

*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. “Ohhhhh, 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-006T 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 ASCIIs 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 ASCIIs 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 ASCIIs 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 getting’ 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 seeing 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.:*

:Innnnteresting,: 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. “Parrrrrdon 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 somewherrre 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 ASCIIIs 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 rrrratherrr 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. “Sorriry 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.”

“Neveerrrr,” Katie said. “We’ll both be therrre 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.

“Motherrr, that rreally wasn’t verrry nice,” Katie said, kneeling to make sure she’d gone safely into stasis lock. “She was clearrrly 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 Lilibet 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 jetted 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'nal 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 Mosley 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 yourrrr 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 paw 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-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?