

Tick Tock Tick

By Robotech_Master

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*Tick tock tick
Tick tock tick
Time keeps on slippin', slippin', slippin'
Into the future...*

Clayton yawned, stretched, and slowly roused himself into consciousness as the song from his musical alarm continued playing. *Fly like an eagle, huh? I'd settle for scampering like a raccoon.* But neither one was exactly in the cards right now. He supposed he should be glad that time actually *was* slipping into the future, for him. Flowing at the good old one-to-one real-world rate, not practically standing still like it had back in the Freezer...

Ugh. No more thinking about that place. Clayton rolled off the cot, yawned, and stretched, and let his eyes rove around the room. *Home sweet home.* The cot, a sink and mirror, table and chairs, a small bookshelf with a few books, chips, and knick-knacks. A screen that hid the sink and toilet away from the rest of the room. A normal-looking door that at least allowed him the dignity of pretending this was a studio apartment rather than a prison cell. *Ah, the lap of luxury.*

Clayton shuffled into the restroom cubicle, shaking out his bushy tail and scratching his whiskers with a claw. The masked face that greeted him in the mirror was the same old muzzle he'd worn for years. *At least I don't have to shave it anymore, that's something.* He splashed some water on it, then glanced down at his right arm. The incision beneath the fur had faded to barely visible; par for the course for overnight Integrate healing. The gap where one of his hardlight lenses had been was a gaping imperfection, but he forced himself to look away. He'd grow it back soon enough. At least they only ever took one at a time. He'd heard horror stories about the Loose Cannons...ugh. But that had been well before his time.

He supposed he couldn't blame them. Hell, there were days he wanted to drop to his knees and kiss Dr. Aventine's feet for pulling him out of the Freezer, even if it was to pull Integrate guinea pig duty for a medical research lab. He'd gone into it with his eyes open, anyway. Trading away ten more subjective years in VR for one real-world year of anatomical study and experimentation hadn't seemed like a bad plan after living through two of them already in so many days. Anyway, getting cut open now and then didn't seem all that bad compared to getting skinned alive for a rug with your pain-blocking overridden. He'd never been through *that*, Dr. Patil be praised, but he knew folks who had.

Some people might not have understood willingly trading away a year of real-world life for ten real-world days locked up, after having already lost months to the pre-trial cryo storage to make sure he couldn't use Stupid Intie Tricks to escape. But then, they'd probably never experienced VR prison. It wasn't a picnic. Barely even enough Nature Range time to stay sane. There was some enforced counseling, but most of the time was spent staring at the wall, without even the ability to erase your own memory of how bored you were by it all. Yeah, he understood, prison wasn't supposed to be *fun*, but still.

He was just glad that his crimes had been relatively minor, in the grand scheme of things. Snatchings and forced Integrations, dozens of them...but he'd never killed

anyone, or done any of the more twisted things some members of Fritz's little band of deviants had gotten up to. Some of the sentences they'd ended up with...ugh. It had just been a job—one he hadn't always liked, but that he'd been damned good at. But at least he hadn't been good and damned.

*I want to fly like an eagle
Till I'm free
Fly through the revolution*

Clayton snorted. *Viva la revolution*. He supposed there was a lot to be happy about—that Integrates could now walk openly in human-and-RIDE society, and long-separated families were getting back together and all that. But before that, a lot of bad things had been done to keep the secret Integrate society ticking along. *“Bad things had been done.” Yeah, that's one way of putting it. Use the passive voice so you don't have to admit to being one of the people who did those bad things.*

He could argue that he'd just done the job, under threat of violence. Not his fault the man in charge had been a psychopath. *But “only following orders” didn't work in World War II, and it doesn't work now either.* He'd gotten the benefits of being a Snatcher, and now he reaped the punishments.

Whatever. Eight more months of this and I'm free as...well, an eagle.

Clayton finished washing up, then went to the door. He wasn't surprised that it was unlocked. They usually unlocked it at the start of the day, and let him come out in his own time. There were plenty of guards around to keep an eye on him, after all. It wasn't as if he was going anywhere.

Pushing the door open, Clayton emerged into the corridor, blinking in the harsh light of the banks of spotlights that made sure the path from his door was clearly visible at all times. He wasn't sure if there was anything to the notion that bright light made hardlight cloaks less effective, but he had to admit that it was pretty psychologically effective. He raised a hand to shield his eyes from the worst of the light, and glanced up at the glassed-in observation booths where the guards were stationed.

There was nobody there. Both of the booths were empty. *Huh. That's new.* Often times only one or the other booth was manned—after all, they had multiple cameras on him, as well as the implanted trackers, so it wasn't as if the guards really served much purpose other than more psychology. But there was usually *someone* there.

Well, not his problem. Clayton walked along the passage from the cell to the checkpoint sealing his wing off from the rest of the research facility. There was a straight two-meter wide path, with upward-sloping walls to either side and ports along the top that had never been opened but he suspected probably held some kind of weapon—pulsers, probably. Not like they were needed. Clayton knew full well that the biggest deterrent to his trying to pull anything was that the Marshals could and would track him down if he did, and they wouldn't have any incentive to be gentle. *Nope, nope, staying right in here 'til they say I can go, thanks.*

As Clayton approached the checkpoint at the other end of the hundred-meter walkway, he stopped in his tracks as he got his second surprise of the day. There was no one there. The glassed-in security booth was entirely empty, and the door was ajar. There had *never* been no one there for as long as he'd been here, and usually it was

more like two or three someones. Armed someones. And the door had been sealed tight.

Clayton frowned. This was beyond unusual. He moved forward cautiously, craning his neck to make sure nobody was crouched down and hiding in the booth. But no, it was completely empty. He gave the door a cautious shove, and it swung freely inward. Taking a deep breath—this was Forbidden Territory as far as he was concerned—he nerved himself up and then stepped inside.

There *had* been people here, Clayton could see that. The chairs were pushed back, not straight—their occupants had gotten up and left without shoving them back. There was a cup of coffee resting on the console. A dipped finger told him it was tepid but not quite cold. A couple of hours old, no more.

Clayton glanced under the console and caught his breath as he saw there was a pulse pistol there, still holstered. That should *never* have been left in an open security booth where he could have grabbed it. He carefully left it alone. It could be a trap—and besides, he could do more damage than a pulse pistol with just what he had built in. He did reach out and tap the red button to open the secure bulkhead, then stepped back out of the booth as the armored hatch slid aside. Taking a deep breath, Clayton stepped into the room beyond.

As with every time he left the prison wing, Clayton was struck by the contrast between it and the rest of the medical facility. He had just stepped out of a high-tech holding cell to find himself in what looked for all the world like the lobby of an upscale business facility. It was a big wide open area that went up for at least ten stories, with balconies all around at every level. It was all done up nicely in stone mosaic tile, with subdued lighting and soothing music playing over hidden speakers. It didn't even seem like a research lab from here, more like a corporate office building.

It was as if this was a pre-existing facility, and they'd just slapped a modular prison wing on to keep him contained. Which, come to think of it, he supposed they probably had. He'd never seen the building from the outside. Probably wouldn't for eight more months. Didn't even know what polity it was in. He'd never asked, and they'd never volunteered it.

That much of the place was familiar to him by now. But this time there was something new in the middle of the floor: a great big stone statue, roughly pyramid-shaped, at least five meters high. It was a kind of abstract thing, with animal heads and parts jutting out here and there: here a horse head, there a pair of eagle's wings. There was a small brass plaque at the bottom. His Integrate vision let him read it without approaching: *DONATED BY THE CAPE NORD BENEVOLENT SOCIETY.*

Something about it put Clayton's teeth on edge. It didn't help matters that there was nobody here either. Nobody resting on one of the benches in the lobby, nobody at the security desk at the other side of the room—nobody at all. *Where is everybody?*

Clayton shook his head. Things had just gone from weird to disturbing. He took a deep breath and kicked in his cloak for the first time in months. There was some flickering over his arm due to the missing hardlight lens, but that couldn't be helped. Hopefully it would be good enough. He needed to find out what was going on here.

He gave the statue a wide berth and skirted the perimeter of the room, taking the stairs to the next level up and turning down a corridor he remembered. His regular lab was right down here—the closest one to the prison wing. It was where they'd cut him open to look inside and pop out the lens. It was also where they had a fabber with his

DIN specs on file—and if there was any hanky-panky going on, he'd be a lot happier with one than without it.

If this all turns out to be some kind of mistake, or even just a practical joke, boy am I going to be in trouble. It was hard to imagine, though, that there could be any more trouble he could possibly be in at this point in his life.

The lab was just a dozen meters up the corridor, fronted by broad glass panels that took up most of its length. As he approached, Clayton caught sight of movement within. *Oh, good, there's someone. I can ask them what's going on.* He was just about to drop his cloak—then he froze as he saw who, or what, was doing the moving. Slim, grey fur, pointed ears, significant cleavage, bushy tail...a she-wolf Integrate. Probably a Sturmie; she had that kind of attitude, like her digitigrade paw-feet were actually high heels.

What in Patil's progressive plan? I'm supposed to be the only Intie in this whole facility. Well, apart from the saiga antelope Intie who was observing the procedures on behalf of the Diet of Enclaves to make sure his transhuman rights were being adequately respected, and this sure wasn't him. She seemed to be poking around the trays of tools and implements on one of the workbenches. As he watched, he saw her hold up a small glittering object—his surgically-removed hardlight lens!—and put it down again, wrinkling her muzzle.

The lab door had the green light indicating it was unlocked—but it was an automatic door, and the moment he opened it, she'd notice. Invisible or not, he wouldn't exactly be hard to find. He had no idea who the hell she was, but in his experience, whenever another Intie you didn't know showed up where they shouldn't have been, it usually meant trouble, and he didn't want to tangle with her until he had some idea what was going on.

Distraction, distraction, need a distraction. Clayton looked around for anything useful, and his eyes settled upon the bathroom, and the elevator just up the hall. He lifted carefully into the air and drifted silently across the way, making sure to hide his flickering arm behind the rest of his body as he passed. In the bathroom, he found just the thing he'd hoped for—a five-centi-thick roll of toilet paper, left in the stall by the cleaning crew who'd swapped a new full one into the dispenser. He scooped it up, then headed to the elevator.

He shot a quick glance back over his shoulder to make sure the she-wolf hadn't come out, then tapped the call button. The elevator slid open. Holding the door, he reached inside and tapped the button for the top floor. Then he slipped back out and jammed the toilet paper roll in the crack so that the elevator door would keep closing onto it and reopening. Then he slipped back up to the other side of the lab door, giving it a sharp couple of raps in passing.

As the she-wolf came running up to the door, Clayton fired a quick directed pulse from his lifters, knocking the toilet paper roll out of the crack so the doors would close all the way. The other Integrate ran out into the hall just as the elevator door closed, then ran across to look. She cocked her head, watching the floor indicator count up. When it stopped at the top, she punched the call button and took the next elevator that opened. Clayton waited until it had closed and started incrementing before he slipped into the lab himself.

So, first things first. The fabber had a security lockout on it, but they usually kept several of his DINs on hand at any given time. He pulled open the drawer next to the

machine, and there they were. He quickly slotted one into the empty socket at the base of his right palm, and felt the whole electromagnetic spectrum open up to him again. Nice. Of course, it didn't mean as much as it once did, back in the day when he would immediately have had the run of any computer on the planet, but at least he wasn't completely radio-deaf anymore.

The first thing he noticed was a lot of encrypted comm traffic was buzzing around. Intie-encrypted, not so easily descrambled as the regular kind. He couldn't tell what was being said, but moving across the room let him triangulate the locations. One source was on the top floor—the she-wolf, he guessed. Another was in the administrative offices halfway up. Two were further back, in a part of the complex Clayton had never been to. And another was...Clayton blinked, cocked his head, and frowned. Yes, that was right. That would put it right *inside* that big statue in the lobby. *Okay, that makes sense. Thousands of years and dozens of light years gone, that damned wooden horse is still making trouble.*

Whoever these Integrate intruders were—and Clayton had a couple of guesses, but now wasn't the time to think about that—they probably hadn't gone to the trouble of infiltrating the complex to invite everyone round for a cup of tea and a soufflé. It was a pity—he missed Ambrosia's soufflés. *Wonder where that bear is now? Someplace nice, I hope.*

But now wasn't the time for thinking about that, either. The she-wolf's signal trace said she was heading back down again. Clayton headed for the door again, stopping to snatch up the hardlight lens from the tray where she'd left it. He pressed it against his arm, and felt that creepy sensation of the flesh squirming around to root it back in place. *Why is it always so much harder to get these things out than to put them back? Heh. Maybe I should ask Doc Aventine next time I see her.*

If I do see her. He was starting to get worried notions about the actual human and RIDE people who'd been in the building. He knew all too well what some Integrates did to humans and RIDES who'd gotten in their way. He'd been one of those doing the doing.

Clayton slipped back out of the lab and drifted back up the hall just in time. The elevator doors pinged open and the wolf approached—cautiously, arms held at the ready, nose twitching as she sniffed the air. *Aw crap. Smell. I forgot about smell. Time to fade.* Clayton lifted off the floor and drifted backward, moving faster as the wolf broke into a run toward him. *All right, fine, you want to play? Let's play.* He held out a hand and threw up an invisible hardlight wall half a meter in front of the charging wolf, then braced. As expected, she slammed right into it and bounced off, stunned.

That was all the opening Clayton needed. He kicked his lifters into full and charged into the wolf-woman. His momentum carried her all the way down the hall. He slammed her up against the wall next to the elevator, his arm holding her neck firm against it while his other hand popped the sapphire DIN out of the socket in the hollow of her throat. Then he summoned a razor-sharp hardlight blade and held it against her chest. "All right, lady, who the hell are you." He released the pressure on her throat enough to let her talk.

She coughed and choked. "Am...Varya."

"I'd say it's nice to meet you, but I don't like lying anymore. Where are you from, Varya, and what are you doing here?"

She tried to spit, but couldn't quite manage. "...get...nothing from me."

“Yeah, that’s just about what I figured.” Clayton noticed that the signal source located halfway up the building had started moving down, and then gone dark. A moment later, they all went dark. *Crap, they must be onto me.* Making a quick decision, Clayton stabbed the blade right through her—seriously enough to keep her from moving for a while, but not likely fatal to an Integrate. Then he dissolved the blade, shoved her aside, re-cloaked, and made for the lobby.

He floated up into the air as he came out into the open, just in time to see someone moving by beneath him, heading back the way he’d come. *The fuck? A bobcat in a bathrobe? No...lynx, gotta be. Tufts.* He frowned. Anything to do with lynx Integrates was a bad scene as far as he was concerned. And the robe suggested that his most unpleasant guess about where these schmucks had come from was probably the right one. *Oh, great, as if my life wasn’t fucked up enough already. Appalites.*

Clayton thought about his next move while he drifted. If they’d rounded up all the people, they’d probably taken them somewhere they could keep an eye on them all together. And to keep an eye on that many, they’d want more than one Intie. So the most likely spot for where they were keeping them was that place further into the complex where he’d seen the two signals together.

He drifted in that direction, wishing he dared to ping the local network for a building map. But they were probably watching that by now, and he had no guarantee that the network would even let him on. Hell, it might even send out an alarm. Briefly, he considered trying to trip an alarm intentionally to bring help, but dismissed the idea a moment later. If they’d managed to slip in here, they probably had a way into the network and would already have damped any outgoing alarm or comm lines. It wasn’t worth giving his position away by trying it.

His position. *Hell. The implanted trackers. If they know it’s me, and they have access to the system, they could find me at any time.* He couldn’t get rid of the trackers; even he didn’t know where all of them were. Maybe he should try to break out of the facility, get help from somewhere...but how long would that take? They might have taken everyone away by the time he got back. And that was assuming he could even *get* out to begin with. The security systems might still be programmed to try to keep him from busting out.

Clayton frowned. There might not be anything for it. They were probably going to catch him sooner or later anyway. He could at least try to see what had happened to the others, and maybe do some damage before they took him down. Checking his memory for the exact position of those two Integrates, he slipped into the first corridor that he saw going that direction.

The nice thing about this facility was that the corridors seemed to be fairly straightforward. It wasn’t a rat maze. The corridor started going one way, and kept right on going that way. Then the unexpected happened—a pair of doors abutted onto a glassed-in skywalk, and Clayton got his first ever look outside the building.

Despite the urgency of his personal mission, Clayton had to stop and press his nose up against the glass and stare. He *knew* that cavernous ceiling overhead. Knew every meter of it. In some parts, every millimeter. He was on the opposite side of the dome from his usual stomping grounds, but there could be no doubt—this was the main cavern of Cape Nord!

So if I’m there, that must mean this is...John Wayne Memorial Hospital. Huh.

Well, it made sense. They wouldn't have wanted to transport him too far from the holding facilities on Bad Wolf Island. He wondered if they even realized this was also his old home.

Clayton was overcome by a sudden wave of homesickness, which was a little odd when you considered that in real-world terms he'd only been away for a few months, which he hadn't even lived through most of in real time. But then again, it had been two years in virtual. He wondered how Hellir Enclave had come through the transition. Was it still there? Was anybody he knew still around? Was the Show still going on? Was there *any* way he could break out of the facility?

Or...wait. Maybe he *could* contact someone in the outside world. Laser comm relay nodes dotted the cavern's ceiling. It could be as easy as placing a comm call. He raised his hand and tried for a link-up from his DIN, but couldn't get a handshake. *What...?* Then he spotted the telltale heatwave shimmer of a hardlight distortion field. *Oh.* They'd dropped a distorting dome over the hospital, then, scrambling laser comms before they could reach out. Smart enough, Clayton grudgingly admitted. Still, it didn't keep him from feeling more imprisoned than he ever had since entering the post-Fritz justice system. *So near and yet so far.*

Well, there was nothing for it. He was at least halfway to where he'd last seen those Intie signals. Taking a firmer grip on himself, he proceeded down the skywalk and into the building at the other side. He moved ahead slowly, keeping an eye out for distortions that might herald another cloaked Integrate while trying to minimize any he might give off himself.

This section seemed to be more offices and administrative—plenty of conference rooms and lecture halls. The signal's position corresponded to one of the larger halls, a multipurpose space made up of several smaller rooms with retractable walls. A couple of the doors to it were open, and while there were people visible standing just inside, no one seemed to be watching the doors for new entries. Clayton slipped cautiously up to one, backed up against the wall next to it, then leaned over to peer through.

The room had been used for meeting space, but now all the chairs were shoved up and stacked against one wall. Against the other were several dozen people and a number of RIDEs. Clayton recognized some of them as regular staffers he'd met over the last couple of months. *Well, this explains where all the guards are.*

Closer to Clayton, a paint horse Integrate and a porcupine Integrate were guarding the exits. A red squirrel RIDE and a confused-looking man with red squirrel tags were standing between them and the crowd. The RIDE was addressing the Inties at the door. "Look, I did what you wanted. I got you into this joint. So we're quits, right? Just pay me and I'll be on my way."

Clayton frowned. The man seemed familiar...and yet unfamiliar. It only took a moment until it clicked. He had a masculine version of Dr. Aventine's feminine features. *Aw, crap. Crap on a cracker.*

Well, that explained how they'd been able to slip that statue in. Dr. Aventine knew all the security protocols for the research facility. Any RIDE who knew the right mental interrogation techniques could have fished them out—especially with the added confusion of an involuntary crossride thrown into the mix. *Poor Doc. Well, he'll get over it. Especially here. Ain't nowhere in the world with a better F-to-M involuntary crossrider support program than Cape Nord.*

That was assuming, of course, that he didn't get taken back to wherever the new

Cave of Wonders was along with everyone else. That was the way Integrates had cleaned up in the bad old days (how well he knew), and it was how Appa still rolled. *Funny how easy it is to hate that shit now that it turns out there's a better way.*

The horse Integrate crossed his arms and glowered at the squirrel. “Nothing doing ‘til the boss gets here. He’s the one makes that call.”

“What’s there to make a call on? I did the job, I oughtta get paid. I don’t need to be part of all this.” He shook his head. “Nobody ever said Inties were involved.”

“If we had, I doubt we could have hired you.” It was a new voice—the lynx in the robe had just drifted in from another door. “A little deception was, alas, necessary. But don’t worry, Redwood. Now that I’m here, we can dispense your reward for a job well done, and you can be on your way.”

“Well, good! Let’s get on with it, then. I’ve got places—I—wait, what are you doing?” The lynx held out his arm, and was joined a moment later by both the horse and the porcupine. The squirrel froze, his optics flickering, for a good thirty seconds. Then he involuntarily Fused back onto the man standing behind him—and they began to melt together.

What the—aw, shit! By the time Clayton realized what was going on, it was too late to do anything about it. Of course—the three Integrates had brute-forced their way past Redwood’s DINsec, then forced him to Fuse back onto Dr. Aventine so they could force-Integrate them. *Because that’s just how we Snatchers roll.* Clayton swallowed hard against the need to be physically sick as the silver puddle spread out from the dwindling squirrel Fuser.

“There! Now just rest there a moment; we’ll soon have you *on your way* back home with us.” The lynx made a show of dusting off his paws. “Well! That’s one loose end tied up, anyway. I had Fields take Varya back to the transport; he’ll be back here shortly. It seems leaving our jailbird for last was a mistake.” Then the lynx turned and looked directly at the space where he was standing. “Wouldn’t you agree, Mr. Clayton?” The other two Integrates immediately whipped around, bringing up their arms to cover him.

Oh, shit and sarium sandwiches. Well, there was nothing for it. Clayton let the cloak drop and stepped out into the room. “Hey there, whoever the hell you are. Sorry about your friend, but she didn’t seem very friendly.”

“She’s not a friend, and she’ll heal. Misunderstandings happen, it’s not a problem. The name’s Reggie. Sorry that we didn’t greet you first thing, but we figured you’d keep, and we had other things to do.” He nodded toward the assembled crowd at the end of the room. “But since you’re here, if you’d care to join us, we could use the assistance of a skilled Snatcher such as yourself.”

Clayton shook his head. “Sorry, but I don’t do that stuff anymore.”

Reggie raised an eyebrow. “Really? Pity. I’m given to understand my father set great store by your services.”

“Your father?” It didn’t take much to add two and two. “Fritz?”

“That’s the one.” Reggie nodded. “Now, of course, he seems to feel the same way you do. I suppose it’s the curse of the elder generations to regret the excesses of their youth. I wonder if I’ll feel the same way in a few decades?” He shrugged. “Regardless, the rest of us have a job to do. Just wait there, and we’ll take you to the transport with the rest.”

A German Shepherd Integrate—Fields, probably—slipped in through the same

door as Reggie, leading an assortment of Walker-mode RIDEs along behind him. Reggie jerked his head toward the end of the room, and the four Integrates moved forward. Clayton watched them advance, again trying not to throw up. *Fuck. Fuck fuck FUCK. I can't just sit by and...shit. Four to one, and four heavily armed at that. I try to take them on, they kick my ass and then do whatever anyway. Shit.*

“Unngggh...”

Clayton glanced down at the newly-minted squirrel Integrate. He was sitting on the floor in a silver puddle, holding his head. “Dr. Aventine? Or Redwood?”

“I...don't know? They both sound familiar...”

Clayton sighed and reached down to take him by the arm and help him up. “On the bright side, at least you already know damn well what an Integrate is, so I don't have to give you that lecture.”

“I'm...we're...an Integrate?” The squirrel looked down at his arms. “And...male?”

“Afraid so. Not exactly a red letter day for you, there. But it could be worse.”

Clayton looked up, saw Reggie and the others beginning their work. RIDEs Fusing, then melting. He had to look away again. “*Will* be worse, unless we figure out some way out of here. Can you walk? Come on.”

“But...where are we going?”

“I don't know. Somewhere that's not here.” Clayton gripped the squirrel's arm and pulled him back out the door. The squirrel didn't resist being led away.

“They...hired me. To Fuse...me?”

Clayton glanced over his shoulder. “Pronouns are weird, just go with it.”

“They didn't say they were Integrates. I thought they were...pro-humanists. Idealists...didn't want Integrate medical research...”

“Well, two out of three ain't bad.”

“They wanted...the access codes. Security keys. I tried to resist, but...I was just too good for me. That's why I earn the big bucks.” The squirrel blinked, bewildered.

“Yeah, well, you're going to be finding a new line of work now.” Then he stopped, as a thought struck him. “Do you still have those security codes?”

“I...don't know? Maybe? Somewhere? I'm...not thinking too clearly right now.”

“Yeah, figures.” Clayton started moving again. They were almost to the skywalk now. As they stepped out into it, Clayton paused to stare out at the cave again, glowering at the distortion field. “Arggh! If only there were some way to get a signal out.”

“Signal? Like...what?” The squirrel shook his head. “Smoke signal? Bat signal? Sorry...head still fuzzy.”

Bat signal? Clayton blinked. “Wait a minute...” The distortion field scrambled fine details, but it still let visible light through, or else they couldn't see out at all. And that meant...

“Cover your eyes.”

“Huh?”

Clayton took the squirrel's hands and placed them over his eyes. “Don't look. I've just had a bright idea.” Squeezing his own eyes shut, Clayton raised his hands and pumped all the power he had through his hardlight lenses, sending millions of candlepower of visible light out into the dome. He felt the skin around the lenses start to sizzle with the heat, but he'd learned a lot about turning off pain sensors by now. *Let's see...short short short, long long long, short short short. Short short short, long long long, short short short.* Opening one eye to a squint, he observed the cave ceiling

flashing bright white in response to his beams. *They'll have to notice that. If nothing else, I'm breaking the hell out of the light pollution ordinances and they need to show up to arrest me. Short short short, long long long, short short short.*

He could feel his battery levels dropping second by second, but he kept it up, determined to pulse the signal for as long as he could. From up the hall, he heard shouting. "Hey! Cut that out! Someone stop him!" He was halfway unconscious from the power drain by the time he distantly felt himself being tackled to the floor.

It took a while for Clayton's batteries to recuperate enough to wake him back up. When he blinked his eyes open, he found he was being dragged along by the arms between the horse and the dog. They were out on the roof, and there was a suborbital transport with ambulance livery waiting with the cargo hatch open.

Reggie was standing by the hatch. "Get them aboard! Hurry!" Clayton tried to squirm in his captors' grip, but he was still too weak. *Dammit. Don't want to go with them. Just trading one prison in for another.*

CHOOP! CHOOP! Clayton's ears perked. He knew that sound. Pulse guns! He blinked his eyes open again in time to see the blasts crater the roof nearby, stinging his skin with bits of asphalt. His captors dropped him unceremoniously to the ground as they turned and raised their arms to return fire.

Clayton didn't know who was shooting, but whoever it was, if the Appalites were firing back, he knew what side he was on. He took a moment to gather his strength, then reached out, grabbed a leg in each hand, and yanked. The horse and dog stumbled, but didn't go down—they caught themselves with their lifters—but at least it threw them off-balance for a moment.

And that moment was all the pulse marksmen needed. Each Appalite took a blast right to the chest and *did* go down. Clayton started to get up, then thought better of it. *Just gonna lie here and be all non-threatening. No threats here, nope nope.* He did raise his head and glance around for a better view.

A black and white patrol skimmer rose into view over the edge of the roof. A woman's amplified voice boomed out. "This is the Cape Nord Law! Eject your DINs and power down, now! If you attempt to lift that ship, we will bring it down!"

"Shit!" Reggie shimmered and vanished as more skimmers rose into view and uniformed officers rappelled down on lines from open side doors.

Well, that's that. Clayton smiled, popped the DIN out of its socket, closed his eyes, and waited to be recovered.

"You idiot, when we said to pop out your DIN and power down, we didn't mean *you.*"

Clayton blinked his eyes open and looked up into the familiar face of a concerned white rabbit. "Aeolia Keys? Well, you're a sight for sore eyes." He glanced down and found he was seated in one of the police transports, with a cable from the onboard RIDESafe feed hooked into his power socket. Aeolia was leaning forward, strapped into the seat directly across from him. "And I thought, hey, better safe than sorry. I *am* still a convicted criminal serving time, after all."

Aeolia frowned. "Not everyone felt that was really justice, you know."

"I did. I mean, come on. Dozens, hundreds of lives destroyed—including yours..."

"Feh, I was Integrating anyway. Hanley and DevCorby might have more to

complain about there, but even they seemed to like life better afterward.” Aeolia shrugged.

“You seem to have done well for yourself.” Clayton took a good look at the heavily-padded and armored uniform she was wearing, with gaps to expose her hardlight lenses. “*You’re* in I-SWAT? How is that even possible in Cape Nord? Not exactly ladylike, is it?”

“There’ve been a few changes. It’s all part of the Game.” Aeolia smirked, her pink nose twitching. “My character—Lieutenant Jeannie Nordstrom—is the Strong Woman stereotype. You know, super-competent and super-sexy, but Needs A Real Man to Show Her How to Love? Audience surveys show it’s really popular in our biggest demo, so we got an exemption on a trial basis.”

“Oh.” Clayton tried to come up with a witty response, but he didn’t seem to be firing on all cylinders at the moment. “How’s that working out for you?”

Her smirk broadened into what could only be called a shit-eating grin. “Well, I never said I planned to stick to the script. So far, I’ve...ah, *enticed* three Real Men into crossriding for the sake of torrid lesbian affairs.”

Clayton snorted. “Enticed? Or entrapped?”

“Well, I won’t *deny* that I savored the looks on their faces after they realized they’d blown all their ad-lib points, and now it was either crossride ‘in a fit of lust’ or break character and be out of the game for five months.” She giggled. “Such a pity that the only way humans can play through crossrides is to actually *do* it.”

“What about...don’t they make strap-on hardlight disguises?”

“Yes, but the very act of wearing one is un-Manly, so they’d have to crossride anyway. Funny how that works. Anyway, they all three chose it in the end. They could just have taken the penalty.”

“And of course, being an Integrate, you can’t get slapped with a Man Card yourself for it?”

“Even if that weren’t the case, they’ve written in a ‘Lesbians Are Hawt’ exemption.” She smirked some more. “Anyway, after I’m done with ‘em, I play a little Cupid and match ‘em up with one of their ex-partners on the Force. Two happy marriages and one engagement so far. I don’t think they’ll be getting Man Cards again for a long time, if ever.”

“The scriptwriters are really letting you get away with that?”

“Get away with it? I swear to Patil, I think they’re actually *helping* me. I hardly even had to ad-lib at all on the last one.” Aeolia shook her head. “I’ve got a sneaking suspicion it’s the new human and RIDE writers doing most of it, but of course the anonymity protocols are still in place so that’s just a guess.” She leaned back in her seat. “But enough about me. Let’s talk about you. I understand you’ve been...*volunteering* for techno-biology study at the clinic, these last couple of months.”

“That’s about the size of it.” Collecting his wits, Clayton gave her his sketch of what had happened before she’d shown up. “Damned Appalites. Did you catch them all?”

“All except that damned lynx. He gave us the slip.” She grimaced. “Takes after his father, I guess.”

“What about the clinic staff? Scientists, guards, and them?”

“Integrated. Every last damned one of them, even the receptionists.” Aeolia sighed. “We’re going to take them down to Hellir for counseling. At least it’ll be easier

now than back in the day.”

“Dammit...” Clayton looked down. “If I could have done something to stop it...”

Aeolia reached out to pat him on the knee. “No one’s blaming you, Clay. Really, they should have known better. We *told* them Integrate research should be done within Enclaves, or at least with a security staff of Integrates, where it would be easier to maintain security. But noooo, they wanted their ‘objectivity.’ Well, lesson learned! If they want to continue their little project, they’ll be doing it in Hellir. We’ve already gotten the go ahead to expand into another set of chambers.”

Clayton swallowed. “So...what does that mean for me?” Visions of another ten years in VR prison passed before his eyes.

“Looks like it means you’ll be coming home, Mister Raccoon Guinea Pig. In light of your aid—we’d never have stopped those Appalites without your help, after all—we’re going to see about getting your sentence commuted, or at least lightened. You might still have to play guinea pig, but we ought to be able to swing probation instead of imprisonment.”

“That would be...nice.” Clayton leaned back, closed his eyes. “Very nice.”

“So, just you relax and recharge, and let us worry about the rest.” Aeolia smiled. “You’ll be home before you know it.”

March 7, 158 A.L.

I want to fly like an eagle

To the sea

Fly like an eagle

Let my spirit carry me

Clayton awoke in a comfortable bed in a comfortable, private space *without* a lock on the door. He opened his eyes and looked around as the music played. His own personal, private little cave room. It wasn’t the same one he’d used to have, of course—that had long since been reassigned to someone else. But it had his stuff in it, that he’d put into storage before turning himself in. It felt like home again.

It looked like he had at least the rest of the month off as far as it came to guinea pigging. The scientists were still getting their heads around *being* Integrates as well as studying them, and the lab facilities were still being built in the new wing of the Enclave. Even after they were ready, he wouldn’t be doing it full-time. They’d decided to rescue a couple more low-risk offenders from VR prison to share the getting-cut-open duties. Well, more power to them. Though he was still perfectly willing to do his share, Clayton couldn’t say he’d exactly miss any of it that he didn’t have to.

Of course, that still left the question of what he could do with himself in the meantime. But a few ideas had been stewing, the last few days. Without getting out of bed, he raised his hand and made a DIN connection to the comm relay on the wall, and pulled up the Game sign-up page. He sketched out his idea for a character, and tabbed down to the “plot notes and ideas” section and wrote:

Lieutenant Jeannie Nordstrom seems to be able to love ‘em, cross ‘em, and leave ‘em when it comes to her fellow cops, but I think she might not be able to resist the charms of a dark, smoldering ex-con with a mysterious past. Might be that she meets

her match, and he has the power to end her string of broken hearts. What do you think?

Clayton chuckled and hit “send,” then crossed his arms behind his head and lay back again. Things were definitely looking up.

Oh, oh, there’s a solution.

THE END