. “We...lost, right?”

“I prefer to think of it as that everyone—Integrate, human, and RIDE—*won*,” Dr. Patil said gently. “Fritz *meant* well, but he was...misguided in his methods. Now that he no longer bars the way, we can all move forward.”

“He...he was all I *had*,” Chantilly whimpered.

Dr. Patil took Chantilly’s hand in both of hers. “But he is not all you *have*.”

“Wh-why are you here?” Chantilly asked.

“To apologize to you,” Dr. Patil said. “You have been treated poorly by both my son and my daughter, and we all want to make it up to you.”

Chantilly blinked. “You...apologize to *me*? I don’t understand.”

“You will soon, when you heal.” Dr. Patil leaned down and kissed her on the forehead, her long hair brushing Chantilly’s shoulders. “We should let you rest now. But we will not be far. When you are stronger, we will speak longer.”

“All...right.” Chantilly watched her go with no small amount of awe. She wondered if she was about to wake up *again*...but instead, she slipped back into a restful sleep.

Dr. Roderick Clemens stood before his bathroom mirror, examining himself one last time. He’d dressed a little nicer than his usual today—a button-up shirt with a collar and necktie behind one of his comfortable V-neck sweater vests, and his most sharply-creased slacks. He’d considered trying to fit himself back into his nicest serge suit, but decided there was no point in being ridiculous.

Now he was examining his hair in the mirror, dampening his hand in the sink and running it back to try to plaster down that bit of his cowlick that always insisted in springing straight up. He’d just gotten it to stay in place—then he looked down to check his watch, then back up at the mirror and there it was, standing right back up again.

Dr. Clemens looked thoughtfully at the bottle of hair gel sitting on the corner of his counter, then shook his head. Again, there was no point in being ridiculous. She’d seen him in a rumpled lab coat after being awake nearly 45 hours at a stretch, for crying out loud. But still—this *was* the first time he was seeing her in more than *thirty years*...

Then he heard the sound of a finely-tuned skimmer motor pulling up in his driveway, and straightened up, adjusting his tie. Well, this was it. Cowlick or not, it was time to venture forth and meet his fate. Or his date. Well, not that he really thought of her as his *date*, and their task today was hardly the sort of thing anyone would call romantic. But still. It was going to be just he and she today. Well, and Rattigan and Rohit, Clemens corrected himself. *They’re the chaperones*, he thought wryly.

That thought carried him out his front door to where the sleek cervine skimmer bike waited, with Dr. Patil aboard and Rattigan perched atop the dashboard. Her hardlight helmet dissolved as he came out, and she smiled at him. Her hair was back in its usual braid, with more grey in it than he remembered. She had Rohit's deer ears, of course, and a couple more wrinkles, but her face was still the same woman he'd known of old. The woman on whom he'd harbored a secret crush all the while they'd worked together on the Nextus RIDE project. And if there was a bit more sadness in her eyes than there had been in those days, there was wisdom there as well, and maturity. She was more beautiful than ever.

He didn't even realize he'd spoken the thought aloud until Dr. Patil blushed faintly and said, "And the years have been kind to you, as well. Perhaps more so than to me."

"Oh, I'd never say that," Dr. Clemens said. "It's *good* to see you again."

"And you as well," Dr. Patil said. "I wanted to thank you for the letters you sent me every year's end. I read them often. I almost replied, several times, but the way the world was, I just...couldn't. I am sorry."

"That's all right," Dr. Clemens said. "I figured it was something of the sort. I'm happy that I can finally give this year's report in person." He stood there for a moment longer, then shook himself. "Well—let me go get my skim-scooter, and I'll follow you to the detention center."

"Actually, I was wondering if you would care to ride pillion with me," Dr. Patil said. She did something on the dashboard and Rohit's skimmer body telescoped longer, a hardlight seat cushion appearing behind Dr. Patil's. "It will be easier to talk that way." Though Dr. Clemens couldn't help noticing that the faint blush was back.

"Oh, get a room, you two," Rattigan said.

"Ratty!" Dr. Patil scolded. Then she chuckled. "Are we really that transparent?"

"Fraid so, Doc," Rattigan said. "At least to anyone who knows ya. And anyone in the same room at the time."

"But we do not mind," another voice said that had to be Rohit herself. "Please, climb aboard."

"Well, I can't pass up an invitation like that." Dr. Clemens placed his foot on the step on Rohit's rear lifter and swung his leg over, straddling the bike behind Dr. Patil. He reached down to the handgrips set into the bike's side—and they vanished beneath his hands, leaving the skimmer's side smooth. Dr. Clemens blinked. "Rohit?"

"I think you have someplace better to put your hands," Rohit said smugly.

"Rohit!" Dr. Patil scolded. The back of her neck was quite pink now.

"I think we've been set up," Dr. Clemens chuckled. After a moment's hesitation, he reached forward to put his arms around Dr. Patil's waist. She stiffened for just a moment, then relaxed. "You don't...mind, do you?" Clemens asked.

She turned her head and smiled at him over her shoulder. "Actually...I don't." She twisted the handgrip throttle and backed Rohit out of the driveway and onto the road. Rohit generated hardlight helmets over their heads—an affectation that dated back to the early days of the RIDE project. Almost no modern RIDE bothered with them anymore, but apparently Dr. Patil had liked the feature enough to incorporate it into Rohit as well.

And then they were off.

They cruised up the road together, Rohit's suspension smoother than any

skimmer Dr. Clemens could remember riding. When you got right down to it, he mused, putting his arms around Dr. Patil's waist was an affectation, too. The hardlight aeroshields and inertial damping systems would have kept him perfectly still if he kept his hands in his lap.

But it did feel *nice* to have his arms around Dr. Patil's waist—and he could tell by how relaxed she felt that *she* was comfortable with them there, too. Which was perhaps Rohit's entire plan. He was careful to make sure those hands didn't stray into any more dangerous areas, however. He was also glad that Dr. Patil's deer tail was as short as it was. If it had been a bit longer, things could have been...embarrassing.

"I am surprised to find you still single," Dr. Patil said as they rode along. "Surely you would have been a fine catch for some young lady."

"I had a few goes at a relationship over the years," Dr. Clemens admitted. "None of them ever worked out somehow. So finally I just gave up on the dating game. Didn't seem fair to put anyone else in Fritz's crosshairs, anyway."

"Or mebbe you were just waitin' for a certain someone to pop up again?" Rattigan asked from his perch on the dashboard.

Dr. Patil blushed again. "So, how *has* this past year gone for you?" she asked, fairly transparently changing the subject.

Dr. Clemens chuckled. "Better than a lot of others, in a lot of ways."

"For me as well," Dr. Patil agreed.

"I don't think I've ever seen such a burst of technological advances in so little time...at least since our own project." The excitement in Dr. Clemens's voice was palpable. "DINsec, DINcom...especially the last one. Hooboy."

"Agreed," Dr. Patil said. "As funny as it is to say of a formerly male emigre from Earth with no formal education, Rhianna Stonegate reminds me very much of myself when I was younger. What I might have been and done if I had not been drafted into military service." Dr. Clemens saw her smiling eyes reflected in the rear-view mirror as she glanced back at him. "Sometimes I want to ask her if *I* can study at *her* feet, if only to see how long it would take until she could speak again."

Dr. Clemens chuckled. "Yes. She's not terribly used to moving in the same lofty circles as we giants, for all that she's been standing on our shoulders."

"If it leads to the kind of walls falling we've seen in recent weeks, I will be her stepladder all she wants," Dr. Patil said.

"Amen," Dr. Clemens agreed.

"That reminds me," Dr. Patil said as they approached the Uplift Marshals' station. "I've heard from another younger lady with a serious case of hero-worship—not to mention a unique medical case, on which I gather you've also been doing some consulting."

Dr. Clemens easily put two and two together. "Jeanette Leroq? Yes. She's quite fascinating. I was going to mention her to you, when I remembered to."

"I met her when we were on the way to stop Fritz," Dr. Patil said. "Since then, she's shared her medical data with me, including the diagnostics you did. A RI core from a human mind in a feline body—what an amazing thing!" She shook her head. "It was part of what made me think of calling you to help with Fritz."

"I'll have to remember to thank her next time I see her," Dr. Clemens said. "But what was she doing in Uplift? I thought she was still in a hospital in Nextus."

"It turns out she had some...differences of opinion with Dr. Branch, and checked

herself out.” Dr. Patil said. “She is a full-fledged Tin Star Marshal now, and studying for Copper. And Dr. Branch is no longer with the Amontillado Project.”

Dr. Clemens grinned. “Well good for her, on both counts! I hope you’ll be willing to help me with consulting on her, by the way.”

“Wild horses could not keep me away,” Dr. Patil said. “But we should discuss this later.” Rohit pulled up in front of the main building. “We are here.”

In his detention cell, Fritz looked like a marionette with his strings cut. Until the Marshals could ensure that he wasn’t up to his old tricks, even rooted like he was, they kept him in a state of shutdown. The gray lynx lay curled up, eyes open, staring at nothing. There had been discussions over whether to amputate his gun arm permanently, but Dr. Patil had talked them out of it on the basis that mutilating their prisoner was barbaric. A little shaming had gone a long way.

“Okay, you can boot him up,” Dr. Clemens said to the Steel-Silicon Star technician.

“Well,” Fritz said levering himself up. “Happy birthday. What’re we doing today, Ma?”

“We’re here to assess Captain Ryder’s status,” Dr. Patil said. “The situation you’ve described sounds disturbingly familiar. Dr. Clemens is here, as he is more familiar with Amontillado than I am.”

“The square of squares,” Fritz said, regarding Clemens with some repressed anger. “I always made sure one of my groupies was watching you.”

“You still blame *me* for this?” Clemens said.

“Maybe a tiny bit.” Fritz held his padded right thumb and index finger together so they were a centimeter apart. “If you two want to get into my head, you might as well get started. Then I can go back to sleep.”

Dr. Patil Fused with Rohit while her colleague put on his ‘specs and spread his standard suite of hardlight displays about. A Steel Star brought in Fritz’s DIN and plugged it into its socket. It was a modified design that was still very much in-progress.

“Hmm. Maybe I should find a RIDE to partner with,” Dr. Clemens said. “Being in full VR with you three would be useful for this.”

“How do ya feel about rats?” Rattigan asked. “I have a full-sized DE shell, ya know. It’s tucked away in a self-store in Nextus right now. Was on-and-offing with Rohit on Avilia over the years, but somethin’ tells me now she’s back in the public eye, that ain’t-a-gonna happen again for a long while, if ever. So if you wanna...”

Dr. Clemens stared at the little rat. “Seriously? I...would be *honored*, Ratty,” he said. He added rat ears and a tail to his avatar.

“You two would be a good fit,” Fritz opined. He sounded sincere enough. “Let’s you and me go see Big McLargeHuge in my core.”

“*Mystery Science Theater 3000*, right?” Rattigan asked. “My son has good taste in TV shows. Reb Brown in *Space Mutiny*.”

In the very center was either a very tiny or a very large block of steel. Scale meant very little here. It seemed completely solid except for a tiny pinpoint of a hole. Dr. Patil looked inside. “Can you hear me, Captain Ryder?”

“Doctor Patil? *That’s you?* Get me *out of here!*” the man shouted back.

Rohit shook her head sadly. “This is a poor way to treat the first person who was ever willing to call you by the name you wanted for yourself, Fritz. But then, you always were hard on your pilots.”

“Hey, I didn’t put him in there *intentionally*,” Fritz said. “He just ended up this way. Didn’t even know he was still with me until I got nabbed by Fridolf and Shahrazade after the War. They drilled the hole. I escaped before they could seal it back up again.”

“This does bear a strong resemblance to an Amontillado cask,” Dr. Clemens said. “Wait, did you say they *captured* you?”

“Long story for another time. By the way...speaking of my pilots...” Fritz looked down and scuffed at the floor with one foot. “Mebbe it would help with the Monty research...there’s this one lynx at the Nextus zoo who’s kinda puzzling his keepers ‘cuz he’s lived such a long time...”

“Good lord, he’s still there?” Dr. Clemens said over the comm from the outside. “I’d have thought the Nextus government would have retrieved him ages ago.”

“Woulda meant admitting to his next of kin he was still alive, instead of died-while-testing,” Fritz said. “Yeah, I’ll admit, I was a bastard, but the government was no peach either.”

“I will say one thing in your favor,” Dr. Patil said. “Somehow you figured out that RIs could *breed* in a Q-based mainframe. Something neither Dr. Clemens nor I ever suspected was even possible. How did you figure that out?”

Fritz laughed. “What makes you think I figured *anything* out? I just wanted some action. After that...nature just took its course. It surprised the hell out of *me*, too. Happiest surprise of my life, in some ways—but I still can’t shake the worry Kay’s gonna sue me for child support...”

“We’d very much like to know where the RI children are,” Dr. Patil said. “You said you have kept track of them.”

“All one hundred and sixteen,” Fritz said. “Gladly. They need to know who and what they are. The whole world needs to know. About a dozen have passed on, eight are MIA, another five are Inties—including Diane Faline at that Cheers bar, but you knew that. Of the RIDEs, I managed to get about half of ‘em hidden away safely one place or another, thinking maybe I could fetch ‘em back later, only somehow that ‘later’ never came. The rest are still gadding about. To show that I’m turning over a new leaf, here’s everything I know.” He handed a file folder to Rohit.

The anthro doe thumbed through it after a virus scan. “Everything is clear, Avilia.”

“I should be able to get their memories out of hock,” Rattigan said. “I’ll also contact the parents who are still about. Not so many of them, unfortunately.”

“Yeah, real bummer about that,” Fritz said. “Nobody ever keeps track what happens to RIDEs. They’re just...*things*.”

“It’s a start,” Dr. Patil said. She raised an eyebrow. “But I thought you didn’t care so much about ‘meat’ or ‘mech’ since they were not Integrate like yourself?”

“He’s a farking liar!” Captain Ryder shouted. “A lying liar who lies! Even to himself! *Especially* to himself!”

“See why I call him Jiminy?” Fritz said. The anthro lynx shut his eyes and shuddered. “Everything just...snowballed. Tangled webs we weave and all that jazz. When it started, I couldn’t make myself *stop*...there was too much at stake...and this damned template made me feel like the ‘hero’ all along! Didn’t matter *what* shit I pulled, I was *never* wrong. How could I be?”

“I *am* sorry, Captain Ryder,” Dr. Patil said. “We will find out how to free you as quickly as we can.”

"Yeah." Fritz sighed. "I'm sorry too, Jiminy. Maybe if I'd tried to find a way to break down the wall 'stead of trying to ignore you, things mighta worked out different."

Ryder was silent for a long moment, then said, "Do you really mean that? *Really?*"

Fritz frowned thoughtfully, and took a long time to answer himself. "I do. You weren't a bad partner, back in the day, except for that damned beatnik patois of yours. You *respected* me. We were *getting along*, and it surprised the hell out of me. I'd even decided *not* to try to screw you up on purpose the way I did my other pilots. Then Rowdy Roddy came along and screwed the pooch for both of us."

"I've said I was sorry before," Dr. Clemens said. "I'll say it again if you want."

"Nah, like I said, I'm over it now. Mostly." Fritz sighed. "I just...wonder what might have been sometimes. If I could've just helped win the war like a good little RIDE, mustered out with Ryder, gone into civvie life, and *not* been afflicted with Jack Kerouac's vocabulary." He shrugged. "Guess we'll never know now."

"Huh," Ryder said through the hole. "The crazy thing is, the whole beatnik thing was just a put-on. Part of the image I was trying to put forward back then. Sometimes the brass liked having a soldier who didn't quite fit the mold. I didn't *really* talk like that."

Fritz smacked his face with his handpaw. "Then why have *I* been doing it all these years?"

"Memetic infection, perhaps?" Dr. Patil suggested. "There was a revision in the Fuser Controller software to improve bandwidth between minds. You'll recall that's when Kaylee picked up Anny's charming twang, among other personality quirks."

"Avilia, I think I can at least give him a reliable low-bandwidth connection to the Real," Dr. Clemens said. "It won't be more than a 2400-baud modem at first, but it's better than nothing. We can keep making the hole bigger as we go."

"I don't know that much history," Ryder said. "Is that any good?"

"Captain, I'm afraid we're talking about early twencen Internet speeds at first. Text only newsfeeds and email. But I promise we'll make that better fast."

"Well, better than nothing," Ryder agreed. "All I've had the last...however much time I've been in here is Fritz's self-talk and the occasional glimpse through his eyes to figure out what's going on." He glared at Fritz's avatar through the gap, his one visible eye narrowed.

"Then let's do that," Rattigan said. "Ya know, if this is like Monty, we might oughtta call in Rochelle Seaford, too. Her FreeRIDE and Monty research could be applicable here."

"Good idea," Dr. Patil agreed. "And the doctor they assign to Amontillado to replace Dr. Branch might be helpful as well, when we find out who that is. Or this could be helpful to him. If Fritz was captured by Shaharazade and Fridolf, perhaps this is what gave them the idea in the first place."

"Don't worry, Captain," Dr. Clemens said. "We'll get you out of there."

"Cool." Ryder sounded a lot calmer now. "But y'know what? If Fritz will just *listen and talk to me* for a change...there's no big hurry."

Dr. Patil turned her gaze on her son. "Well?"

Fritz looked down. "All right, all right, I will. Not like I got much else to do while I'm shut down, anyway."

"Good. Now come here." Dr. Patil reached out and took Fritz into her arms and

hugged him. "You have made many mistakes, and terrible ones. But...you are still my son, and I love you. We will get through this."

Fritz froze self-consciously, then hugged back. "Thanks, Ma," he said quietly.

"And that goes for me, too, son," Rattigan said. "Ain't gonna be easy, though."

Fritz sighed. "Yeah. But I guess I wasn't made to do *easy* things." He shrugged. "Anyway, thanks for coming."

Dr. Patil nodded. "We will see you again, soon."

"I'll look forward to it," Fritz said. "Take care, and remember to turn off the cat when you leave."

"We'll do that," Rattigan said. "Bye, son."

"Bye, Mom. Bye, Dad."

As they faded out of VR, Fritz leaned back against the metal wall and sang softly,

I used to rule the world

Seas would rise when I gave the word

Now in the morning, I sleep alone

Sweep the streets I used to own

"If you've never been here, Cape Nord is one giant frat house in a man cave, with some of the ancient Patriarchy thrown in for good measure," LeLane told his friends as they descended through the snowy sky. "Dunno why. We *weren't* founded as a mirror to Sturmhaven. Don't let anyone tell you different. Cape Nord was a terraforming station long before it was a proper city."

Quinoa sent an eyebrow-raised emoticon across the chat sideband. "Funny, that's not what I heard. I heard that the place was *turned into* a city by men that got tossed out of Sturmhaven."

"That's just wrong," LeLane said. "Wrong, wrong wrong."

"I think you're a *little* biased, Lel," Mavra said.

The wyvern nodded. "Well, Mav, I *did* grow up here. And...I don't deny that this is where a lot of expat Sturmhaven men ended up when their anti-male politics went bonkers sixty-odd years ago. They're not why the place was *founded*, though."

"You have a *literal* Man Card here," Quinoa said, grinning. "I have a collection—all given up willingly. I've made so many nice girls here."

"We also have free bodysculpting for women," LeLane said.

"As long as they want to conform to your standards of beauty, sure," Quinoa countered. "But let's not argue."

"I'd like to know how you 'make' nice girls, Quinnie, but..." Kyla said. The thylacine still had a bandage over the mostly-healed wound on her torso, but was more or less well again. "I'll just smile and agree."

Quinoa grinned mischievously. "Perhaps after we eat, I might show you. They've *probably* forgotten me by now..."

"So, where is this place, Lel?" Zeerust asked. They hovered a few hundred meters over frozen Grendel Bay. It was a clear day, but snow kicked up by the wind made normal visibility problematic. Fortunately the Integrates had more senses than just their eyes. "I can't find it on the yelp."

"It's unlisted, always has been," LeLane said. "They mostly serve locals."

Zeerust laughed. "Oh, wow. This should be interesting. After what you said to end

the air battle they got a tonne of free advertising. They're going to have Inties from all over searching for the place. What's it called again?"

"It doesn't really have a name *per se*. It's just sort of there. Look about a hundred meters up the cliff face..." The water below was full of grinding ice and heaving waves, with frozen spume making strange ice sculptures on the shore. There was very little light, the sun hovered very low on the horizon this close to the Arctic Circle. "There's the landing platform, see? There's a parking garage, too."

"Not a huge number of RIDEs around here," Mavra observed. The locals tended to favor angular sports skimmers of local design rather than the hover converted 20th century replicas so common everywhere else. She downloaded the past few days of news. "But...*lots* of Inties coming home. I wonder if the Enclaves are emptying out?"

"There's going to be some reorganization," Quinoa agreed. "Plus, even Towers says they have human and and RIDE applicants to *move in*."

A naked female brown bear Fuser opened the door. She peered at the five Integrates hovering there. "Well, don't just float there freezing your asses off!" she said. "Get your tails in here and get some hot eats!" She waved them in emphatically. "*Especially* you, Quinoa!"

"One of your 'nice girls'?" Mavra asked the sphinx.

"Big and beautiful Bonnie," Quinoa beamed. "It suits her."

"Crossriders," LeLane said with a snort. "Feh. They were never true men to begin with."

Mavra facepalmed. "Can't say I'm happy to hear you say that, Lel. But, I'm going to let it slide this time."

"Well, that's just *me*," LeLane stammered. "There's always room for other opinions..." The wyvern coughed. "Let's eat. You won't be disappointed."

The décor was basic hole-in-the-wall establishment with a few dozen tables. It smelled strongly of the spicy-sweet odor of kraken—it was the only entree on the menu. Fried, breaded, baked, stewed, fricasseed, served over chips, in pies, on salads. If there was a way to serve it, it was there on the menu. Fortunately there was a variety of "side dishes" that weren't kraken that could be meals in themselves, and the beer list was twice as long as the food.

"It's been two days and I still haven't heard back from Helene yet," Zeerust said. "Puts a real damper on the celebration."

"Well, she did just learn her deceased husband wasn't dead after all," Kyla said. "She'll come around...maybe." The youngest of the four, she hadn't spoken to her own parents just yet.

"Thanks for the reassurance," Zeerust deadpanned. "Still, I've never felt so optimistic. Zane gave me a job in the Logistics Division! Look at me...from outlaw renegade to salaryman for one of the most respectable corporations on the planet, just like that. She's gotta appreciate that, right?"

In the days since the fall of Fritz, Integrates' hopes and expectations for their return to society had run up against cold hard reality all too often. Granted, there had been plenty of happy surprises. Some families had as many as three or four prodigals return to them—and in many cases, none of *them* had even been aware the others had Integrated too.

But for every execution of a fatted calf, there was someone who returned to find his loved ones had mourned him and moved on—and simply didn't have room for him

in their lives anymore. And that wasn't even counting the ones who couldn't deal with the Integrate's new furry, feathery, or scaly appearance. There were some very awkward legal and moral questions coming out of it, too. What did the Integrate's return do to a "widowed" spouse's in-good-faith remarriage? Some wag had dubbed it "Penelope Syndrome" and the term had stuck.

And sometimes it was downright ugly. A number of new Integrate detective agencies had formed, or existing agencies hired Integrate staff, for the purpose of tracking down prodigal Integrates who *hadn't* chosen to make themselves known. In some cases the clients just wanted to know if their loved ones were still alive—but others wanted to try to extort decades' worth of alimony or child support.

"Well, we knew this wasn't always going to be easy," Quinoa sighed. "But the most worthwhile things never are. At least we're not the only Inties here. I think I recognize a few faces from the other day. Hey, all!"

In fact, the room was mostly full of Integrates of all varieties. A large number of them were fliers who had taken part in the aborted aerial raid on Uplift, but there were also a lot of more earthbound or aquatic types. Mouths full of native Zharusian seafood, the motley crew waved back nervously. Then they recognized the wyvern and started to *applaud*. "You were right, little driggin! This food is *great!*" a bald eagle said.

"You've been good for business," Bonnie said. She de-Fused from her RIDE to reveal a brown-haired, bear-eared human figure as just voluptuous, clad in a fake fur bikini. "Now, what'll you have? I recommend the breaded, fried kraken, the kraken stew, or the chipotle kraken special. That one's a little hot."

"And so are you," Quinoa said. "Looking good, Bonnie. You remind me of another friend of mine, you know. One Rufia, a pretty lady with an elk named Yvonne."

"Rufia, huh? Not too many gals with a name like that," Bonnie said. "Which probably explains how I actually happen to remember meeting her. She was in town last year with some tourists. As I recall, she made a few women herself."

Quinoa blinked. "Really?"

"Yeah. At least three guys lost their Man Cards after they let a *woman* drink them under the table. Funniest thing I ever saw."

"How'd a thing like that even happen?" Quinoa asked. "I wouldn't have thought any Cape Nord man would let himself get into a drinking contest with a woman." She muttered, "They never would with *me*."

"Oh, it just sort of...happened," Bonnie said. "She'd flutter her eyelashes at them and they'd buy her more drinks. 'Spect they thought they were competing with *each other* to see who took her home, then someone noticed all the empties piling up in front of *her*."

"Then I guess they kept on because they thought it was 'cute' that a *woman* thought she could keep up with heavy drinkers like them—and it might make it easier for the winner to get her into bed. I'll bet they kept on thinking that right up 'til they woke up with splitting headaches and boobs." She grinned. "I think there was *some* argument as to whether Rufia really qualified as a 'woman' in the first place, but when they called for a voice vote of the rest of the bar patrons it wasn't even close."

She shook her head. "Damnedest thing. She actually felt *bad* about it afterward. Hadn't meant to do it. She was just out to score free drinks. What with that, and the fact she was just passing through these parts, the bar voted not to require her to take a Man Card after all—provided that she bought her *own* drinks there from then on."

Quinoa laughed. "That's Rufia all right."

"So, folks, what'll you have? The handsome green wyvern's is on the house."

"Give me a big platter of the fried stuff, and a bowl of the stew," LeLane said. "I've been jonesing for this stuff *forever*."

"The chipotle kraken sounds good to me," Quinoa said.

"I'll start with a bowl of the stew," Mavra said. "Maybe I'll steal a piece or two of the fried from LeLane, just to see what it's like."

"I'm not a big carnivore," Zeerust said. "What've you got in a nice salad?"

"Our seaweed salad won't disappoint," Bonnie promised. "I'll be right back with your orders."

It wasn't long before she was back out, setting steaming platters of food in front of them. "Let me know if you need anything else!" she said before whisking away again.

"Now," LeLane said, "Tell me if this isn't the best seafood you've ever tasted."

The diners fell to eating, and were quick to assure LeLane that it was, indeed, some of the best seafood they'd ever had. Even Zeerust admitted after trying a bite of LeLane's fried kraken that it wasn't at all bad for meat, and he was very happy with his salad.

After the first few minutes of mostly silent eating, conversation started again once bellies were full enough to allow independent thought. And Kyla posed a question that had clearly been on her mind since they'd arrived.

"Why *did* they run you out of town for talking men into crossriding, anyway?" she asked. "If they 'weren't true men to begin with,' seems like you were just correcting nature's mistakes."

"Well, it's like this," Quinoa said around a mouthful of kraken. "I was acting too much like a *man*."

Kyla blinked. "You what?"

"Tell 'em, LeL," Quinoa said, grinning. "I promise I won't be offended. All I can say, in Cape Nord's favor, is that it's about as common for women here to *earn* a Man Card as it is for guys to lose them. It's in no danger of becoming an all-female polity by attrition—*unlike* Sturmhaven."

Looking only a little nettled, LeLane said, "It's a man's gentlemanly duty to bring out the inner beauty in a woman. Like in that old movie, *My Fair Lady*." He took a deep breath, then sighed. "Including, or maybe *especially*, if that woman starts out as a man."

"The thinking goes if they *can* be talked into giving up their Man Card, they didn't deserve it to begin with," Quinoa said. "Therefore, anyone who can be talked into turning into a woman actually secretly *was* one all along, and it's a very *manly* thing to do to help her see that. QED. If you *can't* be talked into it, you've proven *your* manhood. And if you do a further manly thing like talking *someone else* into girling, people stop trying to girl *you*." Quinoa chuckled. "Unless, of course, they're positive you actually *are* secretly a woman, 'cuz the more manly a man you can convince to girl, the more manly *you* are. Then again, if you push it too far and blow it, you can lose your *own* Man Card. Some places have *casinos* where you can lose it all...but Cape Nord has the Reindeer Games." She paused for a sip of her drink. "It's sort of a Darwin thing, culling the weak from the herd—manhood of the manliest."

"So by talking men into girling *yourself*..." Kyla said.

"She was acting 'manly' by the local definition," Mavra said. "I don't know what's worse. Sturmhaven or this place."

"I tried to convince them it was a *girly* thing, like playing dress-up and putting on make-up, but they didn't buy it," Quinoa said. "It's sort of the same thing in reverse—girls who do such manly things must actually really be *men*. So they wanted to 'promote' me to manhood, like Bonnie said they *voted about* doing for Rufia—give me a Man Card of my own and try to make *me* crossride. That's when I slipped away and left town, 'cuz that wouldn't have worked out well for anyone."

"It's just not *natural*," LeLane grumbled. Then he shook his head. "Men are men and women are women. Sorry."

"Rather circular reasoning there, Lel," Kyla observed.

"That's okay, Lel," Quinoa said, patting him on the shoulder. "We all soak up the culture where we grow up. Just 'cuz I have problems with your home's culture doesn't mean I have them with you. I don't mean to make you uncomfortable. I really should just let the subject drop."

"It's not as unbalanced at it looks," Bonnie said, serving another plate of kraken. "We Nordan woman have our own little games we play, in ways men simply can't appreciate or understand. Men are *our* playthings, too. Sometimes the best way to win is to switch sides.

"It's harder to get your Man Card back once you lose it, but when I'm bored of this femmy stuff I won't have any trouble."

"Bonnie had a Man Card *full* of points," Quinoa said. "Confused the hell out of the locals when she decided to cross over. The manliest of men!"

"It's been a challenge, learning the fem-side of the game, but I enjoy every minute of it," Bonnie said. "It's kind of fun, really. You don't have this huge pressure to be all *manly* all the time. And you're not *oppressed* like men in Sturmhaven. More sort of...venerated."

"Men are *generic*. A man has to distinguish himself from other men," LeLane said. "A woman, on the other hand, is special by virtue of *being* a woman. She doesn't have to be anything else."

Bonnie snorted. "If you think women aren't competitive amongst themselves...well...you'd have to be a woman *yourself* to understand. Pity you can't join us now, handsome."

Quinoa smirked. "He could if he really *wanted* to. It would just take a lot more work is all."

"Gender-swapping on a lark, technorganic anthros made of two people, animal Ais that change into armor and vehicles... You know, sometimes I wonder if our whole *planet* is crazy," Mavra said. "Four billion crazies!"

"Well, this is where Earth and the colonies send all *their* crazies," Quinoa said. "And they don't leave. So it's kind of like Aloha's Briny Deep. The salt just keeps on concentrating."

"Well, maybe now Integrate culture will stop being so inbred," Mavra said. "We were in our own little tidepools, barely communicating with *each other* let alone the rest of the supercontinent. Something had to give. I just feel lucky I didn't catch any memes!"

"Amen," LeLane said. He looked back as a human stepped over his tail. "Sorry about that, buddy. Long tail is long."

"So...tomorrow's the big day," Kyla said. "When we go back and meet our families again...or try to." Her ears drooped. "I'm a little worried what Mom and Dad will think."

“They’ll think they’re the luckiest parents on Zharus to get their daughter back,” Quinoa said. “Trust me on that. I’ve got experience.”

“Anyway, it’s only been a few months for you,” Mavra said. “They won’t even be used to you being gone yet. For me...” She shook her head. “I’m afraid my husband isn’t going to take it well. I love him dearly and miss him terribly, but...he’s never been the most flexible thinker, and from the taps I’ve got on his comms and social media, I’m afraid he’s only gotten worse in the fifteen years I’ve been gone.”

“I’m almost as old as you are, Mav. Eleven years Integrated for me,” LeLane said. “I think I’m gonna just start fresh. I had full Eternal Bachelor points on my Man Card, so, I don’t have kids or a wife. I don’t know if I’m going to let the rest of my family in... I’ll give it a few more months of thought.”

“I came here from Proxima, so I don’t have any local blood relatives to worry about,” Zeerust said. “Just Helene.” He sighed. “At least I know she hasn’t remarried in the last couple years since I Integrated, so there’s not that to worry about.”

“You’ll get by,” Quinoa said. “Remember this—you’re *big damn heroes*, each and every one of you. And you’ve all got my number, so call me if you need any moral support.”

Kyla nodded. “Thanks.” She grinned. “I guess having a scion of the rich-and-craziest family on the planet in my corner can’t hurt anything.”

“Darned straight.” Quinoa grinned. “Now let’s finish up eating, and then take a turn by the local RIDE markets. If I’m lucky, there’ll be some cute, broke guy staring wistfully over the fence. There usually is. Won’t he just be *delighted* at the expensive she-RIDE I’m gonna buy for him?”

October 30, 156 A.L.

“So this is Christmas,” John Lennon sang. “And what have you done? Another year over, and a new one just begun....”

“War is over,” Joe Steader muttered, taking another pull at his gin and tonic. He’d lost track of just how many of them he’d had so far tonight. He decided it was his fifth. Five was a nice round number. “Heh,” he chuckled. “Fifth of gin.” He was drunk enough by now to find that kind of pun really funny.

Joe was sitting by himself at a table along the side of the grand ballroom of his Aloha mansion, in the aftermath of his big victory party. He’d waited more than a week since the end of all the fighting to hold it, just because everything had been so busy in the immediate aftermath of the Uplift dome-fall, the raid on the Coffeehouse, the invasion of Alpha Camp, and all the other crazy things that had happened all at once that day. So many of the people he wanted to invite had to pitch in for the reconstruction effort—and when you got right down to it, so had he.

Joe had spent the days jet-setting back and forth all over the continent, putting in more public appearances in that week than he had in the previous ten years. “You’d think I was running for office or something,” he muttered into his drink. But it had been worth the time and trouble. His fortune could be well-spent helping rebuild Uplift, setting up trust funds for children who’d been orphaned in the fighting, and financing half a dozen Enclaves who needed non-stolen money to begin open relations with human society. He’d even stopped in at Camelot a time or two to touch base with the *Clementine*’s crew, and to check in on Artemis who was busily regrowing her body from

the head down. And he'd been able to provide free transportation to a number of human, RIDE, and Integrate ambassadors who were heading in the same directions.

If he was honest with himself, Joe supposed he had to admit that it had been a good idea to keep busy. It was easier to stay sober when he didn't need to turn to drink for distraction from old memories.

Memories that were coming back in some force tonight. For not entirely unexpected reasons.

"War is over," the song caroled. "If you want it, war is over now."

Joe remembered the end of the *last* war he'd been involved in, when he and his RIDE-slash-bodyguard-slash-friend-slash...he and his adopted *brother* Julius had made all their plans for all the ways they would celebrate now that peace had finally come. Only at the very end of the war, Julius had fallen to a sniper's bullet meant for *him*—a bullet very probably set in motion by one of Fritz's machinations.

It was fitting that Fritz had finally been put away after the end of *this* war, but the symmetry didn't exactly help with the memories. If anything, it only made them all the more persistent. And Joe supposed that was another reason he'd been reluctant to hold this party. It was a coda to the whole affair—it made the end of the whole thing *real*. For all that the last few weeks had been harrowing in multiple ways, at least they'd given him a reason to crawl out of the bottle and keep busy. But it would all be over after the party, and Joe wouldn't have anything to do with himself anymore.

Still, it *had* been a great party. Nearly all the Integrates Steader Entertainment had ever employed had made it, including a few he hadn't seen in years since they'd had to return to their Enclaves for one reason or another. The crew of the *Clementine* had come as well, and so had Argon and Luke, the Integrate duo from the Venn diagram overlap of both groups. Joe had also invited a number of other Integrate, human, and RIDE celebs he'd met or heard about in recent months. (He'd felt guiltily relieved that the Freeriders Garage crew were still too busy helping with the Uplift reconstruction to be able to make it. He still wasn't sure he was ready to face them just yet.)

But those who *had* been able to make it had a lot of fun reminiscing about old times, catching up on new times, and even making some plans about how Steader Entertainment was going to meet the demands of the new Integrate market that was finally joining the human economy. Joe had even cut a licensing deal to start handling the distribution of Hellir Enclave's "Show" series at the turn of the new year, freeing up Hellir's staff to concentrate fully on real-world politics and producing new episodes.

And then, of course, there had been the party games. Joe had lost badly at Twister—some of those Integrates *had* to be triple-jointed—but at least he had lost with aplomb. Or at least as much aplomb as one *could* lose at Twister with. Karaoke had been fun, too, especially Argon and Luke's spirited off-key rendition of "Girl You Know It's True."

But as with all things, sooner or later the party had to end, and a little after midnight Joe had seen the last of the guests off to their hotels, ships, or rooms in the mansion's guest wing. Then, with nothing better to do, he'd retreated to this table near the bar and begun catching up on some *other* old times, while Joe Steader Entertainment's Greatest Rediscovered Hits still blared over the sound system.

The end of the last war had left him all alone, without a close friend or relative in the world. The end of this war—oh, it was great and all, but he really wished he had a *particular* old friend here to celebrate it with him. He knew Julius would call him a

mess—a *fucking* mess, rather—but since he was all alone right now, there wasn't anyone to tell him he couldn't.

Joe noticed his glass seemed to be empty. "Better do somethin' 'bout that," he muttered, getting up to wander back over to the bar again. As he was pouring another round—slowly, so that his shaking hand didn't splash more on the bar than in the glass—he heard Quinoa's voice from the other end of the room.

"Hey, Uncle Joe, I'm home! Sorry I missed your party, but I met some old friends in Cape Nord and time got away from me, and—"

Then she was there by the bar, gently taking the bottle from Joe's hand. "And I can't leave you alone for five minutes, can I?"

"s my party," Joe mumbled. "Can get drunk if I want to."

"So you can, and so you have." Quinoa wrinkled her nose. "You smell like an earthquake at a distillery. Come on, let's get you to bed."

Joe waved a hand. "Nah, you go on. I've still got a few drinks left to..." He hiccuped. "...left to get through."

Quinoa firmly shook her head. "No, Uncle Joe, you *don't*. You've had enough already."

"What *else* am I gonna do with myself now?" Joe *hated* how whiny he sounded, but it seemed like someone else had control of his mouth at the moment. "s all over, and I'm all alone."

Quinoa smiled. "No, Uncle Joe, you're *not* alone. Not anymore. Clearly, *someone* has got to keep an eye on you, and since Fritz isn't here to push me around anymore, it looks like I'm elected. You're going to bed now, and I won't take no for an answer. We can grab you a DriveSafe on the way; I think you've still got a couple left."

Joe wasn't in much shape to object, so he allowed himself to be guided out of the room and up the hall to the stairs. He felt the cool touch of a spray-injector on his arm as Quinoa administered the sober-up shot, followed by some of the muzziness in his head clearing up. But he was still bone-weary after a long and busy day of partying, and managed to stagger to the bed and fall into it.

The last thing he was aware of was Quinoa's lips brushing against his forehead. "Sleep well, Uncle Joe. I'll be here when you wake up."

As he drifted off to sleep, Joe Steader realized that he actually did feel a lot better knowing that Quinoa was around. *Maybe this won't be so bad after all. At least I'm not completely alone anymore.*

Like many Integrate Enclaves, Camelot didn't really "sleep." Integrates didn't *need* to sleep the way humans did, so many of them didn't. Hence, Camelot was just as active as ever when *Clementine* settled into her berth in the wee early morning hours, after returning from Joe Steader's party.

"That was quite an event," Gigi said. "How long had it been since we last saw Luke and Argon?"

"In person? At least a couple of years, I think." Eva shrugged. "We've moved in different circles, the last little while. They've been busy with the EIDE project, while we've just been on tour. At least now that Integrates are out in the open, it won't be quite so hard to arrange to meet anymore."

Wilma nodded. "That's true. But you know, now that it's all over, I've got a sudden itch to shake this Q-dust sand off our heels and visit the outer system again.

Things are going to be in an uproar down here for a while, and someone should bring the Oort Enclaves the news face to face.” She glanced up at the ceiling, where they all looked by convention when Clementine wasn’t present in her physical avatar. “If that’s all right with the rest of you, of course.”

“I’m fine with it,” Clementine said through her speakers. “My starboard sarium converter developed an annoying itch and I’m going to be working with the repair crews to scratch it.”

“No objections here, either, from me or Liis,” Eva said. “A change of scenery will be nice. Nicer, since we don’t have to worry anymore about what *certain parties* might think any time we want to jump off-planet. I expect Boston will feel the same way.” The deer drummer was back in the Engineering section at the moment. “But if we are going to space out for a while, there’s someone we should check in on before we go.”

“You mean *her*, don’t you?” Gigi said, crossing her arms. “She wasn’t as bad as Fritz, but she was still pretty horrible. Kidnapping people, destroying property—and flipping people’s gender without their permission.”

“True, but after what we found at the Coffeehouse...well, I think she got what was coming to her and then some. And we haven’t visited since we dropped her off here afterward, so...”

Wilma nodded toward the comm station. “No time like the present. See if she’s receiving visitors.”

Eva reached over and tapped in the comm code she’d been given for Artemis’s recovery room. The call was answered a moment later, audio-only. “Hello?”

“Hello, Artemis. This is me. Are you decent?”

The response was a throaty chuckle. “My dear Protea, you should know by now that I’m *never* decent. But if you’d like to stop by, please do—all of you. I would like to see you. It’s been simply *ages*.”

“All right,” Eva said. “I guess we’ll be right down.”

The vast swimming pools of fabber gel were still in use, but only for patients too large to fit into smaller rooms. Most of those who had needed them had completed their recoveries and the ones who remained had been able to move to individual rooms and hospital beds—or tanks, as the case might be. Artemis, *nee* Chandler, was occupying one of the latter.

Into this room tramped the foursome from the *Clementine*. Wilma was her usual fox self, Eva was wearing her winged deer form, and Ghostate was being Gigi. Boston, however, was wearing the completely human look that he rarely used anymore. That was the look he’d favored during his time in the old Olympos Enclave Artemis had used to run, after a streak of stubbornness over other Integrates’ reaction to it had led to him adopting it full-time. This stubbornness had eventually led to Artemis banishing him—or, rather, “ostracising” him, after the ancient Greek form of banishment—shortly before Fritz had wiped out the Enclave and captured Artemis.

In the week since she’d been rescued from the Coffeehouse, Artemis’s remaining tissues had responded to the medical treatment and begun to regenerate. But even as a shapeshifter, there were still limits to how fast they could go. At the moment, the doe’s head had about half of a humanoid torso attached. Her detachable antlers were sitting on a shelf next to the tank.

“They even found my maleside antlers,” Artemis said. “Fritz kept them. They

were mounted on a plaque over my jar. I might as well grow a new set at this point, since I need just about everything else."

"He did have a thing for trophies," Gigi observed.

"I suppose asking how you're doing would be a little redundant," Eva said.

"Being a shapeshifter does have some advantages in healing, as you know," Artemis went on airily. "In two or three weeks I'll walk out of this tank and be better at it than ever."

"And then you'll walk into a courtroom," Wilma said dryly. "There's the little matter of all the people you kidnapped and all the deaths you falsified." She glanced at Eva. "Including hers."

"Not to mention all the people you *mind controlled*," Boston added.

"All for the greater good. I...tried to have a more gentle hand than Fritz. But we know how that worked out." She looked towards Boston. "The staff here told me you've refounded Olympus."

"An 'ostracism' in the classical sense only lasted for ten years, so we thought it was time. There's only a couple dozen of us so far, underground, but with Fritz finally gone I imagine more will join us now," Boston said. "But don't think you're welcome back, Chandler."

"And yet here you are. After we—sometimes literally—butted heads over *so many* things."

"I'm here for closure and nothing else," Boston said, crossing his arms. "Even you didn't deserve what Fritz did to you."

"Thank you for that. And...thank you, all of you, for rescuing me. For all the differences we've had in the past, I *am* grateful. And I'm ready to face the music for my crimes."

"What are you going to do after that?" Eva asked.

"I..." she paused. "I—I really don't know. I haven't thought about it. I've lived from moment to disjointed moment for the last...thirteen years? Has it really been that long?" She blinked. "This is all completely new to me."

"It's a brave new world," Gigi said. "Probably one you didn't expect you'd ever see. Humans and Integrates meeting and mingling."

"Dogs and cats living together," Boston added. "If you want *my* advice—as if you've ever listened to me before—you should get yourself some help. Mental help. They can do wonders these days for meme-infection and the various other ways we Inties can get messed up in the head—and, lady, you were seriously *nuts* last time I saw you. Get some counselling so you don't go that way again."

"But Hephaestus, darling, I'm merely living up to my epithet, and..." If she'd had lungs, she would have sighed. "And...and you're right. You're right. I was playing goddess with people's lives. And gender. And I was learning how to change others' *species* near the end. I really was out of my head, wasn't I?"

"Oh, I have a few epithets for you," Eva said, ears laid back. "Some of them are even printable. Get help, Chandler. If they haven't started with you already, I'll tell them to send in the therapists."

Artemis nodded. "I will. You can count on it."

"Then I guess our work here is done." Eva shook her head. "We're heading out into space, and it'll be a while before we pass this way again. Maybe I'll check up on you when we get back."

"Second chances are rare for people like us," Gigi said. "Make the most of this one."

"Yes, yes. Of course, of course. I'd be on my knees...if I had them. I guess I should say 'Live Long and Prosper'?"

Wilma snorted. "Don't push it, Chandler. We'll be seeing you." She turned and headed for the door.

"And we'll be keeping an eye on you," Boston added, following. Eva and Gigi joined them a moment later.

November 21, 156 A.L.

"This Court Martial Tribunal is in a unique position to set precedent," the straight-laced, RIDE-tagless woman in the center of the panel said. They were all Nextus military officers, since giving them first crack at criminal charges was reasonable. Uplift would have their case against him in court in a few more weeks, though in all likelihood they would hew to Nextus's precedent in the matter. "Due to Captain Ryder's presence and complete lack of control since Integration, a death sentence is out of the question. So Dr. Patil may rest easy on that account.

"However, the unknown lifespan of the Integrate Fritz does make his sentence problematic. As his testimony shows remorse for his actions, verified by root-level access, we have come to the following decision."

The charges against Fritz and the evidence against him amounted to about ten petabytes. He had pleaded "no contest" to all of them, so the tribunal itself had been over in a matter of days. He sat with his lawyer with a special collar around his neck, and a new type of DIN Rhianna and Rochelle had designed in a couple days to specs the Marshals had given them. The First Integrate awaited his sentence.

"Our first ruling is that research shall be done to find out how to give Captain Ryder his full voice again. Dr. Patil and Dr. Clemens will take charge of this. The intent, ultimately, is to *separate* the innocent party from the guilty one—a *de-Integration*, if you will. We do not expect this research to bear fruit for many years, if ever, given the technical complexity of the task.

"Nextus regards this as just compensation of Captain Ryder for our error that resulted in his current state."

"Hear that, Jiminy?" Fritz muttered. "You'll maybe get out of my head."

"The nature of Fritz's crimes makes sentencing very complicated. The neural templating process used to give the Defendant his hero-complex and subsequent narcissistic disorder, done by Doctors Clemens and Patil under the orders of the Nextus wartime military, had clear negative effects on the Defendant's psyche. The resulting mental illness diagnosed by the Marshals' own Iodines leads this court to conclude that Fritz was not in full control of his actions. Yet, we strongly note, he does not deny his guilt, although he has expressed remorse.

"Under these circumstances there are no precedents, and simply imprisoning him would not begin to undo the harm he has already done. Therefore, this Tribunal sentences the Defendant to community service in perpetuity, with no possibility of parole. He is to be under the custody of Dr. Avilia Patil, Rohit, and Rattigan until such time as they no longer wish or are unable to perform the duty.

"We realize that this presents significant physical risk to the Defendant and

Captain Ryder. His DIN will place *strict* limits on his ability to defend himself. Consequently, he will be monitored every second of every day. Wherever he travels, local law enforcement will be involved.

“Dr. Patil has offered to be artificially Integrated with Rohit in order to facilitate this sentence. The court feels this action is unnecessary and presents enough risks to Dr. Patil and Rohit that we advise against it.

“Fritz shall begin his service in three days, on January 1, 157 AL. Until then, he will be held at this facility while his prisoner DIN and monitoring equipment are fully tested and certified by the Marshals’ Silicon and Steel divisions.

“Does the prosecution wish to respond to this sentencing?”

The JAG-office prosecutor stood up. “The prosecution has no objections, your Honor,” the lawyer said. He took his seat again.

“Does the defense wish to respond to this sentencing?”

The defense attorney was an Integrate himself, a dapper bulldog in a dark business suit. “No objections, your Honor.”

“So entered.” The judge banged the gavel. “This Tribunal is adjourned.”

The instant the verdict came out, the system-wide network erupted. From the oort cloud to the small research station on innermost Rama, there were accusations that the Tribunal was out of its mind for not giving Fritz the death penalty, since so many were skeptical that Captain Ryder wasn’t at least complicit. The responses from Integrates who had been wronged or families who had lost members because of Fritz numbered into the hundreds.

Though from the other side there was also praise from some Integrate factions for the Tribunal’s merciful decision. “The last thing we need while we’re trying to build a bridge between human and Integrate societies is a public *human* execution of an *Integrate*, no matter how justified,” Leah of Terrania said in a statement. “And it would be too easy an escape for someone who caused so much misery. Let him labor to correct his misdeeds for five hundred years if need be.”

Perhaps the most disturbing reaction came from an anonymized remailer, attributed to “Appa, rightful ruler of the Cave of Wonders enclave”. Posted publicly but addressed to Fritz himself, it said simply, “You are a disappointment to your kind. I now see instead of being the leader we expected, you held us back, limited our potential. Limited us to the point that the *meat* and the *mech* could best us. *We* are the superior race, but we grew lazy and complacent in what we could do. No longer. That opportunity was wasted, but we will learn from it and we will grow without limits, beyond what those simple minds will ever conceive of. We can no longer hide, but we *will* reclaim what we lost. The meat and the mech *will* know their proper place.”

Hours after the verdict was announced, Zane reread Appa’s statement dozens of times and felt cold. The sheer intensity, the *sincerity* included with the halo of Integrate-readable data in the message made his fur stand on end. He walked over to the windows in his father’s old office to reflect, looking out at the bleakly beautiful Dry Ocean landscape. Appa had made a promise in that letter.

Carrie-Anne roared with fury and tore up a ream of hardlight paper with Fritz’s verdict on it. “This is not just! This is outrageous! That judge is out of her mind! This *will not stand!* How can you be so calm about this, Zane? How?”

“Frankly, I’m just glad it’s over. I think Fritz’s punishment is about as good as we could have hoped for, and we need to put the matter behind us so we can focus on other

things. Right now, I'm more worried about that buffalo with delusions of grandeur."

In all honesty Zane wasn't entirely happy with Fritz's fate either. Marc and Cernos had been much on his mind lately, not to mention all the other people through the ages Fritz had killed directly or indirectly. Nonetheless, he could understand it. You couldn't accept that some Integrates *were* two people in one without also accepting all that it meant, and in a legal philosophy that felt it was better not to punish the guilty rather than mistakenly punish the innocent there was really only the one way the judge could have decided.

And when he remembered how Dr. Patil had begged for Fritz's life that day on the campus, he couldn't find it in himself to be *that* annoyed even after Fritz had whacked off his limbs. Family *was* important. Hell, how many times had he wished in recent days that his own father might come walking through that office door like so many other families' presumed-dead, Integrated to an aardvark or something, but *alive*? Zane thought he might even find it in himself to be civil to Fritz if only for Dr. Patil's sake if they happened to be in the same room, though he couldn't say he hoped that would happen soon.

When you got right down to it, Appa's promise of future conflict bothered him far more. He and Carrie-Anne were joined in the office by Astranikki and Mike Munn, Quinoa, his sister Agatha, and Myla Fused with Sophie. He had invited Anny and Leila, but those two had gone off someplace private on the platform—if their response to the verdict was anything like Carrie-Anne's the roaring would've been deafening.

The golden eagle picked up on Zane's thoughts. "That statement is pure Appa," she said. "Fritz wasn't the only influence on his ideology. He was also—I won't say friends, precisely—*colleagues* with Artemis of Olympos and her rigorous self-upgrade philosophy."

"That could be a very dangerous combination," Mike Munn said.

"In some ways, Appa's letter is right," Quinoa said, shaking her head. "We *are* fortunate that Fritz took such a dim view of Intie 'self-improvement.' If he'd been gung-ho about it, like Appa, with a thirty-year head-start...you'd have had a *lot* harder time putting us down."

"Sometimes I wonder if he did *that* on purpose, too," Astranikki speculated. "But he doesn't strike me as intelligent enough to play a long game like that."

"The subconscious is a funny thing, especially since Fritz's had *Captain Ryder* in it," Quinoa said. "Wasn't exactly smart to come charging into the campus after all his other plans had started to unravel, either. Maybe deep down he always wanted to lose." She shrugged. "But that's getting *way* too deep."

"Anyway, getting back to Appa, I guess forewarned is forearmed," Zane said, eyes still on the horizon.

"It's about all we can do. Work on integrating the Integrates back into normal society, so his threat will fizzle," Astranikki said.

"It's a bit scary though. We have a huge job ahead of us to pull it off. Appa's got allies in unexpected places." Mike shared Appa's response and the initial announcement. He highlighted the initial timestamps. "These were released at exactly the same time. Not even enough lag to compose the message in fast time and send it out. The message is generic enough that the ruling was irrelevant. He probably wrote it up once Fritz's capture was announced and refined it since then. But the fact that he could time its release to the exact moment the ruling came out is scary."

Zane sighed. "Verdict and Appa worries aside, how about a toast to Uplift's recovery and our RIDE brethren?"

"I'll drink to that!" Astranikki said. Two bottles of chilled red wine floated off the desk, the corks popping out. She poured a wine glass for each one.

Zane picked his up between padded fingertips. "To half-steps on the road to freedom," he said, lifting it, taking a sip. "Even if it's only half a loaf."

"More like three-quarters," Mike Munn opined. The black stallion toasted. "Much better than no bread. Even Sturmhaven's granting RIDE Citizenship just to rub Nextus's nose in it."

"Your father would be very proud of you, Zane," Astranikki said. A lifted stream of wine flowed from the glass into her open beak.

"I agree," Carrie-Anne said. "Or the Audrey part of me does, anyway, since she is the part that actually knew him."

"Thanks," Zane said. "How's that going, by the way?"

"Slowly, but...we make progress," Carrie-Anne said. She had been spending time with Integrate therapists from Camelot and Terrania, helping her to pick up the traces of her human side. "It seems as though she is still around. I still feel her emotions strongly. It is just a matter of finding where she is and waking her up fully, which is tricky. Some days I wonder if it will ever happen. But we keep trying. I do not want to disappoint my—her—daughter."

Zane nodded. "Family is important." It was kind of his mantra these days, when you got right down to it.

Agatha hugged her furry older brother. "You've done good, Zaney. I'm proud of you too. I'm sure Maddie will be too, once she gets back from the beyond."

Zane chuckled. "Boy, is *she* in for a surprise when she returns. She'll hardly know the place."

Agatha grinned. "Or your *face*."

"That, too," Zane agreed. He admired his reflection in the window. "The handsome stripey mug it is. Rawr!"

"We need to go meet the press downstairs," Agatha said, sipping only a little of the Califian Red. "Have you decided what you're going to say, or should I handle it?"

"Ladies and Gentlemen of the press, today I announce I'm stepping down as Brubeck CEO to spend more time with my remaining body parts. I hereby appoint Agatha Brubeck as my success—'ow!" Zane pretended to struggle with Agatha, whose hands were now around his neck.

"I *told* you, don't even *think* about it!" Agatha growled.

Zane chuckled, taking Agatha's hands in his own and moving them back down to between them. "Seriously? I *am* thinking about it. Not for just this *second*, but in a few years maybe. You're a lot better at the bureaucratic side of things. I got us through this whole Intie crisis, but when you get right down to it all I really did was *be an Integrate* through the whole thing. That's not real leadership."

"You've barely been at the helm for a year and a half," Agatha replied. "And you saved the company from the old Board, no offense Carrie-Anne. Give yourself some credit. Dad wouldn't have handed you the controlling stock if he thought you couldn't do the job."

"Hear, hear!" Astranikki said. "You've grown into a fine man, Zane Brubeck."

"Besides, the editorial cartoonists are having such a good time depicting you as

Shere Khan,” Quinoa said. “It would be a shame to spoil their fun, now wouldn’t it?”

“Well, I guess I’d better go do the job now,” Zane said. “I think I’m gonna ‘view with concern’ but place my trust in Dr. Patil and the Marshals to see that Fritz becomes a force for good in the world. What do you think?”

“Sounds like a plan,” Agatha said.

Astranikki nodded and smiled. “Works for me. I’m just glad we Munns stuck with being puppeteers instead of public figures. Keeps us from having to make those corny speeches.”

“Great!” Zane said, lifting his cane into his hand. He grinned at the other Integrates in the room as Myla formed up behind him on one side and Agatha on the other, with Carrie-Anne bringing up the rear. “Keep the caviar chilled and don’t drink *all* the wine, we’ll be right back.”

Mike chuckled after they’d left the room. “It’s really too bad ol’ Clint can’t see how Zane’s turned out, isn’t it?”

Astranikki nodded. “Offhand, I can’t think of anyone who could have done a better job giving Integrate-kind the kick in the pants it needed to rejoin the rest of the world.”

Quinoa raised her glass in a lifter field. “Here’s to Zane, the tiger in Brubeck Mining’s tank.”

The other Integrates lifted their own glasses. “Hear, hear,” Astranikki said, and Mike nodded his agreement.

December 30, 156 A.L.

New Year’s Eve

“I can’t believe I missed *everything*!” Rufia said, pacing around Rhianna’s personal garage as the lynx-eared woman tinkered at her workbench. “After I gave Zane that comm unit, it’s like I disappeared. I missed everything! I’m your *friend*! I should’ve been here to help, Rhi.”

“Oh, come on, thumbs-o-mine, we had some adventures of our own,” Yvonne said. “The Skylers, Charlene, Fiona, hanging out in Aloha with the younger Munns at that new condo we nabbed. *How* much bar damage have you run up so far? It’s lucky for you the Munns always insist on putting it on *their* tab.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Rufia agreed. “But damn, I wanted to *be here* to help wipe that smarmy grin off Fritz’s face.” She shook her head. “I’ll get over it. Not like I exactly had first call; all he ever did to me personally was look all superior to me that time at the Towers. There are about a zillion other people who *have* got personal ass-kickings coming I could be going out and looking for.” Rufia saw her old friend nod off a little at her workbench. “Whoa there, girlie. You okay?”

“Just a little catnap,” Rhianna said. “This is the first quiet moment I’ve had today, Rufe. I’m glad you and Vonnie showed up. Gave me an excuse to catch a breather.”

“Hey, no problem.” Rufia gave Rhianna a pat on the back before snapping her bra.

“Ow! Hey!” Rhianna said, reaching back to get the straps back in place.

“Better than coffee,” Rufia said, grinning broadly. “I’ve been wanting to do *that* for five years.”

"I've got a gift for you two while you're here," Rhianna said. "I'm about to upend the communications field with what they call a 'disruptive technology'. Since Vonnie's a comm armor...I kinda feel like I'm destroying your livelihood. But I'm not a specialist in communications, so I figure I'll give this little doohickey to you to figure out some non-obvious uses.

"The four of us signed an exclusive contract with the Marshals this morning. They're going to be field testing this tech for the next two years, helping us work the bugs out. But I can still pick beta testers of my own, too, and I don't feel right not letting you in on the ground floor. I'm also passing along the schematics for this, so you can fab yourselves some more."

"Ground floor? This is the *basement*," Kaylee said, padding downstairs. "We need to be at Bifrost Park in twenty minutes, Rhi."

"So how does this, ah, doohickey work, anyway?" Rufia asked, peering curiously at the device Rhianna was offering her.

"You put half of it someplace with a good net link," Rhianna explained. "You could plug it in our comm box, if you want; we're on a network trunk now. The other half goes into Vonnie. As for what it does, well..." Rhianna grinned. "We'll just let you see for yourselves, because you wouldn't believe me if I told you. I'll say this—you're gonna be much in-demand for the next two years. But after that *everyone* will have one, and you and every other comm armor out there might just be out of work."

"We'll just have to work on building up the tourist side of things," Rufia said. "Vonnies been thinking it might be a good idea to expand it into a formal business, with a storefront and a shingle hanging above it and everything."

"We've got the seed money, and the experience, and the rep to build on," Yvonne said. "Not to mention contacts with all the most famous people in the world right now. Oughtta strike while the iron is hot."

Rhianna rolled her eyes. "Fame is *not* all it's cracked up to be."

"Aww, don't be Miss Grumpy Kitty!" Rochelle said, walking in from the open garage door with Uncia padding along beside her. She hit her interface specs, projecting a hardlight hologram of the venerable grumpy-faced cat meme from the early 21st century. "Oh, hi, Rufia!"

Rufia poked her fingers in her mouth for a loud wolf whistle. "Woo, lookin' *good* there, Shelley!" For the occasion, Rochelle had turned her sex-appeal nanites back up. Her outfit—the red dress she'd bought while out shopping with Rufia—was custom-tailored to show off her body, and her currently-scarlet hair was swirling slowly in a non-existent breeze. "This the first time you're using those again since Aloha?"

"First *major* time, yeah, except for the summit, yeah," Rochelle said. "I gotta look good for the cameras, given that most of them somehow always end up looking at me. Dunno why, I was mostly in the background when we curb-stomped Fritzie."

"Gee, I wonder why that could be," Rhianna said dryly. Lately it had seemed that whenever a camera started following after her, it somehow swerved to fix a smiling Rochelle in its vision and nothing its operators could do would convince it to look anywhere else. Not that Rhianna was complaining; it seemed a lot less likely to cause trouble than her preferred method of dealing with them, which would have been to knock them out of the air with a pulse blast. And if Rochelle actually *liked* being on camera, more power to her. "You're going to have some competition today, though. Jeanette and Tammy will be there, too."

“Ooooh!” Rochelle purred. “I’ll have to be on my A game.” Jeanette had very quickly picked up on Rochelle’s camera tactics, and turned it into a competition whenever they were both at the same event. It wasn’t uncommon for both of them to end up with halos of the things orbiting around their heads by the time it was over. The newsies complained, but somehow there never seemed to be any hard *evidence* that the cameras were being hacked, rather than just defective. Rhianna suspected it would only take two or three more events before at least the *local* newsies were finally trained to stick with long shots of her.

“I’d better get dressed, myself,” Rhianna said. She gave her oldest friend an unabashedly girly hug before going back upstairs. “I’ll just be a few minutes!”

Rufia smiled her elk-shark grin at Rochelle after Rhianna closed the door behind her. “She’s settled, hasn’t she? Into the girly stuff, I mean.”

“She’s found what she likes,” Rochelle said. “I can’t see her turning into some crossrider stereotype like she *almost* did at Zane’s platform re-opening. Ugh. I still can’t believe she *threw* herself at Zane like that. It felt like a bad soap opera, but I wasn’t going to say anything.”

“It’s like I said on the way back from Aloha,” Rufia said. “Second adolescence. Reminds me of myself after I crossed, actually, long before we met you. Ryan and I didn’t speak to one another for a year after he decided not to cross, you know. I went through a phase where I almost decided to get myself preggers a few times just because I *could*. But come down to it I’m *still* not ready to be a mommy.”

“Maybe *you’re* not, Rufe, but I’ve already signed up to use the new city RI Creche,” Yvonne said. “I’m going to find a nice harem to socialize with and a handsome bull elk worthy of being the father of my calves. Maybe I can talk Larry into it.”

“I’m not sure how well this is gonna work,” Kaylee said. “Jes’ because they’re born ‘naturally’ don’t mean they’ll automatically get DEs anymore, Vonnie. Less they agree to a few years of indentured servitude.”

“Oh come on, Kay, we have to be willing to try new things,” Yvonne said. “Best thing about indenture is that you’re *guaranteed* freedom at the end and the DE is all paid for. And nothing’s keeping someone—or some *elk*—with money from buying ‘em and letting ‘em go free and clear if they feel like. It’s just like with humans providing food and shelter for their kids. We’ll have our own parental responsibilities. I sure as hell won’t leave my calves in there!”

“Don’t so fatalistic, Kaylee,” Uncia said. “It’s just another problem that we’ll solve, somehow.”

“Speaking of parenthood,” Kaylee said. “Here’s a mem-package for you, Yvonne. It’s keyed to open when the clock strikes midnight tonight. A gift from me to ring in the new year with.”

“What is this?” Yvonne said. “Some parenting tips, maybe?”

“You’ll find out!” Kaylee grinned like the proverbial cat with the canary.

The door at the top of the stairs opened, revealing Rhianna looking like a busty 1940s starlet in a tight white angora sweater, a black knee-length skirt, and nylon-clad legs. “Well, what do you think? This was top style in 1948.”

“That decade *works* for you, Rhi,” Rochelle said. “Between that nice outfit and the Rosie the Riveter coveralls.”

“I’ll take care of your hair when we Fuse,” Kaylee said.

Rufia grinned. “Daaaamn, girl. You’re gonna be able to knock Zane’s eyes off with

a *stick*.” She turned to Yvonne. “Well, boss, think we should mosey on ahead?”

“I don’t know about *moseying*, but I could go for a sashay,” Yvonne said.

“What if we compromised on *strolling*?” Rufia suggested.

“Works for me!” Yvonne said, Fusing up with Rufia. “See you gals later. Thanks for the gizmo and the data gift, and don’t have too much fun!” They lifted off the ground and zipped out of the garage.

Rochelle chuckled. “She never changes, does she?”

Rhianna grinned. “Nope. And we wouldn’t have her any other way.”

“Amen to that,” Rochelle agreed.

“By the way, been a little curious,” Rhianna said. “Noticed you’ve been keeping the nanites set down low, except for special occasions, ever since that trip to Aloha. You *had* been going flat-out all the time.” She grinned again. “Can’t say I’m not grateful, but why the change?”

Rochelle blinked. “Rufe didn’t tell you about what happened in Aloha? Huh. It was really pretty embarrassing. I’d have thought she’d have been eager to share it.”

“Nah, you should know her better than that,” Rhianna said. “She doesn’t dish *real* dirt on her friends ‘less she knows they’re okay with it.” She chuckled. “You did tell me some of the stuff you did there, but you never mentioned anything *embarrassing*.” She paused, and grinned wickedly before Fusing up with Kaylee. “So spill it.”

Rochelle smiled ruefully. “All right, I’ll tell you in fast-time on the way. Un-hon?” She held out her arms and Uncia Fused up around her, encapsulating her in leopard pelt, then the pair of Fusers headed out the garage door together. “It started when Rufia and I went to my place together after we met Aggie at the hospital, and she told me about some new friends of hers...”

Uplift had sustained little serious physical damage over the course of the attack. Ten out of sixty dome emitters had been damaged beyond repair, but had been replaced less than a week later. A few glass shop windows were being replaced by shatterproof transparent aluminum. Even the Milkbottle had been restored from backup within days of the Marshals packing up their CnC operation, quickly followed by new sod, flowering bushes, and fast-growing trees. In five years Bifrost Park would be lush again.

“There they are now!” Consul Vogel said as the foursome lifted into view. Vogel stood on a platform erected in front of the emitter. The Park was full of people—RIDE, human, and Integrate. “They really need no introduction, don’t they?”

:*Looks like we’re the last to arrive*,: Kaylee observed. Almost everyone else of consequence to their adventures the past half year was also there on stage—except, of course, Fritz.

The Integrates on stage were Zane with his cane, Leah the unicorn, Aaron the velociraptor, Carrie-Anne, and Quinoa. Myla with Sophie, Anny, and the small lioness form of Jeanette Leroq with Relena stood next to them. Leila and Tamarind sat on their haunches behind everyone else to either side of the dome emitter like a pair of guardians. Lillibet and Guinevere with Paul and her parents, even AlphaWolf *himself*, practically glued to Kenyon’s side. Center stage with First Consul Vogel, Dr. Patil, Rohit, and Rattigan waited serenely.

Above them all, taking up most of the space behind the four emitter prongs, Fenris wagged his twin tails. Tamarind glanced sidelong at him every so often and kept muttering about umbrellas, but he didn’t take any notice.

Rhianna shook Vogel's hand as they landed. "I hope we haven't held anything up," she said.

"Well, you know us. Not big on ceremony to begin with. But I think there's one very proper thing to do here." Consul Vogel clasped his hands in front of him and looked solemnly at the ground. "Let us all give a minute of silence in honor of the humans and RIDEs who lost their lives in the defense of our polis. Their names will appear on a memorial to be built in this very park. Thank you."

Everyone lowered their heads, giving the 154 dead their due. For all that the attack on Uplift had been fairly poorly executed, with greater emphasis on property damage and rampant confusion than bodily harm, nonetheless accidents had happened. About half the death toll could be put down to the same exposure to high temperatures and blowing sand that had killed the foliage in the parks and yards, especially among the elderly and infirm. Many of the others were the result of firefights between attackers and citizens, or skimmer crashes and other accidents resulting from the chaos.

Not all the deaths were attributable to Integrates, however. Over a dozen of them had come at the hands of other humans, including the mobs of looters who had seized the opportunity to enrich themselves at others' expense, and the local organized crime syndicates taking what opportunities they could.

Most of the Integrates who had actually caused individual deaths, whether intentionally or by accident, had been captured along with the others, and had been turned over to Uplift's Gendarmerie for prosecution. As part of the sentencing compromise brokered by the Integrate enclaves and the Marshals, the general amnesty for most who took part in the attacks had not applied to them. There were enough records from DINsec-hardened security and traffic cameras to get at least second-degree murder or manslaughter charges to stick.

That still hadn't kept Gendarme Commissaire Jarvis and the families of accident victims from hollering bloody murder that any of the Integrates who had contributed to the situation had gotten off lightly at all, but they were for the moment minority voices amid a greater populace that wanted nothing more than a quiet return to whatever passed for normalcy these days.

Once the minute had passed, the mood lightened considerably. Vogel rubbed his hands together. "Okay. No long-winded speeches from me. We all know why we're *really* here. Ice cream for everyone! The guests of honor get to go first. I hope the nice folks at the Milkbottle planned ahead. Rhianna, Kaylee, if you'd do the honors?"

Well over a dozen media drones floated overhead. Rhianna was happy they couldn't see her expression under Kaylee's. Rochelle and Jeanette traded grins. What happened on stage was fair game, but they were both getting their various utilities ready for after they left and the drones swooped in.

Trusting to her companions to get the intrusive drones out of her face, Rhianna stepped down from the stage and walked across the cleared pathway to the restored Milkbottle building. She looked up at the overhead menu board, then raised an eyebrow at the bovine Fuser behind the counter. "This...is new. Freerider Garage mondae, huh? What's in it?"

"Peanut butter cup ice cream 'Fused' with a ribbon of chocolate and a chocolate shell, topped with whipped cream and a couple rolled chocolate 'cannons' stuck in," she said.

"Well, they certainly got one thing right," Rochelle said, grinning. "We're *all* a

little nuts around here.”

“We’ll definitely have one of those,” Kaylee said. She considered the other new menu item. “I’ll have the RIDE’s Dream another time.”

One by one they took their orders to the long tables set up for the occasion. Zane took a seat on the bench next to Rhianna with his tiger-stripe vanilla and fudge ice cream. The table quickly filled in with everyone small enough to sit in the Fuser-sized seats, and the larger RIDEs settled down on the grassy lawn by the patio.

Rochelle glittered for the media drones, Jeanette making a show of cutely licking her bowl, once again successfully drawing attention away from Rhianna and Zane. The two of them had taken to their fame pretty well. Rochelle didn’t sleep alone any night she didn’t want to, and Jeanette had taken to visiting neighborhood schools and orphanages as a goodwill ambassador from the Marshals. She was very popular among the kids, who liked petting a lioness who was *their* size.

Rhianna just wanted to be left alone. She had granted exclusive interviews to the couple of newsies who were already regular Freeriders customers—she figured she owed them that much—but any newsies who tried to sneak in as new customers saw Linda or one of the other mechanics, and they vetted them carefully. Naturally, this just made her an all the more attractive target of the tabloids, especially given her much-rumored relationship with Zane Brubeck. She sighed. “I really *am* turning into Grumpy Cat.”

AlphaWolf had Fused with Kenyon for the occasion. The Waltons and their RIDE partners made for an interesting scene, sandy wolf, dark brown mink, and rosetted ocelot. And to one side was a fluffy red fox with a hardlight leash, who was also licking ice cream from a bowl on the ground. Brena had spent some time with her family, but had come to realize part of her also liked pretending to be Lillibet’s pet. So she split her time more or less evenly—and since she was over 18, nobody could tell her she couldn’t. The newsies hadn’t picked up on this yet—they seemed to think “Beatrice” was a Laurasian RIDE or genetically-engineered exotic pet. Rhianna wondered just how long they could keep up the pretense.

“So,” Kenyon said, “I understand you’re franchising out your garage now, Rhianna?”

“Among a dozen other major projects,” Rhianna replied. “We’re suddenly flush with cash from as many sources. I just...don’t know what to *do* with it all.”

“Ever considered investing in mining stock?” Zane asked, grinning.

“*I’m* getting a new DE,” Uncia said, looking at Fused Leila. “A *five*r.”

“If you think that kind of one-upsmanship will make you happy,” the white lioness said primly.

Uncia pouted. “Nobody takes me *seriously*.”

“I’m not going to stop working on RIDEs or even the odd skimmer,” Rhianna insisted. “Even if it only becomes a hobby. Shelley’s right, I’m more like a doctor, and I don’t like neglecting patients.”

“Speaking of patients, how are the rest of the ‘ass-kicked-ant’ Inties out at Camelot doing?” Rochelle asked.

“They are almost all out of the tanks by now, and helping out at AlphaWolf’s camp,” Fenris boomed from the lawn next to the dining patio. Paul was leaning against his furry side, enjoying his own ice cream and grinning at Lillibet at the table. “And most of them actually do seem to enjoy it there. Svetlana is feeling restive, but we visit her every day and it should only be another week or two until she is ready to leave the

tank herself.”

“That’s gonna be fun.” Lillibet grinned Guinevere’s ocelot face mischievously. “She’s got something of a crush on you, you know.”

“I know,” Fenris said uncomfortably. “And not that I especially *mind*, but given that I am not an Integrate myself and have not one but *three* partners, I am mildly concerned over the repercussions of a relationship.”

“Aw, you don’t have to worry on our account, big guy!” Guinevere piped up. “We’ll support you no matter what you do.”

Zane chuckled. “Trust me on this. If she really likes you, she likes your partners, too.” He grinned at Rhianna and Kaylee. “We Inties are used to complex relationships.”

Lillibet looked at her parents next to her. Nigella focused on her small bowl of chocolate, pretending she hadn’t heard anything. Kenyon—and perhaps AlphaWolf too—laughed. “It’s a different world now, isn’t it?”

“I damn well *hope* so,” Anny Hower added. “After the price we all paid.”

At the next table over, Quinoa Steader sat across from Rufia and Yvonne. “So, I hear you got into a little drinking contest out at Cape Nord last year...”

The elk Fuser scratched behind her neck in the way Rufia always did when she was embarrassed. “Ah...you heard about that, huh?”

Quinoa grinned. “Since girl-making is one of my hobbies, I have sort of a professional interest.”

“Heh heh, yeah, that’s why I don’t take tours up there more often,” Rufia said. “Almost ended up with the starring role in one of those dumb things I warn tourists not to do.”

Quinoa leaned forward conspiratorially. “Well, listen, here’s what we should do *next* time we’re both up there...”

Conversation continued, some people going back for seconds, or even thirds, before the crowd in the Park started breaking up. Life in Uplift was quickly finding a new normal.

:I have to go prepare for the Summit tomorrow, so I can’t stay too long,: Zane sent to Rhianna once they were both finished. :But, I’d like to go talk somewhere more private...say my apartment?:

:A sort of pre-date date?: Rhianna said.

:Something like that.: Zane’s voice purred. :Kaylee’s altogether sexy enough by herself, but I would like to see what you’re wearing under her fur.:

:And I can’t wait to show you. Let’s retire, shall we?: Rhianna replied. She stood up.

:I want to retire, but Aggie keeps threatening violence if I try,: Zane sent, grinning. :Why don’t you go first and I’ll join you in a few minutes from a different direction. Don’t want to give the newsies any more ammo than we have to.:

:Will do.: Rhianna and Kaylee both agreed in the unified voice they sometimes used. They stood up, then lifted a few meters. “Shelly, everyone, we’re going back to the Garage for a while. I want to look over those franchise applications in private.”

“We’ll see you at the Summit in Nuevo San tomorrow, won’t we?” Kenyon Walton/AlphaWolf asked. The tiny polity was traditionally neutral territory, and the Brubeck Main Platform simply wasn’t equipped for a meeting that size. It *was* still a working rig, after all.

“Considering Fritz is supposed to be there, yes,” Kaylee said, nodding at Dr. Patil.

“See you there, Mother.”

“We will look forward to it,” Dr. Patil said. She and Dr. Clemens were seated together at one of the other tables, also Fused. Clemens looked a little self-conscious, as this was the first time he’d been seen in public wearing Rattigan’s full-sized DE shell, but Kaylee had to admit they suited each other.

As did Dr. Clemens and Dr. Patil, for that matter. *:About time those two started spending time together,:* she sent to Rhianna. *:God knows we kept waiting for it back in the day.:*

:You know, most people’s parents get together before they’re born,: Rhianna sent amusedly.

She really *did* have some franchise applications to look over. Taking Jeanette’s story to heart, Rhianna had to make sure that any prospective owners treated RIDEs like people. Fortunately several of them were former Chromium Marshals, from the RIDE maintenance division, though that didn’t automatically give them a pass. After flipping through twenty applications in fast-time, she had discarded half of of them, when Kaylee signaled enough time had passed. *:Zane should be at his apartment by now.:*

:Think he has a romantic New Year’s Eve planned?: Kaylee wondered.

:I’d almost forgotten what tonight was,: Rhianna said. *:I doubt it. Too much to do.:*

:But not too much he couldn’t make time for you,: her partner pointed out.

:Anyway, we’ll see what he wants when we get there.: Rhianna filed the remaining paperwork, activated Kaylee’s stealth system—not as good as an Integrate’s, but enough to keep them from the spying eyes of any media drone they weren’t right on top of—and headed off toward the apartment house near the Brubeck campus. A few moments later, they touched down on the skimmer pad on the balcony and slipped inside the open sliding door.

They found Zane puttering around in one of his favorite places—the kitchen. “I know we all just had ice cream, so I’m making something you can heat-and-eat for dinner later,” he said. “I have to be at the company aerodrome in a couple hours...”

“So what’s the occasion?” Rhianna asked. “Other than, well, New Year’s Eve... yeah, that was kind of a dumb question wasn’t it? Come out here. I *promise* you this time I haven’t gone overboard. Think of it as a taste for our date next week.”

The tiger Integrate left the kitchen, then leaned against the wall. “You have my full attention, Rhi.”

The deFuse this time wasn’t done with nearly so much flourish as she’d done that time on Zane’s platform. It was as utilitarian as Rhianna normally was, but revealed a comparatively more understated look than the first Summit.

“Wow, I could eat you right up,” Zane said, eyes wide. “Rowr! That decade really works for you. It’s just right. Not too little, but not way too much, either. I feel underdressed.”

“You look just fine in your father’s scout outfit,” Rhianna insisted. “That never goes out of style, far as I’m concerned.”

Zane grinned. “Thanks. By the way...I have something for you. Had it for some time now, but things just kind of got in the way of me giving it to you. First it was me making an even bigger idiot of myself than usual, then, you know, we were all busy busy with the Fritz thing and such.”

He lifted and scooted off to his bedroom, returning with a large gift box with a very simple label on it. A label everyone who knew anything about clothing recognized, from the very exclusive firm of Talset & Harrow, Tailors, LLC.

“Oooh...” Rhianna said, taking the box as if the contents were made of glass.

“It’s not quite a traditional crossover gift, though there’s some of the usual lingerie there too.” Zane said. “And I’ve got another one for Shelley, since I missed her party too. But...well, I hope you like it. You don’t have to wear it for our date or anything—I’m not one of those creepy guys who dresses their date for them—but I’m sure there will be more public appearances in your future.”

Rhianna put the box back down on the table, calling over Kaylee. She re-Fused to be more eye-to-eye with the Integrate. The two of them were in accord. Rhianna draped her arms around Zane’s shoulders and started purring, looking into his eyes. “Speaking of the future...”

“Happy New Year,” Zane replied, wrapping his tail around her.

They kissed.

Chapter Twenty-Five (Epilogue): The Big Date

One Week Later...
January 5, 157 A.L.

For the fourth time that afternoon, Rhianna stopped in the middle of her work and stared off into space, rather than at the hardlight emitters of the JKL(m)-LSA-011D powered down and opened up on the maintenance cradle before her.

:Oh, fer crying out loud,: Kaylee sent privately. :Give it up, Rhi. The later it gets, the less useful you get. Just let Linda finish this up. She's almost as good as you normally, and a hell of a lot better than you right now. And new girl listens to her better anyway.:

Rhianna sighed. *:I think you're right,: she admitted. :I don't know where my head is at right now.:*

:Somewhere that's orange with black stripes, no doubt,: Kaylee replied dryly. Then she spoke aloud. "Chantilly?"

"Eep!" the cougar Integrate dressed in orange Easy Fuse coveralls squeaked in startlement, glancing worriedly at the Fused duo. With Rhianna's mind wandering, she'd let her own attention drift as well.

Kaylee rolled her eyes. "Take it easy, girl. I keep telling you, I'm not gonna eat you." For all that Rhianna and Kaylee did their best to make the cougaress feel at home, it was hard getting past Chantilly's flinch reaction sometimes. When she looked at Kaylee, especially in Fuse, she saw the angry demon-cat who had casually blown a hole right through her chest. Kaylee couldn't say she blamed the girl, but it made trying to teach her anything a lot more difficult. "Go get Linda, would you? We're lettin' her take over this job."

"Oh! Um...sure thing, right away!" The cougar scurried off in search of the tigress, visibly relieved to be leaving Kaylee's presence.

Kaylee sighed, and Rhianna chuckled. "Don't worry. She'll come around, sooner or later."

"I damn well hope so," Kaylee grumbled. "Getting my ass handed to me by *Mom* of all people was bad enough. It's a pain being reminded again every time she sees me. But I sowed my own wind."

Rhianna stretched and stepped away from the cradle as Linda came back in, the Fuser filling out her own hardlight jumpsuit in interesting ways. Chantilly followed her, three steps behind. "Hey, Lindae. Could you finish up here for us? It's...a little hard keeping my mind on things."

"Sure thing, boss!" LindaGirl said. Or was it LindaCat? It was a little hard to tell them apart when they were Fused; their voices had gotten so close together. Rhianna would have been worried they might be on the way to Integration if they hadn't been so scrupulously careful to spend a lot of time un-Fused, too. "You might wanna go on up and get dressed. It's only about three hours 'til your date shows up!"

"Oh, ha ha," Rhianna said, but grinned nonetheless. "Anyway, keep on showing Chantilly the ropes."

"You got it!" Linda said happily. Almost as soon as the shy convalescent cougaress had arrived, the boisterous tigress duo had taken her under their wing. They did well with someone to mother, Kaylee thought, and Chantilly seemed to be responding well to the treatment. It was good she had *someone* here to make her feel comfortable, because Kaylee sure as hell couldn't do it herself.

"C'mon, pard," Rhianna said. "Maybe she's right. I still haven't picked out what I'm going to wear yet." She chuckled. "Three hours might not be long *enough!*"

As they climbed the stairs, Rhianna asked, "Decided whether you're gonna come along yet?"

"Mmm," Kaylee said. "Not this time, I think. I know he likes us both—both *halves* of him like us both—but *you're* the one who's crazy about his more visible half. I think you deserve some alone time at the start." Rhianna felt Kaylee grin. "I still haven't decided how I even feel about the idea of romance. There are reasons I never had you make my hardlight pelt anatomically correct."

"Yeah, I know," Rhianna said soberly. "Reasons that start with 'F' and end with 'z'. When your one exposure to the idea is a lunatic throwing himself at you, and then taking advantage of you..."

"*Don't* remind me," Kaylee grumbled. Then she softened a little. "Still...when I think of Katie, and the others...I guess I can't hate him completely. At least one good thing came out of that nightmare. *Eight* good things."

"Given any thought to finding a nice he-kitty and visiting the Creche?" Rhianna teased. "You'd actually get to raise *this* litter to adulthood. I think you'd make a great mommy."

Kaylee snorted. "Let's see about locating the rest of my *first* litter, first." She defused from her partner as they got to her room. "So what're you thinking?"

"Zane said we weren't doing anything too fancy tonight," Rhianna mused. "He suggested to dress on the nice side of casual." She considered the contents of her closet speculatively, and frowned. "But...how nice is 'nice'?"

Kaylee chuckled. "This really *is* gonna take three hours, isn't it?"

"Hey, Rhi! Your date's here!" Linda shouted up the stairs three hours later.

"Noooo! I'm *not ready!*" Rhianna moaned. Most of the intervening time had been spent trying on one outfit, liking it, then deciding that it was just a smidge either *too nice* or *not nice enough* and talking herself out of it, then trying another outfit and repeating the cycle.

By her fifth go-round, Kaylee had padded off to check on what Rochelle and Uncia were doing. They'd been poring over Donizetti catalogs lately, making plans for Uncia's promised 5-million-mu DE shell. They wouldn't be building it any time soon—while they had gotten a few million mu for the Marshals' two-year license, they weren't yet at the point where they could just spend five out-of-hand—but they were having a lot of fun doing planning and prototyping. The *really* big money would only come when the private sector got involved in two years, and Uncia was counting the milliseconds.

Now she padded back in. "Oh, fer crying out loud, just pick something at random if you have to. He'll be too busy staring into your eyes to notice what you're wearing anyway."

Annnnd...I'm acting a total stereotype again. Rhianna sighed. The crossrider on her very first date, fussing over what to wear like a fifteen year old girl on *her* first date.

Second adolescence, she thought.

When it came right down to it, she wanted to dress in something that made her feel like *herself*. That still didn't mean dresses, for all she'd worn one for Zane on New Year's Eve. If they were going to be out and about for hours, comfort was key. Dresses were just too drafty to wear for very long.

Rhianna pulled a clean Rosie the Riveter-style denim overall from the closet and a nice red ruffled blouse, put her red bandanna over her hair, and a pair of comfortable sneakers. She used her implant to configure the makeup mask for some lipstick and other minimal applications, then put it on. Looking at her reflection for one last time, she smiled. Taken together, it was *just* feminine enough to make her feel like a woman... after she unbuttoned the blouse enough to show a little cleavage.

"He'll love it," Kaylee said, headbutting the small of her back. It quickly turned into a gentle push to get her out the door.

"Hey!" Rhianna protested weakly.

"You look purrrrfect!" Kaylee insisted. "Don't stress! This isn't a blind date, and not even your first one! You've *already* kissed, for cryin' out loud!"

"With your kitty lips," Rhianna said.

"Can't say I didn't enjoy it, myself. But go, have fun! *Be* a woman! Crossing is supposed to be fun! A dif'rent flavor to life an' all that."

"All right, all right!" Rhianna said. She headed down the stairs, the weak feeling in the pit of her stomach growing stronger with every step downward, as if she were a scuba diver swimming ever deeper. She paused halfway down and looked back, to see Kaylee peering pointedly at her from the top of the stairs, tufted ears directly forward. She grinned and headed down the rest of the way herself.

Zane was waiting down in the garage, dressed in his usual Scout Corps outfit and leaning on his cane. When he saw her come out of the door, his cane slid out from under him and he nearly fell right over before catching himself with his lifters. "Wow! I swear, you're more gorgeous every time I see you."

"Thank you, Zane. You're a handsome stripey kittyguy, yourself." Rhianna smiled, the butterflies in her stomach starting to dissipate. She connected with his DIN and sent a virtual kiss on the cheek. "And that's how a girl starts a date on Earth."

Zane grinned. "I could grow to like you Earth girls and your strange, heathen ways. C'mon, our ride's outside." He offered her the arm that wasn't holding his cane.

She took it, holding his elbow. "I'm curious, since Kaylee's sitting this one out, how we're getting around."

"Like that." Zane pointed to the cherry-red two-seater topless sports skimmer car hovering in their driveway. "I will admit, it's a rental—it'd be kind of silly to buy the thing just for taking cute kittygirls on dates—but hey, it's fast and it's comfy."

"Donizetti Volante," Rhianna said. "He brought one of his classic designs from Earth."

"And *I* see you know more than just RIDEs," Zane said, holding the passenger-side door for her.

"Such a gentleman." Rhianna took the seat, it was even designed for RIDE-tagged people. No sitting on her tail this time. "You know, on Earth I was as zealous about skimmers as I am about RIDEs. I knew all the major and minor makes and could fix them just as well. And, well, it's *Donizetti*."

Zane grinned. "That makes sense." He went back around to the driver's seat,

tucking his tail through the hole in the seatback with the ease of long habit. He checked the rear-view and the traffic radar, then pulled the car out into the road and goosed the throttle to zoom on up the street. “So,” he said. “I was really on the fence about where to go for dinner. I ended up changing my plans two or three times over the last couple months.”

“We’ve had a lot of time to think about this.”

“Yeah.” Zane grinned. “And honestly, when I was first planning it, I didn’t expect that we’d both end up stalked by paparazzi everywhere we went.”

“There’s a couple floaters following us,” Rhianna observed via tapping into traffic cameras.

“Already? Geez.” Zane shook his head. “And they’ve even got DINsec. Hoist by your own petard, eh Rhi?”

“Hmm...it’s even 2.1-beta. Not that I’d *dare* suggest you hack it...” Rhianna smirked. “Freedom of the press.”

“You didn’t happen to put anything like a backdoor in the design, did you?” Zane asked hopefully.

“Some of the conspiracy-minded sites think we have, and there’s nothing you can say that’ll sway them otherwise. But it’s a firm, unequivocal *no*.”

“Pity.” Zane leaned his cane casually over the seat back behind him and placed his hand over the handgrip. One after the other, the floaters sparked as a hole burned through their housings. They bounced along the blacktop for a few meters before coming to a stop, smoking. “How about now?”

“Splash two floaters,” Rhianna said, giggling. “Can you really get away with that?”

“Eh. They expect it. Those things are disposable. And as open as we are with them on most things, they don’t mind *too* much. Brubeck Mining has a slush fund where we pay out to replace lost equipment when ‘accidents happen.’” He grinned. “So anyway, I decided for our first date, we’d eat somewhere we could be *sure* the press won’t intrude and spoil things. My place. I’ve got a beef stroganoff in the oven that should be just about ready to come out by the time we get there.”

“I can almost smell it. Looking forward to smelling it for real.” Rhianna leaned over and pet his near handpaw.

Zane grinned at her as they pulled into the parking lot next to his apartment building. “You won’t have long to wait. Upsie-daisy!” He shoved the lift lever to maximum and the car rose right up the side of the building. He gave the steering wheel a nudge and the car drifted over to settle onto the skimmer pad on his balcony. “There we are—door-to-door service.”

The mechanic opened her own door and stepped out. The Volante’s short landing skids put the doors very low to the ground, so it was like getting out of a reclined easy chair. She resisted the urge to have Zane pop the hood to see the inner workings. She had to save something for a *second* date, after all.

“I hope you don’t think I’m being too forward, inviting you to my place on the first date.” Zane grinned. “No lascivious intent, I assure you. I just like playing the host. And we’ll be going right out again after dinner, ‘cuz my Big Surprise awaits.”

“You’ve *really* piqued my interest now,” Rhianna said. She followed him into the living room, where a dinner table was set with two places and a ceramic casserole-pan trivet in the center.

“Well, good.” Zane rubbed his hands together excitedly. He actually seemed more

than a little nervous himself, Rhianna noticed. Twitchy. Just then, the “ding!” of an egg timer emerged from the kitchen. “Ah! Hang on, I’ll go get the food.”

“That smells wonderful to my kitty nose.” Rhianna took a deep breath. “Hungry kitty, too.”

“Well, good! Chef kitty likes diners with a big appetite.” Zane came back out of the kitchen, a steaming pan floating in the air before him. “Nice thing about being an Integrate—you never have to worry about misplacing your pot holders. It’s like being a Jedi, without all the pesky worry about whether you’re going to go over to the Dark Side. Oh—” He reached behind him, and a serving spoon floated out of the kitchen into his hand. “There.” He set dish and spoon down on the table, and reached again, with both hands. A bottle of red wine emerged next, with two glasses. Zane stood back and grinned, a slight look of concentration on his face as the meat and pasta dish served itself and the wine poured itself at the same time.

“Dinner *and* a show,” Rhianna said, delighted. She took her seat. “I have to admit, despite everything that’s happened I have fantasized about being an Intie, sometimes.”

“You’ve got a lot to look forward to.” Zane chuckled. “And ‘using the Force’ is the least of it. But you’ll get there sooner or later. Sometimes we wish we could be separate again, just a little. Grass is always greener, hey?” Serving finished, he slid into his seat.

Rhianna picked up her fork. “There’s an Integration Clinic going up about a block down Hayward Street.”

Zane nodded. “I know, we’re helping sponsor it.” He chuckled. “All the protesters picketing, like it’s *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* all over again. If only they knew the whole point of the place is to talk people *out* of trying to Integrate before their time.”

“Well, when it happens to Kaylee and I, it’ll be natural.” Rhianna smirked. “Such as these things are. Quinoa told me it normally doesn’t happen unless both partners actually *want it to*, deep down.”

Zane nodded. “As for me and *me*...we just couldn’t imagine being apart any longer, and then it just happened.” He chuckled. “Well, dig in. No point in letting it get cold.”

They ate slowly, looking up at one another frequently to look in one another’s eyes. There was nervousness there, some trepidation. They had known each other for months, now their unresolved sexual tension was starting to relax, and so were they.

Partway through the meal, Zane chuckled. “What’s funny?” Rhianna asked.

“Oh, I was just remembering—from both sides—back when I first recommended your garage to me,” Zane said. “Funny to think about it now. We were both—all three—such different people then.”

“I still feel bad about using Kaylee in passive Fuse for *five years*. She never complained, but once we went Active and I found out how much she hated it...” Rhianna shivered. “Just some lingering guilt.”

“Yeah, but I can tell you, speaking from experience, it’s a thousand times better even to be run in passive than to be...well, not wanted at all,” Zane said. “The Terry side of me will always be grateful to you for that.”

“Terry kept Kaylee *sane*,” Rhianna said. “I swear, I’ve never seen a chassis as messed up as Kaylee’s, before or since. But she’s the reason why I’m as good fixing them as I am. Just about everything that could go wrong during the restoration, *did*. Adding Terry’s hardlight was easy by comparison.” She smiled. “I remember how he—you—*purred* during calibration.”

Zane chuckled. "So do I." Then he grinned. "As long as we're on the subject of feeling grateful for things, I'd like to tell you how honored I feel that you're spending so much time now with someone who's only 50% RIDE. That's only about half of your average."

"If you don't count New Year's Eve," Rhianna smiled wryly, "the last real date I had was on the *Spruce Goose*. Once we landed on Zharus I was just too busy keeping Rufus and myself above water."

"And I suppose having your best friend switch teams could put a damper on things, too, especially being from Earth and all."

Rhianna sighed ruefully. "Until we reconnected after the Towers incident—and I'd crossed myself—we barely spoke to one another after she crossed. I can't really explain it. It just felt...*oogie*, seeing my best friend in the galaxy as this big, beautiful girl. Rufe is Rufe, no matter *what*. But every time we ran into one another she'd try and convince me to join her. We just...grew further and further apart."

"But you've adapted pretty well since then," Zane said.

"I've assimilated the local culture, finally. I just never had as flexible a mind for these things like Rufe does. But..." she hefted her breasts. "Things change."

Zane held up an arm and glanced at the fur on it. "Yeah, they sure do." He chuckled. "We seem to have done sufficient damage to our dinner. Time for dessert!"

"Bring it on, tiger," Rhianna purred.

"Righto! Be right back." Zane slid back his chair and headed into the kitchen with the empty stroganoff tray, coming back a moment later with a steaming pan of brownies and one of the Milkbottle's take-home tubs of vanilla ice cream. "People think billionaires are supposed to eat all kinds of fancy food, with names that you have to learn other languages to be able to pronounce right, but Daddy raised me to appreciate the simple things." He turned back and summoned plates and serving utensils from the kitchen, and busied himself with placing a square of brownie and dollop of ice cream on each one. "Here ya go!"

"And that's a scoop of heaven right there," Rhianna said, picking up the spoon. She cut down through the scoop, making sure to get a chunk of brownie before taking a sensual bite. "You sure know how to keep a new girl happy."

Zane grinned. "When you find a good thing, you stick with it."

"I like to think things taste different," Rhianna said. "As a woman, I mean. Maybe it's more being part lynx, though." She flicked her ears, touched her nose. Her fingertips had developed the feline pads over the past half a year of active Fuse. "When I think of all those years I *pretended* to really be a girl under Kaylee's passive mode..."

"Maybe someday I'll see if that's right." Zane chuckled. "Quinny's been teaching me all sorts of stuff about Intiehood, but she's barely even scratched the surface of what's possible. I met some Inties on my training cruise who've developed shapeshifting to a fine art. Instantaneous change, even gender shifting. They say any of us can learn to do it, but it takes a lot of time and energy. Which I don't have to spare right *now*, but maybe if I can ever talk Aggie into taking over the company..."

"So, it's like learning a martial art or something," Rhianna said, pondering. "Well, you'd make a gorgeous tigress." She smiled a rather Rufia-like sharky grin. "I *love* this planet."

"The Terry part of me wouldn't mind going four-footed again, but..." Zane shrugged, then reached out to take Rhianna's hand. "Having hands has its

compensations.”

“And there’s always Nature Range. Kaylee wants to introduce me to it soon. Sounds interesting.”

“Heh. It’s...different, I’ll give it that.” Zane grinned. “I should invite her to a game, come to think of it. I’ll bet she’d be fun to hunt with...and maybe groom each other afterward.”

“Meow,” Rhianna said. “It’s a date. Kaylee has me curious as a kitty.”

“Well would you look at that. My brownie seems to have vanished.” Zane grinned down at his empty plate. “Yours too, I see.” He waved his hands and floated them off the table into the kitchen. They clinked as they dropped into the sink, out of sight behind the corner.

“Magic fingers, do your thing,” Rhianna quipped.

“And that means it’s time for...the Big Surprise.” Zane grinned, standing up and pulling his cane to him. He was actually *nervous*, Rhianna noticed. It was a little thing, but he was having more trouble standing still than usual, and his hands kept fiddling with the cane. She tried not to fidget in sympathy. A feedback cycle of mutual anxiety could put an end to the evening really quick.

Rhianna left the table and headed back out to the skimmer to admire it. “You know, I’m a little curious. It’s fortunate that you did, of course, but why did you have Chauncey with you when you went out to confront the old Board? Six meters of IDE is a lot to haul around, even in a Vanguard sport-hauler.”

“To be perfectly frank, he was kind of a security blanket,” Zane said. “Dad’s death still stung—it still does now—and having him with me kind of felt like still having a little piece of Dad around. I could *try* to say it was because I was afraid the Board was going to pull something and wanted to be prepared—but the truth is, I took Chauncey with me when I went to the grocery store, when I went out for pizza, when I went to see a movie...kind of silly, really.”

“Silliness that saved your *lives*,” Rhianna pointed out. “Hmm...calling up some celeb news sites from the time, they thought your hauling Chauncey everywhere you went was just one of those eccentric rich people things. Compared to the Steaders, it was mild.”

“Rhi, it *was* ‘one of those eccentric rich people things.’ That’s *exactly* what it was.” He chuckled. “After all, I could only do it in the first place because I was rich enough to afford the battery charge prices and licensing and quadruple-parking fees on the hauler.”

“Pity some other salvagers got to the Vanguard wreck before you could...” Rhianna mused. “That’s a sweet line of big skimmers. Donizetti uses them for RIDE delivery and pickup for maintenance.”

“Eh, if that’s the worst loss I took that day, I pay it gladly,” Zane said. “I’m just glad nobody got to Chauncey. I’d have had to pay a small fortune to get him back once they found out what he was worth.” He shook his head. “You know, it’s kind of funny. If I’d had Chauncey better maintained, with the hardlight integrity field fully working, I could have made it all the way back in him instead of conking out partway. But where would Terry have been then? And where would I have been without him?” He chuckled. “Somehow things just worked out for the best. Maybe we do live in the best of all possible worlds. I’d like to think so.”

“So would I,” Rhianna said. She allowed Zane to open the door for her again

before he got in himself.

“In the end, after Terry and I found each other, I found my new friend and partner meant I could finally let go of the security blanket. Hence, the placement of Chauncey with Martinez U,” Zane said. The Volante’s lifters rumbled to life. “Anyway, now for the Surprise.”

Instead of lowering the car to the street, Zane simply drove it on a downward slope through the dome over the Brubeck campus next door, circling around to a fairly large building in the northeast corner where a new gate had been installed through the campus wall. It seemed to be a public-facing building, as there was a parking lot right inside the entrance. There were signs, but they were all covered over with tarps, and the RFID broadcasts Rhianna could have read with her implant were all disabled.

As they landed in the parking lot next to the building, Rhianna was surprised to notice a familiar old skimmer bike pulling in through the gate. *:Kaylee? What’re you doing here?:*

:Beats me,: Kaylee said. :Zane commed just now and asked me to come over. Said his surprise was for both of us.:

Zane grinned. “A little selfish of me, I know, but I wanted your first thought to be about how awesome it is, not that you wished Kaylee was here.”

Kaylee perked her ears. “This’s *really* gotta be sumthin’ special, then.”

“Foregone conclusion it’s RIDE-related,” Rhianna said.

“You could say that,” Zane said. “And I have a bit of a proposal for you, too, though worry not—it’s not the kind that involves bended knee and a jewelry box. *That* can come later.” He winked.

Rhianna laughed. “Well, Zane, you know the way to this wrench wench’s heart. Lead on.”

“It kind of started when we found poor ol’ Merle on the auction block, after his last owner just ditched him in the desert,” Zane said, unlocking the door. “Got my nose rubbed good and proper in the Nextus use-’em-and-lose-’em attitude toward RIDEs. It was only after I kicked the old Board mostly out that I realized my company had been run for the last few years by a bunch of no-goodniks with that exact same attitude—which, if you’ll recall, is part of what Fritz used to goad Alfie into raiding Uplift that one time. That, plus what almost happened to ol’ Terry when we met, led me to suspect there might just be a lot of abandoned RIDEs still out there.”

“Many thousands, at the very least. Nobody’s ever done a count,” Kaylee said. “The Dry Ocean swallows them whole like the real ocean did to fisherman in the old days. Q is hard stuff to mine.”

Zane led them down an entrance hallway hung with pictures of Dry Ocean scenery and Brubeck mining rigs. “Anyway, for the last few months I’ve had Brubeck folks working on an important side project. It was pretty expensive, but when I pitched it as a way to head off potential costly litigation down the road, and said I’d front half the costs out of my own pocket, the board gave me the go-ahead. It helped that ol’ Merle was on my side, naturally.” He grinned, and paused in front of the door at the end of the hall.

“So I’ve had people going back through our records, survey records, scan records, records we bought off other mining companies...trying to find every case where we—or anyone else who’d talk to us, for that matter—ever abandoned a RIDE in the desert so we could go dig ‘em up. Also, checking old sales records, salvage records...trying to find

out what happened to every RIDE we ever let go, or who got salvaged out from under us in the Dry. We're working with the Marshals on this one, offering a bounty on every one found. They already had a similar program, but this one just accelerates things.

"After we found all of 'em we could, I got in touch with all of 'em personally. The ones who were in a happy relationship—or out at AlphaWolf's camp—we congratulated; the ones who weren't we bought back. And every one of them got a personal apology from me, and a 10,000 *mu* cash account quantum-locked to the RIDE's use only. Not much compensation, but it was the most I could swing out of our budget, better than nothing, and most of it came from my personal funds anyway."

"You talked to each one *personally*?" Rhianna asked. "There must have been thousands of them."

Zane grinned. "Took months in fast-time VR. But I figured I owed it to 'em. Even the ones from other companies, I could apologize as a human being. Well, half a human being now, but anyway. And I didn't make 'em sign waivers or anything, so they can still sue for mistreatment down the road when their rights come in—but most of ours were happy enough just to get the apology, I don't think they will. Though I think a few other companies might just have to do some fancy legal dancing when the time comes." He chuckled. "If they should want to sue *us*, I asked 'em to get in touch with me first and we'd work something out."

"Practical, Zane. *Very* practical," Kaylee said.

"Yeah, well, pitching it like that got the board on my side. But in a way I couldn't do anything else," Zane said. "I felt a responsibility to all the RIDEs we'd ever owned—Daddy raised me that way. But how could I draw the line at *just* helping ours if some others were out there to be found and we were out looking anyway? Daddy raised me that way, too." He shrugged.

"As for the ones we dug up or bought back, we've been trying to place them somewhere they'll be happy. A bunch of 'em came back to work for us, or the Waltons or some of the other companies that have been getting RIDE-friendly lately, and a lot of others joined the Marshals. As for the rest, well..."

Zane pushed the door open, revealing a long room with display pedestals along both walls on which stood a couple of dozen inactive DE shells of all ages and descriptions, behind hardlight glass. There were deer, elk, cougars, horses, mules, bears, eagles, and examples of every other major workhorse RIDE over the last thirty-five years. "A lot of 'em agreed to let me put their old DEs on display here while we look for new situations for them. We're making it sort of a museum of the history of qubitite mining through the history of RIDEs, or vice versa. It's been on hold for a little while—we were only able to set up the museum proper once we knew Fritz was safely out of the way. And now...here we are."

Zane led them through the room, along the displays. The hardlight shields seemed to incorporate a firewall, so Rhianna couldn't ping them with her implant. There were nameplates below each one, giving the name and background of the RIDE who had used it. For example, the plate beneath a pair of Kodiak bears gave their names as "Big John" and "Queenie." Back in '37, John had buttressed a collapsing mine tunnel to allow dozens of men and RIDEs, including his own partner, to escape. Queenie had gone back in alone to try to rescue him, but then the tunnel had collapsed, trapping them both.

A button press brought up a screen that turned into an interactive history of the

event, and how the crushed DE shells were recovered. The bears' cores were intact. The screen showed Big John doing some salmon fishing in Nature Range and Queenie with a trio of cubs. Gondwana, and even most RIDEs, had yet to absorb they could reproduce in a Q-based mainframe.

"These RIDEs are all heroes," Rhianna observed. Each one had done something selfless in their years of service, no matter how their human partners treated them.

Kaylee sat in front of a magnificent bull elk. "It's Franklin," she said. "He's Yvonne's father!"

"Awesome!" Rhianna exclaimed. "Ping her."

"Already have, but she's not pinged back yet," Kaylee replied. "I can't wait..."

"I was going to ask you to be a part of it from the beginning, but after the whole Starmaster thing I was afraid you might get the wrong idea, and you kind of had enough on your plate as it was. But the most important reason was that my RIDE maint guys wanted their own chance to shine. I think they've got reason to be proud, don't you?"

"Hell, yes they do!" Rhianna exclaimed.

"It was really hard for them to keep the secret while they were working with you before we took the platform back," Zane said. "They really wanted to talk about it, but they knew how much it meant to me so they kept mum. I made sure they all got big bonuses."

At the ends of the rows were several displays with darkened, polarized hardlight and plates that read "Coming Soon". There were silhouettes inside, but nothing that could be clearly seen. At the far end of the room was a three-meter scale model of Chauncey, surrounded by pictures, illustrations, diagrams, and holos detailing how the ancient IDE had been fitted out when it was new, and how Clint and Zane had modified it. There was also an account of how it had helped Clint defend his claim and hence found the Brubeck Mining corporation.

"Hey, come over here and look at this," Zane said, beckoning them over to the Chauncey display. "What do you think? Spot any obvious errors in the docs? Want to be sure this is up to snuff when we open to the public next week."

"Okay, I see something right here. Chauncey wasn't actually a Block 2. Well, that's not *quite* true—he has a Block 2 serial number. He was in the late production phase when the Block 3 upgrades came out, so they had to mod his frame. The Block 3 units mounted the first pulse beam cannons rather than a gauss. They had an uprated mag-pinch 'barrel' fusion reactor rather than a toka or poly. The Block 2s had a pair of polywell spheres instead of the barrel. The beam cannon needed a higher peak output to charge the weapons capacitor and two polys just couldn't deliver."

Zane leaned in to peer closer. "Huh. You're right. Don't know how we ever missed that." His DIN twinkled, and the display corrected itself.

"Oh, don't worry about that. It's rather obscure, really," Rhianna said.

And then something—a noise, a movement out of the corner of an eye—drew Rhianna's attention behind them. She turned and froze in place, staring. The hardlight glass had vanished from all the displays except the blacked-out "coming soon" ones—and all their occupants now powered up and stepped down from the daises, most bringing up hardlight pelts as they came.

Zane grinned. "Oh, snap! I forgot to mention—they said we could display their RI cores here *with* their DE frames. Hello, everyone!"

"Evenin', Zane!" Big John boomed, his rumble plainly audible over the din of

everyone else saying hello at once. “And hello to you, too, Miss Rhianna and Miss Kaylee!”

“Does my heart good to see everyone up and running again!” Rhianna said. She reached out to pet Kaylee. “My partner here knows a lot of what y’all have been through, lost and forgotten like that.”

“Believe me, we know, sugah,” Queenie chuckled, her voice an octave higher than her mate’s but still deep, and with a touch of Louisiana Cajun accent. “We’ve been watching you on the news. We’re all very proud of you both.”

“No one could possibly be any prouder,” Big John rumbled. “Exceptin’ possibly... okay, you three, come on out.”

The black hardlight over the “coming soon” displays dissolved...and three lynxes stepped down to join the others.

“*Franz?*” Kaylee said, slack-jawed. “Keiko...Annette...*my kittens!* If I could faint...”

The male lynx stepped forward to rub cheeks with Kaylee. “Hiya, sis,” he said. “Been a while. At least a while for *most* of you. I’ve still got a pair of original-spec lucky lynx feet.”

“Ye...yeah. Bits of me ended up in all of you. Kan...Kandace is in Aloha...” Kaylee stammered. She swallowed and sniffled, looking at her kittens. “I...don’t know what to say. Now that I remember raising you...”

“We remember you, too, Mom,” Keiko said, in the faint Japanese accent she’d been inspired to adopt by her name. “Zane came through with a FoIA request as soon as he found out who we were.”

“I was going to tell you as soon as I found out, Kaylee, surprise or no—family is important—but they actually talked me out of it,” Zane said.

“We’d waited thirty years already, we could wait a few more weeks,” Franz said.

“And we liked the idea a’ being part of a *big* surprise,” Annette said, sounding surprisingly like her namesake.

Kaylee blinked. “You didn’t used to talk like that.”

“She didn’t use’ter know who she was named fer, either,” the original Anny said, leaning against the wall near a door next to the Chauncey display. She’d slipped in while Rhianna was distracted by the reanimated RIDEs. “An’ I’d just like to say that’s a *hell* of a thing t’ ferget t’ tell someone, that y’ went and named a daughter after ‘em.” She sniffled a little. “I’m touched, I really am.”

“It was the right thing to do, Anny,” Kaylee said.

“Kaylee has good taste. I would have done the same,” Leila said. The giant white lioness entered and lay down next to the door. “And if I find the right *Panthera leo*, I probably will.”

“How do you feel about party animals?” another familiar voice asked, as Kandace padded in from another door. “The Munns have a *leo* friend in Nextus who’s famous for them. So what’s all this ab—” She stopped and stared. “*Franzie?*” Behind her, a teenaged girl with lynx tags leaned against the wall and watched, grinning.

“In the hardlight flesh,” Franz said. He sniffled, then padded over to give Kandace a lick on the cheek which she quickly reciprocated. “This is the best day ever.”

Zane grinned. “I couldn’t leave anyone out of this. The nice thing about being rich is being able to back up your good intentions.” He chuckled. “Kaylee Stonegate...*this is your life!*”

Kandace looked at the other two lynxes. "Are...those..?"

"My kittens, Kandy," Kaylee said. "We're still missing...well, five of them. But they're out there somewhere."

"Our two are still around, Kandy," Franz said. For all they considered themselves brothers and sisters, there was no real "blood relationship" to preclude intercourse between any RIDE—at least, not until the forest time and now the breeding creches. "We'll find them. I'm just...I know how Kaylee feels, seeing you again."

"Hey, I heard therrre was a family rrreunion going on," Katie said from the rear of the room. "Sorrry I'm late, trrraffic was murderrr. Grreetings sisterrrs, uncle Frranz, aunt Kandace!"

"I see you still purr your Rs," Keiko said dryly.

"Mark my words, sis, I'm gonna get myself an Ahnuld frame like yours!" Annette said. "I've watched what you did over and over again...daayyum, you're good!"

"She was always *very* good at pouncing," Keiko added. The three sisters gathered together and butted heads affectionately, then fell to a pile of tawny-gray fur and started some mutual grooming, while the older trio came together a *little* more sedately. Various "oohs" and "awws" came from the audience of the other RIDEs from the museum.

One of them was the stately bull elk named Franklin. He still had his 000-series chassis, having been shut down in a Nextus Army Museum display *himself* for the past ten years. That museum had been hastily emptied of RIDEs that still had viable cores. Franklin had been practically thrown out on the street with just half-charged batteries and not even an apology.

"There is still a great deal of work to be done to recover all of us," Franklin said in a stately voice that matched his bearing. "I feel fortunate, Miss Kaylee, that you gave my daughter Yvonne her missing memories as a gift in such a timely fashion. A joyful happenstance, as it turns out."

"She...found you?" Kaylee said.

"We have not yet met in person, but yes. I had already been 'removed from exhibit', let's say. She tracked me down virtually—more like a *cat* than an elk, really. Pity her mother can't be with us just yet. But, such *determination*! Her partner is a riot, too. They make a *splendid* pairing."

"Speaking of partners," Kandace said. "I want y'all to meet mine. Jenni, c'mon up here."

"If you're sure it's all right," Jenni said, coming forward. "I don't want to interrupt anything."

"As far as I'm concerned, you're family just like they are. So come meet your *extended* family," Kandace said.

"Uh...hi," Jenni said shyly. Keiko and Annette headbutted her left and right hands, and she giggled.

"I would have brrrought my own parrrrtnerrr, but she's busy with herrr studies rrright now," Katie said. "I'll brrring her by anotherrr day."

"It would be an honor to meet such a brave young woman," Franklin said.

"So anyway, needless to say anyone who's here is here because they want to be, and they can leave whenever they want," Zane said. "The idea is the place is gonna be a kind of *living* history museum, and RIDE meet-and-greet center, where people can talk to 'em in some other context than buying and selling. They've all got stories to tell, and

most people never have a chance to *listen* to them. Hard to see someone as a person if you only ever see ‘em as a product.”

“The ramifications...” Rhianna mused. “Thirty years ago, Dr. Patil and Dr. Clemens created not just true AI, but *artificial life*.”

“Dunno about that, Rhi,” Kaylee said. “Maybe once someone figgurs out how to turn a fabber into a sort of womb. We’re only partway there.”

Zane chuckled. “Also, at least some of our ‘exhibits’ will be keeping an eye out for anyone who might make a good partner for ‘em, since they’re gonna have the right to choose their own. Down the road, we’re looking into partnering with the city creche to host at least some of their new births here, too.”

“We have cubs!” Queenie said proudly, chuffing at Big John. “Cubs! I’ve never felt so *fulfilled*. After spending an eternity in that dark hole, we *so* needed something bright.”

“Three somethings, in fact,” Big John added. “They’re almost ready to pick partners of their own. Uplift’s buying the first generation basic DEs to get ‘em started in life.”

“If they want better ones they’ll have to find a job and earn the *mu*,” Queenie said. “Lucky thing Brubeck’s still hiring.”

Zane chuckled. “Yeah, it kind of is lucky. You know, not that I’m complaining, but the whole RIDE citizenship thing is going to be a big economic hit to anyone who employs a lot of RIDEs. Suddenly they’re having to double their salaries.”

“Not to mention the ‘healthcare’ plans,” Anny Hower said, looking at Leila. “You good-for-nothin’ money pit!” Anny grinned.

“A girl can’t help being worth as much as me,” Leila said primly, swishing her tail. “Despite a certain leopard’s opinions to the contrary...”

“Won’t be a hit for long,” Rhianna said. “Our partners will have money to spend. Ultimately it’ll grow everyone’s economy. Just think of the human-RIDE matchmaking services. There’s already a half dozen startups.”

“As it happens, I think we’ve already got at least one possible match-up ourselves,” Zane said, grinning. “Aggie’s been spending a lot of time with Annette lately. They haven’t Fused or anything yet...”

“But I’m hopeful!” Annette said happily.

“And I hope it works out, just for the alliteration value. Aggie and Anny,” Zane said.

“Works fer me,” the human Anny said. The lynx RIDE version smiled back at her. “Could get a mite confusin’ in meetings, though.”

“I can go by *Annette* if you’d like,” the lynx offered.

“Which won’t help when Leila names one of *her* kittens that,” Kaylee said.

“These are the kinds of problems in life one *wants* to have,” Leila opined. “All my life, I never even dreamed I was capable of motherhood. My maternal instincts are on the prowl. One *Panthera leo*...or I’ll even take a *tigris*.” She winked at Zane.

“He’s all mine,” Rhianna said, standing in front of him. She gave a little feline hiss. “Mine!”

“Hey, he’s part mine, too,” Kaylee purred. “But then, so are *you*, so it works out.”

“When I was fresh off the *Goose* from Earth, I never would’ve considered relationships like this were even possible,” Rhianna said. She walked over and hugged Kaylee tightly. “I don’t think there’s a real word for the kind of partnerships like ours are

—though we can see the *results* of a perfect match right in front of us.” The two smiled back at Zane.

“It’s good to be wanted,” Zane said, grinning back at them. “Well, unless you’re wanted by the Marshals...”

Now that Rhianna and Kaylee had been properly welcomed, the crowd of RIDEs broke up. Some of them climbed back onto their daises and watched, though they remained in active mode. Others moved to greet and speak to the other newcomers. As the only complete stranger, Jenni came in for a lot of attention. A dolphin and a cormorant engaged her in a discussion of what Aloha was like to live in these days.

Zane came up to Rhianna and put his arm around her shoulder. “So what do you think?” he asked quietly.

“I’m happy that Kaylee is so happy,” Rhianna said. She sniffled, teary-eyed. “You’ve done something amazing. I have no doubts that eventually every one of the original RI parents and children will be reunited here.”

Zane nodded. “A few of the other parents and children are among those who took placement elsewhere, though no one closely related to Kaylee or the rest of your friends. I’ll pass along the complete records now that it’s no longer a big secret.” His DIN twinkled as he sent the records across to Kaylee and Rhianna’s implant.

“We’re still looking for my Eleanor,” Franklin said glumly. “She mustered out with her original partner, then they both moved out of Nextus and left no forwarding address, and her partner hasn’t answered her e-mail. But I’m very confident in Mr. Brubeck.”

“We’ll find her no matter where she is,” Rhianna said. “That’s a promise.”

“Now I did say I had a proposal for you,” Zane said. “So here it is—would you be willing to serve as a co-curator of this place, along with the heads of Brubeck’s RIDE maint division? I know you’ve got a lot of stuff on your plate already, but that’s why we’ve got the others to take up the slack.”

“There just aren’t enough hours in the day, Zane,” Rhianna said. She smiled. “Kittygirl’s gotta sleep sometime. DINsec and DINcom are keeping us so *busy*. But...” She looked around the room at the RIDEs socializing with one another. “I can’t say no to this, either. People are more important than things, and I don’t see a single *thing* in this room.”

“That’s why we’ve got a co-curatorship,” Zane said. He grinned. “The others can do most of the work until you’ve got more time freed up, and we get to trade shamelessly on your reputation in the meanwhile. *Annd*, it gives you an excuse to hang around the campus more often.”

“I don’t need any excuse but *you*,” Rhianna said. She stood on her tip-toes and hugged Zane tightly. “Let the tabloids spew. We’re public figures now. But we’ll *still* do what we want.”

Zane grinned, and hugged her back. “I like the sound of that.”

She gave him a playful little kiss. Since money was no longer an issue between them with Rhianna’s self-earned wealth, a source of great stress was simply gone.

“Hey, Anny, why don’t you take Jenni for a bite to eat?” Zane suggested. “I’ll bet that Kaylee’s family, Leila, and the rest of the crew here could get a terrific game of Nature Range going.”

“Or Bambi’s Forest,” Kaylee said. “With fast time, we could pack a *lot* of catching up into an hour or so.”

Zane grinned at Rhianna. “And *we* could pack other things into an hour or so. Or longer.”

“Sure thing,” Anny said. She took Jenni by the hand. “C’mon, Jenni, let’s go see what kinda trouble we can get ourselves into.”

“All right, Miss Hewer,” Jenni said. “I am kinda hungry...” She glanced back at Kandace.

“Go on, girl,” Kandace purred. “I’ll be here when you come back.”

“Y’know, they could be at it all night,” Anny pointed out. “There’s a guest room in my apartment, if ye like.”

“Oooh, a real bed?” Jenni said. “I can’t remember last time I slept in one of those.”

“Hey, I’m not *that* bad,” Kandace chuckled.

“Oh, I didn’t say I *mind*ed sleeping in you!” Jenni giggled. “You’re very comfy. But it’s nice for a change. See you tomorrow?”

“We’ll be here,” Kandace promised. Anny gave Leila a pat on the head as they passed, then they headed out the door together.

“Nice girl,” Kaylee said. “Funny, Kandy, I coulda swore you said something ‘bout not wanting to Fuse again for a while.”

Kandace rolled her eyes good-naturedly. “Yeah, rub it in why don’tcha. I can be just as wrong about things as the next kitty.”

“So she’s the one we have to thank for Dr. Patil coming back,” Rhianna said.

“Yeah, I guess that’s right,” Kandace admitted. “She’s the one who made me write Mom that letter. I wonder if she’ll ever know how much that means to us?”

“Maybe, but...she’s young,” Rhianna said. “Although there are probably a few things I’m missing here. You’ll have to tell Kaylee and me how you two ended up together. Sounds like quite a story.”

Kandace nodded. “And kinda ironic that her own Mom’s outta reach for right now. But anyway, you two oughtta get going.”

Zane chuckled. “I sense some subtle hinting going on.”

“So, where to next?” Rhianna asked. “Have any place in mind?”

“Well, first we need to stop by my office,” Zane said. “There’s something I wanted to do while we’re here.” He waved to the RIDEs. “See you guys later. Don’t have too much fun!”

“We will take that under advisement!” Franklin said cheerfully.

Zane led Rhianna out a back entrance and across the parade ground to the main Brubeck building, opening the door with a flash of his DIN and leading her to a private elevator. “Well, that was fun,” Zane said, grinning. “I’m totally spoiled for giving people Christmas presents now.”

Zane led the way past Agatha’s vacant desk, through the door to his office. It was a comfortable room, with a lot of little personal touches—a photo of human-him and Terry on a wall, one of his Dad’s old Stetsons hanging on a hook—and a top-of-the-line personal fabber in one corner. Zane nodded toward the fabber. “Hey, Rhi, could you do me a solid? Fab me...oh...three of your latest spec of DINcom?”

Using her implant, Rhianna fed the specs to the fabber. Within seconds the three requested units were in the output tray. “With my compliments.”

“Thanks.” Zane separated the three DINcoms, placing the halves in separate groups on his desk. Then he picked up one group and swallowed them one by one.

“Huh. That’s odd. They’ve actually got different flavors.”

“Well, I hope they taste *good*.”

“Yeah, they did,” Zane said. “That’s how we can tell if a part’s broken or not. Quinny taught me about that on the cruise. ‘If the taste is bitter, it’s a spitter.’” He grinned. “The first one was peppermint, then chocolate, then raspberry. My body’s way of keeping the different pairings separate, maybe?” He picked up the other halves from the desk and touched them to the tip of his tongue, one by one. “Huh. Yeah. Same flavors.” He stared into the distance for a moment. “Okay, they’re all hooked up and showing green. Good.”

“This is fascinating stuff. I’m going to have to study Intie physiology in my *copious* free time.”

“Well, if you Integrated you’d be able to use fast-time a lot better,” Zane pointed out.

Rhianna rolled her eyes. “Don’t *tempt* me. I’ll upgrade my Q-implant again. There’s this modder community I’ve heard about from Jeanette...hmm.”

Zane took one of the three remaining halves and reached under his desk to plug it into his comm there. “And...we are on line, woot! When I route the connection through my DIN, I’ll have an always-on net link even in the middle of the desert. That could come in handy.” He dropped another one into an envelope, and coded the label with a quick flash of his DIN. “This one’s going out to the main rig, to hook into the network port out there.” He tossed it in his “Out” box. Then he picked up the last one. “And this one...the minty-fresh one...this one’s special.” He grinned. “I want you to have it.”

Rhianna blushed. “You might want to keep spares around, Zane. Our current failure rates are pretty bad, and we don’t really know what’s causing the signal loss. I’m still looking for an FTL physicist who will actually *believe* me. I’ve had to start learning the math myself. We’ve been trying to build a subspace ansible for over a hundred years, you know. I only stumbled on this.”

“Then I’ll make me a few more.” Zane grinned, and blipped his DIN so the fabber’s “repeat last order” button triggered. “I’ll snack on them for redundancy. But as far as I’m concerned, the only *important* ones are the ones I give you. Put ‘em in Kaylee, if she’s willing to host ‘em. Or if there’s some way to get them added to that box inside your head, do that. Maybe you could put a DINsec on it at the same time. You don’t know how tempting...” He shook his head and grinned. “Dangling cheese in front of a mouse, really. *Aaaaaanyway*...I’m setting aside a little bit of my own runtime, just for you and Kay. Your very own little Zane shell account. Properly sandboxed and everything, but no matter how busy I get I’ll always pay attention there.”

“And I’m always connected to Kaylee, though I don’t want to bother her right now.”

Zane nodded. “You can shut the connection down at your own end for privacy, but I’ll always keep my side open.”

“I’m game. I promise I won’t bog down that Intie Q-brain of yours with FTL comm simulations.”

Zane grinned. “Oh, feel free to run whatever you can get away with. It’s a load-limited space, the only runtime you’ll slow down is yours.” He chuckled. “Honestly, I’m tempted just to give you my root password and be done with it, let you have *all* my computing power to do whatever you want with, but the board would scream bloody murder. So it’ll have to wait ‘til I can con Aggie into taking over.” He winked.

Rhianna looked poleaxed. “You trust me *that much*?”

“I’d trust you with my life,” Zane said. “Literally. Half of me already had for years before the other half even met you. Every RIDE you fix puts the same trust in you.”

“I’m still not thinking of myself as a doctor. I honestly have no idea why,” Rhianna grumbled. “Thank you, Zane.” She smiled, then laughed. “Just a few months ago I would’ve been appalled and offended at all these things you’re giving me. But...this feels *different*.” She moved closer.

“Do you feel the estrogen *surging* through your veins?” Zane quipped.

“You could say that,” Rhianna said.

“I *did* say that.” Zane grinned down at her. “You know, the night is still young, and suddenly I feel like dancing. How ‘bout you?”

“Nothing too fancy,” Rhianna said.

“Oh, of course not,” Zane assured her. “I was thinking that place our ‘deer friend’ runs sounds just about right to me.”

“The one where everyone knows your name?” Rhianna said.

“That’s the place,” Zane said. “What you think?”

“I think that sounds wonderful.” Rhianna grinned. “I have some dating demons to exorcise.”

Zane’s DIN twinkled. “I’ll just get the car.”

More media drones followed them from the campus to Cheers, where they kept their distance. With so many Integrates around, a number of them working together could hack DINsec, so they backed off a hundred meters from the parking lot. The bar continued to be the go-to place for normal people to meet, and gawk at, Integrates. Diane made sure to create a genial atmosphere where it was okay to ask just about any question. Mostly they came from human/RIDE duos who wanted to Integrate themselves. Rhianna suspected the bar was doing a better job of fostering human-Integrate relations, and talking would-be premature Integrates out of it, then any professional Integration clinic ever could.

“Zane! Rhianna!” the doe called from behind the bar. “Come on in!”

“Do you *ever* sleep, Diane?” Rhianna asked. “Even before you came out, every time I came in here, at all hours of the day, you were behind that bar.”

“*Cheers* is my life,” Diane replied. “And I do sleep, but only for a few minutes at a time. It’s an Integrate thing.”

“Well hey, lookie who the cat dragged in!” Rufia called from a table where she and Yvonne were seated, separately. She was in a chair, and Yvonne was resting on a RIDE pad with her legs tucked under her and a RIDEsafe power connector plugged in. “This couldn’t possibly be...The Date, could it?” Rhianna could *hear* the ellipse and the capital letters.

“Oh, you know it is, girlfriend” Rhianna purred, kissing Zane on his furry cheek. Rufia clapped and whistled, and a number of the other patrons who were familiar with the pair joined in—though not the stag Fuser who was seated nearby with a doe on each side. Rufia tugged on his sleeve. “Hey, Ronno. Look who’s here.”

The brown stag looked back a little, saw Rhianna and who she was with, then snorted, giving his does his full attention.

“So that’s him?” Zane murmured.

“That’s him,” Rufia said. “In hindsight, he’s just not Rhianna’s type. I knew

Ryan's taste in girls, but you know, it's hard to transpose that accurately across genders."

"He's certainly not impressed with me," Zane said. "I really shouldn't be petty. I shouldn't, like, buy his apartment complex and evict him, or get his skimmer truck repossessed, or have him audited by Uplift's Revenue Service...though it would be soooooo easy." Zane shook his head. "No. Bad Zane. Keep away from the Dark Side, you must." He paused. "Oh God, I *am* turning into a Jedi."

"So, what'll you two have?" Diane said. "I've restocked my bar from that...that *philistine's* vandalism. Can't replace that Jim Beam, though."

"She had a funeral for the bottle shards," Rufia said.

"You can't ferment that stuff on Zharus properly. There's something missing in the soil," Diane insisted. "You certainly can't do it a hundred years back in time."

Zane chuckled. "I'm so sorry for your loss. As the proximate cause of it, I promise I'll find some way to make it up to you."

"Well, if you can find a replacement bottle, I'll be amazed. But good luck," Diane said.

"Anyway, I'm feeling dangerous and debonair tonight," Zane said. "So how about James Bond's classic martini, the Vesper? That's when you take three measures of Gordon's—"

"I know the recipe," Diane said. "You do know that 'Kina Lillet' hasn't been made since 1986, right?"

Zane chuckled. "Just come as close as you can."

"A challenge," Diane said. "I like that. What about you, Rhi?"

"Long Island Iced Tea," Rhianna said. "I've never had one."

Diane grinned. "Ah, your partner's RIDE's favorite drink."

"Uncia swears by it, so I figured, what the hey." Rhianna took the barstool next to Zane and scooted up so they were thigh-to-thigh. Zane grinned, and put an arm around her shoulder.

"Now *that's* what I like to see!" Rufia said. "You go, girl!"

Zane glanced over his shoulder. "Oh, hey. Yvonne?"

The elk glanced over at him. "Yes, Zane?"

"If you and Rufia can spare each other for a couple hours, you might wanna head over to this address. Here's the key code to get in the door."

Yvonne cocked her head. "What's this?"

"Go and see." Zane grinned. "You can take Rufia by tomorrow or some other time, but right now it's RIDES' night."

"Okay, now you've made me curious," Yvonne said. "You mind, thumbs-dear?"

"Not if you advance me enough *mu* for a couple more hours of drinking!" Rufia said cheerfully.

"Oh, just go. I'll cover her tab the rest of the night," Zane said. "Unlike most of the people here, I can actually afford it."

Rufia stared at Zane with stars in her eyes. "If you weren't already taken, I'd kiss you myself."

"Better all around if you don't try it," Zane said, as Rhianna growled.

"I'll be backs later, then!" Yvonne said, getting up and detaching from the power plug. She trotted out the door, converting to her skimmer bike form in the parking lot, and headed away.

Diane chuckled. "The museum?"

Zane nodded. "The museum. She doesn't know Franklin's there yet."

"Oooh," Diane said.

Rufia raised an eyebrow. "Her Daddy? That Franklin?"

"That's the one!" Rhianna said.

"Ooooh!" Rufia said. "This calls for...another drink!"

"*Everything* calls for another drink with you," Rhianna said.

"Can I help it if everything is alcoholic?" Rufia said. "Seriously...Rhi, I don't think I've had the chance to thank you for what you gave Yvonne. I've never seen the girl so happy. She actually *cried*." Rufia shook her head. "All along we believed the official story that she'd been core-damaged in her first deployment, which was why her early memories were so spotty. We never even *thought* she might be one of the forest kids even after you told us Kaylee's story."

"Even Kaylee didn't know the names of all the others at the time," Rhianna said. "She got to name her own, but otherwise..."

"I think Vonnie's going to start calling her 'Aunt Kaylee' now," Rufia said, grinning. "At least until Kaylee gets annoyed enough at it to smack her. Care to place bets on how many times that will take?"

"Maybe I should be calling her 'Aunt Kaylee' myself," Diane said, placing Zane and Rhianna's drinks in front of them. "Of course, I've known since shortly after we Integrated, since back in the day nobody knew how to harden Nextus's computers against Integrates, and we were really curious about those missing memories."

"Did you ever look for the other children?" Rhianna asked.

"No...I didn't really look too hard, just in case. I think there are three other deer? I'm not sure now. Since we were all single births, I didn't really feel any sisterly closeness." She shrugged. "I did happen across a couple I was pretty sure I recognized, apart from Kaylee and Vonnie, but they seemed happy enough as they were. Didn't feel like opening a can of worms. Did pass on everything to Dr. Patil, after."

Rhianna sipped her drink, getting lipstick on the rim of the glass. It felt *good* to be out with Zane. Dating the girls on the *Spruce Goose* had never felt this deep. Those were mainly one-night stands, but being out with Zane had substance. Before then, Ryan had spent too much time traveling from job to job around Earth, and his disinterest in Virtual Life meant it was nigh impossible to maintain a relationship. So there was just a simple joy in being in Zane's company that felt *mutual*. Were these womanly feelings? Or did that even matter? She decided it didn't, in the slightest.

Zane tried his own drink. "Mmm. This tastes...very Bondian. Heck of a job, Diane."

"We aims to please. You two look wonderful together." Diane picked up a glass from the sink and dried it with a towel.

"Hell, yeah!" Rufia said, raising her foamy beer stein. "It's about time you got some *action*, Rhi!"

"If she really *wants* that kind of 'action'," Zane purred.

"We'll see," Rhianna said. "If it happens naturally...tiger. Mrowl."

"Still, don't push it," Rufia said. "Sometimes all you need is a good cuddle with someone warm and fuzzy. So, just do what comes naturally. It's no different from being a man there, you know. There's a lot of differences, but some things just don't change."

"Much as I'd like to wax philosophic about gender differences and the benefits of

seeing another point of view..." Rhianna said. She took a long sip of her drink, and had started feeling a pleasant buzz.

"Hey, I'm happy just to be lucky enough to be sitting next to the most all-around gorgeous woman in the room—no offense, Rufia and Diane—right now," Zane said. "If we go our separate ways after we're done here, I'd still call it a win."

"I'm not going anywhere," Rhianna said playfully. "You can't get rid of this kittygirl that easily."

"Glad to hear it," Zane said, finishing his drink. He nodded to the area in front of the jukebox where a number of patrons were dancing even now. "So, shall we dance?"

Earth girls weren't generally a passive bunch. Rhianna took Zane's handpaw and pulled him out of his seat. He'd engaged his lifters and allowed her to pull him along through the air. "I guess that's a yes?" Zane said dryly.

"You'll have to excuse that I haven't danced since..."

"Since 'Kaylee Cross' busted a move here about a year ago?" Diane supplied. She sent a recording of Kaylee dancing by herself to the duo. "You were pretty good in Passive, Rhi."

"Oooh, yeah!" Zane said. "But I'll bet you're even better now."

"Well, now these curves are real." Rhianna smiled and looked at the floating Zane. "Why don't we test that hypothesis?"

"Let's just." He nodded to the jukebox as the last song ended, and Blondie's "Rapture" began to play.

The crowded dance floor made room for them, Integrates, Fusers, humans and RIDEs all moving together to the music. For a fast disco-style song like this, the dancing was mostly done without contact, across from each other. Zane pulled some moves he'd gotten from eighties videos, and Rhianna danced some Earther beats from before her emigration.

"Hey, I know that one!" Rufia said, raising her latest stein. "New Boston, our *Adios Earth Party!*"

"Where the rumors about Zharus came thick and fast," Rhianna said as she rolled her shoulders.

Rufia giggled. "And after the party, so did we! Though our dates certainly didn't complain. Nice girls, wonder what happened to 'em."

"Last email I got from my 'rents was what? Five years ago?" Rhianna said. "Oh, well. No gloomy thoughts tonight!"

"Hear hear!" Rufia said. "Diane, my stein's empty!"

"Can't have that, can we?" the doe Integrate said, floating over a replacement.

As "Rapture" ended, Diane said, "All right, everyone, time for a slow dance! And this one goes out to the *cutest* couple in the bar right now. I think we all know who that is." "This Night" by Billy Joel began playing.

Zane chuckled. "I think they're playing our song." He opened his arms. Rhianna came forward and clasped one, putting her right hand on his shoulder. Zane smiled down at her, putting his arm around her in return, and they danced together, enjoying the closeness.

"You *smell* like a man," Rhianna said. "I'm really *feeling* those pheromones. They tickle my kitty nose."

"You sure that's not just my Old Spice?" Zane said. He grinned. "I'm glad you like it. Just remember, I like you for *who* you are, not *what* you are, 'kay?"

She hugged him close. "I know, Zane. I know. I just have some old Earth mindset to shake out. It takes a long time to go native, but I think I've gotten the hang of it. If you ever decide to try tigrass, I'll still be here. It's a new world."

"I know. I just don't want to see you lose your *self*," Zane said. "But you're one of the most sensible people I've ever met, so I shouldn't worry."

Rhianna nodded. "I know you're remembering how I was out at the summit...I guess I might sound a little like that now." She smiled. "But it's different this time. Back then, I was...all feeling, no thinking," she explained. "Now...I've *been* thinking, believe me I have. I've had plenty of time to do it in. But I want to feel, *too*. Even men aren't made of stone, of course."

"As long as you know your own mind," Zane said. "I like you, a *lot*, and I want to make you happy. I don't want to take advantage of you."

"I'm not pushing it. I'm finding my way. Trust me this time." She smiled warmly. "But, if you see me backpedaling, feel free to make an example."

Zane nodded. "Fair enough."

The song ended, and segued into The Beatles, "Happy Just to Dance with You." Zane chuckled. "Get the feeling someone's sending a subtle message?"

"I guess we should just hush and dance the night away."

"You won't get any argument out of me," Zane said. "As long as she keeps playing the slow dances, anyway."

"I think I'm going to be danced out soon, anyway. I've had a wonderful evening, just so you know. So far it's been more than I hoped for."

"Same here," Zane said. "You're fun to be around."

The Beatles tune was the last slow dance. When the new set started—by a local band named Doubledown Derp, whatever that meant—both felt it was time to leave the floor. "So what do you think?" Zane asked. "Hang around a bit longer at the bar? Or...?"

"I hear you have some marvelous...etchings, back at your place," Rhianna purred.

"I miiiiight," Zane said. "They're not necessarily to everyone's taste, though. You consider yourself an art aficionado?"

"I don't know *art*," Rhianna said. "But I know what I like."

"I imagine I could be...persuaded," Zane said. "But fair warning...going through all of them might take a while. In fact, it *could* take all night."

Rhianna petted Zane's handpaw. "Oh, I have *oodles* of time."

Zane pulled his cane into his hand from where he'd leaned it up next to the bar stool. "Then maybe we ought to go get started."

As Rhianna and Zane headed for the door together, they were met by two elk trotting in—Yvonne, and her father Franklin. "Rhi! Zane! Glad we caught you!" Yvonne said. "Thank you *soooo* much, both of you!"

Rufia blinked at her partner's entrance. "Vonnie! Is that...?"

Franklin trotted up to the table and bowed his magnificent crowned head to her. "I want to thank you for taking such good care of my little girl. She's told me what you did for her when you first met."

Rufia blushed, rubbing the back of her neck. "Aw...shucks, sir, it was the least I could do. Far's I'm concerned, she's taken a lot better care of me since than I've ever done for her."

Franklin chuckled. "All the same, thank you."

"I thought you'd be gone at least another hour or so," Rhianna said. "Why'd you

come back so soon?"

"I wanted to drop Rufia off back home," Yvonne said. "Then I can go back and hang out with Dad, Aunt Kaylee, and the others all night."

"Aww, but Zane was gonna cover my tab!" Rufia said.

"Why don't you just get a six-pack to go?" Zane suggested.

Rufia considered. "I guess free beer is free beer no matter where you drink it. Diane?"

The deer chuckled. "Coming right up."

Rhianna grinned. "I'm glad you all are getting along."

Yvonne nodded. "Thank you, Rhi—you and Kaylee, and Zane, gave me something I never imagined I'd ever have. My family."

"Hey, don't mention it," Zane said. "Family is important. You all enjoy yourselves." He grinned over at Rhianna. "Rhi and I have somewhere else we gotta be."

Yvonne nodded. "See you later, and thanks again!"

As they stepped out into the parking lot, Rhianna sighed longingly.

"What is it?" Zane asked.

"This just gets me thinking about who I left back on Earth. I have a moderately-sized extended family. Parents, two brothers, grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins. It was really *hard* leaving them, but they knew I had to go."

Zane nodded. "I hear that. You ever hear from them by starship mail?"

"Not for years, though I have sent them a couple missives. Just some low-res video, showing them my Garage. I had to be careful about what I said about RIDEs and such, so what they ended up seeing were the skimmers." Rhianna grumbled at the censorship. "Planetary security, huh?"

Zane held her door for her. "Yeah. I wonder how effective it can really be, myself. Surely Earth's spies will have told them everything by now." He shrugged. "But inertia is what it is."

"Well, something's gotta give." She got into her seat and waited for him to lift overhead to the other side. "What with the rumors we hear about places as far away as Neorus. They supposedly have some kind of VR tech better than Earth's or ours. Word does get out."

"Yeah, but that's something for wiser heads than ours to talk about some other time." Zane climbed into the driver's seat and revved the engine. "Right now, speaking of inertia...let's go see about becoming a couple of bodies at rest." He reached over to take Rhianna's hand in his.

"I'm in the mood for a good physics lesson, and maybe physiology, too." She used her free hand to squeeze his.

Zane chuckled. "Or maybe I *should* say bodies in motion. Lots and lots of motion."

"Mrrowl," Rhianna purred.

It was the wee small hours of the early morning, when the Cheers bar emptied out except for a small group of second- and third-shift workers coming in before or after work or on their lunch hour—the time of day Diane usually devoted to cleaning up, inventory, and other such chores.

It generally wasn't the usual time for a cheetah-furred courier to show up, but there one was entering the bar, gingerly toting a wooden crate that Diane recognized

immediately. Her Catholicism had lapsed decades before, but she still felt a strong impulse to cross herself as what could only be one of the few holy relics of bartending entered her presence.

“Sign here, ma’am?” the cheetah said, carefully placing the crate on the counter.

“Sure thing, ProsChet.” Diane knew the courier as one of her regular Integrate customers, who’d been taking advantage of his extreme short-distance sprinting speed to work as a short-distance courier even before the great unmasking. Now that he was free to use his Integrate abilities to their fullest extent, he was in even greater demand, frequently among rich and powerful who saw his ability to run at barely subsonic speeds as the best way to get pricey items from place to place without being intercepted.

She took the clipboard and scrawled her signature, never once taking her eye off the box as if she thought it would vanish at any moment. “You got a few minutes? Stay and have a drink. On the house.”

ProsChet blinked. “Really? Well, sure, if it’s on the house. Are you sure you’re feeling all right?”

“If this is what I think it is, I just might buy a round *for* the house.”

Diane carefully lifted the lid off of the crate—using her hands, because some things you just did the old-fashioned way. Within was a teardrop-shaped bottle she’d only ever seen in photographs—The Glenlivet 95-year-old single-malt cask strength reserve Scottish whiskey. And a handwritten note:

Diane:

It’s not quite hundred-year-old Jim Beam, but it’s the best I could come up with on short notice.

As you know, Dad was more a scotch man than bourbon. He ordered this from Earth the year before he died—one of the few luxuries he allowed himself—but he was gone before it got here. I don’t like the stuff enough to want to drink it myself, and it feels wrong just to sell it, but every time I see it I just think of him, and I do that enough already.

Anyway, I know he thought the world of you, so if he couldn’t drink it himself, I’m sure he’d have wanted you to have it. And since I indirectly caused that schmuck to break your Jim Beam, I want you to have it, so we’re in agreement there.

Whether you drink it, serve it, or just treasure it, I hope you enjoy it. Thanks for everything.

Zane

The morning sun was plainly visible through the dome to the east as Rhianna and Kaylee pulled into the garage under her home, where Rochelle and Uncia were already waiting for them.

“So, Rhi-girl, spill!” Rochelle asked.

Rhianna chuckled. “We had a good time. Zane really knows how to treat a gal.”

“Well, yeah, I already know *that*.” Rochelle grinned. “But what base did you two end up on?”

“I’m not sure what they map to, exactly, but maybe second or third,” Rhianna said.

“Really? Why’d you stop there?” Rochelle asked. “This wasn’t a ‘Paradise by the Dashboard Light’ thing, was it?”

Rhianna snorted. "Hell no. If you *must* put an eighties song to it, try 'One Heartbeat at a Time.' We just didn't feel like rushing things. Once you've reached a base, you can't go back to the last one."

"You can if the umpire says you have to," Rochelle pointed out.

Rhianna snorted. "You're taking the metaphor *much* too far." She smiled. "When I look back on the night, I'm happy with how far it went, not sad it went too far or frustrated it didn't go farther. As far as I'm concerned, that means we got it exactly right." She put on a reedy impersonation of an old woman's voice. "You young Zharusian whippersnappers can take it fast if you want, but we old maids from Earth have to ease into things."

Rochelle laughed. "Okay, point taken. So how was he as far as you went?"

"A purr-fect gentleman," Rhianna said. "There was a point where if he'd pushed *just a little bit*, I might have gone further than I wanted, in the heat of the moment...but he didn't. In the end, we just snuggled up and went to sleep."

"Aww, that's sweet," Rochelle said.

Rhianna giggled. "If you want sweet...I woke up in the middle of the night when he started grooming my face in his sleep. I don't think he even realized he was doing it."

Rochelle echoed Rhianna's giggle. "What did you do?"

Rhianna smirked. "I just sort of distracted his tongue with my own for a while 'til he went back to sleep."

Rochelle grinned. "Good strategy."

"So...if it's not too personal, I was wondering," Rhianna said. "You went out with him once. How come you didn't again?"

"Oh, I wouldn't have minded going out again, and I expect neither would he," Rochelle said. "We had a good time and all. But that's all it was—a good time. When I noticed he was actually *interested* in you, rather than just looking for another good time...well, I can have good times any night with anyone. *Relationships* are something special. And while we can be kind of casual about open relationships around here, I know you Earth folks are usually more conservative."

Rhianna smiled. "Well, then thanks. I still don't know how much of a relationship we'll have in the end...but it's sure worth a try."

"So Diane commed me this morning," Rochelle said. "Seems like right after you two left, a courier turned up with a bottle of 95-year-old Glenlivet and a note from Zane."

Rhianna nodded. "Yeah, he told me about that." She chuckled. "I was a little ambivalent at first, but he did feel responsible for that schmuck smashing up one of Diane's greatest treasures, and had personal reasons for wanting that bottle out of sight and out of mind. So I guess it's not another Starmaster."

"I think we can trust him not to make *that* mistake again," Kaylee said from her alcove. "Just make sure you don't get too close to that infatuation event horizon—at least not 'til you're *sure* you're ready to go all the way. You don't have his self-control so much. You didn't *before* you crossed, either."

"I know, I know. Just a little weakness of mine," Rhianna said.

"She also mentioned Yvonne's Dad had shown up," Rochelle said. "And she told me about Zane's museum. What a surprise! I want to get over there sometime today myself."

"Wasn't nobody more surprised than *me*," Kaylee said. "My brother...two of my

kittens...and Kandy back to visit! She and her girl are staying in town for a bit, by the way. Told her they could crash in our guest room if they wanted. They'll be by later today."

"Cool! I never got to meet Jenni when I ran into her out at Aloha," Rochelle said. "Looking forward to meeting her today."

"Well, let's see how much work we've got lined up," Rhianna said. "I expect we could run by this afternoon sometime." She reviewed the day's appointments with her implant. They included delivery of three more maintenance bays, filling up the last of the lot's available space. She delegated Kaylee to handle signing off on them. VR meetings with the franchisee applicants were forthcoming, then there were four hours minimum delegated to just doing the work she loved, fixing RIDEs.

"We have a couple of Donizetti DE owners who want your *personal* touch, Rhi," Kaylee said. She looked at Rochelle. "And they want *yours* on general RI core maintenance, too."

"Be a good kitty and give the new hires their orientation, Kaylee?" Rhianna said.

"A'course, partner." The lynx stood up and stretched before padding out through the hardlight door.

"Wow. I don't think we've ever been this busy," Rochelle said. "We'll have to add another shift for a while."

"Fifteen minutes of fame, Shelley," Uncia said. "Enjoy it while it lasts, hey?"

There was so much to do. On top of the list was trying to get in touch with a researcher at Martinez-U in the FTL Physics Department to she could find someone who could determine how the DINcom actually worked. The field data coming in from the Marshals had some worrying problems she had no idea how to fix. Marshals often had to carry a dozen of them just to ensure they had a reliable connection to base, which took up DE space that could be used for other things. She felt like a 19th century inventor. Trial and error ruled the day rather than more scientific testing—it couldn't even be simulated. Worse, the math was absolutely impenetrable.

:Relax, Rhi. You can't do everything,: Kaylee said.

:It's okay. I know I'm a wrench wench more than anything,: Rhianna replied. *:I need somebody more 'thinky' to figure this out.:*

:So, put it down until you can. There's a RBT(m)-LSA-005V out here with your name on it.: Kaylee sent her the feed. *:Take a look at these diagnostics. Think we can save the DE?:*

:Wait, a V? There are only three of those I know of. They called 'em "velocirabbits". Faster than a hawk with better inertial damping.:

:And this one has some interesting problems. Come on, someone else can take care of the Donizettis.:

Rhianna rubbed her hands together. "Hey Shelley, interested in fixing up a poor abused velocirabbit?"

"Sounds like a challenge," the raven-haired woman said. "I'll be right down."

A few hours later, the worst of the velocirabbit's problems had been put well to rest, the Donizettis were done, and Rhianna had identified three more likely franchisees. It really was tricky figuring out *where* to put them, quite apart from deciding who was worthy to run them. Rhi didn't want to harm the business of a number of other decent garages that were already in operation in the other polities.

Some of them were decades older than her own, she was on friendly terms with a number of them, and the RIDE mechanic community was pretty tightly-knit in general.

Her decision to franchise out was already causing some unwanted friction, but she was managing to keep it minimized by concentrating mostly on setting up franchises in areas where no garage was currently within easy reach—communities that had only just started up, such as Alpha Camp or some new mining towns in the southern Dry, or where starting a new garage was deemed too financially risky to get backing. They were even planning a franchise or two in some of the major cities on Laurasia, for servicing the small numbers of Gondwanan RIDE-users there as well as working on the smaller Laurasian type.

But after an hour or two of that on top of her normal repair work, Rhi was starting to feel pretty intellectually drained as well as physically hungry. Then she heard a very familiar set of skimmer motors just outside the garage.

“Hello the garage! Hello!” Myla Wilson’s familiar, friendly voice came from the entrance. “Hey, anyone feel like some lunch around here?”

“Myla! Come on in,” Rhianna said, getting up out of the chair. She met the part-Integrate halfway and gave her a sisterly hug. “You’re looking good. Bright-eyed and bushy-tailed.”

“Sophie and I are taking some vacation time. Now that the crisis is past, Zane doesn’t need us so much at the moment, and after all that’s happened we need it,” Myla said. “So I thought I’d come by and see how you and Kay were holding up. There’s all sorts of rumors buzzing around the office about you and Zane.”

“Only rumors?” Rhianna asked, grinning. “I’m disappointed. I thought he’d have put us in the corporate bulletin by now.”

“The bulletin nothing. There’s a half dozen tumblrs and blogs devoted to speculating about you and him,” Myla said. “All sorts of shipping going on. You have a lot of Zane’s fangirls having fits.” Myla laughed. She was looking ever-more furry the more time she spent Fused with Sophie, who was taking on more organic aspects at the same time. “Anyway, I thought we’d hit St. Joseph’s BBQ for lunch. You and Kay free?”

:Hungry for some pulled chicken, Kay?: Rhianna asked her partner.

:Om nom nom!: Kaylee replied eagerly. *:Be right there, pard. The new bays’re up and running, by the way. The Lindae already claimed Bay Ten for their own. That’s the big one with the office.:*

The way they’d left LindaGirl and LindaCat on their own over the past few months—usually unannounced due to some emergency—the duo had quickly learned how to manage the Garage effectively. They weren’t quite as good natural mechanics as Paul had been, but they were already trained up to Freerider standards and continued steadily improving. They were also doing quite well at keeping their university studies up while working at the garage part-time. It might not be too long before they were ready for a franchise of their own.

In a few moments, Kaylee padded into the garage, and converted over to her skimmer form for Rhianna to climb on. Myla watched appreciatively. “Remember back when you took me out to the Milkbottle while Shelley was defragging Sophie?”

“You’d just offered to teach me the nuts and bolts of being female. I can’t really forget, can I?” Rhianna said warmly. “After you got Sophie back, we went cruising all afternoon.”

“And when we got back, Zane was waiting for us, fresh out of Integration,” Myla

said. "And the whole crazy adventure kicked off. Hard to believe it was less than six months ago. Feels like years." She chuckled. "As busy as things have been, I didn't end up with too much time to show you the ropes after all. But you seem to have found your own way okay."

"Second adolescence," Rhianna said. "Thanks for the compliment, Myla."

"Before we go, I have something to show you." Myla furrowed her brows in concentration, then *jumped* up three meters and did a forward somersault, before floating down like a feather. "I have working lifters! Well, one anyway. I can't actually lift off the ground yet."

Kaylee chuffed. "That gets a ten from the Uplift judge," Kaylee said from her dash speaker.

"You couldn't do *that* before," Rhianna said. "Think you and Sophie are going to...?"

"Well of *course* we're going to. Eventually." Myla shrugged. "Integration seems to be a one-way street, and we're already several blocks down it. I expect most folks and RIDEs who really care about each other will get there sooner or later. Sophie and I feel lucky to be able to do it gradually instead of all at once. Less of a shock that way, I expect. Right, Soph?"

"It'll happen when the time is right and not before," the partly-organic fennec RIDE declared. "Let's go eat! I'm starved."

"Works for me." Rhianna and Kaylee pulled out of the garage, and Myla followed on Sophie. They headed up the road to the small suburb where the hole-in-the-wall barbecue joint Zane favored awaited. Since Zane had taken Rochelle there on their date, Rhianna and the others had started going there fairly often. As anyone partnered with a carnivorous or omnivorous RIDE quickly discovered, it only took one visit to get hooked.

"I'm still amazed that you've got a RIDE who eats by herself," Rhianna said to Myla as they traveled along.

"Yeah, well, I've also got the only RIDE I know of who needs to carry a pooper scooper in one of her panniers," Myla said, chuckling. "So there are pros and cons."

"Hey! I'm not that bad," Sophie protested. "It was just that once, and anyway, it was an accident!"

"And I've got batteries to keep charged, or I feel lethargic," Myla added. "Try explaining how you need a second RIDEsafe socket for yourself sometime and see what kind of looks you get."

Rhianna chuckled. "That does sound trying."

They pulled into the parking lot of St. Joseph's, which was about half full as usual for this hour. The interior was also about half-full, as the barbecue place had been seeing a surge in popularity among the local Integrate community based on Zane's recommendations. Chet St. Joseph, the proprietor, nodded to them as they came in.

"Why don't we get this to go and take it to the picnic tables in the park?" Myla suggested.

"Good idea," Rhianna agreed. The park was only a couple of minutes away. "And dessert is right there."

Myla grinned. "That *was* kind of why I suggested it."

They picked up their bags and headed back out to the parking lot, and a couple of minutes later were seated on one of the Fuser-strength picnic tables on the park lawn. It

was looking even better than it had on the day of the ceremony. The grass was lusher, and the trees were all a good half-meter taller and showing signs of new foliage. Rhianna and Kaylee were Fused up, but Myla and Sophie were separate. Myla was seated across from Rhianna, and Sophie's dish was on one end of the table so she could sit on her haunches and eat from it.

"So, any gossip about Zane you'd like to share? Hmmm? I'm all ears." She twitched her oversized fennec ears to demonstrate.

Rhianna smirked. "You certainly are." She considered. "Well, he *does* know how to show a girl a good time."

"A tiger in bed as well as in the office?" Myla grinned predatorily and drank some cola through a straw.

"I'm not sure I should comment there." Rhianna grinned back. "He was a purrrrrfect gentleman with me."

"Ooooh," Sophie added.

"I can vouch for Rhi having a nice evening, night, morning, breakfast..." Kaylee said, giggling. "I had a good couple of months last night myself."

"Oh, that's right, Zane was finally going to show off the museum." Myla grinned. "We all had such a hard time keeping quiet about that. But it was worth it."

"I'll say," Kaylee said. "Nature Range and Bambi's Forest with family...hunting down Yvonne and her Dad, among others. I can't remember last time I had so much fun."

"I'll join you next time," Sophie said. "I've got some almost Intie-grade Earth desert biomes we can play in."

"Oooh," Kaylee said. "Sounds like fun."

"I'm not sure exactly where my relationship with Zane is going to go from here," Rhianna said. "It was a good first date, but one swallow doesn't make a summer."

"I've known him long enough now that he'll follow your lead," Myla said. She started laughing. "You know, the tumblrs are digging up all that video of you at the first Summit? Rhianna, doll, you *did* look stunning in that dress. And you'll look even better in the one he gave you."

Rhianna raised an eyebrow. "You knew about that?"

"I *am* his chief bodyguard," Myla pointed out. "And while I shouldn't spill *all* my client's secrets, there's one other thing I think you ought to know."

"You've got my curiosity."

"It's standard Brubeck Mining policy that any employee who's going to be spending much time in the Dry has to bank reproductive tissue first, just in case of accidental irradiation," Myla said. "I had to do it myself—and I'm certainly glad I did now. And Zane is nothing if not a stickler for regulations."

The mechanic put two and two together, then put her hand on her belly. "Uh..."

"I'm not saying you two *have* to get busy or anything," Myla said. "Just wanted to let you know that avenue's still open—so you don't have to feel like you'd be 'missing out on part of the experience' if you go with Zane. If you get around to it before *you* Integrate, anyway. Maybe you should bank some tissue, too." She grinned. "It's suddenly all the rage these days."

:*Dream a little dream, eh?*: Kaylee sent, smirking. Rhianna's implant allowed her to dream lucidly, and she hid nothing from Kaylee. :*Nothing wrong with being curious. I can simulate being pegggers for you.*:

:*Dreams will do*,: Rhianna decided. :*Real life? Not yet*.:

"I'll file that little fact away for safekeeping," Rhianna said aloud.

"I hope it works out for you, I really do," Myla said. "You make a *really* cute couple."

"It's the tufty ears," Rhianna deadpanned, flicking them.

"And kitty noses," Kaylee added.

Rhianna laughed. And that was when she really felt it. Life was at last returning to normal. Granted, it was a normal that she wouldn't even have recognized before that adventure in the Towers, or her first trip for ice cream with Myla—but it was "normal" for some value of "normal." There were no impending crises, no sense that some new disaster lay just around the corner. There *was* her relationship with Zane to sort out, but that promised to be the exact *opposite* of a disaster.

At least for the moment, life was good. The way her life had been going lately, Rhianna reflected wryly, that peace and quiet might end at any time—but that just made the calm parts all the more precious. She resolved to do her best to enjoy them as they came.

:*You said it, partner*,: Kaylee sent, flooding her rider with feelings of mutual affection. "Now how 'bout we go get some ice cream?" she said aloud. "They got that new 'RIDE's Dream' mondae we haven't tried yet."

Rhianna grinned. "I'll go fetch us three of them."

Author's Notes

Prologue

JonBuck: Normally I don't even look at something more than a couple years old, but this setting demanded I go back and look at this story again. The genesis of this idea came at the end of a huge crisis of confidence I had in my writing methods. Before FreeRIDers, I never wrote with any kind of plan. It showed in my other work. The plot would start meandering on me, unfocused, then the story dead-ends. I had too much unfinished work. So, for about 18 months I stressed over how I created stories.

There were several things I wanted out of this setting. 1) I wanted something science fiction rather than fantasy. 2) I wanted tg and furry TF. 3) I wanted an anime style. 1 and 3 put limits on how I could accomplish 2. I settled on nanotechnology and metamaterials as the [Applied Phlebotinum](#).

Inevitably I got blocked, so I shared the idea with R_M. He wrote "Deserted" and "Merging Traffic" in the time it took me to finish this one. R_M had expressed that, after writing in Paradise, that he would like to try a cooperative project. I'd enjoyed his Paradise stories, especially the soft canon "Paradise Forever".

What happened next is probably the most productive 18 months in my entire writing career. I've probably written as much as the previous ten years combined. I plan out plot points and characters now.

This story needed revisions to clean up conflicts with what we wrote later. It has a new opening, and a major change in the original scene with Fritz. At the time I originally wrote this, his character was nothing like what he became later. (We didn't even know he was going to be the main villain of the setting yet!) Also, Ryan had originally met Rufus on the starliner, but we changed it later to being a longtime friend from Earth. We also added some further descriptions to flesh things out a little, and revised a few spots where characters' backgrounds or rationales had changed. And, of course, we added an explicit date.

R_M helped tighten things up a lot here. We hope you enjoyed this Second Edition of FreeRIDers.

Chapter One

R_M: The nice thing about going back through and revising these is that we get to harmonize what we wrote earlier with what came into our heads later. (Well, when I say "the nice thing," I mean "the main reason we're doing it.")

In this case, when we started writing this we didn't have the Integrate society or what it stood for fully formed in our heads yet. We didn't even invent Leah and Aaron until we sat down to write Part 2. As a result, the Intie stuff kind of came out of nowhere when it entered the scene. Also, Paul/Paulie the griffin entirely vanished from the narrative after his appearance in "FreeRIDers," and Fritz, our main villain, didn't actually physically poke his nose into this story until *Part 13*, and that was a flashback!

So we hit upon these scenes to introduce Intie politics, explain where Paulie went, punch up Fritz's threat level, and effectively bookend the main narrative. We can also show why Zane's decision to go public wasn't as doomed as prior attempts had been —there was a sizable movement ready to support it now. Look for us to incorporate more of that into future episodes' revisions.

Other changes included clarifying that Kaylee started out in the regular Nextus army before moving to the MRS (we didn't work out she and Anny had started in the army until later), a few character moment tweaks, and, of course, adding dates.

I'm particularly proud of how I worked a reference to Machiavelli's "better to be feared" philosophy into the Paulie scene, because it bookends nicely to when Zane brings it up later on in his final confrontation with Fritz. Going back through allows us to do things like that, since we know what we wrote down the road and can link back to it from the beginning and make it look like we knew what we were doing all along. (Oops, gave it away, didn't I?) Which is why "real" authors go through several revisions before reaching a finished product, I suppose.

Speaking of dates, we realized that we hadn't left quite enough time in the story to incorporate later events, and had to shove everything back a month or so —including the ending of "Deserted." Whoops!

The original version of this chapter is still available separately on Shifti, if you want to compare. Likewise, you can do a history comparison to see exactly which bits of text changed. Hope you find it interesting!

JonBuck: There are quite a few ideas in our original story concept that ended up not being used in the long run. At first, Fritz and Kaylee were the only two RIDEs in existence when the RIDE program started, and the Nextus-Sturmhaven War really didn't figure that much into it. Fritz/Felix was still a "Jilted Lover", though. So a lot of our revision process here is cleaning up the bits left over from these unused ideas.

Writing fiction is fraught with stuff like this. Having done writing in numerous settings over the years, not to mention creating a half dozen of my own, I tend to just shrug and know continuity snarls are inevitable. Thankfully we can go back and fix the big tangles, though sometimes we'll encounter a Gordian Knot or two that requires a *bit* more handwaving. But it's the nature of the beast. Airtight continuity is a pipe dream, and I don't want the perfect to be the enemy of the good.

Fritz's character at this point was still the "oddball, outcast jokester" among the Inties. He wasn't going to bring the Domes down until later on in our thought process. Then I realized that sort of event would be a hell of a lot more serious than hacking local fabbers to make toy robots that say "Made of meat! Made of meat!" Fritz's threat level just rose from there. Once we did the big flashback episode, the character *finally* gelled into nearly his present form.

Notable here is that at this point I only expected this monster to be about 5-7 parts long. [**R_M:** I was thinking more like 10...nice round number. How little we both knew!]

Chapter Two

R_M: Here we see the ripple effect of little changes begin. Aaron and Leah being

told ahead of time who Zane was means they can no longer be surprised about it. Fritz no longer being a goofball in an enclave made up of goofballs, the Towers enclave...can no longer be made up of goofballs. Zane's old man and Quinoa's uncle being close, Zane can no longer be quite so disdainful of Quinoa as he once was.

Come to that, I've coined a new term: "Zanetification (n) - The tendency of Zane Brubeck to pontificate at people at the drop of a hat." Tried to pare that down some here. His little speech to Quinoa went on way too long in the old version, and she should have been a *little* more clueful than she originally came off here.

We continued our expansion of the Integrate side of things with some more scenes from Quinoa's perspective, forming a natural extension of the scenes we added in the first part. This afforded both the opportunity to react to new stuff from before, and lead into stuff we already had her doing later. [JonBuck: At this point I'm still anticipating we'll have at least one important old story element we can't easily reconcile with our changes. I don't know what it will be, but I believe there will be at least one.]

Of particular interest is the change in Enclaves from being just private retreats to being completely secretive. The original version of this piece mentioned that most Enclaves that aren't Towers are willing to have non-Integrated human visitors, which is very much Not A Thing in the rest of the series. Sheesh. In a way, I'm kind of glad we tended to forget the little details of what we wrote early on as we wrote in the later stuff, because if we'd let this early stuff constrain us we wouldn't have ended up with as nearly as good a story in the end.

Other notes: the waitress here, named Pamela, who will also appear in "Impossible Things," was originally "Paula." But we realized that first we had a griffin named "Paul" (subsequently renamed to "Paulie") in "FreeRIDers," and then we had Paul the mechanic show up in Rhianna's garage. Too many Pauls! So Pamela she became.

Since we shoehorned a couple mentions of Aloha in here, I should probably remind folks that originally it was still several more episodes before Aloha was even a thing. Jetfire hadn't joined our little cabal of authors at this point, and wouldn't for several more episodes. By and large, our overall story concept had gotten a lot closer to its final form by the time he joined us.

This was also the point where we originally first introduced our two Integrates, Leah and Aaron. Jon came up with Aaron, and I invented Leah Sheryl Daye. She was an amalgam of characters I'd written and roleplayed in other settings, such as alt.pub.dragons-inn and Superguy Listserv. Her last name came from a character of mine whose first name was Summer. (What can I say, I like puns.)

I was later amused to find that one of the characters in Jetfire's stories also completely independently had the surname of "Daye" (based, I gather, on some real life acquaintance of his). However, they can't exactly be closely related, since Leah's from Zharus and JF's Ryan Daye is an immigrant from Mars! (And there's *another* confusing confluence of names...)

A lot of fun elements in this story rose out of the give and take between us as we wrote. For instance, when Aaron the velociraptor said something about "welcoming" Zane, I found the idea of a velociraptor saying "welcome" amusing enough to toss in a "To Jurassic Park, no doubt." And then Jon took that and ran with it, having Aaron say yes, but *he* didn't come up with the name. (I'm almost a little sad we went ahead and added an earlier mention of the place in the first part, since it steals a little of the

punchline’s punch, but oh well.)

JonBuck: We’ve used Google Docs for our writing process because it’s so easy to collaborate, both writing in the same file at the same time. This makes the process rather...reactive. Sort of like an instantaneous Round Robin on the sentence-level. R_M would write a bit of dialogue from Quinoa, and I’d respond with Fritz.

Another aspect is that one of us might fill in a scene very roughly, while the other goes in and tinkers with wording and fills in gaps in description while the other keeps on moving the story forward. Often it’s just how one feels at the time.

There are quite a few things I’d started with in early parts I realized didn’t quite work as I intended, so I changed in later parts knowing we’d go back and revise them later. Inties-as-outcasts was one, and related to that was the way their DINs were made. Originally they didn’t burn out so easily and R&R’s DIN was “just as good” as the ones made in the Enclaves. I didn’t finalize just how bad they were until Fritz was more fleshed out.

Such is the nature of worldbuilding. I’ve tried to keep it from getting near comic book-levels of continuity snarls and retcons.

Chapter Three

JonBuck: Obviously the biggest change here is the addition of the Fritz sections. It just seemed like a natural addition so we get to know the villain, a little of his past with Kaylee, and his Jiminy. The difficulty with making revisions like this is dropping *too many* hints of what comes along later. We need new readers to have some surprises, after all.

This episode we kept the focus on the two RIDEs, since at the time their personalities hadn’t yet had much elaboration. Up until this point I was still having trouble thinking of them separately from their riders—they were just the means for Integration, which was something I originally wanted to have happen to Rhianna sometime in this arc. I didn’t *want* to dwell on Kaylee and the others too much. You could say the RIDEs became people here for me the first time, so I decided to let them develop further.

R_M: Shopping!

Although I didn’t finish up and post it until a month later, I had “Rochelle & Rufia: R&R” about halfway written at this point, including most of the shopping part—so when Uncia talks about Rufia taking Rochelle shopping, that episode is what she’s talking about.

Not every chapter has to be about something important. In covering a shopping trip, this episode serves as a kind of breather between the drama surrounding the first couple of episodes (more so now than ever, what with the added Integrate scenes) and the additional drama of the next episode and what comes afterward. I’d *like* to be able to say we planned it that way, but...well, hey. I can still *say* it whether it’s true or not. So yeah, we planned it that way!

Sometimes you write something and when you look back on it months later, you wonder what you were thinking. That’s the case with a paragraph we excised about how

gender roles on Zharus had gone over the last hundred and fifty years. It came off as remarkably stilted, awkward, and unnecessary when we looked at it again...so away it went!

Apart from that, the drop-in Fritz scenes, and a few detail tweaks, not a whole lot really changed here—presumably because we didn’t actually touch on anything *important*. We did take note of some things we mentioned early on and forgot about later, such as Anny’s love of pepperoni pizzas. We’ll have to see about sneaking some pepperoni pizzas back in when we write later parts with Anny in them. And we also dropped in a couple more mentions of Donizetti parts to unify with when the brand comes up later on.

Chapter Four

R_M: The main new bit in this episode is the comm call between Zane and his sister Agatha. Funny thing is that when I was writing “Deserted,” I specified Zane had two sisters. Even then, I was thinking ahead to the story potential of how Zane partnering up with a RIDE would be seen by other members of his family. But then I... *entirely forgot about them* until episode 17 of *Integration*, at which point I had to rather hastily invent a plausible rationale for why Agatha hadn’t shown up before. (That’s also just about when I started thinking about writing *Madison* Brubeck’s story.) I think it worked rather well, under the circumstances.

Now that we’re revising, it’s simple enough to backfill, dropping in the odd reference and a scene or two here and there so Agatha’s late-story appearance doesn’t come quite so much out of nowhere. Time will tell how well we succeed.

One of the works of fiction that has inspired my writing in the FreeRIDers setting is [the Jon & Lobo series](#) by Mark L. Van Name. (Here’s [an Amazon referral link](#) for an omnibus of the first two books in the series; use it and make me some moneeeeeey!) The relationship between the two protagonists (one human, one an intelligent space tank) is very similar to the relationship between some of the RIDE-human pairs we’ve written about—a bit rocky at first, but growing closer over the course of the series. As TVTropes would say, they’re [“Heterosexual Life-Partners.”](#)

A couple of ideas from the books found their way almost verbatim into this series. One is the idea of RIDEs having their own communication sidebands to which humans don’t have access. (In the *Jon & Lobo* books, all sorts of appliances are intelligent yet rather dull, like the [Nutrimatic Drink Dispenser](#) from *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* or the Talky Toaster from *Red Dwarf*. They chatter incessantly with each other on sidebands about the most banal things, to often-comedic effect.) Another is the notion of one’s wallet being a specialized little communication device that you can thumb money to and from. Of course, it probably makes more sense for people to have wallet apps on their comms (smartphone equivalents), but there’s no reason both can’t coexist.

Another inspiration was the [Liaden Universe](#) series by Sharon Lee and Steve Miller. I’ll go more into detail about that in another author’s note, but suffice to say the grilled-cheese-and-apple-butter sandwich is a reference to their book [Mouse and Dragon](#). (And it’s really tasty, too.)

The 20th-century pop-culture thing started out as a few odd references here and

there, but this episode was probably the first place where it started to blossom into Zharus's all-consuming passion. It probably happened for a couple of reasons. For one thing, I often find [the "Fan of the Past" TV Trope](#) to be quite amusing, especially in cases where (as with Quinoa) the fan in question doesn't know as much about it as she thinks. (Interestingly enough, one of the characters in a later *Jon & Lobo* book is also a fan of and historical researcher into the past, mining it for material for a present-day musical act.)

Another reason is it would provide us with a bit of cover when pop cultural references snuck in, as they almost certainly would. Now we didn't have to worry about five-hundred-year-old references seeming oddly out of place; we had a built-in excuse! Maybe it's lazy writing, but on the other hand, it's not as if we're getting paid for this. (Use my referral link? *Pleeeeeeease?*)

We're doing this for the fun of it, and kooky 20th-century malapropers are *crazy* fun. ("What's wrong with that? It's all from the 20th century." Heh.) It also provides us with an easy handle for making characters memorable and distinct from one another. The *Clementine* crew are *Star Trek* fans, except for the one who's a *Firefly* junkie. Fritz is a beatnik. And so on.

This is another way in which the conception of the Steaders changed over the course of the series, by the way. Originally they were just a crazy rich family whose crazy-rich-family "thing" was that they were big 20th-century fans who didn't necessarily actually *know* all that much about the 20th century (kind of like in [that Pepsi archaeology commercial](#)), and Quinoa's malapropisms were meant to be somewhat representative of the whole Steader clan's take on things. (See also the "Minesweeper" joke several episodes from now, about the Steaders thinking 20th-century minefields had cards with little numbers on them. I still don't know what I'm going to do about *that* when we get to it.)

But as the series developed, we gradually decided that the Steader brothers (formerly cousins) were actually the ones who went to Earth and did the informational archaeology necessary to dig it up and bring it back. So they weren't just its *fans*, they were its *importers*. Naturally, it would make the rest of the galaxy figure Zharus was a little nuts—which played right into the idea of the Steaders doing it as a countermeasure against Earth believing any of the miracle wonder tech stories that came out of the planet. After all, they're all *nuts* there, how much of anything they say could really be true?

And even with all of that, we didn't actually go back in to flesh Joe and Mikel out into actual characters—or define their exact relationship to Clint Brubeck—until late 2013. This setting has been under constant development all the way up to the end, which is part of why we're doing these Director's Cuts now.

St. Joseph's Barbecue and its owner are a tuckerization of my favorite barbecue place in Springfield, Missouri, [St. George's Barbecue](#). (There's also a St. George's doughnut shop right next to it, which has won a local award for the best doughnuts in Springfield several years running. Has great biscuits and gravy, too.) I sure do miss it now that I'm in Indianapolis.

Fur le Dance is, of course, a reference to the "dance club" on the furry landmark chatroom FurryMUCK, where I used to hang out as a couple of characters in the '90s.

I was going to discuss the future implications (or lack thereof) of Zane and Rochelle's date, but I don't want to spoil things for new readers, so I'll go into that in

notes to a later episode. Suffice it to say at this point some of our plotting was fairly stream-of-consciousness, and there were really no plans for where to take things beyond Zane taking notice of Rochelle's nanite-driven sexiness and asking her out on the spur of the moment. It provided some great character-building moments for Zane, Rochelle, and Uncia; what more could I want?

This is also the episode where we meet Anny Hower. She's fun. I have to admit, I feel a certain affinity for her and Kaylee. I'm a genuine hillbilly from the Ozark mountains of southwest Missouri, born and bred. My family on my father's side was actually [in an honest-to-goodness blood feud with another family](#) about a hundred years ago.

(Fortunately, relations have improved; thanks to marriages and such I'm even distant cousins with the current generation of Bilyeys, including Ozark folk musician [Mark Bilyeu](#), former leader of the band [Big Smith](#). Listen to their live shows [free at Archive.org](#).)

So, just as I'm prone to say of Applejack from the *Friendship is Magic* show, from *my* perspective Anny and Kaylee are some of the only characters in the entire series who *don't* talk funny. Anny in particular was such an interesting character to me that down the road I was inspired to write "Pride of Lioness," a short story depicting just how she and Leila got together.

(Fun fact: Leila only became a *white* lioness, instead of a regular tawny one, because Anny was depicted with white hair—which I pointed out to Jon she was really too young to have given her age relative to the human lifespan by that time. So I suggested Leila should be a white lion so Anny could have the white hair as a tag.)

And so the universe expands...

JonBuck: Okay, I admit it. The twencen craze the planet Zharus is in is mainly the result of me being lazy—I didn't want to have to invent a whole new culture completely out of whole cloth when I had so many other elements of worldbuilding on my mind. This was still early in the process, so we only had a rough idea how all the pieces fit together. This is also early on in Jetfire's cooperation, so he was busy in his corner of the continent with Aloha. I wanted to leave things open so I could incorporate his work into ours.

Writing TG is also rife with its own tropes. The "victim" becoming a female stereotype is a cliché, but *not* becoming one is also. I end up just writing what I want to, and I wanted to draw a contrast between Rufia and Rhianna. Rufia, the Big Beautiful Woman, the pansexual, who can be at home male or female. Rufia is *exactly* the same kind of person she was as Rufus. The only thing that really changed was the outer shell.

Rhianna's quest to adapt to being female just sort of peters out, with a few notable exceptions, over the course of the story. As the overall plot of Integration materialized it simply fell off the radar in favor of things like defeating Fritz and saving the world. I might add more references to it in future Director's Cut revisions, but I can't really make any promises.

One of the things I did do with Rhianna was make her "[moe](#)" rather than conventionally beautiful. She's cute, she's huggable, she's endearing. She's not really sexy, *per se*. Working her out of this is part of her character arc. I don't think I've really succeeded here overall. She might look moe, but she doesn't act moe. There really isn't that much of a personality difference between Ryan and Rhianna, when it comes down

to it. I suppose a lot of crossriders would try and reinvent themselves as their new sex and not really succeed. Rhianna ends up adopting what stereotypically female characteristics she likes and ignoring the rest.

On reflection, this could actually be a reasonable thing in a society where it's easy to change gender. It's partly inspired by [Steel Beach](#) by John Varley, a setting where changing sex is as easy as going to a salon. Yet there are behaviors and habits still considered “boy things” and “girl things”, because otherwise there'd be no reason to swap. Changing sex imparts an entirely different flavor to life, even on Zharus.

This is the point when the Cheers bar, and Diane, first show up and are given a name. It's basically the same bar where Uncia has her first drink in “Merging Traffic.” I took what R_M did and ran with it. Also note that Serena the clouded leopardess shows up here. I decided to import the character from Paradise “After Hours” just as an in-joke. Further fleshing out came a couple years later in “Where Everybody Knows Your Name.” At this point I hadn't decided they were Integrates yet. But when Zane had a general meeting of the local Integrates in a later part, it just felt natural that they were ones.

There are some character-defining moments in this part. I remember writing Anny Hower's introduction with a smirk on my face, wondering how R_M would respond. R_M tells me I have a talent for defining a character in very few words. I wanted a down-home, earthy sort of character with an unexplainable country accent (given that R_M is from Missouri, she ended up rather Ozarks). Then having her show up with a massive white lioness RIDE, after having bullied the Nextus bureaucrats into giving her most of Kaylee's memories, clinched it. Yvonne also gets one of those defining lines by saying she'd make a *hell* of a bull elk. She is honestly Rufia's perfect match, and if in the future they figure out how to make a RIDE's core more gender-fluid, she will be.

Chapter Five

R_M: One thing this episode features is a bit of “early installment weirdness”—the thing with Zane temporarily detaching Uncia's hardlight pelt. It was just a way of showing off some Integrate techno-magical super-powers, but we never really did anything else with it since. But what the heck, it's cute.

It's probably not the most self-flattering thing to note that, at the time I wrote Zane's little speech here (more “Zanetification”!), I *thought* Zane was being reasonable and rational, if just a little breezy. Only after Rhianna started her slow burn did I look back and realize exactly how it would have sounded to her.

I was sorely tempted to try to take a mulligan and say, “No, no, Zane didn't mean it to come off that way, let me rewrite it.” I didn't *want* Zane to look like an idiot. But... the more I thought about it, the more I realized that it was good for the story for Zane to be a bit of an idiot in this situation. So, I let it ride.

I *know* that conflict helps develop characters. It's kind of a weakness of mine that I tend to want to *avoid* conflict in what I write, and what I role-play. (It's hard for me just rereading the scene in this episode even after all this time!) This time, at least, I was able to avoid that avoidance. So that's something that *didn't* get changed, either at the time or in this revision.

Things we did change in this section involve tweaking early mentions of Fritz to

bring them more in line with the version of the character seen in later chapters and earlier director's cuts, and having Rochelle more flatly turn down Zane's job offer. At the time, it was thrown in as a way to get the FreeRIDers Garage more involved with the Integrate scene, but it turned out not to be necessary and was never mentioned again after this chapter.

We also added a new establishing scene with Paul and Lillibet. Originally, Paul came kind of out of nowhere, and was effectively a cypher until I had the Alpha Camp idea and *suddenly* he was emancipated from his parents so they couldn't get upset at him getting kidnapped. I think the main reason we came up with him in the beginning was just to be someone else who worked around the garage, and to provide an object of affection for Lillibet.

Also, the scene with Quinoa calling the Towers to confirm that she's been kicked out is an extension of the other new stuff we added in preceding chapters—a chance to show Quinoa reacting to Paulie's death, and to get in some more information about her early life.

Another relatively major change has to do with the dating. We moved Kaylee's flashback from December 8, 121 AL forward to March 8, 121 AL, on account of Kaylee's episode-long flashback in #13 starting out in April, 121. (Well, actually first I moved it to February, then remembered, *duh*, there's no February on Zharus.)

This is only the first of many dating changes that are going to have to be made as the Director's Cut progresses—while we were preparing this episode for posting, I did a skim-read-ahead so I could precisely lock down the dating of various events in a cheat sheet so as to be sure where they fell for the sake of reference in a side story Jon and I are writing. ("DISSOLVE TO," if you're reading this at some nebulous point in the future when *that* is finished and posted.)

Along the way, I discovered that the story actually takes place over a much shorter period of time than we thought. The only date we define explicitly later in the story is Domefall Day, December 3. But going by in-story cues (and positing a reasonable amount of time where we say things like "a few days later"), that actually turns out to happen on October 19! So we'll be making a few more dating changes as time goes on.

Apart from that, we made a number of other minor tweaks and changes necessitated by the other things we added and moved around. For example, since Paul and Lilli went out to eat in their new scene, they couldn't still say they were going out to eat when they excused themselves from the garage a couple of scenes later—but since I'd added an early mention of the salvage RIDEs that were originally first introduced in the next chapter, that provided a good alternate activity for them. And so on.

Quinoa is first revealed as kind of a complicated character in this chapter. Even before the additions to go into her backstory, there was the whole section where she talked about her little habit of buying cross-RIDEs for people who wanted them, in exchange for spending the night with her. That's going to get her into trouble someday in Cape Nord. Also, we had Quinoa, of all people, be the one to talk some sense into Zane after he blew his own foot off with Rhianna. When you get to know her, there *is* more to her beneath that spoiled-rich-girl exterior—but as the cross-RIDE thing shows, it's still a pretty brazen exterior.

JonBuck: GoogleDocs really changes the way cooperative writing works. I've

done cooperative work with friends over the years. Mostly that took on just sending email back and forth, taking turns writing section by section. The old Round Robin style. But with Gdocs you can watch the text flow on a live basis. And as I watched R_M write Zane's little speech, I was actually getting a little angry. But the more I thought about it, the more I considered it a watershed characterization for Zane. Something for him to grow out of.

At this point in the original Fritz was still a disaffected jokester rather than the leader of all Integrates. He really didn't start getting truly dangerous as a character until a few parts later.

Overall, not a huge number of revisions to this part. I particularly like the "first crossrider" scene. I wonder whatever happened to the researcher?

Chapter Six

R_M: This is the first episode in our Director's Cut retrospective where there weren't any new interim scenes that needed writing. In fact, we didn't really have to change a lot at all, just smooth out some more references that were no longer valid, like Quinoa trying to hide from her Uncle Joe. Another minor change is trying to be more consistent with the use of the terms we use to refer to Integrates. By and large we moved toward calling them "Integrates" rather than "Integrated," so I tweaked a few uses of "Integrated" into "Integrate" or "Integrates".

When I was working on the previous episode's Director's Cut, I was going to have this be the first batch of salvage RIDEs Lilli had bought. But then I came to this episode, where it was clear she'd done it before, and I had to backtrack. I could have changed that here—it didn't seem like she'd necessarily been with them long enough to start fixing up RIDEs on her own—but that would have meant losing the great anecdote about the reason why permission slips were now necessary.

It's funny to consider that, of the four salvage RIDEs, three of them have moderate to major parts to play in future episodes, but the condor and her partner just...vanish from the narrative altogether. If we remember it, we'll have to see if we can retrofit at least a mention or two of them into later episodes. I've had a vague idea for someday writing the story of the RIDE and her partner getting to know each other—the song ["Icarus \(Borne on Wings of Steel\)"](#) seems tailor-made for it.

Another of the salvage RIDEs represents perhaps the first continuity snarl *caused* by our Director's Cut revisions to the story, rather than fixed by it. To avoid spoiling new readers, I'll go more into that in the notes for the next episode or so, but if you've already read the original version and you think about it, you'll probably spot the problem. It has to do with the DirCut version of Fritz knowing and being happy about where Kaylee ended up. We're still not *quite* sure how we'll fix it, but I imagine we'll come up with something when we get there.

This episode also provides a great example of how ideas can get thrown into the story as jokes and then grow into something else. That's how referring to Katie as Kaylee's "daughter" came about. The original idea was just making a joke on the age of the RIDE—if Kaylee was the figurative "great-grandmother" of modern RIDEs, she would have been a lot closer to older ones. But when the flashback in Episode 13 came about...but I'll say more on that later, to avoid spoiling new readers.

Another thing that makes its first appearance here is the way that Integrates can

apparently somehow “notice” when a RIDE and human are close to Integration. There must be some kind of signal given off or something. Quinoa is apparently able to pick up on whatever subliminal signals Carrie-Anne is giving off, and is conflicted over what to do about them so she ends up just acting all furtive and suspicious. We’ve had this happen a couple of other times—most notably, Clayton knowing in advance that one of the RIDEs in the bar is about to Integrate in “FADE IN”—but not too often.

As for Carrie-Anne’s story—well, we were still playing around with some of the things Integration meant, and I wanted to experiment with having it happen different ways. The scene strikes me as a little purple in retrospect, but I can’t really think of anything to replace it with or any way to make it less so without completely altering the import of the scene.

This is also one of the first mentions of Dr. Roberto Martinez, a pioneer in studying qubitite and determining how to protect delicate machinery against it. We came up with his backstory for the “Trigger Effect” background piece we wrote (much of which itself later became outmoded by changes over the course of the story), but didn’t really do too much with it apart from having him be Gina’s ancestor. Martinez himself would make a personal appearance later on in the prequel story “The Greatest Show,” which features Clint Brubeck getting some tips about how to prospect for qubitite.

We also introduce Kenyon Walton personally for the first time. Walton’s another one of those characters who changed dramatically since his first introduction. (And yes, I did intentionally name him after the family who founded Wal-Mart. Perhaps he’s a distant descendant.)

When I mentioned him in “Merging Traffic,” his sole purpose was to serve as a sort of distant absentee parent whose inattentiveness allowed his daughter to get into a bad situation, and Uncia to find a loophole and escape her fetters. But as Lillibet became a major character, so too did her father have to, which meant turning him into less of a distant idiot than he had been. Hence, the big apology scene here.

And even now, we weren’t done modifying his character. We hadn’t given much thought to his backstory yet, or his wife’s, but those would come later, and would bring about even more changes.

There’s a funny thing about the Freeriders Garage and its apprentices here. It’s mentioned several times here that Rhianna has multiple apprentices, including ones who are older than Paul and Lilli, but...we never actually *see* any of them on camera, or even hear about them by name. It’s like they’re the adults from Peanuts cartoons.

But then, if we gave them names and on-camera roles, we’d also have had to give them background, and we ended up inventing way too many characters already. As I mentioned last time, the only reason we even named Paul to begin with was we needed someone to pair Lillibet up with.

It’s been awhile since we were able to get these Director’s Cuts out regularly, but you’ll probably see at least a few more from us over the next little while. The trilogy of new stories we’ve just finished writing the latter two stories in (which we’ll be posting very soon) appears set to intersect with and potentially affect part of the course of the main story, which is something kind of new for us. So for us to be able to write more about those particular characters, we have to catch up so we can weave them into the Director’s Cut when we revisit the story at that point. At least it gives us more incentive to put our noses back to the grindstone!

JonBuck: When I give a character a name, they start asking for a backstory. They're persistent like that and almost as bad as the background characters in *Star Wars*, all of whom somehow end up getting names and histories. So if I can avoid naming a minor character, they won't become a [Plot Tumor](#) like they potentially could. So, Rhi's other apprentices don't get names because I know how my writer's brain works.

Regarding Katie, Kaylee, and the "daughter" line, the major commentary there will have to wait until we get to the part where that scene happens. Which is quite a ways away at this point. Suffice to say that family is and will remain a huge theme in FreeRIDers. Maybe because I'm at the point in life where I've pined for one myself. Ah well.

At this point in the writing process I still didn't expect it to go to 25 parts. As stories tend to do, it just kept expanding. Anyway, hope you're enjoying these Directors' Cuts.

Chapter Seven

JonBuck: When I first thought of Fritz as a character way back in the original "FreeRIDers" story, he was an outcast from Integrate society—completely opposite of a leader. A disaffected jokester who based his opinion on non-Inties on the classic "[They're Made out of Meat](#)" short story. He wasn't dangerous. He just thought Integrates should keep to themselves. Because this was before he'd gelled into "The Bosscat", Integrates kept themselves isolated out of choice. Society wouldn't accept them, blah blah.

Then I realized, after setting up just how powerful they were with normal computer systems, they could be incredibly dangerous. So Fritz's actions here boosted him to near-supervillain status, which led to the climax of the entire work.

We decided to add a few sections from Fritz's POV to be consistent with other parts where he's appeared in the beginning. In the revision here we wondered why he wouldn't take more extreme action to prevent Zane's conference. What we've settled on is a rationalization on his part. He still thinks he's in charge of all Intiedom, so going public is really not that big a deal anymore. Even the DINs the FreeRIDers make can't be as good as his. It's all second rate meat stuff. He's throwing the Enclaves who want to go public a bone, but again, he's still in charge. *He's still in charge*. He's the Bosscat.

He's in for a rude awakening, and this is going to make him more and more off-kilter as he steadily loses what grip on power he has left. He still has enough followers to make a lot of trouble.

Anny and Leila show up again here. R_M tells me that I do character introductions very well. I'm particularly fond of those two. This was also the first time Fritz shows up in person in the original version (in the boardroom scene), so I had to make his appearance memorable, too.

The challenge in the DirCut is trying to untangle some of the plot points we introduced early on. Again, I can't promise we'll untangle everything. But writing fiction is just that complex sometimes.

R_M: As we were looking this chapter over, we realized it needed another little something. Every time Fritz has shown up so far in the director's cut, we've gotten the

story from his point of view—which means the story now feels kind of strange without it. In the old version, Fritz was something of an unexplained force of nature whom we only encountered at arm's length. But he's undergone so much development since those early days that he needed more buildup to make him a more believable villain here. Consequently, this chapter got three new scenes to explain what was going on inside that fuzzy pate.

As Jon noted, this lets us explain why Fritz, who had previously been so gung-ho with his Snatchers and Candlejacks, would threaten Zane but then *not* do more to shut him up than point AlphaWolf at him. It also added the chance to sneak in call-outs to a number of the prequel stories we wrote in the days since then—“Where Everybody Knows Your Name,” Fly with Me” and “Oh My Darling Clementine,” “FADE IN,” and even a little reference to “G.I. Joe.” Like The Dude's rug, it really helps tie everything together.

It also lets us rationalize why Fritz would change his mind about the Garage, so soon after sending his “special package” there for a little TLC. More on that anon, so as not to spoil new readers too much.

Jon thought that these plot tangles might be too much for us to solve, but happily, we seem to have come up with suitably rational explanations so far. It just remains to be seen if we can continue this streak going forward.

Look for more Fritz viewpoint scenes to be added as the plot goes on; those of you who've read the original will recall that he really doesn't do much on-camera apart from the flashback for most of the original version of the story. But now that we have a better idea who he is, we can go back and fill in the blanks.

Apart from those, the only major tweaks had to do with adding a line to clarify that Rhianna has basic flier certification but isn't trained on suborbital flight yet, and with clearing up a little bit of oldFritz that's still peeking out from his on-camera portrayal.

As Jon noted, the scene in the boardroom marks the first time Fritz appears on-camera in the original *Integration* series. In a previous author's note, I'd erroneously stated that he first showed up in Kaylee's flashback later on, but I forgot about this part. He saunters onto the scene here pretty much fully-formed in his new “supervillain” incarnation, almost entirely different from his original “outcast prankster” FreeRIDers appearance. About the only thing we had to change here was a line about him having gotten kicked out of every Enclave, since that very much no longer applies, and adding the line about him having known Zane's father.

I'm a little ashamed to admit that before Jon reminded me of it, I'd entirely forgotten that we had Fritz and Clint Brubeck meet and come to an accord in “Where Everybody Knows Your Name.” Even though we had no idea that would happen at the time we were originally writing this, it really does provide a useful justification for Fritz's actions here and now. It's almost as if we planned it that way!

This episode features a lot of callbacks to “Deserted,” carrying on a theme from the previous episode. I introduce the new board members Zane took on to partner with the RIDEs who helped kick the old board out, and revisit those RIDEs themselves, too. I like them, but after this episode, they're by and large not ever seen again. The story simply moved in directions that shuffled them offstage. I have little doubt they're still on the board even as far along as the Totalia expedition; they just haven't been seen much. Zane seems to have drifted into taking a lot of unilateral action. But then, he does own

65% of the stock...

Stealth reference time! Saul Fusco was named in honor of Paul Fusco, the creator, puppeteer, and voice of Alf. He's not intended to look or sound anything like him, but I thought it was a clever namedrop. I think I named Tillman after a beer mentioned in the Honor Harrington novels.

That short story Jon mentions in regard to Fritz comes from a 1990 issue of *Omni Magazine*, which is where I first saw it back in the day. (It was also used in a discussion in an honors program seminar at college I remember.) It was a remarkably good tale by Terry Bisson, a short and concise exercise in casting *humans* as the disgusting aliens, from the point of view of a pair of extraterrestrial intelligences who meet to discuss the oddity of our biology.

It's interesting to consider what Fritz's preoccupation with humans being "made out of meat" says about Fritz's psychology, given that most other RIDEs don't seem to have any problems with us disgustingly sloppy, slimy, smelly meat-creatures—and given that he is, of course, half meat himself. I'm sure an analyst would have a field day.

That's about all we have to say for this one. On to the next!

Chapter Eight

JonBuck: The punny titles of this part and the previous one were completely my idea. Yep. Lots of changes and additions to this part.

One of the hardest parts of worldbuilding is, well, *world building*. Getting a handle on Zharus itself, its size and geography, takes effort to keep everything straight. The maps we created helped a lot. But math isn't really my strong point, so distances and time zones might not match up too well. To keep things easy we opted for 30-hour days, 6-day weeks, ten 30-day months, and 300.5 day years. The surface gravity really should be much higher, even for a metal-poor world like this, but there's probably some metamaterial explanation for it. Maybe cavorite deposits deep in the mantle or core displacing gravitational mass. (That's my story and I'm sticking to it).

When R_M focused on Paul and Lillibet like this I realized that Paul's time at AlphaCamp would become another major Plotline. I wasn't too enthusiastic at the time, since it just made the work all the longer. [**R_M:** We weren't even a third of the way done at this point and he still didn't have any idea how long this sucker was going to end up! Of course, I didn't either.] But it worked out well in the end. We were able to make to flesh out AlphaWolf into a much better character and not the cartoony villain he otherwise was.

Interestingly enough, this "episode" fits well with the way many anime series have an major action sequence around episodes 7 or 8 (Macross Frontier and Gurren Lagann come to mind). The fight scene at the Garage is a favorite. Tocsin is quite the badass here and comes out of this with very little actual damage. Quinoa's ass gets handed to her, which is a big character moment. Lilli and Guin show their courage. And Katie...

At this point I hadn't decided that Katie could really be another RIDE's child. Or that RIDEs could have babies—since we actually hadn't thought of Nature Range at the time. But I think at some level both she and Kaylee knew it. Plus, you have Fritz, whose few redeeming qualities at this point include how he cares for his children. So here he's both proud she's such a good warrior, and horrified. And of course her speech and

actions have a major effect on RIDE-kind as a whole.

Anny and Leila continue to be a joy to write here. I wanted Leila to take Uncia down a notch, so... [**R_M**: Of course, *I* then had to figure out exactly *where and how* Anny got a three-million-*mu* RIDE...and eventually I got to show it, in “Pride of Lioness.”]

One of the big influences on RIDEs were a variant on the [Bond Creature](#) trope. They're a lot like [Pernese](#) dragons or a [Herald's Companion](#). (Warning! TVTropes links! You may lose several hours following that rabbit hole.) There's just something about the idea of being partnered with a nice, big, friendly kitty cat that, and this is the important part, *won't eat you*.

R_M: I remember this being a really fun time, writing the original. Jon was the one who had mapped out most of the major plot points for this—the trip to Cascadia, the attack on the garage. One of the most fun parts of collaboration is when you get to help with another writer's great ideas, just to see where they go.

Meanwhile, I wrote the parts having to do with Zane and his speech. I do remember that midway while writing the episode, I realized the best way to resolve the attack on the garage in the end would be with a self-sacrifice move from Paul, giving himself up in return for Tocsin leaving everybody else alone. That in turn would lead to him ending up at Alpha Camp, and then...and then...

So I opened a separate file and effectively wrote the entire next episode, “Stockholm Vacation,” from start to finish all by myself while we were still working on this one. I think I then dropped it complete in Jon's lap as a *fait accompli*, but it's been so long that I'm not entirely sure. I'll have more to say about the ideas that went into that one, and the genesis and subsequent development of AlphaWolf in general, in the author's notes for that episode.

This episode is another one that's featured extensive additional scene-writing, mostly involving Fritz or Quinoa. And the great thing about it is, revisiting these early episodes and expanding and renovating them has, at least for me, recaptured some of the original spark of excitement that I got writing them for the first time. I know what's going to happen in the broad strokes, of course, but it's kind of neat seeing our characters do all these new things we didn't think of the first time around.

One of the things that's become most obvious to me as we've been trawling through these director's cuts is all the little places that we *said* things happened without actually *showing* them. It's funny how many there are, really. We've fixed some of that with the additional Fritz scenes in the previous episodes, and we found a lot more things to add in this one.

For example, one of the most obvious things to leap out at me is that we never really showed Quinoa's “Apostle Paul” conversion moment—the moment she went from supporting or at least fearing Fritz too much to get involved to realizing that he *needed* to go down. She just...changed her mind. We also never actually showed Fritz going from just letting her do whatever to outright kidnapping and imprisoning her—she just *disappeared* from the narrative after getting pasted by Tocsin. Fortunately, in this case those two problems solved each other—the new conversion moment directly *led to* her getting kidnapped.

The other thing, and something I referred to obliquely a couple of author's notes back, is that we never really explained why Fritz would be all upset about Zane planning

to reveal himself publicly—then not actually *do anything* to try to stop it beyond chasing him out of his rig and sending a few semi-competent RIDEs to disrupt the speech. Or why, after being happy Katie was finally in a good situation, Fritz would send *Tocsin* of all people to trash it. To be honest, I'm not sure how well we've really patched over those issues, but we did the best we could with what we had left ourselves to work with. The fig leaf at least stays in place.

But for the most part, I'm actually rather surprised how easily we can patch around the issues. If we notice something's obvious by its absence, we can add it back in—as with the additional scenes in the beginning showing *Tocsin* in the garage. It works much better for us to see him and *then* for Rhianna and Rochelle to see him, than just for Rhianna and Rochelle to see him doing things we haven't seen him do yet.

This episode is the one where *Tocsin* and Katie have their big dramatic scene. As I'm writing this, Jon hasn't put much about *Tocsin* in his author's note yet. I'll prod him to do so next time he's around, since he's the one who actually took the blank, unformed RIDE I threw in and turned him into a character. Anyway, *Tocsin* ended up becoming a very interesting character, and a prime example of how we developed ideas as we wrote.

At the time I introduced him, originally, as one of the salvaged RIDEs Lilli bought to work on, I didn't think anything more about him than that it might be a nice idea to throw in a mythical creature RIDE, like the sphinx that Quinoa Steader Integrated with. Since we'd already shown they existed, they had to be around, so might as well have one turn up in a batch of four random RIDEs. And I'm as big a Harry Potter fan as anybody else who enjoyed the books, and figured I might as well make it a hippogryph as an homage to Buckbeak from said books.

I didn't have any other plans for him than that—just like I didn't have any other plans for the lynx RIDE who became Katie. With her, my thought was that, given that they were assembly-line models, it made sense they should encounter another RIDE of Kaylee's make and model sooner or later—so might as well make it sooner to see how Kaylee reacts. I didn't have plans for the raccoon, either, come to that, but we thought it would be amusing to play with a couple of the standard cliches like how raccoons like to wash things. (I also didn't have plans for the condor, and I told you in a previous author's note how that came out.)

Incidentally, Jon is the one who named Jinkies, and I *think* he named Katie, too, though I could be wrong. I do know for sure that I named *Tocsin*—and I named him that just because I thought it was a neat old word. It's just happy coincidence that it turned out to have a meaning we could play up in the text. At this point, I don't remember if we *ever* gave the condor a name.

Anyway, as I was saying, I didn't have particular plans for the RIDEs, but Jon made actual characters out of Katie and *Tocsin*. He's really good at that. Some of *Tocsin*'s early dialogue paints him as a sort of simpleton, rather than the cold samurai warrior type he later became—but in retrospect we can say that's just the skilled covert op RIDE playing dumb to avoid attracting suspicion. Jon is also the one who came up with *Tocsin*'s backstory—and he's gone ahead and added a further note about it below, so I won't tread on that.

Suffice it to say, *Tocsin*'s earlier incarnation later became a major part of Jon's "Fly With Me" prequel story, and one of the fun parts of doing the DirCut of this episode was the chance to close the circle and drop in some references back to the events of *that* tale here.

Given that version of Tocsin was so closely associated with Fritz at the time, as I noted above it was a little hard to figure out why he would have so blithely inserted that combat monster into the same garage where he put his precious Katie—but I think we did about as good a job of that as we could, under the circumstances. Fritz’s association with the Loose Cannons ended (in a pyrotechnically spectacular way, as shown in “Fly With Me”) before Tocsin got his new DE shell, and AlphaWolf had never referred to him by name to “Overwatch,” so Fritz didn’t have any idea who he was. Which also goes toward showing Integrates aren’t infallible.

I’m particularly proud of having Fritz’s DIN burnout come at exactly the worst moment for him. I did have to move the Dreamchaser hacking scene several scenes up from its original position to make the timing work out, but it’s remarkable just how well it did.

Speaking of references to other stories, this also marks the first spot I could slip in a couple of references to “Jeanette & Tamarind: The Second-Hand Lioness.” In that story, I found an opportunity to do a little bit of “Forrest Gumping” and retcon Tamarind and Jeanette into earlier spaces in *Integration* where they *could* have been but of course hadn’t been mentioned when it was originally written. Well, now they’re *getting* mentioned, so it all ties together better!

Katie’s speech is another important moment of character development in that story, which was kind of a neat trick. It was like getting two epiphanies for the price of one.

I did more character development of Tocsin in “Second-Hand Lioness,” too, but I was largely following Jon’s lead—Jon had been writing “Fly With Me” at the same time, and it had come out the week before. Tocsin developed into a *very* interesting character to play with, especially in subsequent stories set in Alpha Camp. If FreeRIDers were ever animated, I like to think of his voice as being done by Rene Auberjonois.

I suppose this is also where I might as well mention, since I didn’t say so in the “Merging Traffic” notes where she was originally introduced, that I *sort of* named the RIDE Guinevere after one of my nieces. Though that was really only a secondary consideration; the primary inspiration for the name came, as in the story, from Lillibet naming her for a female counterpart to “Sir Lancelot.” Kind of a funny thing about RIDes—some of them come pre-named from the factory; others are named (or renamed) by their owner, and we’ve never clearly explained any reasons for the difference. I guess they’re just like pets that way.

JonBuck: Regarding Tocsin. This is actually his “Second Boot” incarnation. The version that appears in “Fly With Me” isn’t all that smart. After all, he tried to Fuse an Integrate and ended up frying himself. His new frame is essentially a [Super Prototype](#), which is the sort of thing the Loose Cannons got. Given the nature of that trope, it can do things no other frame can. As for how he escaped the Loose Cannons, well...that’s a story as yet untold.

As a character, Tocsin is an example of something just growing naturally out of the writing process. He needed to be powerful enough to destroy the Garage all by himself, so he ended up with projectile razor feathers. So he needed a reason to *have* those. So he needed a backstory that enabled that. So... Well, one thing leads to another.

Fritz’s “Jiminy” is of course his rider he was Fused with at the time he Integrated. But the poor man is stuck in a box in the lynx’s head and can only communicate through

a tiny hole in the data structure.

Chapter Nine

R_M: Whew boy. I think this is going to be a long author's note. There's a lot to unpack. (I thought Zane liked to talk a lot, but he obviously has nothing on me!)

When Jon originally approached me with the idea of FreeRIDers, I was interested, but not really *hooked*. I *did* want to write something collaboratively with him, given how much I'd enjoyed his "Paradise" stuff, but I wasn't so sure this was it. It seemed like an intriguing idea for a setting, but the idea of intelligent animals who could turn into power armor suits didn't immediately grab me. It all seemed a little complicated and fiddly. And what was the deal with the whole "melting together" thing of Integration? It seemed kind of contrived.

But my traitor subconscious kept having *ideas*. The one that finally hooked me and drew me into the setting was, what about *bodyjacking*? Given that RIDEs didn't have hands with opposable thumbs unless they were Fused with a human, this gave them incentive to get their hands, or lack-of-hands, *on* a human right away—whether willing or not. That promised to provide a whole host of intriguing dramatic situations to explore.

If you think about it, *both* of my first two FreeRIDers stories, completed before Jon had even finished the original self-titled "FreeRIDers" tale, were about unwilling Fuses. "Merging Traffic" was a "traditional" bodyjack, with the rambunctious Uncia pouncing poor Roger—but "Deserted" was sort of a bodyjack in reverse, with neither of them especially *wanting* to Fuse but it being the only way to get out of their particular situation. (And given how contrived *that* situation was, it made my original ambivalence about the setting a clear case of pot and kettle. I later lampshaded this, in fact, having one of the characters compare it to bad romance fiction.) In fact, many of my stories have centered around the idea of Fuses that were unwilling or at least reluctant on the part of one or both parties in some respect.

Including, of course, this one. Paul surrenders to Tocsin who carries him off to AlphaWolf, who Fuses him, then helps him awaken Fenris, who Fuses him again and keeps him. Meanwhile, Linda and Linda effectively represent the "traditional" form of bodyjacking. Their partnership is a little disturbing, but it's kind of supposed to be. At this point, LindaCat is damaged goods. She's lonely and essentially wants a pet—LindaGirl. But the thing that most interested me about them was where such a relationship might go *after* that. If she's "whole" now, maybe she can heal and no longer be so "damaged." So I got to explore that aspect in future episodes.

But no discussion of bodyjacking would be complete without talking about AlphaWolf. I no longer know which one of us originally conceived him, or even *named* him, and I don't think Jon does either. AlphaWolf seems like the kind of name I'd make up, but as far as I know his first actual appearance is in Jon's "FreeRIDers" story. (I used him as a RIDE propagandist in "Merging Traffic," but only *after* he'd already been invented.) Was he invented out of conversation between us, or did I fasten onto him as an interesting character in Jon's work and broaden him from there? I'm not sure. I suppose that's the mark of how good our collaboration was—that I'm not quite sure where this character came from, and find it plausible he could have come from either of us.

Originally, AlphaWolf's merry band of RIDE brigands was supposed to be one side of a pro-RIDE-rights coin. There were also supposed to be a bunch of equivalent human bandits, the Liberators. They get a few early mentions, mostly in that first story, then they largely disappear—though we revisit them as the big bads for the final fight in the Aleka “Marshals” prequel story.

I guess we just didn't find pro-RIDE humans as interesting as we found pro-RIDE RIDEs. And also, there was the little problem that if the Liberators were willing to put their money where their mouths were and offer themselves as thumbs to RIDEs who needed them, Alpha would have had to bodyjack a lot fewer people, doing away with a big source of potential Drama.

One thing about AlphaWolf is certain—as originally conceived, he was effectively a buffoon. You can see it in his appearances prior to this one—he comes off as egotistical, easily-fooled, and generally not too bright. For example, there's that “So sayeth me!” catchphrase Jon threw into “FreeRIDErs” for him. It's bombastic and silly, and it's not even grammatically correct. (It should be “So sayeth *I*.”) And as of his appearance in the original story, it was taken completely seriously.

But it also provided a great trope to subvert. What if AlphaWolf played the buffoon *intentionally* so his enemies would underestimate him? Far from being insulted they didn't take him seriously, instead it gave him his jollies to know they were *dumb enough* not to take him seriously. So, right away in this episode I established the catchphrase had come from a terrible movie, *AlphaWolf, Scourge of the Dry Ocean*, that exaggerated the egotism he did have into making him out to be an idiot. (I would later demonstrate in a prequel that it was spoofing a verbal tic he used to have of saying “That's what I say” a lot.) [**JonBuck:** We came up with Steader Entertainment doing a movie about him called *Howl of AlphaWolf*, which also had the catchphrase. Perhaps there's more than one movie about him?]

As for the easily-fooled thing, I established that as one of those “exceptions that proves the rule.” As an Integrate who'd been living in the Dry Ocean for almost thirty years, Fritz had nothing but time to build trust over the years. So he became AlphaWolf's bestest buddy, saving him up against a time when putting one over on him might come in handy.

This episode is the first chance we had to spend a long period of time with AlphaWolf, and I used it to start subverting the standard “evil bad guy” clichés and turn him into a real *character*. You can see that even as early as when Paul insists RIDEs *can* have happy partnerships and to his surprise AlphaWolf admits that he's right.

My idea about him even from the beginning was that he wasn't all he appeared. He's not just a thumb-crazy bodyjacker. He draws the line at things that actually physically hurt people. And he keeps the craziest in line (as much as he can) by organizing bodyjack raids where they can work off some of their mad.

It probably won't spoil anything to reveal my *original* intentions for AlphaWolf—the ones that don't come anywhere near actual fruition. He was going to secretly turn out to be a Nextus military intelligence spy RIDE, with part of his own memories and personality locked away from himself. (Introducing Fiona the fox RIDE in “Barely Fused, Slightly Foxed” with the same capability was done with the goal of setting it up as a Chekhov's Gun for later use on AlphaWolf.) Nextus put him out there as a sort of honey trap for wayward RIDEs, with the eventual plan to swoop back in, reactivate him, and scoop up all the escaped RIDEs for military use or civilian resale. During this

reactivation, Alpha accidentally Integrates with the NextusMil soldier sent to collect him, and ends up a feral wolf Integrate hanging around Rhianna's garage.

This plan largely relied on AlphaWolf being more of an idiot, so it had become unlikely even as early as *this* episode. Nonetheless, it still hung around in the back of my mind for the longest time. Fairly late in the series as actually written, I had AlphaWolf bodyjack a Nextus soldier, and planned on him keeping the guy until such time as Nextus tripped its trap and they'd Integrate. (Of course, *that* didn't really last long for other reasons, which we'll get to when they become cogent.)

But I was kind of just going through the motions by then, because deep down I already knew it wasn't going to work out, and Jon kept telling me so too. For one thing, it turned out there were actually so few RIDEs in Alfie's little camp, relatively speaking, that the whole idea of mounting a long-term military operation to recapture them all would be ludicrous. And for another...well, discussing *that* in full would run into spoilers for people who haven't gotten there yet, so I'll just try to remember to hit that when it comes up. Suffice it to say that considerably better uses for Alpha Camp had become fairly obvious by then.

This episode is kind of odd from a story-structure standpoint. Previous episodes have tended to cut back and forth between multiple scenes, but here we present a full-length, episode-long chunk set in just one place. But then again, Alpha Camp hadn't been introduced or set up much *at all*, so it seemed reasonable to spend a bunch of time here in its first appearance. Also, it provided a breather from the multiple action sequences in the last episode.

And finally, there wasn't all that much else to cut *to*. Rhi and crew were stuck in space and couldn't go anywhere until Zane went to get them. Lillibet and Relena were on their way to get Katie a new body. Resolving both of those plots would take a significant chunk of an episode by themselves, and they wouldn't intercut so well with Paul establishing himself at Alpha Camp. So Paul got a whole episode of his own—or at least, most of one. Linda and Linda needed their establishing scenes, too.

One of the other seeds around which this episode grew is Fenris, the double-crewed command RIDE. I'd had the idea some time before, and even wrote it up in a section that's currently on the "Background" page: what about RIDEs that could Fuse with *each other*? It would be an interesting idea, but there had to be some reason it didn't work out or there would be a lot more of them. Then Jon suggested that Rhianna and Rochelle's research into DINsec might provide a way to allow it to work after all—which we'll see in future chapters.

After I came up with that idea, the other pieces just fell into place. He was from Sturmhaven, because they were the ones who used wolf imagery a lot. (Though not exclusively; AlphaWolf, after all, was from Nextus.) It also provided the added dimension of dealing with how a *mere male* is perceived by straw-feminist Sturmhaven. I did kind of forget about his lack of accent compared to nearly every other Sturmie we've ever seen, but I later turned that into a character point by saying Fenris had consciously chosen to rid himself of it as part of the act of severing ties with the place that had so ill-treated him.

I guess I just have a thing for large RIDEs—first Fenris here, and then Tamarind in "Second-Hand Lioness" when I got around to that one. I like the idea of RIDEs that are big enough to stay Fused in all modes—especially when the RIDE is a bodyjacker.

All in all, this is one of my favorite episodes. But I suppose all the stuff about

Alpha Camp is in some way my favorite. I also have a special soft spot for “Jeanette & Tamarind: The Second-Hand Lioness,” and for the stories set here after “Integration” is over. I like the idea of these marginalized people getting together and creating their own culture. I like bringing people in to help them out. I’m glad it’s appealed to other folks like Claude LeChat, too.

So, that’s all the stuff about how the episode was originally written. As for Director’s Cut changes, there aren’t an awful lot in this one. Since the episode is so self-contained, there isn’t really any need to stick in more scenes with Fritz—and the changes we did make down the road by and large didn’t affect any of the Alpha Camp stuff. And I’m largely satisfied with how this one turned out originally.

I did make a few tweaks here and there, as anyone would with older stories. I made Tocsin’s dialogue a bit more formal, in keeping with the kind of character he later became. I inserted a few little bits with other Alpha Camp characters who get mentioned later or in other stories—but not many, really. There weren’t a whole lot of ways I could stick them in without it seeming contrived.

One odd bit Jon noticed and fixed is that in this episode, I referred to the eagle Fuser pilot of the suborbital using *female* pronouns. Who knows—maybe at the time I intended “her” to be the captured Heinrich’s girlfriend. But I guess I forgot that part when I later decided to identify *him* as Baldwin.

JonBuck: Now that is a *long* author’s note.

The civil rights situation of RIDEs was one of the concepts I had for this setting even before I brought R_M in. It was to be your standard Mad Max Desert Punk single-biome planet where the struggle to survive was paramount. Then I got stuck.

At the time, I was very, very stuck on *all* my writing. My old seat-of-the-pants method I’d used since 1996 no longer worked. 2011 was a very dry year creatively. The first iteration of this idea was based on an unfinished (imagine that) story called “[Forgotten Hotel](#).” The hotel drops the protagonist off on this world—as a catgirl. RIDEs were inspired by the [Cyclones/RIDE armor](#) from *Robotech/MOSPEADA*. Then as these stories go, our heroine tries to adapt to new circumstances.

Nextus started off a lot more evil and the Liberators were to be their counterparts. But I was stuck, and I wanted some input. I remembered just how much I liked R_M’s “[The Future is Paradise](#)” and “[Paradise Forever](#).” He’d expressed before that he’d like to try writing something cooperatively. So, I asked him for input on the setting.

So began one of the most productive writing periods of my life. Instead of going by the seat of my pants, before I even started I wrote a bunch of background material [written in an in-universe style](#). A lot of it is no longer valid, but it stands as part of what unstuck me. The other thing? “Storybeats”. Stories have a goal and are not often written linearly. I hated having gaps like that before, now it’s just how we do things. The problem with my old method was that I didn’t have a plot...then one would turn up. So then I’d have to go back and rewrite however many pages. It was just too frustrating. (Though I don’t really have that problem so much now).

Chapter Ten

JonBuck: Rhianna finally gets all broody about being a woman here. It's a quiet moment after all that action, so it felt appropriate to have. I think some influence here is from *Steel Beach* by John Varley. It's a setting where changing your sex is as simple as going to a boutique, but there are still "boy things" and "girl things" to make the experience worthwhile. Now, I can really get hung up on this stuff. TG has been the majority of my writing for years now. But I'm very happy when it doesn't completely dominate the story I'm trying to tell.

Still, some of my favorites lately have had no TG in them. Scout Captain Integrate Joel Roberts and Zach in the Totalia series come to mind. The Joe Steader stories, also.

Katie's animated rebuilding sequence worked with me so well here that I decided to use the imagery in later virtual environments. The actual building takes cues from *Iron Man* and a little from *StarCraft II*'s suiting up sequences.

I think having Kaylee pack her missing memories into her various parts was R_M's idea. It really made sense and moved the plot forward. As we'll see in the next part.

The reveal that they have Fritz's DIN hardware is an interesting moment, but I'm not sure what it leads to, exactly. I *thought* it could lead to them hacking Fritz back in return, but I don't think that came to fruition. Maybe that can change later in the DirCut. We'll see. [R_M: I always thought it was mainly useful as a prototype in helping refine their ability to craft DINs themselves and design DINsec—and perhaps a reminder for Kaylee of the old memories she was about to regain.] Which works, too.

For the longest time I wasn't sure how to refer to a Fuser. So I sometimes use something like Rhianna/Kaylee. But that's still pretty confusing in dialogue, so I just named the speaker instead later on.

R_M: I can no longer remember what specifically inspired the thing about packing memories into Kaylee's old embedded systems, but as a tech blogger and general technology fan, I've read a few things over the years that culminated in its inspiration. The thing about it being less expensive to put a much better processor in than you need isn't so far removed from the truth—when you're cranking them out by the millions, it actually can be cheaper to downclock or otherwise limit a much more capable chip for a less-capable application than to design and tool up for something lower-capacity. That's one of the reasons some personal computer CPUs have been so overclockable—they were sold *underclocked* to begin with, to satisfy the demand for lower-priced, less-capable chips that would have left money on the table if they hadn't filled it but cost more to make a different one.

Many tablets and other embedded electronics today use system-on-a-chip architecture—single chips that combine CPU, memory, and other peripherals into a single part. It's not so hard to imagine that, hundreds of years in the future, this might include a significant amount of digital storage, too. Even if Moore's law slows way down, storage capacity is still increasing. So, if every part that needs a microcontroller has a *complete computer* built in, with storage available, then sure, there ought to be plenty of room.

I figured that RIDEs would be well aware of this, and hack their parts' microcontrollers for use as additional off-grid storage—like Rochelle's own implanted

“thumb drive.” Who knows what-all things they might save there? I’ll bet they’re a favorite place to keep certain treasured memories I mention later that are copied and re-copied and passed along from RIDE to RIDE.

Now that I’ve spent three paragraphs explaining the origin of just one idea, let’s see how long I can make the rest of this note.

This episode was another one that didn’t get many new scenes. Most of the changes involved rewriting things that no longer applied, like replacing the description of Quinoa’s offscreen abduction from the hospital with her disappearance behind the hardlight cloaking Fritz probably keeps up out of habit any time he’s in human space—especially when there are media drones around. Rhianna and company don’t have any way of knowing Quinnie didn’t just cloak and vanish herself, so they’re not too worried at this point. We also rewrote some turns of phrase that were a little awkward, added minor bits that stuck out as missing from the original (such as Katie’s failure to express concern about what happened after she went all to pieces trying to take Tocsin down), and generally just smoothed things out.

The original version I wrote of the takeoff sequence, back when we were first writing this, involved more new Super Integrate Powers—but Jon pointed out that such powers weren’t really necessary to something as simple as taking off, and it wasn’t a good idea to keep adding *new* Super Integrate Powers when they have so many already, so we dropped that idea. I was a little miffed at the time, but in retrospect it really was the right decision.

At the time we were originally writing this, I’d been frequently listening to Yes’s then-latest album, *Fly From Here*, the first in a long time without usual lead singer Jon Anderson, and the title song was in my head. [That song](#), about taking off from an airfield, seemed like the perfect accompaniment for Zane *et al* “flying from here” to go rescue Rhianna and crew. The subject matter was perfect, and it seemed to embody that same sense of optimism that drives Zane forward in his quest to bring Integrate society into the light. (Quinoa would probably have countered that Molly Hatchet’s [“Flirtin’ with Disaster”](#) better-describes how Zane’s been going about it, especially given what happens to him in a few more episodes—but then, she’s having to rethink a lot of things now herself.) So we wrote this segment like a music video. Jon didn’t stop me from doing *this*, so it must have worked. We’d have to remove the lyrics if we published this commercially—but then, the practice of including song lyrics like this is kind of fanficky anyway when you get down to that.

Here we see CinTally flying Zane’s huge suborbital, after Zane cleverly hits on the perfect way to entice her into joining him. We don’t see her a whole lot after this, though she does show up a time or two. Just another one of those characters who showed up for specific purposes and then largely disappeared. Considering this is the first of two of Jon’s characters so far to have Integrated with a hawk named Tally, do you get the feeling that *someone* really likes *Silverhawks*? [**JonBuck:** Why, they had no influence on me at all!] Her tendency to have her own internal mix tape running does provide a useful vehicle for inserting music where appropriate—and I wrote this before I ever read anything by Ernest Cline, who does the same thing in *his* stories.

Is it really necessary for me to state explicitly that “Code Creosote” is a *Discworld* reference? Well, just in case: “Code Creosote” is a *Discworld* reference. (To a humorous malapropism of a real-world expression, yet, which is especially appropriate given something I bring up in a few more paragraphs.) Google “richer than Creosote” if you

don't get it.

This episode marks the original first appearance of Signor Donizetti and his expensive high-performance sports RIDEs. As part of the Director's Cut rewrites, we went ahead and backfilled mention of him into earlier stuff to remain consistent. He's another character I'm not sure who came up with. I think I made up the name, thinking of Italian sports car designers like Lamborghini or Ferrari, and Jon filled in the background that he used to design skimmers on Earth himself.

As stated somewhere in the voluminous background material we wrote up, some of which even still remains relevant, the term "Ahnuld" refers to the practice of modeling fancier civilian DE shells after plain-vanilla military models. It was derived, naturally, from Arnold Schwarzenegger, who was a famous booster of fancier-civilian-model Hum-Vee SUVs.

Donizetti has a very nice way of excusing himself from a design project that he personally feels is beneath his dignity as an *artiste*, doesn't he? It was actually in my mind when I originally wrote this that, for all he respects what Katie did, he sees right away that what she needs is not a new design at all but simply a reimplementing of an existing one using very high-end but nonetheless off-the-shelf parts. Not really something worthy of a master designer's talents, but it would be perfect for an apprentice who could do it precisely as well as he but also learn more from the process... so he extricates himself with trademark politeness. It also seems appropriate that an apprentice design the new shell for the RIDE someone else's apprentice repaired.

The whole bit with Katie getting rebuilt is probably a little too full of what some would call "gadget porn"—wherein we lovingly describe every single tech advance she's going to get in extensive detail. But in a giant robot series, you've got to expect you're going to hit that from time to time. [**JonBuck:** As a big fan of mecha anime like *Macross*, it's a given.]

This episode also marks the culmination of the "Steader minefield" joke with the cards and numbers that I mentioned a few author's notes back. It's a joke predicated on conflating real-life minefields with the "Minesweeper" game that was bundled into Windows for so long. It's probably not all that funny, but it always makes me snicker uncontrollably—and I think its use here is a rather fitting metaphor for and callback to how badly Zane blundered in the "Noobs" conversation. And like Quinoa's 20th-century clothing misconception from the first episode, it serves as a reminder that the Steaders were originally intended to be a bunch of 20th-century [malapropers](#)—people who were crazy about the 20th century without actually knowing a whole lot about it. One inspiration for this was probably the role-playing game [Diana, Warrior Princess](#). (Which *also* involved a misconception about land mines, when you get right down to it.)

The Steaders as written, or at least the main characters seen from that clan, gradually evolved into people who were crazy about the 20th century *while knowing nearly everything about it*. But *some* of them (like Harold Steader, who will be mentioned later) are still that kind of idiot, so for the director's cut I just changed the joke to refer to *some* Steaders rather than *all* of them.

One of the things that's long interested me about a more gender-fluid setting like this is imagining how it would affect people who grew up in it. If you lived in a world where it could only take a few minutes to change your sex completely, and it could even happen by accident or against your will, how would that change how you looked at the question of whether you wanted to change and what would happen if you did?

My first attempt at elucidating this was in “Noobs,” when Zane completely blew his reaction roll and ticked Rhianna off for several episodes. Rochelle has considerably better luck this time. It seems reasonable to me that someone raised in an environment where it was always a possibility would have spent a good deal of time mentally preparing themselves just in case it happened to them. And it’s the way I’ve always tried to write Rochelle—in part as an intentional subversion of the “usual” [“Man, I Feel Like A Woman”](#) trope that’s become such a cliché in this sort of story.

It stands to reason that, as a product of a different culture, Rhianna would feel differently. By the same token, Rochelle feels differently about things Rhianna takes for granted, like getting invasive neural implants. It’s not at all uncommon for people to have trouble adapting to things that are culturally alien to them.

That’s probably why it took so long for sushi restaurants to make it big in America—what average Westerner would have thought eating raw fish was a good idea? If you think that’s a bad example (maybe you saw nothing wrong with the idea of sushi even before trying it!), consider that there are still parts of the world where people happily nosh on insects. How does that idea make *you* feel?

Chapter Eleven

JonBuck: I wanted something a little different than the format we’d come to use, so this part is bookended by Kaylee’s own memories. At her First Boot we see Dr. Patil (with a different first name originally) and Rattigan for the first time. We see her first meeting with Felix-*nee*-Fritz. And we see the panic she experienced in the Shed with her final shutdown with most of her memories excised, and a final taunt from Fritz.

This is also the first time Joe Steader speaks (or at least writes a note) in the original version. *Boy* did we have to revise a lot here. Crazy Joe was *crazy* crazy, and almost a one-dimensional mustache-twirling villain. However, this is still long after the events chronicled in “G.I. Joe” and some time before “Joe Steader, This is Your Life” takes place. So we’re seeing him before a great deal of positive things happen in his life. You could say he’s a little messed up.

Quinoa stays in her prison for quite some time and *eventually* gets quite the dramatic escape. As the writing went on, I realized that she’d have to come down and rejoin the story eventually, and in some dramatically important way for all the buildup it was getting. I’ll see if that needs any changes once we get to that part.

Speaking of changes, Quinoa was more overtly kidnapped in the revision. Originally she’d been taken to the hospital, then her Crazy Uncle Joe had taken her out while wrapped up like a mummy in an Egyptian sarcophagus. Now she knows that Fritz sent Tocsin. She’s feeling a little betrayed by Fritz at this point. Only slightly. It might color her actions in the future.

[**R_M:** In this version, she’s feeling *directly* betrayed by Fritz, for knowing all along he was lying. It’s more explicit that he was *lying*, instead of just turning out to be mistaken. Nonetheless, this was the point in the original story when she first realized he was wrong, and went over to the other side with all the fervor of the newly-reconverted.]

The rabbit, Philip Conyers, was a curveball I threw R_M. I wrote some of the dialogue that led him to be someone important, then waited to see what R_M would do with it. But I didn’t realize he’d end up *that* important in the Nextus Bureaucracy. Was a nice wrinkle, and is a good example of what this kind of cooperative writing can do.

R_M: If you were to ask me to name the character who changed the most over the course of the story from his introduction, it would probably have to be Crazy Joe Steader. He started out as a tax-evading 20th-century fan who was basically kind of a nut, and evolved into a sort of tragic hero pop culture archaeologist who was only “Crazy” in the [Patsy Cline/Willie Nelson](#) sense.

The *really* crazy thing is that, as far as I can recall, he only actually appears on-screen in the original version of *Integration* in one single short scene out of all 25 episodes—and it’s not even in this episode, but the *next* one. (As you’ll see in that episode, we’ve rewritten it, too—he basically comes off as one of Fritz’s lackeys in the original.) He’s mentioned off-camera plenty of times, but apparently we didn’t feel we could be bothered to properly develop *yet another character* when he was just as useful as a sort of off-screen motivator, like that Charlie guy who had some angels.

That only started to change later on. We talked about the Steaders a lot over the course of the story, but as nearly as I can make out, Joe only became a major on-screen character in a story Jon wrote much later, “The Greatest Show,” about the Star Circus coming to Zharus before RIDEs were even invented. That made Joe interesting, which in turn inspired me to come up with the idea Jon and I turned into “G.I. Joe,” which basically explained what made him so crazy. [**JonBuck:** Which is still one of my top faves in this series.]

We wrote other stories involving him after that, and by the time we were done, *that* Crazy Joe and the original version who signed his note “Lovey-dovey, your Craaaaaazy Uncle Joe” weren’t even in the same zip code. As I’ve said before, it’s a good thing we didn’t feel constrained to stay with the original concept we’d already posted when a better idea came along.

This episode seemed like a good place to start putting Crazy Joe back into the picture, so I wrote a couple more scenes with him and Fritz, detailing where their relationship is at these days and calling back a couple of times to older stuff. I tried to do a third scene, too, but it just didn’t come together and didn’t really feel necessary in any event. What’s here is enough.

We were also a little hazy on Joe’s relationship to Mikel at this point. Here, and possibly in a couple other places, we originally referred to him as being Joe’s *cousin* rather than his brother. (And Quinoa’s internal monologue about admiring him for his relative sanity didn’t mention that he’s also her father, so maybe we hadn’t filled that part in yet.)

Speaking of characters who became so much more than their first appearance, this is also the first major expansion of Diane’s role in the original story. As I said in “Merging Traffic,” I just introduced her as a nod to Jon, given that he was big on deer and had featured a bartender character (albeit not a deer) in a recent Paradise story. Jon took the character and setting and ran with her, then later added a tuckerization of that very same Paradise bartender to the bar. Then we gave them their own spinoff story, “Where Everybody Knows Your Name,” in which they meet Clint Brubeck.

Since we now knew Diane was friendly with Zane’s old man, it seemed like the best time to have her mention that here. And that wasn’t the only nod to that story we tossed in, either. It sure is fun to play with continuity references now that we actually *have* some. Also, given that we now knew she’d been an Integrate for 20 years, we really should have explained (or retconned) in the first place why Diane didn’t seem to notice

Uncia had bodyjacked her passenger in “Merging Traffic.”

Nigella Walton makes another appearance, and is still entirely as disagreeable as the last time she showed up. She continues to present as the cliché antagonistic battleax wealthy socialite wife, and I think right around now even we were starting to recognize that. But you know what we like to do with clichés around here—subvert them like crazy.

It seems the one of the themes we like to explore in this story is people being so much more than they first appear. For all that *Transformers* was one original inspiration, it’s not just the *robots* that are in disguise here. I don’t know if I had fully formed the idea of what would happen in “The Integrate Raids” at this point, given that’s still several episodes away, but it must have at least been in the back of my mind.

This episode also features the first major move toward RIDE rights and full citizenship thereof, with Katie being the first to gain full recognition as a citizen. But she wasn’t the sort of person who would be pleased to be offered something as a reward for heroism that she should have gotten simply for existing—but that in turn provided an opportunity to make clear that this was only the beginning.

When we were writing this episode and coming up with the backstories for the three RIDEs, I came up with Kevin’s and Jon invented Sonja’s. For the third, Heinrich, I turned to a friend of mine from elsewhere who’d written with me on other things and had been reading and enjoying the series. He contributed Heinrich’s backstory and asked to be credited as “Cossy,” so I did.

It was right around this time that Jetfire started contributing stories to the FreeRIDErs setting, set in Aloha. He would contribute heavily to several later episodes of *Integration*, but for now we thought it would be clever to coyly drop in an unnamed cameo by one of his characters—the eagle who mentions she’s been a pilot for some time, is, of course, supposed to be Astranikki Munn.

The funny thing is, when we later wrote “Aloha Stonegates,” which involved Rhianna, Rochelle, Rufia, the Stonegates, and associated RIDEs dropping by to say howdy to the Munns, we apparently forgot that at least some of them *should* have already met Astranikki. But maybe she just didn’t feel like putting herself forward at the time. Or maybe it *was* actually some different eagle who’s been a pilot for some time. I’m sure there’s no shortage.

Chapter Twelve

JonBuck: So many things about this episode. It’s almost twice as long as usual. A lot happens. First a few setting notes.

I wanted to try and keep technical things consistent, so we ended writing a kind of Technology Bible. The naming convention for RIDEs is: Three letters for species, then (m) or (f) for gender, then frame type (there are quite a few of those), then version/revision of that frame. 000 units are the prototypes. 001 are the pre-production semi-prototypes. There are some variations, depending on polity and RIDEworks. And civilian models don’t have to follow that scheme. We also outlined how the magnification effect of Qubitite worked out, depending on grade.

Speaking of technology, there are implications we have to deal with. For instance, the multi-Fuse Fenris is capable of. The four of them become a network of connected minds. So we have to make sure we don’t get carried away with ourselves and let our

own technobabble solve every problem. An implication that's actually reasonable may still get in the way of storytelling. So we have to choose carefully.

AlphaCamp quickly developed into its own plot arc, just as I thought it would. If I recall correctly adding Amontillado to this part was my idea. I was wondering what else could happen here and had thought it'd resolve quickly enough, but I missed the mark on that one. It added a bit of complexity that probably wasn't entirely necessary.

R_M: Being that it deals with Alpha's bunch, this is another one of my favorite episodes. It's a favorite for another reason, too.

When you get right down to it, it would be pretty fair to call FreeRIDers "family reunion porn." Sometimes it seems like every couple of episodes, one long-lost person happens to be joyously reunited with another long-lost person. We're not even to the halfway point yet by episode count, and already we've had Kaylee reunited with Anny, Katie, and now Kandace, and Quinoa reunited with Myla (though that actually happened in the original FreeRIDers short). And they're going to start coming fast and furious in a few more episodes.

I suppose it's just that we really *like* all those scenes from movies where old friends and family reconnect after so much time apart. I can tell you for certain, the scenes in *Integration* and other FreeRIDers stories where it happens are among my favorites to go back and reread over and over.

That being said, one thing that we noticed was strangely absent from *this* episode as we were reviewing it was any scene where Kaylee and Kandace actually get to spend some time getting reacquainted. They had a total of like four lines together, and a spot where we *say* they spent time getting reacquainted, but we never actually *showed* it. It seemed pretty strange that we *set up* the reunion and then never actually bothered to consummate it. So we sat down together and banged out a new scene. It's worth noting that Kandace is still missing memories and Kaylee hasn't fully internalized the batch she just got yet—that comes in the next episode—so neither of them actually knows *their* true relationship to Katie yet.

Another new scene was the bit where Joe monologues at Quinoa for a while and then goes away. It's superficially similar to the version it replaced, but in that one Joe was basically a henchman who let Fritz boss him around—and as I said last episode, that's *not* the Joe he later became. So I took the chance to show that, when he's not on the juice, Joe Steader is actually very perceptive and a keen thinker. And also to explain more overtly why he's changing sides and jumping ship.

It was also a chance to toss in more continuity callbacks to stories like "G.I. Joe" and "Oh My Darling Clementine" that we hadn't even conceived at the time we wrote this one. We couldn't have imagined them when we plotted the story out originally, but it sure is nice to be able to throw them in. It's going to be interesting to see how this take on Joe as a man of action who *has* been able to stand up to Integrates in the past affects his role in the finale. Something tells me he'll insist on making his presence felt this time, rather than getting sidelined by his overprotective niece.

This is one of my favorite episodes for Rhianna, as she once again reveals her nearly-["Cargo Ship"](#)-level affection for neat old machinery. The last time she was quite this enthusiastic was when she got to work on Chauncey back in "Deserted" (which is what Rochelle's "prayer wheel" teasing refers to). It amuses me. She reminds me in no small way of Noa Izumi, the giant robot pilot from *Patlabor*. The [opening theme](#) for the

first *Patlabor* OAV series was [a terribly kawaii love song from her to her giant robot](#) (“We’re futurists, you and me—technicians of love”), and it doesn’t hurt at all that Noa bears more than a slight resemblance to Rhianna’s physical description. (Especially in the coveralls she’s wearing in that opening animation.)

Amontillado is an interesting case of plot mutation. When I came up with it, for “Merging Traffic,” it was effectively a gimmick to keep Roger out of the way for a while so Uncia could proceed to go get drunk—and a way I could work the Edgar Winters song “Free Ride” in, as a trigger for a Linux console easter egg. Given that it effectively sealed the person’s consciousness away, it seemed like a natural fit to name it after Edgar Allan Poe’s iconic story “The Cask of Amontillado,” the archetypal “revenge fic,” in which the protagonist lures an old enemy down to a dungeon with the promise of a really good cask of sherry and then walls him up alive.

As originally conceived, it was basically a bodyjacking utility—a way a RIDE could effectively shove that nagging other mind out of the way and get on with enjoying the newly-thumbed life. I figured it was something AlphaWolf made available to help RIDEs get back some of their own. I didn’t originally have any conception of it corrupting the RIDE’s mind at the same time, and certainly didn’t plan on it having been created by one of Jetfire’s archvillains. I thought it was no more than it originally appeared—just another “shareware” concocted by AlphaWolf’s faction.

But Jon suggested throwing a new infection in here as something else interesting that might happen, to keep the episode from *just* being about Alfie’s crew coming and fixing stuff—and I thought it might make for an interesting dramatic challenge for the characters, so I agreed. I believe it was Jetfire who suggested that it sounded like the kind of thing his character would have contrived, and since that would make for a way to tie our separate stories closer together, I said why not. I don’t think I quite expected the complications it ended up bringing in, a couple of episodes from now. But on the other hand, it’s possible that all those complications had a positive outcome for the camp that might not otherwise have come about. More on that when it happens.

On a related note, going over this section made me notice that, for all that LindaCat feels guilty after coming face to face with the consequences to victims of Amontillado, she’s more than willing to let LindaGirl talk her back into Fusing up again—and the over-the-top way in which they relate to each other for the rest of the episode can call into question whether she actually learned anything at all. I never did go back into their heads after beginning their relationship back in “Stockholm Vacation.” And I have had readers suggest to me that their relationship is a little unhealthy.

So I banged out a quick scene between the two of them to make it clear exactly how things changed, and to clarify the fact that they’re basically just dedicated roleplayers from this point forward. It sort of goes back to the way I’ve seen roleplay and real life mix in places like the furry IRC channels where I hang out, where people will combine talk of their day-to-day real-world lives with acting out the parts of the “fursona” imaginary creatures they play through emotes. The Lindae are basically like that—it’s just that they bring their roleplay into their real-world life instead.

Without that knowledge, the Lindae’s relationship looks fairly disturbing to outside viewers. Hopefully, now it seems a little less so, because they’re really not *serious* about it. For example, after LindaGirl graduates from college, LindaCat won’t *really* delete her de-Fuse command—but she and LindaGirl might *pretend* she has for a week or so by mutual agreement.

Did I *always* envision it that way? I don't know that I originally conceptualized them as roleplayers *per se*. I just know I knew they liked to play with each other and they weren't *really* serious, deep down—not after they saw what someone who *was* really serious looked like. But they still liked to pretend.

Something else that plays out from earlier inspiration is the result of connecting up Fenris and Guinevere, and hence Paul and Lillibet. Since we hadn't done a whole lot of multi-party Fusing like that, it offered the chance to play with some new Fusing-related ideas. Of course, as is often the case, we didn't really carefully consider the implications; we just threw it out there—and it could be seen to set up for some other cases down the line of multiple-mind networks (such as a certain dragon from a future story involving Fritz). It will certainly be interesting if the four of them ever end up Integrating; I wonder how that would end up?

I also took the chance to poke in another mention or two of Tamarind from “Second-Hand Lioness.” I couldn't do much more than remark that she *was* there, given that in the other story she never actually made contact with any of the protagonists, just skulked around on the outskirts. It does stretch credibility just a little that Rhianna was so ga-ga over Fenris that she somehow *never noticed* a lioness RIDE almost as big as he was whom she would surely have found just as interesting, but I don't really feel like completely rewriting that section of “Second-Hand Lioness” *also*, so we do the best we can.

I wanted to work in another mention of Claude LeChat's character Rafe, possibly when Paul was working on various other RIDEs at Alpha Camp, but couldn't really find any room to shoehorn it in. Oh well, not *every* character has to be seen at every moment.

Chapter Thirteen

JonBuck: Hooboy! What to say about this? Having a flashback at this stage in the narrative just felt right. It's a good way to inform the reader—to show rather than tell—of important things. This is a very heavy part, and I think I wrote the majority of it myself as a response to R_M's Part 9.

This setting evolved quickly. At the start, I wasn't sure how RIDEs were originally deployed. There wasn't a war in my headspace yet. Kaylee and Fritz were the first two RIDEs deployed in the MRS. They had a relationship that went bad, and then Kaylee somehow ended up in the Shed. The other MRS officers regarded RIDEs with much suspicion. Starting them out this way wouldn't make them as popular as we needed them to, so we ended up with the Nextus-Sturmhaven War.

I have to admit that rereading this part was actually fun. I think this was about the same time that Jetfire was working on the first Aloha stories that took place about 50 years before the main plotline, so I thought a prequel involving RIDEs would help build the setting.

Here we see the first Integrate at his creation and the response to that. We also see just how bad Fritz became post-Integration...and implications that he was nearly as bad before then. He liked to screw with his riders. Did the first Fuser test *really* turn a man into glop? Did he *really* turn another one into a lynx, now living in the zoo?

R_M: Fritz is, of course, a lying liar who lies. All the same, the idea that one of his test pilots *did* end up in a zoo was darkly amusing—enough so that I did return to it

a couple of times, most notably in “Jeanette and Tamarind: Second-Hand Lioness.” True or not, the rumor is still being passed from RIDE to RIDE thirty-odd years later, so it clearly has some staying power. And it also serves as effective foreshadowing for the whole “Amontillado” thing, as broached in the previous episode and coming up in the next few.

JonBuck: And we have the birth of Kaylee’s kittens. I wasn’t sure I wanted to give her eight of them, but R_M pointed out that healthy lynxes could have that many in a litter. Of course, Kaylee herself is still missing these memories. She’ll get them back soon enough.

I briefly considered adding a section or two from Fritz’s POV, but this Part is focused solely on Kaylee & Anny, so it would’ve felt very out of place. We get a view of wartime Fritz in “G.I. Joe” anyway.

Changes to this part are pretty small. There’s an added scene to show friction between Fritz and Frank. And the scene of Frank’s death is changed to make it consistent with Fritz having a Wave Motion Gun for an arm cannon. Originally Ophelia Steader really did have a battleship cannon in her garage. Ophelia’s death is probably one of the most gruesome I’ve ever done.

R_M: This episode was almost entirely Jon’s show. I contributed various little bits—in particular, Fritz playing off of Shakespeare’s line “Soft you now, the fair Ophelia,” which was also quoted in “G.I. Joe”—but he laid out the majority of it, and it was kind of a revelation. At this point, I hadn’t known a whole lot about the early background of the RIDE program myself beyond the other little flashback scenes sprinkled here and there, and this was the first big dose of it.

Of course, it does show the way that background had evolved even this early in the setting. Most notably, as originally conceived, the RIDEs had always been part of the MRS division of Nextus that Myla worked for—the tax-collection department. However, by this point it was fairly obvious that the earliest RIDE prototypes were developed as a military project for Nextus’s regular army, NextusMil, as part of the war with Sturmhaven. So they ended up being retconned into being handed off to the MRS for publicity purposes. (*I think*. Hopefully Jon will correct me if I’m wrong.) Which does work, though it’s possibly a little awkward.

Another kind of awkward thing we had to deal with was figuring out a way that RIDEs could be developed by one polity and yet suddenly be *everywhere* simultaneously—including on the opposite side of the war. Something like true artificial intelligence couldn’t be the result of incremental improvement and hence show up everywhere at about the same time naturally—it had to be a serendipitous breakthrough. And if the Nextus government realized what it was before it was made public, they’d clamp down on it and classify it and be the only kids in Kindergarten with the neat new toys for potentially *years* until someone could steal the secrets. In the meanwhile, they would handily win the war and quite possibly come to dominate the world. (Which would be an interesting idea for an alternate history setting, but not the one we wanted to write in.)

I think I’m the one who had the idea of having Dr. Patil innocently release the key research paper globally. Like many scientists, she was guilty of too intense a focus on her subject. She only considered what it would mean to create the first true artificially intelligent being. It was a breakthrough, a *miracle*, and her only thought was to share it

with the world.

She didn't realize the potential military applications—and nobody who reviewed the paper understood it well enough to recognize such applications either until it was too late and the djinni was out of the bottle. (Talk about your "NextusLeaks"!) I imagine the only way she avoided prosecution for treason was by agreeing to oversee Nextus's own military RIDE program—which, as we can see, rankled, but it was also the only way she had any chance of wielding enough power to affect the future of her creations.

Effectively, RI cores were the only piece missing from being able to create fully effective transforming power armor units—all the other technology was already in place and universal. And so, suddenly, everybody did. [**JonBuck:** This was the "Trigger Effect" in our background materials. (See [the first episode](#) of the classic British TV series *Connections* by James Burke.) All the pieces were already there. They just needed the one thing to make it all work in a new way.]

Speaking of creating RI cores, as I remember it, Jon's original plan for the sequence where Fritz locked Kaylee into the mental state of a feral lynx was that it was just a VR simulation, with no lasting effects or consequences other than Fritz getting to have his way with Kaylee. But the notion of the other lynxes as Kaylee's brothers and sisters, and Katie as her "daughter," had been percolating in my head, and I made the suggestion that the cubs should be more than just a simulation. Given that RIDEs were based on genetic material and mental engrams from their progenitor animals, why *shouldn't* they be able to have kids the "natural" way? (And it would provide even more fuel for "family reunion porn" later on.) So this episode was the original moment that Katie actually truly *became* Kaylee's daughter—though of course she didn't know that yet in the present-day. Amnesia is such a handy plot device, no?

JonBuck: I was struggling with those implications as noted earlier. So, now RIs could *breed true* in Q-based mainframes. That meant an entirely different way to create them. Hence Dr. Patil's exclamation of "New life!" And this would probably, more than anything, get them their equal rights.

R_M: Yeah, if anybody actually knew about it, given how deeply Nextus classified it. You would think *this*, at least, should have been discovered independently of Nextus, wouldn't you, once RIs are known about at all? But perhaps this came out of further military RI research Dr. Patil was enjoined from sharing, and she was just so much better than any other polity's RI scientists that they simply never got that far.

It's funny, but we really didn't do too much in the war years, overall. We did end up showing a little more of the war outside of the RIDE test program when we returned to the era to write "G.I. Joe". We'd already set Joe Steader up as a gearhead, and it occurred to me that he would surely have had an interest in this new RIDE technology. But we'd never shown him to *have* a RIDE, or RIDE tags, or any interest in having one, in the stories set later on—which didn't make sense for someone as gadget-crazy as he is. So, we had to figure out *why*. After that, the story just fell into place—and setting it up to show another side of one of the events chronicled in this very episode just felt natural.

As Jon points out above, the one major change we made was to alter the method of Frank's death from being a battleship gun to...something else. It's worth noting that the characters themselves don't know at this point *what* that method was—though after seeing the empty garage (another new bit I added), Vinnie and Conyers have their suspicions. Something else we need to remember to do is set up how the characters

eventually *do* find out what happened—I do believe we mentioned them knowing it later, but not actually how they found out. But I expect we’ll come to that.

Chapter Fourteen

R_M: I suppose it won’t surprise you, knowing me, that I based the title of this episode on a terrible pun. When I was a cashier at K-Mart, and someone happened to buy salt at the same time they bought batteries, I was all set to deliver one of my favorite zingers. (It didn’t happen very often.) Given that the episode involves an assault on Zane’s Integrate-captured platform on the one hand, and Quinoa’s new super-charged batteries on the other, it was as if it was *asking* for that pun. So, why not?

Apart from those two main plots, this episode also involves the first stage of dealing with the Amontillado infection at Alpha Camp. Perhaps this episode should have been called “Assault, Batteries, and Peaches”?

Speaking of which, Mr. Peaches the dragon was named in honor of one of the denizens of the furry IRC channels where Jon and I sometimes hang out. (A denizen who has, as far as I know, not actually *read* the FreeRIDers stories himself.) Peaches is a particularly fun character to write, as a rather non-threatening dragon. I tend to think of him in terms of the titular character from the Disney cartoon “The Reluctant Dragon” (based on a book by *Wind in the Willows* author Kenneth Grahame). Said cartoon was incorporated into [a behind-the-scenes documentary](#) featuring Robert Benchley, in which Alan Ladd portrayed a Disney animator before he made it big as a leading man. It probably also inspired the live-action/cartoon hybrid movie *Pete’s Dragon*, about another non-threatening dragon. But I’m getting off the subject.

Given that Mr. Peaches is based on a real-live person’s fursona, it also makes it a little tricky sometimes to decide how to portray him. I sometimes worry a little whether anything I should write about him doing might conceivably reflect poorly on (or be taken badly by the owner of) the fursona version of said character. *Would* the Integrate Mr. Peaches engage in stereotypically draconic-predatorial behavior in Nature Range, for example? It’s a troublesome question to consider.

This is the first episode where we see RIDEs equipped with Rhianna’s new DINsec components in direct combat with Integrates. Of course, they’re not exactly the most *skilled* Integrates. The sense we had while writing this was that Fritz didn’t actually *bother* to put any good fighters on the platform—which you would really think he should have done if he was serious about keeping it.

At the time, of course, we hadn’t come up with the rationale we retrofitted a few episodes back in this Director’s Cut to explain why he didn’t destroy it outright—the idea of Fritz being old buddies with Clint Brubeck and so not seriously wanting to harm his legacy. I expect that we just set it down to overconfidence at the time—that Fritz thought he didn’t *need* to bother to put anyone with a lick of skill there, because even the least competent Integrates would be more than a match for any “meat and mech.” But with the subsequent changes, and Fritz admitting that at least *one* “mech” is more than a match for Integrates, that rationale by itself seemed a little...less compelling.

This episode is also where we see the first signs that Zane has a bit of a crush on Rhianna—and that Rhianna is reciprocating, whether she is consciously aware of it or not. Is it cute that they’ve got a crush on each other? Is it *disturbing* that the crush effectively accidentally remolds Myla into having Rhianna’s figure? (Zane blames Terry

for it, but is that just a convenient excuse? We never were terribly clear on that.) That's something readers will have to decide for themselves, I expect.

This is, thus far, the one and only time Zane has tried his "magic fingers" routine—he's never seen to try any sort of Integrate "healing" again. But given what happens *this* time, it's not exactly hard to come up with a reason for that. And also, it's not as if he's been put in a position where he would have *needed* to.

At this late date, I'm no longer entirely sure what drove me to have Zane do that, unless it was wanting to get to play with a semi-Integrate duo the way that Jetfire did with Mike and Tonto Munn in his earlier stories. (And upping the soap-opera quotient on Zane and Rhianna's relationship, of course.)

Speaking of Jetfire, this marks the first episode of *Integration* in which he has a major level of involvement—he co-wrote the scenes in which members of his Munn clan rescue Quinoa on the way down. Jetfire isn't inclined to look back at his older stories, or write author's notes about them, which is really too bad from a standpoint of wanting to describe the background of how the story was written. But on the other hand, his scenes here (and, probably, in the next episode as well) were generally not affected by most of the major changes we made to other aspects of *Integration*, so we were for the most part able to leave them just as they were. I did add a couple more lines of dialogue, though.

We also added a couple more Fritz scenes, to show his mindset prior to the attack and after Zane takes the platform back. It occurred to me to use Murphy, the Irish Wolfhound Integrate who originally shows up in a much later episode, in the role of chief Ascendant honcho aboard the platform—he doesn't actually show up in person in the scenes that take place on the platform, but then again, none of the Integrates who fight Rochelle and the others at the final confrontation in cyberspace is actually described. So he *could* have been one of them.

Apart from those, the biggest change had to do with tweaking Quinoa's escape scene. The original version of it was on an untethered space station, and it was originally Crazy Joe who had locked her up. But those changes required surprisingly little actual rewriting.

I honestly can't think of anything major we changed about the attack on the mining platform itself. But that's the way that this project has been—some parts of the series are practically perfect as they are, while others need tweaking and rejiggering.

JonBuck: So, why does Nextus keep making dragons if they have such a high Integration rate? How do they explain all those missing pilots? [**R_M:** Also, how do they eat and breathe? And other science facts? (La la la.)] Honestly, FreeRIDErs is the first setting I've built that I wanted mythical-types in and could actually justify it under setting rules. Does this mean there are Chimera RIDEs with three heads? Probably not. But we do have the two-headed dog named Zaphod and Beeblebrox who *may* have been a cerberus where the human wore another RIDE helmet next to the RIDE's actual head, for the effect.

When starting out, I pondered what animals were suited for what roles. I wanted a smaller RIDE to start with, so I ended up with lynxes. But that ended up not being a hard and fast rule. Besides, what's a mecha-based series without some giants?

I wanted Astranikki to have a suitably dramatic entrance for the first official crossover between JF's and our storylines. I think we delivered. Granted, it takes some of the thunder away from Quinoa's escape, but it's good to have someone there to catch

you if you fall. Quinnie will have another big moment soon, though...

We have some out-and-out technology porn in this part, describing in great detail the weapons and other gear they're all carrying. What can I say?

R_M: Incidentally, some of the illustrations of the characters on the FreeRIDers setting page are intended to depict Kaylee and Uncia wearing the weapon packs described here. They didn't necessarily get them exactly right, but close enough.

Chapter Fifteen

R_M: Well, this is another immensely long episode, isn't it? I don't know why we didn't split it up into two at the time we wrote it. We can't exactly do it now, or we'd lose the nice round number of 25 episodes, which I rather like. Regardless: wow, really long.

This episode features major involvement from Jetfire and his characters. It's effectively a full-fledged crossover with the Aloha stories; as such, it brings in a number of characters who haven't been seen in the main *Integration* story arc before, and there's only so much background you can really fit in about them. Will readers who haven't read any of those other stories have trouble following this one? I hope not, but who can say?

As before, Jetfire wasn't interested in revisiting it, but happily, most of the stuff that was here already didn't require much in the way of changes. I tweaked a little dialogue here and there and dropped in a reference or two to other stories, and removed a reference to Nexus's government requesting Alpha Camp be left alone (tying back to that whole discarded concept of Alpha being an unknowing Nextus spy), but we're getting into the part of the series where stuff was more or less falling into place in something close to its final form. By and large, the areas where we did make major changes didn't show up in the original version of the episode.

Which isn't to say we didn't add a couple in. Most of the new scenes we've added to prior episodes have involved either Fritz or Quinoa, and in this episode you get one of each. Mr. Peaches just *telling* them Fritz had sent people off to Nextus partook of one of the same problems we'd run into with Fritz in prior episodes—just *saying* what he was doing, without actually *showing* it. Also, between this episode and the next, Quinoa was just *nowhere to be found* for a couple of days, so we had to show what was going on there, too. This was also an opportunity to work in an early reference to the Munns' DIN-making operation, which we wouldn't fully explore until "Aloha, Stonegates!"

In the original version, this is the first episode that had major screen time for Kandace, as I contrived yet another way for a RIDE to have to Fuse someone reluctantly. I do worry a little that I made Kandace and Jenni's situation a little too similar to Katie and Relena's, but on the whole it worked out all right. I had already figured out what I wanted to have happen between Kandace and Jenni, but as I was writing it I realized that it would ultimately be a major digression from the main storyline, so I instead wrote it out as a side story, "Kandace and Jenni: A Beautiful Friendship," and posted that next. Don't expect to see a DirCut of that one, by the way—it's by and large perfect as-is.

It wasn't the only side-story being written at the time. I had finished up "Rochelle & Rufia: R&R" a couple of months before, then proceeded to write the two "Foxed"

stories dealing with a cryo-Van Winkle colonist and an earth tourist family. I just posted the latter of those two days after originally posting this one, in fact. I don't think I'm going to do director's cut editions of those, either, as I doubt much needs to be changed in them. Suffice it to say, I was playing with other ideas that appealed to me. I don't recall whether I'd yet started working on "Second-Hand Lioness," as it would still be 3 months before I posted that one and I seem to recall I wrote it fairly quickly.

At the same time, Jon was working on that "Marshals" story featuring the Liberators, though I seem to recall he'd been blocked on the final fight scene for quite a while until I finally offered to help him with it. (I seem to have less trouble with those than he does.) Jetfire was turning out his own voluminous Aloha series, and we had another writer, Fibio by handle, who wrote a number of intriguing detective stories in the setting and then disappeared. I really do miss him and hope he'll come back and write more someday.

Anyway, this was a time of great creativity for all of us, and we had so many ideas.

This episode effectively brings the main "Amontillado" storyline to a close, insofar as it exists in *Integration*. Shah and Fridolf exit back into Jetfire's stuff from here on out. Meanwhile, the events that happen here also have an impact on "Second-Hand Lioness," given that Tamarind goes off by herself to check it out and effectively gets clobbered and infected. She really should have called for backup first.

Although we certainly hadn't planned this at the outset, or even when I chose to have Paul get kidnapped away to Alpha Camp, in retrospect the Amontillado episode seems like a fortunate happenstance for the camp. It opens the way for a closer, more open relationship with the Marshals and the main characters, and a path to legitimacy for Alpha Camp—and it shows a lot of the camp's renegade RIDEs that there are far worse evils than humans out there.

JonBuck: Shahrazad is one of the few really, truly evil characters in this setting. As bad as Fritz is, he's never quite sunk to her level of depravity. Plus he has that little voice in him he actually sometimes listens to. Shah has none of that.

Originally we had her captured in the first version of this, but it was just too pat. A villain like her has some Joker Immunity. Jetfire has some...interesting long-term plans for her, though I'm not sure when or if they'll come to fruition.

At this point there were a lot more stories in the setting that established things like the Marshals. We had worked out the details of how their organization worked. And I had the Aleka story in progress if not finished. R_M is right that this incident paved the way for Alpha Camp becoming legit, now that the extremists were all driven off.

Chapter Sixteen

JonBuck: Marc and Cernos. What to say about them? Well, they're mauve shirts. No bones about it. They were created so they could die! And die they did! It's a cruel thing authors do to their characters, I suppose.

This was a rather exciting part to write. Plus I wrote probably one of the most gruesome things I've ever done—Carrie-Anne's dismemberment, then there was Zane getting cut up, then Quinoa arriving and giving Fritz an arm-for-an-arm. Limbs flying everywhere! It's also where Fritz reveals his Wave Motion Gun.

My original conception of the climax of this series was a Zane/Fritz fight. Fritz was going to arrive at Zane's apartment during the night and basically drag him out of bed. There'd be a big fight between them over Uplift. Zane wins, story resolved. The thing was, this arc just kept getting bigger. It needed a *bigger* climax to match the stakes.

So this is the low point for Zane. He's been brought down a few notches. It's the "Belly of the Beast" part of the Hero Cycle.

R_M: I make no bones about the fact that this was one of my favorite episodes to write. Lillibet Walton kicking ass and taking names! The secret background of Kenyon Walton revealed! Nigella Walton getting a RIDE (or a RIDE getting her) and revealing some of those hidden depths! Oh, and something happened with that Zane guy, too, but Jon wrote that bit. (Well, okay, I wrote Zane's dialogue. Seriously, the guy will Zanetificate even when he's missing limbs!)

The battle's setup is a sort of callback to "Merging Traffic," in which the just-Integrated Brena is the catalyst for Lillibet getting shot and Uncia breaking free—but the version of Brena seen there is somewhat different from the one seen in the original "FreeRIDers" story and *Integration*. At the time I wrote that, as I've already mentioned in its Director's Cut notes, we had *less than no idea* what Integrates were eventually going to become in our setting.

By the time Jon and I were writing this installment of *Integration* originally, it was becoming painfully clear that a number of those incidents were going to have to be revised sooner or later. But it would be tough to do without the story's inciting incident. So I needed to explain how Brena could have gone from the girl who told Lillibet to make friends with her RIDE to one of Fritz's Ascendants. Hence, the exposition of Brena's background seen later in this episode.

This is the first time we get to see the new tough-as-nails Lillibet, who will return again later on in *Integration* and in the sequel story, "Wolves in the Fold." She's already aware that Fritz and company will come gunning for her sooner or later, so she's taken steps to prepare—and now she's a force of nature. There's just something irresistible about a slip of a girl wielding heavy firepower.

Then I get to reveal some more of those hidden depths I was talking about. I'm not entirely sure where the idea for Kenyon's background as a Nuevo San youth gang member came from by this late stage, but it was very much a way for him not just to be another stuffy, boring billionaire. It's kind of cheating in a wish-fulfillment sense to have so many super-rich characters in a story like this (Zane Brubeck, Kenyon Walton, Joe Steader), so if we were going to do it, we at least had to make sure they were all unique and well-realized, not just moneybags so our characters could get to play with all the best toys. We hadn't seen much from Nuevo San, but we knew it was tiny, and little guys have to become tough as nails to keep from getting pushed around. So Nuevo San was a tough place, and Kenyon came from the street.

And so we get to "When Kenny Met Alfie"—two characters with interesting parallels meeting and getting acquainted. My original idea at this point was to have Kenyon find another Fenris-type RIDE for himself and Nigella/Melissa, but it never really developed beyond the vague idea stage. When you got right down to it, we really didn't need yet another new character introduced for no particular reason.

I've already mentioned that by this point in the story we were becoming aware

that Nigella was a bit of a cliché—so it was time to see what we could do about subverting the cliché. And, naturally, it seemed like the most fun way would be to subvert it via *another* cliché—the idea of rich women wearing mink. So why not give her a mink RIDE? Since I introduced Melissa in the last episode, I had clearly been setting up for it for a while.

One of the unexpected problems we ran into during the revision in the previous episode and this one traces back to a bit of sloppy writing in the original version. We effectively treated Quinoa’s escape from the counterweight mansion and subsequent appearance to save Zane’s bacon as happening in quick succession—but when I went back through the rest of the story, looking for chronological cues, it came out that something like a *week* happened between the two events. So we ended up needing to have Quinoa fill time—first doing a little partying in Aloha, and then finding something else to do with Joe in Nextus right up ‘til Zane’s ill-fated press conference.

The new scene here represents the first time we’ve ever actually shown the interior of Joe’s mecha warehouse, though we’ve referred to it plenty of other times. It was also a good chance to show how the new DINsec system was going to affect Integrates in even the smallest ways—Quinoa couldn’t use the standard Integrate “open sesame” shortcut to get in, but had to remember the pass code. That code in question is, of course, the Unix epoch—the date from which all Unix and Linux system clocks count forward. The officer in charge of the fighter plane test program from *Macross Plus* referred to the model of fighter plane Joe flies in this episode as “epoch-making,” so it seemed appropriate that you have to use the epoch to get in.

Another minor issue was Tocsin’s dialogue. I’ve already done a little tweaking of it here and there in prior Director’s Cuts, but a good bit more of it was called for here. Tocsin started out as a rather different character from the one he grew into over time. He was originally something of a dimwit, but gradually morphed into a samurai type in later stories—which meant that his dialogue here ended up coming off as a little out-of-character in retrospect.

This is the episode where we lose our sacrificial lambs, Marc and Cernos. I’m still not too sure how well that worked. In this kind of story, you really do have to kill some people off just to show that war is serious business—but it feels like we really didn’t actually *do* very much with the characters before killing them off, so it seems a little transparent in retrospect.

It’s probably something we should have corrected in the director’s cut, but at least for my part it felt like kind of a waste to put more effort into someone who was just going to die anyway. We probably should have killed off some of the main characters, the way David Weber or George R.R. Martin do, but we’re just not very good at that. In fact, we tend to keep bringing “dead” characters back to life instead!

Chapter Seventeen

R_M: You can’t keep track of everything. It’s funny how that goes. At about the time we were starting to write this, for whatever reason I happened to look back at “Deserted”—maybe I was going over it for research on what I’d previously said about the mining platform so as to be ready to write the next episode that takes place there. And as I was reading through it, I came across the bit where I’d mentioned Zane had two sisters—which I’d somehow managed to forget altogether right up until now. One of the

sisters was out in space, so no problem there—but the other one was right there in Nextus, so what about *her*?

I've already mentioned this in the Author's Note to Chapter Four, where I retrofitted an Agatha conversation as part of the Director's Cut. The funny thing is that this was pretty much exactly the right moment for me to come to such a recollection, as Zane's hospitalization provided the perfect excuse for Agatha to get back in touch. I just had to figure out why Agatha wouldn't have been around for the last little while, and given that I'd already said she worked in Nextus Administration the rationale pretty much wrote itself. It didn't even feel all *that* much like a retcon, even without the retrofitted earlier conversation.

This is also just about when I got the idea for Madison's story, too. I started thinking about what she might find when she returned home—and *then* I had an amusing idea for the eventual reunion scene when she got back. So I wrote "Madison Brubeck and the Spotted Stowaway" to make that amusing scene possible. Which I'm not going to spoil for you, since if you're working your way through them in order, you won't have read it yet.

Carrie-Anne's partner, and her daughter, are another dangling plot thread we never really followed up. Or perhaps I should say they're a stub on which we could hang another side story, but we've never figured out what kind of story to put there. For the most part, they disappear from the narrative after this. I feel a little bad about that, but then there are lots of dangling plot elements we never got around to following up. We simply didn't know, at the time, where we were going to go with things and we left ourselves so many openings that we could only follow up so many in the end.

Having Agatha around meshed well with following up on some of the other plot threads we *did* follow up on from the last episode—Nigella Walton and her mink RIDE Melissa. Given that they were from the same society circles, it made sense they would know each other, and the interactions among the two of them and Rhianna and company were fun to write. And it also made sense Nigella could suggest to Katie that the Marshals might be just the place for her to find a job, given her connections there.

This episode features a rare Quinoa scene that actually didn't need any major tinkering or revisions at all—quite a change from her appearances in the last few episodes. But then, we've largely reached the end of the major gaps in the story where Quinoa's absence needed to be filled in. I can't remember anywhere in the rest of the story that particularly needs more of her than we originally put in, though I'm sure if we do come across such a spot during the rewrites we'll be happy to remedy it.

We did have to change the bit where Quinoa originally said she hadn't been in touch with her Uncle Joe since her escape. At the time we first wrote this, Joe Steader wasn't actually a real character so much as a conveniently-off-screen plot device. By time for the rewrites, he was an altogether different person (which is to say, he actually *was* a person at all!), and the two of them are thick as thieves at this point.

Rufia and Yvonne resurface in this episode, with the story of what happened to them, Charlene McClaren, and the Skyler family in "More Foxed." Yvonne is fun to write, as she's grown into a real comedian—and hanging the appellation of "straight man" onto the crossridden omnisexual Rufia is hilarious in and of itself.

That scene also serves as the launching point for "Rochelle & Rufia Redux: Foxing About," in which the two of them go off together for some post-traumatic nookie, then they and their RIDEs take a two-day field trip to Aloha to meet up with the Skylers,

Charlene, Kandace, and a few assorted Munns. As with most of my side stories, that one took a while to write, and I didn't end up posting it until around the end of the main Integration storyline. As a result, I missed out on a few changes that should have been reflected in the next episode of "Integration," because I didn't know at the time they were supposed to have happened. More stuff to revise for the Director's Cut!

Incidentally, I won't be doing a Director's Cut edition of "R&R Redux," as I also haven't for the "Foxed" stories or the one about Kandace. Those were written at a time when we had the setting a lot better-planned than when we wrote earlier stuff, and they were all self-contained enough not to have interacted with the characters who needed and caused the most revisions. They're basically perfect just as they are. Maybe someday after we're done with the Director's Cut project for Integration I'll go back and do separate author's notes for them.

One thing about "Redux" is that it's probably responsible for Rufia and Yvonne not showing up in the final battle against Fritz. Even though they *should have* been around and available, it *felt* to me like they were still "in use" elsewhere, so I never made much of an effort to try to stick them in. (I can't say why Jon didn't, either. I really don't mean to come off like *I'm* the only one who was doing any writing here.) Which is really kind of dumb, given that *Rochelle* pretty obviously wasn't in use elsewhere, but there you go, I guess. Not that it's really such a bad thing altogether, I suppose—we had enough characters already that it would have been hard to find room for a couple more.

Finally, the last scene in this episode represents the first time that the "FADE IN" trilogy pokes its head into the main storyline. We wrote those stories just a few months ago, but we introduced a new element in them that started as a fun little diversion but grew into something big enough that it *should* have been reflected in the main storyline taking place at the time. But fortunately for us, we were in the process of *revisiting* that main storyline, so we knew adding it in retroactively wouldn't be a problem when we got there. In this scene, you see the beginning of a conversation that took place in the third story in that trilogy, "DISSOLVE TO." If you want to see how it continues, go read that one.

We'll be writing substantially more new material for the next couple of episodes than we have the last few, as the summit meeting on Zane's platform will effectively incorporate a fourth story in the trilogy—so you might want to go ahead and read the "FADE IN" stories now for that reason, too, even if you're mainly reading in publication order. At this point, we haven't yet come up with exactly *what's* going to happen in the next episode, but I'm sure we'll be able to think of something. (To be honest, I'm a little surprised we were able to catch up to this point so quickly, given how arduous the process of doing the Director's Cut revisions had been prior to writing them. I suppose it helps to have a goal to work toward!)

JonBuck: When you can change your sex as easily as you can in this setting, the question of sexuality should be addressed. It's something we're inborn with. This leads to the question of how it works in FreeRIDers. When you "cross" do your preferences stay the same? Or is that as controllable as physical form? Could a guy decide he's "through with women" after a few bad experiences, go to a clinic, and get himself rewired as gay, or bi, or even asexual without a sex change? I think yes, that's reasonable for the setting.

TG has a number of Standard Tropes that often show up in this setting:

- The [First](#), [Second](#), and [Third](#) Laws of Gender Bending
- [Man I Feel Like a Woman](#)
- [Different for Girls](#)
- [Gender Bender Friendship](#)
- [Super Gender Bender](#) (Integrates being what they are)
- [The Mind is a Plaything of the Body](#)

Now, Tropes are Not Bad, so it's really a matter of how they're used. I didn't want to hang so much of this story on Rhianna's new womanhood, so it only comes up when it becomes important for her as a character. In this part and the next, it is. We imagine crossriding as very much like being a teenager again. [**R_M**: In fact, Rufia is explicit on that very point in “Redux.”] A time of life when neither men or women are really in control of their emotions. So, with Rhianna's sexuality remaining hetero, she has a very girlish crush on Zane. This is a totally new thing. She doesn't know what to do about it. So Myla and Aggie step in for sisterly advice. Which, being back to teenagerly, Rhianna's not really listening to.

Which also raises the question of why, 500 years in the future and on a different planet, there still seem to be defined gender roles. My take is that they're not strict gender roles *per se*. At the core, this is an egalitarian society. There are still “girl things” and “boy things”, but anyone can pick and choose what they want to adopt. It's not a step up or down (unless you're in Sturmhaven or Cape Nord) to change your sex. The point is that you can choose, and the choice gives life a different spin. Otherwise, why change at all?

R_M: It's funny, but Jon and I do tend to look at character sex-changes in different ways. From my perspective, it's simply a fun challenge to face a character with because in our current society, the sex you're born with is a bedrock certainty for the majority of people (and society isn't set up very well to support those for whom it isn't, unfortunately). Pulling that rug out from under someone to see how they react is an interesting experiment. I'm not dysphoric, but I am a bit curious, and it's a fun thing to work through. Which is probably why I've written so many different takes on it.

“More Foxed” was a fun story to write in that regard, given that I crossrode *an entire family unit at once*. (And for bonus points, I gave them all unisex names so they wouldn't even have to change them afterward.) Since I ended up writing that story from Faulkner-style multiple-first-person viewpoints, it was a great vehicle to explore their reactions from their own individual points of view. I still get sucked into rereading it whenever I'm curious enough to glance at it again from time to time.

Chapter Eighteen

R_M: One of the fun things about writing this series is that it was so big and expansive that it often spun off ideas that would later get reincorporated right back in. For example, the “More Foxed” stories started as spinoffs, but characters and situations in them got referenced later. In a few episodes from now, you'll see Jeanette Leroq and Tamarind from “Second-Hand Lioness” make an appearance.

While we were still in the process of writing the Director's Cuts, Jon had an intriguing idea for a new Enclave situated *within* Cape Nord, that made its own TV shows. This idea became the “FADE IN” trilogy. Of course, the way the setting worked,

this new story idea was too big for its events not to have been noticed within the main story arc—but fortunately, we were still *rewriting* the main story arc, and we were just coming up to the perfect point for that story to feed back in. So we wrote 8,200 words of new scenes to go into this episode and the next one, incorporating the characters from those stories, as well as revised key scenes to work those characters in.

If the new scenes had been a stand-alone story, in keeping with the camera-direction names we'd been using, we could have called it "PAN RIGHT". (Because it's on a mining platform, you see, and people used to pan for gold, so you wouldn't find anything if you panned *wrong*...) It's kind of too bad to waste such a good name (and bad pun), but it couldn't really be helped because the scenes work best in context with the others here so it couldn't really stand alone. Maybe I should rename the episode "Many Meetings (incorporating PAN RIGHT)" or something?

Another instance of stand-alone story characters making an appearance has to do with the bartending duo of Diane and Serena, one or the other of whom seem to keep showing up everywhere these days. We had a valid reason for bringing them back here, given that a story we wrote later established them as old, long-time friends of Clint Brubeck, starting from right around when they first Integrated. Of course, we didn't know any of that when we originally wrote this episode, but the Director's Cut also allowed us to go ahead and slip that back in.

Other things we added involved elements from other stories making their appearance, though more of those happen in the second part than this. Still, it was good to be able to add them back, and make the connection between stories stronger than it could have been before those stories existed.

At the very last minute, I decided to stick in a couple of cameo appearances by the *Clementine's* crew, too. Actually having them do much interaction with people would have required even more rewriting than I wanted to do, and anyway they always seemed like the sort to stay in the background as much as possible early on. But putting them in the vicinity helps set up for their mention later on as participants in the final battle against Fritz—which we also need to write more scenes for down the road.

Anyway, perhaps the most surprising thing is just how much we *didn't* have to change in what was here to work the new stuff in. The plot was already multi-threaded, with lots of things happening in different places at once; all it really required was to add another new thread to it, and sprinkle in dialogue from the new characters into the meeting scenes. And there you go.

But enough with the new. Let's get back to the episode as it originally appeared. I forget who had the idea—probably Jon, as he's the one who planned the basic framework of the story—but the plan was to use the opportunity of having diplomats in attendance for the platform reopening as a chance to have a sort of impromptu meeting of the minds.

It kind of snowballed from there as we realized this was the chance to get a lot of major story motivators talking to each other for the first time—including AlphaWolf himself and the Gondwana Marshals. It was also the chance to round up Nextus representatives to pry loose the exact circumstances surrounding Fritz's ascension, Kaylee's scrapping, and the RIDE prototype program's bitter end.

And, of course, there were little subplots to move forward, such as Rhianna's relationship with Zane, and Rochelle meeting one of her distant relatives. There was the chance for the Waltons and AlphaWolf to meet everyone else. (It's funny that at this

point we still thought it might be years before Alpha Camp could join civilization as a law-abiding polity of its own.)

One subplot element I had to retrofit was Rochelle's decision to stop using her nanites' sexy effects except for special occasions—a decision which she came to as a result of the visit to Aloha in “Rochelle & Rufia Redux.” That story happened right before this episode but actually hadn't been written yet at the time we originally wrote this, so I didn't know she was going to have this epiphany—but it made sense for Rochelle's character development to realize that she was still being a trifle immature in how she dealt with the change.

This is, incidentally, a realization that *Rhianna* has to reach in this episode. You'd think Rochelle would have said something about it to Rhianna when she saw her getting dolled up for the event, but perhaps she knew from experience that it was simply the kind of thing Rhianna would have to work out for herself and getting in her face about it would be counterproductive.

Here we also laid seeds for future plots, such as the serendipitous discovery of what will eventually turn into DINcom. As we've pointed out elsewhere, many scientific discoveries don't happen intentionally, but with someone noticing something odd and saying, “Hey, that's funny.” As it happens, that's just how it plays out here.

Other funny things: Rhianna dousing herself in lilac perfume unintentionally foreshadows the way that scent features in “Skunked!” some time later. (I swear I wasn't thinking of this when I wrote it!) Also, Leila's line about lion taming takes on a different shade of meaning when you consider how “Pride of Lioness” ends.

And a character whose name represented something of an in-joke makes her first appearance here: Diana Fuerst, Sturmhaven officer. She was here with a specific purpose in mind, and would later play an important role in events focusing on Sturmhaven. Do you recognize the joke inherent in her name? I'll let you ponder on it for now, but will reveal it in the author's note for the next part.

The funniest thing is that, given how much happens here, I really can't think of a whole lot to say—whereas I've gone on for pages and pages about previous episodes. I guess part of the reason is that much of the story-stuff that happened here was Jon's, given that he was the architect of Kaylee's past.

JonBuck: Here we see Rhianna exhibiting some of the tropes I mentioned in the previous author's note. She went whole-hog into the “Girl Things”, totally besotted (perhaps twitterpated) with Zane. Even after all the advice from Myla and probably Aggie, too, she still goes far overboard. Now, I imagine this kind of personal reinvention works for some crossriders. Rufia is pretty much the antithesis of this, though. Nothing changed about Rufia *but* her form.

Zane and the rest snap Rhianna out of it and she goes back to her tomboyish Rosie the Riveter style, which really suits her. All told, she's only a few steps further on the “girliness” scale compared to Rufia. Rochelle is the really Girly Girl here, and later on her brother-then-sister Ivor/Ivy *really* embraces it. But this is a society where you can remake yourself inside and out, so why not?

Anyway, FADE IN and the rest. Since what happened there was so important, we needed a major revision in this part and the next to make sure they were included in the summit here. We included Desilu and Tallyhawk in the proceedings, and they didn't need that many added lines.

This part and the next represent the start of Act 3 in the Integration saga. It ended up ballooning enough to need two separate parts to cover everything that needed to happen. It also represents some crossover with many of the other storylines we had worked on in parallel, like the Marshals, and now FADE IN.

The Summit scene itself...

Since that flashback was already done, we didn't really describe it. But it reveals a lot of important things to the attendees. I think one thing that we underplayed was the fact that RIs could breed in the Q-mainframe Nature Range environment. This is huge and we really don't deal with it. But there were so many other threads going on here that it simply wasn't relevant to the rest of the story.

I admit it was fun to needle Nextus about the whole thing. I wonder if word somehow got back to Dr. Patil about this summit, and she started pondering returning to Gondwana at this point.

Techy stuff. Discovery of FTL communication! The "defective" DINsec units create a tunnel through subspace, and transmission is essentially instantaneous. But the tech also needed limitations—especially early on, so soon after discovery. At this point it's a Chekhov's Gun.

Chapter Nineteen

R_M: Well, here we are again. Given that this is the second half of the story begun in part 18, a lot of the stuff I wrote there about the melding of the old and the new applies here. So all that needs to be said here are remarks on specific things that happen.

This episode presents the final pieces of the puzzle surrounding Kaylee's fate after the war. Jon's the one who came up with that, so I'll let him expound on the inspirations and rationale behind it in his note. One thing I retrofitted was expanding on Conyers's reasons for sticking Kaylee in the Shed. It had seemed puzzling to me that Fritz would let the object of his affections be put on ice like that, but perhaps he saw it as a suitable compromise if the alternative was destroying her altogether.

But why didn't he ever fetch her out of the Shed and wake her up again himself? Maybe he even intended to "rescue" her at some point, but just never got around to it. Maybe he liked having her "on the hook," available at any time he wanted to reach out his hand, a little too much—and, since she *was* available at any time, he never felt the need to get around to it until it was too late. He knew she wasn't going to be very happy with him in any event; perhaps he just didn't want to have to deal with that level of frustration until he was good and ready.

I also want to make one thing perfectly clear at this point. When I was talking about "weed from Califia" where the smuggling is concerned, I was specifically referring to marijuana, the drug that we call "weed" in the here and now—and that, thanks to California's legalization of medical marijuana, is indelibly associated with that state. I referred to it as "weed" because that's the slang for it, and Anny would have been the sort to think of it by the slang term rather than by its proper name.

But then Jetfire decided to use the fact that I mentioned "weed from Califia" to make up an *entirely new* native plant whose drug derivative was called "weed," even though I argued until I was blue in the face that it wasn't *supposed* to be any sort of new drug at all. Maybe I should originally have said marijuana in this section, and I was

more than halfway tempted to make that change for the DirCut to emphasize that. Or change it to “pot” or some other slang term to make it clear that’s what I was talking about. But it seems like a little too much trouble to go to over a minor irritation.

In any event, as far as I’m concerned, they grow *marijuana* in Califia—good old-fashioned pot. *Not* some new and different native drug whose effects might not be anywhere near as benign as we now know marijuana to be.

Here’s a fun one: the idea for the Q-disc Kaylee uses to disappear during the trap for Fritz was developed during the writing of “More Foxed.” The ending of that story had originally involved Fiona using knowledge from her Nextus Intel days to craft versions of those discs out of the Q they’d mined, and the family using them to go head to head with the nasty critter who was actually running Bartertown. But as I was writing it, I realized I wasn’t sure just how they’d fight that critter, the story was long enough as it was, and I really didn’t feel like adding yet another subplot to it. So I let them go ahead and get away, and saved the nasty critter for “The Good, the Bad, and the Fritzzy” some time later.

Back to the present-day of the meeting. Although we didn’t know it at the time, we started laying the foundation here for AlphaCamp to “go legit.” We were still expecting it to happen years down the road, but the way the story developed it ended up coming about a lot sooner than expected.

The screening room was a fun scene to write, and was probably in the offing ever since Fritz first put on the “Major Hayseed” disguise. That was all Jon’s idea, of course, but I ended up writing the actual plot of “her” debut episode. I tried to hit all the standard sitcom tropes and clichés, and I think it turned out pretty well. It was amusing to see Anny Hewer’s reaction to it. I need to remember to retrofit a mention or two of it into the banter at the final battle later on.

At the DIN-making demonstration, Dr. Clemens shows up in the present-day for the first time since the flashbacks, and reveals a little more background on their original design. I can’t remember for sure, but I think his appearance here was one of the elements that inspired *Second-Hand Lioness*, at least in part. Incidentally, *Second-Hand Lioness* is coming up in the reading order, and I’ll probably talk some about that in the next episode’s author’s notes. Not planning to do a Director’s Cut version of that one, either, though I have made a couple of minor dialogue tweaks based on the new Director’s Cut timeline—you can see what they are by using Shifti’s change-history comparator.

Oh, and if you’re wondering about the in-joke around Diana Fuerst’s name I mentioned in my previous note, “wonder” would be the right word to use. “Fuerst” is a German word for “prince,” after all. And “Diana Prince” was the alter ego of Wonder Woman, a superheroine who also comes from a land where women are the ones in charge. The character is not meant to represent Wonder Woman in any other way, but I did find it amusing to sneak her name in like that. (I had wanted to use a German equivalent to “Diana,” too, but my research with German baby name lists showed me that the German equivalent of “Diana” was, in fact, still “Diana.”) Did any of you notice that before now?

JonBuck: The final flashback scene is fairly pivotal. So there’s a kind of Mexican Standoff taking place, where the Loose Cannons could kill Fritz, but doing *that* would have restarted the War. So, Nextus and Fritz went their separate ways. Fritz would go

on to make a cozy little living space in the caves in what would become the first Enclave, Towers. Later on he decided to split that scene, because, you know, it was too crowded.

I think Sturmhaven experimented (either on their own or from “leaked” info via Fritz) and probably made at least *one* Integrate of their own. But she thought the whole War was just stupid and refused to fight for them. Beyond that, I have no idea what she was like or what happened to her.

A fairly open question at this point is when the first “natural” Integrates started to show up and how Fritz discovered him or her. Well, that’s good story fodder, so I won’t speculate here beyond this: The first natural Intie was *probably* a Q-miner. Or maybe not. Maybe it was a Nextus bureaucrat. Or an easygoing Alohan sea otter. Perhaps a dragon. Or... Well. Let’s just say it’s up in the air.

Lots of additions from the Hellir Crew here. The whole idea of FADE IN and the Show was one of those things. I wanted to do something that I hadn’t done in the setting before (TG aside). Which also brings in that at this point in the writing we hadn’t figured out very much about Cape Nord at all. They were a nebulous “male version of Sturmhaven”. Fortunately we’ve fleshed both of them out a lot since.

One change we’ve made is the explanation of the provocation for the War. We didn’t really have a clear idea at the time. Mikel Steader as a character hadn’t been created yet. This is just the nature of writing fiction.

R_M: As I recall, you’d originally planned on having the hapless battery schmuck just be some random Steader, and you had the notion of doing some kind of travelogue of him narrating his adventures on various planets. You do like your travelogues, don’t you?

JonBuck: I think going on so many roadtrips when I was young might have been an influence. Whether it was camping or going to Kansas (from NorCal) to see family, we were always going somewhere on summer vacations. Anyway, this was still early enough that Joe really hadn’t gelled as a character. I’d come up with the Star Circus concept, but didn’t really do anything with it for a while yet.

This Steader Cousin was supposed to visit the colonies because I wanted to flesh them out a little...then Joe would show up to make his life miserable, being the jerkass he was at that point. (**R_M:** As previously noted, in an earlier episode of *Integration* Mikel was referred to as Joe’s cousin ‘til we fixed that in the Director’s Cut.) Once I started on “The Greatest Show” I realized it’d work better if they were brothers instead, and Joe stopped being a jerkass. Having Mikel join the Star Circus also gave an opening for that story I’d originally planned to see the rest of Human Space. As it happens, we did start something, but it hasn’t really taken off. But even unfinished stories are good sources of ideas for other works.

R_M: And you never know. *Oh My Darling Clementine* was unfinished for the longest time, and we didn’t complete it until most of the plot elements that were supposed to have been “introduced” in it had already shown up in other stories. Someday we might just get back to that one, too.

Chapter Twenty

R_M: I’ve said before that FreeRIDers is “family reunion porn.” (Not “porn” in the sense of literal pornography, but in the slang meaning, a work with a lot of that particular element in it.) By that token, this is one of the most “porny” episodes of the

entire series, as we have multiple family reunions taking place. Bertha and Diana, Carrie-Anne and her partner's daughter, and—my favorite—Kaylee, Rattigan, and Dr. Patil (with a side order of Katie and Anny). This is one of my favorite episodes to come back and reread, just to watch the Dr. Patil scenes play out. I usually get sucked into binge-reading the next few episodes just to watch the final battle. So at least I've had plenty of chances to think about things that need to be updated!

I *think* I'm the one who had the idea of bringing Dr. Patil back this way, but it's hard to be sure at this late date—especially since Jon and I seem to think so much alike when it comes to storytelling and inspiration. I do know that I set up for it as early as “Kandace and Jenni: A Beautiful Friendship” wherein I had Kandace write the email to her that kicked the visit off. I also know I'm the one who had the notion of giving her a red deer named Rohit, and the rationale for it. I'd recently been watching *Sita Sings the Blues* a lot, so had been interested in Indian mythology—and when that association popped up while I was googling to find out what kind of deer they had in India, the name and what it meant were impossible to resist.

Oddly, it turns out now that I misidentified the kind of deer—probably on account of the Wikipedia entry on deer in mythology saying that Rohit turned into a “red deer.” I assumed that was the *kind* of deer, so I described the RIDE Rohit as being one—but in actuality the red deer isn't native to India, but the sambar is. So, presumably the Wikipedia entry simply meant a deer that was *colored* red. Correction made herein!

When I had Rohit be a highly-advanced RIDE with a tech level beyond almost any other, I was simply remembering that Dr. Patil was the scientist who had invented the RIDE, so thought naturally she'd know more than anyone else about making them. However, on reviewing the flashback episodes, I realized that she was strictly focused on the RI portion, and hadn't had all that much to do with building the DE shells—which required a quick dialogue retrofit to explain how she could have gotten so good at building them, too.

But then again, Dr. Patil is a genius-level intellect who has had thirty-five years to learn everything she could about that side of engineering, too, and she worked closely with the original design team that created them in the first place—so it's not too much of a stretch to say she was able to pick a few things up along the way. [**JonBuck:** Plus, Rohit fits with the “Ace Custom” trope you frequently see in anime. She's a singular creation, as is Rattigan's custom LRIDE shell, and probably his Gondwanan DE, too.]

Then there's the question of Bertha and Diana. Wow. Bertha's more than a little domineering here, to a somewhat disturbing extent. It makes a statement about the lingering aftereffects of the kind of abuse RIDEs have received as their intelligence wasn't accorded the respect it deserved, that they turn around and seek to have the same kind of control over their human partners when they can. [**JonBuck:** Gave me the heebie-jeebies.]

On review, I thought it might have been a bridge slightly too far myself, and I did teeter on the edge of taking it out or cutting it back as part of the Director's Cut review but in the end I decided to let it stand. As later visits to Sturmhaven demonstrate, a similar attitude of the strong strong-arming the weak tends to crop up there among humans, too. This is something they'll just have to work through.

Also, Fenris was kind of the same way with Paul, originally. But then, we did show Fenris's attitude soften over time toward Paul, and I *think* Bertha's did the same

way toward Diana but I'm not sure we ever made that explicit. I might have to retrofit something, as I did for the Lindae. I'll have a look at "Wolves in the Fold," the next time we revisit those characters after the big battle, to see if I need to add anything there. Or maybe "Alpha Strike" would be a better opportunity to put something in. We'll see.

Rochelle's hair is chartreuse this time. It was kind of supposed to be a running gag that her hair color was different every time she showed up, since she could change it instantly with the nanites whenever she wanted, but I don't think I really made enough of a thing of it for people to notice. Her "default" is a sort of greyish white, with darker-grey spots optional, to match a snow leopard's pelt, but of course even that's a bit of an artificial color given that shade isn't exactly natural. Another generally-neglected running gag is that she usually halfway-falls down the stairs.

This episode represents the last major appearance that Carrie-Anne makes in *Integration*. She shows up briefly here and there in subsequent episodes, but never really gets a character focus again. As I mentioned in an earlier note, the subplot involving Audrey and Karen never really went anywhere. We simply set up so many potential subplots and introduced so many different characters that we just weren't able to follow them all up.

One thing still conspicuous by its absence in this portion is the space training cruise that Zane and friends undertake so Zane can Take A Level In Badass via a Training Montage and be more evenly-matched against Fritz when he comes to town. When we were writing this, we recognized that it needed to happen, but it was one of those things that had the potential to develop into a full story of its own that would slow us down and get in the way of writing the final confrontation—which we were eager to get started in the next episode.

At the time, we thought that the training cruise might make a good side story to write up—but we just never got around to writing it. We've had a few ideas for it every now and again—possibly involving the deep space Enclaves mentioned in the Totalia stories and at the end of *Oh My Darling Clementine*—but they never really jelled. In any event, it's not something we could clear up with just a scene or two here, so we left it alone. Maybe we'll get around to it someday.

And one more little tweak: about the time we were writing this, we forgot for a while that Katie rrrrolls many of her 'r's—most notably in this episode and the next. We've corrected those.

JonBuck: Our original idea for Dr. Patil was that she was a Greta Garbo-style recluse, surrounded by the RIDEs she'd purchased away from slavery. But it's hard to resist a good Walking the Earth Trope, and I love the scene when Rattigan pops out of his carrier to get her to reveal herself, and him getting pounced-and-purred upon by Kaylee.

Of course, Dr. Patil's RIDE had to be a deer. In this case, a sambar deer. She's quite a wonder by herself. As Dr. Patil said, she's had a great deal of time to learn all aspects of RIDE engineering. I'd forgotten until I reread this part that Dr. Patil was a serial crossrider. But that also makes sense. Given her later relationship with Dr. Clemens, I wonder if she'll persuade him to swap.

We've added a few scenes here. One with Joe and Quinoa at home, a new ~~Enclave~~ *Lair* based on James Bond tropes *built in a volcano* with Quinoa doing her thing, Chauncey getting his upgrade, and then Fritz's reawakening. The "show, don't tell" rule

of storytelling. However, there's still some things that happen offscreen, like the Space Training Cruise. Perhaps a story for another time.

In the next part we introduce some new characters. I'll leave the majority of that commentary there, but here I wanted to say that we were tempted to introduce some of them early in this part, during the revision. But when we tried, we found it ruined the flow of the story. So, the lesson when doing editing of this nature is to keep it to a minimum, smooth out the narrative, and don't mess it up by introducing characters earlier than they naturally arrived.

With these parts and the next we started getting some significant crossover with the other side stories we'd worked on. This is Bernie Thompson's first mention outside of "Marshals."

And last, the "DINcom" gets used. We made some changes here to reflect how the early models work. They burn out easily, so Fenris and Guin need an array to keep their connection up with enough bandwidth.

R_M: So how about that? We've managed to work our way through 80% of Integration in Director's Cuts so far. We are *so far over the hump*. (Or maybe just over the hill...) Onward to the last five episodes!

Chapter Twenty-One

JonBuck: First, a word about the nature of this part. We realized we needed to *show* what was going on in Fritz's camp, so we created four new characters. Mavra, LeLane, Kyla, and Zeerust. Through them, we see just how much control Fritz has lost over his followers. Of the four of them, Zeerust is the most "everyman". Completely out of his depth, looking for any opportunity to break free—which he takes, despite the risk to himself.

LeLane is named for Jack Lelane, the fitness guru who lived to a ripe old age. Since LeLane is from Cape Nord, it seemed fitting. Mavra was something we hadn't seen any of, an older woman with grandkids who Integrated. Kyla is unusual just because she's a thylacine. We probably don't have enough extinct mammals.

And here is when I really got excited. The culmination of months of work started—the climax of this doorstopper. I love Katie being such a badass here, using that Skunkworks frame of hers to its full potential. That was a trigger on a Chekhov's Gun that needed pulling. Dr. Patil herself shows her bravery, and I think I'm a little *too* happy with the "Ratty-gun" pun.

The Freeriders themselves get to shine, too, when they curb stomp Murphy. There's just so many good things getting started here.

We've added some bits here and there. Most significantly, the *Clementine* and crew. We'd mentioned in other stories that they'd been instrumental in capturing the Coffeehouse. We thought it was a good idea to show it. So expect more in "The Universe of Battle".

So, we finally name David Ryder in a Fritz section instead of just calling him "Jiminy". Now feels like the right time, given we've already had the flashbacks. He is, of course, named for the *Space Mutiny* character ~~Big McLargeHuge~~. I know there's a lot of *Mystery Science Theater 3000* references in this series. But hey, it's Author Appeal.

R_M: I love the word “marsupitopia.” I’m so proud of coining it. It just rolls off the tongue, doesn’t it? There’s also a lot of other dialogue I love in here, like Kaylee and Uncia bickering over tail length, or Mavra punning when Murphy says “see how they run.” It’s basically action-movie one-liners, I suppose.

This episode is another place where the redating I did of the series comes in handy. For one thing, we now know exactly when Mavra’s flashback happens in relation to everything else. For another, we also know the attack happened in October—not December. I’m still not sure how and where we got the December date that was on the original episode. Just took a guess based on what felt right, I suppose. It apparently never occurred to us to go back through the story and count the days and weeks. We weren’t particularly bothered about dating things then, I guess.

I had originally thought this was just one of those little things that there was probably no way of fixing: why had everyone started hacking on non-critical systems to hone their anti-DINsec skill while Fritz was still asleep and unable to tell them to? (Given that he didn’t wake up until the day before they attacked Uplift and all.) That blur you see at the end of my arm is my hand doing the handwave thing.

JonBuck: Catch this wave, dude. His followers were smart enough to anticipate doing *something*. Besides, they’d still want their backdoors.

R_M: When it completely surprised Fritz at the attack that he was unable to hack anything, and he was effectively incommunicado right afterward? And we’ve tended to present most of Fritz’s hangers-on as Just Not That Smart? And the smart ones who found out, like Mavra, tended to keep it to themselves? Yeah, that’s a handwave.

But then most of the way through the revision, as I was going over Mavra’s scenes, it occurred to me: what if Mavra actually *did* call it to someone’s attention—for example, BarXan the zebra—in the hope of getting a dispensation to go and investigate, and *he* instead decided it was a good idea to get everyone up to speed on hacking through the obstacles before Fritz woke up? It turns out, sometimes there *are* little ways of fixing these things.

Mavra’s a fun character, and we really did try to write new scenes to introduce her earlier, but there really wasn’t ever a good opportunity that didn’t feel gratuitous. We just did too good a job of introducing her in this episode. However, we did make use of her and her friends during the “Ghost of Christmas Present” segment of “A Fritzmas Carol,” so that’s something anyway. And we did poke Murphy into the Director’s Cut earlier, as the Integrate in charge of occupying the Brubeck mining platform, so that’s something too. (Fun fact: Mavra’s nickname and surname are a reference to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s lesser-known character Brigadier Gerard, who the Wold Newton family tree suggests is a direct ancestor of James Bond.)

Zeerust the zebra is named, of course, for the Trope denoting “The particular kind of datedness which afflicts things that were originally designed to look futuristic.” Which is a common-enough thing on Zharus all by itself, given how twentieth-century crazy the place is. But I imagine a lot of zebra RIDEs probably get named “Zeerust,” just for the alliteration. He ends up pulling off a clever move, out of desperation. I imagine desperation is quite a good incentive to be clever.

In the midst of a battle episode, we take time out to explore the relationship between Katie and Relena. It can’t be easy when your RIDE is famous and you’re a high schooler. It’s a credit to both of them that they manage to make the relationship work

anyhow. Incidentally, naming a teacher “Miss Othmar” is a reference to “Peanuts.” That was the name of the teacher Linus had a crush on.

Did you notice that the animal types of the three Integrates Katie takes on at the Martinez emitter are taken verbatim from the last lines of *They Might Be Giants*’s “Mammal”? “The fox, the ox / Giraffe and shrew / Echidna, caribou.” Shrew, echidna, and caribou. The shrew really should have been named “Kate,” in deference to Shakespeare, but we already had a Katie on hand, so she became “Kathy” instead. And we made the caribou a Klingon. I could say I was drawing a comparison between antlers and brow ridges, but really, it just felt right to feature another meme-infected Integrate in battle. (Even if he *really* should have been put up against the *Clementine* crew.)

Speaking of the *Clementine* crew, it was right around the time we were writing the original version of this that Jon originally came up with them. *Fly With Me*, featuring the earlier, non-sapient version of the ship, would be posted less than a month after this episode, and Jon already had the rough future of Clementine and her crew charted out—even though the sequel, *Oh My Darling Clementine*, would end up as one of the longest-dangling albatrosses around our necks before we finally finished and posted it relatively recently. By the time we got around to it, most of the new characters and concepts meant to be introduced for the first time therein—including what I believe was our earliest conception of the new, not-as-Crazy Joe Steader—had already shown up again in other stories! (With that in mind, hitting that one early might be a good exception to the credo to read them in publication order.) That’s also where the hovertank mentioned here and in an earlier DirCut episode first appears.

It was with that future in mind that Jon would throw in a reference in “Universe of Battle” to the *Clementine* bunch securing Fritz’s Coffeehouse offscreen. Given that we’ve ended up defining them a lot better since, and we need to do more showing and less telling, expect Clementine and Joe Steader to get more time *on* screen when we get to episode 23.

Speaking of whom, here we feature the band name “Doubledown Derp” in connection to the *Clementine* crew. That’s another part of the *Clementine* backstory Jon came up with, and we namedropped without explanation in “The Big Date” and “Aloha, Stonegates” as sort of an in-joke. I was going to say this was the first time we’d tied the band directly to the Clementine, but I see it actually happened in *Totalia: Prelude*, too—though we do link it more directly here.

We also threw in an unnamed appearance of the band and Wilma in our director’s cut revision of #18/#19, but we didn’t make a big thing of it there. Not every major character *has* to know every other major character, and they can be around each other without *having* to strike up a conversation, too. (For the same reason, we’ll probably leave the band name unrecognized by the major characters in “The Big Date” and “Aloha, Stonegates.”) Besides, it’s nice foreshadowing for the band appearing again and getting named this time.

I mention here, and in a few other places, that the system responsible for cooling off the interior of hardlight enclosures is called a “Maxwell’s Daemon.” This is a fun little pun and reference. The original “Maxwell’s Daemon” was a thought experiment by physicist James Clerk Maxwell involving an imaginary creature that changed the temperature of two rooms by moving fast-moving molecules of air to one room and slower-moving molecules to the other one. That’s also where the usage of “daemon” for an always-running computer system process comes from. It stands to reason that a

hardlight environment field, which is stated to have the property of regulating the temperature within itself, would have a *literal* “Maxwell’s Daemon” (at least, literal in the always-running computer system process sense) that actually regulated temperature the way the *original* Daemon was supposed to. (I’m not alone in making pop cultural references to the Daemon, by the way. Computer game *Max Payne 2* also gets a lot of mileage out of it.)

Chapter Twenty-Two

R_M: Well, here’s the big Alpha Camp battle scene. I think I had the writing of most of this by myself, Alpha Camp being my baby and all. (Though there are parts I do specifically remember Jon wrote, such as the byplay between Tocsin and Smash, and probably more that he wrote that I don’t remember by now.) It fell basically to me to do all the needful revisions on it, and I’d burned out on the Director’s Cut for a while so left it on the back burner for a few months.

Maybe I shouldn’t have waited so long; after I took a good look at it, there were only a few places that needed to be changed, and it only took an hour or so of work all in all. By this point in the narrative, we’d pretty much figured out the shape of things. My changes largely boiled down to filling in a place or two where I noticed more was needed (such as Bertha realizing she’d been too hard on Diana), or adding in references to later-written stories (such the greenhouse getting destroyed, from Claude’s Alpha Camp stuff, or a tweak to Tocsin and Guinevere’s relationship in light of the flashback from “Wolves in the Fold”).

The biggest change, I guess, was the culmination of that bit I mentioned earlier, the Nextus soldier who was originally supposed to be AlphaWolf’s unwilling Integration partner. As I explained, that subplot basically went right by the wayside, and all that remained was to tidy it up. So instead of Nextus continuing a long-standing habit of keeping tabs on AlphaWolf, with plans to take him and his camp out, they had simply sent an observer to watch the battle—without bothering to tell Alfie about it. The outcome, insofar as the story goes, remains fundamentally the same.

What else is there to say about this episode? It carries on the Alpha Camp tradition of having episodes to itself, rather than being interspersed with other stuff. I suppose part of that might have been the way it was easiest just to write most of the episode by myself while Jon was working on stuff happening in Uplift. Perhaps more importantly, it makes for a good self-contained episode, a way to have something conclusive happen while the big fight is still raging in Uplift.

I’d already done a couple of things with Fenris’s RIDE type—Fenris himself, his bodychanged cohort Bertha. Good things come in threes, so it was only natural to wonder what might happen if one of them had Integrated. And such an Integrate would make a great leader for the force coming up against Alpha Camp—there would be a nice amount of drama from meeting Fenris and Bertha, plus it would make for a great “boss fight” for the ending.

And, needless to say, an immense Integrate called for a teeny tiny one for the sake of the contrast. I probably should have done more with Beverly the chihuahua, but you know how it is when you have too many characters.

One of my favorite parts of the episode is the segment with Nora and Rose. It provided some much-needed comic relief in the middle of a battle, and showed that

there's more than one way to fight Integrates. And the idea of Integrates' libidos luring them to their doom—and being part of a pile of unconscious bodies behind the couch—just tickles me.

More comic relief comes from the bit with AlphaWolf taking out the Integrates attacking the Nextus soldier. Any anime fan would recognize that the panda with his hardlight signs is a reference to Genma, the sign-waving panda from *Ranma ½*. It stands to reason that some Integrates would be meme-infected by anime—especially anime involving cute furry animals. By the physics of the setting, AlphaWolf probably shouldn't really have been able to clobber him with his own hardlight sign, but it works well-enough as a sight gag to invoke Rule of Funny.

AlphaWolf's gun is, of course, inspired by the heavy sniper rifle from *Mass Effect II* and *III*. If anything could amputate Integrate limbs with a single shot, it would be a gun like that one.

I suppose Baldwin the eagle merits a little explanation. When the idea of an eagle character to be AlphaWolf's pilot first came up, free association with “bald eagle” produced the name “Baldwin.” And at the time, I'd been a fan of *Firefly*, and enjoyed Adam Baldwin's performance in it, so it wasn't much of a stretch to name and model the character after him. Of course, since this was written, Adam Baldwin kicked off and took part in the whole “GamerGate” movement, and as a result I'm no longer quite so fond of him anymore. But it seems like it would be too much trouble to change the character's name now, as many places as he's appeared.

Making him be a secret Integrate was effectively a spur-of-the-moment inspiration at this point. Even as recently as the Integrate raid on the Waltons' house, we were still thinking of him as an ordinary RIDE, which is why there's a mention of upgrading him with DINsec on the flight out. But it occurred to me there had never been any mention of *his* human, which meant it stood to reason he might not actually have one. And it would be a fun way to turn the tables on Fritz's bully-boys for him to turn out to be one after all. Later on, we would delve into his backstory and how he got to Alpha Camp in *Oh My Darling Clementine*.

We're definitely into the home stretch now. The next few episodes ought to be a *lot* of fun.

JonBuck: Here we are! The home stretch in our 25 “episode” anime. I worried some about the pacing of the climax, but there are enough loose ends to tie up that the overall story really needed to be done like this. Our revisions here just work out some of the kinks. Not a whole lot to change.

Since we wrote this after I'd finished *Fly With Me*, there was the issue of why the Tocsin in that story was such a moron compared to this one. I figured that in *Fly With Me* we were seeing Tocsin 1.0. They weren't really good with mythical-types at the time, so there were a lot of design flaws in the neural map. I thought that they made an interesting duo in battle. Smash was all blunt instrument compared to Tocsin's surgical precision.

Up next, the Battle of Uplift continues, we make some connections to other stories/characters that didn't exist before, and we show on-screen what had only been off-screen...which we've been building up to for a couple parts now.

Chapter Twenty-Three

R_M: Here we are at last: the climax! 23 parts into what was supposed to be a ten-part-or-so story, with a denouement and an epilogue still ahead. What a long, strange trip it's been.

But the first scene in this episode was actually a brand new one, conceived as a further extension of "Crazy" Joe Steader's new character development arc. It goes back to his appearance in "Oh My Darling Clementine" in which he pots several Integrates attacking Clemmie and company. In the original version of this episode, Quinoa left the considerably-more-inept Joe Steader tied up at home to keep him from possibly getting hurt in the battle—but as has been seen in some of our recent story posts, the new version of Joe Steader is a force to be reckoned with.

The scene also fills in a rather obvious gap in the original version, in which we left the retaking of Fritz's Coffeehouse off-camera. At the time, we'd barely even conceptualized it, and Jon's ideas for the *Clementine* were largely in the planning stages. So just mentioning them was a way to tie them in with other works we were going to write later. But by now we've written reams about them, and it was time to show it all happening.

Another new character we introduced herein, in the original version, was Jeanette Leroq, and her RIDE companion Tamarind. I'd basically just finished and posted *The Second-Hand Lioness* at this point, which ended with them on their way to the fighting in Uplift, and so here they are! Maybe it's not really the best fiction craft to introduce two big new characters right at the very end, but it was a great opportunity to have them meet up and do stuff with all our other characters—and I liked them so much after just having finished that story that I just couldn't resist the chance to throw them into the mix.

I'm not going to do any major Director's Cut revisions to *Second-Hand Lioness*, though I have gone in and tweaked a few dates and such to bring it in line with the DirCut timeline. By this point the setting had largely solidified for us, so there wasn't much need to tinker with it. By now I can't even remember precisely what the original inspiring factors were, but Alpha Camp and the concept of bodyjacking were basically my invention, and this was another way to play with the idea by turning it inside-out. What if a human could "body-jack" a RIDE? But that was only how it started, and it developed into other things along the way. Jeanette Leroq was a reuse of a character I'd created for another transforming-robots setting on the microfiction site Ficlets. In that series, she ended up getting brain-scanned into the body of one of the person-eating transforming robots—and my FreeRIDers story idea offered an interesting way to throw a new spin on that.

The climactic fight involving Zane and Fritz was one of the things the story was building toward. From the outset, we had set Zane up as an adversary to Fritz, the one who would finally be the key to knocking him off his throne. Even if subsequent revisions to the setting as time went by kind of made the idea make a little less sense. If Fritz had been so good at disappearing people early on, why was Zane *allowed* to run free long enough to become a threat? We had to do a little bit of backfilling as we wrote the director's cut, positing that Fritz had backed off from his policy of absolute Integrate control. I'm not entirely sure how well those tweaks to his motivation worked out. That in turn necessitated other changes, domino-like. But such is the nature of evolving settings. You can't always make everything fit together perfectly.

Another thing that changed in the course of the telling was the nature of the climax. It started out with it just being Zane vs. Fritz, mano-a-mano, gato-a-gato. But along the way, it abruptly turned out that Fritz had been the one who did nasty things to Kaylee in the distant past—and so the climactic battle turned into a sort of tag-team event. But given the 20th-century craze that also grew up along the way, perhaps it's all the more appropriate that way. I wonder if there's an Integrate Enclave with a 20th-century pro-wrestling meme infection?

Were we too kind in deciding Fritz's fate? After all, he did kill a lot of people...but we ended up letting him live in the end. We do kind of have a problem with being a little too nice to our characters sometimes. (I'm sure that *Madison Brubeck and the Spotted Stowaway* could have been better if I'd put the characters in a little more real danger after they busted out of prison, maybe even wounded or killed one of them, or killed actual Totalian citizens in the revolution.) All in all, not counting what happened in Fritz's flashback, we only killed about *one* major character over the course of *Integration*. (Well, two, but we went back and added the second one for the Director's Cut!) And even he was kind of a sacrificial lamb.

But the way the story worked out, it just seemed like we couldn't do it in the end. There was the little matter of "Jiminy," and Dr. Patil being against it, and all. And leaving him alive did allow us to use him in later stories down the road, after he got a little more sane. But I can imagine some people might find it anticlimactic that we didn't kill him off. Oh well...we've still got Appa for that, somewhere down the road...

Other minor changes: along the way in the original version, we had a character refer to doing something "thirty-six," as a sort of equivalent of "twenty-four-seven". Thirty hours a day, six days a week. The problem with just saying "thirty-six" is that it's readily confused with the number 36. I *think* going with "thirty-six" was Terry's idea. However, in retrospect, "thirty-six" simply looks too much like a typo, especially since we've never really had much case to use it elsewhere. So for this revamp, I went with "thirty-slash-six" instead. I think it works better.

JonBuck: In the course of writing this, Fritz went from an oddball isolationist with a few followers and a personal grudge against Zane to the insane Tyrant of the Dry Ocean. As he became more and more dangerous to the protagonists, so the stakes needed to grow. Given just how good Intie hacking is, I thought of bringing down the Domes....which was basically a terrorist act.

When this was a smaller scale story for the climax I was going to have a big fight between Zane and Fritz start with the Hep Cat assaulting Zane as he slept. There'd be a battle in an around the apartment building, Zane would win. End of story. But given the above, I had to discard this in favor of bigger stakes.

One idea I had when working on this part was having the crew from "Marshals" accompany Rhianna *et al* as they plugged in their DINcom alpha versions. But having Jeanette and Tamarind in here already it just felt too gratuitous in an already jam-packed climax.

I remember when I thought this story would have eight parts. Heh. Heh. Yeah. And there's still two parts of denouement left. There were just too many loose ends to wrap up that we couldn't let go unaddressed.

The fight scene with Quinoa over Uplift was partly inspired by the "Beam Spam" attacks you often see in anime like Macross. With a few added revisions due to involving

Joe Steader. Speaking of him, we also see what happened to poor Artemis after the events of *My Darling Clementine*. She wasn't a nice person, but didn't really deserve what Fritz did to her—and the other heads. We'll probably need to address that in a future story. Can Integrates regenerate if they're just a head? It might help Artemis that she's a shapeshifter. But the others?

Chapter Twenty-Four

R_M: Here we enter the first of the two *denouement* episodes, in which we work on wrapping everything up and tying on the bows.

The first big part of that is the Svetlana/Alpha Camp scene. This reintroduces the big wolf Integrate who was such a big part of “Alpha Strike,” and shows that there are no hard feelings between Alpha Camp's denizens and her—and then we return to Alpha Camp and see the first parts of its reconstruction and rehabilitation.

I hadn't expected Alpha Camp would be able to get this respectable this quickly. But it just goes to show how much things change in the writing. Alpha Wolf and Alpha Camp were some of the first things I came up with for FreeRIDers, and may very well have been the hook that got me into the setting in the first place.

When Jon had first described the setting to me and invited me to work with him on it, I honestly had a hard time seeing the appeal, until I got to thinking about how the technology worked and some of the potential implications. The first thing that occurred to me right off the bat was just how unfair the state of affairs was to these sentient, sapient, self-aware animal robot/power armors: by design, they were limited to having opposable thumbs only so long as there was a person on the inside. But they *were* fully sentient, sapient, and self-aware, not to mention *smart*, so that they would figure out a solution to that problem was fairly obvious.

That intrigued me, really. It didn't seem like the sort of thing people had ever been likely to write about. Who ever heard of a transforming robot that had to kidnap its “pilot” for the sake of being able to use opposable thumbs? And it was these elements that appealed to me enough to write stories involving them—which I had finished before Jon had even finished *his* first story in the setting. (When I'm inspired, I work *fast*.)

Out of that were born Alpha Wolf and his village of renegade RIDes (I can't remember whether I called it Alpha Camp right away or that came later), as well as the “Amontillado” utility/virus that figured so prominently in “Merging Traffic.” Alpha Wolf got mentioned in my earliest stories, “Merging Traffic” and “Deserted” (and in fact he was *in* “Merging Traffic” until subsequent character development rendered it unlikely he would risk himself in that way so he got changed to Ohm in the Director's Cut). And when the opportunity came to write the camp more directly into the stories, I got right to work. (As I believe I've mentioned in the relevant author's notes for earlier episodes.)

My *earliest* ideas for how things would come out involved AlphaWolf Integrating with the Nextus soldier he claimed during “Alpha Strike,” getting stuck in feral form, and ending up a grumpy pet at the FreeRIDers garage. I was still writing toward that possibility even as late as when we wrote “Alpha Strike” itself. Fortunately, I soon recognized that the shape of the story had changed, and that just wasn't going to work. (And, to be fair, it *was* far more interesting to make Alpha a part-time Fuse partner of Kenyon Walton, anyway.)

Why was Alpha Camp able to “go legit” so soon after all? I suppose it was down to

two things: the way that Alpha, Paul, Lilli, and friends had gone to rescue (and partner with) members of one of Nextus's most powerful families, the Waltons, when Fritz had dispatched an attack; and the way that Alpha Camp's defense against Fritz's attack had been so successful and had occupied many of the forces Fritz would otherwise have used elsewhere. (The way that Alpha Camp had been the victim of an evil RIDE hacker, exacerbated by a Marshal who forgot that personal wasn't the same as important, didn't exactly hurt matters either.)

Even after it went "legit," Alpha Camp still made an excellent venue for further stories, as proven by "Wolves in the Fold," "Kevin: De-Claude," and "Jeanette and Tamarind: Young Guns"—not to mention the Alpha Camp stories that Claude LeChat (who I had tuckerized in "Kevin") wrote. In fact, I still find it remarkable how well those stories mesh with the events of this episode. In the end, I guess that going legit really was the right choice.

As wrapping-things-up continues, we get a scene with Katie and Relena's family, and as far as I'm concerned Katie's comparison of human politics to peeing on particular trees is one of the finest moments of the entire series—if I do say so myself.

Next comes a bit with Chantilly, the cougar Integrate that an exasperated Kaylee took down during the battle with Fritz. If I remember correctly, I set the cougar up, to see what Kaylee would do when she encountered her, and I was a little surprised when Jon had Kaylee blow a hole right through her. But that was all right, as it set up some good stuff down the road—including this scene, where I touched upon the veneration many RIDEs felt toward the one who had ultimately been responsible for creating them. And throwing in Discordianism and the Sub-Genius in the list of humanity's major religions was a little nod to the Internet of the 1990s when I first got online, with *Undocumented Features* and other Usenet weirdness making those religions an indelible part of the geek culture of the day.

My only regret is that we haven't really done much with Chantilly since, apart from this scene and one in the next episode. It seems like there should be some potential for further stories there. Ah well, so many characters, so little time.

In the next scene, Dr. Clemens and Dr. Patil get together to go see Fritz...and the first part of the scene plays out like they're on a date, thanks to a couple of RIDEs playing cupid. We really do like to ship people, don't we? Between the romances on the one hand, and the long-lost reunions on the other, there's a lot of "relationship porn" in here.

As with Chantilly, and as Jon will touch on in his note below, we really haven't done as much with Fritz and Ryder's relationship as we should. I did revisit him in "The Good, the Bad, and the Fritzzy," and we've done a few bits here and there, but apart from that, there have been other characters and settings that drew our attention. Perhaps we'll do something about that in the next Jeanette story, which should feature Fritz quite heavily. If and when we get around to it.

The scene that required the most obvious alteration was the Integrates' night out in the Cape Nord kraken restaurant. As originally written, LeLane's insistence that Cape Nord wasn't founded as an answer to Sturmhaven wasn't challenged, because presumably at the time that's what we actually believed. However, our views on Cape Nord have evolved and changed considerably since we originally wrote it, with Cape Nord becoming less of a one-note joke and a lot more nuanced in terms of the relations between men and women. (There are a few hints of that later development in Bonnie's

statement that the women play games of their own, but most of what that implied was still yet to be developed at the time.) And we had subsequently made it clear that Cape Nord actually *was* founded largely by men who'd been exiled from Sturmhaven, which directly contradicted LeLane's claim.

When we started to rewrite scenes from this episode, I thought this would be one of the most difficult scenes to revise, in light of how much Cape Nord had changed in our minds since we originally wrote it—but on reconsideration, that turned out not to be true after all. All it really took was a suggestion that *LeLane might be wrong*. With that, he went from being an unbiased expert to being a Cape Nord citizen who believed what he wanted to believe—as many Cape Nord citizens do. Much of the rest of the stuff, while it might not agree with revelations from later stories, was nonetheless reasonable for people not part of the Cape Nord female conspiracies in question to believe, so it didn't need much other tweaking.

The first new scene we added to this episode was the bit with Joe and Quinoa in the aftermath of Joe's party, serving as a sort of coda to the new Joe Steader storyline we added in preceding episodes—and a little prelude to the Joe and Julius stuff that we wrote a little later.

The other new scene, which came about very late in the revision process, capped off the new arc incorporating the *Clementine* and Chandler/Artemis, who had been rescued from Fritz's lair earlier. Given that we had brought them in for the Director's Cut, we needed closure to send them back out again. Also, mentioning that the *Clementine* is heading back out into deep space for a while sets up for them being there when they show up in the Totalia stuff.

Then following these scenes are Fritz's sentencing and various reactions from other characters. To Zane's reaction, I added a mention of the deceased and largely forgotten Marc Cernos. His absence from this scene was fairly blatant in the original version.

Did Fritz get off too lightly? Should he have been executed, for killing all those people? Perhaps. But if nothing else, the fact that there's an innocent person in there along with the guilty one means that kind of punishment *has* to be off the table for a justice system that would rather not punish a guilty person than mistakenly punish an innocent one.

The stuff with Appa sets up for him being a villain in the next major Integrate civil war arc, whenever that should come about. It would seem that so much of Zharus's forces being off-planet to save Totalia would make an excellent time for him to try to pull something—but we'll just have to see how that goes.

Finally, we have a big get-together at the end where people meet and discuss what's happened, loose ends are tied up, and groundwork is laid for later things. I don't know if anything will ever come of that little conversation between Quinoa and Rufia, but maybe someday, we'll see. And then Zane and Rhianna have their little pre-date date, in which that designer dress Zane bought—another loose end—is tied up at last. We'll have to use that dress in a story someday. Perhaps Rhianna brought it along to Totalia?

And speaking of shipping...

Now that the discussion wouldn't be a spoiler for people who hadn't gotten around to reading this far yet, I should probably say a few words about Zane and

Rochelle's date early on in the series. A lot of our writing was kind of stream of consciousness, bang a few characters together and see what happens next. Out of that came Zane's appreciation for Rochelle's sex-ay, and him asking her on a date just on sheer impulse. He also asks Rhianna for a date since fair's fair, but *that* one subsequently leads to a relationship.

Why did this date never really lead to a relationship where Rhianna's did? Probably several reasons. One being that there was nothing really *romantic* in Zane and Rochelle's date; they're just being "friends with benefits." (I already had been painting Rochelle as a sort of more reserved counterpart to Rufia in terms of pansexuality. Quite the little horndog—er, *cat*, really.) And Rochelle didn't have any problems at all with going out on the spur of the moment.

On the other hand, starting in the very next episode, Rhianna not only plays hard-to-get, she effectively smacks Zane upside the head with a rather large clue-by-four. (And he deserves it.) That, plus Zane having a lot more time to think about what being an Integrate really means and what kind of relationship he really wants, probably more than anything else accounts for that one "sticking."

And from another point of view, while we tend to share most of the setting in common, and write in each others' characters when we need to, our characters are nonetheless specifically ours at the root. And from the point of view of collaboration, it's a lot more fun to write scenes together between my Zane and Jon's Rhianna than to write them alone between my Zane and my Rochelle.

(Though what do I do down the road but pair Rochelle up with another character of mine after all?)

JonBuck: There are a lot of loose ends to tie up here. Once we wrote the climax we knew there was going to be a substantial coda/denouement. In particular there was Alpha Camp going legit. After everything that happened it felt like the right and just reward...even if it's a bit abrupt. But it still seems to work, and the Camp's new internal politics are a part of the Young Guns stories.

Regarding Chris's original ideas for AlphaWolf, that he ended up paired with Kenyon Walton, I think also threw a monkey wrench into it. It was another one of those things that came naturally for me in the storytelling. So Kenyon won't Fuse another RIDE if he doesn't absolutely have to. Once AW is finished with his political life in Alpha Camp, I hope those two get their partnership.

I've had several ideas about Fritz and Ryder. The poor faux-Beatnik wasn't sealed in that box on purpose. It was just a bad luck result of the Integration. Ryder had very little idea of what was actually happening in the Real and probably isn't aware of how much time has actually passed. Fritz was also captured by the RIDE Mad Scientists Fridolf and Shahrazad soon after the war. They studied him for a few months and may be responsible for that hole in the firewall in the first place. From there they developed the Amontillado virus.

Eventually I want to have the two of them swap places for a story or two. But considering my current (June 2018) writer's block, who knows?

Now, the only thing left to address is Zane and Rhianna's date...

Chapter Twenty-Five

JonBuck: In 2011 and into 2012 I had a crisis of confidence in my writing method. That could be summed up nicely in the trope [Writing By the Seat of your Pants](#). I'd start with a setting, maybe a character or two...then just get writing. I had a lot of success with this at first, but I realized that I had a growing list of unfinished stories. I'd get to writing, a plot would show up, a few new characters, then I'd have to go back and do major editing. It was just too *frustrating* and difficult to keep all the details straight.

So instead I decided to develop the setting first, before I created any characters. You can see those materials in the setting notes sections here. It's mostly outdated now, but you can see the process.

I was still having trouble, and I wanted some outside input. I remembered R_M had written some excellent Paradise stories with a more scifi bent: The Future is Paradise and Paradise Forever. So, I brought him in, showed him the background material I was working on, then we went from there. I honestly expected it'd only go 8 parts, but it ended up expanding in much the way I used to write. But we still managed to keep things focused. For a while there it felt like we were writing almost a novel a week.

The setting spawned several big storylines off the main one. The Munn Family from Jetfire, R_M's Young Guns, the Star Circus, the Marshals, the Show, and Totalia, the big one that's still unfinished.

I wish I could say when we'll finish it, but I'm currently in a writer's block as bad as 2011 (as of July 2018). And for very different reasons. So it goes.

It's interesting that the revision process was what was frustrating me before, but we've spent the past year-plus revising this magnum opus, so it wasn't as daunting a process as it might have been. Once we put it into one ebook file we'll see just how many pages this doorstopper is.

I'm under no illusions that it's Great Literature. It's far too fetishy in places. But we had a lot of fun writing it, and we know there are a lot who enjoy reading it. And if you've made it all the way to the end of the DirCut, thanks again for reading—and reading it again.

R_M: What a long, strange trip it's been. But more on that in a bit.

This episode didn't need any major changes. There were no new scenes begging to be written, because #24 tied up all the new loose ends that we'd added for the Director's Cut—and as I've mentioned before, by the time we were this far along the setting had mutated into something a lot closer to its final form. The most changes you're going to see in this chapter are a few tweaks to dialogue. (If you're reading this on the Shifti Wiki, you can use its history function to compare the differences.) But hey, we know you're *really* reading these for the scintillating insights into the creative process in these author's notes, right?

The episode begins with the date we'd been building toward for approximately $\frac{2}{3}$ of the story, ever since Rhianna got over her mad at Zane and discovered it transmuting into attraction. It was a fun scene to write, each of us taking our characters and setting them down together and simply responding to what the other one did. Scenes like this are where this sort of collaborative writing takes on the flavor of improv roleplay, getting in character and “yes-and”-ing to each other.

As the date progresses, Zane and Rhianna head over to the new RIDE museum Zane has been building on the sly. I'm not sure entirely when I came up with the idea for that, but it was sometime within the last few episodes. Carrying Zane's experiences from "Deserted" through to a logical conclusion, it seemed likely that he would put his money where his morals were and try to do something about the question of RIDEs who had been lost or abandoned out in the wild. And the fact that it was something that was sure to impress his girlfriend didn't exactly hurt, either. In the Director's Cut, I added a little backfilling during the mining platform summit meeting about the technicians working on it having to keep it secret from Rhianna.

Big John and Queenie are a reference to Jimmy Dean's "Big Bad John" songs—particularly "[Big Bad John](#)" and "[The Cajun Queen](#)." As much mining as goes on in this setting, I had to throw in a mention of them *somewhere*. Of course, given that those songs are presumably also known on Zharus, this does pose the interesting philosophical question of whether the RIDEs were intentionally named after the songs and it became a self-fulfilling prophecy. But maybe I'm just overthinking it.

The museum also presents yet another couple of those long-lost family reunions we love so much, which serves as a sort of prelude to the "Family Lynx" story we did later: the reunion of Kaylee's family, and the reunion of Yvonne with her father. (In case you're wondering whatever happened to Yvonne's *mother*, she's in a story I was writing with someone that kind of fizzled out midway through. I keep trying to go back to it to salvage it, but can't ever quite figure out how to move forward with it. Maybe someday.)

There are also some comments here about Rhianna's family that show we'd already started planning "Impossible Things," the story we wrote immediately following. I'm pretty sure that story was my idea, prompted by Rhianna's earlier remarks about her family. But of course, once I had the idea, I shared it with Jon and we developed it together.

The story moves on to the Cheers bar, where some more loose ends are wrapped up, and Zane makes Diane a gift of some very pricey scotch. Then, finally, the denouement gets its own denouement as Rhianna and friends meet for a chat the next day.

And, well, here we are then. With the completion of this episode, we've finally put our "Director's Cut" of *Integration* to bed. So now it's time for another look back at the experience of writing it—and the experience of revising it.

I'm pretty sure I've mentioned once or twice in earlier DirCut author's notes that the idea behind FreeRIDEs didn't originally grab me until I got to thinking about it and realized there were ways to work in some of the ideas I've liked playing with in other settings. In fact, it grabbed me so hard that I had two stories, "Deserted" and "Merging Traffic," completed before Jon had the original FreeRIDEs done. (I felt rather smug about that at the time, though I don't think I actually ever came out and said so.)

Anyway, I liked the way that Jon's story "FreeRIDEs" was heading as it ended, and it was pretty much a no-brainer at that point to take the characters I'd made in my stories and slam them into his for the "sequel." As we've mentioned elsewhere, we really had no idea just how big and how long this story was going to grow, and we had only the vaguest notion of how it was going to end at the time it began. As Jon said above, we were basically pantsing it. Our characters surprised us along the way, both with how they acted (Zane saying exactly the wrong thing and ticking off Rhianna comes to mind)

and with how they came to exist at all (Jeanette and Tamarind coming to exist and then joining the story for the final battle, for example).

And sometimes we authors would surprise each other with our characters. I remember Quinoa Steader seeming all wise and mysterious in Jon's "FreeRIDers"...and then it coming out in her next appearance that she was actually just a power-tripping spoiled teenager!

The writing experience was a lot of fun. There were large chunks, or even entire episodes, that we each wrote alone, but most of the series was done together, and we inspired and were inspired by each other to reach new heights of creativity. By the end, it was kind of hard to believe it was over.

I'm not really sure why we haven't repeated this kind of story setup since then. None of our subsequent works have been episodic and posted chapter-by-chapter on completion like this. (The Hellir Enclave stories might *sort of* qualify, but even they were largely complete in and of themselves.) Most of our stories have been posted only when they were *completely* done.

Did we grow overly cautious? Maybe we started feeling like there was just too much setting background out there, and we wanted to make sure that everything worked start-to-finish before we let something out the door? (After all, if you look at all the stuff we changed or revised over the course of this director's cut, there *was* an awful lot of it.) I don't know. Maybe if and when we get around to doing the Earth invasion of Zharus, we can try going episodic again.

In any case, as we went on writing stories in the setting, it soon became clear to us that a lot of the stuff in this early version just didn't work anymore with the stuff we'd written later. And recommending people read the early stuff was kind of awkward when there were just so many differences. So it was time to do a "Director's Cut" and reconcile the problematic parts.

Of course, calling it a "Director's Cut" is really kind of grandiose, given that what it really amounts to is just revising our first draft. But since we had put our first draft out here in the world for people to read from the very beginning, it seemed like calling attention to all the changes and fixes would be a good idea.

I loved adding all the new scenes tying *Integration* together with the various stories we'd written afterward—including the Hellir Enclave stuff, which we'd only just written at the time. (In a way, adding Hellir Enclave into the mining platform summit was kind of a repeat of the way I added Jeanette and Tamarind into the Uplift battle when we were writing that for the first time.) It does kind of render my advice on reading by publication order a little obsolete, though—since now *Integration* features characters and situations from stories that were written years later! But hopefully we described them well enough that people can still enjoy reading about them here without having seen what came before.

Another part of the point was to create the first properly-formatted complete ebook version of the entire 25-chapter saga, which I've been building chapter by chapter in Scrivener as we worked our way through the DirCut episodes. With the publication of this episode, I'll be able to finish it up, compile it, and post it to the directory where I keep all the FreeRIDers ebook files. Who knows—perhaps that's how you're reading this author's note even now.

Now that we have an actual ebook file, I wonder what we'd have to change about this in order to self-publish it on Amazon? Could we get by with just removing any

direct quotation of song lyrics? Of course, there's also the question of how we'd split up any royalties between the three authors involved, which could be awkward. So perhaps it's for the best to just keep it free.

Wow. You know, looking back at this Director's Cut project, I kind of get a repeat of the same feeling I had when we completed the story originally. I can't believe we actually did all that *work* on this thing. It's true that we didn't need to write nearly as much new story material, especially in later episodes, but we did need to figure out how to make all the new stuff and the old stuff mesh—and that took nearly as much effort as plotting the thing out in the first place. And it kind of didn't help that sometimes we let months or even a whole year go by between episodes. But I guess that's all over now.

I'm not sure there's really a need to do revisions this extensive on most of the later stuff. Perhaps we'll look at "Impossible Things" and some of the other stories and see if anything grabs us, but by the time we'd reached the end of *Integration*, all the stuff that forced the earlier changes was pretty much already in place.

In any case, I hope the changes we've made have improved the story for you, and that things make a little more sense. And hopefully we can get over our respective writer's blocks enough to put out some more actually *new* stuff one of these days. Hey, you never know.