

Rochelle and Rufia: R and R

By Robotech_Master

An attractive girl in a tightly-tailored, low-cut pair of coveralls sat in an office chair at a desk replete with a number of monitors, keyboards, chording grips, and other peripheral devices. Most of the monitors were showing screen savers, as the girl was staring off into what seemed to be empty space—or at least she would have been if her eyes had been visible, but they were completely covered by lensless interface specs. A pair of snow-leopard ears twitched back and forth above the specs, and the long, fluffy snow-leopard tail that poked out through a hole in the office chair occasionally swished or twitched as well. A long blonde braid coiled up behind her head completed the picture.

Buried in her work, the girl hardly noticed when someone else entered the office. But she nearly jumped out of her seat when the loud voice called out right behind her, “*Damn*, girl, look at *you!* How did you get that and where can I get *me* some?”

Rochelle Seaford nearly fell out of her seat, turning her startled jerk into a spin to swing her chair around and peer blindly at the newcomer. Her hair, naturally, seized the chance to unravel free of the braid and do its usual shampoo-commercial thing of cascading down around her shoulders in *very slight* slow motion. It was blonde today because Rochelle had just spent three hours dealing with an annoying problem whose solution turned out to have been right under her nose all along. After that, she *felt* blonde, and wasn’t ashamed to show it. And since she could change her hair color just by thinking about it...

She ran her hands through her hair, shaking it out, managing not to sigh—her nanites’ body language overrides would only make it provocative. She was uncomfortably aware that even playing with her hair like this was going to send the wrong signals, but she couldn’t help it. Besides, the hair *did* feel nice to play with.

She pulled off the interface specs, then looked up at the tall, heavysset girl leaning against her office door and smiled faintly. “Hello, Rufia. It’s a long story, but for a couple of million *mu*, you too could get exactly what I’ve got. Or, well, you *could* have, they pulled it off the market ‘til they figure out what made it go wrong with me.”

“Damn, that much?” Rufia’s eyes surveyed Rochelle from head to foot, undressing her along the way. “You look like every penny-unit of it. Damn!” A broad grin split her face. On a face as wide as Rufia’s the overall effect was reminiscent of a good-natured shark with elk ears. Which also described Rufia’s attitude toward her relationships, for that matter. Voracious.

“Believe me, it’s not as fun as you’d think it is,” Rochelle said, flipping her hair out of her face with a hand. “Though it might not be so bad if I could just turn it off.”

“Aw, poor thing,” Rufia said unsympathetically. “If I could look like that all the time, I’d be out enjoying it!”

“It’s not *that* fun. Okay, well, maybe a little. Sometimes. Now that I can turn at least the *worst* bits off. But most of the men I meet are too busy drooling to pay any

attention to what I'm trying to ask them, and half the women hate me on sight. And that's *without* the pheromones."

Rufia blinked. "Pheromones? Ryan didn't say anything about *that*..."

"He wouldn't. Probably a little too embarrassing for him."

"Embarrassing?" Rufia's eyes gleamed. "C'mon, dish! Dish!"

"Well, nothing really *happened*, but—you know, actually, calling them 'pheromones' is kind of a misnomer, though everybody does it anyway. There's really no such thing as 'human pheromones,' at least not for normal humans. Though hucksters have been peddling them for centuries—"

"Can we skip ahead to the 'embarrassing' part?" Rufia asked eagerly.

"I'm getting there. I've been working with the company that made these little beauties, and learned a lot more about them. So anyway, one of the few parts of these super'sculpt nanites I've been able to get to turn off was a sort of specialized pharmaceutical nanofactory that produced libido-enhancing, inhibition-suppressing designer drugs under my skin, and spewed them out in a cloud all around me."

Rufia blinked. "Geez, girl, and here I thought you were sexy enough just like this!"

"It's worse if I get close enough for the nanites to get an accurate read on the other person's body chemistry—especially if I can touch them—so they can do some custom-tailoring to increase the effect. And if I actually *kiss* them...well."

Rufia was beginning to get the picture. "So when you came in here, the first time after you'd crossed..."

"Kaylee had to Fuse Ryan to keep him from going completely ga-ga," Rochelle said. "*Not* my best ever moment."

"Oh! Oh ho!" Rufia threw back her head and laughed fit to shake the building. Rochelle actually thought she saw a trickle of dust from the rafters overhead. "That's... that's just too much!" Rufia said when she could get herself under control.

Rochelle smiled faintly. "It certainly was for him." Which sent Rufia off into still more gales of laughter.

"And you never thought about...y'know...going all the way?" Rufia asked.

"If I'd even *tried*, Kaylee would have torn my throat out," Rochelle said. "And Uncia probably would have helped. She thinks of Kaylee like a big sister." It was a little funny given that Uncia was about twice Kaylee's size.

Rufia chuckled. "Well, that's true."

"Besides, I had some issues of my own," Rochelle said darkly. "One of the 'optional' settings on these nanos was supposedly intended for 'shy' or 'inexperienced' people who needed someone to show them what to do. Someone who wouldn't take no for an answer."

Rufia blinked, working through the implications. "That's just...sick."

"So let me just so much as get in a position where I *might* kiss someone—and my own little internal hooker would take over, and I wouldn't be able to break the program until ciggies in bed the next morning." She shook her head. "Never got to try that one out—thank God. Stayed Fused and isolated from contact until I got the control software back, and those and the pheromones were the only parts I was able to turn off."

"But it is off now, right?" Rufia asked. "You can kiss someone without turning into Mrs. Roboto?"

"Believe me, I check several times a day to make sure, and I tested it under *very*

controlled conditions at the company's research lab."

"Wanna test it again? Just to make sure? I could kiss you now. I mean, it'd be a *sacrifice*, but I'm willing to do these things for my friends." Rufia did her best to look sincere, which was really not very good at all.

Rochelle grinned. "Thanks, but...I think I'm good."

"Aw. Can't blame a gal for trying." Rufia grinned back. "What about the 'pheromones'? You still got 'em, right? You could use 'em on people if you wanna?"

Rochelle blushed a little. "Well...yes."

"You ever...tempted?" Rufia asked. "You see a hot guy, you want his attention all to yourself?"

"First, I'm not quite ready to think about hot guys yet—*or girls*, don't grin like that," Rochelle said. "Second, even if I were...look at me. I get all the guys' and half the *gals*' attention just for walking in the room. I don't *need* pheromones."

"I'd believe it," Rufia said. "*Damn* you're hot, girl."

"I have been tempted a little, though. Not by any of the guys, but by some of the women who insta-hate me. If I let 'em have it for just *three seconds*, they'd be eating out of my hands...but no. Just not worth it."

"So, these pheromones...let's see 'em, then!" Rufia said.

Rochelle blinked. "Sorry?"

"Go on, pheromone me!" Rufia said. "I wanna see what they're like. They couldn't *really* do anything to someone as strong-willed as I am," she added smugly.

Rochelle just stared at her. "Strong-willed? Rufia, you fill out the *gender* blank on application forms with 'Yes, please.'"

"I know what they're *really* asking!" Rufia smirked. "Anyway, girlie, you know I only screw who *I* want to and nobody else."

Rochelle nodded. "Okay. Well...no."

"No?"

"No, I'm not gonna show you my pheromones. All it would do is make you horny as hell, and I'm not ready for that yet so you'd just end up frustrated."

"Whadaya mean *make* me? You know I'm *always* horny as a buck," Rufia said. "And just sitting here *looking* at you is getting me hotter by the minute."

Rochelle shook her head. "Not like *this* would make you horny, you're not. You'd get frustrated and mad, and Yvonne would get mad at me, too, and you'd take it out on Ryan and Kaylee and *they'd* get mad at me...no. I'd rather have you a little horny and annoyed at me than horny as hell and pissed off. Sorry." She grinned. "But when I *am* ready to experiment, you'll be one of the first to know." As Roger, she'd been one of Rufia's long chain of no-commitment either-gender significant-others-for-a-while, and they'd remained good friends and still occasional bedmates.

"So if this stuff is so all-fired powerful, snowgirl, why do we still have governments instead of crowds of lovesick politicians mooning around?" Rufia wondered.

"Well, that's the thing, it's not *really*. When I was researching it at the company, I found it can actually easily be blocked with the same temporary nano dosers you get down at the drugstore whenever you've got an allergy. Whatever they do to scavenge histamines out of the bloodstream catches 'pheromone' drugs, too. Even ancient pharmaceuticals like diphenhydramine can chop the effect in half."

Rufia blinked. "So what you're saying is, people go crazy over you 'cuz they're

actually *allergic* to you?”

“Yeah, it’s almost like having an infectious personality, only not,” Rochelle said. “Also, just about anyone even medium-rank in the government, military, or corporate has permanent self-replicating blockers as a matter of course.”

“Huh. I guess that does kinda cut it down a bit,” Rufia admitted.

Rochelle nodded. “Yeah. Had our buddy Zane walk in on me by accident one day, and he said he never even noticed a thing. At the time I thought it was because the circulation fans were on, but now I guess it’s just he’d had the treatment. He is the mostly-owner of Brubeck Mining and all.”

“Kind of a pity, though.” Rufia grinned. “Not so easy to go out and catch yourself a rich husband.”

“They do still get used in espionage, though,” Rochelle said. “You never wonder why the handsome superspies in the stories get to sleep with anybody they want, of either gender? It’s like that in real life, too.”

“Oh, *now* you’re bullshitting me.” Rufia grinned.

“Well, maybe a little,” Rochelle admitted. “Anyway, you have to be pretty damn rich already to get them.”

“Or pretty lucky, huh?” Rufia asked.

“Or pretty *unlucky*,” Rochelle grumbled. “But like I said, they’re off the market for now, until we get the rest of my little problem straightened up.”

“Aw, you mean I can’t get them anymore? I was gonna save up.”

Rochelle snorted. “Yeah, like *that* would happen.” Rufia’s propensity for living from paycheck to paycheck was legendary in local RIDER circles.

“Hey! I *could* do it. Theoretically,” Rufia insisted.

“Suuuuure you could,” Rochelle said. And even Rufia had to join in the laughter.

“So, I guess there’s no point my asking if you’re doing anything tonight?” Rufia said. “I mean, *damn*, girl, you are *fine*.”

Rochelle smiled faintly. “Thanks, Rufia, but I’m still acclimating to all this. I know it took *you* all of about five minutes—”

“Closer to three, actually,” Rufia said.

“—but I didn’t get into this by choice like you did, and then I had these nanos to deal with. And I *still* have to deal with them, because they’re still stuck in super-sexy overdrive.” She ran her hands through her hair again in frustration, and felt her body language change the movement to a slow, languid lift and drop. “I can’t even *walk* normally unless I really concentrate, otherwise I do a sexy strut whether I mean to or not. It makes people think I’m ‘easy,’ or looking for a good time.”

Rufia nodded, turning more serious. “You may think you’re alone in this, girlie, but I’ve seen the same thing happen to a lot of crossriders. You’ve got it a lot worse than they do, but it’s just different degrees.”

“Yeah? I can’t imagine that many crossriders get sexy-overdrive nanites,” Rochelle said dubiously.

“Even your basic bottom-of-the-line Fuser nanos have *some* ‘sculpt built in, right?”

“Well...yeah. That’s kindergarten stuff. It’s because the gender-reassignment nanos they were developed from did,” Rochelle said.

Rufia nodded. “Right. If you’re gonna change someone that much, might as well de-ugly them a bit while you’re at it. So almost every guy who goes girly isn’t just a

chick, but a *hot* chick. With me?"

"Yeah?" Rochelle said.

"So you end up with a bunch of hot chicks who take one look in the mirror, remember what they guy they used to be would have wanted to do with someone who looked like that, and go all neurotic 'cuz they think guys will only want them for their hot bods." Rufia shrugged. "You've just got more reason to feel that way than most people."

"Aha," Rochelle said evenly. "So how did *you* get over it?"

Rufia grinned her elk-shark grin again. "I'm perfectly okay with only being wanted for my body. Beats not being wanted at all."

Rochelle snorted. "Yeah, that's you."

Rufia reached out and put an arm on Rochelle's shoulder. "So hey, snowgirl. I've said I think you're hot like this, and you turn me on," she said, far quieter than her usual self. "But don't you think for one *moment* that's why I wanna spend the night. I like you 'cuz you're *you*. The sexy is just icing. Tasty icing, but what I'm here for is the cake."

Rochelle looked down for a long moment, then back up at Rufia. "Thanks," she said. "I'm still not ready yet, but...I appreciate that."

"Right!" Rufia said in her more usual louder tones. "So, you know what I recommend as good 'girliness' therapy in general?"

Rochelle had been a party to more than one similar conversation, and thought she had a pretty good idea. "Shopping?"

"Smart girl! C'mon, let's hit the malls! There's a new ensemble out there with your name on it, and probably some crap for me, too."

"So much for 'saving up,'" Rochelle grinned.

"Hey, it's not like I can't save up *next* week!" Rufia insisted cheerfully. "Sides, it's for a good cause."

"The continued solvency of half the clothing stores in Uplift?" Rochelle asked.

"Something like that." Rufia moved her hand from Rochelle's shoulder to her arm, and tugged her out of her seat. "Shopping time's a-wasting! Let's go!"

Rochelle let herself be tugged to her feet. "All right, I'll call Uncia."

"There's the ticket." Rufia poked two fingers into her mouth and gave an eardrum-shattering whistle. "Yvonne! Come, my faithful steed!"

The elk trotted up to the office door, with Uncia the snow leopard behind her. "Come? We haven't even started necking yet."

Rufia grinned, tugging Rochelle through the door. "At's my girl. Hey, you two, Skimmer up. We're goin' *shopping!*"

"Oooh, shopping!" Yvonne squealed in an octave-higher, little-girl voice. Then in her normal register, to Uncia. "You *know* who's going to end up carrying all the bags, right?"

"Oh, hush, you smart-ass," Rufia said with a grin.

"Smart-*elk*," Yvonne corrected. But she unfolded into her skimmer form, as did Uncia.

Before mounting Yvonne, Rufia wandered over to Uncia and gave her skimmer form a quick walk-around. "Damn. I don't think I've ever *seen* a RIDE in this configuration. Closed cockpit on a rig this small?"

"It's just a hardlight canopy," Uncia said. "I can go convertible too. But rich people like their 'splendid isolation.'"

“It was useful for me when I was...you know,” Rochelle said.

“In estrus?” Yvonne contributed helpfully.

“Yeah, let’s go with that,” Rochelle said. “Open up, hon.” Uncia’s canopy vanished and Rochelle climbed inside. Rufia leaned over to get an eyeful of the control panels (and, not coincidentally, Rochelle’s cleavage). “Damn,” she swore again. “This is better gear than Yvonne came with, and she’s ex-military commo specialty.”

“Well, Uncia is a lot newer and pricier,” Rochelle pointed out.

“Yeah, and Yvonne’s got much better *now*,” Rufia said smugly. “But still, damn. You could get a job on any salvage team you wanted with this setup.”

“You offering?” Rochelle asked.

“Well, Ryan might get mad if I tried to hire you away.” Rufia leaned companionably against Uncia, continuing to enjoy her view down Rochelle’s cleavage.

“Oh, didn’t he mention? I’m a full partner now.”

“Oh, really? That’s great! We’ll go out for drinks after we shop. First round’s on me.”

“You do know my nanites will scrub out mickey finns and libido-enhancers, right?” Rochelle grinned.

“I am shocked! Shocked, I tell you!”

“That I could dare think you’d do such a thing?” Rochelle asked, feeding the requisite straight line.

“No, that your protection is so good. I’ll have to try another wicked scheme.” She winked. “Anyway...race ya to the mall?”

“You sure you want to challenge a million-*mu* sports RIDE with army surplus?” Rochelle asked.

“Ooooooh, *bring it!*” Yvonne shot back.

“Oh, it is *on!*” Rufia jeered, vaulting to the saddle.

Rochelle grinned, sealing the cockpit. *:Be sure and lose, but sell it really well.:*

:Was already planning on it,: Uncia replied. *:I like Yvonne. I wouldn’t want to hurt her feelings.:*

Uncia and Yvonne lined up at the garage door. “Beep,” Rufia sang out over comms. “Beep. Beep. BEEEEEEP!” And they were off.

They pulled into the mall parking lot a few minutes later, with Yvonne leading by inches. “Yeah!” Rufia whooped, startling bystanders. “Who’s the elk! *Who’s the elk!*” She gave Yvonne an affectionate pat. “Atta girl.”

“I’ll get you next time, Speed Racer!” Rochelle sneered, shaking a fist in mock anger.

:She really is fast,: Uncia said, impressed. *:I could have beat her here, I think, ‘cuz I’m made for traffic and she’s more of a sprinter. But on a straightaway...I don’t know. She’s really tuned.:* She paused. *:And she knows I let her win, but she’s not mad about it. But says not to tell Rufia.:*

Rochelle chuckled. “Good enough.” She climbed out of the cockpit, and Uncia folded back up into a snow leopard. Then Rufia dismounted and Yvonne changed back too.

“Now we hit the stores,” Rufia said. “C’mon, I know some great places for someone your size.”

Uplift Plaza Mall was a typical RIDER mall. Tourists from other worlds were often

perplexed by its extremely wide aisles and larger-than-usual doors. But so many people shopped with their RIDEs at their sides, or even Fused into their persons, that after a few too many minotaur-in-china-shop accidents most businesses had bowed to the inevitable and rebuilt or remodeled to suit the robotic animal companions.

Uncia and Yvonne were far from the only RIDEs following their humans. Mechabeasts of all shapes and sizes, furred or bare metal, walked in both directions with their people—some laden with physical or hardlight saddlebags or shopping baskets carrying bags and packages, others hitched to wagons or trailers. The *other* reason businesses had been so willing to remodel to suit RIDEs was that they made it possible, and hence tempting, to buy so much more at once than a human could carry home by himself alone. Even people who didn't have RIDE partners were able to take advantage—unaccompanied RIDEs sat just outside or just inside the mall entrances under placards advertising their services for rent as combination guides, running total expenditure calculators, and beasts of burden.

It was a common pattern as Rochelle and Rufia walked through the mall that the humans would slow down and turn their heads to stare at Rochelle as they passed. This would often lead to the RIDE right behind them, who hadn't noticed anything out of the ordinary, bumping into them. In a couple of cases, hapless shoppers got their knees knocked right out from under them and went sprawling. This would then lead to the people behind those shoppers slowing down—and then noticing Rochelle and repeating the pattern.

After the third shopper knockdown, Rufia glanced over at Rochelle and said, "Huh."

"What is it?" Rochelle asked, trying to look completely innocent of the traffic snarls forming up all around her.

"This is kinda new for me," Rufia said. "I'm used to being the one who's the center of attention wherever I go. Let's be honest, I do kinda stand out in a crowd. But look at this." She waved a hand around illustratively. "It's like I'm not even here. Don't think I've ever seen anything quite like it."

"Oh. Sorry," Rochelle said. "I can't exactly turn it off."

Rufia grinned. "Actually, I kinda like it. It's nice to go places and not get stared at sometimes."

"Yeah, I'm starting to see how it would be," Rochelle said lightly.

Rufia glanced at her again, and blushed. "Oh, I'm sorry snowgirl, I kinda didn't think that through there."

"No, it's okay," Rochelle said. "Now that it's not total pheromone mind control, I'm starting to find some of the attention a little flattering." She grinned. "I'm just glad you *are* here, so they won't all try to *hit* on me. Come along, big gal!" She reached out and took Rufia's arm in her own, and Rufia blushed a little harder.

They finally got to Rufia's store of choice, a little dress shop called "Uplifting Fashions". Racks with dresses of different colors lined the wall. "Looks like long skirts are in this year," Rufia said. "Let's see what looks good on you." She dived right into the racks, coming up with a different dress in each hand. "Let's see, you'll want to try this one...and that one...and maybe that one..." She laid each one across Yvonne's back as she took it off the rack. The elk rolled her eyes and shot Rochelle a long-suffering look.

"I have to admit, some of those look like they'll go pretty well with my eyes."

Rufia nodded. "And your hair."

“Oh, I can change my hair,” Rochelle said offhandedly.

Rufia blinked. “What?”

“Look.” Rochelle ran a hand through her hair, and was a flaming redhead.

Rufia’s eyes widened. “Ooooooh! Then you’ll want this one for when you’re a redhead...and this one for brunette...hey, do you think you can change your eye color, too?”

“I don’t know, I’ve never tried.” Rochelle thought about it, and her eyes changed from hazel to green, then blue, then brown.”

Rufia blinked again. “That’s great...but now you can just change to suit anything in the whole damned store. How’m I ever going to pick anything out for you now?”

“Maybe, I dunno, just go with stuff you like the style of?” Rochelle suggested. “Really, I don’t know why you’re making such a fuss. I never see *you* in anything but coveralls and jeans.”

“Well, there’s a simple reason for that, girlie,” Rufia said. “Can you even imagine *me* in a frilly dress?” She shook her head. “I don’t think I could pull something like that off.” She swept Rochelle into a brief one-armed hug. “But mah *girls*, that’s something else. Gotta have you looking your best! And with these dresses, you’re gonna go from a knockout to a *lethal weapon*.”

“Ah. Um...thanks,” Rochelle said. She picked up the dresses, nodded, and headed toward the checkout.

“Hey, where you going?” Rufia asked. “Aren’t you even gonna try them on?”

“Why?” Rochelle asked, puzzled. “There isn’t really any point. I already know they’ll fit me—the nanites will custom-tailor them. And since they’ll do that to anything I try on, I’ll have to buy it because it can’t go back on the shelf.”

“So? That’s not the point of trying crap on when you shop,” Rufia said. “You do it so your friends can see what you look like in them without having to wait for you to get around to wearing them. So g’wan, try one. I wanna see you.” Rufia pushed Rochelle toward a fitting room. “I’ll wait.”

“Uh-huh.” Rochelle glanced at Yvonne. “So how many fiber-optic bugs *does* she have in the fitting room around here, anyway?”

“None,” Yvonne said. “They sweep regularly. Started right after we started bringing people here to shop, for some reason.”

“I’m innocent, I tell you!” Rufia said. “I was *framed!*”

Rochelle grinned. “Sure you are. Pure as the driven snow.” She stepped toward the fitting booth.

:You know, Yvonne can extend fiber-optic camera probes, and she’s standing awfully close to the fitting room,: Uncia pointed out. *:And you know what it looks like when you take clothes off, especially if you think someone’s watching.:*

Rochelle sighed. She turned to the elk RIDE and lowered her voice for the RIDE’s hearing alone. “Yvonne, dear?”

“Elk, actually,” the RIDE said primly. “But it’s a common mistake.”

“I know I can’t stop you from taping your little peepshow,” Rochelle said. “And I’m okay with that. If I really objected to Rufia seeing anything, I’d say so and she’d respect that, and I know you would too. I’d just like you to think about one little thing.”

Yvonne cocked her head. “Which is?”

“If you show Rufia in real-time what you’re going to record from that dressing room, she’ll probably end up passed out on the floor, bleeding from both nostrils. I just

want you to think about who it is that's going to end up carrying her from store to store if that happens.”

Yvonne stared at her. “Are you really *that* good? Come on!”

“It’s not me, it’s the nanites. They make me do everything in the most suggestive way possible. Including little things like *taking off all my clothes*.” She shrugged. “Hold off this one time and then make up your own mind, okay?”

Yvonne nodded reluctantly. “All right.”

Rochelle leaned closer. “Also, if any of it ever ends up on the 'net without my *express permission*, you're going to be going bare-metal for the next little while, because *I'll have your hide nailed up on my wall*,” she said, cold steel underlying her voice.

Yvonne actually *gulped*, a realistic lump bobbing in her hardlight-furred throat. “Understood.”

“Good.” She took the dress into the dressing room with her, closed the door, and began to strip.

The first few times she’d undressed after the change, when she’d chanced to view herself in a mirror Rochelle had been amazed. She couldn’t have said exactly how the nanites did it. She didn’t feel like she was being puppeteered or forced to move in ways unnatural to her. It simply felt like the most natural way to move was the way that produced the most effect. She could undress quickly if she forced herself, or could take them off unerotically if she really concentrated (though it gave her a headache), but taking her clothes off at “normal” speed seemed to take five minutes, uncovering as little as she possibly could at a time. The effect was most pronounced if someone else was in the room with her, no matter what their gender was.

So Rochelle oh-so-slowly stripped down to her bra and panties, and played with those for a moment before languidly pulling a pastel yellow dress on—tossing her head or running her hands through her hair every so often because it just *felt* right to do so. There was a little twinkle below one of the door hinges that she had little doubt was Yvonne’s fiber-optic camera, and her body’s new instincts made sure to give it as good a show as they could. Finally, the dress slid completely on, then shrank and tightened in a way that emphasized her every curve, as well as her cleavage. When she finished, she darkened her hair so that the light dress would set it off, then stepped out.

She emerged to a whispered argument between Rufia and Yvonne. “—show you *later!*” Yvonne was saying. “Trust me. You do *not* need the distraction right now.” She glanced back at Rochelle. One of her nostrils seemed to have a trickle of hardlight blood running out of it. “All right, you win,” she said.

Rufia grumbled, but the argument seemed to be driven from her head at the sight of Rochelle. She grinned. “Damn, girl, you weren’t kidding about those nanites. That dress wouldn’t ever have looked that way on anybody else.”

“They had a lot to work with.” She regarded herself in a full-length mirror, turning slightly to examine the effect, and tossed her head to resettle her hair. Half the other women in the store glowered, and the other half (including Rufia) stared appreciatively and perhaps drooled a little. Rochelle tried not to notice. “You really do have a good eye for this,” she said. “Thanks for the advice.”

“Thanks for taking it. I really like the results,” Rufia said. She grinned. “Now go on, try the next one before I get too tempted to tear that one off of you right here and now.”

Rochelle meant to laugh, but it came out as a sexy little giggle. “Oh, we’d better

not have that.” She patted Yvonne on the shoulder as she went back into the changing room to get the next dress. “Hope you’re getting my good side.”

After trying on three more dresses and going through three changes of hair and one change of eye color, Rufia was finally ready to let Rochelle check out. The cashier looked a little oddly at some of the altered dresses, but she scanned their price codes all the same with no comment. Then Rufia insisted she go back into the changing room one more time and change into one of the outfits, a fairly provocative red number with a long skirt that the nanites had slit to her knee. “If you’ve got it, girlie, you oughtta flaunt it...and damn have you ever got it.”

“You just want to be seen with ‘the lady in red,’” Rochelle smirked, but she didn’t actually have any serious objections to the idea. This was actually going to be the first time she’d worn any specifically feminine clothing—not counting the modifications the nanites made to her old male wardrobe when she put it on. And watching herself move in the mirror, she found that she actually *was* starting to like the way she looked—even with the artificial sex appeal.

She wondered why that was. Was it some sort of side effect of the nanites, making her feel better about her body? A natural hormonal adjustment altering the way she thought? Rufia’s unsophisticated admiration subconsciously pushing her to think of herself as a hot woman rather than a crossriding ex-guy? She was actually starting to wonder what it would be like to sleep with Rufia now.

As she walked back to the store entrance, between one step and the next she stumbled and nearly fell, then caught herself. “What the hell?!” She looked down at her feet, then lifted one for inspection. “Dammit! My perfectly flat sandals just spontaneously grew high heels!” She walked a few faltering steps in them, but before she’d gotten halfway to the door was walking as if she’d been born to them.

Rufia wolf-whistled. “*Damn*, girlie, you’re looking hotter than ever. Are you *sure* you’re not busy tonight?” There was almost a *wheedling* note hidden behind the jocularly.

Rochelle frowned. She didn’t want to be pushed into anything, but...she didn’t want to hurt her friend’s feelings, either. And it wasn’t as if they’d never done anything before. Anyway, it was hard to get too annoyed with Rufia for being, well, Rufia. She’d always been that way, even back when they’d first met right after Rochelle-as-Roger had helped Ryan solve an especially pesky problem with Kaylee’s bootloader and joined the garage staff as a semi-freelancer.

Roger hadn’t been anything special in the looks department back then, but Rufia had cheerfully leered at him with the same equal opportunity lecherousness she offered to anyone except Ryan, whether friend or complete stranger. Roger hadn’t been sure how to respond, not wanting to offend Ryan—it was hard to be sure whether the two of them had anything going on or not. He was still pretty nervous about his position at the garage, and didn’t want to do anything to jeopardize it. But finally Ryan had noticed his awkwardness around Rufia and set him straight.

“Really, I don’t care what you and Rufia do, as long as it doesn’t interfere with your work,” Ryan said. “She’s my first, best friend, but it’s just platonic. But a couple of things you should know about her.”

“What’re those?” Roger had asked.

“First off, she doesn’t do commitments. She’ll probably tell you that her own self, but you should know it going in. If she really likes you, she might get with you again

from time to time, but don't get too attached. She gets bored easily, so she's always trying new things."

"Huh." Roger shrugged. "Okay. I can live with that. I don't exactly feel ready for commitment myself."

"The other thing is...you know she's a crossrider, right?" Ryan asked curiously.

"Well, I sorta figured, with that body type." Although the Fuser nanites were a lot more effective than the old pre-nanite surgical/hormone therapy at rebuilding transgender body types to the proportions of the new gender, certain extremes of build in either direction seemed to make them essentially redo the face and figure, and then throw up their hands and give up on the rest in disgust. Rufia had pretty obviously been built like a concrete wall back when she'd been "Rufus." Now, she was obviously feminine—but still over two meters tall, with the proportions to match. "So?"

Ryan blinked at that, then shook his head. "I keep forgetting. You were born here."

"Well, yeah." Thirty-five years had been plenty of time for the younger generations of Zharusians to grow up considering gender-swapping to be "normal". After all, it had always just been "the way things were" from before they were even born. Even if Roger didn't want to crossride himself, that was largely just a matter of preference. People were *people* first and a gender second.

Although immigrants like Ryan were sometimes put off by the idea, a lot of native-born Zharusians didn't care what gender their partners had been born as, so much as what they were *now*. (And many of those would also adjust their preferences as necessary on a person-by-person basis.) And while Rufia wasn't what you might call conventionally attractive, Roger was actually drawn more to her boisterous personality. She was almost always cheerful, no matter what befell. And she didn't just let things *happen* to her; she grabbed life by the throat and held on with both hands. That attitude was infectious, in a good way.

Ryan shrugged. "Anyway, have fun. And don't get jealous if you see her with someone else, she hates that." He grinned. "But for some reason it isn't really a problem with most of her lovers. She's the sort of person that they all like to get together and talk about over drinks. Sometimes with her at the same table putting away the most drinks of any of them."

Roger laughed. "I'll look forward to joining the club, then." And so the next time Rufia took a pass at him, he caught the pass and went for a touchdown. That had been a fun night...

Rochelle came back to the present as she walked alongside Rufia through the mall, with a shopping-bag-laden Uncia to her right, and Yvonne to Rufia's left. Somehow they'd ended up hand in hand. She considered dropping it, but after a moment's thought found she didn't really mind that much. She flashed Rufia a smile, and was rewarded by a blush and a quick look away. *Heh. I don't know what she was thinking just now, but I'll bet it was dirty.*

She chuckled. Maybe she was closer to ready than she'd originally thought. But she didn't need to rush into anything. After all, the day was still young, and there were plenty of stores left in the mall.

Rochelle got into the spirit of the shopping for the next few stores, She discovered that she could make things easier by hanging her purse or a shopping bag from her

thick, fluffy tail to keep her hands free. (And with a full-sized snow leopard keeping an eye on things, it didn't seem likely that anyone would try to snatch it.)

Nonetheless, she eventually started to get tired of clothes shopping. It didn't help that she could no longer do anything with her hair. If she tried to put it up in one of those elaborately-twisted shampoo-commercial 'dos, it simply came loose and cascaded back down in slow motion the moment she let it go. Her current outfit was just too girly, she supposed. The hair didn't want to be confined.

"I think I've got enough clothes now," Rochelle said. "Let's do something different."

"Aw, c'mon, we still have several more shops to go!" Rufia said.

"I think I'm just about out of snow leopard, I'm afraid." Rochelle nodded to Uncia, who had by now completely disappeared under a heap of plastic shopping bags stuffed into hardlight panniers, with still more piled on top of the bags stuffed into the panniers and held on with the same inertial dampers she would normally use in skimmer mode to keep her pilot in place at high speeds, and even hanging from her tail. The overall effect was of a giant pile of plastic bags with a muzzle poking out at one end and a bit of a tail at the other.

"Oh. Well, that's all right then," Rufia said. "What you want to do now? Go get that drink maybe?"

"There's just one place I'd like to hit first." She pointed across the hall to "Paks 5th Ave," a high-end RIDEpak and component store.

"Whoa!" Rufia said. "That's a bit out of my budget."

"Yeah, well, mine too, but it's still kind of fun to window-shop," Rochelle said.

"I've got a lot of that stuff in me already," Uncia pointed out.

"Well aren't *you* special," Yvonne said crossly. She didn't have nearly as many shopping bags on her as Uncia did, but she had a few and didn't seem to think they were terribly dignified. "*Some* of us have to get by on commodity parts."

"Aw, don't be that way." Uncia gave Yvonne a slurp on the cheek, then padded on after Rochelle. Yvonne blinked at her for a moment, then followed.

A few moments later, they were all browsing displays in the store. Rochelle looked at a few things, but after a few moments she was more interested in watching Uncia—who was carefully watching to see what Yvonne was looking at. The elk was most interested in a particular high-intensity comm laser, which was better than anything Rufia had been able to put in her yet—but was also well out of Rufia's price range even if she had been able to save her money.

Then, just as everyone was moving on out of the store, out of the corner of her eye Rochelle saw Uncia speaking to the person behind the counter. He checked his register, then went to the counter where the comm laser had been. A moment later, he was back with a small wrapped package, that Uncia took into her mouth and swallowed down into internal storage.

:Raiding the maintenance fund, are we?: Rochelle sent to Uncia with a chuckle.

:She looked so sad. Besides, Nextus RIDEworks shares are up today.:

Rochelle chuckled. *:I knew it was a mistake introducing you to the stock market.:*

Their mall shopping finished for the moment, they headed out to the parking lot where, by shifting slowly and very carefully, Uncia was able to convert into her skimmer form and pull all the bags inside to stow behind the passenger seat. Yvonne managed a

similar feat, shifting her shopping into her many storage panniers, though she had an easier time as Rufia hadn't bought as much.

"So...drinks?" Rufia asked.

"Give me a bit to drop all this stuff off at home, and sure," Rochelle said, sliding into the seat.

Rufia nodded. "Okay, Yvonne and I should do the same. See ya in thirty?" She beamed an address to Uncia's on-board navigation system.

Rochelle glanced at it. "You're on." The two skimmer bikes revved up and headed off in different directions.

As they pulled up to the "Cheers" bar half an hour later, Uncia groaned.

"What is it?" Rochelle asked.

"This is the first place I went *that* night, when I started drinking."

"Well, maybe they won't remember you," Rochelle said. "You only had, what, a couple of beers here? You didn't go crazy 'til the next one."

"Yeah, I guess," Uncia said. "It's still kind of embarrassing."

"C'mon, let's go. Rufia's waiting for us inside." Rochelle triggered the Fuse, and a moment later walked into the bar in snow leopard skin.

Rufia was sitting at the bar Fused with Yvonne, and there were big mugs of dark beer in front of her and the vacant seat next to her. She looked up at Rochelle's entrance, and patted the stool. "Hey, c'mon over!"

Rochelle sauntered across the bar, her body language combined with the figure Uncia gave her drawing attention from half its patrons even with her features hidden.

"Oh, hello again," the doe bartender said. "Back for more, huh?"

"Couldn't stay away," Rochelle said, grinning. In the back of her mind, Uncia groaned again.

"Oh, I didn't know you came here before," Rufia said. "Been here often?" She waved to the bartender. "Hey, Diane. Gimme a liter of that new Double IPA you've got in."

"Just the once," Rochelle said. "I wasn't really paying much attention at the time." She took up the muzzle cup and poured it down through Uncia's mouth and into hers. It took a little practice to get right.

"Congratulations on going full partners with Ryan there," Rufia said, clapping Rochelle on the back and almost causing her to spill her drink. "How'd that happen? Last I knew, you didn't have the cash to put in."

"It's the nanites," Rochelle explained, putting the mug down. "Settlement money I got from Nextus Nano over them going all crazy and stuff. Plowed a bunch of it into the partnership fund. Figured it was about time I stopped leeching and did my part."

"I have to admit, I'm still kinda surprised you went first," Rufia said. "Is it true what Ryan said, that you got genderjacked by your RIDE?"

Rochelle felt Uncia whimper a little in the back of her mind. "Yeah. But I don't blame her for it. She wasn't in her right mind at the time."

Rufia nodded. "That sort of thing happens sometimes. It's just one of those things."

"Like I said, I'm still working out how to deal with it. It's just..." Rochelle waved with the hand that wasn't holding the drink. "You know, I grew up with this whole thing going on. I've had uncles who turned into aunts, and vice versa, and a few cousins who

flipped—and one who even flipped back three years later. It was ‘normal’ for other people to do this. Just like it was normal for...I dunno...other people to get a tattoo or a piercing. Something that happens, but not something *I* ever planned to do.” She felt Uncia whimper more, and tried to send reassuring thoughts her way.

“And yet, here you are,” Rufia said.

Rochelle sipped her beer. “Yeah,” she said. “And yeah, I’m going to be this way for at least three more years. But you know, I can honestly say that I’ve already started giving serious thought to not switching back.” Uncia’s whimpering abruptly stopped, and Rochelle felt the snow leopardess listening with her full attention.

“Yeah? I made that decision about five minutes after I crossed,” Rufia said. “Said to myself, ‘Girl, you’ve got a good thing going on here, with this great new bod and this awesome elk. Why change it?’”

“Funny thing is, that’s kind of the same conclusion I’m reaching,” Rochelle said. “Uncia and I are getting along well—sorry to be talking about you as if you’re not here, Un-hon, but we are, right?”

Uncia found her voice, speaking through Rochelle’s lips. “Uh, sure!”

“I suppose I always knew it *could* happen to me,” Rochelle said. “I mean, genderjacking is one of the things those lunatic RIDE separatists do sometimes to get their point across. Or I could buy the wrong gender of RIDE by accident like Ryan did, but not be smart enough to make my first Fuse in Passive. Or any of a number of things could have happened. So in a way I was sort of half-prepared for it already when one of them did.”

“I guess I can see that,” Rufia said.

“So for me it’s really not *that* big of a deal. The nanites kind of freaked me out, but the rest of it...I mean, just look at this gorgeous snow leopardess I have. Or who has me.” Uncia purred at the praise. “She’s a nice person, she’s very pretty, and she’s got some of the best onboard computer equipment money can buy. Where am I going to find someone else like her if I go guy again?”

“That’s *just* how it is with me and Vonnice,” Rufia said. “I knew from the first time I met her she was the gal for me. Just the equipment I needed, great personality...not much of a sense of humor, but you can’t have everything.”

Yvonne took control of Rufia’s tongue long enough to blow a raspberry. “See what I mean?” Rufia said, but she was grinning with Yvonne’s elk face. “She’s not just some piece of equipment, she’s my friend and partner, and I’ll *never* give her up.” She took a long pull at her beer as if to hide embarrassment over what she’d just said. For a wonder, Yvonne kept silent as well.

“I’ve only known Un-hon for a short time, but I’m more and more feeling the same.” Rochelle took a drink of her own beer. “So, I guess for me this is all about just easing into things. Learning how to be girly for real, instead of just imagining it.”

“How’s that working out for you so far?” Uncia asked.

“I think I’ve eased myself in a few more notches this afternoon,” Rochelle said. “It’s starting to feel more natural to wear dresses and walk in high heels—though to be fair, at least part of that is due to the nanites futzing with my body language. Still, it’s working. I’m getting calibrated.” She grinned.

“Want to maybe ‘calibrate’ a little further, tonight?” Rufia suggested.

Rochelle cocked her head, considering. “Maybe. I’d have said no this morning, but...we seem to be moving right along, don’t we? I guess we’ll see.”

They stayed at the bar long enough to have a couple more beers each, taking their time and talking about other things. Rufia had a really funny story to tell about a group of Proximan tourists who'd spurned her guide services on leaving the most recent starliner, and had then thought it might be fun to buy avian RIDEs for sight-seeing over the course of their five-month vacation until the next liner came. No one had adequately informed them of the extreme consequences of Fusing to RIDEs so physiologically different from humans.

"When they found out they couldn't change back for three years, *man* they were pissed!" Rufia grinned, gesticulating wildly with her mug but somehow managing not to slop any over onto the bar. "I told 'em when they got off the ship, if they didn't have someone to babysit 'em they'd get in trouble."

"What did they do?" Rochelle asked.

"What could they do? They couldn't go home like that. Even if they'd been willing to, Customs wouldn't have let 'em. Evidence of sekrit Zharusian technology sort of thing. So they cashed in their return tickets for seed money and started an aerial prospecting and recon biz with a couple locals who could show 'em the local ropes. I hooked 'em up, of course. Got a nice little headhunting commission—"

"Which she immediately spent *her* half of on beer," Yvonne put in.

"—and everyone lived happily ever after," Rufia said. "Even those bird-brained tourists, when they stop and think about it. They'll be on vacation a leeeetle bit longer than they meant to, but won't they have a hell of a story to tell in one of them there Proxima bars when they finally can change back and go home? If they don't decide to stay permanently, anyway."

Rochelle chuckled. "Ah, the dangers of the wild and wooly planet of Zharus. Come for five months, stay for three years."

"You said it, sistah." Rufia raised her mug. "Here's to the dangers of the unknown, and the money you can make by making it more knowable."

After they'd had enough beers, Rufia proposed a visit to the local Fuser-friendly PubDom CinePlex. The Steaders releasing all that 20th- and 21st-century media had been a godsend for movie theater operators, since it was all in the public domain by now. This meant that any theater owner could show any old movies or TV he wanted, draw a huge crowd, and not have to pay anyone for the privilege. Modern filmmakers still existed, but the market for their stuff was smaller, at least at the moment.

Even though in virtual space it was possible to make screens as big as anyone could want, or even expand movies into whole virtual worlds you could walk among and watch unfold from within, there was still something special, something *visceral*, about about the experience of getting together in a darkened room with dozens of complete strangers to watch a 2D picture thrown up on screen in the old projected-light way.

And so the four of them took seats in the Fuser section (which offered greater separation between seats and a higher slope to its stadium seating than the "naked" seats) to watch a screening of the original *Tron*. It was fashionable among some to laugh at the primitive CGI and silliness of the "sentient computer programs from the 1980s" plot, but Rochelle had always loved the simple innocence of the movie, the naive assumption that a virtual world could be made a safe and happy place. It was an assumption largely missing from the sequels made so much later, in a different era—and while Rochelle still liked those movies, too, she couldn't help but feel something had

been lost.

And this was Uncia's first time to see *Tron* herself. Thanks to the surface-thought telepathy between Fused partners, Rochelle discovered she was able to "see it anew through someone else's eyes" in a literal sense—experiencing Uncia's bemusement at the silliness of the concept gradually transmute to full immersion in the story. Truly, this was one of the best things about watching movies while Fused.

Of course, some people had other opinions on that. "You know what the best thing is about watching a movie while Fused?" Rufia opined during a break in the action. "No leaving your seat to run to the restroom. Ahhhhhhh."

"I think that's way, *way* TMI, Rufe," Rochelle said.

"You think *that* was TMI?" Yvonne spoke up. "*I'm* the one who has to drink her pee."

"Ewww!" Rochelle groaned, and was roundly shushed by all the moviegoers around her.

After the film let out, just as the sun was starting to go down, Rochelle and Rufia had dinner at a small pizzeria near the theater. Rufia ordered an extra-large veggie-lover's delight, and stared in astonishment when Rochelle ordered an extra-large-with-everything-plus-double-anchovies. "You really gonna eat all that?" she asked.

"Uh-huh!" Rochelle said, practically inhaling her first slice. "I can't turn these nanites off, and they use up a *lot* of energy. And they draw it from my metabolism. So I have to keep my metabolism topped off." And not only did she eat the entire thing, she finished the last piece while Rufia still had two left.

After dinner, they de-Fused and wandered around a shop district on the edge of the park near Rochelle's house, their RIDEs at their side. This was just outside the miners' entertainment district, so the merchandise was a bit more upscale. It was pleasant to window-shop from store to store without any real urge to go in and buy something.

Rochelle was conscious of Rufia nearby as a strong, reassuring presence. It felt so different from those times when Roger had been out with her. Then *he'd* been the stronger one—or at least had *felt* like he had, because he was the male one. (Though, thinking about it, Rufia could probably have roundly kicked his ass *then*, too.) She wondered if she should be worried about these changing perceptions.

For all that she had been so blithe about the adaptation process earlier that afternoon, Rochelle was still a little nervous about the changes. *Some* differences in perception and behavior were only natural, she told herself. After all, she had a different endocrine system, different hormones, even different internal organs. And the mind *was* the plaything of the body.

But were the changes good? Were they bad? She wasn't really sure if she could tell. More and more, she was leaning toward the position that the changes simply *were*. Just another thing to get through and deal with so she could find out who she was *now*. It was an adventure, and she'd always felt that you should take the adventure fate sent you. This was hardly an exception.

And so, as she felt Rufia come up behind her and put an arm over her shoulder, Rochelle reflected that perhaps she *was* ready for the next step in that adventure. So she let herself lean a little on Rufia's shoulder and smile up at her. And when Rufia naturally tilted her head down just so for a kiss, Rochelle didn't pull away but lifted hers to meet

it.

She'd kissed Rufia before, of course, as Roger. In the back of her mind she was curious, in her analytical sort of way, whether there would be a difference. She *thought* there was, but she wasn't quite sure. Maybe the taste was different. (Didn't she remember reading that men and women had different arrangements of taste buds?) Or were her memories of the male kiss trustworthy? It had been a while.

Regardless of whether it was different or not, it was certainly a pleasant kiss. When it was over, Rochelle smiled up at Rufia, face flushed. It was a little hard to tell in the dimmer evening light, but she thought Rufia might be blushing a little as well.

"Damn, girl, you're a better kisser than Roger ever was," Rufia said after a moment.

Rochelle smiled faintly. "It might be the nanites...at least a little," Rochelle said. "I still have the sex behavioral stuff firmly locked away, but there's a little overlap between sexy body language and kissing..."

"Maybe we'd better double check that," Rufia said, leaning in for another, even longer kiss. After this one was over, she said, "Nah, it's not the nanites—it's you."

"How can you be sure?" Rochelle asked.

"Female intuition," Rufia said.

"Do Fuser nanites include that, too?" Rochelle wondered.

"Nah, it just sort of seeps in afterward, over time," Rufia said.

"So you've got more of it because you've had more time for it to seep?" Rochelle asked.

"That's the idea," Rufia said, with a little smirk. "And y'know, right now that intuition of mine is telling me your place is just a few blocks away. Y'know, if you wanna, I mean. I'd offer mine, but the cleaning lady hasn't been by yet this month."

Having seen Rufia's place when she'd been Roger, Rochelle doubted very much that a cleaning lady had been to it during *any* month since Rufia had moved in. If she had, she would probably have fled screaming in terror. Excessive tidiness was not one of Rufia's cardinal virtues. She sometimes wondered how Ryan had managed to be her roommate, back when she'd been Rufus, for so long.

Rochelle grinned at Rufia, considering the offer. It was so hard to tell—did the impulse to say no stem from *really* not feeling ready, or from not feeling like she "should" feel ready this soon? "Well...let's drift that way and see how I feel when we get there," she temporized. "After all, it's such a nice evening for a walk through the park." She offered Rufia her arm, Rufia took it, and they strolled. Their RIDEs tagged along a discreet distance behind.

"Man, I still can't get over how nice these parks are," Rufia said as they walked through it.

"You didn't have them back on earth?" Rochelle asked.

"We did, but...not like this," Rufia said. "Oh, they were all nice and green and well-trimmed and stuff, but they were also full of cyber-gang-bangers, just like everywhere else on the planet. Not safe to walk in the evenings like this. Part of why me'n Ryan left. Here...it's much nicer." She pulled Rochelle a little closer. "Everything's nicer. Including the company."

"I guess those cyber types couldn't find the cash to get out this far, huh?" Rochelle said.

“Cyber-arbitrage being what it is, it wouldn’ta been a problem if they’d really *wanted* to. They coulda sold some metal when they landed and been all set. No, it’s more like it didn’t *appeal* to ‘em,” Rufia replied. “Take one of those rats outta their nest and they’d be totally lost. Good riddance to ‘em.”

“Mmm.” Rochelle half-closed her eyes, enjoying the warmth of her companion’s shoulders. She couldn’t ever have imagined doing this as Roger. It was as if the new body brought along its own new set of behavioral imperatives. Or maybe it was the nanos doing this to her. She’d have to do some more research...later. Right now, she was enjoying herself far too much to worry.

As they approached a particular spot on the path through the forest, Rochelle giggled and suddenly stopped. “This...*this* is right where it happened,” she said.

“‘It’?” Rufia asked.

“This is the last ever place where I was a guy,” Rochelle said. “Here is where a ferocious metal snow leopard stepped out of the woods and growled, ‘MINE!’” Rochelle giggled again. “Then she glomped onto me, and I haven’t been the same since.” Over her link with her Fuse partner, she vaguely sensed Uncia wishing the ground would open up and swallow her, and she suspected Yvonne was getting in some not-so-gentle ribbing over the sideband frequencies. She sent back a wave of reassurance, which Uncia acknowledged gratefully.

Rufia grinned. “No, you’ve been *better* since.” She looked around. “It is a lovely spot for an ambush, isn’t it?” Then she turned to face Rochelle, growled, “*Mine!*” and ambushed Rochelle with a kiss. Rochelle giggled even more and kissed back.

They finally made it to the end of the woodland trail that led out of the park into the neighborhood Rochelle called home. Her house was just another block further on—as was the choice it represented. Rochelle felt her pulse quickening with the thought of it. What *was* she going to decide?

Apparently Rufia had picked up on her nervousness. She leaned down and whispered in Rochelle’s ear, “No pressure now, girlie. You wanna just thank me for a fun evening and say goodnight at the door, I’m cool with that.”

Rochelle smiled up at her. “You’ll know as soon as I do.” But Rufia’s reminder helped a lot. She felt the pressure of the choice lifting. Really, when you got right down to it, it wasn’t as if it would even be her first time sleeping with Rufia if she *did* invite her in. Just her first time as a woman.

At last they reached Rochelle’s abode—a cozy little yellow brick French Provencal two-bedroom home in a residential neighborhood. Rochelle had Uncia send the unlock code to the front door as they came up the walk, but she still pretended to fumble with a key at the door. Some things were, after all, traditional. But she doubted Rufia was fooled.

This was the point of decision, after all. This was where she had to choose whether to send Rufia home and go to bed alone, or to invite her in with all that entailed. But then, as she turned to look at Rufia again, she realized she’d already made her decision some time ago, after all. So she smiled sunnily at the elk-girl and said, “Well, you might as well come in. I’ll make some coffee.”

Rufia looked at her for a long moment, but didn’t ask if she was sure. She just grinned that elk-shark grin of hers. “Well, girlie, guess we don’t mind if we do.” She and Yvonne followed Rochelle and Uncia into the house.

As Rochelle headed into the kitchen, Rufia took a seat on the overstuffed living

room sofa. Uncia, as graceful a host as Rochelle, plopped down on the floor next to her padded RIDE bed and nodded Yvonne onto it. The elk accepted, without any of her trademark sarcasm for a change.

“I’m just going to put the coffee on to perk, then go slip into something more comfortable!” Rochelle called out from the kitchen, ducking out the back exit to her bedroom.

“I’ll be here!” Rufia called unnecessarily after her, pulling out a small tablet and checking her email while she waited.

Rochelle skinned out of the dress and hung it in her closet—thanks to her nanites, it hadn’t picked up any sweat or dirt, and was perfectly clean to wear again another time. Then she considered what to wear now. A provocative nightgown or even a kimono seemed far too blatant. She decided to go with sweats instead. She wore them often enough around the house anyway that it wouldn’t feel too out of the ordinary.

As she pulled them on, she noticed her heart was still beating faster than usual—but this time it seemed to be in excitement, rather than panic. Well, that was an improvement, at least. It was almost enough to make up for the annoyance of the sweats shrinking down to a super-snug fit as she pulled them on. Stupid nanites, not understanding the whole point of *loose* sweats. She sighed, considering the sleek body and more-than-healthy amount of cleavage the modified clothing showed off. Well, at least it would keep Rufia’s attention.

Rochelle slipped back into the kitchen just in time for the coffee to be ready, and she poured it into two mugs, adding lots of sugar to Rufia’s. She took them into the living room and passed the sweetened one over before taking a seat on the sofa right next to her.

Rufia sipped the coffee. “Mmm!” she said appreciatively. “This never saw the inside of a fabber.”

“Well, of course,” Rochelle said. “Hello, programmer here! As much coffee as I go through, why would I settle for anything less than the real stuff? Percolators are cheap. I keep one at work, too.”

“Well, that’s true enough.” Rufia reached over to put her non-mug-holding hand around Rochelle and pull her closer. Uncia thoughtfully dimmed the lights a little.

Rochelle grinned, putting her own empty mug aside, and snuggled into Rufia’s shoulder. Rufia smiled down at her. “Damn,” she murmured. “I’d never have thought *you’d* end up this way, ‘Roger.’ I had, I’d have been teasing *you* even more the last few years than I did Ryan about when *you* were gonna cross. You’re just so *different* now.”

“I hope it’s a good ‘different,’” Rochelle said.

“Oh, the best.” Rufia grinned. “Does it even bug you any? Seems like half the crossriders I know spend more time worrying ‘bout whether they’re still the same person, and has crossriding turned them into some kind of mind-controlled sex zombie.”

“I’ve had those thoughts,” Rochelle admitted. “But I still feel like the same person to me. I might act differently, respond to stimuli differently, but the space behind my eyeballs still feels like ‘me’ to me even if the space below my neck feels all different now. Seems more like I should worry if I’m still the same person when I wake up as I was when I went to bed.”

Rufia put down her own empty mug and ran her free hand slowly through Rochelle’s hair. “You’re not worried you might be moving too fast?”

“If it weren’t you, I might,” Rochelle admitted. “But I already know you’re not going to get any ideas about a relationship I might not be ready for. So this is just a matter of trying out my new toys in a non-threatening environment.”

Rufia snorted. “Girlie, I think that may be the first time I’ve ever been called ‘non-threatening.’”

Rochelle giggled. “Aw, you know what I mean.”

“I guess that’s just the benefit of being me,” Rufia said. “I’m still a little surprised, though. Before the mall you ‘weren’t ready.’ That’s the fastest mind change I’ve ever seen. And you were always straight before. I’d expected you’d try being ‘straight the other way’ first.”

“You should know by now we young Zharusians don’t tend to think that way,” Rochelle said. “Just because plumbing changes doesn’t change what people we like. And if we’re not trying to do something specific like have kids, there’s nothing special about one way of sex over the other. It’s just rubbing different bits and sticking other bits into different places on the other person to make you both feel good. If you and the other person like each other and don’t have a problem with it yourselves, what does it really matter what the bits and places are?”

“That’s an enlightened way of looking at it,” Rufia said.

“And you’re a *good* friend, Rufia,” Rochelle said more seriously. She reached out to take Rufia’s hand in both of her own. “You always have been, even when I was Roger. And as long as you’re willing to be with me, I’m glad for my first time as a woman to be with you.”

“Well, I guess I can’t argue with that.” Rufia grinned at her. “So...ya wanna?”

Rochelle grinned back. “Let’s.” She let Rufia help her up from the sofa, and together they adjourned to the bedroom and shut the door.

A couple of minutes after the two humans had left, Uncia glanced over at Yvonne. “So...um...wanna play?” she asked hesitantly. It could be a little hard to judge moods with someone so often sarcastic.

But happily, she’d judged right this time. Yvonne grinned at her. “Thought you’d never ask. Nature Range?”

“Oh, please!” Uncia said excitedly. “You host or me?”

“Shoot me your benchmarks,” Yvonne suggested.

“Sure.” Uncia passed them over.

“Hmm. We’re about even overall,” Yvonne said. “You’ve got better base specs, but I’ve got better upgrades.”

“We could switch off?” Uncia suggested. “More fair that way.”

“Okay. You first, since it’s your house?”

“Works for me,” Uncia said. “Okay, server’s running. Connect when ready!” She curled up comfortably and closed her outer eyes. A moment later, Yvonne did the same.

Just as with children, a healthy amount of play was deemed important to RIDEs’ proper mental development and continued sanity. This was why so much time was spent in such environments after First Boot—even a hardlight-lacking Nextus RIDE could have an avatar of its fully-furry self on the inside.

Every RI core carried within it its own seed of the world where it had been brought fully on-line—an important part of its inner self, where it could retreat to relax inside its own mind. A number of RIDEs’ virtual games made use of those seeds in one

way or another. For example, Nature Range took Uncia's snowy mountainside and Yvonne's verdant forest and fed them into procedural generation algorithms to create randomized terrain where Yvonne could graze...and Uncia could hunt.

Although humans had originated the idea of RIDE virtual games, the RIDEs had their own ideas about how they should be played, and had by and large rewritten the rules of many to be more in line with the animal psychologies on which they were based. They didn't often share this aspect of their nature with humans, though—some not even with their own partners. Many humans found it disturbing to be reminded that, though RIDEs generally acted like humans, they were still animals at heart, with animal instincts and needs.

The powerful snow leopard moved through the snowy landscape, sniffing the air, searching for hoofprints or other signs of passage. She kept finding false trails, but she knew her prey had to be close. Somewhere in this forest, she knew, an elk was nibbling at grass, sniffing the air, looking nervously around...and getting ready to make a run for safety. But the only safe ground was behind the leopard...

Then she saw it, out of the corner of her eye—a flash of brown. She wheeled and bounded forward. There she was, running for the safety of the darker band of forest that marked the scenario's boundary. But she wasn't gonna get there! No matter how souped-up they might be in the "real" world, in here they were limited to their best "natural" speeds—and the leopard was just a *little* bit faster. With a great lunge, she brought the elk down—and tore out the elk's throat with her fangs.

The leopard took a moment to savor her victory, making sure the elk was good and dead before tearing out chunks of flesh with her powerful jaws and gulping them down. Finally, she relaxed, sated, her muzzle dripping blood.

Then the elk opened her eyes and sat up. "So," she said, "Best two out of three?"

Rochelle and Rufia lay together in Rochelle's bed, satisfied—for now. It had been...interesting. Rochelle's nerve had almost failed her at the last minute, and she'd haltingly offered to turn the behavioral mods back on, not wanting her lack of experience as a woman to make things less enjoyable for Rufia.

"Don't you even dare," Rufia had said. "I don't want a robot, girlie, I want *you*. Maybe someday we might try it just for fun, but not this time." And by mutual unspoken agreement, neither of them brought up Rochelle's pheromones, either. They didn't want anything to sully or alter this first time between them. So in the end, they simply...came together, and enjoyed themselves.

Rochelle was surprised anew at how gentle Rufia was with her, even though Rufia had been the same way when she'd been Roger. You wouldn't expect it from someone that size. But there were a lot of things you learned about people that could surprise you. Rochelle learned a few about herself that night.

In the wee early morning hours, Rochelle slipped out of Rufia's grasp and out of bed to use the bathroom, then slipped on a nightgown to go to the kitchen for a glass of water. She happened to glance out the kitchen door into the living room—where Yvonne was lying on her side on Uncia's RIDE bed, with the snow leopard draped over the top of her and chewing happily on her neck, making little "nom nom nom" sounds.

As Rochelle stared, both Yvonne and Uncia stopped and looked up at her. "Can we help you?" Yvonne asked.

"Er...sorry. Carry on what you were doing." Rochelle got her water and beat a

hasty retreat back to the bedroom.

Yvonne snorted. “Humans.”

Uncia nodded. “Yeah.” Yvonne laid her head back down and Uncia happily resumed her nomming.

The next morning found Rochelle and Rufia lying lazily in bed, arms around each other, cuddling. They’d made love a few more times in the early morning hours until both were more than sated. Rufia had sampled the delights of Rochelle’s super-sexy body, and Rochelle had tasted the joys of womanhood for the first time. All in all, the two friends were fully satisfied with each other, and with themselves.

“Not bad for a first time, eh girlie?” Rufia asked drowsily. “Need to find yourself a man next. It’s really different from the other side, let me tell ya.”

Rochelle chuckled. “I might just look for one. Thought about asking Ryan, but I don’t wanna screw up the friendship we got going—or the partnership.”

“Yeah,” Rufia said. “That’s why I’ve kept hands off, ya know? We’re too close. Been through too much together. It’d be like screwing my own brother, if I had one.”

“I don’t really feel like doing it with a stranger, though,” Rochelle said. “Hmm, I dunno. Maybe Zane. He’s native-raised, shouldn’t care I’m a crossrider...”

“Doesn’t hurt that he’s rich, either,” Rufia pointed out.

“And he won’t be dazzled by my pheromones, so I can be sure it’s all me with him,” Rochelle concluded.

“Speaking of those, you wanna go ‘head and hit me with ‘em?” Rufia asked. “I’m dying to know what they’re like.”

Rochelle considered, then shook her head. “Too tired and happy to go again right now,” she said. “Besides, we oughtta save *something* for next time.”

Rufia shook her head. “Aw, you little minx. After all I’ve done for you...”

“Don’t you mean all you’ve done *to* me?” Rochelle teased.

“That too.” Rufia grinned. “And...well, *damn*, girlie. Even after a whole night of all that...your hair is *still* perfect. You aren’t even mussed a bit.”

“Can I help it if I’ve got such eager little helpers?” Rochelle asked.

“Yeah, probably just as well I don’t,” Rufia said. “It’d be like that thing about the irresistible force and the immovable object. Poor little buggers’d burn themselves right out the first time they tried to make *me* beautiful.”

Rochelle leaned in and kissed her. “Silly. You already are.”

As they heard their humans murmuring to each other in the bedroom, Uncia and Yvonne disentangled themselves and yawned, stretched, and got to their paws or hooves, respectively. “I had fun last night,” Uncia said. “Thank you for playing with me.”

“Hey, no problem. It was fun, thanks for having me.” Yvonne said.

“You’re welcome!” Uncia said. “And you’re also tasty! Mmm, tasty, tasty elk. Oh... before they come out here...there was something I wanted to give you.” She put her head down and coughed.

Yvonne blinked. “A hairball?”

Uncia coughed again, triggering the internal servos to retrieve the small oblong box she’d swallowed into internal storage the day before. She set it down on the floor between herself and Yvonne, and sent the small servos in its hinges a command to open.

Yvonne blinked down at the small, penlight-like form of the high-priced comm laser she'd been eying wistfully in the store. "You...got this for me?"

"Uh-huh!" Uncia said happily. "I thought you kinda deserved it. You were such a good sport about me letting you win that race and all. And everyone should get at least *one* thing they want when they go shopping. So go on, open up."

Yvonne obligingly dropped the hardlight on her face, and opened a small port in her forehead. Uncia carefully activated a friction pad in her paw to lift the laser up and maneuver the end of it into the port, where Yvonne's internal mechanism pulled it the rest of the way in. She brought her hardlight back up and cocked her head, then shook it experimentally.

"How's it feel?" Uncia asked.

"It's all hooked up!" Yvonne said. "I'm updating the firmware now. *Thank you!*" She nuzzled Uncia gratefully, and Uncia purred.

"Go on, try it out," Uncia suggested. "Lase something."

"All right, but just on low power," Yvonne said. "This laser also doubles as a weapon, you know." She looked around for something to light up, and settled for making a bright blue spot appear on the carpet. Then Uncia promptly reached out a big snowshoe-like paw and slapped the dot.

"Heh," Yvonne said, moving the dot a little. Uncia slapped at it again—then, when Yvonne moved it a little farther away, she crouched, wiggled her big furry butt, and *pounced!*

When a sleepy Rochelle and Rufia made their way into the living room a few minutes later, drawn by a series of loud crashes, they found a room full of overturned furniture, and two *very innocent-looking* RIDES sitting in the middle of it.

THE END

Author's Notes

I started writing this story fairly early on, at about the same time we started writing *Integration*, but it kind of languished until I finally got around to finishing it after we'd posted about ten episodes. It goes back and looks at how Rochelle is getting along shortly after her unexpected life change as a result of Uncia coming into it. And it looks at her relationship with Rufia.

Rufia is one of my favorite characters from the FreeRIDers setting. She's one of a character archetype Jon does particularly well—a boisterous, enthusiastic “ladette” type. Almost always cheerful, and almost always unfazed by circumstance. She reminds me of Bernard/Brooke from Jon's Paradise story “[After Hours](#),” which is the same place Cheers's assistant bartender Serena came from. (Kind of ironic given that *another* of Jon's FreeRIDers characters ended up adopting the Bernie/Brooke moniker, but he/she isn't anything like the one from “After Hours.”)

As such, it's kind of embarrassing to admit that this story is based on not one but *two* separate misconceptions about the character—one of which isn't necessarily easily corrected in the text. (This may be that “one thing” Jon suggested would turn up that just couldn't be reconciled with the new version of events, though in a sense it's actually reconciling it with the *old* version that's the problem.)

The one there's not any real way to fix has to do with Rufia and Ryan's friendship. This story was written to come between “Merging Traffic” and “FreeRIDers”—Roger had just become Rochelle, but Ryan is still Ryan. The thing is, when I was writing it I was still new to the setting and apparently didn't twig to the fact that Ryan and Rufia had drifted apart since coming to Zharus, after Rufia couldn't stop teasing Ryan about crossing. As described in “FreeRIDers,” Ryan hadn't actually seen Rufia in *months*.

But somehow that slipped by me. I just thought they were local friends. So in this story, I had Rufia be coming around to the garage regularly. And there's not really much I can do about it given that Rufia dropping by and hanging out with Roger/Rochelle is kind of integral to the story. I guess Jon must not have had any problem with it, or he'd have said so at the time. Still, it's kind of embarrassing.

The other gaffe has to do with Rufia's physical appearance. Some of the early descriptions of the character had it that there was only so much Fusers could do to when crossing a man of Rufus's build. So what I got from those was basically a more sort of androgynous appearance, like Iphigenia Rose the first time she emerged from the early nanosurgery chamber in “The Greatest Show.” But it turned out that, no, Jon meant was that Rufia *was*, in fact, perfectly feminine—it's just that she was still as *big* as she'd used to be, and Rufus had been a pretty big man to begin with. Not *obese*, just big, tall, and muscular. So, effectively, in [this picture](#), Rufia could be seen as having the body type of the woman fifth from left. (Whereas Rhianna and Rochelle are the second from right and third from right, respectively.)

In the end, it wasn't too difficult to tweak the story around to fit. Hence, Rufia's opinion she wouldn't look good in a dress or her doubt that Rochelle's nanites would be able to do much for her is simply insecurity without much actual factual basis.

Effectively, this story is about the process of Rochelle adapting to her new self. She does adapt pretty quickly, but I've already explained why that was in the author's note for “Spaceflight of Fancy.” Indeed, Rochelle's explanation of it to Rufia here is very

similar to the same explanation she gives Rhianna there. (Not too surprising, since we wrote that episode right at the same time I was finishing this!) She does adapt pretty quickly, it's true, but as she explains, she was primed to. Her explanation is necessarily a bit general—there's no reason *everyone who grew up on Zharus* would necessarily feel the exact same way about it. But she's not really trying to speak for *everyone*, just for herself.

One criticism I've heard from a reader or two is that we almost always depict M-to-F crossriders, rarely the other way around, and almost everyone we write about it happening to ends up happy about it. Also, such crosses usually end up in heterosexual relationships with people who were the same sex before. (Though this particular story should itself stand as an exception to that last one!)

I'm willing to admit those criticisms are at least somewhat valid—but in our defense, as writers we tend to focus the sorts of stories that interest us, even as plenty of other stories are happening in the big wide world. Some stories appeal; others don't. But we're always happy to see other stories written in the setting—so if you want to deal with a crossride or relationship we haven't covered, we'd love for you to write one yourself!

As for the issue of the happy crossride, one of the things we've hinted at that the crossride process also tweaks whatever areas in the brain are responsible for one's perception of one's own gender. Of course, this is pure science fiction, when you get right down to it—recent studies suggest that the structures of male and female brains may actually be effectively identical—but it's kind of a fig leaf. We just find it more fun to write about characters exploring themselves and coming to terms with what's happened to them, rather than going around being grumpy all the time. And since our *fun* is about all we're getting out of this, why shouldn't we write for that? It's not as if we're getting paid for this, after all.

In this early story, Rochelle is still having a lot of fun playing with the sex-appeal nanites she got from Uncia. A little *too much* fun, really, and in some respects it's a little embarrassing to reread. Later on, she realizes it's kind of juvenile and dials it way back. But even this early, one thing she *won't* do is use her pheromone drugs on Rufia. In fact, she never *does* end up doing that. She doesn't want to risk harming their relationship. Given what later happens with Chet, that's probably a wise move.

And I'll admit that the shopping thing is also a bit of a cliché. I really didn't intend to be insulting or patronizing. (Anyway, I like shopping a lot myself, and I'm a guy.) But even that far into the future, the characters are fully *aware* it's a cliché, and Rochelle wants to indulge in silly clichéd behavior just to see what it's like doing it as a woman. And Rufia...just likes doing things with her friends—not to mention, spending money.

This is also the first time that Nature Range, which would later become such a staple of RIDE psychology, appears in the original version of the story. At the time I invented it, I was thinking of it in terms of first-person shooter PVP, like in *Counterstrike* or *Team Fortress*. The gamers compare computer stats to see who has the better box for hosting, then one starts a server, the other connects, and away they go. I'm still kind of proud of the name, which puns on both a firing range and *home on the range*. And it was a useful way to show that RIDEs aren't simply human minds in funny metal bodies—they have distinct psychological quirks unique to them, and their own ways of coping.

There are just a couple of other minor changes to the Director's Cut version—I

dropped a reference to Diane into their visit to the Cheers bar, since even by now it hadn't appeared too much yet in the main story. And I also retrofitted a reference to the Steaders and their 20th-century pop culture into the section about the movie theater. (The movie theater sequence was another inspiration behind me writing the story at all, come to think of it. I thought about how nice it would be to have a "stillsuit" on that would mean you could relieve yourself at any time without having to miss part of the movie, so not have to worry about trying to avoid caffeine or booze beforehand.)

In any event, this was a fun story to write. No great enemies or challenges, just a little slice of life with two fun characters having fun with each other. When you get right down to it, that's what it's all about.