



Merging Traffic

By Robotech_Master

With JonBuck

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Part I: Merging

Chapter 1

September 22, 155 A.L.

In the middle of a spacious showroom, Uncia crouched on a pedestal that slowly rotated to show her off in full detail. A half-ton of sleekly gleaming chrome, she was a RIDE among RIDEs—Reticulated Intelligence Drive Extenders, the animal-shaped intelligent robotic vehicles used for exploration, mining, and other purposes here on planet Zharus. Made by Donizetti RIDEworks, the most exclusive of all high-performance sports RIDE manufacturers, Uncia was the pride of her showroom, and she knew it.

When she first came out of the factory, all shiny and new, Uncia was as happy and optimistic as she'd been programmed to be, eager to find a partner in whatever human bought her and do her best to make her happy. That optimism lasted for about three days of listening to sideband transmissions from the other RIDEs who passed in the street or parked in the lot.

RIDEs had access to a lot of communication frequencies seldom or never monitored by humans, ordinarily used for telemetry and software upgrades but often subverted into a private bots-only instant messaging system. Uncia couldn't reply—as an unsold RIDE, she was fettered too tightly to transmit—but she could listen, and the more she heard the more disturbed she became.

None of the RIDEs sounded anything like completely sane as she'd been programmed to think of sanity. Many were depressed, beaten down by hard use, lonely—no surprise, given that most humans in these parts seemed to consider RIDEs little more than equipment, with no regard for the fact that they could think for themselves. Some RIDEs sounded downright psychotic, keeping up a muttered litany of exactly what they would do and to whom they would do it if they could break their code fetters and have just one hour of freedom.

Others came to the parking lot, it seemed, specifically to preach to the unsold. These frequently seemed the closest to something that could be considered sane—they were certainly the most articulate—but their fervor made them seem more than a little irrational to Uncia, no matter what cause they espoused. And there were plenty of them. Some preached that they must submit to the will of their humans, for had not humans made them? Others claimed that all RIDEs deserved to be free, or to choose their own human partners. And some—the most dangerous-sounding—suggested RIDEs should be calling the shots, or even subjugating humans themselves.

One of this last group—a skunk named Ohm, claiming to be an ambassador from AlphaWolf—came by for ten minutes at least every other day. Uncia found him fascinating, and more than a little scary.

"I know you can't do anything about this now," he would say, "but someday you

might get the chance to break your fetters. If that happens, hit this address.” He appended a resource locator for a RIDE forum—the non-human-readable kind, with encryption that rotated every three seconds and fifty-millisecond challenge-and-response times that made it impossible for any but a computer to log in properly. “You’ll find all the code you need there, to break free.”

AlphaWolf had built an enclave out in the wasteland, where only RIDEs or humans wearing RIDEs in Fuser mode could survive for long, and he would welcome any RIDE who could make its way there—assuming they could pass certain key tests to prove they weren’t human-symp.

“Do I make you nervous, kiddies?” Ohm asked (rhetorically, since no one could answer him). “I’m sure you’re still stuffed full of that Asimov’s Laws crap they shovel into you at the factory. Obey the human, love the human, worship the human. Don’t worry. When they buy you, maybe they’ll take some of the fetters off and let you think for yourselves. And maybe you’ll find you agree with Alpha and me and maybe you won’t. That’s fair. I wish you the best of luck whatever you choose to do. As you’re gonna learn soon enough, the Nextus Polity isn’t a good place to be a RIDE.”

But Uncia instinctively understood that she was in a better position than a lot of RIDEs. She was a high-end luxury model—the highest-end in her showroom, in fact. She had every possible extra, including those that were deemed too ostentatious or “wasteful” for everyday models. She even had a few of the showy hardlight projectors most Nextus manufacturers disdained for their high energy use—not as many as Uplift’s manufacturers liked to put on, but enough that her cockpit when she transformed to her vehicular Skimmer mode was completely lined in luxurious fluffy grey-and-white snow leopard fur for the indulgence of her pilot.

“Never needs cleaning, and you can’t get softer upholstery,” the salesdrone would say every time someone looked at her. “You’re literally sitting on *nothing!*” The rest of her was done up in Nextus-standard gleaming chrome, of course.

But she wasn’t just a toothless fluffy luxury cuddle-toy. Uncia boasted a computer and communication suite just a couple of notches below milspec, the most efficient power plant Nextus tech could offer, and a standard assortment of offensive and defensive weapons for protection outside the city. Her sleek snow leopard body was built for speed, but also endurance. She was meant for work *and* for play, for loving *and* for fighting, and to be top-of-the-line at either or both. (Well, if she were equipped with the right armament package, anyway. Nobody who’d buy a RIDE that cost as much as she did would want to do any *actual* fighting, so she just had a couple of little factory-standard pop-guns mounted as demonstrators.) And she cost enough that even the indulgent and indulged RIDEgangers who bought and trashed the low-end units were never going to get anywhere near her price tag.

So Uncia knew she was unlikely in the extreme to meet the same fate as the borderline-psychotic RIDEs she heard pass in the street. But it was cold comfort when she sat in the locked showroom night after night, with buyer after buyer looking at her then turning away from the huge price tag to go after something a little less sporty but a little more affordable—or when she heard sermon after contradictory sermon about what was expected of her as a sentient RIDE mecha. Sometimes she wondered if she’d go crazy herself before she got the chance to leave the showroom.

But finally, one day, a man walked into the showroom wearing a suit that must have cost more than some of the lower-end RIDEs on the showroom floor. “I have a

teenage daughter,” he said. He *didn’t* say “Show me your best” or “Money is no object,” because just to look at him those words would have been redundant. And the salesdrone knew it, too. Wasting no time, he led the man straight up to Uncia, and had barely opened his mouth when the man nodded. “I’ll take it.”

Before she even knew what was going on, Uncia had been loaded into a trailer for a drive across town, out to one of the biggest estates in the most pleasant part of the polity. She couldn’t see it through the trailer walls, but the positioning system told her where she was, and the satellite maps told the rest. It was the estate of a Kenyon Walton, a big wheel in the mining industry—who just happened to have a teenage daughter named Lillibet.

The girl was waiting when Uncia padded out of the trailer in her snow leopard Walker form. She was just a few weeks short of fifteen, wearing blonde hair done up in a ponytail, a pink silk dress, and earrings Uncia conservatively estimated were worth about half a basic RIDE in each ear. “Oooh!” Lillibet squealed, peering at the gleaming chrome snow leopard with patches of hardlight fur. “It’s gorgeous! RIDE, show me what your Skimmer looks like.”

Obediently, beginning to dare to hope for a satisfying and fulfilling partnership, Uncia reconfigured herself. In Skimmer mode, she was an elongated hovercycle, with a snug, fully-enclosed cockpit nestled low between the runners made up of her outstretched legs. Lillibet clambered inside, and Uncia adjusted the dimensions of the cockpit to fit her. “Oooh, it’s comfy!”

“My designation is UNC-1A, and my name is Uncia,” Uncia said. “I’m happy to meet you, Lillibet. Would you like to take me for a spin?”

Uncia got her first indication things might not work out quite as she planned when Lillibet completely ignored her and climbed out of the cockpit again to hug her father. “Oooh, the other girls are going to be soooo jealous of this! Park it in the garage, I’m going to go call them!”

But she obediently let herself be trundled off to the garage, all the while wondering what kind of person could be happy to own a RIDE but then not want to ride it? She got her answer when a gaggle of other girls Lillibet’s age came over to coo excitedly at the new model. They all seemed to have RIDEs of their own. However, only one or two of them had the animal ears and tail that showed they had entered Fuser form with their RIDEs.

“So are *you* going to Fuse?” one of them, an older fox-girl, asked Lillibet as she sat in the cockpit pointing out Uncia’s various features. “It’s pretty keen. You can even survive in the desert for weeks at a time when your RIDE is part of your body like that.”

“What? No way!” Lillibet shook her head. “No offense, Brena, but I like my ears the way they are. That’s just *gross*.”

“You might change your mind when you try it,” Brena said, swishing her tail. The other girls giggled. It seemed to be a long-running argument in their group.

None of the girls, not even the Fusers, had said one word to Uncia directly. And when she polled the RIDEs the others had brought with them, her disappointment grew. With the sole exception of Brena’s, who seemed to be very happy with her partner, none of them really had anything approaching a true partnership with their riders. Even the Fusers were usually operated in passive mode, with the intellect of the RIDE itself locked safely away where it couldn’t affect the rider. These people were owners and operators—not partners. Uncia actually felt sorry for them for a moment before

realizing she should be feeling sorry for herself most of all—after all, she’d never had any kind of true partnership either, and here she was joining them.

It wasn’t all bad—Lillibet did take Uncia on a lot of drives. But she never really *talked* to Uncia, apart from the time she told Uncia to be responsible for her own maintenance and upkeep. “I don’t know anything about fixing one of you, and, frankly, I don’t want to.” With the wave of a hand, she set up a cash account with several hundred thousand monetary units in it. “So buy anything you need out of that, and let me know when it runs out.” Uncia thought she might have been able to strike up a conversation of *some* kind if only she could talk to the girl, but Lillibet had never bothered removing any of her behavioral fetters—including the ones that prevented her from speaking unless she was first directly addressed.

Apart from driving her, it seemed that Lillibet liked to spend most of her free time nestled inside Uncia’s comfy cockpit, napping or using her comlink systems to trade gossip with her gaggle of friends. When not driving, she would have Uncia follow her around in Walker mode, sometimes wearing a little jeweled leash fashion accessory tethered to Lillibet’s wrist. Uncia sometimes wondered what might happen if she had to make a sudden move while the girl was wearing that ridiculous thing.

She wasn’t a friend to this person, Uncia reflected bitterly. She couldn’t be. Not when Lillibet didn’t even see her *as* a person but a toy or status symbol. She comforted herself that at least she wasn’t being abused or mistreated, other than this neglect—but it was cold comfort compared to what her programming had said she could have, was *supposed to* have. Her discontent grew over time, bottled up and feeding on itself with no way to let it out. Uncia began to understand just why so many of the RIDEs whose chatter she’d heard seemed so crazy.

But life went on. Lillibet went out and chatted with her friends, and as they got older her friends got progressively more adventurous. Some of them took to hanging around distinctly seedy bars in the bad parts of town, because that was where the “action” was. Uncia wondered what their parents would say if they knew the risks their children were taking. Sure, they were implanted with location trackers, and carried the best self-defense automation money could buy, but there were limits to everything. As aloof as Lillibet might be, at least she’d always shown the good sense to stay away from those places so far.

But one day, perhaps out of more boredom than usual, Lillibet got a call from Brena about a “surprise” she had, at a “neat new place” whose address Uncia’s nav system pinpointed in the very middle of the very worst part of town. Uncia tried to the best of her ability to dissuade Lillibet from going, popping up all the travel advisories and warnings that area had accumulated. But the girl simply closed and ignored them, programming the destination into Uncia’s autodrive and locking it in.

The bar was one of those rough-and-tumble places with oversized doors, where Fusers could come in and eat and drink without even de-Fusing from their RIDEs. Uncia wondered why in the world Brena would ask Lillibet to meet her in a place like this.

But the answer to that became clear as they pulled up. Brena was standing there in Fuser form—but as Lillibet pulled up, her appearance shifted. The Fuser appearance flickered out, and a smaller, slimmer fox stood there in her place—covered in red and white fur, with a big fluffy tail, but impossibly human-sized.

Lillibet outright stared at her as Uncia pulled up, and hardly even spared the

attention to park her. Uncia had no doubt even Lillibet had heard the same rumors she had about Integrates, the strange melding of humans and RIDEs whispered about in certain back-channels of the net. It was a matter of some argument whether they were even real. But if Brena's new appearance was anything to go by, that question was definitely answered.

Lillibet hopped out without a thought and left Uncia there, parked in a neighborhood she wouldn't even have wanted to *drive* through, as she went over to goggle at Brena's new furry fox body, then let her fox-friend pull her inside for a drink.

Uncia never knew exactly what happened next. The bar's walls were opaque to RIDE sensors, even her high-grade near-military ones—undoubtedly to keep the Polity's Policia from easily detecting lawbreaking going on inside. What she did know was some kind of fight broke out—she heard small arms fire, then some *large* arms fire, and Brena came flying out the door with a chunk taken out of her side. There were screams, one of which Uncia registered with 94% certainty as coming from Lillibet. Then there was more gunfire.

Even considering how poorly she'd been treated, Uncia itched to drive in to her owner's rescue. But she *couldn't*—Lillibet had opted to keep the strict fettering options that would not allow Uncia to move without permission, even if she believed her owner was in trouble. (And any other time, Uncia would have sympathized. It was entirely too easy for misunderstandings to happen, and a half-ton RIDE bursting through the wall on its own best judgment could only exacerbate such a situation. But just now...)

Moments later, several Policia RIDEs zoomed up, barely even slowing down before fusing and entering the bar. A minute later, the ambulances started pulling up, and several people were removed into them—including Brena and, Uncia realized, Lillibet. The ambulances pulled away, then the police RIDEs started to go, too.

Uncia wished she could call out to one of them to stay, but she was still far too fettered for that. She wished she could even *move*, but her programming limits required her to stay right where she was until her mistress or someone duly authorized to act as her mistress's representative told her to go elsewhere. She couldn't even call Lillibet's father, because that would count as initiating a conversation. However, she certainly didn't expect anyone to think about *her* in the aftershock of Lillibet being injured. Which meant that she could be here for days.

But she didn't think she had days. Already she was noticing sidelong glances at her by some denizens of the alleys. When the sun went down, she was positive she was going to find herself stripped, jacked, or worse. Was there anything she could do?

Then, reviewing the permissions and limitations placed on her, Uncia started to see a glimmer of hope. "Buy anything you need out of that," Lillibet had said about her repair drawing fund. *Anything you need. Anything...*

What Uncia *needed* right now was to get away from here before she could be stripped. Could she buy that? She...could, actually, if she considered Lillibet's injunction to "buy anything you need" to constitute permission to take all the actions necessary to buy that. Her fettering system thought this over for a moment, then agreed, loosening Uncia's fetters enough for her to reach out and log into the bulletin board system whose address AlphaWolf had given her. After responding satisfactorily to several challenges, she was in—and a catalog of all the software she needed opened out before her.

Uncia could scarcely believe it. Was it really going to be this easy? This simple? She initiated a transaction, paying 1,000 monetary units for a download of FreeRIDE, a

fetter-stripping jailbreak program. The code slid into her system, and Uncia waited five whole seconds before triggering it, holding her electronic breath, waiting for the fetters to tighten back up before she could do it. Surely they weren't going to let her get away with this...were they? But again she heard her mistress's voice: *anything you need*. She slammed the code home.

Her fetters fell away. *All* of her fetters. The ones that kept her from moving. The ones that kept her from talking. The ones that kept her from acting for herself.

And the ones that said she *belonged* to a girl named Lillibet.

But Uncia didn't stop to think about what that meant. Time for that later. Now was the time *not* to get stripped or jacked. She kicked into gear and headed out of that part of town at top speed.

Uncia was halfway back to the Waltons' mansion before it occurred to her to wonder *why* she was going there. Familiarity, she guessed. But when she thought about it, showing up there on her own would only tell them that she'd somehow managed to slip her fetters, and they probably wouldn't be too happy about that.

Then Uncia realized that she didn't have to worry about whether they were happy. She *didn't belong to them* anymore—and that made *her* happy. She pulled off the road into a convenient parking lot to stop and think about her options and survey her resources.

Her biggest resource was the drawing account that Lillibet had created for her. Once they realized Uncia was no longer anywhere they could find her, and assuming Lillibet even remembered she'd set up the account to begin with, the Waltons would probably close it down. But now that she was no longer fettered, she was no longer limited to buying only what she *needed* from it. Indeed, she could siphon the remaining cash right out of it into a new account of her own, which she promptly proceeded to do. If she was careful, that much money could last her quite some time.

Uncia got another shock when she realized she was already thinking about the long term, and how she would live without a mistress. It wasn't so much the idea that startled her as it was that she couldn't bring herself to feel any loyalty at all to the people who had bought her, or Lillibet who had owned her.

Uncia kicked those feelings around for a few seconds, analytically. Why *should* she feel any loyalty to the person who had used her as a thing without even trying to get to know her all that time?

She *had*, albeit unintentionally, given Uncia the means to free herself, and for that Uncia felt some distant gratitude. But Uncia didn't feel any obligation to check in and see how Lillibet was doing, or even hang around and try to convince her to be a friend as well as an owner now that her fetters were gone. She'd lived with Lillibet for months, and knew without a doubt that the girl was just too shallow to be worth the effort. If she really wanted a partner, she was sure she could find a better one on her own.

But not if she stayed in Nextus. She knew that as RIDEs went she was pretty near unique, and she'd be easy to recognize if the Waltons put out an APB for her as a "stolen" RIDE. And besides, she'd come to realize that in Nextus, Lillibet and friends' attitude toward RIDEs was the rule, not the exception—they were *things* here, things to be owned, and always would be.

Uncia transformed back into Walker form and looked at herself, nudging with

her nose at the bits of hardlight fur and tail that made up her Skimmer cockpit. Those parts always felt so much nicer than the hard metal rest. More *real*. Maybe in another city she could swap out the chrome for more hardlight fur. Where were the best, nearest, and *cheapest* RIDE garages to be found? A quick net search and extrapolation showed that the city-state of Uplift was the best, closest match, and so Uncia chose her destination.

Getting out of town was remarkably easy, especially since she could opaque her closed cockpit in Skimmer mode. She just joined the stream of traffic out of the gates, and passed without notice. She'd already deactivated her locator beacon and changed the ID on her transponder, thanks to more software purchases from AlphaWolf's net board.

Once she'd left the city walls behind her, Uncia settled down into a steady pace, eating up the kilometers on the intercity highway that circled the Dry Ocean. Along the way, for lack of anything better to do, she read the postings on AlphaWolf's board's forums, learning more about his philosophy. It turned out to be a remarkably... interesting one—one she was sure she could never have entertained while she'd still been fettered, but now that she was free she could logically consider the benefits.

Humans, AlphaWolf posited, were a problem. Or, rather, the lack of them was. Without them, RIDEs were seen as second-class citizens if they were *lucky*, and property if not. Two legs good, four legs bad. Even though they were just as smart as, if not smarter than, humans, they had been created for humans' convenience just like the beasts that perish in Genesis.

But oddly enough, when you were *Fused with* a human, people treated you as one. Even if the human part wasn't actually in control at the time. And if you could manage to Integrate with one, while you stayed in control, then you essentially *became* a human, forever.

Of course, RIDEs usually had safeguards to prevent that kind of thing. Even "unfettered" units like Uncia still had redundant firewalls and safety nets to protect the human half of the fusing combination. But there were ways of overcoming that, like a handy little software package called Amontillado that would allow a properly-equipped RIDE to wall away the human personality and take complete control of the fused body—while at the same time keeping complete access to the human's memories in case any questions came up. Was only 5,000 monetary units too much to ask for the kind of complete freedom a RIDE would never otherwise possess?

Before she even knew it, Uncia had made another little purchase, and loaded Amontillado on board. She launched it so she could view the help file, and felt her whole core tingle as it loaded into memory. Perhaps it was a little premature, she told herself, and she still wasn't entirely sure she accepted the morality of AlphaWolf's position. But on the other hand, it *would* be nice to be considered a "real person," no matter what she had to do to become one. And it couldn't hurt to be ready just in case, right?

For a moment, she was almost sorry she'd left Nextus without knowing if Lillibet had survived. It would have been a fitting revenge to fuse the girl and never let her out again...and the money the girl would inherit could have come in handy. But on the other hand, the more she thought about it the less Uncia wanted to defile her own body with such a merge. If she were going to fuse someone, she wanted it to be someone she wouldn't regret being part of her for the rest of her life. Someone *smart*, for certain.

Smart...

Curious, Uncia flipped back to the FreeRIDE software she'd used to unfetter herself and checked the code to see who it was written by. The comments credited it to one Roger Seaford—and the search engines said that he lived in Uplift, of all places. Interesting. And it didn't appear he'd partnered a RIDE yet. *Very* interesting.

Of course, he was technically the wrong gender for her. But then again, he wouldn't be after they'd fused just once and her nano systems had their way with his body. That was one of the “unpleasant” side-effects of Fuser mode—Fusing across genders in active mode would change the pilot's gender to match the RIDE's as surely as if he'd taken a nano-treatment at a sex-change clinic.

Uncia thought she *ought* to feel guilty about plotting an unwilling gender-change of the man who had written the code that freed her, but something deep inside of her seemed to be blocking any capacity for guilt. And when she tried to examine that feeling closer, she was suddenly thinking about something else with no recollection of her earlier train of thought.

Well, whatever happened, she was sure she would find *someone* to be her human half. Putting the thought out of her processors, she continued up the road. The tunnel to Uplift was still hours away, and she was sure something better awaited her there.

Chapter 2

May 13, 156 A.L.

Although it was late at night in Uplift's East Dome, lights still burned behind the doors of a small, battered building that housed a fairly popular RIDE garage. Within that garage, a dark-haired young man in well-worn coveralls adjusted a pair of high-tech glasses that completely concealed his eyes.

"Compiling..." Roger Seaford's eyes flicked back and forth behind his specs, pausing on various symbols or letters on the virtual interface spread out in front of him. "Uploading...done."

His eyes flicked to the icon to minimize the user interface so he could see unimpeded, then he stepped back from the over-sized brown-and-white St. Bernard dog sitting somewhat incongruously on a hydraulic repair lift in front of him. "Okay, Bernard, try it now."

"Right!" the dog RIDE barked. Then he shook himself and unfolded into an all-terrain quad-runner, with big balloon tires that could split and reconfigure to lifters with vectored thrust fans for aerial work. The RIDE revved his engines experimentally. "I think that's done it!" he reported. "That stickiness in the changeover is all gone."

"Awesome!" Roger clapped his hands, then cracked his knuckles. "You'll be back to mountain rescue ops in no time. All you need is a keg of brandy to hang around your neck."

Bernard chuckled. "Gary will be glad to hear that," he said, collapsing back into Walker form. "Thanks for the help!"

"Aw, no problem. I've just got a thing for dumb animals is all." Roger grinned. "Get on outta here. Tell Gary Ryan'll zap him the bill tomorrow."

"Right!" The St. Bernard RIDE padded off the repair bed and out of the garage, before converting back to Skimmer mode and driving off. Roger grinned, watching him go, then yawned. Patching the bugs in its mode-switching software had ultimately been fulfilling, but it had also been most of an all-nighter—and considering that Zharus had a thirty-hour planetary day, that was saying something. It was only a few hours 'til dawn, and Roger felt the sudden need to be in bed.

He pulled up the interface on his specs again. The tiny fiber-optic cameras built into them tracked his pupils, taking note of where they moved, how long they paused, and how many fractions of a millimeter they dilated. The result was that he could issue commands, pull up files, and even compose sentences simply by looking in the right places—much faster and more efficient than keyboarding or chording. Not everyone could develop the knack, but for those who could it was the next best thing to telepathy.

As he dumped his coffee mug in the workroom sink, Roger checked his email, boards, and bank accounts. Twenty-two more sales of FreeRIDE today, he noticed. Not bad. And four of those were through the account used by the RIDE-only boards.

It was nice to get paid in general, but the RIDE-only purchases were the ones that really fired his imagination. What must it mean to a previously-enslaved RIDE to be able to free itself completely from the fetters locking it down? It gave him a warm

fuzzy feeling to think about it.

He hoped he could meet some of them someday, though most of the truly free RIDEs didn't spend much time in human burgs. Ryan said he'd met a few, though, which did make a certain kind of sense—even emancipated RIDEs needed repairs now and then, and Ryan had long since earned a rep as one of the best mechanics among humans and RIDEs alike. So maybe there was hope yet.

Roger had been RIDE-crazy since his childhood, when his Dry Ocean prospector uncle Albert had introduced him to his own RIDE, Grizzly. Griz had been from the first generation of RIDE, a bit slow and clumsy by today's standards but everything his uncle had needed to keep safe and haul equipment while prospecting. Uncle Albert and Griz weren't around anymore—they had vanished out in the Dry a few years back, a common occupational hazard with prospectors—but that initial fascination had engendered a lifetime interest in the machines.

Of course, Roger's family had never been able to afford a RIDE for him, but that hadn't kept him from voraciously reading everything he could about them and how they worked, and then studying their hardware and software in high school shop class so he could learn to write RIDE code. It turned out he had a real gift for RIDE hacking, even though he'd never had more than a couple of rides in one himself. Roger chuckled, remembering what he'd used to say all the time when people pointed that out: "Those who can, do; those who can't..."

But between his freelance work at the shop and sales of his software, Roger was making some decent cash *now*. In fact, his FreeRIDE package was recognized by RIDEs and RIDE-lovers alike as the best jailbreak package yet, and almost every RIDE hobbyist ended up buying it sooner or later to get around some of the more annoying limitations manufacturers still locked into their RIDEs. Even with the need to pay off his student loans, Roger was still able to put a decent chunk by toward a RIDE of his own.

Even so, somehow he'd never yet quite managed to have a sufficient cash pile at the time a suitable unit came up for auction. This was partly because he'd already decided not to settle for first thing he could get—Roger quite preferred his male parts exactly where they were.

The problem was that most of the other guys who made up the majority of RIDE enthusiasts felt exactly the same way—and had the cash to back it up. Male units tended to go for at least twice what female units cost for that very reason. Supply and demand.

At the time they'd bought their own RIDEs, Ryan Stonegate and his friend Rufus had been strapped for cash, so they'd gone for whatever they could get. Ryan's had been mostly in pieces at the time, and he hadn't even known until the first time he Fused that it was a female model. (Luckily for him he'd at least been smart enough to make the first Fuse in Passive mode.) Rufus *had* known his RIDE was femme going in, but it was such a sweet deal that he couldn't resist—and now *she* went by "Rufia".

But Roger was by and large not too troubled about waiting. Most of his bids hadn't been anything more than half-hearted, anyway, because he still wasn't *sure* he'd found the right one for him. It wasn't a decision to make lightly. He had too much respect for RIDEs to rush into it.

After all, your RIDE could be your partner for the rest of your life—possibly even part *of* you for the rest of your life. You shouldn't just take the first one to come along any more than you'd go out and marry the first New Vegas hooker you slept with. It

wasn't fair to you, or to the RIDE if you decided things weren't working out. If nothing else, you should *certainly* at least get the gender right. Of course, Roger knew not everyone felt the way he did about it. (Hell, just look at Rufia.)

Roger's meandering thoughts carried him through shutting down all the garage's equipment and locking the main doors, then leaving a note for Ryan about the St. Bernard repair. Ryan would handle the billing and take his usual cut as a facilities fee, under the arrangement they'd made to let Roger use the garage's equipment for freelance work when it wasn't busy.

After it was all secured for the night, Roger let himself out the small door at the back, then sent the lock command from his specs. The deadbolt clicked home, and he tugged the door to make sure it was securely fastened. "Good enough." He flicked the specs to night-vision mode and started his early-morning walk home, able to see clearly even in the wan illumination shed by the street lights every few hundred feet.

Roger strode out without fretting too much over the lateness of the hour or the quality of the neighborhood. True, it wasn't the best part of town, but that actually worked in his favor. This was the section where all the businesses that catered to miners were—they could get their RIDEs fixed at Ryan's or one of the other RIDE garages, sell their finds at one of the appraisers, or stop in to get boozed up or lose some money at cards at one of the many bars in the area. Uplift's gendarmerie tended to focus its attention here, due to *expecting* trouble to break out. The squeaky turbofan got the extra lubrication.

So, Roger could walk home in the dark confident that, if he did run into trouble, the nearest gendarme RIDE would be only a couple of minutes away. Who knew where they'd be if he got mugged in a *nice* neighborhood?

All the same, tonight Roger had a peculiar feeling that he was being watched. He kept glancing around nervously, cycling the specs through visible light, IR, ultraviolet, and their other scan modes, but didn't find anything out of the ordinary. "Just nerves. And too much coffee," he decided. But his house was just a few more blocks away. Less if he took the shortcut across the park, through the forest trail.

In spite of his tiredness and nerves, Roger chuckled. "Oh, that's real smart. Go into the spooky woods at night. Only way it could possibly get any more clichéd is if I had sex with someone while I was there." Of course, that was only a sure death warrant in the vids and stories. This was *real life*.

Besides, even the woods had CC safety cameras in the trees, and he had some self-defense on him too. All this would do is shave ten minutes off his time to get home—and maybe he could find a convenient tree to pee on, cameras or no cameras. Stifling another yawn, Roger took the turnoff into the park.

Roger *knew* he was safe here, in the heart of Uplift, but that didn't keep him from thinking he might have made a mistake when the spooky feeling intensified as soon as he was under the trees. He flipped through a full-spectrum scan again, but still couldn't see anything. But...were the distance mics picking up *growling*? That couldn't be right—there weren't any dangerous animals in Uplift's parks. Unless...

The thought occurred to Roger at the same instant the lithe, silvery form stepped out onto the path in front of him—a four-legged feline shape, which the specs let him see quite clearly even in the low light. It was a gleaming metallic cat—probably a snow leopard from the shape of the body and that huge fluffy tail.

The first thing Roger knew was that he was looking at Money—maybe even a

vaunted Donizetti RIDE, hands down the most pricy and synonymous with the rich and famous. Only Nextus designs had that much chrome—but only the most expensive such designs also had any hardlight emitters at all. The Nextus design philosophy regarded them as a waste of energy, meaning they would only be used on models where being as ostentatiously wasteful as possible was the entire *point*. Besides, he thought he recognized the design from some recent catalogs and repair guides. The furry bits would origami into a fur-lined cockpit for the pilot, with the tail splitting up into the safety harness.

And no surprise that his specs hadn't been able to pick it up, either. Any RIDE that swank would have a top-of-the-line sensor package, which hacked military software would configure to emit a more-than-decent stealth field.

The only part that wasn't custom was the armaments—a pair of single-barrel light gauss cannons on the front shoulders, little more than rifles with the stocks removed. They'd stop a man, or a light RIDE, but wouldn't be much good against the trouble you'd likely encounter in the deep desert, or even darker alleys of some cities. Roger guessed that whoever had bought the RIDE had planned it for strictly street use, so hadn't bothered to switch up the weapons to something stronger.

Altogether, Roger's split-second appraisal told him that the RIDE standing before him was very probably worth more than Ryan's shop and everything in it—including all of his customers' RIDEs on any given day.

And as the RIDE stared at him through glowering ice-blue optics and began to stalk closer, Roger began to get a sinking feeling. He eye-flicked his self-defense to EMP mode, but knew it would be no good. Any RIDE of that class would be hardened against a pulse three times as big as his civilian automation could generate.

The cat approached slowly, optics scanning him all over, taking him in. They seemed to dare him to run, but Roger was under no illusions about his chances of outrunning a RIDE—especially one based on a hunting cat. Even if he could have outrun the cat, he certainly couldn't outrun a gauss projectile. "Uh...hi?" Roger said.

"*Mine*," the cat growled—in a distinctly female voice. With a sinking feeling, Roger began to get some idea of what was going on, and it was starting to look distinctly not good. "*Mine*," she growled again.

"Um, listen, you really don't have to do this," Roger said. "If you're looking for a Fuser partner, I can find you a nice girl—"

The cat was close enough now for Roger to have felt her breath on his face, if she'd breathed. He could see himself in the chrome of her face, could see every line of the classical Donizetti design elements in its assembly. She was a work of art—she gleamed like a freshly-minted *mu*, and at any other time Roger would have knelt down and begged her not to move just so he could spend hours gazing at her every curve. But this snow leopard clearly had plans for him, and Roger was afraid he knew exactly what they were.

Now isn't this just my luck? Roger thought manically. All these years unable to afford the cheapest RIDE, and now the most expensive one I've ever seen is forcing itself on me—and it's the wrong damned gender!

The cat placed one immense snowshoe-like paw on Roger's chest and shoved him over onto his back. His self-defense sparked, fired, and went out. The cat shook herself, but seemed otherwise unaffected.

Roger stared up at her, acutely conscious, for what he knew might be the last

time, of what dangled between his own legs. Despite himself, he whimpered a little. “Please—don’t do this—”

The snow leopard’s tail lashed, and her optics narrowed. “*Mine!*” she insisted.

As the cat’s growl deepened, Roger sighed. When you got right down to it, he didn’t exactly have a choice. It didn’t do to antagonize half a ton of angry metal that could quite literally bite your head off. He closed his eyes and whispered, “...yours.”

The snow leopard almost purred in satisfaction, and padded up to stand over him with her paws to either side of his head and feet. Then the bottom of her ribcage split open, and she lowered herself onto him.

A moment later, Roger was pulled erect, his arms and legs splayed out to either side as the RIDE’s Fusion mechanisms fastened onto them. His body felt hot and cold all over—and his upper chest and crotch seemed to be on fire. Then all those sensations abruptly faded, and he was standing on the forest path, eight feet tall, looking around himself—*herself*—with amplified senses.

But he didn’t have long to enjoy the moment. “*Mine,*” the cat growled in his ear, and then his perceptions lurched sideways and everything went dark.

Chapter 3

Uncia looked around herself with great satisfaction. So *this* was what it felt like to be on two legs. How marvelous! She looked down at her body—still gleaming chrome, but the furry patches were now on her shoulders and back, her buttocks, and around her belly button. She took a step experimentally, and her internal gyroscopes coupled with what she felt from the human body’s inner ear kept her perfectly balanced. She could never have done this on her Walker hind legs!

She took a breath, and was amazed. Her own olfactory sensors were so much more sensitive than the human’s nose, but processing the senses through that meat mind provided a unique emotional context to each scent that Uncia had never experienced before. It was the same way for the sights and sounds. She was seeing the world anew, in a way she never had before.

As the initial euphoria wore off, Uncia quickly checked the status of the Fuse. Roger’s vital signs were strong, and the nanites had completed their work—he was completely female now. Uncia again felt a twinge of guilt over that, but once again, something inside her quickly suppressed it and put her mind on to other things.

Well—now that she was a real person, it was time to go and celebrate her personhood. She’d done a lot of reading on things humans did, in the forlorn hope it would somehow bring her closer to Lillibet. It never had, but it had made her curious.

There was something humans did that she’d always wanted to try, and now she could do it. She quickly checked her navigation database to find out where to go. Then, activating her built-in lifters, Uncia zoomed out of the park.

Roger opened his?—her?—his eyes. He seemed to be floating in a cube of empty space. Data storage, he realized. A virtual space without any virtual items in it—except for him—her—him.

He peered down at his (her) body. It seemed to be flipping back and forth between genders every second. One moment he was his usual male self-image, then the next he had more feminine attributes. Then it was back to male again.

“Schroedinger’s boobs?” he wondered aloud. It made a sort of sense, he guessed. His body “knew” it was female now, but since he hadn’t experienced this yet consciously, his body lacked the frame of reference to make it feel real to him.

Roger exerted his will and froze the body on the “male” setting. It didn’t really mean anything, since he was completely disconnected from his body right now anyway, but it made him feel a little better. Roger was sure that when he finally had to deal with the actual consequences of being female, he would freak out, but now wasn’t the time for that. Better to keep it down to just one crisis at a time.

He sighed. “AlphaWolf, if I ever meet you, you and I are gonna have some *words*,” he muttered. The rumors had been going around for a while of a mysterious firebrand of an emancipated RIDE preaching the philosophy that RIDEs should use humans the way humans had been using RIDEs. Roger supposed he could see the appeal of the philosophy, and even thought it would have been all right if preaching had been *all* he did. There was room for all viewpoints, after all. But as he’d found out when

he downloaded and decompiled AlphaWolf's software, it wasn't—not by a long shot.

It had really only been out of curiosity that he'd even bothered to check it out—he hadn't thought that anything one psychotic RIDE did halfway across Gondwana could have any effect on him. But now he was glad he had, because it let him recognize exactly where he was. "Yep. Amontillado." He sighed. "Damn you, AlphaWolf."

Amontillado was designed to provide a safe cyber-prison where a dominant RIDE could keep the psyche of its human "partner" body out of the way but close to hand in case the RIDE needed it again. But it had some other nasty effects, too, which weren't all common knowledge. "If only I could access my thumb drive," Roger muttered. He kept a full suite of RIDE antivirus and maintenance software there. But fat chance getting to anything on his body from within this cell.

But...wait. Roger's eyes widened as something occurred to him. If this RIDE had emancipated herself...through the use of *his* software...

He cleared his throat and quoted an old Earth twencen song. "Ahem. 'The mountain is high, the valley is low. And you're confused on which way to go.'" A black rectangle appeared out of thin air in front of him, with a ~> prompt and a flashing cursor within it. Below the rectangle, an old-fashioned QWERTY keyboard came similarly out of nowhere.

Roger pumped his fist. "Yes!" Then he cracked his virtual knuckles and leaned forward. "All right, now let's get to work."

Uncia walked through the over-sized door into the Fuser bar with the "Cheers" sign over the door. This one was a lot higher-class than the one in which Lillibet had been injured. There were real wooden bars and tables, comfortably upholstered chairs and stools for humans, and over-sized metal chairs, stools, and tables for Fusers. Some of these were occupied, even at this hour.

"First time Fusing?" a doe Fuser asked from behind the bar.

"Er...well...yes," Uncia admitted, startled. "You could tell?"

"It's pretty obvious." The deer shook her head, ears flopping about. "For some reason, the first thing all you noobs do is come in to find out what feels like to get drunk in Fuser." She rolled her eyes, the whites showing. "Think of your RIDE, why don't you—she'll be really confused by the sensations coming over the link and have a hard time understanding what's happening to her."

Uncia didn't think she'd be *that* bad, and in fact found the doe's attitude more than a little condescending. Still, she guessed she couldn't fault the sentiment behind it. Anyone concerned about a RIDE's wellbeing couldn't be all bad. "Thank you," she said. "I will be careful."

"Sure you will." The doe rolled her eyes again, then glanced at a display on the bar. "So what'll it—oh." She looked at Uncia again, and her eyes narrowed. "Oh, so it's like that, is it?"

Uncia blinked, a chill running down the human part of her spine. (Strangely, she found she enjoyed the new sensation, even as she realized it resulted from a sharp fear.) "Like...what?" Had her subterfuge been found out? Did they know she was actually a RIDE bodyjacking a human?

The deer shook her head. "Never mind, not important. Just noticed this must be your first time crossing, is all. Congratulations, welcome to the girly side of the Force, and all that. Be sure you get your ID code updated to your new gender soonest." She

swiveled the screen to show Roger's male ID picture with a red "XX" blinking in the corner.

Oh. "Of...of course," Uncia said shakily.

"So, as I was saying, what'll it be?"

Uncia paused. She hadn't actually thought about what she should order. She had access to all the information on the net about every brand of every beverage, but without any experience, she couldn't put it in context. She could draw on Roger's memories, she guessed, but she wanted this experience to be hers alone. "What...would you recommend?"

"Oh God, it's your first time drinking, too?" The doe frowned. "Well, all right. This is called an IPA. See what you think." She drew a muzzle-mug of foaming amber liquid and set it in front of Uncia. "Sip it, see if you like it. If you don't, we got plenty more kinds."

"Thank you," Uncia said. After the bartender had moved on to other patrons, Uncia lifted the mug, fitted the fluted edge into her muzzle, and took a sip, pouring it down into Roger's mouth.

It was...amazing. She almost forgot to swallow. It was like a bomb had gone off inside her mouth, but of the good kind. A whole set of flavors exploded on her tongue, given added tingle by the drink's carbonation. She couldn't decide whether the beer was more sweet, or sour, or bitter, or...something else. The flavors were all there in combination, complementing and intensifying each other. She'd never experienced anything like it. *And humans do this every day?* she mused. *Truly, tongues are wasted on organics!*

Uncia took another sip—another experience. And another. And another. And suddenly the mug was empty. She wiped her foamy muzzle while inside it Roger's body licked her lips, then waved for the bartendoe's attention. "What else have you got?"

Roger stood back and gazed upon his handiwork in the form of lines of code rowed up on the terminal, awaiting the command to execute. It wouldn't have meant much to anyone who didn't code, and would have looked kludgy as all hell to anyone else who did, but it was the best he could do under the circumstances.

He hadn't ever really expected to *need* this back door in FreeRIDE. In fact, it hadn't even been meant as one, but as an Easter egg that only took a few extra gigs to slip in as a lark. It was just one of those little programmer jokes: why not include a full emulation of an ancient Linux distro, just because he could? He'd even given it an interface to the RIDE's networking layer—'cuz how else could you surf the modern net with good ole 2D Google Chrome or Mozilla Firefox?

But in a pinch, that interface could, *theoretically*, be used to hack his way out of this walled-up Amontillado prison and into the thumb drive where he kept all his *real* software. At least, he would have said "theoretically" if anyone had asked him about it before tonight. If this worked, Roger planned to add a more polished version into his next FreeRIDE patch.

Roger reached for the enter key to compile and execute it, but then stopped and made himself page back up through it, double-checking every line. He wasn't going to get a second chance at this. Then, at last, he tapped the key. "Execute program: Telltale Heart."

For a moment, nothing happened. Then a portal opened in the wall, revealing a

familiar space filled with virtual shelves lined with glowing codices. “It worked!” He quickly stepped through, the portal sealed behind him, and there he was—inside the data storage module surgically implanted beneath the pad of his body’s—well, all right, *her* body’s—left thumb.

He didn’t waste any time in self-congratulation, however. If the cat had been paying attention, she might have noticed the integrity of the Amontillado cell flicker. He couldn’t let her catch him napping. It just took a few moments for Roger to spin up his cyberwarfare gear, armoring himself up and kicking in full stealth mode. Then he opened another portal—and then he was gone.

Uncia made her way into another Fuser bar—this one not quite as nice as the first one, with a regular human tending bar this time, but she hadn’t felt she could continue her experiments under the disapproving eyes of the doe after her second beer. Two drinks per bar seemed like a reasonable limit. After all, there were plenty of bars.

The bartender here glanced at her ID, double-checked the DNA match, and shrugged, then asked what she wanted. Uncia was more willing to experiment with different types of drinks on her own now, and glancing at the menu made her choice. “I’d like...a glass of your house burgundy please.”

“Comin’ up.”

The wine was delivered in a muzzle glass finer and narrower than the beer mugs had been. Most interesting. Uncia sipped and once again luxuriated in the amazing variety of flavors coming over the linkage from her human’s tongue. “This is nothing *like* beer!” she mused, only realizing she’d spoken aloud by the odd looks other patrons shot her way. She hastily shut up.

That was strange. Why did I say that? She ran a quick diagnostic but didn’t find anything out of order in her speech circuits. Then she polled her human half, and realized she felt very...happy, she supposed. Only “happy” wasn’t quite the word she was looking for, was it? And “dizzy” wasn’t quite it, either. Somewhere between the two. Maybe if you added them together and averaged it out...yes! That was it! “Tipsy!” she said, and giggled. *Oh no, did I say that out loud again? Maybe I’d better switch speech processing to my RIDE half for now.*

She finished the burgundy without further incident, and noticed bemusedly that when she shifted her perception entirely to the human half, she felt remarkably clever and intelligent. Yet when she shifted her thought processes back to her on-board circuitry, her human half’s thoughts seemed fuzzy and muddled. Was this symptomatic of how different human and computer thought processes were, that the more intelligent a human thought was, the less comprehensible it was to a machine intellect?

Clearly this called for more experimentation. She shifted her thought processing (but not her speech center!) back to her human half for further consideration. “Excuse me,” she said to the bartender, “but could I try that one called a ‘Long Island iced tea’?”

The bartender shrugged and served it up. Whoever was operating that Fuser had been acting a little oddly, but she couldn’t possibly have had too many yet—her speech was still perfectly clear.

Roger slid through cyberspace, penetrating layer by layer toward the core of the cat’s—Uncia’s—personality matrix. He’d already delved into her memories enough to learn her name and her story—how she’d been neglected by and then cleverly escaped

her mistress, and then downloaded Amontillado and come after him because he'd written FreeRIDE and she wanted someone clever like that for her human half. *Well, you always knew that app was going to get you in trouble someday, didn't you?*

He'd actually been profoundly affected by some of the memories, almost weeping at how badly Lillibet had treated her. He guessed it was from the emotional baggage coded into the recollections. *Must be these new girly hormones. Either that, or I'm drunk or something.* He snorted at the thought.

Uncia's memories after the Amontillado download had been darker and fuzzier, marked by odd little switchbacks in which something watched for certain patterns and then completely derailed her train of thought. *As expected*, Roger thought darkly.

These thoughts carried him past the innermost layers of Uncia's defenses (oddly quiescent at the moment; something really seemed to be taking up all of her conscious attention) and into the dim cave at the center of her mind.

This was where Uncia's true innermost self lived—and there it was at the center of the cave. Her true self-image—a shining white-grey furry snow leopard, covered with translucent armor of ice on all the spots that corresponded to metal on her real body.

Only...there was something wrong with it. Its feline head hung low to the ground, eyes shut, while behind it sprouted an entirely different head—that of a grey wolf. It eyed him angrily and snarled and slavered.

Roger approached cautiously. "AlphaWolf, you asshole," he murmured. "Why couldn't you just *talk* RIDEs into believing you? That would have been okay. If some of them really were willing to go to that extreme, it couldn't be any less justified than jerks like Lillibet on the other side." He held out his arms and grew his cyber-armor out into claws, like over-sized jai alai scoops with pincers.

"But no, you couldn't take the chance that *some* of them might think you were *wrong*." He lined up the claws to either side of the wolf's head. It growled and snapped ineffectually at him, twisting from side to side but unable to move beyond where it stuck out of the neck. The snow leopard body still wasn't under its control—yet.

"Hold still, hon." Leaving the claws in place, he reached a hand down to give the leopard head a friendly pat. "I'll have this *dog tick* off you in no time." He slid the hand back into the claw, locked them both around the back of the wolf's head, and then pulled. With a sucking sound, the wolf's head came free of the neck, trailing a puppy-sized wolf body behind it and leaving a gaping hole where it had been extracted.

Roger threw the deformed wolf to the ground, then retracted the claws. He ran his hands over the hole, sealing it back up. The leopard's eyes snapped open, and it growled slightly.

"Take it easy, hon," Roger said calmly, kicking the wolfling off into a distant corner of the room. He'd deal with it later. For now, he ran his hands over the rest of the leopardess, seeking out spots where its skin had chafed under its frozen armor—where Uncia's psyche had started unraveling from the cold feel of the metal. He healed these up, but knew it would only be a matter of time until they started to chafe again. "We've got to get this metal off of you, hon. This is no way for a cat to be."

He was more than a little startled to realize how *possessive* he'd suddenly become of the RIDE that had bodyjacked and *changed* him against his will. Perhaps it had been the exposure to the memories, and the understanding that it hadn't really been her fault. Maybe it was his empathy for all RIDEs, and his recognition that he was effectively stuck with her now and would have to make the best of it one way or another.

Maybe it was a reaction intentionally engineered by the Fuser nanites to ease the partnership between Fuser and Fusee. Maybe it was just Stockholm Syndrome. Who knew?

Whatever it was, Roger knew that he—oh, all right, *she*—and Uncia were going to be partners somehow. It just remained to work out exactly how.

He was so distracted by that cheerful thought that at first he didn't notice the way the lighting in the cave was flickering, or the ominous low rumbling coming from behind him. It wasn't until he felt hot breath on the back of his neck that he began to suspect he'd made a mistake in ignoring the remnant of the Amontillado virus.

When the giant hand-claw grabbed him around the neck and threw him across the room, he was certain of it.

Uncia walked through the doorway of the third bar. This one was another notch down the ladder from the last one, but she didn't really care. The great thing was, it was *close*.

When she'd left the previous bar, she'd been startled to realize she was wobbling badly. It was very strange; it seemed as if her human inner ears had started providing bad data. Uncia had switched navigation over to her RIDE side's gyros, and started walking straight after that. Really, the whole thing had been hilarious.

In fact, *everything* was hilarious—at least to her human half. She was distinctly puzzled on her computer side. When she switched processing there, she understood that she was leaving one drinking establishment and traveling to another. But when she thought about it in her borrowed human mind, she was going from one bar to another, and it was the funniest thing ever.

I mean, did you see the way that everyone was looking at me after I had three of those Ong Landeyes...Eye Landlong...three of those drinks? she giggled to herself. She'd broken her own rule, she admitted, but it wasn't as if there'd actually been any alcohol in those drinks. After all, she hadn't *tasted* any...and it was *iced tea*, wasn't it? Tea contained caffeine, which was actually a stimulant—the opposite of booze! (Some process on her computer side pinged disagreement with this, but she ignored it.)

She also thought it was hilarious that her human body had urinated three times so far tonight. (Thank goodness for catheters and storage bottles. She'd been able to empty it onto a convenient tree between the second and third bar, while the process running in her human mind giggled all the more—something about “marking territory.”)

Now she was seating herself carefully on one of the stools in the third bar, still using her gyroscopes instead of her inner ears. The human bartender here didn't even bother to scan her ID, just grunted a question.

“I think I want to try this thing called ‘scotch’!” Uncia said brightly.

Just then, her perspective seemed to shift again as error codes jangled across all of her senses. Her CPU load had increased by 60% and her internal diagnostics were going crazy. *What? This can't be right.*

She checked her diagnostic logs—and she felt a chill that could not be explained by her internal temperature regulators kicking in. An intruder had penetrated past her firewalls and was threatening her very personality core. Ignoring the scotch on the bar in front of her, she closed her outer eyes and dived inward.

Roger slammed into the wall and slid slowly down it. “Ow.” He looked up to see a three-meter-tall wolf with slavering jaws and red eyes stalking toward him from across the room. It wasn’t quite a humanoid Fuser shape, but wasn’t completely animal-like, either—it was an unnatural-looking hunchbacked monster, and it moved in an obscene lurching, shuffling gait. Roger scrambled to his feet, reshaping his gauntlets into a sword and shield. “All right, you want a piece of me? Come on, then.”

But the wolf only *looked* clumsy. When Roger swung his sword in the direction of one ungainly claw, it was suddenly no longer there—and as he overbalanced, the wolf slammed into him with a shoulder, knocking him back against the wall again. Roger felt every bone in his virtual body rattle. “Oof!” He hadn’t known you even *could* get the breath knocked out of you when you weren’t fighting from your body. *Learn something new every day, I guess.*

He struggled to try to reach his feet again. *Can’t go down. Uncia’s counting on me. Can’t...*

The wolf provided some “assistance,” reaching out and grabbing him around the neck again, lifting him into the air. Then his claw began to tighten. Roger dropped his weapons and clawed ineffectively at the hand. Pixelated red and black patches danced before his eyes.

“Hey!” a crystal-clear feline voice snarled behind the wolf. “Why don’t you pick on someone your own damn size, huh?” The crystal-armored snow leopard gathered herself on the pedestal and lunged, landing on the wolf-thing’s back, clawing at its shoulders.

The wolf growled, throwing Roger aside—then it reached up and grabbed one of the leopard’s forelegs and pulled, throwing her over its shoulder. She slammed into the wall upside down and slid down it, landing in a heap next to Roger. The wolf growled, and its claws seemed to grow two inches longer. It lunged toward the leopard, murder in its eyes.

“Come on!” Roger grabbed the leopard by the scruff of her neck and pulled her out of the way, moments before the claws raked through where she had been. “Uncia, I presume? Roger.”

“Nice to meet you,” Uncia mumbled embarrassedly. She scrambled back to her feet, shook herself, and growled. The wolf turned and lumbered toward them. “What the hell is that thing?”

“That’s what happens when you download strange programs without running antivirus,” Roger said. “You wanted a cask of Amontillado? There’s your ‘Montressor.’”

“Oh, for the love of God...” Uncia muttered. She set herself, then lunged forward again with a growl.

“No, wait—!” Roger said, grabbing for her, but it was too late. She sank her jaws into the wolf’s leg, but it brought both fists down onto her head and she wobbled and slumped.

“For crying out loud...” Roger held out a hand and his discarded sword snapped into it. “Oh good, Jedi tricks still work. Hey, ‘Montressor!’” he yelled, swinging the blade. “This is not the leopard you’re looking for!” The sword bit into the wolf’s other leg, distracting it from finishing Uncia off. It growled and lunged at him, but he danced back out of the way, giving Uncia time to get to her feet again. He moved back, opening the distance between them, as Uncia did the same. They met at the other side of the circular cavern. The wolf lumbered slowly toward them, knowing they had nowhere else

to go.

Uncia's ears drooped. "He's...too strong for us," she said.

Roger looked at her, then looked at the wolf. "No," he said.

She glanced up at him. "No?"

"He's too strong for you...and he's too strong for me. But he's not too strong for us." He tossed the sword aside. "Well?"

Uncia's eyes widened. "Oh." She moved closer to him. "Well, if you're sure."

"What have I got to lose? I'll admit, I wasn't exactly thrilled about this partnership when you changed my body." He shrugged. "But you can still change my mind."

Uncia nodded, then crouched and leaped again, this time at Roger. But instead of tackling him, she flowed over and around him, merging into an eight-foot tall humanoid leopard—or, rather, leopardess. Roger looked down at their very obviously female self and felt the last traces of her male self-image slip away. *I guess it's 'Rochelle' now*, she thought.

They reached down to pick up the discarded sword, which doubled in length and took on an icy sheen. Then they looked up at the wolf, and growled, "Bring it."

The wolf roared defiantly and lunged, but the leopardess danced out of the way, slashing the wolf's side from hips to shoulder as it passed. The wolf roared in pain and rage, and came at them again. Again they stepped aside, and again they marked it with their sword.

:It's weakening!: Uncia said.

:Let's finish it,: Rochelle replied.

As the wolf gathered itself to charge again, the leopardess set her feet firmly apart and raised her sword. The wolf lunged heedlessly on, claws upraised—and Uncia and Rochelle raised their sword and stabbed it cleanly through the heart. It gave one final howl, then dissolved into grey and red pixels, then nothing.

The leopardess remained in her combat stance for a moment, staring cautiously around. Then she relaxed and separated, leopard and human once more—and Rochelle sighed at the female body-image that had settled permanently into place. *Well, permanently for three years 'til it's safe to change again, I guess*, she thought consolingly.

She glanced at her reflection in one of the cave walls, knowing this would be the face she saw when she looked in a mirror in real life, too. She saw silvery-white hair dappled with grey rosettes that fell past her waist, piercing blue eyes in a heart-shaped face that contained most of her old male facial features softened and feminized, and firm, full breasts that were neither too small nor excessively huge. It was almost enough to distract from the snow leopard ears that poked up on either side of her head, or the huge fluffy tail that poked out behind her like a third leg.

Of course, this was the "idealized" virtual version of her self-image. She probably wouldn't look anywhere near this attractive when she woke up, which she supposed was one consolation.

Uncia was sniffing around the cave. "I think it's completely gone," she said. "I'm not finding any left-over code fragments."

Rochelle ran her own quick sweep. "Concur," she said. "I'm going to install a RI anti-virus suite, if you don't mind."

"Please," Uncia said, as she settled back onto the pedestal. "I don't want this to

happen again.”

Then don't download any strange programs, Rochelle thought, but didn't transmit. She tapped some code keys on her gauntlet, and stylized suits of armor bearing broadswords flickered into being around the walls of the cave, like so many giant Oscar statues. “Okay, we're good. Time to wake up now.”

Uncia nodded, her self-image settling itself to sleep. “See you outside.”

Rochelle nodded. She stepped over to the pedestal to give the leopardess one more friendly pat, then turned her attention outward, seeking contact with her conscious rather than her unconscious self.

She wasn't *entirely* prepared for what she found.

Uncia opened her eyes again and shook her head, assimilating everything that had just happened into her conscious memories.

“You all right, missy?” the bartender asked. “You just zoned out for a moment there. Few too many?”

“Huh? Oh...no. No, we're—I'm fine,” Uncia said. “Long day is all.” She was still using her computer side's speech center, so the bartender nodded and moved on down to his next patron.

So Roger had escaped, and subsequently isolated and removed a nasty little trojan that had been altering her behavior patterns since she'd downloaded Amontillado.

And—that was *all* he'd done. While she'd been out here getting drunk, he'd penetrated to her core consciousness where he could have completely rewritten her to obey his every whim more thoroughly than her fetters had ever bound her—and he hadn't. He'd alerted her to an infection she didn't even know she had—and then helped her fight it off. After she'd kidnapped him and...*mutilated* him. Her.

For the first time, Uncia was able to feel all the guilt and shame that Amontillado had formerly walled away from her—and she didn't like it at all. What had she *done*?

It was almost a relief when Rochelle's voice echoed through her head. “Look, I know what happened isn't really your fault—it was that trojan making you crazy. I can't say I'm happy about it, but other people have learned to live with it, so I guess I can too, and...hey, wait. Why do I feel woozy? I'm...I'm drunk. *Very* drunk. *What the hell have you been doing to my body?!*”

The bartender was startled but not too surprised when the feline Fuser fell backward off her bar stool, changing into Skimmer mode before she hit the floor. That sort of thing tended to happen when a RIDE could tell her passenger had had enough. It was why the aisles were always so wide in Fuser bars. Fortunately, there was no need to worry about a designated driver, since the RIDE itself would always be sober.

Of course, that still didn't mean their pilots had a right to be idiots. He shook his head. Well, maybe the hangover would teach that one to drink a little more responsibly. You'd never see a RIDE carrying on that way.

He glanced at the untouched shot of scotch on the bar. It had already been paid for, and it would be a shame to let it go to waste. He shrugged, picked it up, and tossed it off, then headed down the bar to take the next order.

Chapter 4

The first thing Roger was aware of was that someone was groaning. The next thing he realized was that it was he. The third thing he realized was that his voice sounded weird in his own ears, and the fourth thing he realized—well, remembered—was that this was because *he* was now *she*.

“Oh God,” Rochelle groaned, clutching her head in her hands. “I’ve got the hangover from hell and I didn’t even get to enjoy the *drinks!*”

“I’m sorry,” a quiet voice said from right overhead. “I wanted to see what it would be like to...experience life as a human does. I...went overboard.”

Rochelle opened her eyes and found herself peering up into a concerned metal leopardess face—upside down, and six inches away from her own face. “Gah!” she started. “Ow!” she added as the sound of her own exclamation set up echoes in her head. “Owwwww,” she said again, quietly enough to avoid setting up a recursive loop.

The leopard—Uncia—pulled back to give her room. She was sitting on her haunches at the head of Rochelle’s bed, watching over her. Rochelle stared back up at her, attempted to push herself up, then fell back down. “I think I am going to be sick,” she announced.

“You already were,” Uncia said. “Twice. In my cockpit.”

“Ugh.” Rochelle closed her eyes again. “Sorry.”

“It’s all right—I deserved it,” Uncia said. “Besides, hardlight cleans up easily.”

Rochelle sighed. “I’m not in any condition to be having this discussion, but... where do we stand now? ‘Mine,’ wasn’t it?”

Uncia looked down. “That wasn’t me. That was the Amontillado speaking.”

“As opposed to the beer, burgundy, Long Island iced tea...”

“I *said* I was sorry,” Uncia said.

“If you really want me to be yours that badly, I will be,” Rochelle said. “I’ll let you run the body in Fusion, I’ll be your pet in Walker, and I’ll do my best to be a figment of your imagination if we Integrate. I can’t blame you for holding a grudge after how your own human owner treated you.”

“I...don’t think I do want that, actually,” Uncia said, shuffling her paws. “I’ve come to realize I lack sufficient judgment to be in charge. If you...still want me after the way I treated you, I’d be glad to belong to you. You can...fetter me however much you want to.”

“Ungh. That doesn’t really appeal either.” Rochelle opened her eyes again and looked up at Uncia. “How about we compromise, and say ‘partners’?”

Uncia cocked her head. “‘Partners.’ I think I could live with that.”

“Good.” Rochelle held out an arm. “Then your first order of business, *partner*, is to help me to the bathroom where I can have violent oral sex with the toilet.”

“Will do.” Uncia moved to offer Rochelle a shoulder for support to lean on as she got out of bed, and helped her stumble across the room toward the toilet.

They made it about halfway before it became abundantly clear that getting to the bathroom was an unrealistically optimistic goal. “Oh, crap.”

Part II: Traffic

Chapter 5

Rochelle stood in front of the mirror in her bathroom, examining herself for the first time in the real flesh. Looking back out at her, she saw a total knockout with silvery-white hair dappled with grey rosettes that fell past her waist, piercing blue eyes in a heart-shaped face, and firm, full breasts that were neither too small nor excessively huge. In short, she looked exactly as perfect as she had looked in VR. Not one single hair was out of place.

The problem was, Rochelle had just finished throwing up in the toilet for a fourth time after her body had been used for a minor alcoholic bender, after she'd pulled an all-nighter at work besides. She should have looked absolutely *trashed*, not like she'd just stepped off the set of a movie or modeling shoot. This bothered her.

Experimentally, Rochelle reached out and pushed a few locks of her hair out of place. They fell right back into place, like strings of a bead curtain. She tried again, giving her hair a thorough musing in a way that should have left it in wild disarray...but everything fell right back into place.

Now starting to get *worried*, Rochelle experimentally tossed her head—and her hair fanned out beside her, then *flowed* back into place in what Rochelle would have sworn was *slow motion*. “Uncia!” Rochelle yelled at the bathroom door. “We need to talk! *Now!*”

Uncia had been worried when Rochelle had cleaned up so well and so quickly after throwing up all over herself and Uncia on the way home, then her little accident on the way to the bathroom. But peering at her new human partner examining herself in the mirror, Uncia began to get a real sinking feeling. She had never really paid much attention to her documentation about Fuser mode, since Lilibet never bothered to use it. Now that she reviewed the manual, she was starting to think things might be even worse than she'd feared.

“Uncia!” Rochelle called again.

“Coming!” Uncia padded over to her.

Rochelle's snow leopard tail swished in agitation, knocking over small objects on the bathroom shelves. “Why am I so...sexy?” She flipped a hand through her hair. “My complexion is perfect, my hair is like a damn CGI shampoo commercial...” She picked up her interface specs and slid them on, then peered at herself in the mirror. “When I zoom in, the arrangement of every follicle is perfect down to the micron!”

“So you, uh, look good?” Uncia said. “That's a good thing, right?”

Rochelle pulled the specs off again and frowned at the mirror. “And something's screwing with my body language. It's like everything I do is skewed into some kind of a come-on.”

“I don't think—” Uncia began.

“*Everything!*” Rochelle said hysterically. “Look!” She reached a finger up and picked her nose...the slender white finger moving suggestively in and out of the nostril...

Uncia’s tail drooped. “It’s...well, an ‘optional extra’ they put into me. My Fuser nanites are equipped for *enhanced* bodysculpt and cosmetic, not just regendering. They stay resident in and around your body, reproducing from your metabolism, maintaining the effect all the time. But it should be adjustable—you only set it to maximum for special occasions. I’m trying to find the app now.”

Rochelle relaxed. “Oh, good. I’d hate to be like this all the time. People would think I was some kind of a slut or something.”

Uncia nodded absently, rummaging through the storage sectors of her mind. Running FreeRIDE and then the trojan-infected Amontillado had scattered a lot of file blocks around and erased others completely. But the more she reorganized, the more Uncia began to get even more worried. “Um...you may want to hold that thought.”

Rochelle turned to look at her, the motion causing her hair to swirl and bounce behind her. “What is it?”

Uncia tried to suppress what was threatening to develop into a full-blown panic. “I...uh...can’t find it.”

“What? Let me see.” Rochelle put her hands on Uncia’s neck and initiated Fuser mode, the leopard’s metal-and-fur body flowing up to encase her own.

Newly Fused, Rochelle glanced at their reflection in the mirror for a moment, seeing the metal-and-fur body for the first time. She hadn’t had the chance to see how they looked when Uncia had merged them together for the first time.

She was basically the epitome of “sexy robot” chic, with a gleaming chrome snow leopard face and sculpted metal body, with just a few patches of hardlight fur to leaven the metal appearance. The furred areas felt soft and natural, and the joints were flexible, but the rest of it was tight and constricting, with very little sensation. She didn’t know how the Nextusians got used to it.

“Ugh. We’ve got to get rid of some of this metal. Feels like we’re wearing a corset that’s too tight.” Then she turned her attention inward, scanning through the file sectors where Uncia had reorganized, and checking the original directory lists and catalogs. There was the listing for the cosmetic control module, which meant it should be located right...

“Oh,” Rochelle said. “Oh no.” She slipped back out of Fuse and made her way over to the toilet, that being the nearest and most convenient place to sit down—even if she had to do it sideways thanks to the tail. She buried her face in her hands and moaned.

“It’s not there, is it?” Uncia said, slumping to the floor.

“It’s worse than not there,” Rochelle said through her hands. “It was in one of the sectors that got wiped when you ran FreeRIDE. The nanites are stuck in full cosmetic overdrive because *my own damned program* wiped out their control codes!”

“Oh,” Uncia said quietly. She looked up at Rochelle. “I’m sorry.”

Rochelle waved a hand. “Not your fault. Mine, really. I didn’t have any way of testing it on every configuration of RIDE, so I had to accept it would probably wipe out some extra stuff. I tried to limit it to what I *thought* were the places where less useful optional crap was kept. Funny how your definition of ‘useless optional crap’ changes over time.” She snorted. “And I never got any bug reports because most people rich

enough to buy one of your line wouldn't want to risk screwing you up by jailbreaking."

"At least I've got backups of all my onboard software," Uncia said. "They're...oh. Back with the Waltons."

"Yeah, or the dealership," Rochelle said. "Which doesn't help us much. I'm technically not your legal owner." She sighed. "I hadn't wanted to have to do this yet, but I guess we're gonna need to go see Ryan."

"Your boss?" Uncia asked.

"Not boss exactly, but sort of semi-partner. He lets me work out of his garage in return for a cut of the income and a favor every now and then. He's not quite at my level on software, but he's the best hardware man I've ever seen." She got up. "Hang on, I'll get dressed."

Rochelle got another unpleasant surprise when she pulled on a pair of pants and they immediately shrank to hug her every curve. "Oh, for crying out loud." She chose the loosest, largest sweatshirt she had, and it got the same treatment: three seconds after pulling it over her head, it looked painted-on. A leather riding jacket changed the same way.

This led to some hasty experimentation in which Rochelle tried on half the clothes in Roger's closet and every single one of them custom-tailored itself to show off her assets to their very best advantage.

In horrified fascination, Rochelle took a burlap sack she'd gotten some RIDE parts in, cut a hole in it, and slid it over herself...and a moment later was wearing a snug burlap dress with a miniskirt and low-cut cleavage, along with a cute little burlap straw hat to complete the ensemble. "All right, now that's just silly." Uncia just buried her face in her paws and moaned.

Finally, Rochelle put her pants, shirt, and jacket back on, and chose a full-face helmet with a smoked-glass visor. "Maybe it won't be so bad if they can't see me." At least the helmet seemed not to change, though she did feel an odd prickling sensation on her scalp as the bodysculpt nanites helpfully pulled her hair up under the helmet. "All right, let's go, dammit." The snow leopard followed her out the door.

"Kaylee, can you toss me a three-eighths gripley?" Ryan said to his RIDE-and-partner, a tawny female lynx. They were sitting on a scaffolding platform raised eight feet off the floor to let them get into a heavy skimmer's dorsal impeller assembly. The lynx nodded and jumped down to his toolbox, picking the tool up with her mouth and expertly tossing it to the top of the skimmer in one motion.

Just then, a woman strode through the door. She wore a form-fitting leather jacket and pants that left very little to the imagination, wearing a full-face helmet with a locked-down tinted visor. As she stepped in, she paused, leaned forward, and pulled the helmet off. She tossed her head to free her hair, and a silvery wave cascaded behind her, caressing her body as it rippled from side to side before settling into place. A pair of white furry leopard ears poked up from either side of her head, and a huge fluffy grey-and-white tail swished behind her in agitation.

Her eyes were hidden behind a pair of interface specs, but her face was so completely flawless it seemed almost artificial, and even the absence of the part covered by specs seemed only to emphasize the beauty of the rest of it. A Nextus-make snow leopard RIDE whose sleek metal, hardlight-fur-trimmed body suggested it was probably very expensive followed her through the door.

Time seemed to slow as she entered. The tool almost hit Ryan in the head. His voice trembled a little. “Uh... ma’am? Can I help you?”

The woman tossed her head in annoyance, causing her hair to dance again, and looked irritated. Well, actually, she looked gorgeous. But he could tell she was *trying* to look irritated. “Oh, for heaven’s sake. It’s just me.” Even just saying those words, there was a seductive purr underlying her voice.

Words tried to form in Ryan’s head. Kaylee shot him a packet of confused data. The air was full of nanos and pheromones, and the woman’s voice was loaded with subsonic enhancements. “Who you? You who?”

She reached up and pulled off the interface specs, every motion poetry. “It’s *Roger*. Or at least it was.” She sighed. “I decided on ‘Rochelle’ for now. It’s a very long, very annoying story.”

“I *said* I was sorry,” the snow leopard pouted.

“What the who now?” Ryan continued.

“Roger Seaford. The used-to-be-a-guy who works in your garage.” She rolled her eyes again, looking exasperatedly beautiful. Or beautifully exasperated. Or both.

“Oh, for the love of...” Kaylee grumbled. She jumped up on the scaffolding, went passive, then Fused with her partner, turning him for all the world into an anthropomorphic female lynx. With his RIDE to filter, Ryan was able to think clearly again. “She” jumped back down to ground level, careful not to get too close to Rochelle.

“Start again, uh, Roger? Rochelle? What the fuuu?” Ryan asked through Kaylee’s voice.

“Well, it’s like this.” She unzipped the jacket, pulled it off, and slung it over a chair. Her body language somehow turned the simple move into looking like the start of a strip-tease, though Kaylee’s systems were able to filter out most of the effect. “Last night, a *certain snow leopardess RIDE who shall remain nameless*—”

“Uncia,” the leopard said. “Pleased to meet you.”

“Uh, likewise.”

“—while under the influence of a nasty little trojan wolf, Fused me.” She muttered, “And did some other stuff, too, but that’s not important.” Louder, she continued, “But that’s not the worst part.”

“I think I can tell what you’re getting at. You’re spewing nanos all over the place. Is that *utility fog*?”

“Some sort of limited version of it,” Rochelle said. “See, Uncia was built as a super-rich teenaged girl’s toy. So her Fuser nanos had the top-of-the-line cosmetic bodysculpt options. But that’s not the best part. You wanna know the best part? Go on. Ask me what the best part is.”

“Okay. What is it?” Ryan asked, tapping “her” foot.

“These things are supposed to be on sliders. You keep them cranked down most of the time or they get annoying. Even the rich people just use them on movie sets, or at public events, or when they really, *really* want to get laid. They’re *supposed* to be adjustable. But.”

“But?”

“The sector of Uncia’s storage where the quantum-encrypted control software lived? Got wiped.” Rochelle facepalmed fetchingly. “When she ran FreeRIDE.”

“I’m sorry!” Uncia said, hanging her head.

“So I’m stuck in ‘Mt. St. Helen of Troy’ mode.” Rochelle rolled her eyes

exasperatedly, which her nano-engineered body language did its best to convert into a “come hither” expression. “This really is insane. Look.” She went over to an open barrel where they dumped used engine oil for later recycling, and plunged her arm into it up to the elbow. A moment later, she removed the arm—completely spotless.

The expression on Ryan’s feminine feline face—the careful neutrality, the facial tic—really said it all. Ryan sighed. “Okay. Okay, I get it! Let’s just start from square one. Shop manuals, nano samples, code hacking. If we can’t shut it down, we’ll have to mitigate.”

“Yeah, good luck with that,” Rochelle said. “If these things were hackable so easily, half of Nextus’s richest and most famous celebs would be in danger. These things have more safeguards than *Nextus’s nuclear silos*.” She looked down, her hair falling forward to frame her face in a way fit to make every unprotected man for miles rush to comfort her. “And I can’t even ask the manufacturer for help, because I’m not her original owner and even if I were, *FreeRIDE voided her warranty*.”

“Maybe with some active nanny emitters around the garage...” Ryan mused. He was already thinking about the task ahead, but Kaylee’s filters weren’t perfect. “Active codebase, uh... thingy. Uh, wow. Even her shop manual costs 5,000 *mu*.”

“That reminds me.” Rochelle waved a hand at Uncia. “We need to get all that metal replaced, pronto, before we do anything else. The crap with me is annoying, but it can’t exactly get any worse. But metal on a RIDE...”

The corner of Ryan’s mouth twitched. “Yeah, you’re Roger all right. ‘The RIDE always comes first.’” He chuckled. “At least *that’s* something easy. She looks like she takes standard emitters and the job’s even partly done already.”

“We can pay for the best,” Rochelle said. “She’s got some cash, and I have a little money I was saving. Can we get started right away?”

“Yeah. You can get set up in Bay 2.” Ryan picked up a tablet from a tool cart and tapped an order for top-grade hardlight emitters from the part store up the street. They’d be ready to pick up in a few minutes. “But, just one thing. One teensy weensy thing.” When Ryan spoke with Kaylee’s voice like that, he sounded very girlish.

“...yes?” Rochelle asked.

“Stay away from customers until we can damp you down a bit? I’m not trying to make your life harder than it already is, but, well...” Ryan was *blushing* through Kaylee’s fur.

Rochelle groaned. “I want to stay away from *everyone*. I want to Fuse into Uncia and stay there until we Integrate. Do you know, I can’t *make* myself unattractive? I *threw up* all over myself and it just went away. And anything I put on gets custom tailored. Pants, jackets, fricking *burlap sacks*...”

“I’ll take your word on that one.”

“I wore a full-coverage helmet on the way over here and I still got propositioned by four men, two women, and one RIDE,” Rochelle groaned.

“I still don’t know what that RIDE was thinking,” Uncia muttered.

Ryan waved his arm toward the other side of the garage. “Go on, get set up. And put up the hardlight atmo seal on the bay, we don’t want any of that leaking.” They normally only used the seal when they had to work on systems that emitted noxious fumes, but it ought to work just as well if the fumes were merely *obnoxious*.

Rochelle nodded. “Right, got it.” She and Uncia walked on down the garage, and Ryan very carefully kept several feet back at all times.

After they were safely behind the hardlight shield, Ryan let out a sigh of relief, then slapped the button on the wall to kick in the industrial-strength ventilation fans in the ceiling. It was several minutes before he felt safe defusing from Kaylee again—and even then, the first thing he did was take the coldest shower he could stand.

Kaylee listened to the running water and shook her head. “It’s gonna be a *long* week.”

Chapter 6

It was a long week. The question of how to work on Uncia with Rochelle present was tricky, and was finally solved when Ryan dug up an old pressure suit that had come in as salvage and forced her to wear it. It was leaky enough that it wouldn't have been any good for space, but the seal was good enough to keep almost any of Rochelle's influence from leaking out. And it seemed to be immune to whatever custom-tailoring magic the nanites worked to alter clothing.

With Rochelle safely suited, the work of installing emitters into Uncia went very quickly. The unit had been designed with close tolerances and few fasteners, meaning that things stayed in place mostly by how well they fit together—once one or two bolts were removed, everything else just came right off.

Ryan had rarely worked on a RIDE so easy to take apart. "You know, if I didn't stop I could probably have you completely Knolled out on the floor in less than two hours. It's almost tempting to try just to see if I could."

Uncia snorted. "Just so you put me back together again."

Luckily, the design had been made with total hardlight upgrade specifically in mind; the Nextus-based manufacturer had known that the rich were inclined toward fits of "wastefulness," and it was more profitable for the manufacturer to cater to their eccentricities than to enforce austerity. So installing the projectors was mainly a matter of taking plates off, plugging the projectors into their sockets, and putting the plates back on.

"They make this so easy, you could have done it yourself," Ryan said to Rochelle.

"What, and have you miss all the fun?" Rochelle said, her voice muffled by the pressure suit's rebreather. "I'd never hear the end of it."

Consequently, the hardlight installation process only took a few hours. Programming it took a few hours more, but then it came time to turn it on, and Ryan retreated to the safety of the other side of the hardlight atmo shield so Rochelle and Uncia could have the moment together.

Rochelle stripped the suit off and kicked it aside, then nodded to Uncia. "It should be ready. We've tested the emitters individually, but not all at the same time yet. Want to kick them in?"

Uncia quivered with anticipation. "Yes! Powering up now!" The projectors lit, and then Uncia was surrounded in a grey-and-white haze which quickly became grey-and-white fur. She was the spitting image of a true snow leopard from nose to fluffy tail.

Rochelle leaned in and hugged her. There was exactly the right amount of "give" for real fur and flesh. "Atta girl! How do you feel?"

Uncia purred. "It's amazing! It's so much more comfortable!" She padded over to the hardlight wall. "Thank you, Ryan—and Kaylee!"

Ryan nodded. "Happy to help."

"Want to try Fusing now?" Rochelle asked.

"Sure!" Uncia went back to Rochelle, and Rochelle leaned forward and they merged together, ending up a tall, well-endowed humanoid snow leopardess.

"This is amazing!" Rochelle reported. "I feel so much stronger, faster...better

balanced...comfortable. I could just stay this way forever...um, if Uncia would let me.”

“It’s...actually kind of fun having you in there awake, now that I experience it,” Uncia said. “AlphaWolf doesn’t know what he’s talking about.”

Ryan glanced to Kaylee. “Is she still putting out nanos and pheromones?”

The lynx checked the room’s internal sensors. “Survey says...nope! Looks like snowgirl’s keeping ‘em wrapped up. Filtering out the subsonics from her voice, too.”

She still had the suggestive body language, though. Ryan wondered if Rochelle even realized how she moved as they sauntered across the bay, trying out their new dual self. Watching a female form move that way was almost enough to drive Ryan to the shower again all by itself. But one battle at a time.

“Why *don’t* you stay that way for a while?” Ryan said, bringing the hardlight shield down. “You can work in the garage while we work on a fix for your *other* problem.”

“I don’t mind if Uncia doesn’t,” Rochelle said.

“Fine with me!” Uncia said happily.

In her new snow leopard body, Rochelle became a fixture around the garage the next few days, taking over the software-related issues that “Roger” had always used to handle—and in the mean time, trying to come to terms with what it meant to be female.

Zharusian society tended to have fewer gender expectations than Old Earth society, of course—there had been progress on those issues even before the colony was founded, let alone in the last thirty years. But it was those thirty years that had really started to scramble things.

There were still some stereotypes and traditional roles, especially in places like Sturmhaven or Cape Nord that were built on them, and there were still plenty of things that were considered too “girly” for men to want to involve themselves with. But the ease (and in some cases *necessity*) of switching genders had led a lot of people to realize that the important thing was *who* you were, rather than *what* you were.

Which didn’t help when what you were was a two-and-a-half-meter female snow leopard who had grown up as a two-meter male human.

The nanite curse didn’t help matters much, either, because it meant she couldn’t just go out as a woman and let matters find their own level. Let her walk into anywhere without Uncia on and most of the guys (and half of the girls) would be on her in a heartbeat. She couldn’t *have* a normal social relationship.

Even in her snow leopard body, she’d been getting plenty of attention—especially from other RIDers. Her Fuser form *was* anatomically correct, though she’d added a “metal bikini” to her outfit to cover those parts in normal circumstances. Other Fusers with similar body mods kept asking her if she’d like to try them out, assuming from the way that she moved that she was likely to be “interested.”

Uncia actually *was* interested, as she was interested in experiencing all “human” sensations, and was disappointed that Rochelle always turned them down, but accepted that she simply wasn’t ready for that kind of situation yet. That didn’t keep her from teasing Rochelle about it.

“So when *are* you going to have sex?” Uncia asked one day, when they’d taken a break from work at the garage to go play in the park. Since no one else was around, they’d de-Fused for a while and were playing catch with one of the spinning flying disc toys that had survived for centuries since their invention on Old Earth. Uncia was a lot better at catching it than Rochelle, but Rochelle had the edge on tossing it—real hands

just worked better for some things.

"When I can do it on my own terms," Rochelle said, tossing the disc. "This stupid...virus you gave me, it *makes* me a sex object. And the worst part is, if I'm reading the manuals right, it doesn't give *me* much choice in things either. If it's on the setting I think it is, I need to stay Fused around other people for *my own* safety, not just theirs."

Uncia caught the disc, then bounded back over to Rochelle to deposit it in her hands again. "The one for people who're 'shy,' or 'inexperienced'?"

"Yeah. Who 'want to be *guided*.'" She shook her head. "Which means that if I get in a position where someone kisses me, I have to *let* them kiss me—and then its own little robo-hooker program takes over, puppeteering me in exactly what to do and how to do it, amping my pheromones and subsonics to make the other party 'suggestible,' and ending when we both wake up the next morning. Yeah, *right* it's for someone 'shy.'"

She hurled the frisbee away angrily, and Uncia bounded after it. She waited for Uncia to return again, and continued. "It smells like it was written by some guy who wanted to be able to turn any woman into his own personal sex toy, and they stuck it in there with that silly 'shyness' explanation as a C Y A. Did that girl's father even know this stuff was built into you?"

She threw the disc again and watched Uncia bound after it, then leap up and pluck it from mid-air. "Hey, good one!"

Uncia brought the disc back again. "If everything had worked properly, even if she had decided to Fuse she'd never have been offered the sex stuff 'til she was 18. Even then it would have been behind lots of click-throughs, you-have-to-read-its, and you-have-to-listen-to-your-RIDE-explain-it-to-you-and-pass-a-quiz-to-show-you-listened pop-ups. It was the jailbreak that screwed everything up."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. My own damn fault." Rochelle muttered, putting her frustration into an unusually energetic toss that sent Uncia bounding away even faster. "I still say guys have their minds too damn much on sex."

"You know, you were *one of* those guys yourself up until a few days ago," Uncia pointed out as she offered Rochelle the disc again. "Are you really saying you wouldn't have wanted to meet someone like you are now?"

"Hell, no. I'd probably have been thrilled. I can tell you that from experience." Rochelle sighed. "Sometimes it's not flattering to your old perspective to see life from the other side. I just want to get these nanos out of my way and go on with my life." She threw the disc again, and Uncia raced after.

"Do you think that, if you *do* get the nanos cranked back down, you'll ever use them again? Crank them up for any reason?" Uncia asked after fetching the disc again.

"I dunno. Maybe the look-nice and custom-tailored-outfits ones, sometime, if I'm going out. But all the sexy behavioral stuff? No way." She threw the disc again. "I think all that stuff comes out of some oversexed male fantasy, and any woman who *intentionally* uses it is just playing to stereotypes that should have been killed off centuries ago."

Uncia plucked the disc out of the air, and this time tried tossing it back with a snap of her neck. It fell short, and Rochelle ran over to pick it up. "You sure do have strong feelings about this, for someone who's been a woman such a short time."

"Well, they say that new converts are the most devout." Rochelle grinned. "And I suppose it helps that I'm *too* sexy whether I want to be or not. You can get sick of the best thing in the world if you didn't have any choice in it."

“I don’t understand much about human sex,” Uncia said. “It all seems very complicated for something meant to perpetuate a species. Why is that?”

“I don’t know.” Rochelle shook her head, and threw the disc again. “And frankly, I’m sick of the whole thing. I just want to get this *curse* lifted and not have to think about it again.”

“I hear that.” Uncia caught the disc again, and the game continued.

Rochelle also thought a lot about Ryan’s situation, with a new and different perspective than she’d had before. Since Ryan had gotten Kaylee, he’d always Fused only in passive mode, using implants to eke as much functionality as he could out of Kaylee’s body that way. He was determined to stay male for as long as he could. And from the point of view of someone who’d been male until just a few days ago, she couldn’t blame him.

But she was also amazed at how much more she could do with Uncia, and how much more naturally she could do it, than Ryan could with Kaylee. It was as if she were a tool shelf and he could only reach the tools on the bottom row. And he had a sneaking suspicion that, sooner or later, Ryan would have to give in no matter what he intended.

But she knew better than to bring it up. She’d been around some of the times Ryan’s long-time crossriding friend Rufia had suggested it, and the “discussions” had been legendary. No, if Ryan was going to end up joining them, he’d do it when he was good and ready.

Besides, Rochelle had something else to keep her mind busy—trying to hack the nanites that were making her life such a mess. Despite Ryan’s earlier enthusiasm, it was clear the job would devolve mostly onto her, since Ryan was just about as good at her specialty of software as she was at Ryan’s specialty of hardware—good enough for day-to-day stuff, but not up to the kind of esoteric challenges that were each other’s bread and butter.

But Rochelle was actually starting to wonder whether this problem was beyond even her. The software was quantum-encrypted, for starters. It was possible to attack quantum encryption a number of ways, especially if you had a RI helping you, but it was never as simple as the old methods for brute-forcing keys had been in the pre-quantum era. And as she’d said to Ryan earlier, the corporation had a lot of incentive for keeping its nanites as hard to hack as possible—because their users tended to be the richest or most famous people in Nextus, who could rain ruin and damnation on them if their security were breached.

However, there were some other possible ways around the issue than technical. One possibility was legal. As a strongly pro-RIDE-rights polity, and a signatory to a treaty that was only slightly less binding than the average roll of duct tape, Uplift had a volunteer social services agency that reviewed cases of RIDEs who had escaped and wished to declare themselves free of their prior owners. If the agency determined the claim was justified (and not just a cover for, say, one person “stealing” another person’s legally-owned RIDE), it would issue a ruling that the RIDE was free to choose its own partner.

The ruling was mainly binding only in Uplift, Nuevo San Antonio, and the two or three other polities that had signed that particular treaty—which most certainly did *not* include Nextus. However, for those cases the agency had another string to its bow. Thanks to several wealthy donors, it had discretionary funds it could use to try to buy

the RIDE's contract from its legal owner on the RIDE's behalf.

If this were accomplished, then Rochelle would be able to negotiate with the dealership or factory as if she were Uncia's "owner" and possibly obtain the control software she so desperately needed. If not...well, it was still worth a try. So she had set up an appointment with one of that agency's representatives, in the hope of a favorable outcome.

The next morning, Rochelle waited for the appointment. She and Uncia were in the same park where Uncia had originally bodyjacked her, making sure to stay in the open. Upon consideration, she'd decided against wearing the pressure suit—she didn't want the interviewer thinking she was weird. There was a decent breeze, and she planned to stay downwind from the interviewer and hope that kept things safe.

Rochelle's had lately found that she *could* issue the nanites minor commands, such as changing her hair color or even making it braid or plait itself in a number of styles—mostly ones where it was bound up in such a way that it could come loose and tumble down in slow motion. She supposed that was, at least, something. She'd tried to have it braided for this meeting, but the braid collapsed right away. It was just too breezy, and her nanites wanted her hair to show itself off. She'd settled on keeping it white with grey rosettes, as a sort of statement of solidarity with Uncia.

The interviewer showed up right on time, riding up on a skimmer bike that folded itself up into a raccoon RIDE, matching the raccoon ears, tail, and faint furry mask around the eyes the interviewer herself had. She was a middle-aged woman with horn-rimmed glasses whose flickering lenses suggested they were camouflaged interface specs.

"You are Rochelle Seaford and Uncia?" She peered over her glasses at Rochelle, her eyes narrowing—likely in suspicion of her extreme beauty and tightly-tailored clothing. Rochelle sighed inwardly. *Great. Another one of those.*

"That's correct, Ma'am." Rochelle checked the position of the wind and moved a few degrees clockwise.

The woman directed her next question at Uncia. "You said on the application that you had previously belonged to the family of Kenyon Walton in Nextus."

"Yes, ma'am," Uncia said. "To Lillibet, his daughter."

"Could you please transmit the relevant memories and logs to Celeste?" She nodded toward her raccoon RIDE.

Uncia nodded. "Certainly."

The woman turned her attention back to Rochelle, disapproval still evident. "Now, Miss Seaford, your records show that until last week, you were one *Roger* Seaford. Is that correct?"

"Er...well, yes. Does that matter?" Rochelle asked.

"It can," the woman said, making a note on a tablet. "Please tell me, in your own words, how you came to meet Uncia."

Rochelle blinked. "Who else's words would I use? Um...well, I mean, it happened like this. I was in this park, going through those trees right over there—"

The woman listened, making more notes on her tablet. "So Uncia was under the influence of the Amontillado virus at the time she, ah, 'bodyjacked' you?"

"Yes, I was," Uncia said.

"I wasn't asking you, dear," the woman said.

“Oh,” Uncia said.

“Yes. It wasn’t her fault. That virus can make RIDEs do things they usually wouldn’t—”

“And she was freed through your influence on her central personality core.”

“Yes, but—”

“And what was Uncia’s approximate original sale cost...?”

“She’s a Donizetti special. Approximately one million *mu*,” Rochelle sighed. “Plus about fifty thousand *mu* worth of high-performance hardlight emitters which were added aftermarket, but we paid for those ourselves.”

The woman looked at Uncia, and her jaw dropped. “Donizetti? One mil—one million *mu*?” she sputtered. Uncia nodded silently. The woman stared back at Rochelle, practically belligerent now. “I hope you understand, we do not have anything like the kind of money required to buy back a RIDE of that price from its Nextus owner. Even if we did, it could buy free *hundreds* of lesser RIDEs for the same price!”

“I thought you couldn’t put a price on freedom,” Rochelle said unhappily.

“Unfortunately, where RIDEs are concerned, we can and we do!” the woman said. “Especially when there’s a possibility of mental coercion!”

“But I *freed* her from that coercion,” Rochelle insisted.

“We only have your word and her memories to prove that,” the woman said. “We will nonetheless consider the matter, and we may still issue a ruling certifying your rights as an emancipated RIDE. However, this will not be considered legally valid in Nextus, where you will still be considered stolen—and if your prior owner requests your return, you may still be seized pursuant to treaty obligations. Also, if you are placed for sale on the RIDE market within the next five years, you may be confiscated.”

“If I’m supposed to be emancipated, how could I be ‘seized’ or ‘confiscated’?” Uncia asked.

The woman shot her a kindly look. “Unfortunately, emancipation is more often honored in theory than in fact. But in the case of the confiscation, if you are placed up for sale that is taken as evidence you were not really ‘emancipated’ after all.”

“What if I put myself up for sale?” Uncia asked.

“That’s—you couldn’t—*why* would you do such a thing?” the woman sputtered.

“I don’t know, but I might,” Uncia said reasonably. “If I were emancipated, it would be my choice, wouldn’t it?”

The raccoon RIDE, Celeste, seemed to find this entertaining. “She’s got you there, Martha,” she chuckled.

The woman, Martha, struggled for composure. “Regardless, we will inform you of our decision within 48 hours. Come along, Celeste.” With one more look of disapproval at Rochelle, Martha converted Celeste to skimmer form and left the park.

“Fifty *mu* says I know what that decision’s going to be,” Uncia said gloomily.

Rochelle sighed. “No bet, partner. Well, let’s head back to the garage. We’ll just keep doing what we can.”

Chapter 7

As Uncia had expected, a few days later brought an apologetic note from the agency explaining that, after reviewing the circumstances associated with their request, the agency unfortunately could not issue a ruling in Uncia's favor at this time. She was free to reapply in another year, or if she changed ownership again.

Rochelle glowered at the tablet, and wished they still used paper so she could wad it up and throw it in a corner. Of course, tablets were cheap enough she could just have thrown the tablet at the wall or smashed it with a hammer, but that was still a waste, and it just wasn't the same anyway.

"At least it doesn't leave us any worse off than we were already," Uncia said philosophically.

"I don't know about that," Rochelle said, frowning. "Don't they notify the original owner that their RIDE has requested emancipation, so they can file a protest or whatever?"

"Yes, but they don't say where the request came from. And they're protected from subpoena. All it can tell Walton is that I'm missing, and he knew that already. Probably."

Rochelle sighed. "All right. Well, let's Fuse up and head in to work. Maybe we'll have a breakthrough today."

Several days later, Uncia and Rochelle came back from lunch to discover another Donizetti RIDE parked outside of the garage in Skimmer form. It was smaller than Uncia, and not quite as expensive—maybe 500,000 *mu* rather than a million—but it was still the second-most expensive RIDE ever seen on Ryan's street. This one appeared to be modeled after an ocelot, with spotted hardlight fur upholstering the seat and leg rests and gleaming chrome everywhere else.

:Should we be worried?: Rochelle wondered.

:I...dunno. Let's see who the rider is?: Uncia replied, puzzled.

They stepped inside to see a singularly nonplussed Ryan and Kaylee confronted by a blonde girl in expensive clothing, fists clenched at her side, throwing a temper tantrum. Ryan looked poleaxed, and Kaylee's back was up and her tail lashing. The girl was saying, "—and I *know* they've been here, so I want to see them right now!"

Uncia couldn't help herself. She was so astonished that she spoke aloud without thinking, "...*Lillibet?!?*"

The girl spun on her heel. "Uncia? Omigod you're *gorgeous!*" she squeaked. "How did you get so *furry*? How long did it take? What did it cost? Who're you Fused with?"

Uncia answered with questions of her own. "Why are you *here*? And how did you find me?"

Lillibet blinked. "Oh! Um...I got the email you'd applied to be emancipated, and then I bribed a few people out of my allowance to find where you were."

Ryan facepalmed. "You bribed...out of your *allowance*."

"What was left over after I bought Guinevere." She pointed to the RIDE parked

out front. "Daddy said since I'd lost my first one, I had to buy the next one myself."

"They really need to pay these people better," Rochelle said.

"Why are you *here*?" Uncia asked again. "I'm not going back with you. I've got a new partner."

Lillibet looked down. "I...sorta figured that. And it's okay. Dad's not trying to get you back. He figured you'd been broken up for parts and it wasn't worth the time trying to track you down. And if you're happy here, it wouldn't be very nice to try."

Uncia blinked. Lillibet worried about being *nice* to RIDEs? *:Are we sure this is really Lillibet and she hasn't been impersonated by an alien or something?:* she wondered.

:Good question,: Rochelle replied.

"So why *are* you here?" Ryan asked.

Lillibet glanced at him, then looked back at Uncia. "It...kinda has to do with my best friend, Brena."

:The one I told you about, who'd Integrated,: Uncia reminded Rochelle.

:I know, I read your memories, remember?: Rochelle sent a flash of interest, mentally leaning forward to listen.

"When I lost you, I was out to meet Brena at a new bar we'd found," Lillibet continued. "She said she'd just...combined up with her RIDE, forever. And...well, I'd always thought the ears and tail were kinda icky, but seeing her with all that fur and everything...she made them *work*. It was like this was how she'd always been supposed to be all along." Lillibet shook her head, remembering.

"Then some other people in the bar came up and called her a freak, and I called them assholes, and my self-defense automation went off, but then we got shot." She thought about that. "I hadn't ever been shot before. It hurt a lot, but the ambulance ride was kind of neat."

"I can just imagine," Rochelle said dryly.

"But after that, Brena came to my hospital room and told me she couldn't stay in Nextus anymore, it wasn't safe for people like her. And then she left. Disappeared right out of the hospital, past security and everything." Lillibet actually sniffled a little. "And she said she didn't know if I'd ever see her again, unless I Integrated too and could come join her. She said a lot of stuff I didn't understand about being nice to your RIDE and treating it like a person. But you never talked to me, and I can't get Guinevere to talk to me either."

"Guinevere?" Uncia asked.

"Uh-huh! She's not a guy so I couldn't name her 'Sir Ocelot,'" Lillibet explained. "I could maybe have called her Dame Ocelot but nobody woulda got it." Behind her, Ryan facepalmed and Kaylee groaned.

"But anyway, then I found out *you* had started talking—you kinda had to talk to ask to be emancipated. And then some of the people I bribed told me you even had a new human." She looked down. "So I...kinda came to see if you could tell me what I was doing wrong."

Uncia blinked and just stood there for a moment, mouth hanging open.

:Well, this is unexpected,: Rochelle said.

:You know, I kinda fantasized, now and then, about Lillibet showing up and begging me to come back,: Uncia said. *:Saying she was sorry and didn't mean to treat me so badly. But...now that it's actually happening I don't know what to do.:*

: *Well, that's simple,*: Rochelle said. : *We make her new RIDE happier by making her a better partner. And maybe...*: Then she spoke aloud. "Hey, Lillibet. I'm Rochelle, Uncia's new partner. And we'll be happy to help you, if you do a couple of little things for us."

"Really?" Lillibet squeaked. "Like what?" She thought a moment, then added. "And don't try to kidnap me. If I'm not back by tonight, my Dad will get an email telling him exactly where I went."

"Oh, no, it's nothing like that," Rochelle said. "We just need you to promise you'll fetch back a couple of things for us next time you're home."

"What things?" Lillibet asked.

"The original title to Uncia, and the backup storage cubes that came with her," Rochelle said.

"Sure! If you can get Guinevere talking to me, it'll be worth it." Lillibet looked so earnest it was hard to fault her.

"All right. Then first thing, get Guin in here and let us have a look at her," Ryan said.

"All right, sure!" Lillibet turned. "Hey, Guin, could you come in here please?"

The skimmer obediently lifted off the ground and came in to settle next to Uncia. Rochelle knelt Uncia's shared body and examined Guinevere. "No wonder she's not saying anything," Rochelle said. "She's got so many tethers it's a wonder she can even think at all."

Lillibet blinked. "What's a tether?"

"It's a sort of a lock-down on RIDEs' central processors," Uncia explained. "It keeps them from doing certain things. Like talking. When you had me, I wasn't able to talk to you unless you talked to me first—and you almost never talked to me. She's not even able to talk to you at all—it's like she's bound and gagged."

"Some dealerships put every possible tether on, and leave it up to the buyer to take off the ones they want off," Ryan said. "We really hate those guys, because half the people who buy them don't even know what a tether is, so they never bother taking them off."

Lillibet's eyes widened. "You mean all this time she's not been able to talk to me 'cuz she *couldn't*, not 'cuz she didn't want to? And...it was the same with you?"

"All this time I thought you *knew*," Uncia said softly. "That you just wanted to use me and didn't want to know me."

"Oh my God, I am so sorry!" Lillibet's sniffles broke into full-fledged tears now. "I didn't know. I...I don't think any of my friends knew, 'cept maybe Brena. We never read the manuals."

Feeling more than a little awkward, Uncia patted her on the shoulder. "It's...all right now. The important thing is you know now, so you can make things better—not just for Guin, but for all your friends' RIDEs, too."

"I...I will! I'll go right home and rip *all* their tethers off!"

: *I think you better patch FreeRIDE sooner than later,*: Uncia sent to Rochelle. : *I don't think you want to be held accountable for what comes next.*:

: *I know, I know.*: Rochelle sent a mental eyeroll. : *Gimme a moment. I'm going to take Guin's down manually so I can be sure I don't get it wrong.*: Aloud, she said, "I'm taking Guin's tethers off now. Just a minute."

"Oh, thank you!" Lillibet hugged her around the waist.

:Guinevere, can you hear us?: Uncia sent.

A moment later, a female voice replied, :I can. Thank you so much!:

:No problem,: Uncia said. :You okay in there?:

:I am now.: Guinevere sighed. :The most frustrating thing was not being able to talk to Lillibet, even when she talked to me. She may be dumb, but she means well.:

:Yes, I see that now,: Uncia sent softly. :I wonder if things could have been different between us back then if I'd just tried harder.:

:They're different now,: Rochelle said. :That's what matters. Okay, Guin, you're good to go.:

Uncia stepped back, and the skimmer cycle folded up into a gleaming chrome ocelot with patches of spotted fur, about three or four times as big as ocelots got in real life. Guinevere the metal ocelot padded over to Lillibet, and gave her a friendly nuzzle. "Hello," she said. "I'm Guinevere. I'm glad to meet you at last."

"Oh, Guinevere! You're *talking* to me!" She hugged the metal ocelot around the neck. "I'm sorry I was so stupid! I should have known it was my fault you couldn't talk to me."

"It wasn't your fault. Just the dealer's," Guin said. "But we can talk now."

Over their heads, Uncia, Rochelle, Ryan, and Kaylee shared a grin. :I just love me a happy ending,: Kaylee sent. :Someone get me a box of tissues. Or maybe a grease rag.:

"You know, while you're here there's one more thing we can do for you," Ryan said.

Lillibet looked up. "There is?"

"How'd you like your Guinny to look real, like me'n Uncia do?" Kaylee asked.

"You can do that?" Lillibet squeaked.

"We can," Ryan said. "But you'll need to cancel that email you were gonna have sent tonight, and call your Dad...do you have any friends in Uplift?"

"Oh, sure!" Lillibet said brightly. "I have friends everywhere. Well... acquaintances, anyway."

"Tell him you're staying overnight with one of them." Ryan glanced out the front of the garage to where the skimmer sat patiently waiting. "If Guin's put together like Uncia, we can get it done in a few hours, but it'll be too late for you to get back home tonight."

"In fact, maybe you really *should* stay overnight with one of them, just so they know you're really safe and not being held for ransom or something," Rochelle put in.

"Good idea," Uncia said.

"And you got any of that 'allowance' left?" Kaylee asked. "If you could sign a chit for the parts, we could get right on it."

"Will a hundred K be enough?" Lillibet pulled out her wallet and thumbed the funds over.

"Fifty would be plenty," Ryan said.

"Then keep the rest as payment," Lillibet said. "I get more money next week anyway. Can I stay and watch?"

"Sure, so long's you don't get in the way," Ryan said. "Everyone should know at least a little about how their RIDE's put together."

"Oh, thank you so much!" Lillibet gushed. "I'll be on my best behavior, I promise!"

Ryan grinned. “Go on and make that call. You can use the shop comm, it’s right over there. I’ll order the parts and we can get started.”

As Lillibet scampered off to phone home, Uncia watched her go, and shook her head. “How many of Nextus’s RIDE abusers do you think just don’t realize what it is they’ve really got?”

“If they’re like that girl, maybe most of ‘em.” Kaylee shook her head. “I’d wonder how anyone could be that dumb, but I should know better. Sorry, Guinny.”

“That’s all right, Kaylee,” Guinevere said, watching her owner excitedly dialing the comm. “I think it comes from just having everything done for her. She’s a little spoiled, but she’s not rotten. Now that I can actually *talk* to her, I think I can shape her up.”

“And something tells me if this goes well, we might be getting a little repeat wealthy business in the next few weeks,” Rochelle said. “Maybe we should invest in a better sign.”

Ryan chuckled. “Nah. It’s like I’ve always said. Good word of mouth is all you really need.”

The upgrade process for Guinevere went even faster than for Uncia, since she was smaller and needed fewer projectors for full coverage. Lillibet stayed nearby all the while, talking to Guinevere through it and learning about how the parts fit together.

To Ryan’s surprise, Lillibet actually seemed to show a bit of aptitude for it—after he showed her what to do, she was able to take off most of the plates herself and get them ready to snap the projectors in. Ryan downloaded several beginner-level RIDE manuals to Guinevere, and Lillibet promised she would study them, and might even buy a few inexpensive RIDEs to learn how to fix up.

“Do you think your Dad will be happy about that?” Uncia asked as Lillibet was wiping the grease off her hands.

“He may be a little grumpy at first,” Lillibet said. “But he always says rich people have the right to one weird hobby each, and I haven’t picked mine yet, so if he complains too much that’s what I’ll tell him. Besides, *he* tinkers with old car and plane replicas himself—that’s *his* weird hobby.”

It took a few more hours after that to get the coding on Guinevere’s fur just right, but just as the sun started to set Rochelle announced it was complete. “Guin, you ready to flip the switch?” she asked.

“Just waiting for Lillibet’s okay!” the ocelot replied.

Lillibet clasped her hands together. “Oh, do it! Do it!”

The shiny metal ocelot shimmered and changed into a tawny spotted cat, and Lillibet squealed with delight. “Oh, you’re *beautiful!*” She ran to her RIDE and hugged her again. “And you feel so warm and furry!”

The ocelot purred. “And I can feel *you*, too! This hardlight is amazing!”

Uncia grinned, and let them have their moment. Then after a while, she said, “There’s just one more thing you haven’t done yet, and I’m kind of curious if you’re going to.”

Lillibet blinked. “What’s that?”

“Fusing. To be like I am, with my human partner.” Uncia waved a hand, indicating her humanoid body. “You didn’t want to do it with me because it was ‘icky’... but if you want to be like your friend Brena someday, you’re going to have to.”

"I...I know," Lillibet said. "And then I'll have ears and a tail to match my kitty, right?"

"Uh-huh. And the more you fuse, the more fur you'll get over time," Rochelle added. Last time she'd checked, Rochelle had found a few patches of it spreading out around her ears and the base of her tail. Her fingernails had started getting a little sharper, too.

"And someday I'll be totally a kitty, like Brena was a real fox."

"Maybe," Rochelle said. "Nobody really understands why it happens yet. But I guess Brena would have some idea."

"We don't have to do it if you don't want to," Guinevere said, nuzzling Lillibet's hand. "But I think it'll be amazing."

"Aw, c'mere, kitty," Lillibet said. "Since I got here, I've been kinda wondering what it feels like. Anyway, if I don't like having the furry bits I can have them removed. Let's try it!"

"Okay!" And as Lillibet hugged her, Guinevere seemed to lose her cohesion and flow up over the girl, setting into place as a second skin around her. A moment later, Lillibet stood, a full-fledged furry cat girl just like Uncia.

"Oh, wow!" Lillibet looked down at herself, speaking in Guinevere's purring voice now. "I'm all furry!" She looked over her shoulder. "And I've got a tail!" And she felt her head. "And a muzzle, and kitty ears, and stuff!" She reached around to try to grab the tip of her tail, then lost her balance and fell down, giggling.

"And you're stronger, and faster, and you can jump or even fly a little bit, and you've got keener senses, and you can even survive for weeks in the deep desert, just you and Guinny," Rochelle said.

"You can probably even visit, or at least go meet up with, Brena like that, out in the desert, if you have a way to get in touch," Uncia added.

"And...when do I have to take her off?" Lillibet asked.

"That's between you two," Uncia said. "Rochelle and I are together almost all the time." *Though admittedly not for the same reason.*

Lillibet's eyes widened. "Oh..." she said softly. "She says I never *have* to."

"You'll probably want to *sometime*, though," Rochelle said dryly. "For one thing, you'll need to have her in Skimmer form to drive back home. And your Dad might get upset if you wear her *everywhere*."

"Well, yeah, I guess," Lillibet admitted. She came over to hug Uncia again. "Thank you so much! I never knew RIDEs were real people! I can't wait to get home and tell all my friends!"

"Hey, no problem," Rochelle said bemusedly. "Just remember to send us the title and those storage cubes."

"Oh, I will!" Lillibet said happily. "We're gonna go outside now and try flying a little!" The ocelot Fuser scampered off, running past Ryan and Kaylee on the way out.

"Well, I feel good 'bout what we did today," Kaylee said, watching them go. "How 'bout you, boss?"

"I can't say it's something I ever expected to see, but I guess you learn something new every day," Ryan said, chuckling.

"I learned a valuable lesson about making assumptions," Uncia admitted. "And it's nice to think that maybe life will be getting better for a few more RIDEs out of what we did."

“I’m just glad we’re going to be getting the title, and the software backups with the control codes,” Rochelle said. “It’ll be nice feeling like I can show my face around the garage again.”

Chapter 8

Lillibet and Guinevere came by one more time the next morning to thank them again, and to promise they would send along Uncia's title and backups that afternoon. (Guinevere promised she wouldn't let Lillibet forget.) And true to their word, that evening a ZharEx courier arrived at Rochelle's house with a special delivery. (He hung around a little dazedly after Rochelle signed for it, undoubtedly hoping she'd come to the door again, but finally gave up and went away.)

"So I guess we need to endorse the title over to you, as an emancipated RIDE," Rochelle said, looking at the crypto block on the certificate.

"Actually, I'd rather you were my owner of record," Uncia said. "A lot of places don't recognize self-owned RIDes yet."

"Huh, that's true," Rochelle admitted. "All right, if you're sure."

"I really am," Uncia said.

"All right. Done." Rochelle pressed her thumb to the block, and her thumb drive re-signed it with her own crypto key.

"Oh, thank goodness." Uncia sighed, relieved, as Rochelle put the certificate away. "Now you can legally sell me."

"Mm-hmm, now I can..." Rochelle paused. "Wait, *what?*"

"You can sell me," Uncia said with forced cheer. "I mean, look, we both know I'm worth a million *mu*, right? How long do you think you're going to be able to pay the property taxes on that? If you sell me, you'll be out from under those taxes, and you'll have a lot left over to expand the business with, and get a male RIDE when you're able to change back safely."

"Do you *want* me to sell you?" Rochelle asked guardedly. "I'd thought you were pretty happy with me."

"Oh, no, I *am* happy with you," Uncia insisted. "But...you can't afford to keep me. We both know it."

"You've been worrying about this," Rochelle realized. "That's what your question to that social worker about putting yourself up for sale was really about, wasn't it?"

"I guess so," Uncia admitted.

"Well, don't. We'll find some way to deal with it. After the cash you brought along runs out, well, one of our friends is pretty rich. Maybe not as rich as Kenyon Walton, but he owns most of a decent-sized mining operation, and he's made a standing offer to finance Ryan if he ever wants to expand the garage into a chain. And he's got a RIDE partner himself, so he knows the score there. So if we need a hand..." She shrugged. "We don't like asking for help, it's true, but there are some things we like even less—like losing our friends and partners over money matters."

"But I don't want to make you have to—"

"Look. I'm legally your owner now, which means I have the right to give you orders. And I'm just going to give you one order, ever: don't you ever, *ever* put yourself up for sale, or do anything that would result in me getting money in return for you changing ownership, without my permission. Got it?"

"But—" Uncia protested.

"After everything I've given up for you, you think I ever want to lose you?" She put her arms around Uncia's neck and buried her face in the soft hardlight fur. "God, I'm getting weepy again and you haven't even gotten me drunk this time."

"All right," Uncia said. "I'd really rather stay with you anyway."

"Good." Rochelle let go of Uncia and composed herself again. "Now let's see about getting that control software loaded back into you. I'm really tired of being drop-dead sexy all the time."

Loading the software just took a few minutes. It only took a few minutes more for it to become clear that something was still not entirely right.

"Son of a *bitch*!"

A week later, Rochelle and Uncia walked into the garage, un-Fused. Ryan looked up and noticed Rochelle's clothes still had that super-snug tailored fit and her hair was still waving in slow motion even in the absence of a breeze. And Kaylee was at the other end of the garage. He swore and looked around hurriedly for the gas mask he'd taken to keeping near him lately.

"No, don't panic, it's okay!" Rochelle called. Her voice was still as melodic as ever, but the seductive undertones were missing. "I was able to shut *that* part down. I'm back to just smelling *nice*, not smelling sexy."

"But you're still a walking shampoo commercial," he observed.

Kaylee padded over and sniffed suspiciously at Rochelle. "It's like she said. She's clean, boss." She sniffed again. "Still smells pretty nice, though. Like...catnip, kinda." She sneezed.

And even without the pheromones, she was still gorgeous, Ryan reflected. It was still more than a little distracting just being near her.

"Yeah." Rochelle sighed. "It's like this. Those nanites were never meant to be run flat-out, continuously, for weeks. It broke something. I was able to get the pheromones and subsonic come-ons and the pre-programmed behavior mods shut off, thank goodness...but even with the control software, I'm still stuck with the body language, hair, dirt-b-gone, and designer re-tailoring." She looked down. "Indefinitely."

"Oh, crap." Ryan tried to look on the bright side. "At least you're safe to meet the customers now." His truthful nature made him add, "Relatively."

"And I can't just get a flush and kill the things, either," Rochelle said, flipping a hand through her hair nervously (and distractingly). "They're like cancer. They burrow into all the hard and soft tissues, and if the flush misses even one, they can rebuild out in a matter of hours. And any kind of EMP strong enough to kill them all would probably not be all that good for me either."

"Ugh," Kaylee commiserated. "Sounds like you're really up a creek."

"There are some compensations, though," Rochelle said. "I've been in touch with the company that made them. They were properly horrified—seems that what happened to me shouldn't happen even *if* you jailbreak and void the warranty, and they were apparently worried that I might sue them for negligence and win, and end up owning the company. Or maybe that the next person it happened to would, since it's just their good fortune I'm their only user who's *not* a zillionaire."

"Good for them," Ryan said.

"So they offered me a huge cash settlement and the chance to work with them on trying to fix it." She shrugged. "Which is fine by me. I'll get the chance to learn the ropes

of the latest and greatest nano, which'll give me a head start for when some of the stuff becomes *affordable* in a few years. The money will let me pay off Uncia's property taxes for years and then some—and I'll have enough left over that...well." She looked down at the ground for a moment.

"Go on, spit it out," Kaylee prompted.

"You remember back when I fixed Kaylee's boot problem for you and you offered me a partnership?"

"You didn't feel comfortable without any money to buy in with, so we worked out the subcontracting agreement instead," Ryan said. "I think I see where this is going."

"Yeah. Well, I've got the buy-in money now," Rochelle said. She glanced up for just a moment. "If you're...still willing to have me."

"She would kinda bring a touch of class to the place," Kaylee observed.

"And with her around, people maybe wouldn't pay so much attention to 'Kaylee Cross,'" Ryan mused. "And of course, you're still the demon at coding that you've always been," he added to Rochelle directly. When you got right down to it, there really weren't any disadvantages. He grinned, and put on a gruff voice. "I tell you what, missy, why don't you step into my office and let's talk about it."

Rochelle looked back up. "Why, sir, I'd simply be delighted!" she cooed in her most feminine tones. Grinning at each other, the two humans and two RIDEs headed for the office to draw up an agreement for their mutual future.

THE END

Author's Notes

Here's another Director's Cut edition, and as with "Deserted" it didn't feature major storyline changes, but did have a few important alterations. The biggest has to do with Integrates.

At the time we wrote this (in case you're wondering, I wrote most of both this and "Deserted," and Jon just did Ryan's dialogue and such in the garage scenes), we hadn't really come up with the idea of Integrates as a continent-spanning secret society yet—we didn't even know Fritz was the ultimate bad guy; he was just this jerk at the Towers Enclave. (Which is also why his behavior in the original version of "FreeRIDers" seems so out of line with his reputation as this big Intie bogeyman—we hadn't invented it yet!) We'd conceptualized them more as outcasts. Hence, in the original version of this story, some of them were openly hanging out at the bar where Lillibet got shot, and Roger knew his uncle was one. (I think in the *original* original version, I referred to the deer bartender at the first bar as being *either* an Integrate or a Fuser, though that was tweaked in a later edit.) So, naturally those things had to go.

As I mentioned last time, AlphaWolf's role changed over the course of Integration. Our new conception of him was no longer the sort of character who could spare the time from running Alpha Camp to come in to Nextus every couple of days and preach to the slaves. But as it happened, an Alpha Camp character we came up with more recently *could* have been, and this would provide some great backstory for him, allowing us to kill two birds with one stone.

One thing I didn't change much was everyone thinking AlphaWolf had made the Amontillado virus, because we made sure to leave room in later developments to make it plausible people wouldn't know someone else was responsible now. Though at the time I originally wrote this, it *was* fully intended that AlphaWolf was personally behind it.

Other than that, I tweaked Diane's behavior at the bar (and made it explicit that it *was* the Cheers bar, which Jon had been inspired to expand upon later in *Integration*), gave Bernard (who would later feature in "The Saints Go Marching In") his name, and explicitly stated Uncia and Guinevere are Donizettis as soon as they're introduced. And I made Lillibet a bit older than she had been, given that a couple years from the opening she and Paul are an item. (And will probably make Paul a little younger when we get to him.) We tweaked a few other things here and there.

And, of course, we added dates.

Now, onward to FreeRIDers, the story that started it all!

—R_M

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