

# Merging Traffic II: Yield Ahead

By Robotech\_Master and Jon Buck

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Chet Mackenzie wandered through the lush green grass of Bifrost Park, enjoying an ice cream cone and letting the faint breeze from Uplift's wind generators ruffle his hair. It was always so hard to get used to breezes anymore. He spent most of his time on a ship in hard vacuum, where a breeze often meant there was a leak somewhere. Even here on Zharus firma, they were under a sealed atmospheric dome. But breezes were a necessary part of the human experience when living "outside," so Uplift made them by creating pressure differences between dome segments. Just another one of those crazy things people did to live in extreme environments.

When you got right down to it, humans could get used to anything, Chet reflected. For example, he was getting used to having a real digestive system again, for the fourth time. It was a little annoying. But on the other hand, he had a few extra figures in his debit account to make up for the annoyance. And there was at least the bright side that he could properly enjoy the Creamery's amazing ice cream again. It was a sort of little ritual of his, having an ice cream cone on the last day of every Zharus stopover. Plain vanilla—the regrown stomach was too new to risk upsetting it with anything fancier—but even the plain vanilla was amazing.

Though in some respects it was scant compensation. Chet always enjoyed the outward-bound limb of the trips more, when he had the nutrient extraction modules and artificial bladder in place. He could just sit in the cabin of shuttle *DiCaprio* the whole trip, bolted to the exterior of the *Spruce Goose* star liner, with the evacuation and catheter hoses hooked to the ports in his body, and while away the hours in the ship's Virtual Life. The most bothersome part was the exercise periods, when he actually had to get up, move around, and jog or bike some laps. And when he got tired of it all, the shuttle flight deck's built-in cryo-capsule would flash-freeze him right where he was, and thaw him out when it was time to ferry tourists down to planetside. On the way back, with the real tummy and having to *get up and go to the bathroom* all the time, he'd probably just go into cryo early and stay there all the way back 'til he could get cybered up again.

Of course, the digestive system wasn't solely for the sake of convenience, otherwise he'd have kept it always instead of just half the time. Sometimes Chet was tempted to do exactly that. But the prices Earth clinics were willing to pay for organic organs and Zharus clinics were willing to pay for gently-used Earth cyberware were always too tempting. And there really wasn't any other cyber he could take with him. He had to keep his optic implants for the job, and as a pilot he simply couldn't do anything that would mess with his ability to make his arms and legs obey his thoughts and reflexes. So it was internal organs or nothing, and again, the more important things like his heart and endocrine system needed to stay organic.

So generally it was the stomach, liver, bladder, and a kidney or two that went

away on Earth and came back on Zharus, helping Chet build up a nice little nest egg. He'd been back and forth four times already; in another trip or two he might be ready to retire and live a life of ease, at least for a few years until he might just have to go into piloting again. Or maybe he'd just decide enough was enough and keep the artificial stomach full-time. But on the other hand, the cybernetic stomach was by far the most lucrative thing to sell Zharus-side. What with the free energy on Zharus, native-built energy extraction from nutrients just wasn't as efficient here, and it was one of the parts everyone who wanted to go cyber wanted to have. Chet couldn't say he blamed them. And, perhaps more importantly, this amazing ice cream would be hard to give up.

Chet watched the environment with his pilot's eyes as he reduced the cone, taking in the people playing, the fliers and skimmers passing by overhead. They always had such an amazing variety of vehicles here, based on all sorts of old vids nobody even thought about anymore back on Earth. Chet was occasionally tempted to buy one and have it shipped back to Earth with some of his nest egg. But the thing was, when would he use it? He was only on Earth for a few weeks at a time—long enough for Zharusian tourists to take in Olde Earth, and for him to cyber up—then it was right back out into space again with the *Goose*. Once more, he put off the purchase until “next time”... maybe he would be ready to retire by then.

As he thought about it, one of those very skimmers hovered into the park itself. It was a sleek, enclosed two-lifter-pod design, a large silvery motorcycle with a sealed cockpit, accented with panels in the grey-white fur pattern of a snow leopard. Then the skimmer unfolded into a gleaming metal cat, and then fluffy grey-white fur appeared on the cat's body as a woman rolled off its back onto the ground. Chet nodded to himself. With the fur pattern trim, naturally it would be a RIDE—one of the weird-ass skimmer/powersuit/robot animal combos you found on Zharus. He scrutinized the woman thoughtfully, zooming in with his implants. She was wearing form-hugging Easy Fuse coveralls, from which a big fluffy white tail almost as big as the RIDE's emerged, and matching ears were poking up from her head. As he watched, she pushed her hands back into the mass of grey-white hair behind her head and shook it out. It fell past her waist, spreading out into a grey-white sheet that billowed in the breeze. She had enough hair to curtain a medium-sized room, Chet thought wryly.

He shook his head. That was another thing you only saw on Zharus—hair like that. “Rapunzel hair,” the local trope sites called it. With modern nanites, you could go from a buzz cut to ankle-length locks almost at will—especially here—but that was the very reason most people on Earth didn't bother. Hair that long was heavy, and a lot of work to wash and take care of, and it got caught on things. Back in the old days, you at least got the compensation of impressing people with how much time you put into growing it to make up for all the trouble. But now that it only took a few hours at a clinic...well, there were a *few* people on Earth who made Rapunzel hair their own, and really made it work as a fashion statement. But most people just wanted to get on with their lives with as little inconvenience as possible.

But here on Zharus...it seemed like that taking care of hair like that wasn't such a problem, because of their ungodly hyperactive little nanites. On Earth, you never saw nanites outside of clinics that had the massive equipment necessary to keep massaging them with broadcast power while they did their work. Here, you could buy them in skin patches or pneumatic syringes in the drug stores. Chet was actually on several nano-treatments right now—anti-rejection and drugs and pain medication for the new

stomach, and some allergy and cold treatments for the allergic reactions he invariably had to the plant life that was different from what he'd grown up with. He was pretty sure some of those treatments weren't supposed to be used together, but he'd never really been one to pay much attention to medication labels. Of course, he couldn't take them with him when he left—there would be a targeted EMP sufficient to fry the nanites without harming his implants as part of outward-bound customs clearance. (Really pretty ridiculous, he thought, the idea that forbidding them from being taken off-planet would somehow keep Earth from finding out how good they were. But those were the rules.) But it was nice to have them while he was here.

But Zharusian nanites weren't just useful in medicine. You could buy fricking *nanite hair spray*, or even a full-fledged salon treatment, full of busy little microscopic bees that kept your hair in place, gave it body, changed the color, or even moved it around for you. Judging by the behavior of the woman's hair, she must have had a top-of-the-line treatment, because her hair was swirling around her more strongly than the breeze should have caused—and it was blowing about *more slowly* than it ought to, also. She was like a walking shampoo commercial. *Swirly girl*, Chet thought. *Swirly girl, and her girly swirl*.

The woman turned to look around, and Chet could see her face for the first time. She had an attractive, heart-shaped face with ice-blue eyes and dimples, Her figure was thin but not anorexic, with curves that were not overexaggerated but were definitely there. Not shorted at all in the looks department, but then, this was Zharus so that was not exactly unexpected. Another big use for the nanites was cosmetic modification. What they used to call “permanent cosmetics.” They had this on Earth as well, but Zharusian nanites made the changes a lot more feasible, so everyone could have them without costly all-day clinic sessions. The end result was something of a “planet of the Barbie and Ken dolls” effect. Chet was kind of ambivalent about it. Everyone was certainly easy on the eyes, but there was a kind of sameness to it all, at least in the people he encountered day to day, that made him long to see a good old-fashioned *ugly* face every now and then.

As Chet finished his cone, another skimmer arrived, carrying a frumpy-looking older woman with raccoon ears and tail. As the woman climbed off, the skimmer folded up into a giant raccoon. The raccoon-woman and the snow leopard-woman began to hold a conversation. Chet was almost curious enough to try to eavesdrop with his implants, but decided against it. Whatever they were talking about, it was none of his business, and he didn't need to know what it was to appreciate the snow leopard-woman's looks.

The conversation didn't seem to be going well for her. The older woman's expression was sharply disapproving, and the other woman's shoulders lowered and her fluffy tail drooped as she apparently got some bad news.

At that moment, the breeze shifted as the directional vanes on Uplift's breeze generator fans changed their angle. They did that every so often for variety. Now the breeze was blowing right from the direction of the two women. And suddenly, Chet found himself taking a *lot* more interest in the leopard woman. How had he not noticed before that she was *drop-dead gorgeous*? That flowing hair, that fluffy tail...what would it feel like to run his hands through that shaggy fur? She was...everything he looked for in a woman. (Which was odd, a little corner of his mind said, given that he'd never been *with* a woman like her before in his life, but he ignored it.) But would she be interested

in someone like him? He should...he should at least go up to her and say hello, shouldn't he?

It looked like he would have his chance. The raccoon converted back to a skimmer, and the older woman straddled it and flew off. The snow-leopard woman was alone with her RIDE.

But as Chet started forward, the woman threw her arms around the RIDE's neck and it engulfed her into its skimmer form. "Shit!" Chet said as the skimmer lifted and flew away. His own rental skimmer bike was at the other end of the park. He turned and ran for it, but by the time he got there the snow leopard skimmer was gone.

Chet spent the next half hour driving through the neighborhoods around the park, looking for any sign of the skimmer, the leopard, or the woman, replaying every second he'd recorded of the woman over and over. She wasn't anywhere to be found—she must have gone into one of the houses. "Dammit!" Chet swore. How could he find her? He *had* to meet her. He didn't know why, exactly, but it was the most important thing in the world to see her, talk to her. What would her voice sound like? Would she be interested in him? He had to know.

But his thoughts were interrupted by an alarm breaking in from his implant. It was time for him to head back for the aerodrome, to lift the *DiCaprio* with the last load of passengers for the Goose. It was time to head out for Earth.

For several long moments, Chet was conflicted. He couldn't leave now, he hadn't found that woman yet. He had to see her—it was the most important thing ever! He'd just resign his position. One of the backup pilots could lift it without him. But...then a more rational part of his mind made itself heard. *Seriously? You're going to throw over your entire career for the sake of a woman you saw for ten minutes?* That gave him enough of a jolt to pull to a stop at the side of the road and think for a moment. If he resigned his position now, breaking his contract to fly home to Earth, he'd never be able to find another piloting job. His whole career would be over. It didn't make any sense to do that over a sudden crush, did it?

Chet shook his head. He still longed to see that woman again, but in perspective it suddenly seemed a lot less important. Sighing, looking around one last time as if he could force the snow leopard-woman to materialize by force of will, he reluctantly turned the skimmer toward the aerodrome and home.

*April 23, 157 AL*

"Argh! Of all the stupid, insufferable, bloody-minded, idiotic stuffed-shirts!" Rochelle groaned as she emerged from the Nextus Administration Building into the bright daylight and geometrically-arranged symmetry of Nextus's central administration park. She ran her hands through her hair in a by-now-unconscious gesture. "Two weeks in, and no closer to consensus than when we began."

"I hear that," Uncia said, padding over from the RIDE parking lot to join her. "But it's about what we expected, isn't it? I mean, the RIDE rights amendment took *how* many months in Uplift? And since we were in town anyway for the design consultation...."

"Yeah, I guess," Rochelle said. "It would be nice to get it wrapped up, though, so we have more time for the consulting. Every day I have to go in there and argue with them. I mean, they *invented* you here. They ought to know better by now."

“Yeah. Well, you know how hard it is for a leopard to change their...oh, wait.”  
Uncia's hardlight pelt shifted to neon green polka dots, then chartreuse and beige zebra stripes, then back to its normal color. “Never mind!”

Rochelle bapped her on the head. “Silly kitty.”

“So, I guess back to Donizetti's for now?” Uncia asked.

Rochelle shook her head. “I commed him from in there. They still haven't gotten the next batch of parts in from the fabbers yet, so no point in having us 'mooning around with nothing to do.' But he did have some other great news.”

Uncia perked up. “Oh yeah? What?”

“One of his NextusMil connections finally came through with special access for us to the Mother Lode of old RIDE parts.” She grinned. “We're going picking...in The Shed.”

“Oooh.” Uncia shuddered. “You mean...the place where they kept Grammie Kaylee all that time?”

“Probably the exact same building,” Rochelle said. “Actually, what they call 'The Shed' is a series of big warehouses. When they filled up one, they'd build another. They're still using out of the newest ones, that are for parts storage of more recent designs. But the old stuff's just been sitting there for years, 'cuz it's not compatible with anything they're currently using. They sold some of it—that's how K got out in the first place—but there was just so much of it, they decided it wasn't cost-effective to spend time and effort digging out useful stuff. And there was too much bureaucracy in the way to let the private sector in on it.”

“Until you got Donizetti to cut through it,” Uncia said. “Sweet!”

“And Brubeck and Walton and even a little Steader,” Rochelle agreed. “They're finally going to open it up to private parts dealers—what's so funny?” Uncia had rolled over on the ground and was giggling, shaking her snowshoe paws in the air. Rochelle replayed what she'd just said, then groaned. “*Silly* kitty, get your mind out of the gutter.”

“Well, stop saying such funny things!” Uncia replied. “Oooh, I bet Rufia would love to know the addresses of those *private parts* dealers...”

Rochelle cleared her throat. “But anyway, we get first crack at it, and they'll give us standard scrap rates on any usable parts we find. Except any heavy weapon systems, of course—they worked a deal where any the military don't still want will go to the Marshals—and also cores. They don't think there will be any—Kaylee was a special case—but if there are, we get them free to take back for rehabilitation in the rescue museum. Trying to pour oil on troubled waters and all that. And they're going over the newer Sheds with a fine-toothed comb looking for cores that might have slipped past them, too.”

“Good for them,” Uncia said. “About thirty years overdue, but still, good. Are Rhi and K gonna join us?”

“Dunno. That's up to them, I guess. I emailed Rhi about it. Might be too traumatic for Kaylee, though.”

Uncia nodded. “Yeah, I'll bet. She was awake for part of it, you know.”

“I know,” Rochelle said. “Ugh.” She shook her head. “Anyway, we know enough about the hardware side by now that we probably won't make any terrible picks even without them. So let's saddle up. We can have a skimmer truck from the Nextus franchise meet us there for hauling stuff away. Got your parts cataloging program

ready?"

"You bet!" Uncia said, rubbing against Rochelle, then shifting to skimmer form around her. "I'm looking forward to seeing this place myself."

"Really?" Rochelle asked.

"Yeah! It'll be like one of those Halloween houses of horror that you humans are always going to. Spooooky. But there ought to be some stuff there we can use!"

"Kaylee," Rhianna said gently, standing atop the Dreamchaser in its hangar. "Come down from there." The pony-sized lynx had fled into the darkened (and, fortunately, titanium-steel-reinforced) rafters when Rhianna—gently—brought up the Shed. She acted so human sometimes it was easy to forget her brain was based on a wildcat. "Talk to me, at least. I'm listening."

"You've been in my head, Rhi. I shouldn't needta talk," Kaylee replied between anxious yowls. She raced back and forth across the metal rafters, ears folded back. "You damn well *know* what I went through in there before my batteries ran out! They pract'ly blanked me!"

"I know, Kay. I know," Rhianna said. "But if you're not coming down, I'll join you up there."

"Leave me alone," Kaylee replied. "If you want ta go yerself, I ain't stopping you. But I ain't going."

"Now you know I won't do that," Rhianna said. "I'm not setting foot in there without you with me. You'd think I was taking you to the *vet* or something."

"Don't say the V-word!" Kaylee exclaimed with a hint of her sense of humor. "But I ain't goin' and that's final!"

*Okay, looks like I'm going to have to bring out the big guns,* Rhianna thought. "You may never get another opportunity to face your demons like this."

"Who cares. Why should I bother?"

"Because if you don't, Kaylee, Fritz *wins*," Rhianna said gravely. The response from above was complete silence, as she expected. The lynx-eared woman used her implant to open the suborbital's hatches and loading ramp. "I'll be in the pilot's chair when you want to talk, Kay."

Rhianna stepped down through the flight deck hatch, then took the her seat in the comfortable pilot's chair. Sounds from the busy Garage filtered inside through the open doors. She could have connected with the network if she wanted, but this was important enough that watching her RIDE even indirectly felt crass. Folding her arms, she waited.

On the control board a mass indicator ticked upwards. Kaylee lifted into the flight deck from the cargo hold, then unceremoniously rested her large head on Rhianna's lap. "I ain't gonna let him win. 'Sides, there could be another one like me in there somewhere. Doubt it, but...ya never know."

"I've filed a flight plan to Nextus," Rhianna said. She stroked Kaylee's fluffy hardlight fur, then hugged her tightly. "I knew you'd come around."

"Yeah...well..." Kaylee mumbled, starting to purr. "You still need me to fly this thing, partner. Let's Fuse. I've told Uncia we're on the way."

The grey-and-white skimmer pulled up at the checkpoint into the NextusMil base. Uncia dissolved the hardlight canopy so Rochelle could wave to the gate guard.

“Hey, you need to check our bona fides?”

The guard, a fully-Fused German Shepherd RIDE with hardlight Military Police armband and helmet, shook his head. “Read the transponder, and your scans match up. You check out. Let us know when your trucks are coming, we’ll clear them through.”

“Thanks.” The canopy closed again, and Uncia pulled on through. Beyond the gates, a row of immense, identical warehouses awaited: slate grey pre-fab buildings, four stories tall. A roll-up door was open on the first of them. “I think that’s our spot,” Rochelle said.

“Right! Rhi said not to wait for her, so...let’s get started!” Uncia Fused up, and they hovered through the door, conserving their momentum. They entered a world of crates, immense shelves, parts and random junk stacked to the ceiling. Shafts of light shone down through dusty skylights, providing just enough light to make the shadows darker. Then two pairs of glowing eyes in the shadows revealed they were not alone.

Rochelle blinked. “Rhi? How’d you make it so quick...waaaait. There’s *two* of you.”

“Hold on, I’d know that Donizetti shell anywhere,” Uncia said. “Which means *you* have to be...”

“Herrrrre on behalf of the Marrshals,” Katie confirmed, stepping out of the shadows. “Since you werrrrre so kind as to wangle us dibs on the heavy weapons...”

“When we heard your request was gonna go through, we sort of had to make it a family affair,” Kandace added, stepping out next to her. Like her niece, she was in Fuser form. “After what sis went through in this place...ugh.”

“Since the Young Guns arrrrre on detached serrrrvice rrrrrright now for the school semesterrrr, we were convenient to lend a hand,” Katie added.

“And we wanted to come along for the ride,” Katie’s partner Relena put in.

“For the RIDes,” Jenni put in, from inside Kandace. “After all, we’re *all* family now.”

“We’ll be glad for the help,” Rochelle said. “This place is even bigger than I expected,” Rochelle said. “Rhi and Kay shouldn’t be more than a few minutes out themselves. We might as well wait for ‘em.”

“Sounds good to me,” Kandace said.

*:This isn't the base where they built you originally, is it?:* Rhianna asked.

*:Nah. This is MRS Surplus Storage—Everyone just calls it the Shed. Fritz blew that place up like fifteen years ago, I think. Details are rather sketchy. They turned the site into a big polity park,:* Kaylee said. She sounded, and felt, very nervous. Her stubby tail flicked in agitation.

“The one they named for Dr. Patil?” Rhianna said aloud.

“That’s the one. Mom said she’d grumbled about it, but they did it when she was on walkabout and everyone thought she was dead—then they said it’d cost too much to change it when she popped up again. We’re clear for landing.”

The nondescript grey tarmac of the aerodrome’s small landing pad grew larger before them. The base didn’t boast the longer strips common to commercial spaceports, but they were something of an affectation anyway in this age of gravity-bending cavorite and cheap sarium energy. A few moments later, they were safely on the ground.

Rhianna’s stomach fluttered in sympathy from the surge of anxiety from Kaylee. Although she was trying to keep them locked away, she could catch little snatches of the

fragmented memories that were all that survived from Kaylee's final moments as she was rolled into the shed. She'd been shut down to passive, stripped for parts, and tossed into a bin. Or so the technicians believed.

In actuality, her body had locked down, but her consciousness had continued, undetectable but still active and fully aware as she was dismantled, bit by bit, part by part. It was the bookend to, and probably the direct cause of, the episode that took place later on, in Ryan's garage, when Terry kept Kaylee sane through several nights of sensory deprivation when she couldn't go into passive properly. And it was no accident. Fritz's mocking voice in her comm receiver made sure she understood that.

Rhianna tried to keep a handle on her temper. She understood, and in some moments even sympathized with, Dr. Patil's contention that Fritz hadn't been fully responsible for his own actions—that the “hero” neural template his designers had imposed had combined with the trauma of Integration to cause psychosis. That didn't keep her from wanting to skin him centi by centi for a rug right now, however.

*:There's nothing you can wish on him that I haven't a million times over already, Rhi,:* Kaylee said. *:After Mom's lecture I...lost my taste for revenge. So don't you go that way, hear?:*

Rhianna hugged herself, the closest she could come to hugging Kaylee in Fuser form. “I won't, Kay. But are you gonna be all right with this?”

Kaylee huffed. “I'll have to be. I'm not gonna let that bastard keep *any* of his claws in me. Let's go.”

They headed down the ramp to the tarmac and stood for a moment, orienting themselves. There was a long row of warehouses, a door open in the one at the far end. Kaylee shivered, looking at it. “That it?” Rhianna asked.

“Yeah.” Kaylee looked at it for a long moment, then shook their head and kicked in her lifters to fly them there. Though Rhi couldn't help noticing that the closer they got, the slower Kaylee was flying, until she stopped near the gaping darkness of the open door. “Aw, *hell*.”

“Mom!” Katie shouted from inside. She flew out and practically pounced on her with a tight hug. “Hey therrre, Rrrhianna. Hope you don't mind the snuggie.”

“Not one bit,” Rhianna said.

Kandace stepped out next. “Hey, sis. Hope you don't mind a little company. When we heard they were opening up this place for you...well, we couldn't let you face that alone.”

“I can't think of anyone else, besides Rhianna, I'd rather face it with,” Kaylee said. “No offense Jenni, Relena.”

“Nah, that's fine,” Relena said. “Sometimes we're just along for the ride, you know?”

“I do know,” Rhianna added dryly.

“They need to be there for you, we're there for them,” Jenni said. “Friendship is transitive.” She paused. “We're learning about properties in math right now in school.”

“So here we are.” Kaylee looked up at the warehouse, then averted her gaze back to the ground. “I *hate* this place.”

“I visited the catacombs in Rome and Paris once or twice,” Rhianna said. “This place has that same feeling.”

Kandace shook her head. “We RIDEs all talked about this place among ourselves, especially after...after. Didn't go near it if we could. It was a bad business.”

“It just gets worrrse the longer we wait,” Katie said. “Shall we?”

“Let’s go,” Kaylee said firmly. Katie and Kandace stepped forward to take her hands.

They stepped through the door together, Katie holding one of their hands and Kandace holding the other. “Well,” Kandace said. “Here we are, then.”

“It really doesn’t look any different from any other parts warehouse I’ve ever been in,” Rochelle said. “But I guess it’s being *this specific* parts warehouse that’s the problem.”

“Right...there.” Kaylee slowly raised an arm and pointed to a spot along the wall, a few meters back from the entrance. “They had me in a bin, racked on the wall right there. Section alpha-4, bin 78.”

“I guess it’s lucky you were so close to the entrance,” Rhianna said. “You were right there when they decided to sell a few things.”

“I can thank Conyers for that,” Kaylee said without a hint of rancor. “I’d still be in a box somewhere in here if he hadn’t. Can hardly call it luck. I still owe him a few rounds at Cheers, I suppose.” She walked slowly over to the wall and looked down. “Funny, you’d think there should be more traces left here than a couple spots of grease.”

“Maybe a plaque saying ‘Kaylee Cross slept here?’” Uncia suggested.

Kaylee chuckled. “Maybe so.” She turned, unconsciously scuffing her foot like she was trying to kick litter over the spot. “Well, what’re we all standin’ around for? We’ve got parts t’ sort.”

“Aye aye, boss!” Uncia said, saluting. “Katie, Kandace, you get the scanning code package I uploaded?”

“Affirrrrrmative!” Katie replied.

“Received, extracted, and installed,” Kandace said. “Looks like an upgraded version of the one we used in the service.”

“That’s because it is,” Rochelle said. “Kaylee still had the code on board when Ryan got her, and I’ve been tweaking it ever since I started working at the garage. We’ll each take a fourth of the warehouse, and Uncia will collate the scans from the rest of you. Let’s go.”

The RIDEs moved among the shelves, planes of laser light flicking out from scan packages and sweeping across each shelf, reading names and bar codes and recognizing part shapes, at the same time low-level radio pulses triggered RFID tags. The scan system matched parts to labels when it could, then tagged matches that looked iffy and attempted to confirm the parts’ identity by contour matching or other means.

The shelves held plenty of spare parts—some new, still in their original shipping boxes; others obviously stripped from battle-damaged units. Rhianna kept an eye on the tally sheets that Uncia relayed and Kaylee threw up in a corner of the HUD.

Occasionally she would carat-mark a particular item on the list for special attention. A lot of these parts were getting rare and harder to find these days. Replacements had to be custom-fabbed for repairs, and they were almost never as good as the originals from the wartime mil-spec fabbers. They were going to make a big profit out of this.

Not that they were exactly going to be gypping Nextus either. To them, the space to hold parts for things they *could* use would be a lot more valuable, and it would cost them more in administrative costs than they’d earn back in profit to sell the stuff themselves.

Of course, it was going to be pocket change compared to what the DINcom stuff

would pull in, but she kept that compartmentalized from the rest of the business—it wouldn't do at all to start relying solely on that windfall to keep afloat. No point in letting standards slip.

Parts weren't the only things they found, though. There were still a significant number of leftover complete DE shells, remnants of the old days when many more Des than cores had been made. Some of them were still in their original packing materials. Rhianna tagged the choicest shells for retrieval—mostly the much-coveted 001 and 002 series, very popular with shell hot rodders for their legendary versatility. The stripped hoopties could be left for the other dealers who would follow them.

“Wow, sweet, look! It's a double-ought-one comm elk shell, just like Yvonne's but still shiny new!” Uncia said. “I'll bet some of these things would fetch a fortune from collectors.”

“Yeah, maybe they would, but I had something else in mind,” Rhianna said. “There are a number of Zane's rescuees back at the museum whose old shells were beyond repair, but they don't like the newer ones as much. Was thinking of snagging these to offer to the ones we can find a match for.”

“I think that's a great idea, Rhi,” Kaylee purred. “Did you see there were a couple of LNX-002s back there? Maybe we could hold a male one for Liam.”

Rhianna grinned. “I was already planning on that, partner. In fact, I'm calling dibs on every LNX and LNX part we find. We don't know how many of the yet-to-be-found kittens are gonna need new bods.”

There were other used chassis that had been stripped for parts, but none of them had RI cores in them, nor were there any cores on the shelves apart from a number of archaic unformatted blanks. It made sense. What had happened to Kaylee aside, an experienced core was valuable enough that it could always find a new home, especially during wartime.

In addition to the other parts, there were also weapons systems: pulse cannons, gauss guns, plasma beams, and so on. Although slightly out of date by military standards, they were nonetheless too powerful for the civilian market—which was, after all, why Katie and Kandace were here. “The Lithiums are going to love these. But if you see anything you want for purrrrrrrsonal use, let us know,” Katie assured them. “We do have some strrrings to pull.”

Not everything was carefully catalogued or labeled. There were a number of storage lockers and boxes that begged to be opened.

“Section gamma-5, bin 458. Wait... is this supposed to be a *centaur* DE?” Kandace wondered, looking inside one of the unmarked bins. It was clearly equine with a large hole where the head and neck would have been. The inside of the Shed was dust-free and climate controlled, so the place where the rider kneeled was visible inside. “What were the engineers thinking? These things are *rare*, even now.”

“Looks all in one piece, too,” Kaylee added. “Guess they thought it was unique enough to just store away 'cause they thought it might be useful later rather than just strip it for parts.”

“This must date all the way back to when they first started messing around with mythicals, in the late Twenties. Considering the way the taur-type tech went compared to what we're seeing here, I'd say this unit is darned near one-of-a-kind,” Rochelle said. “Do we take it with us, or leave it be?”

Kaylee snorted. “What do *you* think? This is *Rhianna* I've got on board here.

She's the one who falls in love with hundred-year-old IDEs and calls twenty-meter wolf RIDEs 'baby.' There's not an odd-lot DE shell made she wouldn't take home to squee over."

"If anything it'll be valuable just to figure out *why* this approach didn't work," Rhianna said, trying to sound serious and composed and failing utterly.

"Yeah, and those little squeals you've been making under your breath don't have *anything* to do with it," Kaylee smirked.

"I can't help it! This place is like candyland!" Rhianna said happily. "Um...for me, I mean. Sorry, Kay."

"S all right, Rhi," Kaylee said. "Honestly, the place isn't so bad now I'm away from the entrance. Never got this far in, so this part looks like just another parts warehouse to me. Creepy as hell, but not...well, y'know." Rhianna felt Kaylee was still tense beneath the surface, but she wasn't close to outright panic anymore.

"But there *are* still 'taur RIDEs around," Relena said. "There are some in the Marshal service, even aside from Bernie Thompson."

"Yes, but those are usually standard four-foot Des, either factory modded or retrofitted with a conversion kit," Rhianna said. "Gives them sort of a fourth mode, a Fused Walker. The military especially likes them, for having four-foot stability on rough ground and hands for manipulating things at the same time. The RIDEs often don't like it much, though. They don't get a good sensory feed if the rider wants to go human-face, and having six limbs feels unnatural outside of winged types like pegasi and dragons. Takes some getting used to."

"And Bernie's deertaur shell was a custom job based on Laurasian tech," Kaylee said. "Pure taur-types still work best with a brainbox in the lower torso."

"Looks like there's no RI core slot at all. Must've used early qubitite co-processors and Ad-I..." Rhianna mused, peering deeper inside.

"Really? Stock units or custom parts?" Rochelle asked.

"Oh, don't get her started or she'll talk all day," Kandace warned.

"The DE engineers were trying all kinds of funky things back then, once the war was over," Rhianna continued gleefully. "When Nextus folks discover a new thing they just go *crazy* on it, and..." Everyone was looking at her. "Okay, okay. I'll stop."

"Clearly, they're not the only ones who go crazy when they discover a new thing," Rochelle put in. "Though in your case I guess it's *old* things."

"New old things," Uncia corrected. "Hey, guys, I've been collating the scans and noticed something a bit odd at the back of the warehouse." She pulled up a map display. "There's a chunk back there we didn't look at yet. Looks like a corner of it's been blocked off."

Rhianna blinked. "Really? We've got an Al Capone's Vault in here? This day just keeps getting better and better."

"Probably not anything they were intentionally trying to hide," Kandace said. "Just something that got blocked off and lost in the shuffle while they were shoving stuff around to make room for more stuff. That's the way things work around here."

Rhianna rubbed her hands together. "Let's see about un-shoving it, then. I think I saw a forklift a few rows back."

"On it!" Katie said.

A few moments later, the lynx-girl came back in the pilot's seat of a lifter-bearing forklift. Though it had the same lifting forks as forklifts ever had, it mainly used directed

lifter fields to move heavy objects. Katie locked it onto the shelf Uncia indicated and pulled it away, opening a gap large enough to let them slip through.

“Hey, this isn’t a storage area,” Rochelle said as they stepped through. “It looks like they set up a temporary repair bay.” She pointed at a row of cylindrical pods set up along the wall. “This kind of cradles are normally used in field workshops, right?”

“They’re portables, yes,” Rhianna said. “So are these toolchests and manipulator arrays. See the handles? They fold up into boxes that transport trucks or RIDEs like Tamarind can cart around. These are like the first used cradles I had in the Garage, before I could afford permanent ones.”

“Maybe it was meant for overrrrrflow, when the other bays werre full,” Katie suggested. “At the height of the warr, there was much serrrvicing to do.”

“And it’s right inside their main spare parts supply, so convenient,” Relena said.

Uncia paused in front of a diagnostic terminal so Rochelle could tap the power key. It came to life with hardly a flicker. “This stuff hasn’t changed much over the years. Just needs a firmware update or two. They’re probably still using the same models today.”

“Yeah, but they said we could have *anything in the warehouse*,” Rhianna said gleefully. “If they didn’t realize they still had ‘useful’ stuff here, that’s their loss. These will be great for field work, and there’s enough here to outfit several shops with mobile units. Kaylee, remind me to earmark some of it for Paul and Lilli.”

“Hey, you guys, come over here.” Kandace stood by one of the cradles. “This one’s got someone in it.”

Kaylee's fur stood on end. “What? What?! Who is he? Who put him here?”

“Calm down, Mom. It's okay. Let’s go find out,” Katie suggested. She took Kaylee’s hand and gave it a squeeze, then moved over to the cradle. Uncia followed, then, hesitantly, so did Kaylee.

The occupant of the cradle was a Nextus military feline DE shell. The body styling showed it was male, and the grey rosettes dappling the chrome finish and the thicker-than-usual tail indicated it was a snow leopard even without the hardlight up.

Rochelle brought up the cradle’s diagnostic array. “Hey, there’s a RI still in this one.”

“He’s gotta be one of Krystal’s brothers,” Uncia said. “The dates are right.”

“Looks like this place was working furiously during the final push,” Kandace said. “Last days of the War during Operation Final Fury. When the Sturmies just up and surrendered, well, I can guess what happened next.”

“Well, we can be sure he’s not another Kaylee, anyway. Looks like he went safely into long-term shutdown after left alone for a week in passive,” Rochelle said. “Body’s missing some parts—maint log says they were in the middle of loadout refitting when the place got closed off.”

“Why didn’t anyone come back for him?” Jenni asked. “I mean, if someone was in the middle of doing this and they came back one day and it was blocked off...”

“Maybe whoever was doing it got kacked before he could,” Kandace said. “Or maybe they were reassigned to another project and thought someone else would be taking over this one, but nobody got assigned. I remember how crazy those last days were. Lots of stuff got lost in the shuffle.”

“Well, we’re here now,” Rhianna said, moving to look over Rochelle and Uncia’s shoulder. “The equipment we need is all right here. And parts shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Ohhhh, no, don’t say it,” Rochelle said. “You’re going to say it, aren’t you?”  
Rhianna grinned. “We can rebuild him! We have the technology.”

“Oyyyy, you said it,” Rochelle groaned. “So, what then? I don’t think they expected us to find a whole RIDE in here.”

Rhianna shrugged. “Doesn’t change anything. They said we could have any occupied cores we found for free, for rehabilitation. And his line’s no longer in service anyway. So we buy his shell at the same price as the ones without cores, and take him back home with us.”

“Umm...” Uncia said. “I know this question might come off the wrong way and all, but...could we keep him, Shelley? Please? I’ll bet he’s *really* handsome in hardlight...”

Rochelle chuckled. “Well, about that, we’ll have to ask him what *he* wants, when we wake him up again.”

“Let’s get him complete and closed up, but don’t boot him back up ‘til we’ve got him in a friendlier place,” Kaylee suggested. “I know *I* sure wouldn’t want to be woke up here.”

“Right!” Rhianna clapped her hands. “The Shed temporary branch of the Freeriders Garage is now officially open. Katie, Kandace, I’m beaming you a list of what we need. Could you fetch these parts? I’ve highlighted their locations on the shelves. Shelley, get me a full diagnostic on the core and the shell’s on-board computers. I’m going to start stripping him down and checking for age-related failures. May need to request some more parts if I find anything else has broken down. I’m seeing a few hints of old battle damage.”

“Do we have time to do this here?” Uncia asked.

“We’ve got all day, and we’re basically already finished with the inventory,” Rochelle said. “This shouldn’t take more than a couple hours. And like she said, we’ve got the best access to the right parts here.”

“We’ll get starrrrrted on those now,” Katie promised.

“Core is a Mark 1A—same series as the lynxes,” Rochelle said. “No bad telltales on software probes. He’s clean. Should be an easy awakening from his thirty-some year catnap.”

“That’s a relief,” Kaylee said.

“The trucks are here,” Uncia reported.

“Let’s get this wrapped up,” Rhianna said. “He’ll be in working order before they finish loading. Kandy, mind handing me that...”

**BEEEEEEP!**

>>DEOS v1.17, copyright 122 AL, NextusMil RIDEworks.<<

>>Loading...<<

He came slowly back to awareness as bits of him loaded back up at different speeds. It took him a good 330 milliseconds before he remembered how much he hated this process. It took him another 217 before he remembered his own name. *Nils. I’m Nils.* He couldn’t remember what he’d last been doing before he restarted, but he knew that would come to him. Memories always loaded in chronological order.

He hated cold reboots. He always wondered if he was the same person afterward as he’d been before. He knew that it was actually just the shell’s co-processors that were restarting, and his core had been saved in exactly the same quantum state as when he’d

gone to safe mode, but you had superstitions about these things...

Nils opened his eyes. *You mean activated your optics, don't you?* He thought wryly, and then thought, *Shut up.* He always felt a bit scattered on restart, before the defrag kicked in. But what he saw when the optics came to life put arguing with himself right out of his head.

The shutdown had been in a military maintenance facility. A makeshift thing slapped together on short notice, but military all the same. This place...was not. Oh, it was a nice enough repair bay, neat and tidy for the most part, equipment kept in good order (even if he didn't recognize half of it), but there was a different *feeling* about a military place than a civvie, and this smelled like civvie to the core.

There were other people there, too, but he spent a few milliseconds considering the delicious conundrum of *where* he found himself before moving on to who he found himself with. Surprises were rare enough in military life that he found he quite enjoyed them—or at least, the ones that didn't come out of nowhere and threaten to wipe out his core unit in a split second.

*Well, this shouldn't be,* he thought bemusedly. He'd just been supposed to be under for some quick R&R. But a restore-and-refurb should have had him wake right back up where he'd gone to sleep. And the people were clearly not his technicians, PFCs Jenkins and Naismith.

They were two RIDEs and two humans. From their tags, the humans were obviously the RIDEs' partners. The more familiar RIDE was one of Nextus's own LNX-LMAs. He'd worked with several of them on various ops, though he didn't think this was one of them. And she was pretty clearly no longer original spec. Just looking at her, he could see a number of her parts weren't original. Weren't even made by the right companies, though they'd tried hard to match the specifications. That was...odd. As far as he knew, nobody except the contractors were making RIDE parts yet.

The other...Nils's optics widened, the iris dilating as he considered the other RIDE. She was another snow leopard, he could tell that by the general body shape and plating markings, but she was like *nothing* he'd ever seen before. About a third larger than he was, sleek and curved where he was blocky and angular, her body moved with a smoothness that made even his own feline grace seem halting and awkward. Her parts fit together with tolerances a quarter the size of his own's gaps. It was as if she was a civvie sports car to his military jeep. And...she was one of the most gorgeous things he'd ever seen.

Their partners wore grease-stained coveralls adorned with an "Easy FUSE" logo. It looked like a brand name, but not one he'd ever heard of. And by their posture, they'd never been in the military themselves. *Curiouser and curiouser.* Then he paused, as a thought struck him. *Wait...when is this? How long was I out?*

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>>WI-FI CONNECTING... handshake... updating protocols... obtaining IPv8 address...timesync... September 4, 17:35:21, 157 AL.<<
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Nils stared numbly at the time code. He ran the time sync three more times in case there had been some kind of error. *Thirty-five years? I've been asleep for thirty-five years?* In spite of himself, he whined a little.

"If it's any consolation, we won," the lynx said. Now he was positive he'd never worked directly with her. Nonetheless, her voice was familiar, if only because every RIDE knew who the first ones had been. Despite her current gear, she was still a bonafide preproduction 001-series LNX unit, one of the only four who didn't get a

trailing letter. “Just take it easy...”

“What...happened?” Nils’s news aggregation software scoured the network, building a history of the last thirty-five years, but he could scan that later. His question was meant more personally, and they both knew it.

“You got et by bureaucracy,” the other snow leopard said cheerfully. “That’s Nextus for ya.”

“Seems that there was a bureaucratic snafu and you got...misplaced,” the woman with lynx ears said. “As near as we could find out from official records, your mechanics Jenkins and Naismith got promoted to Spec 3 and reassigned. In the gap between them leaving and your replacement showing up, someone blocked off your repair bay by shoving a shelf in the wrong place, and the people who showed up afterward to pick up where they left off just figured there was some mistake when they couldn’t find you and went off to do other things.”

“We were right in the middle of Operation Final Fury!” Nils exclaimed. “I was supposed to get a new operator and take part in the invasion!”

“The Sturmies surrendered *before* they would have finished your repairs either way,” the lynx said. “You could say there was a *little* disorder in the ranks when that was announced. Maybe if there hadn’t been, you wouldn’t have gotten lost so easy. In the aftermath, they didn’t care as much about misplacing ‘equipment’ since they didn’t need it so much anymore. But trust me, you’re not the first RIDE to get that sort of treatment.”

Nils groaned. “Oh, Hendrix, you *asshole*.”

The other snow leopard blinked. “Hendrix?”

“My erstwhile ‘partner.’” Nils shook his head. “Up and decided he’d rather be a ‘she,’ asked for reassignment. That’s why I was in maintenance to begin with, fixing me up for my next operator.” He growled. “I hope she ended up with VD.”

“But they don’t *have* VD anymore,” the other snow leopard said. “Nanomedicine cured all varieties of it before you were even made.”

“I know,” Nils said. “But I can still hope she got it anyway. She...he...was such an *idiot*. And the reason I’m stuck with this *stupid* name.”

“Um...what is your name?” the other snow leopard asked. “I’m Uncia, by the way. And the woman with my ears and tail is Rochelle Seaford.”

“I thought we were *all* Uncia,” Nils said wryly. “I’m Nils.”

“Pleased ta meecha, Nils. I’m Kaylee, this is my other half Rhianna Stonegate,” the lynx said, confirming Nils’s suspicions. She *was* one of the First Four: Kaylee, Kandace, Franz, and Frank (the last, sadly, had been destroyed in the line of duty).

“But Nils doesn’t seem like such a bad name,” Uncia said.

“Never said it was my *full* name,” Nils said. “Hendrix fancied himself a music historian. Named me in honor of some twencen rapper.”

“Before the Steaders, yet?” Rochelle mused.

“Who are the Steaders?” Nils asked. The question was largely rhetorical. A few milliseconds brought him the answer from the networks. “Oh God. What’s happened to my *planet* while I’ve been sleeping?”

“I think a good way to help you catch up would be a little fast-time Nature Range,” Kaylee said.

“But...you never said what your full *name* was yet,” Uncia said plaintively.

Nils sighed, rolling his eyes. “If you must know...it’s Vanilla Snow.”

“But why don’t you just *change* your name?” Uncia asked. The three RIDEs stood on a rocky promontory jutting out from a mountainside, just below the snowline, within the virtual reality setting of Nature Range. Nils glanced over at Uncia again in wonder. Her avatar had about a 20% higher voxel count than his own. She was just as gorgeous in here as outside.

Then Nils remembered her question, and snorted. “Are you kidding? It’s my *name*. I can’t just change who I am, even if I don’t like it. And I suppose I don’t mind being Nils so much.”

“When I booted I was just 'K-3',” Kaylee said. She continued on, dryly. “I understand the German Shepherd triple-zero had the K-9 designation, but...ah think they ended up calling him Klein or Klink or somethin' like that.”

“Yeah, well...my name was one of the first things I got, and it just wouldn’t feel right to dump it.” Nils slumped on the stony terrace, placing his muzzle on the ground between his paws. “Thirty-five years...God. No wonder I’m in a civvie garage. Our service life was supposed to be *five* years. From state-of-the-art to antique in the blink of an eye.”

“We’ve got enough in our slush fund to bring you up to date,” Kaylee said, eyeing a distant brown hare down the slope. “You’ve got a solid 002-series chassis. Though if you want we can do a core transplant into something brand new. Won’t be a Donizetti, a’course.”

Nils shook his head. “This is my body, and I’m sticking to it.”

“That’s what I thought you’d say,” Kaylee said. “Wouldn’t say any different myself, you get right down to it.”

“I think it’s a nice body!” Uncia said. “And really, you’re not *that* much out of date. RIDE tech hasn’t changed a whole lot since you were made. The style’s a bit different, that’s all. But I *like* retro.”

“Retro,” Nils deadpanned. “So, I guess this means I’m the property of the Freerider Garage...?”

“Not exactly,” Kaylee said. “There’ve been some...changes in just the last year or so. RIDEs are starting to get considered people now.”

“What,” Nils said flatly, raising his head.

“It’s true!” Uncia said cheerfully. “We’ve got civil rights!”

Nils cocked his head, thinking about that for a moment. “I’m not so sure I *like* that.”

“What’s not to like?” Uncia said, tail a-swish with confusion.

“The uncertainty of not knowing where your next repair will come from?” Nils replied. “Not having someone there to tell you what to do? Hendrix was an idiot, but... he was *my* idiot. At least I knew where I stood.”

“We sorta figured ya might feel that way,” Kaylee said. “We can help you find another partner, if you want, or you could stay with Uncia and Shelley for a while ‘til you feel ready for that.”

“Ooooh, please stay with us!” Uncia squealed, tail swishing harder. “We’ll have so much *fun!*”

Nils considered her thoughtfully. She really *was* gorgeous. Just looking at her, he could feel his simulated endocrine system kicking into overdrive. (In his darker moments, he often wondered why they’d even been *given* simulated endocrine systems.

He usually blamed it on programmers who were too geeky ever to get any themselves.) He wondered if the sideband rumors about how some of the 1As had been made were true.

“Pardon me,” Kaylee said, recognizing the way the two were admiring each other. “I think I see a hare with my name on it.” She bounded off down the hillside, leaving the two of them alone.

“Uh...hi,” Uncia said, averting her gaze.

“What’s this? We’re alone now and you’re suddenly shy?” Nils said, chuckling.

“Well...I don’t want to make you uncomfortable or anything,” Uncia said. “I don’t want to come on too strong.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” Nils said. “I’m a big boy, I can take care of myself.” He chuckled again. “You’re a bigger girl, though. That shell of yours is huge. What are you, a heavy class?”

Uncia blinked. “Hey, don’t you know it’s not polite to talk about a girl’s weight?”

“Okay, you’ve got me there,” Nils admitted. “Sorry.”

“Anyway, my maker doesn’t really make size class distinctions. That’s a military thing. Though if they did, I think I’d probably be at the high end of medium still. The sizes have drifted a little upward over the years. From my side of things, *you’re* kinda tiny.” She paused. “Geez, now I know how Rufia must feel.”

“Who?”

“Human friend of my partner’s. Really really tall,” Uncia said. “Anyway...um... yeah.”

“Never seen anything like that shell of yours,” Nils said. “When were you made?”

“Just a couple of years ago,” Uncia said. “And I’m kinda expensive on top of that. Top-of-the-line everything.”

“That explains the high voxel count,” Nils said. “You must have some amazing processors.”

“Well, yeah...” Uncia said. “Try not to let it go to my head, though. Much.”

Nils shook his head. “This is all new to me. Half an hour ago, subjective, I couldn’t have imagined any one RIDE costing as much as you must, except for some kind of military prototype. But you’re...clearly not military.”

“Nope!” Uncia said. “Doesn’t mean I can’t fight, though. Rawr!” She pawed the air with claws extended.

“I’ll bet,” Nils said. “You serious about that offer to stay with you?”

“Serious as a heart attack!” Uncia said. “Oh, I mean, sure, there *are* other places you can go if you want. Places for recovered RIDEs to live after they’re rescued. We can go visit some of them. But most of the RIDEs there are more independently-minded. If you want to feel like you *belong* to someone, well, you could stay with us.”

“Is that the *only* reason?” Nils prodded.

Uncia looked away, ears flicking in embarrassment. “Well...that and *mumble mumble mumble*.”

“Beg pardon?” Nils asked.

Uncia rolled her eyes and said, louder, “I think you’re kinda cute.”

Nils blinked. “You know, I’m used to being thought of as a half ton killing machine with nano-sharp teeth and claws and an arsenal of high-powered weaponry. I think that’s the first time *anyone’s* ever called me ‘cute.’”

Uncia’s ears twitched again. “What can I say? I just love a man in uniform.”

Kaylee came trotting back up the slope, unencumbered by captured prey. “He got away?” Uncia asked. “That’s not like you.”

Kaylee flicked an ear nonchalantly. “Eh. He reminded me of someone I know.”

“So, where do we go from here?” Nils asked. “I should probably start with reviewing all these history files I’ve indexed. This is going to take a while. I’ll have questions. Like, what’s this security hardware you’ve installed in me? DINsec? The firewall is...incredible. Much better than mil-spec was before they ‘forgot’ me.”

“Well, we can either do this in a month of fast-time in here, or you could just bring up your index on an as-needed thing,” Kaylee said. “Take your pick, snowcat.”

“I have something I want to show him back in the Real before anything else,” Uncia said. “I have a feeling he’ll want it for himself...maybe not right away, but...”

“I’ve been under long enough,” Nils said. “I was made to *do* things.”

“Then let’s go meet the brave new world,” Kaylee said.

Nils opened his optics back onto the real world. “Hello, world,” he said. The latches on the maintenance cradle released and he lifted himself out to stand on his four feet again. “Ahhh...thank you. Did I say that yet? Thank you, *all* of you.”

“You might want to get back in that cradle in a minute,” Kaylee said. “Ready, Uncia?”

“Ready!” Uncia struck a glamor pose.

Nils looked on, puzzled. “Well...take it away, ladies.”

Starting with her muzzle and working back, Uncia kicked in her hardlight generators, clothing her metallic body in sleek fur and rippling muscles, all the way back to the tip of her tail. “Rowr,” Uncia said, yawning to display a delicate pink tongue the size of a kitchen towel. Beside her, Kaylee also covered her body in hardlight fur. She and Kaylee looked exactly as they had in Nature Range, aside from size.

Nils blinked. “But...wait. I thought too much hardlight was bad for you. There were sideband rumors about...” He glanced at Kaylee.

“Not true,” Kaylee said. “Hardlight wasn’t behind...that. Take it from me, I know. But they knew damn near nothin’ back then, so they jumped to conclusions.”

“Eeeeeeyeah,” Rhianna said. “I guess you already know why the engineers thought it was a bad idea back then to be too ‘real’ in the real world. You had Nature Range to fill those kinds of needs.”

“But Nature Range isn’t enough. It’s really bad for RI psyches over the long term *not* to have hardlight,” Rochelle added.

Nils blinked again. “Well...you’ve got the benefit of 35 years of experience. I guess if it hasn’t led to lots of RIDes going like...*he* did, you’ve had time to find that out by now.”

“It didn’t,” Rhianna said firmly, but there was obviously *much* more behind those two words. “You can trust us, though. It’s completely safe for you.”

“We’ll have more to talk about those old rumors later, Nils. I won’t hold anything back, neither,” Kaylee said. “But take it from me. Hardlight’ll change your life. So, what do you say? Upgrade? We have everything here in the shop ready to go.”

“And what’ll it cost me?” Nils asked. “I...don’t exactly have any money, when you get right down to that.”

“Past year or so there’s been a massive effort by just about everyone—” Rhianna began.

“Except Nextus,” Kaylee interrupted.

“*Except* them,” Rhianna said. “We've been recovering lost and abandoned RIDEs. Well, to make a long story very short, you have money. Reparations for the last few decades as unrecognized people. It's not a huge amount, but it'll pay for this. But we *insist* you let us absorb the cost.”

“Wouldn't be the first time we did this for a rescued RIDE,” Uncia said. “So don't think you're special...I mean, you're special to *me*, but...”

“Hmm. I don't know. I'm used to being like this,” Nils said.

“You don't hafta use 'em all the time if you don't want!” Uncia pointed out.

“They'll still be here tomorrow, next week, or next month,” Kaylee said. “No rush.”

“Maybe later,” Nils said. “I've been maintenanced enough for now. I want to see the world *outside* of a garage.”

“Fine with us,” Rhianna said. “Now, the big question is, how much culture shock can you stand in one day? We've recovered RIDEs abandoned in the Dry for thirty years, so we have some experience with this.”

“I don't care,” Nils said. “I can read the entire history of this place later. I just want to *see* things now. What does a world at *peace* look like?”

“Welcome to Uplift!” Uncia said cheerfully. “Can we take him home with us, Shelley? Maybe we'll even find him some rental thumbs and go to the Milkbottle...”

Nils blinked. “Some *what*?”

Rochelle rolled her eyes. “Baby steps, Un-hon. But sure, let's show him where we live. We can cut through the park, it's on the way.”

“Lead the way, ladies. I feel like stretching my leg servos and my lifters,” Nils said.

“Let us know when you want the hardlight upgrade,” Kaylee said, stretching like she'd just awoken from a catnap. “We'll leave you in Uncia and Rochelle's capable handpaws.”

“It was nice meeting you, Kaylee,” Nils said respectfully. “I'd like to talk shop later, if that's okay.”

“Likewise! I'll let a few local warkitties know we've got a new member. Ah imagine we'll have more than a few things ta shoot the breeze about,” the lynx said. “See y'all later.”

Once the trio left, Kaylee slumped to the floor with relief. Rhianna leaned against her flank and stroked her shoulders. “Wow. Just...*wow*, Rhi. Ah don't know what to say other than I'm glad he came through with all his marbles.”

“Nils seems a nice enough guy,” Rhianna said. “Never seen Uncia quite so twitterpated.”

“She's young, but so's he—technic'ly, after bein' asleep for so long. They're about the same age,” Kaylee said. “I think they'll get along just fine. I just wonder how well he's gonna adapt to this new world. Some of the rescued never do. I blame those older cores—”

“Like yours?” Rhianna pointed out.

“Hey, I was almost a blank when you woke me up. Special case,” Kaylee said.

“And the rest of your family?” Rhianna continued.

The lynx cleared her vocoder. “Speakin' of special cases, that centaur's a-begging to get looked into.”

“It damn sure is!” Rhianna said excitedly. The duo Fused up and started scanning the un-boxed equine torso mounted in a makeshift lifter inspection rig, since it was very non-standard and Rhianna wasn't about to risk damaging it. *:Okay, let's try and get in touch with the original engineers...:*

As they left the garage, Uncia dropped her hardlight and converted into a sleek enclosed skimmer cycle around Rochelle. Nils shook his head in wonder at the smoothness of the transformation. She *was* a sports car, or at least a sports bike. With machining like that, he couldn't imagine how much she must have cost. She made him feel clunky and clumsy. *Oh brave new world, that has such people in it.* He converted to his own skimmer form, a bare-bones machine whose lifters were mounted in skids that could serve as snowmobile runners at need, and followed, antiquated lifters growling complaints to keep up with her.

The streets outside the garage, and the air above those streets, were filled with skimmers—less so on the garage's side street, but a lot more as they got onto the main thoroughfare. Many of them were RIDEs. Nils recognized the lines of some of them, and *almost* recognized others—they looked like evolutions of familiar military designs a few years on. But many of them were as new and strange to Nils as Uncia had been.

“Why are there so many RIDEs in a civilian environment?” Nils wondered. “Weren't we supposed to be military hardware?”

“Not...*exactly*,” Rochelle said. “The Army got you first because there was a war on, and they were looking for anything that could turn an advantage. But Dr. Patil always meant you to have a larger existence than that.”

“But...why do civilians need super-strength power armor?” Nils wondered. “For operations in the Dry I could see, but...here? Under the Domes?”

“It's not the power armor they need!” Uncia said. “It's transportation...and their furry friends!”

“‘Friends,’ huh?” Nils said. “Wonder what that's like, to have a ‘friend’ instead of a superior officer.”

“You can find out!” Uncia said brightly. “If you don't want to, you never have to Fuse with someone who isn't a friend ever again!”

Nils grunted acknowledgement, and they traveled on in silence for a while.

“Never been to Uplift before,” Nils said a little later, looking up at the underside of the dome. “I saw it in the distance a few times on border patrols—hard to miss the Domes—but...what the *hell* is that?”

An avian Integrate—a raven with shimmering tattoos on his legs—had just streaked overhead, condensation vortices spinning off his wingtips as he turned sharply. Close behind him were a pair of other avian Integrates—a great-horned owl and another raven—projecting Uplift Gendarme badges on their bellies and flashing blue and red lights around them. The police were in hot pursuit.

“That is a *long* story,” Rochelle said. “Park's this way, Nils.”

“I'm going to be saying that a lot, aren't I?” the metal snow leopard said. “Tough neighborhood?”

“Not especially,” Rochelle said. “It was just a thing.” Inwardly she was hoping he didn't freak out when he learned about Integrates, that the rumors he'd heard about Fritz during the war had been largely true.

Unfortunately, Nils was attracting some attention because of his unusual

skimmer mode. Another feline Integrate, a female ocelot, matched speeds with them. She was dressed in pink leg warmers, off-the-shoulder shirt, a pink sweatband around her head, and pink sweatpants like an early 1980s jogger. “Hey, like, is that a Mark-2 Snowcat DE?” she asked.

“Uh, yes,” Nils said. “All original equipment. Hardly been used,” he stammered.

“It's a classic! That's, like, *totally* awesome!” she replied with strong Califia valley girl accent. “Like, see you around!” With a burst of her lifters, she accelerated away.

“Where's she from? I haven't heard that accent before,” Nils said.

“Califia. It's on the west coast south of Burnside,” Uncia said. “Founded after the War, so...”

“It sounds like an old Earth accent,” Nils said. “How do you get that here? I mean, I looked up how the Steaders apparently made some sort of massive release of twencen pop culture...but how do you go from that to people actually *speaking* that way? And everyone flying around in skimmer designs taken from the 20th or its fiction?”

“It's kind of a long story,” Rochelle said. “But in a way, RIDEs are partly responsible. You're the ones who actually had the time to watch everything and spread the gospel.”

“And the incentive,” Uncia added. “When you think this fast, and everyone else thinks you're an appliance, you get bored easy.”

“I think that may be harder for me to adjust to than anything else,” Nils mused. “Civilian RIDEs are one thing, but the whole planet turning into 20th Century Land in the blink of an eye? It's like a whole different world from when I went under.”

“I can't imagine what it was like *without* twencen pop culture,” Uncia said. “What did you even have to talk about?”

“We got by somehow,” Nils said wryly. He gazed after the departed ocelot, then glanced at the other furry figures at play in the park. “Hmm. I get the feeling there's something else you haven't told me.” A few quick searches turned up the answer before he even finished speaking. “Something to do with...Integrates.”

“Oops...busted!” Uncia said.

“Ah,” Rochelle said. “It's not that we were trying to hide it, we just wanted to explain it sort of gradually. After what you said about Fritz and all...”

“There's a *lot* of news about them lately,” Nils said. “After you two and Rhianna and Kaylee...*defeated Fritz in combat?*” He was so startled by the last news story he nearly dropped out of the sky. “Um. I am going to have to do some serious deep background reading later, aren't I.”

“It's kind of complicated,” Rochelle said. “Which was another reason I didn't want to get into it just yet.” They turned onto a path into the park, and set down to convert back to walker form to walk through it. Nils followed suit, conscious that his metallic cat form stuck out when everyone else had hardlight fur on. *Maybe I should have had them set me up after all*, he thought. *Well, later for that.*

“Anyway, for now, trust us—*most* Integrates are decent people,” Uncia said. “We have a lot of good friends who are. And it's *not* caused by hardlight, no matter what you might have heard about Fritz. We can tell you all about it later.”

“And we might as well go ahead and tell you, the purpose of that security module we put in is to protect your systems against hacking by any *unfriendly* Integrates,” Rochelle added. “It's basically standard equipment for everything these days.”

“As Hendrix would say when things got tough...Murphy Almighty,” Nils said. “But I’m damned well not going to let this ruin today. It’s just one of those things. I’ll cope, so don’t worry about me.”

“If you want a soft shoulder to snuggle with...” Uncia purred suggestively.

“I may take you up on that later,” Nils replied sincerely. “Any other shockers you want to show me before sundown? I can’t imagine what else there is.”

“There might just be a few things,” Rochelle said. “We’ll see what we think after you see our place. Though with all the research you can do overnight, I doubt anything will surprise you much by morning.”

“There is that,” Nils said. “But I like to see things in person first, form my own impressions, before I read what other people say. Comes from my time in recon. Hendrix always said I should be from Missouri because you have to show me, whatever that meant.”

“Fair enough!” Uncia said, turning around to prance a few steps backward up the path. “Right over there is the best ice cream in the whole world, though a’course you need a partner to taste it through.”

“I guess I have something to look forward to,” Nils said. “Are those *cow* Fusers behind the counter?”

“Yep!” Uncia said. “You gotta beef with that?”

“It’s just a little puzzling why anyone would make cow RIDEs,” Nils said. “I mean, big cats at least have a military purpose. And I could see, maybe, bulls being used for assault. And I guess in a civvie market people might have a thing for all sorts of funny animals that the mil wouldn’t dream of using. But...cows? Why cows? Who would *want* cows?”

“I think they were for meant for use in agriculture,” Rochelle said. “Cows herding cows.”

“Wouldn’t that be a little weird knowing the animals you were palling around with were going to end up in the slaughterhouse?” Nils wondered.

“I think they’re used more often with dairy herds, not meat herds,” Rochelle said. “I don’t know, never really asked.”

The conversation carried them most of the way through the park, to the suburbs on the other side. “No need to go back to skimmer mode, it’s just a couple blocks away. We can walk it easily.”

Nils looked around. “Seems like a nice neighborhood. A little weird seeing all these twentieth-century-style houses instead of the standard Nextus beige boxes.”

“You’ve even got a lot of twencen-inspired houses in Nextus now,” Rochelle said. “Though they do tend to be modeled after the twencen neighborhoods with the houses that were all exactly the same, with a neighborhood association ready to pounce on anyone who deviated too far from the norm.”

“I could see that,” Nils said. “Is this the place?” They were walking up the driveway of a small yellow brick house that an online architectural database identified as “French Provencal” style.

“This is it! Home sweet home,” Rochelle said. “Haven’t been here much lately, as we’ve been over in Nextus working on some projects and testifying in the RIDE civil rights legislation hearings there on the side. We’ll be going back in a day or two. You can come along if you want.”

“I might just.” Nils waited for Rochelle to code the door open, then followed her

and Uncia into the house. It was laid out in an open way, with the wide doors and hallways that were a hallmark of RIDE-friendly architecture. It was weird to see that in a residential setting instead of the military barracks he was used to. “This is...nice,” Nils said. “Not what I expected...but I’m not sure what I expected.”

“I’m going to slip into something more comfortable!” Uncia said, swishing her tail and padding toward the garage. “If you need, there’s a couple of chargers right over there in the corner, and another in the bedroom. And one in here, too.”

“Thanks, but I’m good for now,” Nils said, sitting on his haunches and looking around. “Are all houses RIDE-friendly like this?”

“Most of the ones built since about 130 or so,” Rochelle said. “And a few from earlier. Once it came clear how popular RIDEs were gonna be, people figured they might want to make sure there wasn’t anything keeping a RIDE owner from buying the house even if they didn’t have one themselves. You guys really changed the whole shape of society just by existing.”

“Ahhh, that’s better!” Uncia trotted back in from the garage.

Nils blinked, then stared. She’d gone from being a third bigger than he was to barely a third of his size. “Um...bwah?”

Uncia flirted her tail. “Whatsamatter, big boy? You’d think you’ve never seen a mini-shell before. Oh, wait, you probably haven’t.”

“What is that? Is that...like Rattigan was?” Nils asked.

“What, an animal-only shell? Nah, though they do have those over in Laurasia,” Uncia said. “Watch!” She padded over to Rochelle and dropped the hardlight. Beneath it, the shell was basically a hollow framework with a few internal systems showing. Then Rochelle put out her arms and the skeleton reconfigured around her, the hardlight coming up again to give her fur. She ended up looking about like one of the Integrates they’d seen in the park.

“That’s...really pretty impressive,” Nils said. “That would have some great military applications.”

“Naturally you’d think of *those* first,” Uncia smirked.

“But you’re right, it would,” Rochelle agreed. “And even more civilian ones. We just had the idea a few months ago—we only made the advances that made it possible a little before that—and this is the first prototype. We’ve made a few more for close friends. It still has a few bugs to work out, but so far it’s looking pretty good. We can even Fuse Uncia’s full-sized shell over it, like a Sturmhaven doll.”

“I’m still working out how to control both bodies at once,” Uncia said. “I’ve got the processing power, it should be possible at least to do basic stuff like walking. But it’s tricky.”

Nils shook his head. “What a world.”

“Anyway, we’ve got plenty of chargers around,” Rochelle said. “We often have guests over. You’re welcome to stay as long as you want.”

“Not sure where else I’d go, to be honest,” Nils said.

“We could show you a couple of places, just to be fair,” Rochelle said. “One of them was on the list for new surprises anyway.”

“Sure, why not?” Nils said. He chuckled. “I’ve still got a few shocks left in me today, I think.”

“Great! Let’s go!” Uncia said. She led the way out the door, then peeled off of Rochelle to reconfigure into a hoverboard under her feet. “Vroom vroom!”

Nils converted back to his bike form. “Okay, lead the way.”

Rhianna contemplated a model of the centaur in VR after the scanners had recorded every little piece, from the frogs of the hooves to the tip of the tail. “Very... nonstandard, isn't it Kay?” Rhianna said to the anthropomorphic lynx.

“That's the understatement of the century,” Kaylee replied. She gestured and exploded the model into its thousands of parts. About the only standard parts were the battery packs, network, power connectors, and weapons hardpoints. Even the Fusers were custom. It struck her as more a pretentious engineer's art project rather than a serious attempt to meet military specs. “No wonder they lost the contract competition.”

So far the only reference to this odd DE frame they had found was a public announcement of the winning entry in the “Centaur Drive Extender” competition. The winners had been Nextus RIDEworks with their conversion kits for existing Des. Very cost effective in every way. This centaur, however, was its polar opposite.

No documentation had come with the DE, and the Nextus military stubbornly refused to supply any. “Specifications and operating manuals are not included with your *hardware* salvage rights,” the stuffy bureaucrat had said.

The VR model reassembled itself and stood in the center of Rhianna and Kaylee's problem-solving simulation jig. Rhianna pondered an odd connector at the base of the open neck. “Hmm...that looks like it's in about the right spot to match a rider's tailbone, isn't it?”

“Yeah,” Kaylee agreed. “Some kind of nerve interface jack. I think we're missing some important bits, Rhi. Not sure if I can make this sim work. I can brute-force the software, but...I dunno. We'll need Shelley here to work her trinary qubit magic.”

“Or a response to our web board posts on the DE forums,” Rhianna said. There hadn't even been any names attached to the DE either, so they'd been forced to simply put the word out on the Taur Nation DE Forum. The VR model data they had posted had already generated thousands of replies from humans, Inties, and RIDEs alike, especially the 'taurs themselves.

“Lets' try and catalog what we can. I'm not going to worry about doing more today,” Rhianna said. Kaylee re-exploded the model and walked among the suspended Drive Extender components. She picked a thimble-shaped module out of the air. “Fuser Controller?”

“Maybe,” Kaylee said. She flicked her ears, looking around. “Reminds me of that recalled Sturmhaven RIDEworks vixen head Cira and Ivy have. Too complex for its own good. Does it even have a vehicle mode? There's usually some interior kibble...”

They worked through the exploded centaur RIDE methodically, trying to identify what went where, what the scanning might have missed. It had unusually large hardlight emitters on the withers Rhianna thought would project pegasus wings in flight. There were two Fuser tanks instead of just one, and a second Fuser Controller. Some components just defied their attempts to divine what it was for. They put all of these out on the Taur Nation boards to argue about.

Eventually the long virtual hours of frustration took its toll. Rhianna returned to the real world. “You know, I haven't said this in forever, but I'm stumped.”

“You and me both, pard,” Kaylee agreed, giving her rider an affectionate feline headbutt.

“I could use a drink,” Rhianna said. “Cheers?”

“Cheers,” Kaylee repeated, changing to skimmer mode. Off they went.

A few minutes later, Nils, Rochelle, and Uncia pulled into the parking lot at the Uplift RIDE creche facility. Rochelle stepped off, and Uncia reverted to her smaller-than-usual Walker form. “I like to wear this bod around here, ‘cuz it makes me closer to the kiddies,” Uncia explained.

“So this is like a daycare center run by RIDEs?” Nils asked.

“Sooooooomething like that!” Uncia said. “C’mon!”

Nils followed them into the building. They paused at the reception desk, where the Arabian horse Integrate at the reception desk said, “Mary-Anne’s with the toddlers, you can go on back.”

“Thanks,” Rochelle said, leading the way through the door beside the desk. Nils padded along behind. “This doesn’t look like a day care, more like a—” He paused as they stepped through the door to the first room. “Oh, you have *got* to be kidding me. What is this, a real-world Bambi’s Forest?”

“Hello, Rochelle, Uncia!” The fossa Integrate made her careful way through the groups of youngsters, some of whom were already gathering around Uncia.

The nearer-their-size snow leopardess dispensed some friendly greeting licks. “Hi, kiddies! Have you been good?”

“Uh-huh!” the miniscule RIDEs chorused.

“Well, better you than me!” Uncia said, and they giggled.

“So, what is this?” Nils said, metallic ears flat with confusion. “Pet RIDEs? I’ve read there’s something like them popular in Laurasia because of Grandad Rattigan...”

“Hey, how come he’s all metal?” one of the toddlers asked.

“*Old* metal!” another one said.

“*Cool* old metal! I want a dee like that!” a female leopard cub said.

Mary-Anne looked at Rochelle, then at Nils, then raised one eyebrow. “If I didn’t know better I’d say you’d just brought another Earther just off the ship. Is he a Dry-lost Rip Van Winkle you recovered? His shell is a *bit* too well-kept for it. Garage find, maybe?”

“The last one, Mary,” Rochelle said.

“And you brought him *here*?” the fossa asked.

“Immersion therapy,” Rochelle said. “Getting the worst of the shocks out of the way all at once. Kind of like a crossrider party.”

“I’m just not getting this,” Nils said, bewildered. A young lion cub was trying to stalk the metal leopard’s tail. “Are these...cubs templated as youngsters for...wait...no... that doesn’t jive with the whole civil rights thing going on here...”

“Well, when a mommy RIDE meets a daddy RIDE in Nature Range and they love each other *very much*...” Uncia said.

Nils finally pulled up a search window and took a few nanoseconds to read. “... you *have* got to be kidding me. I thought the Forest Litter was a myth, like Silicon Heaven.”

“Hey! If Silicon Heaven is a myth, then where do all the toasters go?” Uncia said.

“RIDEs are seriously having...baby RIDEs?” Nils said just as the cub pounced on his tail.

The rambunctious cub didn’t get close enough to tumble with it. Mary-Anne

sighed and stopped him in midair. “Eddie, *what* have I told you about pouncing on people?”

“If they don’t wanna get pounced on, what’re they doing *here*?” Eddie protested. “Grown-up tails are made for pouncin’!”

Rochelle chuckled. “He could be right.”

“I’d like to have some little ones of my own someday,” Uncia said. “I just gotta find the right snowy to be the daddy.” She glanced over at Nils. “But not right away or anything. I still got a lot of irresponsible to be before I’m responsible enough to be a mommy!”

“Um,” Nils said. “How does that even *work*?”

“I *told* you!” Uncia said. “When a mommy RIDE meets a daddy RIDE and they love each other *very much*...”

Nils looked plaintively at Mary-Anne.

“If you wish a more technical explanation,” Mary-Anne began uncertainly. “There are many papers on this...topic.”

“I know, and I’ll probably read them,” Nils said. “I’m just looking for something to help me cope with this right now.”

“Suffice it to say that the folks who tried to make Ris as perfect a simulation as they could of living creatures did their job too well,” Rochelle said. “Even Dr. Patil and Dr. Clemens didn’t expect it. We’re not *entirely* sure we understand it even now, but something about being modeled after neural engrams and genetic material of living creatures makes you able to...extend the model. Q-based computing hardware is the key.”

“I guess I should thank you for this,” Nils said, looking around. “After this, I don’t think *anything* else in this brave new world of yours is going to have the power to surprise me.”

“I hope you’re not gonna be turn out to be one of the Mechanist bunch who think it’s ‘unnatural’ and all evil and stuff,” Uncia said. “They’ve got this whole protest movement thing going on...even raising money to buy out the last RI manufactory in Uplift so they can keep making Ris the way we’re ‘supposed to’ be made.”

“I don’t know,” Nils said. “I haven’t been around long enough to think we RIDEs can have a ‘natural’ anything. If anything, seems like this *should* make more sense than just making us from scratch. I mean, Fritz—”

Mary-Anne hissed. “Don’t *mention* that name here. The toddlers ask enough questions as it is.”

Nils backed up. “I’m sorry, ma’am. I didn’t mean to step on your tail.”

“Anyway, there’s actually more to him than you know about, but we can get into that later,” Rochelle said.

“I guess you’d be the ones to know about that,” Nils said. “From what I read on the news net and all.”

“Those things don’t know the half of what really went on,” Uncia said. “I’ve been in the middle of it, and I still don’t know everything. I’m not sure I really want to know.”

“It’s been kind of a weird world to grow up in,” Rochelle said. “It’s kind of funny, you know. You were living life as an ‘adult’ before I was even a baby. I don’t even remember a time when RIDEs weren’t everywhere and the place wasn’t nuts for one twencen franchise or another.”

Nils looked around at all the cubs, many of whom were looking raptly back at

him. “Weird about describes it, but...on the whole, I think I like it. I could wish I’d seen more of the in-between, but it is nice in the end to see the world all our fighting won for us.”

“You just described why I’m here,” Mary-Anne said. “I fought in that war, too, after a fashion. We were Nuevo San Antonio Border Patrol.”

“Oh! You were one of the annoying twerps who kept getting in our way all the time!” Nils said. He paused. “Wait, that didn’t come out right.”

The fossa smiled amiably and tapped Nils on his nose with her finger. “Twerps’ we were—very successful twerps who put both polities in their places—but that is long past now. I work *here* to nurture the future.”

“We’ve all put that behind us by now,” Rochelle said. “One of our best friends is partnered with a Sturmie wolf. *Beeeeeg* Sturmie wolf.”

“If you say so,” Nils said. “It’s still a bit recent for me. I can recognize, rationally, it has to be true. Emotionally...well, just a few hours ago I was raring to get fixed so I could take part in Operation Final Fury. Still a little disappointed I missed it. Gonna take time to deal with that.”

“Then maybe we should move on,” Rochelle suggested. “Thanks for putting up with us, Mary-Anne.”

“Think nothing of it,” the fossa Integrate replied. “You’re all welcome back at any time.”

“I think I *would* like to come back and spend some more time here when I’m... better acclimated,” Nils said. “I always sort of figured that we were fighting so the children could grow up in a better world. I just never expected it to be *our* children.”

“C’mon, Big V!” Uncia said, disentangling herself from the playful youth. “The next place we go, you oughtta like better. Maybe you’ll even meet some old friends!”

“Okay, now you’ve got me curious,” Nils said. “Lead the way!”

“I’m stumped, Diane. Absolutely stumped,” Rhianna said, sipping a good lager. “I’ve *never* been this stumped before. Not even when I first unboxed Kaylee’s chassis.”

The doe Integrate smiled. “Feeling a little overwhelmed, then?”

“Lordy, yes,” Kaylee echoed. “If they’d provided some simple documentation, maybe we wouldn’t be so stumped. Farking Nextus bureaucrats. Got *no* patience for their damned games.”

“We hit a dead end,” Rhianna said. “And my stein’s empty.”

Diane got her another beer and slid it down the table without her lifters. “There you go, honey.”

Rhianna took a long gulp, enough for Kaylee to get the taste in the Fuse. “This’ll go nowhere if we can’t find out who built the thing.”

“Hmm.” Diane thought a moment. “Might be, you’re looking in the wrong place. The way you think, you’re probably attacking this from the technical schematics angle, because technical schematics are what you do.”

“Well, sure,” Rhianna said. “I mean, what else is there?”

“Ah. Now there’s a thing.” Diane grinned. “From what you say, it sounds like this was built to submit to a NextusMil bid competition.”

“That’s right,” Kaylee said. “And the ‘taurs we have today came out of the other competing design team.”

“Well, if it was paid for with public money, by Nextus law there *have* to be public

documents on file about it,” Diane said. “Nothing classified like design schematics, but there would at least be info on the contractor, who the engineers were, stuff like that. And since it’s not classified, they can’t tie it up with red tape. You find the names of the engineers, you can look up their lifetime comm codes. Maybe some of ‘em are still around.”

“Yeah, but...when a Nextus bureaucrat gets in a snit, they don't make that stuff easy to access. Especially for outsiders. Jumping through arbitrary hoops is the last thing I want to do right now,” Rhianna said. She pondered, looking at the tumblers and wine glasses hanging from the rack over the bar. “Frustration aside, it's a real piece of work. Maybe I should just put it in Zane’s museum for a while and see what happens.”

“Right alongside the model of Chauncey?” Diane suggested. “Well sure. And you never know, maybe some of the older RIDEs there were around when they were testing it.”

“Wicked good ideah, Diane,” Rhianna said with a touch of her Boston accent that usually came through when she was a little tipsy.

“In the end, it’s prob’ly just gonna take time for our posts t’ percolate and the right people to see ‘em,” Kaylee said. “And at least since we’re famous, lots a’ people follow our posts already. So y’ never know.”

“Still, the bid listing does seem like something worth at least checking into,” Rhianna mused. “I’ll ask Shelley and Uncia to look into it when they go back to Nextus. Couldn’t hurt.”

“Well, I'm going to give the bears a call,” Kaylee said, referring to Big John and Queenie, the two RIDEs who had become the museum's curators-in-residence. “Tell them there's somethin' at the Garage for them and their interns to bring in. We'll meet them there. Thanks, Diane.”

“No problem, you two,” Diane said, drying a freshly-washed stein. “Once you have a display set up, I'll go have a look at it myself.”

The next stop was a fair distance across the dome. Uncia the hoverboard weaved skillfully through the lower traffic lanes, and it was all Nils could do to keep up. “We're gonna need to have Rhi repack those lifters for you when she has a moment!” Uncia teased cheerfully.

“Or maybe just hang some lead weights on you to slow you down!” Nils retorted.

“Ooh, good one!” Uncia said.

“Hold on, we're almost there,” Rochelle said, pointing to a smaller dome ahead of them. It seemed to cover a small industrial campus, and they were flying right toward it at full speed.

“Um, shouldn’t we be slowing down?” Nils asked.

Uncia giggled, executing a 360 spin in the air while continuing forward. “Nah, we got a key. Open, sez *me!*” A round opening appeared in the dome in front of them, staying open long enough for them and Nils to pass through before closing behind them.

“Okay, so where’s this?”

“This is the HQ of Brubeck Mining, a little Q-refining operation run by a friend of ours,” Rochelle said. “But we’re not here for that. He’s donated the space to host the special little meeting place we’re visiting.”

They touched down in the parking lot behind the building, converting back to walker form as they landed. Nils looked at the sign curiously. “A museum, huh? Maybe

that is where I belong.”

“Maaaaaybe!” Uncia said. “But not in the way you think you mean! C'mon inside.”

Nils followed Uncia and Rochelle through the entrance, and paused just inside to look around. There were a lot of raised daises for displays, but only about half of them seemed to be occupied. But there were a lot of RIDEs down on the floor, mingling and talking with humans and each other.

“Isn't this a little noisy for a museum?” Nils said.

“It's a *living* museum!” Uncia called back. “Living is noisy!”

Some activity at the other end of the room caught his eye. Next to a scale model of an old Terran IDE, a couple of bear RIDEs and a familiar woman and lynx were positioning on a dais what looked like the metal body of a horse without a neck or head.

“Hey, Rhi!” Rochelle called over. “What's up? What's the centaur doing here?”

“You're not going to believe this, but we're stumped,” Rhianna said, throwing up her hands in defeat. “You can have a look at everything for yourself. *Maybe* you can figure out the firmware better than we did the hardware.”

“When you're back in Nextus we'll have some more FOI requests for you to file,” Kaylee said.

“They do put more weight on those if you show up in person,” Rochelle said.

“Sure. No problem. At least he ought to make a nice conversation piece here.”

“He'll be the centaur of attention!” Uncia said.

Nils glanced around, puzzled. “What is this place?”

“New friend, *cher*?” the female bear Fuser asked Rochelle. “Snowcat Mark 2... pristine condition...who's the gentlecat wearing it?”

“Queenie, Nils. Nils, Queenie,” Rochelle said. “And that's her mate Big Bad John fiddling with the horse-parts over there.”

“Uh, hi,” Nils said. “Vanilla Snow, aka Nils, 115th Nextus Mountain Recon, entered service 121 AL...retired 123, I guess. About five hours ago.”

Queenie's ears tilted forward. “As short as all that, hon? You must be feelin' *beaucoup* confuzzled! No wonder they brought you down heah. Now you make yourself right at home! Come on 'round and meet some of the others. We gots us some o' your comrades in arms, an' some from the other side too! We all get along real well now, a' course—exceptin' sometimes in Nature Range!”

“You still play that, huh?” Nils said. “Nice to see *some* things don't change.”

“Momma! When are you going to let me Fuse?” a young female voice complained. “Come on! I wanna try!”

The speaker was a young grizzly sitting on her haunches, clearly not wearing a DE frame large enough to do it.

“Daisy, honey, you're still a couple years away from that,” Queenie said. “It's not a thing we rush into.”

“The Saints' kid's gonna get to,” Daisy sulked.

“Not any time soon he's not, way I heard tell,” Queenie said with vast patience.

“Is everyone having children?” Nils asked. “Sorry, that was rhetorical. This is just a lot to deal with in one day.”

“Not a problem,” Big John rumbled. He looked back at his sulking daughter.

“Where are your brothers?”

“Somewhere...” Daisy muttered.

“Daisy...” Queenie reproved.

“Um...they...went to Dome Top with whathisname. The owl. Tuklas.”

“Those boys,” Queenie sighed.

“I’ll grab Manwe and go fetch them, honeysuckle,” Big John said. He de-Fused from around the intern. The brown bear RIDE nosed him back to reality. “Break time, Gerold. Sorry to interrupt your study time.”

“It’s okay. Thanks, John,” the bear-tagged young man said. He was quite muscular, and had a bear-ish nose. “Sure you don’t want me to come with you this time?”

“I think Manwe and I can handle it,” Big John said. “We’ll be back soon, hon,” he told his mate.

“Just don’t tell Bo and Luke I told you,” Daisy mumbled. “I’m such a blabbermouth.”

“We won’t. Now go play with your friends,” Queenie said, hands on hips.

Big John gave his daughter an equally big lick before she scuffled off, then he converted to his hulking van-style skimmer mode. A Great Horned Owl had landed outside. “Ah, there’s Manwe now,” the bear said. “Back soon with the boys, honeysuckle.”

“See ya soon, *ma cher*,” Queenie replied.

Queenie glanced at Nils, as if suddenly remembering he was still around. “Sorry you had to see our little family biz’ness there. Why don’cha go on an’ have a look around, sugar? We gots lots a’ RIDEs from the old days. Mebbe some ya can talk shop wit’.”

“Uh, thanks,” Nils said. “Guess we will.”

“C’mon,” Uncia said. “It’s too bad Kaylee’s kids aren’t here right now, woulda liked you to meet ‘em. Oh well.” She led the way through the throng, and Nils followed the bigger-turned-smaller snow leopard bemusedly. Her smaller form was exactly like her larger in microcosm, right down to the positioning of the spots, and she looked every bit as attractive out here as her avatar had seemed in VR. Her body language was every bit as provocative as well. Nils’s instincts weren’t quite sure how to deal with being attracted to a she-leopard a third his size.

They stopped and greeted a few of the older RIDEs. They were among the most familiar models Nils had seen yet, some of them siblings to ones he’d met during the war, even if most of them were covered in fur now. But Nils wasn’t sure what to say to them, so he kept moving on.

Then he stopped stock still as a snatch of song carried from somewhere nearby, in a familiar baritone voice. “—playing winter games with the rein...deer—”

Nils’s ears swiveled to track the source of the sound, servos making faint whirring noises. *It can’t be. But...I recognize those subharmonics. No two of our vocoders were the same down to that level.* “Hey! I think I know that guy!”

Nils turned and shouldered his way through the crowd to face the singer, just as he concluded, “For I am a rein...deer too!”

“I’m pretty sure that’s *not* how that song goes,” Uncia piped up from behind Nils.

The singer, a massive caribou covered in shaggy fur with a dramatic set of antlers, snorted. He was standing on one of the display daises, surrounded by listeners, which added a meter to his already-impressive height. He cast a gimlet eye down from on high. “It’s how *my* version goes, missy. The original doesn’t make any sense

anyhow.” The dais was labeled “Nextus CBU(m)-HAA-002C: Blitzen.”

“It’s Tom Waits, it’s not *supposed* to make sense.”

“Hey, ‘bou, is that you?” Nils called up to him.

The caribou blinked and peered down further. “Am I seeing things? Great Googley Moogley! Vanilla Snow! Wondered what ever became of you. You never answered your email.”

“Never *got* your email, Blitz-boy,” Nils said. “I went under for a tune-up and never *woke* up. ‘Til now.”

“So *that’s* why you’re still nekkid,” Blitzen said. “Get some fur on! You’ll feel better.”

“I’ll get to it,” Nil said, shifting his forepaws uncomfortably.

“Get to it *soon*. Do you a world of good, old friend,” the caribou RIDE said. “So, where were they putting you after they broke up the Mountain Forces? Last sideband ping from you I have is about two weeks before Final Fury.”

“Beats me. You know how it is when you’re equipment. Always the last to know.” Nils shook his head. “Maybe *they* didn’t even know, and that’s why nobody ever looked when they misplaced me. It was just hours ago to me, ol’ lunchmeat.”

Blitzen shook his own head, rattling his wattle. “I know how that goes, but at least it wasn’t such a big gap for me. Though I did end up with several of ‘em, over the years.”

“I’m still trying to get used to all this,” Nils said. He paced back and forth like a caged animal, the stress finally starting to get to him. “I went to sleep, and everything’s just...RIDEs having kids...even *you* have hardlight fur...”

“Look, snowcat, take a break and pull yourself together if you have to,” Blitzen said with some gravity. “We might be inorganic, but our brains, you know...if the sim wasn’t good we couldn’t have calves.”

“Do *you* have calves?” Nils asked pointedly.

“Me? Hell, no! I’m not father material,” Blitzen replied. “I leave that up to the bears. Wow, those two are *amazing*. I’m teaching the cubs how to take me down proper in Nature Range.”

“You’re *teaching*?” Nils said. “Mister ‘I hope they assign me someone who *already* knows what they’re doing next time’?” The metal leopard wobbled a little. “You know what...I’m going to go lay down for a while.”

“Hey, you feeling okay, handsome?” mini-Uncia asked.

“I’m fine. I just...need a few minutes,” Nils said, padding away.

“Let him go,” Blitzen said. “He’s just had a shock is all. Whole series of them. And he’s got more to come.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Uncia said. “You think maybe we shouldn’t’a brought him out here? We asked, but he said he *wanted* to see it all at once.”

“Sometimes what you think you want and what you really want aren’t always quite the same,” Blitzen said. “Well, he’ll get over it.”

Nils retreated to a corner to gather his thoughts. For all that he tried to act blasé about what he’d seen, it was starting to get to him. It seemed like there wasn’t anything familiar *left* anymore. Even Blitzen had changed so much.

Thinking about his old friend, a thought suddenly struck Nils. On impulse, he tapped the net and dialed Hendrix’s Nextus lifetime comm code. It was supposed to stay

active as long as its owner was alive and on the planet, like a social security number you could dial. And it still worked! It rang...

It answered with video, and a woman's voice said, "Hello?" The face on the other end was completely not what Nils had expected, and for a moment he wondered if he'd dialed the wrong number. It was a triangular furry face, seemingly all muzzle, with eyes to either side and small round ears poking up through wiry brown hair.

"Uh...Hendrix?" Nils asked.

The ears flicked. "I used to be—well, more recently I was Hendra. Still am, partly. But we mostly just go by Antigua now," the anteater said. "Do I know you?"

"Well, that's just *great*," Nils grumbled. "You *gave* me the stupid name I'm stuck with, and you don't even remember me anymore."

Antigua blinked. "Vanilla Snow? Nils? Is that really you?"

"In the metal," Nils said. "Which you're...not anymore. I can't believe it. I mean... all that crap about Fritz...and now you 'Integrates' are all over the place and nobody cares?"

"It's...a little more complicated than that, Nils," Antigua said in a slightly different voice. This one seemed to have more of the inflections he remembered from Hendrix's way of speaking, even if the pitch was all wrong. "But it's not a *bad* thing. Not for all of us. You find a partner you like, and you just...go further."

Nils shook his head. He couldn't think about that. Not now. So he seized upon another way to turn the conversation. "An anteater, Hendri—Hendra? Really?"

"Hey, Antie had a great hardlight sampling drill rig in her snout," Hendra said. "Just the thing for shallow Q prospecting. We made some pretty good strikes back in the day. Where have you *been*? I looked for you after the war, but you weren't in any of the records."

"I fell off the records. Got stuck in a repair bay in the Shed while I was waiting to be reassigned. Only just got found today."

The anteater's eyes widened. "Seriously? So the war was *yesterday* for you?"

"It was like *six hours ago* for me," Nils said. "This is one weird-ass world you live in now, you know that?"

"You don't know the half of it, baby," Hendra said. "Where are you?"

"I'm at the Rescued RIDE Museum in Uplift with the new friends who got me back up and running," Nils said. "Trying to decide what to do now."

"Really? I'm hanging out in Terrania right now, so I'm really close. Don't go anywhere, I'll be right down."

"Uh, sure. See you soon." As the Integrate anteater hung up, Nils sighed. Nothing was working out like he'd expected. "The world really *has* gone on without me."

He ducked back into private VR for a few minutes, to collate and examine some of the articles his net searching had turned up. Right now, he was most interested in getting the broad strokes of the last thirty-odd years of history: new polities formed, new business interests arose—including the Brubeck Mining company that was responsible for this museum. Earth had gotten more paranoid and invaded some wildcat colonies. And then there was that Integrate mess last year, which looked complicated enough it would need to wait for another time to untangle.

He dropped back into the real world just in time to see Antigua the anteater come through the door. She was covered in brown fur, with darker stripes going down from her head to her shoulders, and sported a brown tail even fluffier than Uncia's. She

paused just inside the door to look around, then spotted Nils and started over that way.

Nils got to his feet, watching her approach. He thought he could see vague signs of Hendrix's body language in the figure, though given the alterations to gender and species he could just be imagining things. "Ah...hi."

"Vanilla Snow, it's really you!" Hendra said, kneeling to hug him around the neck. He felt the end of her muzzle brush his back through his mechanical pressure sensors and caught himself wondering what it would feel like with a hardlight skin instead.

"Uh...yeah," Nils said, nonplussed. "I'm...surprised you're so glad to see me."

"I know," Hendra said. "It's only been hours or days for you, and we didn't exactly part on the best terms. But for me, it's been *forever*. And things are so different now. I wanted to find you and...well, apologize. But you'd just vanished."

Nils blinked. "You? Apologize? Are you *sure* you used to be my Hendrix?"

The anteater chuckled. "'Used to be' is right. You can go through a lot of changes in thirty years."

Nils looked at her. "So I see."

"So where are these new friends I have to thank for waking you up?" Hendra asked, looking around.

"Hang on, I'll call them over." Nils sent quick comm pings to Uncia and Kaylee. A moment later, they made their way over, humans in tow.

"Hey, what's up?" Uncia asked.

"Wanted you to meet an old...acquaintance. Sort of," Nils said.

There were stars in Rhianna's eyes as she took in the anteater Integrate. "Oh, wow! Is that...were you custom? I can count the number of anteater RIDEs on both hands and feet."

"There was never enough demand for us for a full line," Antigua admitted. Nils was better able to distinguish her voice from "Hendra's" now. "But they wanted to see if probe drilling was an effective way of finding shallow Q deposits, and our snout shape was just right—" Then she gaped, recognizing who was speaking to her. "Nils, you didn't say your new friends were the original Freeriders!"

"*Original Freeriders*," Kaylee said sardonically. "Hear that, Rhi? The franchises are diluting the brand."

"I didn't know it was that big a deal," Nils said. "But I haven't really dived into the news coverage yet..."

"For a while there they were bigger than the Steaders," Hendra said. "They basically saved the world."

"It ain't saved *yet*," Kaylee said. "But it's getting' there."

"You pretty clearly know who *we* are," Rochelle said. "So who might *you* be?"

"She was my original operator," Nils said. "Or part of her was. I think. I suppose I'm still not quite grasping this Integration thing."

"I'm Hendra, and my now-partner is Antigua," Hendra said. "We hooked up after the war."

"Well, I guess there's pretty clearly not any chance of you two getting back together then," Uncia said.

"That would be a negative," Antigua said. "We're pretty much stuck at this point."

"So you don't have any idea why he ended up in a back corner of the Shed either?" Rhianna asked.

The anteater shook her head. “It was news to us. We’d split several days before. I was waiting assignment to a new RIDE when I got word the war had ended and my services were no longer needed. I mustered out just a week later.”

“Yours too, huh?” Nils said.

“Oh, Nils, I’m so sorry about that,” Hendra said. “If I’d known...well, I might not have cared so much right then. But later on, once I got to thinking about it...and once I knew more about what RIDEs were...” She shook her head, the tip of her snout describing a long arc through the air. “I’m sorry we didn’t get along better. And I’m sorry I was...a bit of a pain, I guess.”

“Uh...that’s...okay?” Nils said. “You didn’t seem any worse than the operators any of the other RIDEs had.”

“I shouldn’t have been your ‘operator,’ I should have been more your *partner*,” Hendra said. “I only got that later. I’m sorry.”

“If I may get all philosophical for a sec,” Uncia said. She cleared her throat. “Humans don’t know the full implications of what they create, yadda yadda yadda.”

“Which is complete bullpucky,” Kaylee said. “*Mom* knew. So did Anny. You know how many Nextus military folk struck up gen-u-ine partnerships during the War and *demand*ed they take their RIDEs with them when they mustered out? Why d’you think we got so popular so fast with civvies?”

“I didn’t see that much in my unit,” Nils said.

“Our trainer didn’t encourage it,” Hendra said. “We were taught they were equipment and nothing else. We never fully engaged. I never did with any RIDE until... well, until Antie came along.”

“Still, it’s taken a while,” Kaylee admitted. “But it’s ‘zactly like the Civil Rights battle in the twentieth. And guess what? We’re winning. Even if Nextus is being such a goddamn slowpoke.”

“And I’m glad you are,” Hendra said.

“So, now what do I do?” Nils asked. He wobbled again. “I...what skills do I have? I mean, skill chips, but...what use am I really? Antiquated, outdated...I belong in this museum, chumming around with Blitz-boy.”

“If you want to stay, that’s up to you. But you’re not ‘outdated,’ Rochelle said. “We’re still using most of the same tech we did thirty years ago. We can bring you up to current spec pretty easily.”

“Really, you’re built *better* than a lot of modern RIDEs,” Rhianna put in. “Because you were made to mil spec, when there was a war on. They don’t make ‘em like you—or Kay, for that matter—any more.”

“You’ll feel better once you’ve had the time to catch up on events and you don’t feel so disconnected anymore,” Hendra predicted.

“I don’t think you belong here,” Uncia added. “To visit, maybe, but...I think you should spend some time around people and RIDEs from *this* time first. In a kinda less cluttered environment. Y’know, like a house!”

“*Your* house, I suppose?” Nils asked.

“Well, sure!” Uncia said, tail swishing suggestively. “It’s close, it’s convenient, and it’s got *me* in it! What’s not to like?”

Nils’ optics brightened. “Well, I can’t argue with that logic, can I? I think getting a few upgrades would make me feel more...useful.”

“And taking the time to read the news,” Antigua put in. “It’s hard to know your

place in the world if you don't know what the world's like anymore."

"I guess I'll do that," Nils said. "Thanks."

"Actually...*I* ought to thank *you*," Antigua said. "Hendra was...drifting away from the world until you called. But seeing you snapped her out of it."

"I wasn't *that* bad," Hendra mumbled. "I just...you were doing such a good job running things, I just didn't feel like cutting in."

"Partnership, my other half, remember?" Antigua said. "Nils, I hope you'll stay in touch. I really don't want to be alone in my head."

"I will," Nils said. "Between you and Blitzen, I'm feeling a little more...anchored, I suppose."

"Good." Hendra nodded. "Oh...and don't feel like you have to rush right out and find a partner. Just hang out for a while. If there's one that's right for you, you'll find 'em sooner or later."

Nils nodded, then openly admired Uncia's hardlight pelt. "I think I should start with that fur coat Kaylee and Rhianna wanted to install when they woke me up."

"Great! We can swing by the garage on the way home!" Uncia said.

"There's just one thing I want to do before we go," Nils said. He connected to the museum's network and pinged his old comrade. "Hey, 'bou!"

"Yo!" Blitzen replied. "Sup, snowcat?"

"Want to come see me get a hardlight refit over at the Freerider Garage?"

"Dayum, yes!" he replied. The caribou came around the corner. "I've wanted to have a look-see at that place. My lifters need a stretching, too."

"And I think *your* hardlight projectors could use a tune-up," Rhianna said. "We can take care of that while we're there, too."

"Ooooh! And after that, we could do some Nature Range!" Uncia squealed.

"Catch me if you can, snowcats," Blitzen said. "This 'bou has a lot of tricks and kicks!"

"I'm looking forward to it!" Uncia said.

"We'll tag along, too, if you don't mind," Hendra said. "Don't have anything better to do."

"Great! Then let's go!" Rhianna led the way to the exit. "Oooh, I can't wait to get under your hood again..."

*May 17, 156 AL*

It was only by telling himself over and over that if he *didn't* go, he'd wreck his whole life that Chet managed to drive himself back to the aerodrome. And when he was faced with the prospect of having to line up and go through customs clearance, he almost said to heck with it and turned around anyway. But one final effort of will brought him to the walk-through scanner and pulse generator that would fry any Zharusian nanotech he had on board. *Bye bye antihistamines*, he thought. *Oh well.*

The technician, a stocky man with fox ears and tail, glanced at his monitor as Chet stepped in, and whistled. "Wow. Really went overboard, eh buddy? I haven't seen this many nanos in a tourist since...well, ever."

Chet shrugged. "I just took some cold meds, antihistamines, and stuff."

"Looks like a good bit more than that from here," the man said. "But whatever. EMP jolt'll kill 'em just as dead. Please shut down and safe your implants."

Chet reached in and flipped the mental switch that powered down his hardware to protect it from the EMP. “Done.”

“Okay, going to do a series of three pulses to make sure we get everything.”

“I’ve been through here several times, I know how it works. Just do it,” Chet said, fighting the urge to turn around.

“Right-o. First jolt in three...two...one...” A blue light on the scanner flashed, then flashed two more times. Other than that, there was no obvious sign of anything happening. Chet thought, as he usually did, that he felt a tingle, but it could have been psychosomatic, brought on by the light. “Annnnd...no sign of any remaining nanites on the scope, or any other proscribed tech on your person. You’re cleared. Step out of the scanner and you can turn your hardware back on.”

“Thanks,” Chet said. As he stepped forward, brought the implants back up, and ran a quick self-test, he suddenly realized all urges to run back in search of the mystery woman were gone. He ran over his recordings of her. She was still pretty hot, with that long hair and those exotic furry bits, but he didn’t feel like he was going to die of loneliness if he didn’t rush out and find her. *Huh. Side effect of the allergy nanos? He wondered. Maybe I really shouldn’t have taken them and the cold ones together. I’ll know better next time.*

Now that he was safely cleared, Chet was allowed to proceed to the airfield where the shuttle *DiCaprio* awaited him. After he did a quick preflight, he would taxi it over to the boarding gates where the last of the returning Terran tourists and departing Zharusian tourists were getting ready to head up to the *Goose*. A few trips up and back and his day would be over, and so would the *Goose*’s stay. Then it would be back to Earth to start the cycle again.

Chet grinned. Even if he was going to have to go to the bathroom the old-fashioned way all the way back, it was still going to be good to be in space again. Now that he’d gotten that mystery woman out of his head, he was looking forward to it. “All right, then,” he said to himself as he strode across the tarmac to where his shuttle awaited. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

As he usually did, Chet went back into cryo shortly after the *Goose* made its quick outbound stop at Wednesday. There was no point in having to go to the bathroom any more than he had to, after all. He set the wake-up alarm for a week or so before they hit Earth.

It wasn’t long after he woke back up that Chet first noticed that his thoughts were returning to the mystery woman more and more often. He’d gone from thinking about her now and then to starting to fantasize about her, picturing her in various alluring poses with her hair hanging down like a curtain next to her face. When he started actively trying to imagine what she might look like naked, Chet knew *something* was wrong.

Chet stood in the shuttle’s small medical compartment and eyed the autdoc thoughtfully. The problem was, if there *was* something wrong, the shuttle’s computer would tattle to the *Spruce Goose*’s computer, and that could lead to...complications. Unless...

He went back to the flight deck and put the onboard comms into a one-hour test cycle. Until that cycle ended, nothing was going to get in or out. Then he went back to the ‘doc and checked in.

It didn't take long for the sensors to come back with a report that he had extremely elevated levels of nanites in his bloodstream. *Zharusian* nanites. *Where did they come from? How did they survive EMP?* Chet wondered, as he was wiping the 'doc's memory and deleting its reports from the comm queue while the comms were still down. Well...it didn't matter. He'd just have to go back to Zharus and see someone about getting them taken out.

It only took a few minutes of thought for Chet to realize he wasn't going to be able to get his usual cyber-implants this time. Not unless he wanted the medicos back on Earth to notice his little free riders. And that could lead to the government taking an interest, since after all they didn't have that many examples of Zharusian tech to study.

And he didn't have any way of knowing how long it would take to get rid of them on Zharus, either. For all he knew, it could take months. After thinking about it a while longer, Chet pulled up his comm and amended his contract to make the next trip one-way, Earth to Zharus. It meant giving up the bonus the cruise company offered for people who committed to round trips, but so be it. He'd gotten enough of them, and made enough from his cyber arbitrage, that he could afford to spend a year or two on Zharus 'til the ship came around again. (*Besides, his traitor libido told him, that way you can find that woman, and...see what happens next.* He tried to ignore it.)

Chet flew his shuttle trips amid a rising wave of distraction. He was too good a pilot to let his daydreams get in the way when he was flying, but every other waking moment was spent imagining the mysterious woman who had caught his eye back on Zharus. He went into sleep while the Goose stayed at Earth, woke up again for the next round of flights, and went back to sleep again as soon as he could after the flights were over.

By the time Chet woke up again, all he could think about was the woman. In his more lucid moments, he wondered if the nanites had somehow been reproducing all during the times he'd been sleeping. But whatever the reason, it didn't matter. As soon as they were within data comm range of Zharus, Chet took screen caps from that footage he'd been replaying over and over and ran a facial-recognition search.

To his surprise, it came back with a wealth of information almost immediately. The woman's name was Rochelle Seaford, and she'd been in the news a lot lately. Chet saved the reports to file, but didn't have time to look at them—because he'd found the one most important bit of information right away: her address.

Convincing himself to stay with the *DiCaprio* long enough to fly the several passenger-carrying sorties that were his duty was every bit as hard as leaving Zharus the first time had been. Reminded of that, Chet considered taking a quick turn back through customs and the EMP zapper, but just couldn't bring himself to do it. For one thing, it would probably raise more questions than he wanted to answer. And for another, by this point he wasn't sure he *wanted* to lose his infatuation. By now it seemed like he'd always known her, and she him. He could see her in his mind, smiling at him, beckoning him onward...

At last the shuttle was grounded for good. Chet grabbed his kit and arranged to have the rest of his things put into storage for the time being until he could find a place. Then he rented a skimmer, programmed the address into its nav system, and hit the road. She was only a few minutes away. Wouldn't she be surprised?

*May 8, 157 AL*

Rochelle opened her eyes, yawned, and rolled out of bed. She'd gotten in late, as usual, but thanks to Zharus's longer day she'd been able to get most of her sleep in while it was still dark all the same, and her blinds had kept out the ungodly radiation of the evil daystar long enough to let her make up the rest.

Yawning again, Rochelle sat down at her dresser and peered into the mirror above it. She was wearing a white silk nightgown, and her hair (currently black) was still up in the bun she kept it in while she was sleeping. She picked up her interface specs and put them on, and a quick eyeflick command dissolved the bun and let her hair cascade down her back. She ran her hands back through it to fluff and spread it out, and with another eyeflick recolored it to basic white with grey rosettes. She felt like matching Uncia today.

Rochelle tilted her head to the side, then jerked it forward to swing her hair around past her shoulder. She chuckled at the way the rosette pattern stayed constant as the hair moved. That sort of thing took a lot of processing power, but her fuser nanites were up to the task. They really were top-of-the-line.

She smiled at herself in the mirror. As usual, she didn't have a trace of the rumpled look usual to someone who just woke up. That was one of the nanites' features she *didn't* keep disabled most of the time. While she didn't have to look drop-dead sexy every waking moment, she did enjoy looking *nice*.

But sometimes it bothered her that she was being a woman in "easy mode." It felt as though she was "cheating" by getting to have the benefits of her looks, her hair, her body without any of the drawbacks. Her hair just didn't get tangled up or caught on things. She never looked rumpled or frazzled, never even had a *period* (though she was hardly alone on Zharus in *that* respect). And given that she'd only been female for a couple years...was she some kind of a fraud?

On the other hand, there were a *lot* of unappealing real-world conditions that science had solved. Most forms of cancer, AIDS, other health problems and conditions that were easily nano-treatable, all were things of the distant past. Why should she have to live with *any* natural body consequences she didn't want to?

Rochelle ran her hands through her hair one more time, then pushed it back behind her again. She smiled faintly. "Still can't stop playing with it, can you?" she chided herself. For some crossriders, their new breasts were their chief object of fascination, but she couldn't seem to keep her hands out of her hair. She'd tried cutting it pageboy short to break the habit, but it had just felt so *wrong* she'd grown it back out again after only a couple of days. As habits went, she supposed it wasn't so bad. At least she wasn't pulling it out.

But enough woolgathering. She slipped out of the nightgown and pulled on her panties, bra, and skirt. Then she selected a button-up blouse to wear. These days she didn't wear many T-shirts or sweatshirts that didn't button up the front, unless she was having Uncia Fuse-fab them onto and off her. Too much of a hassle pulling her hair up through when she put it on, and even more bother pulling the shirt over her head and then down a meter and a half of hair when it was time to take it off.

She was just finishing up when the doorbell rang. "I'll get it!" she called cheerfully, walking past the living room toward the front door. She glanced into the living room and chuckled. Uncia had the smaller Nils pinned under one of her forepaws, and was cheerfully giving him a thorough grooming. Nils did not look particularly put

out by this. Of course, turnabout was fair play; he just as often did the same to Uncia when she was in her minima shell.

He'd done pretty well over the last month or so, streaming and watching hundreds of hours of news and history documentaries to catch up. The patter of little RIDE feet no longer freaked him out, and he'd even gone down to volunteer at the creche a time or two, when he wasn't over at the museum hanging out with Blitzen and other friends. Sometimes Hendra/Antigua came and helped. He hadn't yet worked up the nerve to try renting some thumbs, though. "That's a little too *nouveau* for this cat. If I do partner up again, it'll be a longer-term commitment."

So, yeah. That was Nils. Rochelle had to admit, she'd gotten used to having him around, especially on their Nextus trips. An extra set of sensors had come in handy for going back and picking the next three Shed buildings, which they had done as soon as they'd gotten the pickings from the first one squared away.

It had been a fun trip, and not as hard on Kaylee as the first time—her demons had been bound to that one spot in that one specific building, and they'd pretty thoroughly chased them away anyhow. They hadn't found anything quite as unusual as the centaur, or as unexpectedly useful as those field service cradles, and they *certainly* hadn't found any more Rip Van Winkle RIDEs. But they had found a few more interesting curiosities and come away with quite a number of useful parts and a few more whole DE shells, albeit at the cost of most of the remaining cash from the advances they'd gotten on the DINcomm tech from the Marshals.

They were going to be back on a tight budget for a while, at least until they could sell some of the stuff they'd found. But then, Rhianna made no attempt to hide that she would a lot rather have neat junk to play with than money, and she was really more comfortable without the temptation of extra cash to fritter away on unnecessary things anyhow. And Rochelle couldn't say she minded, either. Since she'd let Zane talk her into a personal loan at a reasonable interest rate until the cash from the commercial uses of DINcom started coming through, the Maxima project wasn't dependent on cash on hand.

Speaking of which, Nils had some interesting points of view on the Maxima project. And Donizetti was quite interested in him, too. He didn't see a lot of older RIDEs in such prime condition, and he was also interested in how the psychology of Ris had changed over time. "You have to know your customer, after all," he'd say.

The doorbell rang again as Rochelle reached the door. "I'm coming, I'm coming!"

"No you're not, you're not even breathing hard!" Uncia called from the next room.

"Oh, hush!" Rochelle called over her shoulder, opening the door. She blinked at the man on the other side. He was of middling height—a few centis shorter than she, but then she was pretty tall. He had sandy brown hair, green eyes, light complexion. He was wearing a beat-up leather flight jacket with a *Spruce Goose* starliner crew patch on it—not one of the fakey ones they sold tourists, but the real deal. "Um...who are you?"

"I...um..." the man stammered, staring at her. "I'm..."

*Oh, crud, did I leave my nanos set to 'high' by accident?* Rochelle wondered. Then, as she took a breath, she noticed an aroma in the air. It seemed almost familiar, but she couldn't quite place it. "Who?"

The man sighed. "...yours."

Rochelle blinked again. "...mine?"

He nodded emphatically. “*Yours.*”

Rochelle took another breath, and rubbed her eyes. She wasn't quite sure why, but all of a sudden she felt a stir of warmth in certain parts...and darned if that guy didn't just look *dreamy*. “I can work with that,” Rochelle said, reaching out to grab him by the hand and yank him into the house. *Aw, dammit, why did I have to wear a blouse with so many buttons? This is gonna take forever to take off!*

Uncia looked up as Rochelle all but ran back through the house, dragging a strange man behind him. “Scuse us, bedroom emergency!” They disappeared into Rochelle's bedroom and closed the door.

Nils blinked. “Who was that?”

Uncia shook her head. “I have...no idea. I don't think I've ever seen him before in my life. And as far as I know, neither has she.” She stared at the closed bedroom door. “Shelley likes to have fun, but this is a little sudden even for her.”

“Do you think something is wrong?” Nils asked.

“I'm not...oh, crap. I *am* sure.” Uncia's ears tilted back. “I'm picking up a heavy concentration of my *original* Fuser nanos in the air.”

“The ones designed to turn your partner into a sex goddess?” Nils asked.

“Yeah. It's like they've been...factory reset to their original spec, like they were before Zane fixed them. They're trying to factory reset *mine*, but I've got permissions for that disabled. And the DNA encoding on them...some of them are from Shelley, but most of them are...from *him*. Whoever he is. Which is weird. I mean, I have no idea how he could have my Fusers. I never Fused with him; I'm pretty sure I'd remember—and he'd be female.”

“So...um...those were the nanites that could, like, make humans horny?” Nils said.

“Granted that, in Shelley's case, that wouldn't take *much*...” Uncia rolled off of Nils and got to her feet. “...but yeah. I see what you're saying there. I've certainly never seen her go from zero to bed in ten seconds like that.”

“So...do you think we should do anything?”

Uncia looked at the bedroom door again, ears cocking forward. “I think we'd probably better. I can re-reset Shelley's nanos if I Fuse with her. There's just...one thing. They've *both* got those whacked-out nanos in them. Somehow they must have *come* from that guy. We wanna fix one of 'em, we gotta fix 'em both.”

“Which means you need someone to Fuse the guy and fix him, too. Right.” Nils cocked his head and was silent for a moment.

“I'd do it myself after I do Shelley, but it's kind of a dirty trick to gender-flip someone like that,” Uncia said. “I know you said you didn't want to Fuse someone except as a long-term commitment, but...”

“Hey. To help out the gal who got me out of the Shed, Fusing with a stranger's not too much to ask,” Nils said. “I didn't have any choice at all back in the Army. Being asked if I'm willing is a new experience. I kind of like it. Besides, I've kinda missed having thumbs.”

“Right. Then the first thing we need is to get you some of my Fusers,” Uncia said. “Which...is the first problem. I've got a couple tanks full of them in the closet, but...”

“...how do we get them in me without hands,” Nils finished. “That does present a problem, doesn't it.”

"I guess we could run down to the garage, get Rhianna's help..." Uncia said. "I just don't want to take longer than necessary."

"Well...hm," Nils said. "There's a field-expedient Fuser-sharing trick we used back in the service. You might think it's a little gross, though."

"Hit me," Uncia said.

"All right...let's go into the kitchen," Nils said. "We don't want to do it on the carpet." He led the way into the other room.

"All right, so now what?" Uncia asked.

"Well, you just need to expel a liter or so of nanos via your oral vents. Then I'll lap it up and kick replication into gear."

"Oh, you have *got* to be kidding me," Uncia said. "So let me get this straight. I'm supposed to *vomit* up a puddle of Fuser nanos like I was horking up a hairball, and then you lick up the sick?"

"You got a better idea?" Nils asked. "Time's passing."

Uncia rolled her eyes. "All right, fine. I'm just glad nobody's watching. This would be really embarrassing." She lowered her head, opened her jaws, and a moment later spewed a silvery puddle out onto the floor.

"Right." Nils padded over and started lapping it up. "Mmm, yummy."

"Ew," Uncia said. "I mean, I know it's just nanos, and this is basically what we *have* to do and all, but still...ew."

Nils finished. "Replication's kicked into high gear. I should have enough in five minutes."

"Great. C'mon." Uncia led the way back to the bedroom door. She cocked an ear. "Wow, they're really going at it in there."

"Seem to be enjoying themselves," Nils agreed.

"Almost seems like a shame to interrupt them," Uncia said.

"Almost," Nils said.

"Once we get this straightened out, it'll probably be pretty embarrassing for one or both of them," Uncia said. She giggled. "Isn't it *great*?"

"Dunno that I'd say that, exactly," Nils said. "But I guess you have a better sense for how well Rochelle would take that kind of embarrassment."

"Rufia will probably laugh herself silly," Uncia said.

"Should just be another minute or two," Nils said.

"Great." Uncia paced back and forth in front of the door. "I swear, this has got to be the last straw. They're gonna *have* to recall them now."

"These are really fancy Fusers," Nils said. "They actually tingle. Fuser system's primed and on combat standby."

Uncia nosed the bedroom door open. "Right. Let's go stage our intervention."

The two snow leopards padded into the bedroom. Articles of clothing were scattered in random places around the room, and the covers were in great disarray atop two squirming bodies. Uncia grabbed a jawful of blanket and yanked.

Bereft of blankets, Rochelle looked blearily up. "Huh wha?"

Uncia hopped up onto the bed. "This is for your own good." She lowered herself onto Rochelle and Fused around her. A moment later, Nils did the same for the strange man.

:Got 'em,: Uncia sent to Nils. :Now we just need to concentrate on the Fuser flush.:

“Huh,” Rochelle said, glancing down at the snow leopard Fuser body she was now wearing. Then she shrugged and reached for the anthropomorphic male snow leopard next to her, pulled him close, and started continuing where they had left off.

:Um,: Uncia sent to Nils. :*Sorry 'bout this. She's kinda strong-willed.*:

:*That's...quite all right, actually*: Nils sent. “At least they’re not trying to de-Fuse,” he added, popping up in their clearing in VR next to her.

“I suppose if it keeps them distracted while we...work on...other...stuff...” Uncia said, purring. “Oh...um...wow. I think the effect is contagious.” She raised her fluffy tail high in the air.

Nils sniffed under her tail. “You know...it smells like you’re right. You’re *definitely* in heat. You know, we probably should...take care of that before we get down to business. We shouldn’t have anything...distracting us...” He moved forward to rub his cheek against hers. “We can do it in fast time...”

Uncia blinked. “Seriously? You...don’t mind?”

Nils chuckled. “I’ve been trying to figure out the best way to ask for quite some time now. I didn’t want to offend you if you wanted to just be friends.”

“Wow! That’s why *I* never said anything to *you* either,” Uncia said. “I didn’t want to make you mad or anything...”

“Well, we’ve got the time right now,” Nils said. “Let’s enjoy ourselves for a while, and then see about fixing our partners’ Fusers.”

Uncia purred. “By *all* means.”

Chet couldn't speak. He spent an embarrassed, silent hour tugging on his new snow leopard ears, trying not to tangle his new tail around his legs. He still felt the connection to Nils through his implants, though the RIDE was respecting his mood and not keeping more than a basic ping open between them.

Nils had assured him that the bugged nanites had been flushed, replaced by Rochelle's updated firmware that allowed him far more direct control over them. That did little to mollify him. He wasn't sure whether he should be furious with her or just plain humiliated. He understood that what had happened hadn't exactly been her *fault*, but still.

Movement in the kitchen made him look away from his tail. The sound of an espresso machine hissing steamed milk into a shot glass of supercharged coffee filled the house.

Rochelle Seaford. Formerly Roger Seaford, or so Chet's implants told him now. Icon of the RIDE emancipation movement, heroine of the Battle of the Domes, and all around beautiful woman...looked rather more plain than she did when he'd knocked on the door.

“Would you like a cup?” Rochelle asked. Her white hair hung limp, roughly tied up into a thick ponytail. “I...I don't think I know your name. Don't worry, I shut off my nanites completely. First time since...”

“Chet Mackenzie,” he said. “I...don't really know what to say.”

“I made sure his nanos are shut down, too,” Nils said, padding into the living room. He sat on his haunches next to Chet. “Don't worry, buddy, you're safe.”

“I didn't *mean* to...” Chet stammered.

“I know you didn't,” Rochelle replied. “Neither did I, but... Let's just start from the beginning, Chet. How did you get my original Fusers? Please, tell me about yourself.”

Coffee? I think I may even have some tea...somewhere.”

“Your original...what? I’m not even sure what they are.” Chet shook his head. “But I’ve been crazy about you ever since I saw you meet that woman with the raccoon in Bifrost Park.”

“He was standing downwind from you,” Nils supplied.

“That was back when they were still out of whack,” Uncia said. “But the effects should have faded as soon as we left.”

“He already had several other non-prescription nano-pharms in his system at the time,” Nils said. “Which he wasn’t supposed to be taking together even then.” He paused. “Have I ever said how *weird* it is that you have non-prescription nanite pharmaceuticals now?”

Rochelle facepalmed. “Drug interactions. Of course. The fusers must have imprinted on the non-prescription nanos and kicked in the self-replicating routine so they started cranking out more of them.”

“I was okay for a while—I got the zap when I left for Earth—but by the time I came out of cryo they must have built themselves back up again,” Chet said. “I knew I had to come back. And so I did.”

“They’d have survived the EMP at customs by hiding in your bone marrow, or maybe in your implants. It’s rare, but sometimes, under the right—wrong—conditions...” She shook her head. “Get the standard bug report form ready, Un-hon?”

“Already on it,” Uncia replied. “I’ll beam it to your specs when it’s ready. This one is a doozy. They even reverted your firmware changes.”

Chet regarded Nils with a mix of fascination and a touch of shock. “Just how far into my head did you get, kitty cat?”

“Don’t worry. I only looked for clues for how you ended up like that,” Nils said. “We RIDEs are good at staying out of places in our operators’ heads we’re not welcome. Operational security, that sort of thing. But it’s nice to meet you *properly*, Chet.”

Chet looked at the fluffy snow leopard tail—his own—draped over his lap. He twitched the tip with a little concentration. “I feel like one of those weird furry people in VL.”

“So, um, who exactly *are* you, Chet?” Rochelle asked. “You’ve got an Earth accent, and from that jacket I guess you’re starliner crew.”

“Pilot, actually,” Chet said. “Drop shuttle pilot, and fourth reserve jump helmsman for the *Goose*. Though I don’t have a lot of flight time for liner-class ships outside of sims. Just enough to qualify as a backup.”

“Oooh...a pilot, really?” She grinned. “And you’re all mine.”

“Well...I am if you want me,” Chet said. He shook his head. “Damnedest thing. I only just *met* you, but...I’m still incredibly attracted to you. Even like this, with all the cosmetic effects off. I didn’t even *believe* in love at first sight, but now...”

Rochelle facepalmed. “Ugh. Sorry. Must be residual imprinting from the nanos. Um...I think I’ve kinda got it, too, you handsome devil.”

“Does it go away?” Chet asked.

“Usually,” Rochelle said. “We can check with Eleven down at the hospital. He knows more about the medical end of nanites than I do.”

“I think I know him,” Chet said. “He put my new stomach in last trip.”

“We could get those tags docked at the same time,” Uncia said. “Unless you want to hang onto them.”

Chet glanced at Nils. "Actually...I think I'd like to Fuse again at least a time or two before I decide that. Um...if you wouldn't mind, that is."

"I liked what I saw, Chet," Nils said. "I'll be happy to give it a go."

"You know, I have a guest bedroom that's not being used for anything," Rochelle said. "Unless you'd like to just share mine...ugh, no. Bad Shelley. Not on the first date." She slapped herself on the hand.

"Why not?" Chet said wryly. "Seems like we already did just about everything else."

"We haven't actually *had* a first date yet, so that doesn't count," Rochelle said.

"We'll have to work on that imprinting thing," Uncia said. "It'll take a few hours in Fuse to get everything restored, if I'm reading this data right. Nils?"

"I guess," Nils said. "You know more about the tech side of it than me. I'm just a simple grunt." He glanced at Chet. "But if you're willing, I sure wouldn't mind having a pair of thumbs for a while. From what I read in your head, you seem like someone I could get along with."

"Sure, why not?" Chet said. "After what just happened, seems like Fusing with a RIDE is a small thing by comparison. And I've been a little curious, all these years." He shook his head. "Do *all* the nanites you guys use mess with your head like this?"

"Not all of them, but some of them." Rochelle sighed. "The hyper-cosmetics always were a little on the experimental side. I'm still not sure how they got them approved in the first place. This might just be the last straw that kicks them onto the ban list."

"We'll...work on that, Chet," Nils said uncomfortably. "Hooboy. RIDE personality templating was bad enough with some of my comrades. I knew far too many gung-ho morons who got themselves and their operators killed. I didn't think you could do that to a human brain."

"You don't even need nanos to screw up a human brain," Rochelle said.

"Hypnotism, brainwashing, subliminal messages...we've known about *that* crap for hundreds of years."

"Nextus Nano's going to go nuts when they get this bug report," Uncia said.

"Absolutely nuts. This is the sort of thing they're *required* to go public with, no loopholes."

"On the bright side...I could *use* a good pilot about now," Rochelle said. "I'm about halfway through commissioning an experimental suborbital shuttle, and a pilot's input on the design would be helpful."

Chet perked up. "Oh, really? Sounds like fun."

"It is." Rochelle grinned. "Let me tell you about *Uncia Maxima*..."

When Rochelle staggered into the garage that afternoon, Uncia padding along behind her, Rhianna almost didn't recognize her. Her hair hung limp behind her in a set of Fuse-arranged coiled braids, and all her cosmetic effects were off. She looked tired and more than a little mussed. "Shelley? You look like hell," Rhianna said. "I don't think I've ever seen you looking like that."

"You've never seen me with my nanites all the way off," Rochelle said. "I've had the most bizarre, stupid, wonderful day and it's barely even past noon yet. I'm still not sure how to deal with it."

Rhianna pulled up a couple of folding chairs. "Go to the lounge and make

yourself a strong cup of that motor oil you drink, then come back here and tell me everything.”

Rochelle smiled faintly. “Right. Be right back.” She was gone just long enough to work the Keurig brewer she’d installed in the lounge, and returned with a steaming mug. “Better.”

“So what’s got you so freaked out?” Kaylee asked, sitting on her haunches next to Rhianna’s chair.

“Ooooh boy, wait’ll you hear it!” Uncia said.

Rochelle rolled her eyes. “Well, the doorbell rang, and...” She quickly sketched out the pertinent details between sips of coffee.

Rhianna listened with growing consternation. “Those nanites just...threw you and a complete stranger into bed together? That’s not exactly normal behavior.”

Rochelle snorted. “Yeah, you’re telling me? And there’s some residual imprinting involved, too. More on his side—he’s had weeks awake for them to do it to him—but even I have to admit I *still* find him pretty hot.” She shook her head. “Uncia and I have been doing some heavy poking into the logs and diagnostics, and we know how *he* got stuck with them. The crazy part is, what happened to *me* is partly Zane’s fault.”

Rhianna blinked. “How’s that exactly?”

“Well, when he patched them over with his magical Integrate powers, it wasn’t exactly an ‘official’ patch, with the proper crypto signature,” Rochelle said. “So when some of the factory-standard nanites reintroduced themselves into my system from Chet, they assumed all the others had been ‘corrupted’ so they initiated a factory reset.” She rolled her eyes. “I’d set Uncia’s Fusers not to accept firmware changes without confirmation, but I forgot to do the same for mine. And then, well, *he* was cranking out pheromones like crazy...”

“Say no more. I know what a farkup of that magnitude looks like,” Rhianna said. “So you’re going cold turkey on the nanos?”

“Until I can be sure we’ve got all the kinks out,” Rochelle said. “We sent off our complete report to Nextus Nano and I’m waiting to see if my peers there agree with my findings and that it’ll be safe with the tweaks I’ve proposed. Or, I may just get impatient and turn them back on anyway.” She grimaced. “It’s *annoying* being without them. Yeah, yeah, I know, *you* manage. But you don’t have all this hair.”

Rhianna snorted. “So, where’s—” A comm from the Museum interrupted Rhianna’s line of thought. It was one of the bears. The comm projector on the wall came to life. “Hey, Big John. Something up?”

“Hey, Rhi. We’ve got a fella crowing over the centaur,” the bear RIDE said. “Claims he built it. He wants ta meet ya. Might wanna come on over and say hello.”

“Be right there, John. Thanks,” Rhianna replied. She hung up. “Can we finish this conversation later, Shelley?”

“Oh, sure. Can we come with you? I haven’t actually gotten a look at the centaur’s OS yet,” Rochelle replied. “I’m a little more energetic after that cup.”

Rhianna nodded. “Want to use my makeup mask before we go?”

“I...think that would be a good idea,” Rochelle said. “No more easy mode—at least for now.”

At the RIDE Rescue Museum, Big John brought the foursome into a private conference room, where a man waited. “Where the hell did you find it?” he asked. He

was just a middle-aged man, with no RIDE tags evident, wearing battered interface specs of a design a decade or so older than Rochelle's. "The bureaucrats snatched it away from us with nary a by-your-leave. And not a great deal in the way of compensation, either. At least it looks still operable. Pretty damned pristine."

"It was in their big storage building with all their surplus parts," Rhianna said. "But they'd stripped out the OS firmware for some reason and wouldn't provide a byte of documentation. She is a beauty."

"*It is a beauty,*" the man insisted. "The centaur's hardware is ambisexual. It adapts to the sex of its operator."

"Oh, *really?*" Rochelle said. "How did you manage that, Mister...?"

"Arnold Craig," he said. "As for how we achieved it, well, my fellow engineers and I decided we simply wouldn't be limited by the then—and *still*—current paradigms and began from first principles. Hence no legacy components beyond standard batteries and connectors."

"How did that work for you?" Uncia asked.

"After our project was found...lacking...I turned my back on RIDEs and went into terraforming. One of my old colleagues who is still in the field in Laurasia contacted me in Punta Sur about this. I decided there was little harm in seeing what had become of the fruit of our labors."

"Can you tell us a bit more about it?" Rhianna asked eagerly. "There seems to be some kind of implant connector about where the operator's coccyx would be..."

"That's such a fun word," Uncia said. "'Coccyx...coccyx...' I could say it all day."

Rochelle rolled her eyes. "Just ignore her, she's like that sometimes."

"It was the natural place for a neural connection of this type," Craig said haughtily. "When in Fuse, the operator's legs are effectively non-existent. His or her entire lower body is melded with the machine. Granted, the resulting Fuse process took minutes to properly complete...but we felt that was a minor flaw, and if it had entered production we could have tightened that up considerably."

There were stars in Rhianna's eyes. "This is absolutely genius work, Mr. Craig."

Craig snorted. "Genius' is nice, young lady, but it doesn't pay the bills when the design committee decides in favor of the other guy. Should've figured it ahead of time, really. The Nextus mindset. Give 'em a choice between same and different, they'll always pick same, even if different's better."

"Without OS firmware and the Fuser nanite specs, we're still up a creek," Kaylee said. "You and your buddies didn't keep copies, by chance? We'd love to get it running again."

"It belongs in a museum," Craig said. "A novelty of an immature technology, right up there with clockwork automatons that can write letters."

"It sure does," Rhianna agreed. "But it would be great if we could showcase it as a working model instead of just letting it gather dust on a pedestal."

"Well...you understand, it never *did* work very well," Craig said. "We were still in early trials when the other team completed its work to the committee's satisfaction." He scratched his head thoughtfully. "We had ideas for improving it, but after the decision—and the confiscation of our prototype—they more or less evaporated."

"All we need is the OS and the Fuser specs," Kaylee said. "With some Intie help, maybe we'll come up with something that'll make it work. What do you think, Rhi, Shelley?"

“Sounds good to me,” Rochelle said.

Craig pondered, eyes flicking through commands in his specs. “As it happens, we retained the OS and Fuser specs, as well as the hardware design schematics. They’re old enough to no longer be considered secret and were never patented. After all, they did sell the frame to you. Which leaves me in a bit of a quandary.”

“How so?” Rhianna said.

“I’m a bitter man. I admit that,” Craig said. “The four of us put so much work into this project. We thought of ourselves akin to Dr. Patil and Dr. Clemens. We weren’t *just* engineers, we were *artists*! We were doing something *revolutionary*—freeing the world from the need to create still more intelligent beings to use as slaves. Then it all collapsed around us.”

“I get that,” Rhianna said. “I feel the same way in the work I’ve been doing. So I’m guessing you’re a little reluctant to let it go.”

“You understand, it’s not about money,” Craig said.

“I know,” Rhianna said. “So what would make it easier for you?”

Craig frowned. “That’s the hell of it. I don’t *know*, exactly. It’s kind of an old wound you’ve opened up here.”

“I think I could take a guess,” Rochelle said. “You want some kind of *closure*. You want something good to come out of it after all this time. More than it just being a part of a museum exhibit.”

“I guess that sounds about right,” Craig said. “Why, you got an idea about how to make that happen?”

“As it happens, I might,” Rochelle said. “I’m working on a project myself with a few passing similarities to this. A suborbital-based DE shell that won’t have an on-board RI core. It’s going to interface with a separate RIDE operator, which in a lot of ways isn’t so different from interfacing with a human. And we’re having a few problems getting the systems integration locked down.”

Craig nodded. “We had a lot of trouble with that ourselves. It’s probably the main reason people kept using RIDEs—it pretty much took an on-board sentience and sapience to mesh two complicated bodies *easily*. Let alone the *three* you’d be talking about there.” He sniffed. “A brute-force approach, no finesse involved. But then, slavery was ever thus...”

Rochelle nodded. “And I hadn’t realized anyone had even tried it before. Mr. Craig, I could really use your help with my Maxima project. Since we’re funding it ourselves, it *will* get finished. Your expertise would be invaluable, and I promise you’ll receive full credit for your contributions. It’s the first of its kind, but I’m pretty sure it won’t be the last.” She grinned. “You know what? I’d *love* to work out some way to incorporate that whole ambisexual thing in. My pilot’s a guy, and it would be nice to let him and his RIDE partner be able to link in without having to sing soprano.”

“Needless to say, we’d love to have your help in restoring the centaur, too, if you feel like it,” Rhianna added.

“You’ve piqued my interest, ladies,” Craig said. “Maybe we should go discuss this in more detail, but later. It’s been quite an emotionally-charged day.”

“I hesitate to ask, but...about the firmware?” Rhianna asked.

“It’s yours, to what end, I don’t know,” Craig said. “Consider it emailed...now.”

:*What about that group of RIDE Engineering students from Martinez U who were gawking at it yesterday?*: Kaylee suggested as their inbox chimed with the

promised attachment. : *We can't invent everything ourselves.*: She sent a smirking emote.

: *They have done such a good job with Chauncey...*: Rhianna mused. Aloud, she said, “Thank you, Mr. Craig. And we promise that we’ll keep you posted—and however we display it, your team will get proper credit.”

“That’s all I can hope for, I suppose,” Craig said. “I’ll let my colleagues know. I’m sure they’ll want to contribute. Now...where’s a good place to eat around here? I’m a little sub-lagged.”

“You like BBQ?” Rhianna said. She passed the location of their favorite lunch eatery in VR to him.

Arnold Craig smiled. “That will do nicely. Thank you, Miss Stonegate. We’ll meet again soon.” He reached out and offered his hand, which both Rochelle and Rhianna shook, then left the conference room.

Rhianna slumped against Kaylee. “Wow. That poor man! The Nextus bureaucrats really screwed him and his team.”

“Yeah,” Rochelle said. “I guess I can see their reasoning. Ris work, they’re cheap and easy to mass-produce, why reinvent the wheel. But still.”

“Frankly it sounds like the whole centaur bunch were a little full of themselves,” Kaylee opined. “I get what they were tryin’ ta do, but Lordy Lord Lordy, did they pick the *wrong* way to do it! What primadonnas. Shoulda at least used standard parts to keep costs down. Common sense like that.”

“It’s easy to second-guess from this far in the future,” Rhianna said. “Back then, they didn’t have the broad range of parts available we do now. Maybe we’ll understand their reasoning a little better after we review the docs.”

“More stuff to do in our copious free time,” Rochelle said dryly, tossing her head. “Ugh! My hair just doesn’t *feel* right like this.”

“Someone’s spoooooiled!” Uncia caroled.

“Oh, hush up, you. This is all *your* fault,” Rochelle said. “They’re *your* damned Fusers.” Uncia just giggled, and Rochelle rolled her eyes.

“So, getting back to before we were interrupted, where is this new guy anyway?” Rhianna asked.

“Where do you think?” Rochelle said. “Off to the Milkbottle with Nils for a cone or a mondae. That’s where everyone seems to want to go when they start a new phase of their life these days.”

Kaylee perked up. “With Nils? Your nanite-induced boyfriend’s partnering up with the ol’ snowcat?”

“Well, they had to Fuse up to fix his little Fuser infection,” Rochelle said. “And they seem to have hit it off. Makes things easier, I guess. Did I mention he’s a shuttle pilot *and* fourth backup helmsman for the *Spruce Goose*?”

“So that’s what you meant by your *pilot* being male,” Rhianna said. “Convenient. So you’ve decided he’s a keeper?”

Rochelle shrugged. “We’re going to see how the relationship goes. I guess if nothing else, I’m glad Nils seems to have gotten a good partner out of it.”

And so it was that a couple of hours later, Chet found himself straddling a snowmobile-skimmer bike, hovering down the street to Bifrost Park. “I’ve been looking forward to this,” Nils said. “Everybody tells me about how great the ice cream there is,

but I've never actually gotten the chance to have any."

"It is great," Chet said. "I don't think I ever had anything like it on Earth. But you never had the chance to come down? It's right near your house..."

"We need to Fuse to 'eat,'" Nils said. "Well, technically it's our partner who's doing the eating, but we get to share the taste across the neural link. I didn't really feel like getting into that with a temp."

"Oh." Chet thought about that. "Seems awfully complicated."

"Well, it was never intended that we'd do things like 'eat' at all," Nils said. "Or share our partners' sensations. More sort of an unexpected side-effect. There were a lot of things they didn't think about, and even I'm still getting used to finding out what some of them are. I was asleep for a long time."

"You mentioned," Chet said. "And I gotta say, I feel for you there. I'm used to being asleep for months at a time on the star cruises, but thirty-five years? Damn."

They pulled in at the park's Fuse spot. "You ready?" Nils asked.

"Do it," Chet said. He paid closer attention this time as the skimper bike seemed to crumple inward, molding itself to his body. Everything went dark for a moment, then he was looking out at the world through optic sensors instead of eyes. His body felt warm and cozy at the same time he felt normal-temperature overall. A short feline muzzle extended in his field of view. Chet could feel the cool breeze on his whiskers.

As he was still coming to grips with the sensation, "his" body moved forward on its own, lifting off the ground and hovering through the air toward the ice cream shop. "Hey, we're flying!" Chet said.

"Um, yeah? I have lifters built in?" Nils reminded him.

Chet chuckled. "Sorry. Still getting used to this. So I guess you're in charge of the body when we're like this?"

"We both can be. I just took over 'cuz you weren't doing anything, and *I* want some ice cream. I'll be happy to let you run it later."

"You know, I feel a kind of buzzing in the small of my—your?—back. A sort of tingle..."

"Secondary dorsal lifter," Nils said. "One of my frame's many design quirks. And it's your back too, right now. The whole point of Fusers is to make everything feel natural to the human wearing me. Comes in real handy in battle, let me tell you." He landed at the back of the line. There were thirty people between them and the ordering window.

"So far, this is pretty normal. The line is always like this," Chet said. He marveled at his handpaws, twitched his ears. "This is better than VL."

"I'm sorry, what?" Nils asked.

"Virtual Life. The brand name the company who makes most of Earth's VR software these days uses," Chet said. "It got genericized, like 'Kleenex,' so these days everyone from Earth calls anything VR 'Virtual Life.' I hear the colonies have some different names. Anyway, I don't spend too much time in it—just use it as a sort of virtual office and entertainment room, since I spend most of my time strapped into a pilot's couch. But some people use it to simulate other bodies. I...played around with that a little, but got bored pretty quick."

"This is no simulation," Nils said. "If you want, we can go outside the dome later and I can show you what I can *really* do."

"You're fully environment-capable, then," Chet said. "You'd make one heck of a

flight suit.”

“That was one of our selling points,” Nils said. “How much do you know about Zharus?”

“Just what I picked up in port over the years,” Chet said. “I know what it looks like from orbit really well. I can find my way around Toptown and the main parts of Uplift without a map. As for the details, history, that sort of thing...well, doing the cyber-arbitrage for a living I didn't want to learn too much because the government might pick my brain.” *Again*, he thought.

*:I'm sorry, I picked up what you're thinking there,:* Nils said internally.

*:Wasn't trying to be private enough, I guess,:* Chet said. The line was shrinking pretty fast. *:Nothing grotesque. It was a couple round trips ago. They just asked some questions about what Zharus is like. All the starliner regulars come in for that sooner or later. Don't worry about it.:*

*:Mmm,:* Nils replied. Aloud, he said, “We’re almost to the front of the line. What’re you going to get?”

“Hey, I've been here before. It's your first time, buddy. What do *you* want?” Chet said, looking at the hand-made menu behind the windows. “Most times I’m here I just get plain vanilla anyway, because I’ve got a new stomach. But the one I have now is pretty well broken in.”

Some of the items had rather tantalizing names: RIDE's Dream, Fuser's Delight, Raptor Ripple, Savory Sarium Special (Inties only!). There were combinations of chocolate, vanilla, butterscotch, birthday cake, sweet cream, hot fudge, fruit sherberts, “genuine” Italian gelatos—the full menu in VR was huge.

“Seeing that I’ve never had *any* of it before, plain vanilla seems like a good place to start,” Nils said. “And it seems kind of appropriate, given my name and all.”

Chet smiled to himself. “There's a *dozen* kinds of vanilla to choose from, Nils. The choice is obvious. Let's get the Snowy Vanilla Mondae.”

They carried their heaping ice cream dish to a vacant RIDE-sized table and had a seat, then Nils picked up the spoon. “This could be a little tricky. I haven’t had a whole lot of experience ‘eating for two.’ The most we did in the field was ration bars.”

“I’m sure we’ll get by,” Chet said.

“Here we go, then.” And Chet was treated to the sensation of his mouth opening not of its own volition, and a spoon carefully poking its way inside and depositing a mouthful of smooth vanilla ice cream drizzled with vanilla syrup.

*:Mmm, that's good!:* Nils sent as they swallowed.

“Yeah, and I still seem to have all my teeth, too,” Chet said afterward.

Nils chuckled. “I wasn’t *that* bad, was I?”

“Well, I *was* a little worried,” Chet admitted.

As they ate more ice cream, a thought struck Chet as so amusing he nearly choked on a bite from laughing.

“What is it?” Nils asked.

“Oh...I just realized,” Chet said. “This place was sort of a touchstone of my cyber-arbitrage. Whenever I swapped out my implants for my new organic stomach, I’d come here for a cone.”

“Yeah?” Nils said.

“And now I’m here again...serving as a sort of implanted organic stomach for someone else.”

Nils grinned. "It is pretty funny when you look at it that way, isn't it?"

"Ironic, anyway," Chet said. "You know, I have *no* idea what I'm gonna do with my life now. When I got back to Earth, after I'd got the infection, all I could think of was getting back here, and...nothing else. Now that I'm here...and at loose ends for at least the next year or so, 'til I sign on with the *Goose* again, if I do..."

"Well, as long as you don't have any plans, I could use a pair of thumbs," Nils said. "And it would keep you near Shelley, at least 'til you two can decide if you really feel anything for each other."

"We do have a lot in common, don't we?" Chet mused. "We're both kind of stuck in unfamiliar territory. You in time, me in space."

"I guess we out-of-placers have to stick together," Nils said. "At least until we both know the ropes."

"Sounds like a plan," Chet said.

"I could pay you the standard salary for rental thumbs, at least for a while," Nils said. "I've got a decent little nest egg from the abandoned RIDE legislation Uplift passed."

"Don't worry about it," Chet said. "As many times as I've cyber-arbitraged, and as little as I've had to spend it on, I'm pretty flush myself. How about we go fifty-fifty on any upgrade or repair costs you have as long as we're together, and call it square?"

"That works for me," Nils said.

There was a message chime in Chet's implant. "And *that* would be the approval of my long-term Zharus Residency Application."

"Helps when you've got a bona fide celebrity greasing the wheels, doesn't it?" Nils said.

"I guess," Chet said. He swished his tail back and forth. "That is *such* a weird feeling. All the more so when we're *not* Fused. All those times I thought about what it would feel like to run my hands along *her* tail, I never imagined having one of my own."

"Give it a few days. You won't know how you ever got along without it," Nils said.

"What else am I going to feel that way about?" Chet asked wryly. "I've heard all the crazy rumors about you guys."

"Oh, really? I haven't," Nils said.

"Like you can *really* turn people into animals," Chet said. "Make any weapon you want out of hardlight. Get inside people's heads and mind-control them. Oh, and at the same time you're not *real*, because if you were they'd allow you to be taken out of the star system."

Nils snorted. "Sounds about right. Well, there's a little truth in all of those, but not a whole lot. And the real truth is weirder than you'd imagine. So what's it like being a starliner shuttle pilot? See some pretty neat places?"

"Lots of spaceports, mostly," Chet said. "Earth, then Wednesday, then Zharus. Then Wednesday, then Earth. Then Wednesday, then Zharus."

"I get the idea," Nils said.

"I do a little tourism—mostly on Zharus. Earth I've already seen. We don't—guess I should say, *didn't*—stop over at Wednesday very long, and there's not much to see there anyway. Not very...hospitable. Worse than your Dry Ocean."

"You're going to have the time for a lot more tourism now," Nils said. "For that matter, so am I. Didn't get to see much while I was Army equipment."

"Then I guess it's a date," Chet said. "And seriously? You were 'equipment'?"

“We all were,” Nils said. “It was a different time.”

“Apparently not all *that* different, if RIDEs just started getting human rights in the last year or so.”

“It’s easy to make excuses for them,” Nils said. “In fact, I keep finding I *want* to make excuses for them. Because that was just how life was. I didn’t feel *oppressed* or anything. I felt glad to be alive. And if the cost for being alive was to be someone’s equipment, well, it was better than *not* being alive.” He paused. “You know, I should... yeah, I *will*. Here...I’ve just unlocked access to my memories. Scan ‘em, see what you think.”

Chet blinked. “Just like that, you’d let a complete stranger into your head?”

“I already let you into my body,” Nils pointed out. “Besides, we’ve touched minds enough you’re not a *complete* stranger anymore, anyway.”

“Huh.” Chet thought about that for a moment. “Well...I don’t know if my own life is as interesting as yours, but you’re welcome to look. God knows my head’s screwed up enough already as it is, it surely can’t hurt anything.”

“Fair enough,” Nils said. “This is good ice cream, isn’t it?”

“You’re not sure?” Chet asked.

“As you’ll see, it’s the only ice cream I’ve ever had,” Nils said.

“I guess I’ve gone and spoiled you for anywhere else,” Chet said, chuckling. “Well, let’s finish it before it melts.”

The sun rose high into the Zharusian sky as two new friends sat and ate ice cream, and got to know each other better.

**THE END**