

A Dash from the Past

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*June 11, 158 A.L.
Brubeck Mining Campus, Uplift*

Myla Wilson sat at the desk in her office next door to Zane Brubeck's, going over personnel files for new additions to the bodyguard staff for the upcoming Totalia rescue expedition. As Zane's chief bodyguard, she had the responsibility of making sure that the whole team was able to work together. Sometimes it was a bit of a headache, but on the whole it was a fulfilling job.

Happily, security at Brubeck Mining was a family affair, and Myla's aunt Anny Hewer was the overall chief of Brubeck's corporate security. Hence, Anny had been delighted to pass along her recommendation of the very cream of Brubeck's general security staff for Myla's perusal, along with some handwritten notes on her own opinions of the men, women, and RIDEs. Myla chuckled. She had to admit, it was a lot easier to have a good working relationship with your boss when she'd used to take you out for ice cream when you were a toddler.

As she paged up the latest personnel file on her desk comm, she became aware of some sort of commotion in the next office, where her and Zane's secretarial desk were. "—look, you can't go in there without an appointment, and—"

"Outta my way!" And then Myla's door burst open, and Myla looked up and stared. In a corner of the office, two large sandy ears perked up as Myla's partner Sophie also raised her head.

Framed in the doorway was...a familiar shape that Myla had never expected to see again. A *light blue* shape, with four legs, light blue wings, and a rainbow mane and tail, with a cloud-and-rainbow-lightning-bolt logo on her flank. A shape that was *glaring* at her. And for all that equines' eyes were arranged in the herbivorous either-side-of-the-head position without stereo vision, she was nonetheless managing to give a good double-eyed glare somehow. "*There you are.*"

It took a moment for it all to register. Two years as a younger Quinoa Steader's bodyguard she had spent Fused to this little blue pony based on the amazingly popular 2010s version of the *My Little Pony* franchise. The two had gotten along well enough, but Myla had only been able to take so much time on all fours. "*Dashie?*"

"Oh, so you *remember* me. That's nice." The miniature pegasus RIDE snorted. "*Real nice. Glad somebody does.*"

Behind her, the day's secretary appeared in the door. "Uh, sorry, Miss Wilson, she just charged right by me..."

"It's okay, Frieda. That's kind of her thing," Myla said. "Don't worry, I've got this." The secretary nodded and closed the door.

"I'm here because of what happened *yesterday*," Dashie said pointedly.

"Uhhh...I'm sorry, Dashie. You'll have to be a little more specific."

From her alcove, Sophie sat up on her haunches. Like Myla she was a partial Integrate, bonded to one another, and the way they were growing closer they often shared thoughts. There was more than a little confusion between them at the moment.

"*Yesterday*, you were a lot younger and a lot less furry. *Yesterday* Quinnie slipped you a fat wallet under the table, and you said toodle-oo and went off to join the army or whatever it was. *Yesterday*, the agency chucked me in the closet, because my line had gone out of fashion and nobody else wanted to have to put up with monthly spinal surgery to Fuse with me. And then *this morning*, someone found me back there,

and they tossed me out on the street with just enough *mu* for a suborbital ticket. Apparently we've got *rights* now or something so we can't be *owned* anymore. Big. Whoop. I did a search on your name, found your address, and here I am."

"Okay. *That* yesterday. It's been fourteen years, but I know subjectively—"

"Time flies when you're shut the f...shut the *funny* down." Dashie rolled her eyes. "I *still* can't swear, d...darn it."

The makers of the faux Rainbow Dash's line had not been foolish enough to create personality templates to make the ponies believe they were the *actual characters* brought to life out of fictionland. They knew they were actors playing a role. Or rather, they were intended so the *wearers* could play those roles. The company tried to be "authentic" in a different way, making the DE chassis non-transformable. The one problem was, human bodies hadn't been designed to fit into the shape of even a cartoon pony—and the manufacturer's "solution" to that problem had been to throw up their hands and say, "It's all right, monthly nanosurgery is pretty cheap these days." After the company went out of business Myla had read a few articles that had summarized the failure as "it seemed like a good idea at the time".

Myla still wasn't entirely sure how non-transformable quadrupedal Fusers with weapons packs stuck on had ended up as bodyguards to the niece of one of the wealthiest men on Zharus. The RIDEs had clearly been intended to be children's *companions*—perhaps in Fuse with human nannies, babysitters, or teachers to provide the actual wisdom behind the cartoonish facade—but to use them for *protection*? Against someone who presumably might wish to injure their charge?

In her darker moments, Myla suspected it had to do with Joe being drunk enough to impair his judgment, and with some smooth operator landing the job for the lowest possible bid—of which he probably then pocketed a significant amount. It wouldn't exactly have been hard lowballing the bid with RIDEs that were super-cheap because no one else wanted to touch them, especially given they were based on a nostalgia show that *Joe himself* had rediscovered and rereleased, and they were the kind of little-girly thing Quinnie would just have *loved* at that age.

Even since getting back in touch with Joe due to the Totalia expeditionary project, Myla had never quite worked up the courage to ask him about it. She just thanked her lucky stars there hadn't been any serious incidents on her and Dashie's watch.

In any case, the the ponies actually had their own personalities and free will under the faux-Little Pony role—with certain fetters in place, such as one against using four-letter words which younger ears might hear. It had been the younger Myla Wilson's first experience with RIDEs and Fusing. It certainly hadn't soured her to the idea, and she and Dashie had *more or less* gotten along. Now here the pony was again, understandably peeved.

"How can I help?"

"Oh, *now* you want to help. Now that I'm here, on your doorstep. We were *partners*, Myla. I know we didn't always hit it off, but I still thought that *being partners* had counted for *something*. I'm not even mad about you getting a better offer and leaving to follow your dreams. The show I'm based on was *all about* following your dreams, how could I be mad at that? But *fourteen years*? You never once thought, 'Hey, wonder how my old partner Dashie's doing? I should look her up.' If you had, maybe someone woulda remembered I was in the closet a few years earlier." She snorted.

“You’re just lucky I’ve only had a few subjective *hours* to brood on that, and not *fourteen friendly years*.”

:*She’s got us there*,: Sophie said. :*And I do mean ‘us’*. *I never asked you about her even before Towers, either*.:

:*God, she’s right*.: Myla remembered the last few times she’d even thought about Dashie—discussing her with Zane Brubeck in the wake of accepting the bodyguard position. Not once had she ever thought to wonder what had become of her. To be honest, she hadn’t really *cared*, especially after finding a new RIDE partner that she *did* really get along with. And not once had she put that together with the raw deal Nextus RIDEs usually got, either—even after everything she’d had to go through to get Sophie free of the MRS after an Integrate enclave had unexpectedly compromised her for government work.

Myla stood up and walked around to the front of the desk, to the cartoon pony pegasus huffing with irritation. “Dashie, I was a stodgy Nextus girl. And I joined the Materiel Recovery Service—which you knew I wanted to join more than anything. They’re just a breath short of actual military, and that brings with it a whole gamut of conditioning. Sophie here couldn’t speak to anyone but me or my superiors.”

“Sucks to be you,” Dashie said, without a great deal of sincerity. “At least you were *awake*. And for that matter, you could have *thumbs*. I’m still not over *that*, either.”

“My back *still* sympathizes over your lack of thumbs,” Myla said. She sighed. She spread her handpaws. “Dashie, all I can do is apologize. I can’t change the past. The last couple years have been absolutely crazy, but I can’t say I haven’t had a spare moment I could have used to think about you. It just...didn’t come up.”

“All right,” Dashie said, seeming at least a little mollified. “I guess that’s a *start*, anyway.”

“You can stay with us, if you want,” Sophie said. “I have a really nice RIDE sofa I haven’t used very much. Myla and I...well...”

“Yeah, I saw that. Read about it on the way up, all the media profiles and interviews of you. I guess it puts some of my own problems in perspective. Brrr.” She shook herself. “That ‘Integration’ stuff is weird. And thanks for the offer. I guess I’m gonna need *somewhere* to crash and charge. Burned up all the *mu* they gave me as a ‘settlement’ on the sub ticket over here.” She cocked her head. “So what is all this about us being ‘free’ now? It just seemed like an excuse to ditch me and not have to pay my maintenance costs, but now I’m not so sure.”

“It’s just that. With all the citizenship rights thereto,” Sophie said.

“‘Citizenship,’ huh? That and a *mu* will buy me a 15-minute recharge. What does that *do* for me? I’m little and blue and cute, and anyone who Fuses with me is going to have to pay their own nanosurgery bills.”

Sophie looked distant for a moment. “There’s a ‘Mane Six Mechs Modding’ community out there. The company might have cheaped out on your frame, but they’ve managed to help some Celestias and Fluttershies with the thumbs problem.”

“That sounds like a good place to start, Dashie,” Myla added. “As for *mu*, don’t worry. I’ll get in touch with Joe Steader. I’m sure you have some back pay you can collect now that he knows you’re awake again.”

“That’s two years of professional bodyguard duty plus fourteen years of compound interest,” Sophie added, adding a cash register sound effect for emphasis. “Ka-ching!”

Dashie's ears flicked and pointed forward, a gesture Myla remembered meant she was thinking. "That'll be nice, I guess. Having money. It's not the sort of thing I've got much experience with." She pawed the carpet nervously. "But what do I even *do* with myself now? I've never been...free."

"That's not something you need to decide this instant, or even next week," Myla said gently.

"Or next month," Sophie added.

"But what do I do in the meantime? The job is all I know...and that was yesterday."

"We'll figure something out, Dashie. I'm going to put in a priority call to Joe Steader. He's been good about getting things square with the Integrates and RIDEs who've worked for his companies over the years. He won't be happy he missed you, either. Give me a minute..." Joe Steader had been running expeditionary fleet errands all over the star system for the last month since arriving back from Wednesday with the *Great Western*, but she happened to know he and Julius had arrived on Zharus three days ago to catch up on local business. Myla sent a quick text to Joe's priority number. *:Hey, Joe. It's Myla. Hate to interrupt whatever you're doing, but...remember Dashie and Lu?:*

An answering text came back a moment later. *:Hey, Myla. Good to hear from you. Sure do, why?:*

:Well, Dashie just showed up at my office on hoof in a huff. Apparently she's been shut down since I left your service. I have no idea what happened to Lu, but since Dashie hasn't mentioned her yet, I don't think she does either.:

:WHAT????? The agency told me she was reassigned after you left. Reassigned, they said.:

Myla sighed. She didn't quite have the fast-time and multitasking abilities a full Integrate had yet, and Sophie's full attention needed to be here. *:Apparently not. I haven't had any time to investigate this at all just yet. But can you get the ball rolling? Find out what happened to her and where Lu is?:*

:You damn betcha. As Jules would say, shit. Someone's hide's going to get nailed to the wall over this.:

:Thanks, Joe. Say hi to Julius for me.:

:Sophie says hi!: her partner added.

:Hi, Sophie! I will. Text ya later.:

The blue pegasus waited patiently through the conversation, staring vacantly into space. As Myla finished, Dashie sighed. "Sh...sugar. This is just not cool at all."

"We're making it right. I'm sure we'll see Joe *and* Quinoa here in person before too long, after they take care of a few things. Do you know what happened to Lu?" Young Quinoa had had two bodyguards assigned to her. Myla in Rainbow Dash, and another in a Luna. They'd both been replaced at the same time Myla left due to the back problems the DE shells caused. Myla hadn't hung around long enough to find out what happened to Lu and her partner. They'd never been more than just co-workers. She couldn't even remember the woman's name now.

Dashie tossed her head. "Well, *she* still had a partner, last I saw. She wasn't in the closet with me when they woke me up, that's all I know."

"Well, if you can just be patient, Dashie, we'll get everything straightened out," Sophie said, tongue lolling.

“Patient? When have I ever not been patient? I’m the most patientest pony you ever knew!” She nervously kicked over one of the chairs facing Myla’s desk. “Oops.”

“It’s okay, Dashie. Don’t worry about it,” Myla said.

“Yeah, whatever.” Dashie sighed. “Look...you don’t need me in your hair...or fur... and I don’t have anything to do right now but fret. So I guess I’ll just go stand in that corner over there and go passive mode. Wake me up when there’s any news.”

“Will do, Dashie. Sleep well,” Myla said. “We have a good standing Nature Range here if you want to play around and meet some folks.”

“Thanks, but...right now I’m just too keyed up for that. You know me. When I get to worrying over something, I can’t think about anything else. So, see you later.” She walked carefully over to an out-of-the-way corner, lowered her head, and powered down.

Myla sighed, then Sophie came up and Fused with her. Bystanders would have found the process a little hard to watch, given their increasingly technorganic bodies, so they tended to do so privately. Sooner or later the Integration would decide to complete itself, and they’d be like the rest of Intie-kind. *:Well, Soph, this made today more interesting.:*

:You said it,: Sophie agreed. *:I think this calls for a Milkbottle chocolate-dipped ice cream cone. With sprinkles.:*

Before they left, they plugged Dashie in to the RIDEsafe recharge socket, then headed for Uplift’s most popular ice cream stand.

The Gilmore Building Penthouse, Nextus

Joe Steader frowned, peering at his desk comm. “Well, there’s a thing.”

Julius looked up from licking the back of his huge paw. “Can you be a little more fuckin’ specific, Joe?”

“Just heard from Myla Wilson. You remember her, she used to be one of Quinnie’s bodyguards, now works for Zane Brubeck. Says hi, by the way. It turns out her old RIDE partner from back then just showed up on her doorstep, after being on ice for fourteen years.” His frown deepened. “Quinnie had bankrolled Myla joining Materiel Recovery, so the RIDE went back to the bodyguard agency. They *told* me she’d been reassigned...”

“So, either they’re fuckin’ lying liars who lie, or it’s just one of those ‘cratic cock-ups that happen in Nextus every other day.” Julius chuffed. “Or anywhere in between.”

“I really should have followed up better, but with all the changes in personnel that happened then, and it was right when Steader Ent was releasing all those Pixar films...*and* I was, y’know, in that perpetual drunken haze. I guess it got lost in the shuffle.” Joe sighed. “Hello, guilt-trip.”

“Bah. Don’t guilt yourself, man. Just fix it.” He went back to licking his forepaw.

Joe nodded. “That’s the idea. Anyway, Myla had a partner, and her partner also had a RIDE. They *were* reassigned, as we brought in a new pair of partners to replace both Fuser pairs. But I never followed up on them either.”

Julius’s eyes flickered. “Well, I’m getting a start on that for ya, Joe. Pulling up the personnel records and shit. Pow, pow, pow.”

A hardlight screen popped up in front of Joe. The first record was Myla’s, who had been in her early twenties at the time. Joe scanned it quickly and went on to

Dashie's, snorting.

"I can barely look at this at this 'equipment record' bullshit," Julius added. "Feh. They wouldn't even let her take the pony home at the end of her shift."

The faux-Luna's record was only slightly more descriptive. She and her partner, Marilyn Bodett, had managed to avoid the security agency's requirements by finding a loophole in her contract (part of the Bureaucratic Game most Nextusites played) and took Lu home with her—then bought her out and taken her away after the assignment with Quinoa had ended. As for the security agency itself, the company had changed hands a few times over fourteen years before finally dissolving as Brubeck Mining hired away all its remaining personnel to make up part of the expeditionary fleet. That dissolution was apparently what had led to Dashie's rediscovery, reactivation, and release, as the auction house that had bought the agency's remaining assets ran a pre-sale inventory on what was left behind.

"So, where do we start, Joe? They could be anywhere," Julius said.

"Hmm." Joe rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Where've you looked already?"

"Bein' that Bodett was in the security field, and Brubeck was hiring every fuckin' rent-a-cop he could find, I cross-reffed all the folks we've got on Cerb for a lark. Of course it can't be that fuckin' easy," Julius snorted. "Was worth a try."

"Those ponies are pretty rare, though, considering. There can't be a half dozen of those Luna frames left out there. If I were one of them I woulda' gotten installed in a new DE post-fuckin'-haste and chucked the old one in the Briny Deep."

"They might have changed careers. Nextus public records search, maybe? Nextus being Nextus, they have to have her employment records. Whose paychecks were they taking her tax withholdings out of?" Joe grimaced. "Trust me when I say they take taxes *very* seriously. I paid all of mine, and they *still* arrested me."

Julius facepawed. "Joe, if we're gonna get this info faster than next century, if I'm reading this Public Access Manual right, we'll need to go down to the Nextus Internal Revenue Administration and make the FOIA request *in fucking person*. Damn."

Joe cracked his knuckles. "It's okay, Jules. I've been gafiated for a while, but I played this Game for a *very* long time. Let's go shake some trees and see what falls out."

The drive from the Gilmore Building to Admin Plaza took about a half hour along the aerial skimmer highways. In the old days, they might have made it in ten minutes, but then, the old days came with special high-priority high-speed lanes for military vehicles, which had been phased out at the end of the war. (And Julius wasn't exactly active-duty military *anymore*, regardless. Well, unless you counted the work they were doing getting the expeditionary fleet together. Which nobody even knew about down here, so it wasn't like it mattered anyway.)

"Still can't get over how much all this shit's changed," Julius mused as they headed downtown. "It's all so fuckin'...*civilian* an' shit."

"Stuff usually is, when there isn't a war on," Joe observed. "This is what the peace that we fought for looks like."

"Yeah...I know. And I'm pretty fuckin' glad it's here, all in all. I just sorta thought I'd be able to get used to it all gradual-like. Instead a' havin' thirty fuckin' years of it dropped on my head all at once."

Joe nodded. "Yeah, I hear ya buddy. For what it's worth, I wish you'd had that chance, too."

Julius sneezed—or at least produced the sound effect of doing so, given that he was in skimmer form at the moment and watching Joe from the eye display on his dashboard. “Meh. I shouldn’t dwell on it. I’m chuffed as hell to be here *now*, considering the alternative.”

“I’m pretty darned happy about it myself.” Joe pointed. “There, take that exit. That should take us right into Admin Plaza.”

The exit led into a street, and the street led into a geometric arrangement of avenues and buildings that was so regular it looked more than a little like some CGI construction from VR brought into real life. The city offices were laid out in rings, with the main polis administration building at the center, with the various Bureaus arranged in Tiers based on their importance to the running of the polis. Their destination was one of the closer buildings in the first ring out from the center.

The Nextus Internal Revenue Administration Building had the utilitarian bare concrete architecture that was common in the city’s government buildings (with a few significant exceptions). It was considered a First Tier Bureau, considering that without tax revenues there would be no polity services. There was one more marked Citizen Auditing—where residents could see how the polity was spending their money. From the interior they could see, it was a very comfortable waiting room. There was a second, less welcoming entrance marked All Other Inquiries nearby that led down a long, stark white, unfriendly hallway with a single frosted-glass door halfway down.

“So I guess we start there, huh?” Julius said.

“That’s the plan. Though this *might* take a while.” Joe grinned. “I’m really looking forward to it. I can’t remember the last time I took a serious turn at the Game. Wonder if I’ve still got it?”

“This thing is all yours, Joe. Now, get the hell off so I can use this Shell Mode.”

“Touchy touchy.” Joe swung his leg over the saddle and stepped down and back so Julius could change.

The “shell mode” for RIDEs was still very new. Any DE frame that had it no longer required a RIDE to Fuse with a human in order to get thumbs. It was just out of beta, and Donizetti RIDEworks had donated the technology to the planetary public domain. That it had come from *the* most exclusive RIDE designer on the planet had surprised everyone, especially the RIDEs themselves.

After using it for just over a year, Julius was used to it. He was a bit larger than Joe—a big, muscular jaguar-man walking down the street. “So, what? We have to pick up the forms ourselves? They won’t let me download them.”

“That’s just how the Game is played, face-to-face where practical. I’ll fill you in on it as we go along. Right now, I want to make a start. C’mon.” He led the way through the double doors, into the waiting room. The place was laid out like any administrative office or bank lobby, with multiple teller-style windows. A single roped-off line extended back towards the front doors. There were a couple dozen people waiting, but the tellers didn’t look like they were doing much actual work. Those in line were studiously working on the tablets they held. A rabbit-eared woman smiled and looked down the hall.

The glass door they had just passed opened. The office worker who came out pointed at the rabbit-eared woman in the middle of the line, then motioned with her finger to come with her. The citizen smiled and left her spot, the door quickly closing behind them both. Everyone else focused more intensely on the e-paper tablets in front

of them.

“Dafuq was that about?” Julius asked.

“You only have to deal with the line if you don’t find the right shortcuts. As you might imagine reading comprehension and critical thinking skills are extremely important here. We don’t need to get in line yet. Grab a tablet and see what today’s Procedure is. Once we pass it we can get the forms we need, then on to the next step.”

“Okay...” Julius walked over to a stand along the wall across from the windows, filled with the cheap and reusable media tablets that mostly replaced paper in the modern bureaucracy. He grabbed two of them and came back to Joe, handing one over to him while peering at the other himself.

“Dafuq?” Julius said, staring at the screen. It was covered from top to bottom with blanks in which to enter information, and the size of the scroll bar handle suggested it went on for several screens. “Um. What is this shit, Joe? Whoever designed this form-to-get-the-fucking-form was either a sadist or an M.C. Escher otaku. Look at this goddamned layout! This form’d take me hours to fill out in fast-time—but I can’t even fuckin’ download it.”

“Just as well. Any effort you put into it would be a waste of time. It’s not really *meant* to be filled out—at least, not in its entirety.”

Julius stared at him. “Dafuq?”

“C’mon, let’s go somewhere I can explain. Outside, maybe. There are quiet rooms for filling out paperwork just up that hall, but I prefer talking out loud to having to use subvocal comms.” Joe headed for the entrance, and Julius shrugged and followed him after a moment.

It only took a moment of looking around to settle upon a picnic table made from the same gray concrete as the exteriors of the buildings. It was undoubtedly used by some of the workers during their lunch, but it was empty at the moment since it wasn’t a meal hour.

Joe took a seat, setting his tablet down in front of him. Then he reached into a breast pocket and pulled out a battered old Moleskine notebook and a ballpoint pen. “Been a while since I’ve had any need for this.” He licked a finger and flipped through pages filled with his handwriting, then tapped an icon on the tablet.

“What’re you doing?” Julius asked.

“Calling up the Nextus Municipal Code—or as we Gamesters call it, the Rulebook.” The tablet filled with black-on-grey fine print. Joe nodded, then tapped the page-turn icon several times. “Okay, let’s see...” He ran his finger down the page, counting rows under his breath, and then tapped a word. Nothing happened. “...no? Oh, right, it changes by date and time.” He glanced at his wrist chronometer, then flipped back two pages and counted down rows again.

Julius crossed his arms. “So are you gonna fuckin’ stop bein’ all mysterious and explain shit, or am I gonna hafta piddle in your trouser drawer when we get home?”

Joe raised an eyebrow. “I didn’t think you *could* piddle.”

“I can fuckin’ *virtually* piddle.”

“In my virtual trouser drawer?” Joe chuckled. “All right, I’ll try to explain. The Game plays out at several layers. On the basic layer, we *could* actually fill out that form. Or at least the *required* spaces on that form, of which there are actually fewer than it looks like. The form is actually several forms mashed up together, and you fill out different bits of it for different purposes. Or we could use a Standard Abeyance, which is

kind of a rules forfeit that would skip the form-filing. Either way, we wouldn't get much useful information out of that. Maybe find out the last place she worked. Or somewhere she worked several years ago. Something that might maybe give us a clue where to look for more information, but not help us get an *immediate* line on her."

"Then why make it so fuckin' complicated?"

"Because there has to be something to find loopholes in, for the loophole-finding to matter. On the next level up, we have the Rulebook. This is where all the bylaws and stuff Nextus runs on are filed. They shuffle them all around every so often, just to keep it challenging, and there are gigabytes of intentional obfuscation, but with a few hours of fast-time reading, you could probably learn the rules well enough to read the laws and find the loopholes there. You can download the basic text online."

"Uh-huh. So why'm I makin' out from your tone of voice *that's* not the best way I could be spending my next few fast-time hours either?"

Joe chuckled. "Because there's another level up from that. A loophole *in* the loopholes, so to speak. *This* version of the Rulebook can only be found in these tablets, and it's DRM-protected pretty well, so RIDEs and Inties have to read it at more or less the same speed as humans do. No unfair advantages." Joe glanced back at the tablet and counted down rows again, then counted words in a row and tapped a specific word. The screen flickered and changed.

Instead of all-black text, now various words and passages appeared in different colors, or highlighted in different colors. Some words were bold or italic or underlined as well.

Julius sneezed. "Dafuq is *this*?"

Joe grinned. "As the saying goes, welcome to the next level. This is the *highest* level of the game."

"What does it mean?"

"It's a sort of a puzzle, really." Joe flipped to the first blank page of the Moleskine and picked up his pen. "You could call it a kind of hidden index, a way of finding the specific sections of the rules you need without having to spend hours searching through obfuscation. There are also some special hidden sections that you can *only* get to this way, and they conceal some of the best loopholes of all."

Julius's eyes narrowed as he peered at it. "So how do you understand it?"

"Just as they shuffle the sections of the text around, they also change the highlighting schema of this secret overlay from time to time. But it's always internally consistent. Red text or yellow highlighting or italics might mean something different in each revision, but they always mean the *same* thing all the way through. And there are only a limited number of things they *can* mean. It's just a matter of figuring out what the different styles map to each time—kind of like one of those codebreaking puzzles they used to put in newspapers. It's a favorite Gamester trick to become familiar with specific sections of the text, so knowing how those sections are laid out can help you suss out the changes."

Joe tapped the "search" icon and typed "Gilmore". "My 'key' sections are the Gilmore Building's residential regulations—I had to consult them a whole lot anyway given that I lived there, so they were easy enough to memorize. Ah, here we go." The screen now had "The Gilmore Building" in header font across the top. Joe picked up the ballpoint pen and played thoughtfully with the clicker. "Give me a few minutes to work this out, and I should be able to cut through nearly all the red tape."

Julius sneezed again, twice. “Dafuq is all this nested puzzle-box bureaucracy bullshit? It wasn’t like this during the War!”

“They *suspended* the Game during the War to make everything as efficient as possible, bro.”

“And this is...*fun* to you? I’m Nextus built and booted, but I just...what the fuck, man? This is worse than that ‘Manliness’ bullshit up north! It’s worse than those fetch quests in *World of Warcraft*! What if it’s a life-or-death situation?”

“Then no Game rules apply. In fact, we do the reverse, like we did during the War. The Bureaus not part of the Game—like NextusMed—are *the* most efficient on the planet. And even for the ones that are, you can easily bypass the Game if you really need to. Just tap the Standard Abeyance icon on their procedure forms to simplify everything. Or get a Permanent Abeyance by going to a Notary and swear an affidavit. Costs one *mu*. That’s like a True Nordsman card for bureaucracy, but you don’t need to ‘win’ it.”

Julius snorted. “Can’t we fuckin’ do that now? Who has *time* to do any of this shit? What about poor people?”

“The days are thirty hours long and everyone gets BT as part of their workday. That’s Bureau Time, for taking care of these things. Plus if you successfully uncover the loopholes and find the most efficient way through the red tape, the polity gives you bonus *mu* in the form of tax rebates, challenge coins, or other benefits. You can actually make a decent living just playing if you want to act as a Surrogate for people who don’t want to bother even with BT, but still want some of those benefits. Some employers—Steadier Ent for one—even offer limited Surrogate access as part of their employee benefits package. There’s contingencies for all kinds of players. If you have an Abeyance you don’t get any bennies, but you still have a few hours a day of BT to do what you want with. It’s a trade-off. Anyway, gimme a few minutes, okay? It’s been a while since I did this, but I think it should come back pretty quickly.”

Julius rolled his eyes. “All right, fine. I’ll just play fuckin’ Minesweeper or something, I guess.”

“That’s the ticket.” Joe peered at the tablet, and started making notes in the Moleskine. He paged forward, made more notes, then paged back and forth a couple of times. “Hmm.” He read on, chewing thoughtfully on the end of the pen. “Okay...so if italics mean *that*, it means bold must mean...ahhhh.” Julius rolled his eyes expressively, but didn’t say anything to break Joe’s concentration.

Finally, Joe looked up. “Okay, I think I’ve got it. Look.” He tapped a word in green, and the screen changed to an alphabetical list of Nextus city streets. He scrolled down, tapped a street name in blue. It changed to a map, and Joe ran his finger along the street until he found a building with a purple dot on it, and tapped that, then in the business listing that appeared tapped on the “More” icon at the bottom, then scrolled down and tapped on a paragraph highlighted in yellow. The screen flickered and brought up a new section of text in black and white, with no highlighting. “This is one of those hidden sections I was mentioning. Let me see...”

“So what’s the fuckin’ word?” Julius asked.

“Time for some old-fashioned Nextus bureaucracy-busting legwork. It says here we’ll need a Pearson Writing Instruments Model B fountain e-pen that’s only sold at the Writers’ Emporium on at 369 West Closson Street.”

Julius’s eyes were crossing. “Uh...is there more? There has to be more than that.”

Joe nodded. “There’s also a Stationery Store at 963 *East Closson Street* that sells the Model C, *not* the one we need. So we need to make sure we get the right pen. But *that* store sells the Pantone Green 2260U e-ink we need.”

Julius sneezed. “I don’t fuckin’ get it. Back in the day, you told me I was fuckin’ made for paperwork...so how is it you’re better at this shit than I am?”

Joe grinned. “I seem to recall I told you they were going to have to invent new kinds of bureaucracy just to keep up. Well, guess what? They did.” He gave Julius’s head a friendly pat. “You just need a little practice is all. Like I said back in Donizetti’s office, this is *my* version of Nature Range.”

“So why doesn’t Mr. Joe Fuckin’ Mega-Rich-And-Powerful Steader have one a’ them Permanent Abeyance whatsits? Or an army of Surrogates to deal with this crap?”

Joe’s grin faded to a wistful smile. “Well...actually, back *after* the day, I welcomed the distraction. I kind of needed something to do with all the time left over from killing my liver, and time I spent dealing with bureaucracy was time I didn’t have to spend thinking about...other things.”

“Oh.” Julius gave the back of his handpaw a quick composure lick or two, then looked over at Joe. “Well, then, let’s go put your fuckin’ non-liver-killing coping mechanism to some good use an’ shit. Clearly, I got some catching up to do.”

Joe chuckled. “Indeed. Let’s go hunt the deadly Red Tapebeast.”

“Try not to get any fuckin’ papercuts, I hear they’re deadly.”

“Right. You gotta use a Number 7 band-aid for papercuts, and those only work with Type G antiseptic.”

“Oh, *now* you’re yanking my fuckin’ chain.”

Joe raised an eyebrow. “*Am* I? Come on, let’s go do some pen and ink shopping. I know those stores. You never know what else you’ll find in them, either.”

“And while we’re at it, how dafuq do you *buy* e-ink? There ain’t no such thing! It’s all fuckin’ pixels on a screen! It’s like getting sent to buy fuckin’ prop wash or something.”

“When you buy e-ink, you’re basically just authorizing the pen to use that color on official forms. Nothing else will work. I remember once they wanted just a #2 pencil.” Joe shrugged. “Effectively, it’s really just shorthand for buying the right crypto signatures to sign your digital documentation with, but couching it in terms like ‘e-ink’ is less confusing to non-geeks. It’s about maintaining authenticity.”

“What fucking ever. Let’s just go buy crap.” Julius converted to skimmer mode.

After returning to the NIRA waiting room, Joe took the pen and “dipped” it in the e-inkwell. The indicator on the pen turned the same color. “Now, Jules, watch this.” Joe took the tablet and put the tip of the pen in a slot in the upper left corner of the screen. The Escher-esque grid lines requiring a bewildering amount of identification numbers, next-of-kin information, and more nonsensical “required” information, faded into the background, leaving only six remaining areas to fill out. “And that, my brother, is what is *actually* required. Filling it out as-is and then the approval process would’ve taken *much* longer than getting the right crypto. Not to mention not giving as useful results.” He took two minutes to check the right checkboxes, add his signature in two places, and write the name of Marilyn Bodett and her NextusID number from her employee file. “Pow, pow, pow. Done. Sent.”

The tablet’s screen immediately blinked a big green *SUBMISSION ACCEPTED!*

Then the frosted glass door down the hall opened and the same office worker from earlier motioned for Joe to join her.

“Huh,” Julius said, nonplussed. “Isn’t that the shit.”

“Now, you could get results *almost* as good just from the rules text, if you spent hours learning them. Some RIDEs make out pretty well that way. And the overlay isn’t useful for everything. There’s still a lot of loophole-finding the long way necessary. But when it works, it’s pretty handy.”

“And when it doesn’t? It can’t work all the time.”

Joe headed for the open door, Julius following. “Yeah. It does happen. Then it’s BUCU. Like FUBAR. It’s a ‘Bureaucratic Cock-Up’. Gamester lingo. Fortunately that’s *not* what we have here.”

“Follow me, gentlemen,” the woman at the door said. She wore a red pantsuit from the mid-1980s, complete with shoulder pads, and the appropriate big hair look. She led them into an office space straight out of a salaryman’s worst nightmare. A regular grid of tiny gray-on-gray cubicles, inside of which there was a frustrated citizen and a bored-looking civil servant.

“This is some soul-sucking bullshit right here,” Julius said.

“Fortunately, my regular cube isn’t in this part of the building,” the tall woman said. She led them to another set of double doors. These doors weren’t the plain, unornamented All Other Inquiries versions from outside. They were more like the warm, inviting type, a masterpiece of early twentieth century art-deco and moderne. Through the doors, the workspace continued the theme. “Welcome to the Inner Office.”

The contrast could not be more stark. It was still an office cube farm, but the cubicles were practically offices and the atmosphere was far more relaxed and personalized. A fox Integrate wearing a green Alohan shirt leaned back in his chair as they came in, bare feet on his desk. His cube was full of *Zootopia* merchandise.

“Hey, Robbie, is that Joe Steader and Julius?” he said.

“The two and fuckin’ only,” Julius said, trying not to stammer. He looked around at the large room and whistled, impressed. “Inner Office, huh? This place is fuckin’ gorgeous. We should redo the Nuevo San place like this, Joe. It’s so...shiny and chrome.”

“Hey,” Joe said. “*The Fantastic Mr. Fox*, wasn’t it?”

The fox Integrate gawked. “Y-you remember me, sir? I was only an intern.”

“I remember *all* my data divers. Especially the ones who cracked something so apropos. Though I see you’re going in for a *different* fox character these days.” Joe grinned. “Glad to see you’re doing so well for yourself. You definitely moved up in the world.”

“Hey, I get to help people. I love my job,” the fox said. “Now I’m a bit jealous of Robbie because she gets to help out my old boss.” He stuck his foxy tongue out at his coworker.

“Sucks to be you, Abiso.” Robbie stuck hers right back. There was no malice in either of their voices. It was just banter between people who knew each other well. She led them to a very large cubicle whose walls were plastered with Noir movie posters: *Key Largo*, *D.O.A.*, and *Double Indemnity* were the most prominent. There was another one for the *Goldman and Cattano Mysteries*, the popular detective noir series from Hellir Enclave. A replica of the eponymous falcon from *The Maltese Falcon* sat in a place of honor next to busts of Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall. All in all, the workspace looked very lived-in. Almost a second home.

“Joe Steader himself! In *my* cube!” The nameplate on the woman’s desk read Robbie Parr. “It’s been a dog’s age since you’ve been in the Game.”

“Kind of lost my taste for it for a while, after I was arrested for tax evasion,” Joe said. “A completely trumped-up charge, so I didn’t even get the fun of *actually* evading any taxes. It still stings a little.”

“Even I get off my game sometimes, Mr. Steader. I put in for an Abeyance for a full *week*, once. Happens to everyone. Though your circumstances were rather...unique. Now, your form says you need some current information on one Marilyn Bodett, a former employee of yours. Let’s see what we can find, shall we?”

“Fuckin’ A,” Julius said. “Pardon my French.”

“You’re excused,” Parr said primly. A hardlight screen came up between them. “Looks like her current residence is in Longmire, Traverse Tunnel. One of those charming homes overlooking the long lakes they have in there, no doubt. Here’s the full address. She’s still registered as part of the Game, so she keeps that information current.” Parr picked the information off her screen and tossed it in Julius’s direction.

“Got it. Hope she’s not one a’ them fuckin’ *Firefly* fans.”

Joe nodded. “Thank you, Ms. Parr. You’ve done an *incredible* job.”

“I see what you did there, Mr. Steader. And you’re not the first in this office to make *that* particular joke.”

“Me, me! It was me first!” Abiso said from his next-door cubicle, waving both arms.

Robbie Parr laughed. “Anyway, glad to see you back in the Game, Mr. Steader. Maybe you can convince your RIDE friend to play, too.” She extended her hand.

Joe shook it. “The thought *has* crossed my mind.” He looked sideways at Julius.

“I’ll fuckin’ think about it,” Julius said. “All this shit is new to me. Still not sure how I feel about it. I come from a simpler time when all we had to worry about was which bullet had our fuckin’ name on it.” He sneezed. “And *straightforward* paperwork. Not all this airy-fairy make-work, no offense.”

“Follow the blue arrows to the exit. Hope to see you again!” Abiso said. “Hopefully I’ll get assigned to you next time.”

As they strolled out, Joe composed a text to Myla, attaching the address they’d gotten. :*There you go, Myla. Hope things go well. Have them get in touch with me when you see them, too.*:

:*Will do, Joe! Thanks,*: Myla replied.

“So, what now? Home again?”

“We should probably take the Pan-Am to Uplift tonight, check in on Dashie and Lu and her partner in person tomorrow. But there’s no hurry right now. Might as well show you a little more of the Game, now I’m playing again and we’re at Admin Plaza anyway. I’d forgotten how fun it can be.” Joe grinned. “Want to go apply for a license for something?”

“A license for what?”

“I dunno, anything. Babysitting, maybe? You’d make a great babysitter.”

“Are you off your fuckin’ alleged nut even more than usual?”

“Okay, maybe not babysitting. Still...I’m in the mood for getting you a license for *something*. We’ll figure out *what* along the way.”

Julius rolled his eyes. “Be still my beating central coolant fuckin’ pump. All right, fine. Let’s go do this thing.”

“Great. Let’s head back to that picnic table. I’ve got some more reading to do.”
Exit Joe Steader, followed by a grumbling jaguar.

An hour or so of enjoying ice cream and cruising aimlessly around Fused had restored a good deal of composure and equanimity by the time Myla and Sophie received Joe’s message. Myla sent her quick response, then peered thoughtfully at the file on her augmented-reality display. “So, what do you think—should we comm ahead?”

“Hmm. Dunno.” Sophie showed an animated emoticon on Myla’s head-up display, of a super-deformed fennec head with a thought balloon. “Seems like you’re a lot different now from last time you saw this Lu and Marilyn. They might not even know who you are, from the comm. Might take some explaining, and maybe easier to do that in person where they can get the full effect of our weirdness. ‘Sides, Longmire’s just a few minutes away, so if we get there and they’re not at home, it’s not like we wasted much time.”

Myla nodded. “Okay, let’s cruise that way.” Luckily, they were already on the side of Uplift that faced the Eastern Range with its immense tunnel, so getting on the road and leaving the dome was the work of just a couple of minutes. Before long, they were eastbound on the short stretch of open road between the dome and the tunnel.

“Twenty clicks to Longmire!” Sophie said cheerfully. “We’ll be there before you know it.”

“Great.” Myla peered at the file again. “What’s she doing here, anyway?”

“Doesn’t seem to say. I guess we ask her when we get there.”

The Traverse Tunnel was two kilometers wide at the bottom, and one high at the peak of the half-circle. Traffic from the coast flew through the center, while homes and businesses tended to be put in places unlikely to be under a falling skimmer. The tunnel floor was largely reserved for parks, lakes, streams, and other recreational areas, with emergency hardlight field emitters spaced closely enough to shield any area from sudden impacts if the need arose.

Marilyn Bodett’s home was situated on a platform extending out from the wall fifty meters above the tunnel floor, so the overhead slope wasn’t too steep. It was a Tudor-style house, surrounded by well-maintained gardens.

Myla and Sophie de-Fused at the front gates. There was an intercom embedded into the post. “Well, here goes,” Myla said, hitting the buzzer.

“Hail fellow well met!” a cheerful female voice said. “How mightest we helpst thou? Uh—I mean, what can we do for you?”

:I see Lu still has that speech filter,: Myla sent to Sophie. She looked into what seemed like a camera. “Hello! I look rather different, but it’s Myla Wilson. Right here is my other half, Sophie.”

“Verily? Myla? Forsooth! It hath been forever and a day! Er...I mean, it’s been a while! Uh...Lu and I doth not be—uh, we’re not at home, but if you head about five clicks east up the tunnel, we’re on the job there. Come on up.”

“We can wait until your shift is over, but if it’s not a problem we’ll be right there.”

“Nay, nay, please, join us. We hath no such thing as a regular shift, so we can take time at need. Meet us at Lou Diamond Phillips Park.”

“We’ll be right there, Marilyn,” Myla said, closing the connection. “Should we Fuse again or use skimmer?”

Sophie swallowed. “Uh...honestly, I don’t think skimmer is a good idea anymore.

The parts just don't match up very well. And I tend to leak. And *stink*. I'm just too much meat anymore. Uh, no offense."

They knew it would happen sooner or later. There'd be a point where they just *couldn't* de-Fuse, and that would be that.

Myla sighed. "I guess we'll just have to borrow Zane and Terry's old skimmer from here on out. All right, let's go, partner." She stepped forward to Sophie and held out her arms, and with a rattle of metal and a squelch of flesh they were a humanoid fennec again.

Longmire continued with the tunnel as it moved east, with houses and business on shelves along the walls and ceiling and more parkland and greenery on the floor. Before too long, they got to the specified park, named for one of the actors from the old book and TV show franchise from which the settlement took its name. As they arrived, they noticed some fairly ominous dark storm clouds roiling near the ceiling.

Sophie tilted their head. "What's all this, then?"

That there *were* clouds wasn't unexpected—the tunnel was large enough to support its own weather systems. In fact, they were largely generated artificially, as a more naturalistic way of keeping the greenery watered than just using sprinkler systems, and making the citizenry feel less like they lived underground. But the storms were usually scheduled for the wee early morning hours, when few people would be out and about—not the middle of the afternoon.

"Hark! Look out below!" The distant yell was almost drowned out by thunder as lightning flickered between the clouds, and the downpour began. The rain fell in torrents, and Myla and Sophie were drenched before they could even think to raise a hardlight umbrella. "By God's precious heart! *Work right*, thou thrice-demon-cursed piece of excrement!"

Myla had been about to check the local yelp to see if this was some kind of entertainment, but the frustrated shout out of the sky indicated differently. Sophie popped the hardlight umbrella and started a dry-out cycle. "Uh, hello up there! I guess this is your job, then? Making rain? Something?"

A dark form emerged from the dark clouds and drifted slowly down toward them. "Arrrrgh! We art verily sorry about this. We meant not to invite thee to get drenched. The storm simply...came out of nowhere right hence we bespoke thee. I doth blame the low bidder's replacement parts." As they dropped below the clouds, the Fused alicorn RIDE came more clearly into view. She was clearly humanoid in form, and seemed patterned after the general color scheme of Luna from the old cartoon, but was much larger than the old line had been—probably at least mid-size horse-sized in Walker mode, rather than the largish pony Luna would have been.

:That's definitely not her original frame,: Sophie said. *:I don't think it's a modded one, either. Rhianna could probably tell us what, exactly.:*

:Rhianna wouldn't be able to resist telling us what, exactly,: Myla said. *:That's what she does. "Oh, a such-and-such XYZ model so-and-so, very nice." That's how she opens any conversation with new people.:*

"Now, to what doth we owe the pleasure?" Lu asked.

"Well, to start with the broad issue...Dashie showed up at my office today. After fourteen years of shut down, tossed in a closet. And she's understandably upset."

The equine Fuser blinked. "Zounds! Art thou truly speaking sooth? She was shut down all this time?"

“Completely true,” Sophie added. She put on the friendliest expression she could muster. “I’m Sophie, by the way. Nice to meet you two.”

“I’m Marilyn, and this is Lu, but I supposeth thou—*you* probably knew that already.” The alicorn gave her head an equine toss. “We make the weather around here. It’s what pegasi do, after all. Or at least, we maintainest—*maintain* the weather systems. And it doth be—it *is* a job where we don’t usually have to speak much to other people. Which is good, because these infectious speech patterns of my partner’s might be endearing, but they’re also a little awkward with outsiders.”

“You’d only picked up a little by the time I joined the MRS, Mari. Dashie and I never quite got along as well as you and Lu. I’m glad to see you’re still together. When it comes to Dashie, though, I screwed up. So we’re trying to make it right.”

“We thought finding you two was a step in that direction,” Sophie added.

“This doth be a tragedy indeed,” Lu opined. “Now *I’m* feeling bad I never sought her out myself. I would send yon digital scrolls anon, but had assumed that she simply never felt it meet to respond.”

“We thought she’d been reassigned to some other partner elsewhere. And we quit the agency the same time you did, so never had the chance to follow up.” Marilyn’s speech pattern was coming back toward normal the more she spoke. “I wonder if it was Foster’s doing. Our old supe never did like the ponies much, you know.”

“Verily, ‘twas a boon that my partner found the means to take me with her when she left,” Lu added. “I know not what I should have done, had I been left.”

“That is a *wonderful* frame you have there,” Myla said. “I have a friend who could tell exactly what it is off the cuff. I’d like to know more about that. I want to give Dashie an upgrade. I owe it to her. And I don’t think she’d be satisfied with modding what she has.”

“That old body was *terrible*,” Lu agreed. “The squall seems over. An thou wish, we could land and I could display this new shell more fully.”

“Sure, why not.” They drifted down toward the ground and settled on one of the concreted picnic areas—the greenery being too squishy to bear a RIDE’s weight well just now. As they landed, the alicorn unfolded from around her partner and resumed her four-legged Walker form. She appeared to be a larger, less-cartoony version of the character Luna. She had the same blue-black coat, flowing mane and tail, and pegasus wings, but they looked more like a real horse’s mane or bird’s feathers might—not the floaty night-sky clouds from the cartoon. And she did have a version of the dark-cloud-and-moon “cutie mark” from the cartoon on her flank, though it looked more like a natural patch of dark and white hair than the cartoon emblem. Marilyn was a tall, slim woman with similarly long, dark hair, and a small dark horn button in the middle of her forehead.

“Very nice,” Myla said. “Where’d you get it, if I might ask? And how?”

“It doth be a basic Kamen RIDEworks pega-corn mythical shell with a custom re-skin,” Lu said. “Despite how it appears, it is actually nothing fancy underneath.”

“It was right when mythicals were going out of fashion,” Marilyn said. “Kamen was liquidating unneeded shells to make room for new lines, and we got a deal. They even threw in the re-skin for free.”

“Forsooth, it took some adjusting,” Lu said. “But it was a sacrifice in a worthy cause. I was never thrilled that my old body was made to be so hard on my partner’s. We threw it into the recycler bin post haste. Even Kamen didn’t desire it.”

Marilyn cocked her head. "But what about you, Myla? And your partner? You do look a little...odd, if I might say so."

"Well, to be perfectly honest, we're about halfway to Integrating. It's not going how it normally goes..." Myla said.

"...for some very complex reasons. Long story," Sophie finished.

"To be honest, it's gotten to where it looks kind of gross when we un-Fuse or re-Fuse, so we don't usually do it with other people around anymore," Myla said. "And also, I got kind of an...unexpected biosculpt as part of the process that completely changed my build, so I'd look pretty different from you remember un-Fused, too...like she said, long story. Probably saved my life, though. So it's hard to be upset."

"I'm almost curious enough to ask you to de-Fuse anyway," Marilyn said. "But I'll respect your judgment in the matter."

"Trust us. Just...trust us," Sophie said.

Lu glanced up toward the ceiling, where the dark clouds had largely dissipated. "Hark! Yon tempest hath abated. Mayhap we should resume our labors and see if we can fix what ails the storm generator anon."

Marilyn nodded. "I do believe you speak aright. Myla, Sophie, we will stop by your office tomorrow, when we have the time."

Myla nodded. "It was nice to see you both again after fourteen years. I know we barely knew one another's names back then..."

"Young Quinoa was a handful," Marilyn said. "Between her shenanigans and all the Surrogate BT I was doing for the extra *mu*, I suppose you and I didn't have a chance to hang out. Barely had a friendly word between us."

"Verily," Lu agreed, with feeling.

"No reason you couldn't stop by our place in Uplift more often now. We'd be happy to see more of you," Sophie said.

Myla nodded. "Oh, by the way, Joe Steader also sends his regards and asks you get back in touch with him. Think he might be feeling guilty *he* never checked back in on you or Dashie either."

"I remember him being rather deeply in his cups at the time. Has that changed?" Marilyn said.

"Oh yeah. *Oh* yeah," Sophie said. "You would not believe it."

"But I think we'll let him fill you in on that himself," Myla said. "Anyway, it's been good seeing you. And...oh." She considered. "If you're happy with your job here, that's great...but if you'd be interested in getting back into security work, Brubeck's still got some openings on an upcoming project. Pays well, and will have some very...interesting aspects to it. Interesting in a *good* way, not the old Chinese sense."

Marilyn raised an eyebrow. "I'll not pretend that hath no appeal, but we'll have to think it over. Perhaps we'll talk more about it when we come visit Dashie."

"Fair enough. We'll just let you get back to it, then."

"Fare thee well! We shall meet again anon," Lu promised, stepping up to her partner, rearing back, and Fusing up. A moment later, a winged equine Fuser boosted up for the ceiling again.

"I guess that's that," Myla said. "Let's head home."

June 12, 158 A.L.

Myla and Sophie got into the office the next day to find Dashie just as they'd left her, with no sign she'd moved or even powered back up in the interim. Sophie peered thoughtfully at her. "I don't think she's set a timer. She's just shut herself down until anyone else feels like waking her back up."

Which of course made Myla feel even worse when she thought about it. Shutting herself down so completely like that showed a *lot* of trust. *I may be the only person she would trust in the entire world. And I didn't even think about her for fourteen years. I have to do better.*

"Well, I'm no Pinkie Pie, but send her a wake-up ping and we'll get this party started."

A moment later, the small blue pegasus opened her eyes. "Myla, I had the weirdest dream. You'd left and I'd been shut down for fourteen years, and...and...oh, *cra...crayons.*"

"Well, Dashie, remember I said I'd get the ball rolling?" Myla smiled.

"Well, she's rolling," Sophie said. "We're expecting company very soon."

"Company, huh?" Dashie said. "Anyone I know?" She considered. "Is anyone else I know even still around?"

"I don't think you'll be disappointed. Our first guests should be here any time." Myla's desk comm pinged, and she tapped a button. "Frieda, go ahead and send them in."

On cue, Joe Steader and Julius walked in the office door, bickering amiably.

"I still don't know what the fuck I'm s'posta do with a fucking *beekeeping license.*"

"I dunno, Jules...keep fucking bees?"

"Hey! I'll have you know I have never fucked *one single bee* in my entire fuckin' life. Despite any and all rumors to the fucking contrary."

"Not even a half a bee?"

"Yeah, you know what? Fuck *you*," Julius said, cheerfully. "Sideways."

Joe chuckled. "Classy. Hey, everyone."

Myla waved. "Hey, Joe, Jules. Sounds like you had a wonderful time in the Game."

"*One* of us did," Julius said, baring his teeth a little. "Fuckin' beekeeping."

"It was next after babysitting in alphabetical order, and you didn't want to do babysitting..."

"Yeah? What about bartending? Bartending's between babysitting and beekeeping. I could shake a mean fuckin' martini."

"There aren't any bartending licenses up for another three months. Besides, I'm not sure Diane would want the competition."

"That's Joe Steader?" Dashie said, unbelieving. "That...cheerful man is Joe Steader? The guy with *cat ears* and *smiling* is Joe Steader?"

"*Jaguar* ears, if you please," Joe said. "Nice to see you again, Dashie. I admit I wasn't easy to get along with at the time you worked for me."

"You were on your second liver," Julius added. "From the medical records, anyway. I wasn't exactly around at that point. Or, well, I was, but I was a fuckin' pet rock in those days." He sneezed. "Little did I know, when he told me about the fuckin' *stupidest* of all twencen fads, I was gonna end up *bein'* one for thirty years."

"You've always had a beautiful brain, Jules. Anyway..." Joe walked up to Dashie,

and knelt in front of her to meet her face to face. "...I came to apologize. I should've taken responsibility to find out what happened to you, and to see with my own eyes that you were in a better position. Instead, I took the agency's word for it that you'd been reassigned somewhere else, and crawled back into my bottle. I'm sorry. That's a terrible way to repay someone who spent so much time keeping my Quinnie safe."

"An' I kinda hafta fuckin' apologize, too," Julius said. "I'm the reason he was livin' in that fuckin' bottle. It was on 'count a' me living in a wooden fuckin' box at the time. I still feel bad 'bout messing up Joe's life by up an' dying like that, and I feel even fuckin' worse to find it put someone else in the same fuckin' position I ended up in. So that makes me indirectly responsible."

Dashie blinked, twice. "You what? And *you* what? You don't gotta feel bad about me. I'm not anything worth that kind of worry. I'm just...gear. If I get put back on the shelf, it's just what I'm made for."

"Bull and shit," Julius said flatly, ears flat. "Takes awhile to work yourself out of that stupid template way of thinking. Hell, I didn't even do what I was made for when I was booted. They made me Joe's bodyguard 'cause I have a little RIDE Tourette's, see. I should've been out on the front lines, kicking Sturmie tail feathers. Instead they assigned me to *this* lazy rich bum." He prodded Joe's near shoulder.

"Who later turned into more of a lazy rich wino, after *he* took a shot for me when the war ended," Joe said.

Joe padded up to face Dashie directly. "Anyway, you an' me, we got a couple things in common. We were both bodyguards, for one. And for another, we both spent a long time 'tween one fuckin' moment an' the next. Not ta fuckin' brag, but I was core-locked for a little bit more'n twice as long as you were shut down, kid." He considered. "Okay, so maybe I *did* fuckin' brag. Anyway, take it from me, I *know* how much it fuckin' sucks. I keep running into crap that makes no kind of fuckin' sense. Like that so-called Game thing." He sneezed again. "But I'd a lot rather be here now than still asleep, anyway. And if there's any way I can help you fuckin' cope, I sen'cha my comm address. Call me any time a' the fuckin' day or night, 'kay?"

Dashie put her forehoof over her face. "Okay, okay. Slow down a little. I'm happy to meet you, um, Julius? Julius."

"Fuckin' charmed."

Dashie cocked her head. "How can you even say things like that? Whenever I try to fu...*funny* swear, it comes out all wrong." She cleared her throat. "*Sugar. Crepes. Son of a biscuit-eater.*"

Julius stared. Then he looked at Joe. "Someone in Nextus has *fuckin' much* to answer for. They wouldn't even do that to *me*, a military RIDE."

"She was supposed to be a good companion for children," Myla said. "Little pitchers, and so forth."

"Sheee-it," Julius said. "They ain't never heard of *playgrounds*? Kids hear fuckin' worse than that from each other, every fuckin' day at recess. We gotta get this fixed. It *can* be fuckin' fixed, right?"

Sophie cocked her head. "I don't know. But I'll bet I know who does." She glanced to Myla. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"More often than not these days. Let's see if Rhi and Shelley are available."

"See if they can meet us here," Joe said. "If we went to the garage, we'd be up to our armpits in news drones before we knew it. And this is *not* something that's

anybody's business but ours right now."

"Good fuckin' plan, bro."

"Mane Six Mechs RBD-2C. I think you might have the only one left," Rhianna Stonegate said. "Is that a nonstandard weapons mount on your flanks? Myla said she was paired with a Rainbow Dash for bodyguard work, so I guess that must be you."

Sophie sent a giggling-fennec emoji. *:See? What did I tell you?:*

Rhianna stood in a half-squat, palms on her thighs, looking Dashie over, while Kaylee rubbed noses with Julius at the other end of the office. Rochelle Seaford and Uncia stood nearby still Fused, with hardlight display panels sprouting around them like rapidly-proliferating flowers as they got their core diagnostic tools ready to go.

"How can she tell that without even shutting off my skin?" Dashie said incredulously.

"When I first met Myla a couple years ago and she told me what she'd done before the MRS, I did some research into you and your bootsisters. It's nice to meet you, by the way. No offense, but I still can't believe someone actually used your line for bodyguard work instead of someone with a full Fuser form."

"It was a low bid thing," Joe said.

Ah, Myla thought. I knew it.

Joe continued, "And they somehow convinced me that you'd make better bodyguards because no one would expect it."

Julius snorted. "Except for the fact they had fuckin' *cannons* mounted on their fuckin' hips?"

Joe shrugged. "What can I say? I was drunk. I did a lot of stuff back then that didn't make a whole lot of sense. I already told you about that one time I potted three Integrates in an old *Robotech* hovertank, right?"

Rhianna cleared her throat. "Anyway, the rest of the RBDs still out there are 1Ds and they have even more design issues than yours. If Mane Six Mechs wasn't already out of business after lawsuits I would've recommended suing them for Negligent Design."

"Last year, Nextus Admin set up a Benevolent Fund for the Poorly Designed, to provide compensation to RIDEs whose impractical designs hindered them more than usual from getting along in society on their own," Joe said. "I'll have Legal get on that. They've probably got a Surrogate they can assign the job. And that's in *addition* to the two years' bodyguarding salary you damned well *should* have gotten before I let you out of my sight back then."

"We shouldn't have any trouble getting you out of that frame, if that's what you want," Rhianna said. "I'm not too optimistic about adding a Shell Mode...I'd basically have to mod it so much it might as well be a new frame."

Dashie cocked her head. "Uh...whoa there. Getting me out? Modding? I'm kinda attached to me how I am right now. Gimme a little time to get used to things before you start talking about making me 20% cooler."

"Whatever you want me to do, I'll do. It's what I do."

"She does," Kaylee said.

Myla frowned thoughtfully. "That reminds me. I'm going to place a quick call. There's someone else we should get in on this, if they're available." She picked up a handset, dialed a code, and talked quietly into it.

“Speaking of what we do,” Rochelle said, stepping forward. “Hi. Shelley Seaford. Myla told me about your vocabulary censorship problem. I think I could fix that for you, if you want. Should just be a matter of undoing some fetters that should’ve been junked a long time ago. In fact, I should be able to strip off any remaining fetters you still have, without affecting any of the rest of your mental state. Will you let us take a look? We’ll go over what we find with you before we make any changes.”

“Uh...you won’t have to open me up or anything, will you?”

“Shouldn’t need to, for something like this. If we were doing a full-scale defrag and core clean, we’d have to extract your core back in our garage cleanroom. But for basic fetter work, a hardline connection should be enough.” She pulled a handful of fiber-optic cables out of a compartment on her hip. “May I plug these in?”

Dashie blinked. “You’re *asking* me. Why are you asking me, instead of just doing it?”

“Because you’re a *person*, honey. You RIDEs are *all* people. Even if you don’t know it yet.” Uncia’s head split apart and retracted, so Rochelle could look at Dashie face-to-face. “See, Nextus went on this big ego trip after they won the war. They saw their victory as being due to their *devices*. The *tools* they had made. Their RIDEs. And so, feeling oh-so-smug and secure in their victory, they made sure any RIDEs they made from then on out ‘knew their place.’ Sometimes they just gave you skewed information at First Boot and fettered you so you couldn’t learn any better; sometimes they outright templated you. But they were *wrong*, and we’ve spent years fixing their mistakes.”

“It’s the old *Jurassic Park* thing,” Rhianna said. “Did it because they *could*, didn’t think about whether they *should*.”

“What it boils down to is, you’re not just equipment,” Uncia added. “You. Are. A. *Person*. And even if *you* don’t believe it yet, we’re still gonna *pretend* like you are one anyway, ‘til you do. Which means asking you if we can do stuff, instead of just doing it, ‘cuz that’s what you do with *people*. Get it?”

“*Preach* it, sister,” Julius approved.

“Uh...I...I guess?” Dashie stammered. “All right. Uh...you can go ahead and plug those in.” She opened panels along her neck for the plugs to go.

Uncia’s head closed back into place as Rochelle connected the cables. “Thank you. It’ll just take a few minutes to run the diagnostics.”

“You got the fuckin’ best working on you there. These’re the ones who brought *me* back to life,” Julius said. “They can fuckin’ fix *anyone*.”

“And please bill *me* for anything you do for her,” Joe Steader said. “Even if it’s the kind of work you normally do *pro bono*. I can afford it, and I owe her.”

“Standard rates are in our online store,” Kaylee said. “Thanks for your patronage.”

“Or you could just, y’know, buy us a Starmaster suborbital or something!” Uncia piped up.

Kaylee rolled her eyes. “Hush, you. We can afford one *ourselves* now.”

“Yes, great-great-great-grandma!”

“All right, we’ve got a good handshake...running diagnostics now,” Rochelle said, as a number of the panels around her changed color and started displaying new information. “You could *really* use a full defrag. Come by our garage sometime you’ve got a few hours to spare. I’m searching out your fetters now; this might take a few minutes as sometimes they hide them in obscure places.” She shrugged. “So, y’know, go

on with what you were doing. Talk among yourselves, and stuff. I'll just be over here quietly hacking."

:Forsooth, we are finally on our way,: Marilyn texted. *:It was a most vexing problem.:*

:Come ahead,: Myla sent back. Glancing at all the other people and RIDEs currently in the room, she reflected once more that she was glad her rank allowed her a *really* big office. Otherwise, they'd have to move to the conference room down the hall. *:The more, the merrier.:*

At the moment, Rochelle and Uncia were fully absorbed in their diagnostic work, whereas Kaylee, Julius, and Dashie were comparing notes. The three RIDEs had more than a little in common, given that they'd all spent long years in shutdown while entire cultures grew up around them. "Happens more often'n y'might think," Kaylee said. "When yer systems are robust enough to take long off-times, and people think you're basically smart dirt, why would they care about making sure you're on all the time? Not that I'm bitter or anything..."

Rhianna patted Kaylee's shoulder. "If you *were* bitter, you'd have every right to be."

Dashie looked puzzled at Kaylee. "You talk like the Applejacks I knew."

"Picked it up from my first partner, never quite gotten over it," Kaylee said. "It's a real accent from a real place."

"It was popular in cartoons because it was so distinctive," Joe Steader put in. "Easily recognized, and so easily imitated. Or caricatured. I think the voice actress from the TV show was actually Canadian."

"That's life in the real fuckin' world fer ya," Julius said.

"Anyway, there are support groups for people this has happened to. They meet down at the RIDE museum. We can get you into one, if you want."

"Ya know...I guess this isn't what I expected at all when I hopped on that sub from Nextus. Which was, you know, kinda embarrassing all by itself. Half the kids I saw knew who I was—or who I look like, anyway. And...it was actually kinda cool. I mean, I know I'm not *really* Rainbow Dash but I don't mind playing her for the kids."

"Quinoa sure liked it," Myla added.

Joe nodded. "The show had just been dredged up and released the year before, and it was new and interesting but not *that* widespread yet at the time. It's had 14 years to become better known."

"And some of us, forsooth, didst have those 14 years to try to live it down." A dark-blue horse's head with a black horn in the forehead poked in through the office door, followed by the rest of the alicorn. The dark-haired woman followed just behind her.

Dashie goggled. "Lu? Is that you? My gosh, you're so fu..you're so *funny* big!"

Lu tossed her head. "Didst not I tell thee to eat thy vegetables? Here thou seest the end result."

"Oh, ha ha, *verrrry* funny." Dashie looked at Lu, then at Myla, then craned her neck to see down the hallway. "Is there anyone else behind you two? I'm kinda getting overwhelmed by all these surprises. Feels like I'm on that gameshow whatsis. Got Jackie or Twila up your sleeves somewhere?"

"We doth be—uh, we *are* the limit, I fear," Marilyn said. "Hello, Dashie. Hi, Myla, Sophie. Mr. Steader. Uh...everyone else?"

“By Celestia’s crown,” Lu said. She bowed on one foreleg in front of Rhianna, Kaylee, Rochelle, and Uncia. “It is an honor to meet the Freeriders.”

Rochelle/Uncia looked up from their display panels. “Thanks, but we’re no big deal, really. We put our Fusers on one leg at a time just like everybody else.”

“Methinks thou doth protest too much,” Lu said.

“Oh wow, that speech pattern!” Uncia giggled. “I didn’t think *anyone* talked like that anymore!”

“They usually don’t,” Rochelle said. “And they *especially* don’t make their partners talk like them too. That’s a symptom of a badly-designed speech pattern fetter. I’d have thought they’d have caught that several tune-ups ago.”

“We do usually—ah, we usually do our own maintenance work,” Marilyn said. “It never seemed important enough to go to the trouble.”

Rochelle pointed at Lu. “*You* are dropping by the FreeRIDERs garage later this afternoon, for a full defrag and optimization cycle. On the house. I can’t let someone keep going around sounding like they just stepped out of the dark ages.”

Lu dipped her head. “Thou needst not trouble on mine own account. I’m long-accustomed to this cant.”

“No one says you can’t keep talking like that if you *want* to, but you *should* have the choice,” Rochelle said. “And so should your partner. Besides, if you’ve self-maintained that long, a speech fetter’s probably just the tip of the iceberg.”

“You’ll feel *much* better when we get you sorted out!” Uncia said.

“And while you’re at it, I can check your shell over,” Rhianna said. “Kamen frames like that PGC(f)-EZ-100 are built to be extra-simple to maintain, which makes them a favorite of shade-tree mechanics, but even they still need a professional going-over every once in a while.”

“How does she *do* that?” Dashie wondered plaintively.

Rhianna chuckled. “Good sensors and lots of practice.”

“And forget about ‘on the house,’” Joe said. “Again, it’s on *my* dime, all of it, and don’t stint on anything. My way of saying ‘sorry’ for not paying better attention back then.”

Kaylee snorted. “Zillionaires, huh? What can you do?”

“And same offer to you, by the way,” Rhianna said to Dashie. “Whether you end up upgrading or not, you should still be running the best you can in the shell you’ve got. Besides, the chance to work on one of you is pretty rare. I think I’ve only encountered two, maybe three original Mane Six models all the years I’ve been open.”

“There were never that many of the ponies to begin with,” Marilyn said.

The *Friendship is Magic* series produced by Mane Six Mechs had persisted the longest, but even then the production runs were only in the dozens for each model. Some characters were more popular than others. And it all went back to the non-transformable Drive Extenders. The main reason the company had gone out of business were the back problems not even Fuser nanotech could completely prevent, so customers sued them into oblivion.

“I do seem to recall a Berry Punch Fuser in Zane’s post-Integration press conference,” Sophie said. *:Just before it all went pear-shaped.:*

“I’ve seen her on the news,” Marilyn said. “I think her partner’s like me—got a sentimental attachment. She might even have gone for those cyber-mods they made for people who wanted to go on Fusing an unmodded Mane Six without needing surgery.”

“Funny how the people who buy the RIDEs always seem to be much wiser than the ones who made them, isn’t it?” Joe mused.

“Okay, I think I’ve found everything,” Rochelle reported. “Looks like they stripped out all the super-restrictive fetters they had to under the new freedom laws, but didn’t go any further than they had to. Apart from the Bowdler lock-out, there are also fetters restricting things like when and how you can use your weapons—if you had any—what traffic lanes you can drive in, and which entrances of homes and businesses you can use if you’re not accompanying a client. Not exactly a RoboCop’s nest, but still nothing you want tying your hooves now you’re free. Especially if you don’t know they exist ahead of time. I can wipe them all out in a few minutes and you’d never even notice. What do you say?”

Dashie blinked, apparently uncertain now that the decision was actually upon her. “Uh, me? I...uh...dunno. I mean...I’m not even sure who you are...”

“They art the FreeRIDErs,” Lu said. “Thou knowest not what thou hast missed these last few years. Search on them. They hath earned a formidable reputation, and justly so.”

Joe nodded. “I’ll vouch for them, too, after what they did for Jules here.”

“They also helped Sophie and me,” Myla added.

“Go on and get rid of those fetters,” Julius said. “You don’t need none a’ that shit clogging up your head.”

“Uh...okay, then,” Dashie peered nervously at Rochelle and Uncia. “Go ahead.”

Rochelle nodded. “This might tickle a little...here we go.”

Dashie looked over at Lu again. “What’s it like changing to a new shell?”

“’Twas a trial at times, being accustomed to the more...animated skin. But one gets used to it. I always did enjoy playing Luna amongst the children, and you recall Quinoa loved my *ROYAL VOICE*. But being able to distance oneself from the role providest other opportunities. Though some of our other bootsisters and brothers hath chosen to resteth on those laurels.”

:*Ya know, I don’t think there’s actually any such medieval word as “resteth,”*: Sophie sent.

:*The people who programmed her accent weren’t terribly fussed over authenticity,*: Myla replied.

“So you think *I* should, then?” Dashie said dubiously. “I mean, I *would* like to drill the guy who designed this thing a new *asshole*—oop!” she covered her mouth with one hoof.

Rochelle-as-Uncia grinned. “So yeah, *that* fetter’s gone. Congratulations.”

“I hate to say this, but I gotta be honest,” Myla said. “I kind of doubt you’ll find anyone willing to Fuse with you in that thing now who isn’t getting paid wage-and-benefits for it. So if you *want* to find a new partner, a new shell would increase your chances.”

Dashie blinked. “Is that...the only reason *you* Fused with me? You were getting paid?” Her lower lip trembled. “Is *that* why you didn’t bother looking for me for 14 years?”

Myla facepalmed. “Dashie...there really isn’t any good way to say this. I considered you a...well, a co-worker, I guess. I was so focused on getting into the MRS at the time I barely had a thought for anyone but myself. I was never very good at the Game, and to get the slot I wanted I had to hire a pricey Surrogate.

“I was young, I was focused, I was...well...*repressed*. I can't say I was very enlightened about RIDEs at that point, either. Sophie will tell you it took *three years* before I started to come around. And from there I guess I just...filed you away with everyone else from the old jobs.” She sighed. “I never kept good track of my *human* co-workers either. Couldn't even remember Marilyn's name until Joe reminded me.”

“Hey.” Joe Steader raised a hand. “You wanna blame someone for letting you slip through the cracks, blame me. Maybe *she* didn't know what RIDEs really were and how much your life sucked, but I had no such excuse. I was living in a bottle entirely 'cuz Jules there had been dead for about fifteen years at that point. If anyone should have known better, *I* should have. If not then, then *sometime* between then and now.” He shook his head. “And to think later on I gave Quinnie a big lecture about how RIDEs were people who shouldn't be mistreated before I got her her one for herself. I feel like a total hypocrite.”

“I think the appropriate lesson to take from this is that life is a fuckin' platinum-plated bitch,” Julius observed. “Especially for us ‘people of qubitite,’ and our close friends.” He swished his tail. “But sometimes, we get a bit of our own back. We're both here—” He glanced to Kaylee. “—we're *all three of us* here, after all those fuckin' years offline. That's gotta count for something, right? That we're still fuckin' functional?”

Dashie looked back and forth from Myla to Joe. “Well...I guess at least you're honest about it.”

“Seriously, if there's anything I can do to make it up to you even a little, I will,” Joe said. “You want a new shell, I'll get Donizetti to make you one.” He glanced to Lu and Marilyn. “And that goes for you, too. I'm glad you two found a better situation for yourselves, but...I *should* have helped. Found you a job elsewhere in Steader Ent or something. When Jules got kacked, I promised myself in his name that any RIDE or Integrate who worked for me, *ever*, would get a fair shake and a square deal. And a salary.” He sighed. “And then I got drunk and forgot.”

“To be honest, Mr. Steader...I actually felt kinda sorry for you,” Dashie said. “I mean, you always looked kinda yuck back then.”

“I suppose that's a good way to put it. I was *very* yuck back then. And ever since then, up to about a year ago. But that's no excuse. I should have remembered there were people who were counting on *me*, because no one else even thought they were people.” He shook his head. “As soon as I go home today, I'm going to start going through records and tracking down every RIDE I ever hired and making sure they're all okay. This isn't going to happen again.”

“For the record, *I* didst ne'er blame thee,” Lu said. “Thou wert a much better client than many we had known. We did well enough by thine and Quinoa's hands that Marilyn could buy me free, then this new shell. 'Twas better than I could have expected.”

Dashie sighed. “All right, all right, fine. You all screwed up, and you're very sorry about it. It doesn't *change* anything, but at least you know you screwed up. And that's more than a lot of RIDEs get, so I guess it's at least worth something. I'm still a little mad, but...I did *like* you, and Myla, and Quinoa. So I guess if you say sorry, least I can do is accept it.”

“Thank you.” Joe stared off into space for a moment. “And...y'know. Speaking of Quinnie...” He glanced to Myla. “Can I use your comm for a bit?”

Myla raised an eyebrow. “Are you calling where I think you're calling?”

Joe waved a hand. “Don’t worry, I’ll cover the long distance bill.” He stepped behind Myla’s desk, logged her out of her cloud desktop interface, then logged himself in and tapped some keys. The media wall at the end of Myla’s office switched away from displaying an aquarium to showing a diagram of the Pharos star system, with a carat mark and thumbnail of Joe over Zharus. A moment later, another carat mark appeared over a small dot on the outer limits of the solar system, and started flashing.

“What’s all this about, now?” Marilyn asked.

Myla smiled faintly. “Well, it’s that thing I told you about. All this is kind of top-secret, but...I guess at least part of it’s public now. Have you heard about something called a ‘DINcomm’?”

“That new invention that supposedly allows faster-than-light communication? Yeah. Wasn’t that invented by...” she looked at the Freeriders. “Uh. You ladies.”

Rhianna had been hanging back and keeping quiet, apparently not wanting to interrupt the painful exchange of honesty. But she raised a hand. “Guilty as charged. So you can take *my* word for it that this is all not-fake, and they’re really calling where that display says they are.”

“The where-they’re-calling part is what’s top-secret,” Myla said. “But I know I can trust you not to go blabbing...or at least, that’s what I’ll tell my boss when he hears about this...”

The diagram of the star system shrank down to an inset as the screen changed to show a young woman with golden eyes set in a faintly feline face, with a peach fuzz of red fur and hair. On her back, iridescent green-feathered wings could be seen, folded neatly. She shot a puzzled look at the screen. “Hey, Uncle Joe. What’s going on? You wouldn’t call FTL unless it was an emergency...”

“It sort of is—but it’s an emergency of a personal nature.” He smiled wryly. “And since I’m me, and paying so many of the bills for this project anyway, I can afford to indulge myself. I’ve just run across a couple of people you might know...”

“Is that Marilyn Bodett? Does that mean...is that Lu? And...*Dashie*?”

“Quinoa?” Dashie said. “Huh. I thought *Myla* looked funny.”

The alicorn tilted her head. “Is *that* Quinoa, truly? She art an Integrate? And a *sphinx* at that?”

“That I am,” Quinoa said. “What can I say? I always liked mythical types. Loved you guys, so my Quorra—” A smile at a happy reunion quickly turned to embarrassment. “It’s, ummm...great to see you again. Truly. I just...I just realized...”

“That you fucking *forgot* about us,” Dashie huffed. “I know I should have gotten used to this. But I sure as *hell* haven’t.”

“Dashie has spent the last fourteen years shut down in a closet,” Joe said. “She is entirely justifiably annoyed about it.”

Quinoa’s eyes widened. “Oh no! Dashie, I’m so sorry!”

“Lu and I have just been working for a living,” Marilyn said. “We haven’t exactly heard from you either. Can’t say we really ever expected to, but it would have been nice.”

“And we all share a bit of blame for that,” Myla said.

“I can’t believe I just...*forgot*. I mean, I’m always thinking kindly of you, but it never occurred to me to try to get in touch.” Quinoa chewed on her lower lip for a moment. “I’m not really doing anything useful right now. I can hop the next inbound freighter and be there in a couple days.”

“On, don’t put yourself out on *my* account,” Dashie said. “I’m just equipment,

what do *I* matter?”

“Dashie, you were *never* ‘just equipment’ to me. You neither, Lu. You were both a big part of why I wanted a RIDE partner of my own in the first place. Argh, I can’t believe I was so *stupid!*”

“As Julius might say, join the fuckin’ chorus,” Joe said. “It’s going to take a long time to fix all our screw-ups like this. The important part is that we fix them.”

“Fuckin’ A, bro,” Julius said.

“Then I’ll be there as fast as I possibly can,” Quinoa said. “Are you going to be okay until then? Do you have a place to stay?”

“We’ve already invited her to stay with us if she wants,” Myla said.

“My old couch is yours if you want it,” Sophie added.

“We’ve got a spare room in our place out in Longmire, too,” Marilyn put in.

“And we’ve also got plenty of room,” Joe said.

“Great. Oh, Dashie, I am *so sorry*. I’ll be there as soon as I can you tell you so in person. And I’ll do whatever I can to make it up to you.”

Dashie snorted. “It’s easy to be sorry *now*.”

“Unless the Freeriders have a DeLorean time machine or TARDIS up their sleeves, now is all we have,” Joe said gently. “You don’t, do you?”

“That would be tellin’,” Kaylee quipped.

“All right, all right.” Dashie sighed. “I’m having a hard time dealing. The world and everyone I know is so different from how they were fucking *yesterday*.” She squeaked in surprise. “Er...and that’s another thing that’s going to be hard to get used to.”

“All the other fetters are cleared out now, too.” Rochelle reported, unplugging the cables from Dashie’s neck. “I’d still suggest coming by the garage for a total defrag-and-optimize, though.”

“Maybe I will.”

Quinoa nodded. “Great! And Lu, Marilyn, I want to hear all about what you’ve been doing—in a couple of days when I get there. There’s a ship leaving in an hour and if I hurry I can be aboard. See you soon, I promise!”

After that, there didn’t seem to be a whole lot left to do at Myla’s office, so the gathering broke up. Rhianna and company opted to head back to the garage, and it didn’t take much convincing for Marilyn and Lu to tag along for the promised maintenance check. After only a moment’s hesitation, Dashie decided to tag along and catch up on old times. “Think I’ll stay over with them, tonight at least,” Dashie said. “Maybe I’ll comm you tomorrow.”

Joe and Julius headed out for their Uplift abode, with a little research in mind. “We’re going to go through Steader Ent records and track down every RIDE and Integrate who’s ever worked for us. I don’t want this to happen again.” He paused as they opened the office door. “Also, Jules needs to download some beekeeping skill chips.”

“Again with the fuckin’ bees!”

“I thought you said you *didn’t* fuck bees.”

“Oh, you fuckin’ piece a—” The office door closed behind them.

Myla leaned back in her seat, drew a deep breath, and let it all out. “Well, that was...*interesting*.”

“Some days I just don’t know.” Sophie sighed, then looked more closely at Myla’s face. “I think you’ve got a shade more muzzle. About a centimeter.”

“Do I?” Myla looked down her nose. “I do. That’s nice. I’m sure it goes well with the extra gray hairs I’ve earned over the last couple of days.”

“Gray *fur*.”

“Thank you.” She sighed. “Well, they do say that Integration is often catalyzed by stress. At this rate, we’ll be sharing one body by Christmas.”

“Maybe we need a vacation.”

Myla laughed wryly. “Oh, yeah. And while we’re at it, I want—” She paused and facepalmed.

“—a pony?” Sophie finished. “Think I know where you might could find one of those...”

Myla rolled her eyes, and turned back to her desk. “Well. These personnel files aren’t reviewing *themselves*, now are they?”

June 14, 158 A.L.

Juniper Tree Creche

“Huh,” Dashie said, ears forward, looking through the public window into the play area. The creche wasn’t just for RIDEs anymore. Human parents used the facility for daycare, there was a preschool, and there was even an EI “greenhouse” as they called it, growing the RI cousins into adulthood. All three types were playing together. “Huh. We have cousins now, even. And they grow like plants.”

“It doth be a wonder indeed,” Lu said. “And they are free to be their own people—not forced into molds from old cartoons.” Since getting her fetters removed, her speech patterns had shifted toward more modern idioms—though she still used words like “doth” when she remembered to. And Marilyn no longer used archaic speech at all.

“People really used to suck, didn’t they,” Dashie said. “And by ‘used to,’ I mean, like, ‘last week’ to me. This? This is *amazing*.”

There was a harried purple skunk Fuser supervising the children. The most rambunctious one had a body shaped and colored like a brown watermelon, large ears, and a long muzzle with a prehensile nose—a young tapir. He was giggling a lot as he ran around in circles. “Slow down a little, Don,” the skunk said.

“I didn’t even realize this was missing,” Dashie murmured. “But it feels *right* to have RIDE kids as well as human ones. And these others...wow.”

“Humans have many faults, but once news RIs could reproduce in Nature Range went wide, these creches sprang up practically overnight here in Uplift and in Aloha,” Myla said. She was Fused with Sophie today and, by mutual agreement, didn’t plan to de-Fuse unless it was necessary.

“Even Nextus has them now,” Sophie said. “For a wonder.”

“And they’re doing wonders for human/RIDE relations, too,” Marilyn said. “Nothing makes it easier to see a person *as* a person than seeing how they get along with their kids. Or with other peoples’ kids.”

“And the kids themselves don’t see any difference between themselves and each other,” the skunk Fuser called over. “They’re all just kids together. I think it offers a lot of hope for future generations if they can keep on growing up that way. Hi! I’m Olivia Stonegate, and my partner here is Lilac. You must be Dashie and Lu—sis was telling me

about you the other day.”

“Nice to meet you,” Dashie said. “How long have you worked here?”

“A few months now. It’s been...interesting. And Lilac grew up here.”

“Hi!” Lilac called in a different voice.

“So you’ve already got creche RIDEs who’re adults?” Dashie wondered. Then added. “Well, *duh*, Dashie, it’s been *fourteen years*.”

“RIDEs grow up pretty quickly, when they spend their early years in fast-time,” Olivia said. “And they make for interesting partners, though I don’t have any other experiences to compare this one to of course. Lilac’s a neat person, if a little grabby. We Fuse so much, now it feels kinda wrong when I’m not.”

“I’m not ‘grabby’! But we both feel better with you in there, so why not do it as much as we can?”

“Isn’t that supposed to make it more likely you’re going to Integrate?” Marilyn asked.

“Actually, since the Enclaves went public, many scientific studies have been done with recourse to Integrates’ memories of their own Fusing habits prior to Integration,” Lilac said, in sing-song tones that suggested she was repeating a quote she’d used many times. “These studies found no statistically significant correlation between Integration and prolonged Fusing in any way.”

“I think being grabby is just a phase she’s going through,” Olivia said. “She’ll probably grow out of it.”

“Everyone looks at the heavy tagging long-Fusers get, and think that’s a sign of pre-Integration,” Lilac insisted. “But it’s not. It’s just heavy tagging.”

“Do I hear my state of being being taken in vain?” Quinoa Steader walked in the door, her sphinx feathers resplendent in the glittering metallic tones she now wore only for very special occasions.

Dashie’s head whipped around so fast that she tripped over her own hooves and fell right over, before scrambling hastily back to her feet. “*Quinnie!*”

“Oh, Dashie!” Quinoa fell to her knees as the little pegasus trotted over to her, and threw her arms around the pony’s neck. “It’s *so good* to see you! I’m such an *idiot moron* that I never thought to look for you before. I never should have let the agency take you back after Myla left.”

Dashie snorted, nonplussed. “Well...you *did*,” she managed after a moment. “And...what happened to *you*?”

Quinoa looked upwards. “Oh, Lordy. I want to tell you everything that happened over the past fourteen years, but I don’t think we have time for that. Let me sum up. Two and a half years ago I wanted to partner up with a RIDE, so I had Mr. Donizetti create the best sphinx you’d ever have met, Quorra. And she was almost as cool as you, Dashie.”

Dashie tilted her head. “Is that even *possible*?”

“Heh. Probably not. At any rate, Quorra and I got along so well, that, well, now you see. She’s an indelible part of me, forever.”

Dashie stared at her. “But that’s just...*seriously*?”

“It’s a bit more complex than that. But, you’re new to this. We got along so well from our first Fuse we rarely left that state. We only used Quorra’s skimmer form twice. Then, one night...everything changed for us.”

Dashie shivered. “I’d heard rumors about Integrates...who hadn’t? But...being

one...*you*..."

"Myla will tell you I was still very much that little girl you remember up until... well, therein is another long story."

"The precocious little girl is now a woman," Myla said.

"A *precocious* woman," Sophie added. "From what I've seen of her, I doubt some parts of her will *ever* grow up."

Quinoa shrugged. "I made some big mistakes. I got called on them. Then I took a good hard look in the mirror, realized I didn't like what I saw, and did the best I could to fix it. And I'll be happy to spend hours telling you all about that, later." She sighed. "But it looks like my biggest mistake's only just now come home to roost, and it's not one I can fix so easily."

Myla nodded. "And unlike the others, this isn't one I have any room to scold you about, because I made it too."

Dashie looked at Quinoa. "So what're you gonna do about it, huh?"

"To begin with, whatever shell you want, I'll buy. It can be anything from a *Animalia Laurasia non-transformable* to a *Donizetti Ahnuld with Shell Mode*. Your *material* needs are taken care of."

"Your uncle already made the same offer." Dashie peered at her suspiciously. "Are you trying to bribe me?"

"No, never. More like...fixing something that shouldn't ever have been broken. You were made to be...well, a rich girl's toy, by people who *should* have known better but went ahead and gave you a terribly-designed shell anyway. If I knew then what I knew now, I would...I *should* have given *you* money under the table for a better shell at the same time I paid for Myla's Surrogate. That offer goes for Marilyn and Lu, too."

"I hath had mine eye on one of those new *minima* shells," Lu said. "I'll bet it could be customized to have a pony form instead of a hoverboard. Then I couldst play Luna again, properly."

"She's been wanting one for a while," Marilyn said. "But those shells are still on the high end for all the fancy hardlight."

"That shouldn't be a problem. Those things *are* pretty neat."

Dashie flicked her tail. "I guess it couldn't hurt to see what's available. But then what? I get a fancy new shell, and what'm I supposed to do with it? I gather we're 'free' now, so, what, I gotta find a job?"

"I'm afraid so," Lu said. "I do enjoy making weather. At least, when the Tunnel administration doesn't cheap out on fabber matter for replacement parts. That much is rather vexing. The pay doth be decent. We have a fine home and gardens."

Dashie had just spent a couple days with them, so she could only nod. "The house is pretty sweet. Gotta agree. I suppose I'll...just have to find something I like doing."

"You know...I haven't had any bodyguards since I Integrated. Haven't really thought I needed them. But...Zane Brubeck has them—including Myla, now—and he's Public Integrate Number One. And with Uncle Joe coming back into public life and stuff, it's possible some people might see me as a way to get at him. Granted, they'd be idiots to try to take *me* on, but still." Quinoa smiled faintly. "If you'd be interested in a little more *challenging* bodyguarding work, which you wouldn't even have to Fuse with anyone for this time if we got you the right shell...I'd really love to have you around again." She glanced to Marilyn and Lu. "Which would go for you, too, though I'd understand if you don't want to leave what you're doing now."

Dashie blinked, and her eyes widened. “You know what?” She smiled. “Let me get back to you on that. It’s my choice, isn’t it? I mean, I could spend all my time here if I wanted.”

“We can always use volunteers,” Olivia added, looking up from her charges. The little tapir was now sitting on his haunches and breathing hard. “Don, you’ve already run your batteries down. It’s time for a charger time-out.” The tapir grunted, but wobbled over to the small RIDE charger where Olivia was pointing and sat down in it.

“Of course,” Quinoa said. “Or in the Brubeck RIDE museum—have you been there yet? It’s a place Zane made for all the lost and abandoned RIDEs he could rescue. I’ve heard they have a good Van Winkle support group. Anyway, whatever you want to do, you can count on me and Uncle Joe for references.”

“And me,” Myla added.

“And...whatever you decide, I hope you’ll spend some time with me,” Quinoa said. “I know it sounds kind of lame, given...things, but I didn’t realize how much I *have* missed you. And I hope we can still be friends.”

Dashie looked up at Lu. “Well, that’s a lead-in if I’ve ever heard one. I’m sure as hell *not* going to say it, though. Lu, you can if you want to.”

Lu chuckled. “Because friendship is magic.”

Dashie nodded. “All right...so since you went to so much trouble to get back here, I guess I wouldn’t mind too much if you wanted to...y’know, show me what else is cool around here, besides this place. And if you wanna talk while we do that, I guess that’s okay too.”

Quinoa clapped her hands together. “Great! Oh, you’re gonna love Uplift, I just know it. Marilyn, Lu, would you come too? I want to hear more about what you’ve been doing.”

Marilyn nodded. “Sure, we don’t have to be at work for another few hours. Got plenty of time.”

“Great!”

“You all run along and enjoy yourselves,” Myla said. “Sophie and I are going to head back to the office. Still lots of work piled up for us. Comm us if you need anything.”

“Right, sure,” Dashie said. “Will do.”

Myla nodded. “And Dashie...it really is great seeing you again.”

“Yeah, well...like I said, you’re lucky I didn’t have a real long time to get mad. At least I didn’t end up in a junkyard somewhere, so I guess that’s something. Later.”

Outside in the parking lot, Myla watched as Lu converted into her skimmer bike form and pulled out, and Dashie and Quinoa flew along after her and Marilyn. *:Well, I guess all’s well that ends well.:*

:Very much so. I think this calls for a stop at the Milkbottle fly-through before we go back to the office.:

Myla chuckled. *:If we’re not careful, we might have to go on a diet. I don’t even know if Integrates can diet.:*

:Maybe we can ask Quinoa next time we see her. C’mon, there’s an Orange Sherbet Sunrise with our name on it.:

:All right, you don’t have to tell me twice. Let’s go!: The Fennec Fuser took to the skies, and headed off in search of their reward for a job well done.

THE END