

# Aloha, Stonegates!

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After Kaylee dropped her off, Rhianna rang the doorbell promptly at 22:00, and smiled as she heard the thump-thump-thump of footsteps coming up the hall, followed by the door unlatching. “Come in, come in!” her mother Arlene said, beckoning her over the threshold. “Oh, you brought something? You didn’t have to do that...”

“It’s just potato salad,” Rhianna said, handing the covered dish over. “Made it myself, though I fabbed a couple of the ingredients. Found a recipe I liked. And it goes with pretty much anything, so...”

“You never had much interest in cooking before,” Arlene said.

Rhianna grinned. “Well, Zane’s been teaching me a little. That tiger *loves* to cook.” She followed her mother inside. “It’s not so different from fixing RIDEs, really. Doing something with your hands, following instructions to turn raw materials into a finished product.”

“Smells great!” Ferris said, as Arlene put the dish down in the middle of the dinner table, alongside a fairly large roast turkey, and dishes of dressing, potatoes, salad, corn, and other side dishes. It was obviously a Thanksgiving dinner, and Rhianna didn’t need to ask what they were thankful for. Ferris and Roy were already in their seats, and Rhianna slid into her customary spot at the end of the table.

“Hey, Ferr,” Rhianna said. “And Dad.” She nodded to her father. “So you got the implants out today. You’re looking great! A lot less...metallic.”

“You should see Ivor,” Roy said. “He’s bright pink across about three quarters of his body.”

“That’ll go away in a few days,” Rhianna said. “But yeah, I *do* want to see that. Where is the little runt?”

“He and Olivia are upstairs with Cira, I believe,” Arlene said.

“Oh, they picked her up from the Creche today, too?” Rhianna said. “Great! I’ll bet she’s excited to be out of there.”

Arlene nodded. “She is. And Nana’s down in her workshop in the basement playing with her upgrades. I’ll call them all in for dinner shortly.” She chuckled and held up one of her new pinkish hands, gazing at it as she flexed the fingers. “I still can’t believe how cheap this was. If they knew about this back on Earth, you’d have a land rush.”

“If the government let people make the trip,” Roy said darkly.

Rhianna chuckled. “I’m really amazed at how...*normal* this all feels. Sitting down to a family dinner together. You’ve even...*decorated* this place just like the old house, with all the same old knickknacks. How did you do that?”

“The truly irreplaceable heirlooms, like old family photos, we shipped with us,” Arlene said. “It’s amazing how little of it there really was, when you get right down to it. Fit in a very small crate, didn’t cost much at all compared to the cryo.”

“The rest...well, we took a lot of photos and 3D images of the stuff before we left,” Roy said. “So we just fabbed it all.”

“I...like it,” Rhianna said wonderingly. “It feels like the same home, just in a new house. I hadn’t realized how much I missed that.”

“Brings back memories?” Roy asked. “Well, here’s something else you might remember.” He went to a shelf and picked up a large antique handbell, the brass bell scratched and tarnished through centuries of use. He shook it back and forth and it rang out in a peal loud enough to be heard on all levels of the house and some distance into the yard.

“Wow!” Rhianna said, her ears ringing almost as loud as the bell. “I can’t believe you brought *that* all the way from Earth!” The bell had been in the family for centuries, and for as long as Rhianna could remember it had been used to summon wayward residents and guests, especially children, to the dinner table.

“I did say we brought the irreplaceable heirlooms, dear,” Arlene said. “There was room in the trunk, and we wanted to have it on hand for the grandchildren. Speaking of whom, when can we expect you and that tiger of yours to be getting busy, hmm?”

Rhianna blushed bright red, feline ears splaying. “Mooooom!” she protested. “We haven’t even decided if we want to get married yet!”

“And that’s another thing,” Arlene said. “How long are you two planning to continue living in sin?”

Rhianna facepalmed. “All right, now I *know* you’re yanking my chain.”

Arlene laughed. “Sorry, dear, but you make it so *easy*, it’s hard to resist the lure of low-hanging fruit.”

“Did someone mention fruit? I’m *starving!*” Olivia said, bouncing down the stairs. “You’ve got some fabbed food, right?”

“Now, Livy, you know what we discussed,” Arlene said. “We didn’t raise you to be a picky eater.”

“Aw, Mom!” Olivia protested. “I’m happy to eat *anything*, as long as it’s fabbed.”

“You won’t find *only* fabbed food here, and we’re not going to tell you what’s fabbed and what isn’t,” Arlene continued. “So you can eat whatever you want, or nothing, but we’re not going to cater to your silly hang-ups. You can eat what you like once you get your own apartment.”

“Hmph.” Olivia grumbled and sank into her chair. “It’s not *silly*,” she muttered.

“I’ll eat anything you set in front of me, then come back for seconds!” Ivor said, following his sister downstairs with a small silver fox at his heels. He was indeed, as Roy had said, new-skin pink across most of his body. “And maybe thirds. I’d forgotten how much of an appetite you have when you’re made out of meat.”

“I’ll watch!” Cira said cheerfully. She leapt up atop the china cabinet with some lifter help, then lay down with her fluffy tail curled around her nose, watching everyone with yellow, cat-like eyes. “Don’t mind me. I’ll just be hunting virtual mice.”

“And even *I’m* looking forward to dinner for a change,” Socah said, coming up the other set of stairs from the basement. Her face was a match from the photos on the wall screens from when Arlene was a child: a strong-jawed blond woman in a short mohawk and Army fatigues. The plasticky, borderline uncanny valley was completely gone. She’d decided to appear older than her daughter, though that was a choice in and of itself. “I can’t remember the last time I had a real appetite...or the ability to indulge it. Who brought the potato salad? Rhianna? Looks mighty good.”

“Thanks, Nana,” Rhianna said, practically glowing at her grandmother’s new look. “I think *everything* looks good. I can’t believe I’m sitting down to a real family meal for the first time in years.”

“I can’t believe you’re sitting with the rest of us looking like *that*,” Ferris said. “It must feel a little strange. Awkward.”

“Not really,” Rhianna said, shrugging. “It just feels like...well, *me*.”

“Hey, Rhi hasn’t been a man in a year, but I haven’t been flesh and blood for almost *fifty*,” Socah said. “I...these...” words failed her for a moment as she stared at her hands. “The hardlight system is slowly cranking up my senses so I don’t get bowled over, but...I’m *starving!* Let’s dig in, everyone!”

A half hour later, the serving dishes on the table were much emptier than they had been. The roast turkey had been completely denuded, and most of the fixings were gone as well. Rhianna noted with some amusement that Olivia had at first reluctantly put a little of everything on her plate, as if trying to figure out what was fabbed so she could avoid everything that wasn’t--and then had gotten huge seconds of everything anyway. Rhianna suspected an application of the same philosophy that led to putting blank cartridges in with the live ones in firing squads--if she didn’t *know* for sure which foods were or were not fabbed, maybe she could just pretend they all were.

“So, it’s been a few days, how are you all settling in? I noticed a few new skimmers in the garage,” Rhianna asked.

“Well, new-used,” Arlene said. “Your younger brother wanted the van, so we gave it to him. They’re just inexpensive transportation.”

Inside that garage were replicas of a 2014 Smart ForTwo for Arlene, a 1967 Fiat 500F for Roy, a Harley-style skimmer-cycle that was obviously Socah’s, and a Honda Silverwing air-scooter for Olivia. That only left one who didn’t have personal transportation. Rhianna smiled at Ferris. “So, how are you and Franklin getting along?”

“Rather well, in fact,” Ferris said, smiling faintly. “He has been assisting me in looking into the new position in Nextus, as well as some other research of a more personal nature.”

Rhianna chuckled. “Would that personal research have anything to do with...Fusing?”

Ferris smiled more broadly. “As a matter of fact...yes. Neither Franklin nor I feel the need to rush into anything, and I would rather like to learn more about the effects before I take that step.”

“Good for you.” Rhianna grinned. “You’ll look great with elk ears and antler stubs.”

“Well, I’m glad you think so. Your own feline ears do rather suit you,

sister,” Ferris said.

:*We’re three minutes out, Rhi.*: Kaylee reported.

Rhianna sent her partner a ping of acknowledgment. “You know, the past week’s been really busy for everyone. Subjectively busier for all of you.”

Arlene nodded, shivering. “Still, I’m feeling mighty revitalized every time I look out the living room windows.” The rental house had a great view of the stark beauty of the Dry Ocean. “But you’re right. We really haven’t slowed down since we thawed out.”

Rhianna smiled broadly. “So, how would you like to? We’ve got something of a standing invitation with some nice folks out west. I haven’t taken advantage of it yet personally, but I think this *could* be the right time.”

“Well, I’m open to continuing the tour,” Roy Stone said. “I doubt we’ve seen everything this city--excuse me, polis--has to offer yet.”

“As long as it isn’t Sturmhaven or Cape Nord, I’m game,” Arlene added.

“I’m so glad you said that, Mom, Dad.” Rhianna counted down the seconds. *Three...two...one...*

The sound of lifter thrust vibrated the house, rattling the windows like a Sensurround subwoofer. Kaylee could have landed completely silently, but the occasion called for something dramatic. Ivor and Olivia dashed outside, followed by Cira and Socah. Rhianna followed her parents to the family room window, which faced the front.

The Dreamchaser landed softly in the driveway, just *barely* fitting. The hardlight emitters on the landing skids had projected wheels for convenience. The little ship’s Earth-style design looked out of place among the zeerusty houses and skimmers.

“This is your ship, huh?” Ivor said, noting the Freerider Garage’s logo on the sides. “Not to sound ungrateful--I’m *sure* you’re not just showing off or anything--but where are we going anyway that we need something like this?”

The cockpit door opened, Rochelle stepping out in a tiny pink triangle bikini top and short shorts. “Aloha!”

Ivor looked like he was about to get a nosebleed. “Uh...Aloha, Shelley.

But where are we going?”

Olivia gave her besotted older brother a gentle whap on the back of his head. “Aloha, silly! We were supposed to have been thawed out there, remember?”

“Ouch!” Ivor exclaimed. “That’s *real* hair and scalp now, you know.”

“Well, now you know all the nerves work right,” Olivia replied, mussing his straight blond hair.

“I’ve never been to Aloha!” Cira said. “But then, I’ve never been anywhere.”

“Well, there are a few things you should know about the place before we go off into the wild blue yonder,” Rochelle said. “First thing. This...” She gestured at her outfit, “is considered *overdressed* in some parts of the polis.”

“No nudity taboos,” Ferris informed. No doubt he’d already done some exhaustive research on the history of each polis on the continent. “It was founded by a couple of Earthers almost fifty years ago--Nick and Jason Munn. Here, I can send you a summary...”

“We’ll just take your word for it, Ferr,” Ivor said.

Socah raised an eyebrow. “Fifty years ago? Sounds like they’re from my generation. Names don’t ring any bells, though.”

“Pretty close, Nana,” Rhianna said. “Now, if you all don’t want to go there, there’s Punta Sur, but it’s not as tourist-focused.”

“Terraforming capital of Zharus,” Ferris said. “Or so they call themselves.”

“Aloha sounds just fine to me,” Ivor said. He seemed to be having trouble deciding whether he wanted to stare more at the Dreamchaser or at Rochelle.

Rufia stuck her head out of the open door. “Hey, that’s great! There’s some folks down there I’d like you to meet, too. Oh, Ferris? Frankie’s down below.”

Ferris chuckled. “I know. He messaged me earlier when you were coming.”

“Spoilsport,” Rufia said, crestfallen. “I wanted to surprise ya.”

“So, uh...who’s the pilot?” Ivor asked. “Is it just a VI running an ES?”

“No silly ‘virtual intelligences’ or ‘expert systems’ here,” Kaylee called

from inside. “Just little ‘ol me and Uncia.”

“Nice landing!” Cira complemented.

“Thanks, kid. Subs like this are only just legal enough to land in your front yard for a few hours to load and unload,” Kaylee said.

“Sooo, all aboard!” Rochelle said cheerfully. “Don’t worry about packing. We’ll just buy whatever you need when we get there.”

Olivia hugged her sister. “Which means we can go *shopping!*”

“Sure, I’m game,” Rhianna said, returning the hug. “We can girl out as much as you want.”

“There’ll be other people to girl out with there, too!” Rochelle said. “*Lots* more people.”

The family filed out onto the driveway, and up the ramp into the suborbital. Inside, the multifunction bay had been configured with seats for people and pads with harnesses for RIDEs. An antlerless Franklin was bedded down on one. “Greetings, everyone!” he said. “I fear this is simply too small a space for a magnificent rack like mine.”

“That’s what *she* said!” Rufia crowed, happy for the straight line.

Franklin himself was unperturbed, having lived with her long enough to expect it, even laughing a little himself. “A real zinger, that one. Splendid.”

“Dad loves playing the straight man,” Yvonne added from her own pad. “Have a seat, everyone. We like our takeoffs a little hard, so the dampers are down-tuned a little.”

“After we’re in space I’ll have you come forward to the flight deck by ones and twos to see what it’s like,” Rhianna said, stepping forward to Fuse up with Kaylee and entering the forward hatch. Rochelle had Uncia’s full-sized DE along, and Fused up with it to join her.

Kaylee’s face appeared on the lower deck screen. “Your attention please. Your captain has turned on the ‘no smoking’ and ‘fasten seat belts’ signs. Please make sure your seats are in an upright position. Your stewardess will be around to collect any rubbish you may have.”

The Dreamchaser lifted off the ground with a muted rumble, landing gear retracting. The garage doors closed as the house dropped out of sight. They quickly left the Dome through one of the portals, ascending higher and higher to get a better view of the polis itself.

Uplift was situated on the old continental shelf between the Eastern Range and the steep, eroded continental slope that dropped down to the Hardpan two kilometers below. It was one of the few places where rain-bearing clouds could form in special circumstances in the winter. Nearly twenty million people lived on a narrow strip of a city, barely twenty kilometers wide, but over a hundred from north to south.

“You know, they might as well connect the Dome to the Traverse Tunnel,” Kaylee said. “There’s only a few clicks left. I have no idea why they don’t.”

“Blame the Tunnelers,” Uncia replied. “They’re afraid if we do that, we’ll just swallow their unrecognized polis whole.”

“About a million people live in there,” Ferris said. “I can see the reluctance.”

“Why are we facing east?” Ivor asked. “A suborbital trajectory...”

Everyone was pushed back into their seats under 3 Gs of acceleration as Kaylee and Uncia pushed the throttles to full power, pulling up the nose to a 45-degree angle. “Wooooo!” Socah cheered. “We’re going into *orbit!*”

“So much for my surprise,” Rhianna said. “Yep. We’re fully orbit-certified. Kaylee and Uncia are doing the piloting. This is a test flight, too. Consider yourselves test monkeys.”

“How did...you manage that?” Ferris asked, straining to get the words out under the acceleration. “Everything I’ve read suggests...orbital license is...really difficult to acquire.”

“Skill chips for us RIDEs,” Uncia said simply. “Here, I’ll turn the dampers up a couple notches...”

“It does help to be...well, *us*,” Rochelle said. “Heroes of the polis, and all that. It’s a little bit of an unfair advantage, maybe, but hey--we paid our dues, so we’re not too proud to abuse the privilege a little.” The sky through the viewports grew steadily darker.

“Besides, after being stuck up here for a few hours once, well...” Rhianna said, “we just wanted that much more peace of mind.”

“You basically watched movies until Zane came to rescue you in one of those monster Starmasters,” Ivor said. “They had you watching really bad movies and riffing on them. It was in one of those simmed dramedys.”

“*That* won’t happen again,” Kaylee said. “We’ve got a completely

isolated backup battery pack now. We have to throw a physical switch to hook it in, so nobody can short it on us even if they do hack us.” She cleared her throat. “Anyway, we thought we’d take you around the block a couple times, see what you probably didn’t see before. It’s a *big* planet. Four times Earth’s surface area.”

“Neorus, Eridani, Kepler, and Zheng He were all rather hostile, shall we say, to human life, without extensive terraforming,” Ferris said. “Big as this planet is, we settled here without much trouble. It was worth sending *two billion* people here. I don’t know how Earth did it without depleting every single resource in Sol.”

“Things were different back then,” Socah said. “My own Grandma used to like to talk about it. After all the wars, including the ones that came this close to wiping the whole planet, people had a new appreciation of how fragile life was. They figured it was worth the trouble to make sure humanity didn’t get wiped out by the next war, or even just a big rock that tumbled down from the sky or whatever.” She snorted. “*That* fear sure didn’t last too long.”

“Plus, they figured out some major starship design engineering efficiencies in propulsion, durability, and power generation,” Ivor said. “There was a constant ‘wagon train’ between Earth and her Colonies. Send one group of ships out, offload the colonists, send back the automated core ship for refitting. Got a lot easier with FTL.”

“Ah, yes,” Ferris said. “I believe one colony ship made a dozen round trips before they retired it barely ten years ago, the *Conestoga*. A few parts of the hull and interior are in a Landing City museum.”

“Would you all just stop analyzing it and enjoy the moment?” Olivia said, her face pressed to the porthole next to her. “We’ve got a whole *planet* spread out below us, geez!”

“Oh, you wanna talk about enjoying the moment? Get a load of this!” Rochelle said, her grin evident in her voice. The ship began to roll to starboard.

“Hey!” Olivia protested as the planet fell away from her porthole.

“If I could direct your attention...well, *up*...” Rochelle continued. Everyone looked up to see the cover iris opening over a transparent aluminum viewport that took up most of the ceiling. “Say hello to the west

coast of Laurasia. We'll come up on Landing City in a few minutes."

"Ooooooh!" Olivia gasped, staring up at a whole continent. It was firmly on the night side of the planet, and several areas were lit up with spiderweb-like trceries of light. Much of the continent was still in darkness save for a few scattered bright spots here and there, unlike Earth where the entire landmass would have been glowing.

"If you're not still strapped in, hold onto something," Rhianna said. "I'm turning off artificial gravity in three...two...one..." Everyone suddenly felt the weight go away. "So if you want to float up and take a closer look, be our guest!"

"Don't mind if I do!" Olivia said, releasing her seatbelt and pushing carefully off to drift up to the viewport. "Wooooow...what a view!"

"Yeah, it never gets old," Rufia said, grinning.

The cockpit door opened and the Fused lynx jetted through. "You know, when we bought this thing I thought the Garage would continue business as usual. I was taking a lot of repair jobs in the Dry, but my competitors were beating me to the punch. We've only used the sub for that purpose two or three times. I can barely justify the cost, even with all the money flowing in."

"Let's be honest here," Rochelle said, following her in Fused with Uncia. "We weren't *really* thinking about that at the time. We were thinking about some way we could spend Zane's huge overpayment for making him a DIN on something nice we could at least *pretend* was business-related. Besides, Zane *wanted* to inflict a Starmaster on us, so we had to grab this in self-defense."

"This is about the smallest sub on the market out there that isn't a bespoke," Kaylee said. "Like the Waltons and their X-15s and HL-20s."

"You always tried to spend every penny I gave you during the bad old days," Arlene said.

"Little boy logic is all I can say," Rhianna said.

"Your father and I were making so much money at the time we didn't know what to do with it, ourselves," Arlene said. She gazed at the landscape five hundred kilometers beneath them. "There's still *so much* down there that doesn't have a glimmer of artificial light. Even Earth still has people everywhere."

“Laurasia alone could swallow Earth’s entire population and not even burp,” Rochelle said. “You can’t really get a sense for how much bigger the planet is without living on it for a while. At least that’s what I’ve heard from other ex-Earthers. A globe just looks like a globe, and all you can tell from ground level is that the horizon looks funny. Wait until you see Rodinia.”

“Or not-see it,” Kaylee added. “We’ll have to turn up the false color imagery in the dark. Totally native vegetation down there.”

“And a few virulently isolationist Intie enclaves,” Yvonne said.

“So, everyone, just relax and enjoy the view,” Rhianna said. “We’ll be landing in Aloha on the second orbit.”

“Because it isn’t really an orbit if we don’t go all the way around at least once,” Uncia smirked.

“Which reminds me, Shelley. We *do* still need to join the Zero Gee Club,” Rufia smirked.

“I’ll try to pencil it into my busy schedule!” Rochelle promised, winking at Rhianna’s little brother. Ivor looked like he was about to have a nosebleed again.

During the flight they took turns floating up by the viewport, and also slipping up into the small flight deck to spend a few minutes in the co-pilot’s couch just before the de-orbit burn. “My, this is a nice little bird,” Socah mused, looking over the instrument board. “All the amenities. Takes me back to drop shuttle training in the 56th.”

“You had shuttle training, Nana?” Rhianna asked.

“Cross-training,” Socah said. “Backup specialty. Mainly so there’d be someone who could grab the controls and land us if both our pilots took a hit. Never ended up using it much. Still, I hear it’s like riding a bicycle...”

“If you pick up a sub license, you can borrow her sometime, as long as you bring her back with a full charge,” Rhianna said, grinning.

“I might just do that,” Socah mused. “Would make for a great family outing, being able to go anywhere on the planet. Not sure what I should do for my new career yet. Somethin’ very non-military.”

“You know, there’s someone I should introduce you to when we’re back at Uplift,” Rhianna mused. “Kay’s original Army partner, Anny. She’s Zane’s chief of security now. She might have a few ideas for you.”

“Maybe I’ll try something more science-y,” Socah mused. “Or go into business. Or...I dunno. Can’t hurt to meet her, sure. Scuttlebutt is you know Quinoa Steader, too. Mikel’s daughter?”

“That’s her. Sphinx Integrate now,” Rhianna said.

“I wouldn’t mind saying hello to ol’ Crazy Joe after fifty years, if you can finagle that,” Socah said with an unbalanced smile.

“I think that can be arranged,” Rhianna said, grinning. “Quinnie comes around the Garage for a visit sometimes, and she’s got a pretty wicked sense of humor where her Uncle Joe is concerned. I’ll bet she’d love to introduce him to a face from his past, probably as a complete ambush. I’ll let you know if she stops by.”

Socah nodded. “Thanks. I’ll be looking forward to it.”

Just then, a chime sounded from the instrument panel. Rhi glanced at it. “Looks like it’s time to start our retrofire. Better get everyone back to their seats.”

Socah nodded, unstrapping from the co-pilot’s station. “See you dirtside.”

“All right, everyone, turning gravity back on in thirty seconds!” Rhianna announced. “Buckle in, we’re about to re-enter.”

Everyone drifted back down to their seats and latched in place, as their weight slowly returned. The Dreamchaser’s nose began to glow cherry red as it entered the atmosphere. “To our port side, that silver thread you can just make out through the glow is Aloha’s famous Beanstalk,” Rhianna said over the intercom. “We won’t be passing very close--space traffic control gets a little antsy about orbital paths around it--but it’s close enough on the ground to visit sometime.”

The glow gradually faded as the lifting body shed atmospheric heat, and the globe lost its curvature and the sea and land spread out below them. Uncia and Kaylee guided the sub in a sweeping arc, shedding velocity and locking in on the guide beacon from the Munns’ home, the Aerie.

“Right on approach path,” Uncia reported. “I can’t wait until I have my *maxima* DE. Bringing thrusters back on...now! We have powered flight.”

“Smoothly done, Uncia!” Franklin said from the passenger hold.

“Thank you, kind sir. We’ll be on the ground in ten minutes,” Uncia

replied. "In front of us is Tranquility Bay. Our landing spot is...right here."

The snow leopardess magnified the image, showing a sprawling, open-plan home atop a cliff, with a similar smaller structure next to it. The walls were mostly windows, half of them with a foggy privacy screen.

"I suppose being one of the city-state's founders has its privs," Roy said. "I hope they know we're coming."

"Oh, snap!" Rochelle said, grinning. "I *knew* we forgot something!"

"We had to connect with their house landing system," Kaylee said. "So they won't be caught completely off guard."

"And they did say it was a standing invitation," Uncia said. "Just drop in any time.' So we are. Literally!"

"Something's coming up behind us fast, from above... Oh they know," Kaylee smirked and the comm channel opened up.

"Good day to ya!" Astranikki's friendly voice came over the comm. A screen opened up, showing the golden eagle integrate to starboard. She glowed in the air. "Permission to comm aboard?"

"Granted," Kaylee said.

A moment later, the eagle-woman appeared holographically in the cabin with the others. She made a show of looking around and nodded to Socah. "A whole nest of Stonegates. Welcome to Zharus."

"We're all just happy we made it without any freezer burn," Olivia said.

The bird-woman grinned, the edge of her beak turning up, and looked at Rhianna. "So how does it feel to go from a star orphan back to a family woman?"

"Still trying to wrap my brain around it," Rhianna replied. "But these are the kinds of problems you *want* to have in life. Hope you don't mind, Astranikki."

"Nah! Not at all. Just coming back from space myself. Had to pick up a few things for Sigma," the bird-woman replied. She moved through the cabin, a wing occasionally flickering through a seat before stopping next to Socah. "Nice to see another four-thirty here. Not many of us left here on Zharus."

"Huh," Socah said. "Four-thirty?" Her eyes flickered as she looked something up. "Yup! Public bios on both... ADF jet jockeys, huh?" The

hardlight fatigues Socah was projecting shimmered into a North American Army service uniform, in the less-formal garrison style, with all of her appropriate rank insignia and decorations in place.

Astranikki flickered as well, becoming human and male again, dressed in the light blue uniform of the Aleutian Defense force. “Been a long time since I wore these. ‘Fraid I don’t have as much metal as you,” Captain Nicolas Munn said. He tugged at his coat in the classic Picard maneuver. “Still, I prefer this one to the one I wore just before I came here. Never cared for Space Force.”

“Get a load of this, Grans,” Olivia interrupted them. “Found this video on Nick and his RIDE, Astra. It’s like a marriage proposal! Then they got even closer, if I understand how Integration works.”

“Yup, that’s us,” Nick said, blushing. “In hindsight, we were well on the path to Integrating long before that storm did it, but that first fuse, I just thought to make it proper considering the mess I made with Jay and Wanda’s mom. Ended up creating one of Aloha’s first tourist booms when it went viral.”

“Family relationships get rather complicated here, don’t they?” Arlene asked.

“Well mine’s not too bad, other than me integrating. No crossriding except for me, just a few divorces and one good happy marriage. Though I am beginning to wonder about Nikki, that’s Wanda’s eldest. Now my brother, his family got it all. Inties, Criss-crossing, just no exotics yet.”

Socah shook her head, momentarily lost in thought from the ancient uniforms. “I was barely a second louie during the ADF skirmishes,” Socah said. “So I doubt we ever faced each other directly, Captain Munn. Col. Socah Gates, 56th Heavy Mech Infantry. Pleased to meet you.”

“And pleased to meet you as well. No hard feelings; we never had a chance to meet back then. Jason and I were aquatic birds. Spent all our time over the Pacific and Arctic. All in all, we didn’t see much action. Mainly peacekeeping and SAR.”

Socah gave the Integrate’s projection a salute. “Looking forward to meeting you on the ground, ma’am.”

“And give you the advantage?” Nick morphed back to her golden eagle appearance. “It’s all in the past now. This is my present, and my

future.”

“I understand you used Vari-Tec IDEs up until fairly recently?” Socah said in a borderline fangirl voice.

“Still using, or trying to. Let me introduce you to Sigma. Follow me!” The holo-avatar flickered out and the golden eagle shot ahead of the sub, leading them down to the Aerie below.

The Dreamchaser landed atop the platform next to the house, the engines’ whine fading as the pilots powered it down. Almost before the noise faded, the side hatches were opening and the passengers were disembarking. Rochelle de-Fused from Uncia’s full-sized shell into the body-hugging *minima* undershell before stepping out with the rest.

Astranikki floated just outside the hatch to greet them. “Welcome to Aloha. I’m afraid I don’t have any leis handy to give you a proper greeting.”

“No problem. Judging from the last time I was here, we’ll be draped in them and little else by the time we leave,” Rufia said.

“I’ve heard you have your old Vari-Tecs here somewhere?” Socah asked, trying not to sound too eager.

Astranikki dragged a talon lightly on the patio. “Wel-ell,” she dragged out. “I promised Wanda I wouldn’t keep dragging our guests down to see them. But since you’ve asked, I can make an exception. You folks can follow me if you want to see, or feel free to stay up here and enjoy the sun and the views if you’d rather.”

She turned and pulled her wings in, landing and walking into the big house. Toys moved out of the way for her, clearing a path to a door off the kitchen, leading down to the massive garage and workshops built deep within the rock.

“Fraid it’s just me here at the moment. Wanda and Ryan have their twins down at the beach, Nikki’s spending the night with friends, and Scratch is out with the Samoyed twins,” Astranikki explained, winking at Rochelle, before going on.

“Since you probably don’t want to be bouncing about the city in that sub and you don’t all have your own RIDEs yet, I’ve already sent for a rental. It should be up here by the time we’re done.”

“Thanks,” Rhianna said. “That’ll be helpful.”

“Oh, God...I see they made a smarmy movie out of your early exploits here,” Socah said.

Astranikki laughed. “Don’t mention that thing around Sam, unless you want to risk being gored. When she saw it, she was livid. Not only did they set her up in a love triangle between Jay and I, they made her *Terran!* Jason was sleeping in the dingy for a month after that. I’m just glad I was in Nextus back then.” The corners of her beak turned up a little, looking from Socah to Olivia. She noticed both of them watching her, and spread her wings. “Like the wings, eh?”

“They’re...stunning,” Olivia said. “So’s the rest of you. What’s that golden sheen to your flight and tail feathers?”

“That’s where my hardlight emitters are, in the shafts,” Astranikki said. “Funky Intie techno-biology. If you suddenly feel like being a bird, though, there’s a fifteen month cooldown even *without* a sex change, and you get some interesting physiological changes.”

“I’ve done my research. I don’t feel like laying an egg every month,” Olivia said. “You’ve just got this majestic, fierce look going that’s also very, uh, feminine.”

“It is pretty impressive,” Ivor said speculatively.

“I like foxes better,” Cira piped up. The silver vixen nevertheless was as impressed as Ivor and Olivia.

“In any case, we might as well start this way. My brother and I set up a kind of memorial for our old IDEs,” Astranikki said.

Upon seeing the Q-scorched remains of Alpha, Socah gaped. “Holy Mother of God!”

“And *that’s* what raw Q can do to unshielded mecha,” Rhianna said. “Qubitite multiplies, *magnifies*, the properties of whatever chemical material it’s doped with. RIs and sarium are just the tip of the iceberg.”

“We never figured out what really happened. It vaporized itself and the records when it went up and took Alpha out. Leading theory is there was a natural battery or something like that, built up with the salts from the Briny,” Astranikki said. “It amplified my scan pulse by hundreds of times and sent it back. Damn near killed me. Would have, if it wasn’t for Jason and Sam. God, that was almost fifty years ago.”

“That’s a VSF-25 Vari-Tech,” Socah said. “Decent transforming

mecha for its time. The series managed to fill infantry and air superiority almost as well as dedicated units.”

“IDEs were never very popular here even before sarium and hardlight,” Rhianna said. “As with most unshielded tech, the qubitite in the Dry would get in their workings and shut them right down--one of the reasons what Clint did with Chauncey was so impressive--and there wasn’t much need for a machine like that outside of the Dry.”

“I don’t recognize the rest of your stable,” Socah said. “Homegrown designs, no doubt.”

“We had help from former Earther designers and engineers, but I like to tinker,” Astranikki said. “I’ve picked up a few skills...even more since I turned Intie and came home. Wanda was the programmer, and I was the mechanic, but we didn’t have the nano-design skills like Rhianna has. I’ve been learning it since then, but it’s not easy.”

Socah paused next to the last one on display. “Are those claw marks?”

The Integrate nodded slowly. “They are. We don’t publicize that story much. That’s Zeta, Jason’s last before the incident and she hooked up with Melody.”

Ferris looked distracted for a moment before speaking. “Wow,” was all he said.

Astranikki pointed to Zeta. “That is what a feral RIDE and a Dry storm can do to a damaged IDE. We did rescue the tourists in the end, but the whole incident made a huge impact on my family. I don’t want to get into something so dark when you’re trying to relax. On to more pleasant topics.”

She led them into the next room. Transparent aluminum windows flooded it with light, giving a view of the bay. “This is Ryan’s workshop. He’s working on a new pair of dressers for the twins. Their twins that is.”

The final room had no outside windows, but it was still brightly lit. Workbenches lined the walls and ran down the centre, with a couple of industrial fabbers at one end. The other end was dominated by a partially assembled IDE, similar to the models in the Memorial.

“This is my current project, Sigma. An IDE for me. Still a lot of bugs to work out, but we’re making progress. To her left you’ll see the owner of the Aerie, my beautiful daughter, Wanda.”

The snow leopard-woman waved to the crowd and smiled. “Greetings everyone. Your sub parked on our patio was rather hard to miss.”

“You don’t mind, do you?” Rhianna asked. “We can move it if we need to.”

“Nah, it’s fine. Part of the reason the patio was made that big.”

The eagle walked over and hugged the woman. “You didn’t interrupt your beach outing for this, did you?”

“Not at all. The twins were turning into raisins and getting cranky. Ryan’s upstairs putting them down for a nap.”

Wanda and Crystal peered at Rochelle. “What is that you’re wearing?” Wanda asked.

“Oh, me? Just a little something something we cooked up,” Uncia replied.

“I’ve never seen a shell so light before,” Wanda mused. “Does it have all three modes?”

“Uh-huh,” Rochelle said. “Small kitty, hoverboard, and fursuit like you see.”

“That could have some definite applications, especially around here,” Wanda said. “I could see it replacing wetsuits for recreational diving. Where’s the core?”

Rochelle grinned. “We’ll be happy to tell you all about it later. In fact, we were thinking maybe we could drop by later this evening for more tech geekery, if you’d be free. Since Rhi’s here this time, I thought we could do a little side-by-side DIN bakeoff.”

Wanda grinned back. “I can *get* free. And I think I know just to call in.”

Rhianna grinned. “Boy, won’t they be in for a treat. It’s always fun DINing up a newbie and watching the look on his face when he first tries it out.”

Wanda chuckled. “You’ve got that right. Like little kids on Christmas morning who just learned Santa Claus *is* real after all.”

Just then, a horn sounded from outside. An outside view popped open, showing an oversized RIDE-friendly limousine skimmer had arrived without a driver.

“Looks like our ride’s here,” Rufia said.

Rhianna nodded. "It's been great meeting you--and I guess we'll see you later tonight, Wanda."

"Sure, Krystal, give Zed a call, see if he and his new girlfriend are available tonight. I suspect they can free themselves."

Astranikki started escorting the Stonegates back up, through the smaller house. "Socah, give me a shout later on, we can knock back some beers or wine or your drink of choice and bore the young'uns of the tales of old. I'm sure Jason and Sam would love to join in."

Socah chuckled. "I think I will just take you up on that."

"Meet us on the *Queen of Thorns* tonight. Looking forward to it," Astranikki said.

Rochelle went and got Uncia's full-sized shell from the shuttle, then they all filed out to the limo. Rufia and Yvonne climbed into the driver's seat, Rochelle took shotgun, and everyone else climbed in the back. Rufia put the car in gear and away they went. "And we're off!" Yvonne said cheerfully.

"So, there's some other people I'd like you all to meet," Rochelle said. "And we're in luck--they're free tonight. So I commed them to meet us at a little beachfront bistro Rufe found here, for dinner for them and an evening snack for us. Great place to watch the sun set over the ocean."

"Sounds like fun," Arlene said. "It's getting to be just about time to feed the new tum again."

"Great! We'll be there in a jiff." Rufia and Yvonne steered the skimmer limo onto one of Aloha's main thoroughfares and headed north to one of the beach neighborhoods.

"Reminds me a lot of Hawaii," Rhianna said. "This is actually my first time here."

"I was about to say the same," Arlene added.

"Well, it's not too surprising," Rochelle said. "Has to live up to its name, after all."

They wound their way into a nice neighborhood along the beach, with houses giving way to tasteful businesses. There were a lot a lot more people on the sidewalks in various states of undress. The resident Alohans were easy enough to pick out of the crowd, be they RIDE, Integrate, or human. The tourists were equally easy to spot--they were the ones who had the

most clothes on.

At last they pulled up in the parking lot of a small seaside restaurant whose placard whimsically proclaimed “We Have Crabs!”

“Try the kraken. It’s a native animal a lot like a squid or octopus,” Rufia said.

“*Eww*,” Olivia said. “They’ve got fab food too, right?”

Arlene sighed theatrically. “Where *did* we go wrong in raising her?”

“Well, to be fair, we couldn’t really get fresh food back on Earth,” Roy pointed out. “So she doesn’t have that much experience with it.” Olivia rolled her eyes and said nothing more.

Rufia pulled the limo into one of the longer bus parking spots, and killed the lifters. “All ashore what’s goin’ ashore!” The Stonegates, Cira, and Franklin filed out of the bus, with Rochelle/Uncia and Rufia/Yvonne bringing up the rear.

“As neat as this place looks, I’m not about to take my top off,” Olivia said. “I’m a tourist and proud of it. Plus, I’m waaaay too pale.”

“*You’re* too pale?” Ivor scoffed. “You didn’t have any limbs or skin replaced. *I’m* the really pale one here.”

“There’s only one way you get less pale, you know,” Rufia said. “It involves ultraviolet light and bare skin!”

“Just wait’ll you’ve been here awhile,” Rochelle said. She held out her arms and Uncia’s larger shell de-Fused into its skimmer form in another parking space, leaving her in the skintight suit of her *minima* shell. “Okay, let’s go see some food!”

“That’s a...nosebleed-inducing look, you know?” Ivor said.

“We know!” Uncia said happily. “When in Aloha...”

“Rufia!” a woman with long black hair and cat ears called from the dining patio. “Nice to meet everyone! I’m Dana Skyler.”

“Hey, Dana!” Rufia yelled back. “Better push some tables together, we’ve got a crowd. No way we’re gonna be able to avoid the mandatory 18% gratuity with this bunch, eh?”

“Skylers, Skylers...” Roy said. “I just found a news story about...wow.”

Ivor looked at the three of them. “*All* of you crossrode at once? Really?”

“That would be correct,” the large lion-maned man next to her said.

“I’m Kelly, and this is Jamie. As you probably already know from the news story.”

“Hi!” Jamie said, her giant fennec ears swiveling forward like radar dishes.

“Charlene and Fiona aren’t here yet,” Dana Skyler said. “Their story’s way different than ours, though.”

“Feels kind of contrived, doesn’t it?” Rufia said. “Like some writer somewhere came up with the thinnest possible excuse to make a whole family crossride at the same time? Funny how sometimes real life can just be like that.”

“You folks have an interesting story, yourselves,” Kelly Skyler said. “You know, this is one of those times when being in the news actually *helps*. There isn’t much else to tell one another about the broad strokes our mutual situations. That was a fine interview you gave SNN, Mr. Stone.”

“Thank you,” Roy said. “Though I think the coverage is canted a *little* in our favor, thanks to Rhianna’s fame. Your own story is a trifle sketchier.”

“We heard about *you* even before that, though,” Dana said. “Back on Earth. Your...public shaming was all over the submeshes before you left.”

“We’d kinda wondered what happened to you, in a following-the-news kind of way,” Jamie said. “Me and my friends in VL, anyway. Hadn’t realized you took the slow boat.”

Olivia’s eyes darted back and forth as she read the story from her implant. “You really crossed only a *month* after you got here?”

“It wasn’t exactly by choice at the time...but I’m sure not complaining,” Jamie said, reaching down to pat the head of the giant fennec lying next to her seat.

“Saved our lives,” Dana said. “You might’ve read that part, but if Isolde, Athena, and Gordon hadn’t decided to seek revenge...we’d be a trio of corpses drying in the sand.” Behind her chair, Isolde started purring.

“And doubled the size of our family, too,” Kelly said. “Three more mouths to feed.”

“Luckily, they got rich at the same time,” Rufia said. “Not a patch on Zane or Rhi, but they’ll be able to live on the interest forever.”

Cira, who had settled on Ivor’s lap, put her forepaws up on the table. “Hey, don’t forget about me! I’m Cira!”

Athena peered across the table at her. “You certainly are. Hello, little one.”

The silver vixen cocked her head. “Are those Fischer VR-46S sport lifters in your specs? *And* an Aloha Rideworks Pro Diver Orbital Drop Aeroshell Generator?”

“They are,” Athena said proudly.

“I had VR-44s,” Cira said wistfully, resting her head on the table.

“Had,” Athena said. “I see. No need to elaborate.”

Ivor scratched her between the ears. “You’ll have something just as good again. That’s a promise.”

“Yay!” Cira wagged her tail happily.

“How have you adjusted since the change?” Ferris asked thoughtfully. “It must have been quite a shock, adjusting to new genders and a new world at the same time.”

“All I can say is *anything* feels normal after a few months of *sitting down*, if you know what I mean,” Dana said dryly. “I’m sure Rufia, my *daughter*, and Charlene will back me up on that. Once Charley gets here. Where *are* they?”

“The *Rocky Comfort* is late getting in today,” Jamie said. “They’ve been out prospecting for new plays, what with that fancy boob-tacular sensor package Fiona has.”

“Boob-tacular?” Dana said.

“Well, what else would you call it?” Jamie said defensively. “I just got a ping from Fiona. They should be here in maybe five minutes.”

Rufia and Yvonne perked up at the mention of the *Rocky Comfort*. “Hey, our elkbois are back in town?” Yvonne said. “Sweet! I’ve been meaning to talk to Larry ‘bout something.”

“Where’d my mother go?” Arlene asked, looking at the empty chair. “We got so into our chatting she managed to slip away. She’s not responding to my pings...”

“Oh, don’t worry, Mom,” Rhianna said. “After what she’s been through, I think she deserves a little time alone.”

*The sand between my toes*, Socah thought blissfully, flexing them, feeling the grains flow between. Warmth and late-afternoon sunshine

against her simulated bare skin, and a body with the clock turned back seventy-five years, to the young woman she was before accepting her officer's commission. Turning back time.

*Okay, Socah Gates, what do you do with this old brain and new skin now?* she pondered. She folded her arms beneath her pert, youthful breasts. Surrounded by other nude bathers she hardly stood out. She walked forward just far enough to allow warm seawater wash around her ankles. While she had a low-power lifter that gave her enough buoyancy to swim, she didn't quite feel like it.

As she waded, a snatch of song drifted down from someone's audio player up the beach.

*Wouldn't it be nice if we were older  
Then we wouldn't have to wait so long  
And wouldn't it be nice to live together  
In the kind of world where we belong*

The song was in multi-part harmony, hauntingly familiar, something dimly-remembered from fifty years ago. Socah's neural lace searched her hypothalamus for the associations.

*You know it's going to make it that much better  
When we could say goodnight and stay together*

The last time Socah had heard the tune was out of the mouths of Joe and Mikel Steader. This time it was just a recording, but the vibrancy out of the mouths of the Beach Boys brought back that day, thirty meters down in a waterlogged trench and the careful recovery of a half dozen solid-state hard drives wrapped in plastic. By some miracle, most of the terabytes of data in them was recoverable with late 25th century technology. Someone had carefully backed up everything they'd owned in digital format and put it in a hermetically-sealed safe. It was a treasure trove of world culture just before Peak Oil in 2045: music, twitters, Facebook, movies, images, tax records, diary entries, texts, and various ephemera.

Joe and his brother Mikel had celebrated by playing the music for the entire 56th, who had listened politely even if most of them had been fairly unimpressed. "Aw, c'mon, people!" Joe had said. "This is your heritage! Show a little enthusiasm!" It hadn't helped. Of course, he had the last laugh in the end, Socah recalled. For the next month, even the ones who hadn't

much cared for the music kept catching themselves unconsciously humming the tunes. Say what you would about the 20th century, they sure knew how to breed earworms.

The fruits of all that effort, almost two years going from site to site, finding media in a hundred different formats (physical, analog, and digital) literally surrounded her. The Zharusians themselves were building new things out of that centuries-dead culture, often blending together several decades at once.

Through it all, there was a common thread. Optimism about the future, a sense that the best was yet to come, instead of looking decadently behind at a golden age. Many on Earth considered that to be centuries past, with the construction of the three Beanstalks in 2250, the establishment of the Colonies, a Renaissance that fully deserved the capital letter that lasted almost two hundred years.

The United Earth government officially considered those days *past* now, the result of too much population loss, too much colonization. A seething resentment, a metastasizing envy of the achievements of her Colonies, had since taken hold. Where Zharus, for all its lumps and flaws, was optimistic and forward-looking, Earth was the opposite.

*And I'm here, twenty light-years from there*, Socah thought, seafoam flowing around her calves. She could have left Earth decades ago herself, but just never felt right about leaving the rest of her family like that. “*We’re here*,” she said aloud.

Those twenty light-years between Zharus and Earth felt like a long way. But part of her refused to fully let go. The UE military was busily putting down rebellion in the Sol system, the destruction of Sharp City a few decades ago their last *blatant* effort in-system to keep Ganymede, Ceres, Vesta, Luna, and the other billion off-planet “Solar Citizens” from getting too many ideas about their own autonomy. Her connections in the Earth military had indicated they were starting to look towards Centauri and Proxima. Mil-spec FTL could reportedly cross that distance in a matter of a couple weeks.

In her own lifetime, FTL speeds from Earth to Zharus had improved many-fold, from taking almost twenty years barely past *c* to the present six-to-eight months. There was no reason to think that trend would stop, or

slow down.

*So I'll enjoy the quiet while it lasts,* Socah thought, looking up at the clouds. *And do my duty for Zharus when she needs me.*

“Hey, everyone, sorry I’m late.” An extremely-well-endowed fox Fuser stepped up to the table as the gathered families and friends were still looking over the menu. She held out her arms and the fox de-Fused, leaving an equally-well-endowed red-headed woman. Her hair was in braids that were coiled and pinned about halfway down her back, and she wore a halter top and daisy dukes over an Easy Fuse wetsuit as a concession to propriety. Ivor gazed appreciatively at her, then tore his eyes away to try to keep from doing the creepy stare thing.

“Hey, Charley!” Rufia said. “Hey, Fi! We saved a chair and a plug for yas.”

“Thanks, Rufe!” Charlene said, smiling at her as she slipped into the seat. She tossed her head to settle her braids, then picked up the menu.

Olivia looked between the newcomer and her brother. *:That could be you, ‘Ivy’, if you really want,:* she sent privately.

*:You’re kidding me,:* Ivor replied, looking at Charlene again.

“Everyone, I’d like you to meet my great-great-great-great-great grandparent,” Rochelle said. “Charlene McClaren, one of the original colonists, and Fiona, her partner. Charlene, Fi, the people you don’t know yet are Rhianna’s family, just in from Earth themselves.”

“Oh!” Charlene said. “Um, hi. Hope you had a better trip getting here than I did.”

“Three years in cryo,” Roy said. “But...” he gave a quizzical look to Rochelle. “Okay, if my news searches are accurate...”

“I spent just a *leeeetle* bit longer in cryo than that,” Charlene said. “Just a smidgin.”

“A *teensy* bit, then?” Arlene said. “*Mister McClaren?*”

“It was after bein’ a mite’v an accident,” Fiona said. “Fer some value of ‘accident.’”

“They usually are,” Rufia said, and about half the table chuckled knowingly.

*:You’re not kidding me,:* Ivor sent. Olivia grinned at him. *:I almost*

*get the feeling you don't want me as Ivy sometimes.:*

*:It took our sister five years to decide what she wanted,:* Olivia reminded him. *:Don't go thinking you'll be as happy as she is.:*

*:Or Rufia? Or Astranikki? Or Dana Skyler?:* Ivor retorted. *:So far I've got no reason to think it'd be a bad thing to do. None of them are unhappy.:*

*:Point. I'll admit that,:* Olivia replied.

"How remarkable," Ferris said. "Do you realize, you might be the earliest-born person yet alive on this planet?"

"Maybe," Charlene said. "I gather there were a couple of other long-sleepers found in the last hundred years or so, and they might still be alive too." She shrugged. "Anyway, that plus a *mu* will get me a cup of coffee."

"I'm sure there must be plenty of institutes of learning who would like to interview you, from a historical viewpoint," Ferris insisted. "The things you could tell them about the early days of the colonization effort..."

Charlene blushed faintly. "You might be right. Thing is, I kind of, um, haven't exactly been advertising who I am, since I crossed. Partly that's not wanting to deal with the press..."

"I hear *that*," Rhianna said with feeling.

"But partly...um...well, I'm kind of dating the doctor who revived me out of cryo, but he doesn't know who I am, and I'm not sure how to tell him."

"Still? Really?" Rufia asked. "Damn, girl, you've got to get the lead out. The longer it goes, the deeper in you get."

"I know, I know." Charlene sighed. "I just...kind of want things to go on like they are right now is all."

"She's after bein' right, ye know," Fiona said, raising her head above table level. "I wouldn'a introduced ye that way had I known it'd turn out like this."

Charlene patted her on the head and chuckled. "It's all right. You couldn't have known. Anyway, I'm pretty happy the way things are right now. Got my guy, got my fox, got a job..." She shrugged. "We're getting by. Though I might could do better if I could find a good lawyer. There's a little matter of a huge sum of compound interest owed to me from my original share in the colony..."

On the other side of the table, Cira was staring at Fiona in a mixture of envy and admiration. “I’m *surrounded* by bigger vixens in hot rod shells!” she grumped.

Fiona perked up, ear swiveling to orient on the smaller fox. “An’ who’s after bein’ that cute little chiseller over there?”

“This is my new friend Cira,” Ivor said, petting the nape of her neck. “She’s fresh out of the Creche, after a little, uh, misstep. I’m building her a Fuser-sized Drive Extender once I know what to buy and how to put it together.”

“An’ isn’t that just a kick in the pants?” Fiona mused, looking at the Creche-born vixen with equal fascination. “The things they can do these days. Might just have to have a wee snapper of me own someday.”

“I’m sure we can find a willing tod,” Charlene said.

“Excuse me, did I hear you say you were looking for a lawyer?” Roy said.

“Yeah. It’s kind of a silly thing, really, but...well, after they found the last long-sleeper before me, they passed a law so that the banks wouldn’t have to give any more corpsicles who might turn up the interest we’re technically owed on our share in the original colony charter. Which means I’m a whole lot less rich than I by rights ought to be. I don’t really care about the money so much, but I feel like they damn sure owe me *something* as a matter of principle.”

“My v-card,” Roy said, passing it over. “I think we can help one another, Miss McClaren. I’ll resolve your case *pro bono*, if you’re willing to put enough confidence in me to get a ruling in your favor.”

“Make it a contingency basis, and take whatever percentage you think is fair,” Charlene said. “The amount of money we’re talking about, I won’t miss it, and I’m not gonna have you work for nothing.”

“*Pro bono* work is more about attaining a reputation, Miss McClaren. Presently I have none on this planet. Money is beside the point,” Roy said. “But since I’ve yet to pass the Bar here, we can negotiate after I’m licensed to practice law anyway.”

Charlene nodded. “No hurry. With my share of the Skylers’ ore-find, plus my jobs, I’m not about to go to the poorhouse anyway. Like I said, the money doesn’t matter to me--but if what I’m hearing on the sidebands is

right, *you* got here without much more than the cyber on your bodies. If you get me a win, you deserve to be paid for it. Don't muzzle the ox while threshing the grain and all that."

Roy nodded, conceding the point. "We can discuss it later. But thank you for thinking of us."

Charlene grinned. "When I woke up, I had nothing. After I met Fiona, I didn't even have my natural gender anymore. I've been there." She reached down to give Fiona a friendly scratch behind the ears, and chuckled. The fox was curled up behind her seat, and Cira had come over and settled into the nest formed by her curled body. The two foxes were peering at each other face to face, ears forward, undoubtedly burning up the comm waves between them.

Then Socah stepped back into the dining area, clad once more in her field fatigues, though looking a touch younger than her daughter. She pulled out the last seat at the table and sat down. "Sorry I'm late. Needed some air."

"No problem, Mom," Arlene said, smiling at her. "Seems to have done you some good."

"Hmm? Oh." Socah considered for a moment, then shrugged and left her age as it was for now. Changing it once she'd been called on it would be tacky.

Charlene nodded to her. "Hello...uh...did she call you *Mom*?"

"Just call me Ponce de Leon," Socah said. "This planet's got a *hell* of a fountain of youth."

"Tell me about it," Charlene said. "Charlene McClaren, first wave Zharusian colonist, overslept." She extended her dainty hand.

"That's putting it mildly," Socah said, taking it and giving it a gentle shake. "Socah Gates. Pleased to meet you."

"Well, now that we've got everyone here," Rhianna said, "why don't we order?"

The food came swiftly, and conversation passed into the general light chatter that usually accompanied a pleasant meal. By the time it was over, the sun had set, lights were on all along the beach, and everyone was on generally friendly terms. As the plates were cleared away, Olivia was the

first to hop up from the table. “All right, that was a great meal, but now it’s time for some *shopping!* Who’s with me? Rhi, Shelley?”

Rhianna shook her head. “Sorry, Livy, but not tonight. Wanda Munn invited us to hang out with her for some tech geeking.”

“There are plenty of malls around, but not so many chances for tech geeking with the Munns,” Rochelle said. “We’ll take a rain check, and make it up to you later.”

Olivia pouted. “Aw. Well, all right. Anybody else want to come?”

“Sounds like fun,” Jamie said. “We’ve got some great malls around here, and I’ll be happy to show you around ‘em.”

Charlene pushed back her own chair. “I’ll come too. After a week out in the Dry, poking around some shops is just my speed.” As she stood, she reached up to pull out the pins holding her hair in place and shook it out. It came out of the braids and fell straight down to her ankles.

Ivor stared appreciatively. “Uh, maybe I *will* come, too. You girls might need a chaperone.”

“No other reason than that, huh?” Cira piped up. “Well, guess I can sorta understand you wanting to go where the foxes are.” She paused. “And the attractive women, too!” Fiona reached down and gave the little fox a slurp on the cheek.

“We can all ride double on Athena and Fiona.” Olivia started dragging Ivor out of the dining area, and Jamie and Charlene and the others followed. “See you later, Mom, Dad! Comm us if you need us!”

Rhianna waved. “Goodbye! Have fun storming the castle! To thine own self be true!” She glanced at Rochelle. “You think the Dreamchaser will have enough room to haul everything they buy home?”

“It’d take a miracle,” Rochelle said. “Bye!”

The other Zharusians at the table chuckled at the reference, while the other Stonegates just looked puzzled--until Ferris made that “Eureka” face he always had when he came to a net-aided epiphany. “Oh, you’re paraphrasing a line from a movie! That’s really rather clever...” He noticed the odd looks everyone else was giving him, then shook his head. “Never mind.”

“Anyway, Kay, Shelley, Uncia, and I are gonna head back to the Aerie. We’ll be going on RIDEback, so we won’t need this.” Rhianna handed the

rental limo's keyring over to Arlene. "Comm us if you need us. We can either fly back tonight or get you a hotel room, whichever you feel like. Don't worry about the cost, it's on us. Oh, and if you want to rent a couple of bikes or something for individual exploring, let me know, I'll cover that too."

"And my human and I are gonna go find the *Rocky Comfort*," Yvonne declared. "Won't Tom and Larry be surprised!" The three of them plus their RIDEs withdrew from the table as well.

"I guess that just leaves us," Arlene said, looking around at the rest of the table.

"The old fogeys," Socah said, leaning back in her chair. "We folks with the maturity to enjoy sitting still in one place more than running around all over."

"Oh, you're looking for *maturity* here?" Kelly said. He glanced at Dana. "Sorry, hon, you're gonna have to leave the table."

Dana snorted. "Ladies and gentlemen, my wife. He'll be here all night. Don't applaud, just throw money."

The rest of the table chuckled. "It's funny," Arlene said, "but I think we've all got a few things in common."

Dana nodded. "I know. Two Earth-expatriate families, exiled to Zharus by situations beyond our control."

"We've been here a little longer, though," Kelly said. "Long enough to start getting acclimated, anyway." He grinned. "I think we do have a few tips we can share with you newbies."

"And we've got some questions for you, too," Dana said. "You have four grown children...does it *ever* get easier?"

Arlene laughed. "This *is* going to be a fun conversation, isn't it?"

When the geeks returned to the lab, they found it had been considerably cleaned up. All of the workbenches had been cleared off, and the fabbers were warmed up, ready to go.

"Welcome back guys. Figured we'd both start with a clean slate," Wanda greeted them. "Dinah and Zed are on their way. How long do you need to set up? Do you need anything in particular?"

"No time at all," Rhianna said. "We're generally ready at a moment's

notice, with our own personal version of the portable ‘technomage kit’--we never know when we might run across someone in need.”

“Impressive,” Wanda said. “Let’s see what you’ve got.”

Fused into their RIDEs, Rhianna and Rochelle unpacked their equipment, consisting mainly of nanolathe gear and interface cables with a few customizations. “We have a bigger setup back in the garage, but it really doesn’t save all that much time over the bare essentials anymore,” Rochelle said. “Of course, it helps that Kaylee’s got a fabber module and Uncia’s got a great CPU.” She was wearing Uncia’s full-sized DE shell for the DIN-making operation.

Astranikki waved a wing and a hologram of a pterosaur Intie appeared. “This is Dinah, our main client. Just moving to Aloha from Jurassic Park. Never had a DIN other than the original design a techno made for her. Standard DIN setup from what she’s said.”

“Sounds like fun, and a good baseline at least,” Rhianna said, looking her image over.

“Pretty much. The JP technos are getting better, now that Fritz’s leash has come off. But they’re playing catch-up to us.” Wanda explained as she unpacked a variety of probes and scanners on her table. “They occasionally ask for help, but most are as stubborn as us, wanting to figure things out themselves. But we give the help willingly when it’s asked for. Sometimes I worry about retraining the technomages to make the DIN’s properly. But in the end, it’s probably for the best. You showed the danger of keeping those eggs in one basket.”

Rhianna nodded in agreement. “There are way more Inties than we can handle, and most of them just want to be able to do what everyone else can do. Better to get everyone on a level playing field than to try and keep anyone down.”

Krystal lifted her head from a RIDE couch, “Our guests are here. Coming in through the garage,” she proclaimed, showing a view of a zebra and winged dino intie arriving.

“Come on in guys, we’re waiting for you,” Wanda called out over the garage comm.

The saurian Integrate looked nervous, but the zebra waved. “Thanks Wanda. On our way now.”

The zebra lead the other one towards the gallery and the workshop, as if he was familiar with the place. A few moments later, the pair walked in. The zebra, a young man, walked with a swagger that drew attention away from his companion, who was clearly more shy.

“Hey, stripes!” Rochelle said. “Nice to see another zebra. We’ve got a friend who’s a Zebra intie, name of Zeerust.”

“I think I saw him mentioned in the reports about the Uplift domefall,” the zebra said. “The name’s Zed.”

“Zed was a troublemaker a while back,” Wanda explained. “But he’s straightened up fine since then. Part of the Alohan Intie welcoming committee now.”

“Mainly because Watchdog ratted me out. Damn that thing has *teeth* when you don’t expect it.” he rubbed his arms ruefully and grinned.

“Anyway, this is Dinah, fresh in from JP and looking to settle ‘round here.”

Krystal smirked at the pterosaur integrate, glancing between the pair, but staying quiet. She smoothly fused over Wanda.

Dinah waved her arm shyly, her wing membrane going from her wrist to her upper thighs. “Hi there. I’m honored you picked me. To have the choice of these new DIN’s....”

“Hey, it’s no big,” Rhianna said. She Fused up with Kaylee. “We’d have been happy to make one for you anyway, as we do for any Intie who crosses our paths. Nobody should have to put up with technomage junk one second longer than they have to.”

Wanda laughed. “That’s easy for you to say. You’ve got the Inties out in Uplift in awe of you.”

“And you don’t have the same here? Between Mike and Astra and Scratch, the Munns had the enclaves at this end of the Dry under your paws for years. Even *Fritz* didn’t dare do much down this way. And from what I heard from Quinoa, you and Krystal were the icing on the cake,” Rhianna retorted playfully.

Wanda held up her paws in submission. “Fine, fine. It’s a draw. But much as I’d love to redo every DIN down here, we’ve got too many Inties and too few hours in the day. Especially if dad and I want to have a normal life outside of it. Even with thirty hours in a day, there just aren’t enough hours to get the job done.”

“It’s not like it takes a long time or anything,” Rochelle said. “Let’s get started.”

“Not a long time?” Astranikki looked puzzled. “You must have a strange definition of long. Time to put your money where your logic probes are. Dinah, please sit over there and Rhi and Shelly will take a look at you.” Astranikki pointed to a stool in the middle of the room, midway between the workbenches.

“Your method takes a long time? Guess we’ll find out,” Rhianna nodded. “Dinah, Could you show me your DIN socket, please?”

Dinah sat down, and twisted her head to one side. “It’s right here, back of my neck, base of my skull.”

“Hmm...” Rhianna said, looking at the socket. She extended the DIN socket sensor probe from Kaylee’s fingertip, then allowed Wanda to have a look at it.

“Well, nothing really different from mine here,” Wanda said. “Convergent design needs. This is the same scanning tip in the original ‘Rod’ technomages used.”

“It does have to fit into a DIN slot, my dear,” Astranikki pointed out. She shook her head. “Just thinking about that old Rod gives me the shivers.”

“Like they say, it’s not the size that matters, but what you do with it,” Uncia said.

Rhianna fitted the probe into Dinah’s DIN socket. “You may feel the odd tingle as we take our readings,” she said. “Shouldn’t take more than a minute or two.”

“Okay, we got ‘em,” Kaylee said. “Now comes the fun part.”

“We used to have to make a half-dozen or more prototypes before we got it right,” Rhianna said. “Trial and error. But now that we’ve done a lot more trial, we make a lot less error.”

“Most of the time these days we’re one-and-done,” Kaylee said. “About 1 in 5 takes two tries, and maybe 1 in 20 we have to do a third, but almost never any more than that.”

“And even the ‘rejects’ would still work better than the TM stuff,” Rochelle said. “But if we’re gonna do something, we make sure we do it all the way right. Sometimes we check up on our earlier patients, just to make

sure they've still got the best we can give them."

"I suppose technically we do that too; but ours takes longer to make," Wanda said. "You're done already?" she stared in awe.

"Yup! Here comes our first try." Rhianna reached down to the fabber module on Kaylee's hip and produced a small silvery disk with protrusions on one side. "I'll just fit that in here...attach the leads so I can test it...yeah, I think this is gonna be another one-and-done. Other than the software side at least."

"My turn!" Rochelle and Uncia stepped up as Rhianna and Kaylee stepped aside. She took the leads Rhianna had connected and hooked them to a port on Uncia's wrist. "Okay, running the decryption routines now, and prepping the latest version of my DIN codebase for porting. This part doesn't take as long as it used to either. Okay, we've got the key.. And...there's the key. Customizing the code...uploading now. And done." She detached the leads and unplugged the DIN base, handing it across to Rhianna.

"And here's the comm bead." Rhianna pulled a small emerald green bead out of her fabber and snapped it onto the disc. "Ready, Dinah?"

"Yes!" Dinah squealed. "Please, plug it in!"

"Sure thing!" Rhianna plugged the DIN in. "Now try it out."

The pterodactyl Integrate's DIN flickered, and her eyes lit up as well. "This is amazing! I knew it would be better than what I had, but...wow!"

Rhianna and Rochelle grinned. "You're welcome," Rhianna said. "We're beaming across all our data on your socket and interface, and the schematics for the DIN device so you can fab it if you need to. We haven't had one of ours blow out yet under normal working conditions, but there's always a first time, so make spares just in case." She glanced over to Wanda. "We can swap the same data after your turn."

Wanda nodded. "Interesting technique you have there. Ours is a bit different. More cooperative and a lot longer. I've got a lot of questions but I think we better get ours done first." She held out her hand. "We'll have you test these after we're done."

Dinah reached back and reluctantly plucked the new DIN out. She handed it over. Wanda passed it over to Rochelle, while Astranikki prepared her own probe for the DIN slot.

“This may tingle a bit, but it’s just a reader,” Astranikki said. “Once I say go, Wanda will give you a list of instructions. Follow them to the letter.”

The workshop fell silent, as Dinah concentrated on the instructions. Astranikki, Wanda and Krystal monitored the results, occasionally having her repeat some steps or try a different set.

*:So what are those?:* Rhianna asked Wanda over the comm so as not to interrupt the RIDE and Integrates. She attached a copy of the instructions Dinah was going through; they were a mix of english and binary, seemingly mixed together randomly.

*:A system we developed. Well are still developing. It’s our way to decipher an Integrate’s language... their API basically.:* Wanda explained. *:Krystal and Astranikki are doing a lot of the crunching to sort it out on the fly.:*

*:We started with some of the old SETI programs to talk with ET’s. Helps set up a baseline to build from.:* Astranikki explained, sounding very distracted, but not distracted enough to notice their talk.

It took an hour for them to finish up. Finally the fabber in the corner warmed up and a pair of new gems popped out. Wanda retrieved them and handed one to Dinah, while tossing the other to Rhianna.

“Give this a shot and let me know how it feels.”

She plugged it in under the watchful eyes of everyone else. Her eyes lit up, and her mouth dropped open. “Wow... Just wow...”

“I’ve sent the specs for that one as well. You might want some spares; we haven’t got the durability down like Rhianna has. Ours *have* failed, and not just because Watchdog bit them. Can you tell a difference?”

She looked pensively for a moment. “It’s... It’s hard to tell. I think this one’s a bit faster. It’s easier to work with too.”

Rhianna dropped the gem into the recycle slot on her hip for her fabber to analyze it. “All one piece, there’s some similarities to hardware DINsec...hmmm...”

“We’ve got some tests we’ve been using to test Dad’s connection with Sigma; they should be easy to use to compare the DIN’s. Just a sec and we’ll get them set up,” Wanda said, moving over to the bench next to the IDE.

Krystal smiled and flicked her tail, going the other way. She nudged Zed from behind. “Don’t think we’ve forgotten you, my striped friend.”

“Me? You already made a DIN for me years ago. And thank you for it.”

The snow leopard nudged him forward. “Yes, and oh how much fun that was. I want to see how Rhianna and Rochelle handle it.”

Rhianna lifted her eyes from the DIN Wanda had made and looked thoughtfully at Zed. “I sense a challenge in the air.”

“Zed has a rather...unusual DIN configuration,” Wanda said, chuckling. “His innie is separate from his outie.”

Rochelle raised one of Uncia’s eyebrows. “That sounds...interesting.”

The zebra rolled his eyes and lifted his hands. He had a pair of DIN gems, one on each wrist. “Input,” he explained, lifting his left hand. “And output.” He shook his right hand.

“Oh, my.” Rhianna slowly grinned. She rubbed her handpaws together. “This is gonna be *fun*.”

“He was force integrated by an Olympian refugee. The Technomages actually had to have original thoughts to make a DIN pair for him,” Krystal explained. “Took them weeks to sort it out. Hell took us almost a day to get it made ourselves.”

Rhianna got out a second probe. “Hopefully it won’t take us *quite* that long.”

“You could benchmark the two DINs for Dinah while I’m working on this,” Rhianna suggested. “Compare the data we compiled making them. I’m curious to see if we can both learn from each other’s techniques.”

“Working on it,” Astranikki called out. “Don’t let us interrupt you. Zed’s case was a really fun challenge, even for us. When he says input and output, that’s literally the case; you need to coordinate the two slots to get any sort of feedback.”

“Intriguing,” Rochelle said. “Makes me wonder all the more about just how and why DINs even exist to begin with. It’s like they were *designed* to be decrypted...but by who? Or what? Inties with unencrypted DIN sockets are one in a million.”

Wanda shrugged. “No idea. Never really thought too much about it. I always figured it was something left over from the RIDE part. The old interface ports that get a bit scrambled when integrating.”

Dinah owed and slapped at her neck. She popped Wanda’s DIN out

and rubbed the slot. “Ouch. That stung.”

Astranikki passed over a fresh DIN and smiled in sympathy. “Ours are fine for everyday work, but they can pop under extreme load. We’re trying to improve the load handling, get it up to Sigma’s levels.”

“How about giving ours a shot?” Rochelle suggested.

Astranikki checked the readings and nodded. “Right that’s probably not a bad idea. This should be enough for a baseline to compare with. Swap them out Dinah and we’ll rerun the tests.”

The zebra Integrate and his pterosaur girlfriend did a lot of smiling and nodding as they were worked on over the next few hours. To them, the discussion between all the geeks amounted to technobabble. All that really mattered was that before the night was through, Zed had a much-improved I/O DIN pair and Dinah was now fully functional wirelessly.

Astranikki escorted the Integrates to the exit, while the brain-exhausted humans and RIDEs recovered.

“That’s a lot to think about,” Wanda said, rubbing her temples. “You’ve got the durability licked it seems. We have better throughput on average, but the differences are insignificant in everyday use.”

“I’m interested in that data processing you do,” Rochelle said. “I’d like to know more about that.”

“I’ll send you the outline of what we do. A lot of it we rework on the fly, which makes training new makers harder. Our method needs an Intie, or a couple really smart RIDEs to work properly,” Wanda said, stifling a yawn. “But that can wait ‘till morning.”

Astranikki walked back in. “From what I can tell you already do a bit of that, but you seem to have made some shortcuts. Not that those are bad. You derive a pidgin version of their API somehow, and translate everything through that. Your comm package then interfaces that pidgin language translation to the standard signal packages and away they go. Great for everyday work and very durable in general since the Intie’s internal, self-healing systems handle much of the load.

“Meanwhile, we work out the Intie’s full language, and design a custom translator between their digital thoughts and the rest of the world. We have a bigger command space to work with, but we have fewer buffers. The increased complexity weakens our DINs, leaving them prone to

burnout. But I suspect an Intie with our DIN might be able to do more than one with yours, all other things being equal.”

“But your DIN would burn out long before ours would. Sprinter versus marathoner. That all makes sense. Also explains why it takes you so long to make your DINs,” Rochelle said.

“One thing I can’t figure out with your system though, is how you figure out what you do. You don’t have their full instruction set, but you have enough to make the connection, without a big decryption stage,” Krystal said.

Rhianna chuckled. “That’s easy. I’m surprised you haven’t figured it out. We use their dandruff.”

The Munns stared at her in confusion.

“Quantum fractal dandruff. All Inties we’ve met have it. Traces get left behind on any systems they touch, whether they have a DIN or not. It’s unique to each Intie, and we found we can use it as a seed to figure out their language, so to speak.”

She brought up some filters and showed it to the Munns. “I’ve seen this before,” Krystal said. “But I could never make sense of it. I figured it was just noise and ignored it, filtered it out. We had bigger issues to tackle that we never looked into it.”

“I’m kind of surprised you never noticed every Intie has different dandruff,” Rochelle said. “With your development of Watchdog, and your husband being a cop and all. The dandruff is pretty useful as a sort of digital fingerprint, for accurate identification.”

The RIDE suddenly muzzle palmed. “Of course! The Technomages ignore it too. Their DIN kits are designed to filter it out. Our techniques were based a lot on theirs, so we never paid it any attention. Just goes to show you should question everything.”

Wanda rubbed her RIDE’s head and smiled. “Well, now we know. And we did fine before. It’ll certainly give us a lot to think about. Including thinking about how unique that really is. To use it in law enforcement, we’ll have to prove that it’s truly unique. Remember how long it took DNA to get accepted?”

She looked pensively at the filters, showing Astranikki’s traces around the lab, then sighed. “It certainly would have come in handy back then;

we've got a long list of possible Intie crimes that we haven't been able to pin on anyone in particular. The ones we did catch in the act were the ones stupid enough to wake Watchdog. And those ones we usually worked to redeem instead of imprison. There are some bigger cases out there though, that have all the signs of an Intie but no proof to show who it was."

"We haven't found any two with the same patterns yet," Rochelle said. "And it has helped us make some identifications."

"And DINs," Rhianna said, grinning.

Wanda nodded, "I'll bring it up with Ryan, and we'll look into officially making it an identifier. The Criminology Profs at AU are gonna love this. Damn, I can't believe we overlooked that."

"To be fair, Wand, other than you and me, all the rest of our experts are Inties," Krystal pointed out. "And they can't even *see* this dandruff. It's like one of those Magic Eye puzzles that were so big in the 1990s."

"We might not have noticed it ourselves if Fritz hadn't given us the Gizmonics Institute treatment," Rhianna said. "Getting shot helplessly into orbit does wonders for your attention span."

"We'll send them cheesy movies! The worst we can find!" Uncia added musically.

"La la la!" Kaylee sang.

Uncia stared at the elder lynx. "You..."

"What, you think I don't have a sense of humor, Unc?" Kaylee deadpanned, hugging and headbutting the snow leopardess.

Astranikki looked thoughtfully at the filters, then at Sigma. "You know, I'm getting some ideas about the problems we've been having. Could my...dandruff be part of what's causing the overload? Too much data overwhelming it?"

Wanda became more alert as she pondered it. "That might be an idea, Dad. You girls up for more geeking? I'll send Ryan down on a coffee run if you need it. *Real* stuff, I remember your preferences from the last time."

If the IDE had been alive, it would have run for the hills at the seven predatory gazes that suddenly focused on it.

"...and that's about how it was on Earth when we left," Dana said. "The government eventually 'recolonized' pretty much everyone else who

fought against that bill--if you'd held out another year or so, they might have paid for your tickets, too."

"We felt bad about that, of course," Kelly said. "And after hearing about what you went through, I feel a little ashamed we didn't do or say anything about it ourselves. But..."

"But you had a family to think about," Socah said. "So you kept your head down and didn't make waves. Nothing wrong with that. If *certain people* had done the same thing, we'd still be on Earth now."

Arlene rolled her eyes. "Moooom..."

"Maybe if everybody spoke up, together, it'd make a difference," Dana said. "But it's the old prisoner's dilemma thing. As long as everyone *doesn't* speak up at once, well, you know what happens to the people who do. I'm just glad Jamie kept his VL involvement fairly minimal."

"Not that it made all that much difference to us in the end," Kelly said. "If we tried to go back now...well. Even if the government left us alone, all our friends, neighbors, employers..."

Arlene nodded. "I know what you mean. I thought I was pretty liberal--hell, I was liberal enough to get us all kicked off of Earth--and I *still* had conniptions when I learned what my Ryan had done to himself."

"It is pretty startling the first time you run into it," Dana said. "Even more when it happens to you." She grinned. "I can't say I ever planned on going distaff, but after a few months this way I can't say I regret it, either."

"Manhood has certainly given me a new perspective on things," Kelly said.

"What is Fusing like?" Roy asked. "Even if we stay the same gender, I'm not sure I see the appeal."

"Before all this happened, I'd have said I agreed with you." Dana chuckled. "In fact, that was the whole reason we ended up this way in the first place. I didn't listen to Rufia when she suggested we should get rental RIDEs for our Dry Ocean expedition. So we ended up waiting to freeze to death before our new friends found us." She reached down and patted Isolde on the head.

"As for what it's like...well, it's hard to describe," Kelly said. "It's like being hugged all over from head to foot...and it's like suddenly being a big, strong furry animal-person, able to fly and leap and shoot things...and it's

like having a new best friend all around you and in your head with you.” He grinned. “Well, that’s what it’s like if you get a really good partner, anyway. I wouldn’t give ol’ Gordo up for the world.” He reached down and scratched the lion behind the ears. Gordon swished his tail and purred loudly. “Except maybe if Dana and I swap for a while in a couple years. We’re still all discussing it.”

“Among other conversations we’re having,” Kelly said. “Like, for instance, having more children.”

“I’m not sure I’m ready for motherhood,” Dana said.

Ferris, who had been quiet for quite some time, lit up at that idea. “Now *that* is one of the more intriguing social effects of this crossriding phenomenon,” he said. “The potential for the equal sharing of childbearing.”

“As I understand it, the Munns--Sam and Janet that is--have both borne children in turn,” Franklin said. “‘Father one, bear one’ prenuptial agreements aren’t uncommon. And the ease of swapping roles simply by swapping RIDE partners means experimentation can be attractive to any couple.”

“Speaking of experimentation, Franklin and I believe we’re a good match,” Ferris said. “Any other thoughts? Otherwise, he and I thought we’d Fuse for the rest of the evening.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard anyone treat it quite that formally,” Gordon said, looking over his forepaws at the elk. “But then, you triple-zeroes have some quirks.”

“Give it a try,” Isolde suggested. “Since you’re same-gender and not one of the extreme changes with longer cooldowns, you don’t have anything to lose. If you don’t like it, you can get the tags erased for a few *mu* at any street-corner nano-clinic.”

“The most you have to worry about is if you mind each other knowing what you’re thinking,” Kelly said. “And if you’ve been getting along well already, that’s probably no problem either.”

“I’ve read a number of ‘Mech Market Horror Stories’ during my research. What happens if the match is poor is, shall we say, not pretty,” Ferris said.

“Don’t believe everything you read,” Isolde said. “Most people who

end up in incompatible matches find other partners sooner than later. No reason to keep banging your head against a brick wall.”

“How can you be sure you get a good match?” Arlene asked.

“How can you be sure the next person you meet will be a new friend?” Gordon asked. “You spend a little time getting to know ‘em. If you get along well out of Fuse, you’ll probably be okay in Fuse too.”

“I’m ready, then,” Ferris said. “How about you, my friend?”

“As I’ll ever be,” Franklin said, getting to his feet. “It’s been a long time since I had a partner. I do hope we’re compatible.”

Ferris stood up and brushed some imaginary dirt off his green polo shirt and dark slacks, then walked behind his chair. The bull elk nosed the palm of his new partner’s hand. “I’m ready, then,” Ferris said.

“Stand straight, arms out to your sides. This won’t take long. Fusers charged and nominal...” Franklin said, shutting down his hardlight skin.

The entire process took just over five seconds before his pelt came back on, leaving an armored anthropomorphic elk with his eyes shut. Ten seconds later, they opened. “This is...incredible,” Ferris said, looking down at himself. He raised his furry arms, turning his hands to back and front, examining the prominent hoof-chitin nails on each finger.

“Like old times,” Franklin added. “Yes, this *will* work! Yvonne will be quite pleased!”

Arlene and Roy watched with interest. “Do you suppose we should try to find RIDEs as well?” Roy wondered.

“There’s no reason you particularly have to find a permanent partner if you want to know what Fusing is like,” Isolde pointed out. “If you know of any friends with RIDEs who’d both be willing to let you Fuse temporarily, you can have the experience of seeing what it’s like without commitment.”

“Or you can rent one,” Gordon said. “Plenty of us are offering ourselves freelance here or in Uplift.”

“Or you can rent *yourselves* out as ‘thumbs’ for a free RIDE,” Isolde suggested. “It’s popular for college-age humans to do this to earn some *mu*. Plus, RIDE tags are more fashionable than ever.”

“The one caveat is you should not Fuse with too many different RIDEs in too short a period of time,” Franklin added. “It is best to give your brain a few hours to adjust to the experience. In fact, sleeping between

Fusing different RIDEs for the first time is recommended.”

“Intriguing,” Socah said, peering at the giant shaggy tabby cat and bigger lion. “It’s hard to believe you were invented as military hardware.”

“Oh, but we were,” Gordon said. “Don’t let the cuddliness fool you. In fact, both Isolde and I actually fought in the Nextus/Sturmhaven war--on opposite sides.”

“Oh, really?” Socah said.

“We even saw each other on the battlefield a few times, though never actually shot at each other,” Isolde said. “I was in comms and he was heavy assault, so we weren’t directly opposed.”

“And needless to say, I am a veteran of that war as well, in a sense,” Franklin noted. “Although I didn’t see combat. The triple-zero series and the followup zero-zero-ones are prototypes. During my service life I tested nearly three dozen equipment loadout configurations and hardware upgrades. After twenty-five years at it, I ended up in a museum.”

“And you can think for yourselves,” Socah mused. “That’s more than any IDE I ever drove could do. It’s almost tempting to get a flesh and blood body again just so I could see what that’s like.”

“Anyway, a RIDE isn’t just a piece of equipment, no matter what they say in Nextus,” Dana said. “She’s a friend and companion, and a part of your family. Which isn’t to say she can’t be useful, too. Izzy’s got the best computer on-board I’ve ever used anywhere.”

“I can already see how this partnership is going to help me,” Ferris said. “Franklin is an amazing researcher.”

“I had a great deal of time for such things in the museum,” the elk said. “Ah, how about some dessert? I have a weakness for chocolate cake.”

Ferris laughed. “Of course.”

Arlene checked her internal chrono. “After you’re done, I think I’d like to stretch my new legs a little. We’ve been sitting for too long. The docs said we should pump these muscles as much as we can.”

“Moonlight stroll on the beach?” Roy proposed. “For some value of moonlight...”

“We’ve got good beaches for that,” Kelly said.

“Yeah.” Dana chuckled. “We might just do that ourselves.”

“And I think Franklin and I will explore the city a little,” Ferris said.

“There are some schools, museums, and libraries that look interesting. It’s amazing how much of this polity operates a full thirty hour day. Doesn’t anything close?”

“A few of the smaller businesses may, but most places are active all the time. RIDEs and general automation have helped that out. It comes from the tourist and transport industries that this place was founded on. There’s always more people coming down the Alohavator, or coming in from across the planet, and they’re on all different sleep schedules,” Kelly explained.

“I think I’ll take Astranikki up on that invitation to get together,” Socah said thoughtfully. “For ‘Looties,’ they’re not bad sorts. I’ll comm them for directions, then call a cab.”

Arlene nodded. “Then we’ll comm each other later to get together for a hotel room? I think there’s too much to see here to go back tonight.”

“Works for me,” Socah said.

“Call us tomorrow, if you’re free,” Dana said. “We can show you around the local tourist places. We also know a couple off the beaten path, too, if touristy isn’t what you want.”

“Well, Franklin and I are going to take off,” Ferris deadpanned, rising into the air about a meter. “A pleasure meeting you, Skylers. See you at the hotel, all.” The elk Fuser continued rising, past the reach of the parking lot lights, until they were just an antlered silhouette against the stars, before accelerating away with a sudden burst of speed.

“Now that’s making an exit with style,” Roy said. He stood up and offered his regenerated hand to his wife. “Shall we?”

Arlene smiled at him. “Let’s.” They pushed back their chairs and left the table together.

Dana and Kelly sat there awhile longer, watching them go. “Nice folks,” Dana said. “I hope they don’t make the same mistakes we did.”

Kelly chuckled. “I don’t think *anyone* could make the same mistakes we did.”

“At least *we* didn’t make some of the ones *they* did,” Dana said. “We got here as cruisers, not corpsicles.”

“Yeah,” Kelly said. “Though like I told them, I do feel a little ashamed at how easy we had it. It was easier to feel like we were justified in keeping

silent when we hadn't met any of the people who paid the price for speaking up."

"Well, you're all here now," Isolde said. "You can at least help them get used to the place."

"Good point, kitty o'mine," Dana said. "So, shall we take our own little stroll?"

Kelly grinned at him. "Let's." They got up and left, followed by their RIDEs.

The shopping expedition proceeded apace. Olivia, Ivor, Jamie, and Charlene were walking through the broad tiled expanse of the Aloha Oceanside Mall. Athena and Charlene trotted along behind them, festooned with shopping bags in hardlight saddlebags. Cira romped back and forth, sniffing at potted plants, wastebaskets, and other objects.

"Really? You do orbital courier drops for a part-time job?" Olivia said.

"Uh-huh," Jamie said. She held a hand up above her head and swooped it down, whistling from high to low and ending with a little splash sound. "It's fun. Even if Athena does all the work."

"Jamie's too modest," Athena said. "She's a natural pilot. Working her way up to a suborbital license."

"That sounds like fun!" Cira said. "Can we do that too when you've made my body, Ivor?"

"I...think that's a little too much for me," Ivor said.

"Aw, don't be a wuss!" Cira said. "It's just skydiving from orbit, it's not like it's *dangerous* or something."

Charlene chuckled. "I've RIDE-dived from one of the lower 'pults on the Beanstalk and it was more than exciting enough for me."

"Still...there's a parts shop here," Ivor said. "I think it's time to get my fleshy feet wet on where to get started. Chassis-out."

"That sounds interesting," Olivia said. "I probably should learn more about RIDEs myself."

"C'mon, it's this way." Jamie led the way to an intersection, and down an adjoining corridor to the store, whose sign proclaimed it to be RIDE Aloha.

The saleswoman behind the counter had ferret ears and tail. "Oh, we

can do everything from selling a do-it-yourself kit to an assembled Drive Extender ready for core installation,” she said.

“I’m trying to start with first principles,” Ivor said. “Do you have anything that approximates an 001-series chassis?”

“Well, there are a lot of *pretenders* on the market,” the saleswoman said derisively. “It depends on your budget. Are you looking for a Light, Medium, or Heavy frame?”

“It’s going to be yours, Cira. What’s your preference?” Ivor asked.

“Um...I dunno,” Cira said. “I kinda hadn’t thought much about it beyond wanting to be faaaast. Voom!” She cast a glance over her shoulder at Athena with undisguised envy.

“Then I recommend the Burton VIX-GT chassis to start with,” the saleswoman said. “Mounts for lifters *and* impellers. Supports three potential skimmer modes, depending on plating configuration. A-plus or greater batteries are required.”

“Hmm.” Ivor looked at the catalog display the saleswoman indicated. “That’s...kind of pricey.”

The ferret-woman nodded. “Designer frames usually are. A lot of scratch builders prefer to start with a second-hand frame and add new parts. A good frame can last for decades, even under hard use.”

“This is going to be *my* frame! Shouldn’t I get to choose everything?” Cira said petulantly.

“I’m not made of money,” Ivor said firmly. “And before you ask, I’m not going to lean on my sister or her boyfriend. If you want to find a job and contribute, then that’ll help. Otherwise this is coming out of my pocket. You *can* count on me not to skimp, since I’m doing this right.”

“A job? What can I do?” Cira complained. “I’m little and cute. People don’t pay you for that.”

“They didn’t teach you more skills than hunting in Nature Range?” Olivia said. “That’s not how they’re doing it. There’s something called AnthroVille in there, too.”

“It’s living in a Saturday morning cartoon is what it is,” Cira said sullenly. “Where they teach you valuable life lessons and crap and you’re not supposed to hunt anyone. Laaaaaame!”

“You’re old enough to assimilate skill chips, according to the

literature,” Olivia said. “That’s always a start.”

“I still dunno what I can do, though. Be someone’s personal assistant, maybe, but then I’d have to hang around with them and not Ivor,” Cira said.

“I’ll get you a good body anyway,” Ivor promised. “Like I said, I’m going to do this right.”

“I can refer you to several reputable salvage dealers that guarantee the parts they sell were obtained legally and the former RI occupant moved on,” the saleswoman said. “Since you’re a novice, no offense, you will probably make some costly mistakes. Putting a DE shell together is a lot like assembling a personal computer was in the early 21st century.

“Every polity has at least one major RIDEworks factory. There are a dozen Fuser nanny manufacturers alone, and twice that number for hardlight emitters. All that requires software and firmware to run.”

“Then there’s some interesting civil rights issues,” Olivia said. “Even if you buy every part yourself, Ivor, the moment Cira’s plugged in the DE becomes hers. It’s like your body or mine. You can make a contract beforehand she has to pay you back for what you put into it--through earned cash or a period of indenture--and she can always choose to abandon the body herself to get out of the contract. But you can’t take her out of it without her consent.”

“That’s a crime,” the saleswoman said. “A Class B *felony*. It’d be like ripping the brain out of your skull and putting it in a brainbox.”

“That happened to my cousin Eddie on Earth, actually,” Ivor said. “He was in debt to the mob for a hundred thou. It...wasn’t pretty.”

“Of course, on the other side o’ things, we’re after havin’ RIDE-on-human bodyjacking ‘round here,” Fiona said. “Not so much anymore since AlphaWolf went legit, but it does happen time to time.”

“Also a Class B felony,” the ferret-eared woman said. “Though not looked upon quite so harshly, given the history between RIDEs and humans until recently.”

“That’s putting it mildly,” Athena said. “If they hadn’t been given a polity-wide pardon for taking out so many of Fritz’s Inties, most RIDEs in AlphaWolf’s settlement would be in VR prisons right now. And their polity laws are stacked in RIDEs’ favor even now.”

“We’ve run deliveries there a few times,” Jamie explained. “It was

an...interesting experience.”

“Did you know that if you can’t *prove* you’re solvent when you get there, you can get sentenced to thirty days’ mandatory paid indenture so you have some money?” Athena said. “Only applies to un-paired humans for some reason.”

“I don’t want to leave here without buying something, so I can at least feel like I’ve gotten a start,” Ivor said.

“Tell you what,” the saleswoman said. “I do have something I was going to return to the factory as defective, and it’s just right for you. I can sell it to you for seventy five percent off.”

“Defective? What’s wrong with it?” Ivor asked.

“It’s what we call a ‘fixable defect’, but normally not by the average consumer. It’ll take some elbow grease, some know-how, and the right tools, but you look like the determined sort. What normally happens is we send it back to the factory, they recondition it, and then it gets sold as refurbished.”

“What’s the part?” Ivor said.

“This cute little thing.” The saleswoman went behind the counter, then picked up something from behind. That something was a full vulpine head--minus eyes, ears, nose, just about everything. In the center the RI core plug was empty.

Cira looked away. “Ugh! It’s like looking at someone’s skull!”

“Alas, poor Yorick,” Fiona said. “I knew him, Horatio. A fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy.”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“Mode lock,” the ferret-eared woman replied. “It’s a Sturmhaven RIDEworks VXM-GT-4. Non-military, but highline as these things go. Quite compatible with most vixen chassis, though we do recommend using the same brand and trim-level going forwards. Practically new.”

“I’ll take it!” Ivor said. “My first challenge.”

“Considering that’s going to be *my* head...” Cira said. “I hope you’re as talented at this as your sister Rhianna.”

“Don’t think I should quit while you’re a head?” Ivor asked.

“Oh, ha ha,” Cira said.

“So now that we’ve got the RIDE stuff out of the way, who wants to go

try on some more dresses?” Olivia said cheerfully.

“Oooh, be still my beating heart,” Jamie said, grinning.

“Dresses, ho!” Charlene said.

“Though hopefully not ho dresses,” Ivor muttered.

“I hope you’re paying attention, ‘Ivy’, because this is going to apply to you eventually,” Olivia said. He rolled his eyes in response.

“Thanks for your help,” Ivor told the saleswoman.

The saleswoman smiled. “Hope to see you again. We deliver anywhere on Zharus, same day, so think of RIDE Aloha when you’re ready for the next steps.”

Ivor left the shop satisfied. Olivia put her hand on his shoulder. “Well, bro...it looks like you’ve got something to put your mind to now.”

“That head still gives me the willies,” Cira added, hardlight coat shivering. “It at least needs ears before it stops looking so creepy.”

“Speaking of creepy,” Olivia said. “I saw a place on the mesh nearby that claims it can tan away that fresh-out-of-the-tank look of yours, Ivor. You are *pink*. I mean, not in a girly way pink.”

“Erm,” Ivor stammered, looking at himself. “Yeah, sis, good idea.”

“I feel like a comic book character! Super Elk!” Ferris laughed along with Franklin as they streaked through the Alohan night sky. Far above them the silvery ribbon of the Alohavator ascended into high orbit, glimmering in the remaining sun. The ribbon was swiftly growing dark as the planet rotated it into night. “Glorious! The Beanstalks on Earth aren’t half so beautiful.”

“The museum staff restored me to my original configuration, so I don’t have the *oomph* of the latest gear,” Franklin said. “By RIDE standards, I’m old.”

“You’re good enough for me, my friend,” Ferris said. “My entire *life* is devoted to enjoying that which others might dismiss as ‘old,’ but you’re entirely new to *me*. But if you do wish to be brought more current, I know of a remarkably talented RIDE mechanic who would probably be happy to help.”

“Indeed?” Franklin said, chuckling. “I should note that, when we de-Fuse, your tags will be rather more obvious than even Rhianna’s. The

Fusers are new, but the firmware running my chassis has certain pilot requirements. I'm afraid you'll be a little furry around the ears and beard, in addition to the elkish nose. Antlers *remain* stubs." He paused. "Unless I should come down with my daughter's sense of humor at some point. Which seems unlikely, but one never can tell."

"I shall consider them a badge of honor," Ferris assured him. "An unmistakable visible sign of our partnership. I imagine I'll look like a rather handsome cervine beast."

"Why, thank you," Franklin said. "Were it not for my digital nature, I should have trouble remembering the last time I had such an amiable partnership." He paused. "In fact, my digital memory tells me I never actually *have*, Nextus being that which it is. I have some pleasant memories of my first partner, Major Ackroyd, but they were never more than pleasant."

Ferris chuckled. "I believe *we* can do better than 'pleasant.' So, what interesting places are nearby to visit?"

"Hmm, let me see." Franklin did some quick net searching, popping up a dozen windows in Ferris's field of view. "We should likely save the greater tourist attractions for doing with the family tomorrow, and concentrate on the pleasures of academe tonight."

"Sounds fine by me," Ferris said. "I consider it one of my lifelong regrets that I have never been able to interest the rest of my family in academia."

"You might find your interests and theirs align more closely here," Franklin pointed out. "You can *study* 20th-century popular culture, while they *live* it."

Ferris laughed. "That is a most astute point."

"And with that in mind, I believe there is a branch of the Steader Institute for Popular Cultural Studies nearby," Franklin said. "I seem to recall you regretted never gaining access to the database they found back on Earth. They do have it all here."

"Then by all means, let's go!" Ferris said. The elk Fuser changed direction in flight, their destination set.

The bar was set up as the first floor of an office tower. It took up the

bottom couple of floors, with Western Saloon style swinging doors. The loud music coming from the stage underscored the sounds of a brawl in progress.

“This the place?” Olivia asked.

“Rufia’s ping is coming from here,” Ivor confirmed. “And she did send an invitation.”

“This is the Banks Tower Saloon. It’s the usual hangout for people just in from the Dry. But it’s usually not *this* rambunctious... Yikes!”

Charlene jumped to one side as a figure flew through the window.

The window itself shattered, then flickered away, hardlight shards fading before it regenerated undamaged in the wall. The fighter was a woman, with a green mohawk and furry pointed ears, along with a thickly-furred tail. She bounced back to her feet and yelled into the bar, “F-You you Sturmhaven Bitches! Your dads pumped iron and your moms knitted tea cosies!”

“Evening Ash. Getting a late start?” Jamie asked.

The woman brushed herself off and looked at the group. Her face lit up in a smile. “Hey Jamie. Yeah, I’m running late. My sub from Cascadia was caught in a holding pattern.” Her tail curled up until it touched the base of her back. “You guys must be the Stonegates. Welcome to Aloha, and to Zharus. Come on in, the elks, the dogs and Scratch are in the back room.”

“What about you?”

She cracked her knuckles and grinned. “I’ll be there in a sec. There are some Valks in there who are insulting the guys on the stage. Alohan honour is at stake here.” She growled and ran back inside.

“Alohans have honour?” Ivor asked.

Jamie grinned, “News to me. Let’s go find the others.”

The saloon was made with two main rooms--the front room with a stage, currently hosting a rock band named Doubledown Derp. An actual wire mesh divided the stage from the patrons, and glass shards from beer bottles and glasses were scattered just inside the mesh where a hardlight field kept the shards from actually reaching the band. As they entered, a naked man with tie-dye patterned tattoos was being lifted up by a dressed woman with wolf ears.

“Hey! Put him down!” Ashley shouted, running towards the wolf

woman.

The woman tossed the man into a table, which shattered before flickering out; another hardlight construct. Ashley tackled the woman, and wrestled her on the ground.

Unfazed by the fight, the band continued playing. Half of the bar's patrons were watching the woman brawl, cheering on their favorites. On the datalayer, bets on what might happen next were flying around.

The Stonegates and friends skirted around the edge of the room, heading to the second, quieter room. Hardlight sound buffers and bouncers helped keep the rowdiness from the first room out of the second. A Samoyed the size of a small pony with fur matching Ash's green, was currently standing on the quiet side of the buffers, keeping a wary eye on the front room.

"That is a very large dog," Ivor deadpanned. Cira stood on his shoulders, looking around the room curiously, the feral silver vixen taking everything in.

"This is Zharus," Fiona said. "Everything's after bein' larger here. Including the whole planet."

"Texas only *wishes* they were us," Athena agreed.

They stepped through the sound buffer, and the decibels decreased dramatically. "Hey, Chena," Jamie said. "Sup?"

The Samoyed wagged her tail. "Hey, Jamie, everyone! Welcome to Zharus! First round's on me. But only the first." She peered between them at the door again. "I hope Ash wraps this up soon. It's not polite to ignore company."

"Don't worry!" Ash slipped through the buffer behind them. She held a towel to her cheek and was grinning wildly. "We came to a little understanding."

"You mean you got knocked down, but you got up again, they're never gonna keep you down," Chena smirked. In the other room, the wolf eared woman shook her fist angrily towards them before turning back to her own group of similar women and RIDEs.

Ash grinned. "Pretty much. Now it's time for the whisky drink, the vodka drink, the lager drink and the cider drink." She waved cheerfully to the angry vixen, wiggling her middle finger in mid wave, and turned her back

to them. “Besides, Donny wanted us to wrap it up to give him time to get the jello pit filled. C’mon, I’ll show you where we’re all sitting.”

The Munn twins and friends had claimed a long table toward the back of the room, with a large alcove behind it giving space for un-Fused RIDEs. At the moment, another large Samoyed was sharing space with Yvonne and a male elk with a magnificent set of antlers. Jamie and Charlene de-Fused, and Chena and the pair of foxes padded over to join them as the humans took a seat at the table. Cira hopped down to the floor and followed a second later, touching noses to the two bigger dogs.

Rufia looked up and grinned. “Hey, you-all. Glad you could join us!” She was seated next to a brown-haired man with similar elk ears to her own, plus a pair of antler stubs and a furry neck that Ivor supposed were a preview of what Ferris would look like if he Fused with Franklin. He wore a scuffed flight jacket with missing military insignia patches.

On Rufia’s other side was a male humanoid tiger-striped orange housecat with hardlight plates embedded in his chest--another Integrate, Ivor supposed. Neither of them seemed terribly to mind the fact that Rufia had an arm around the shoulders of each of them, including the other. Across from them was a Samoyed-eared man, with pink fur, hair and eyes who had to be the other twin. “Hey, you-all!” he said.

“Hello, Aaron,” Charlene said, taking the seat next to him. The de-Fuse from Fiona had left her hair braided and pinned up again, so it wouldn’t drag on the floor when she sat down. *That’s convenient*, Ivor thought. *If I end up with hair that long, I’ll have to remember to have Cira do that for me.* It wasn’t at *all* impossible, given how nice it looked on Rochelle and Charlene...

“Hey, you bunch!” Rufia said happily, freeing the arm from around Scratch to pick up and drain the tankard of beer in front of her. “Glad you could make it!”

“Glad to be here,” Olivia said. She took the seat across from the elk-man. Jamie sat down next to her, leaving a couple of empty seats at the other end of the table. Ivor slid into the one across from Scratch.

“You’ve met Ash, and Chena,” Rufia continued. “This is Captain Tom Clark, my elkboi, of the good ship *Rocky Comfort* and that’s his partner Larry back there necking with Yvonne. That’s Aaron Munn, and Chimo.

And this is Scratch. Don't let his name fool you, he's actually pretty *good* at pool." Scratch gave Rufia a light smack on the head. "And those are Ivor and Olivia Stonegate, and the little nipper there is Cira."

Scratch peered at Ivor with some interest. "Well, hello! Rufia's been telling me so much about you. I hear we might be calling you 'Ivy' soon."

Ivor blushed. "That's...not really been decided yet," he mumbled.

"Well, maybe I can help you decide," Scratch said, his voice's pitch starting to shift. Ivor goggled as the cat-Integrate's body slimmed, hair lengthened, and breasts expanded, and he changed from male to female before Ivor's very eyes.

"Scuse me," Scratch said to Rufia, then she picked up her drink and came around the table to slide into the seat next to Ivor. "So...what do you think?" she purred seductively, leaning on the table. She hadn't bothered to cover her breasts with any clothing--but then, this was Aloha, after all.

Ivor stared at the attractive cat-woman next to him, who only moments before had been a fairly handsome cat-man. "Er..."

"What's the matter, cat got your tongue?" Rufia said, grinning.

"Not *yet*," Scratch purred. "But the night is still young." She licked her lips suggestively.

"You'll have to forgive my brother," Olivia said dryly. "It's one thing to know a lot of women here are crossriders in *theory*, but another to have someone do it right before his eyes." Not that this was keeping *her* from staring, too. "That was absolutely amazing. The last time I saw a morph like that was in VL, but that's *virtual*...just, wow."

"Some Integrates are just special like that," Rufia said.

"It's really convenient," Scratch said with a cheshire grin. "Never let a silly little thing like sex stand in the way of...well, *sex*." She looked at Ivor. "So...too soon for you? Too shocking? Too much of old Mother Earth's soil still on your boots?"

Ivor blinked. *Is he...she...seriously propositioning me?* He had known any woman he met here might previously have been a man--and in fact, since the Fusers incorporated biosculpt, the more attractive the woman, the more *likely* she'd been a man. But he hadn't ever expected to encounter a woman who'd been one just a *minute* ago. On the other hand...the principle was the same, wasn't it? And given that *he* was planning to do it himself,

he'd really have to be some kind of a hypocrite to let that throw him, wouldn't he?

And really, she *was* rather hot, in a furry feline sort of way.

"I...think I can adapt," Ivor said, offering her his arm. Scratch purred and scooted up next to him, resting her head on his shoulder. Ivor stiffened for just a moment, then relaxed. It actually turned out to be easier than he thought, with that purring vibrating half of his body. He put his arm around her, and chuckled. "This was certainly...unexpected."

"Most people say that about Zharus sooner or later," Rufia said. "Right, Tom?"

The captain nodded. "I've been saying it a lot ever since I met Rufia," he deadpanned.

"Yeah, and I've been saying...oh, hey, my beer's empty!" Rufia said.

"That's *not* unexpected!" Yvonne piped up from behind her. A laugh went around the table, and Aaron beckoned one of the saloon girls over with a loaded tray.

"All right!" Ash grabbed a beer and raised it high. "Now, let's get this party *started!*"

A 30-hour world like Zharus had a longer day, but also a longer night for partying. After it ended, Ivor came slowly back to awareness, casting his memories back to how the last moments of the evening had gone. They'd drank and eaten, had raucous conversation, and then the twins and their RIDEs had excused themselves for more honor-defending. "You coming, Rufia? It's all just for fun and profit!" Ash had asked.

"Nah...ordinarily I would, but I got somewhere better to sleep than jail tonight," she said, giving Tom another squeeze. "Besides, I gotta make sure the kids stay out of trouble. If Jamie spends another night in jail this month she'll get grounded for weeks, and Rhi would never forgive me if I let her sibs' first night in Aloha end in a jail stay." She winked at Ivor. "Now, your *second* night, maybe."

So they'd stayed safely in the back room while all sorts of interesting racket came from the front one, followed by sirens arriving outside. "Just stay back here, kids, don't even go watch," Rufia cautioned. "Leave it to the professionals."

“Professionals?” Olivia said dubiously, craning her neck toward the door.

“Yeah,” Rufia said. “Only people I ever knew who had a bail tab like I have a bar tab.” She chuckled. “It’s all in fun, most times...nobody gets *seriously* hurt, and they cover the bail-out costs of anyone they drag along, too. But like I said, that’s a little too much to lay onto first-timers. Save it for later.”

After everything had quieted down, Rufia beamed over details of the hotel suite Rhianna had booked for her family. “Jamie, Charley, Scratch, can you-all make sure they get there safely?”

“I think Ivor and I will take a little...detour first, if you don’t mind,” Scratch said in her sultry voice.

“I don’t mind!” Ivor said quickly.

Rufia grinned. “Sure, you kids have fun. Just be sure he’s in his bed when the folks wake up.”

“Oh, we will!” Scratch said.

“The one in the hotel,” Rufia clarified.

“*We will!*” Scratch repeated.

The hours that had followed were among the most pleasant Ivor could remember having in months--even skipping over the years spent in cryo. He knew he would probably end up short of sleep the next day, but Scratch had her ways of making it entirely worth it. *Is it because she’s “played both parts”?* Ivor wondered. *Could I get that good after I cross?*

The ending had been a little hazy, but now that Ivor opened his eyes and saw the hotel-room decor that was apparently the same on any planet you went, he figured Scratch had been as good as her word and made sure, somehow, that he ended up in his hotel room bed by morning. He regretted a little that he couldn’t remember if he’d thanked her for a good time, but he imagined he could do that the next time he saw her.

The next time turned out to be a little sooner than he had expected. A furry arm snaked out from under the covers next to him and pulled him into an embrace. “Hello, lover,” Scratch purred. “Wanna go one more time before everyone wakes up?”

Scratch checked his appearance in the mirror, smoothing his fur and

generating his costume. He planned to pick up Real clothes later, but for first impressions, hardlight would suffice. The look was the classic African explorer khakis and pith helmet.

He slipped back into Ivor's room and waited, listening to the family and waiting for an appropriate cue. He opened the door and stepped out. To his delight, Olivia and Ivor had their back to the bedrooms, so they didn't see him right away. Roy and Arlene were suitably startled.

"Who are you? And what are you doing coming out of my son's bedroom?" Roy asked, fatherly instincts kicking in.

Before the kids could explain, Scratch moved further into the room and swept his hat off, bowing to Roy. "Good morning, Stonegates. My name is Scratch, registered and certified tour guide for the Aloha region, as well as the southwestern Dry Ocean."

"Do all Aloha tour guides pop out of the bedrooms of tourists to offer their services?" Arlene asked. The parents were beginning to sense something was up.

Scratch adjusted his hat and moved to the table. He stood next to Ivor, his tail tickling Ivor's neck. "They do when they spend the night with a guest's excellent company."

He sent some tour packages into the room's public data space for them to examine. "Here are some of the tour packages available. As friends of Rochelle and Rufia, and family of Rhianna of course, my services are gratis to you, but some packages may have extra fees.

"As you can see, there are a wide range of options available for you to chose from, either as a group in total," he let himself shift slightly, dropping his voice to a feminine lustful growl. He leaned closer to Ivor and stage whispered, "Or for individual desires."

"Ah, I see he followed you home," Olivia said, grinning mischievously. "Cats do that, if you pet them..."

"Especially if you pet them *just* right, like he did last night," Scratch added.

Arlene coughed. "Well, Ivor, I hope you two had...a nice night."

"Scratch is very, uh, flexible," Ivor said, blushing a little. "Integrates have some...uh..."

Scratch smoothly morphed the rest of the way to the feminine. "Just a little talent I have. What sex I am is really just a matter of mood," she said.

"Mood, huh? It took me longer to dress in my court robes than it took you to change yourself so completely," Arlene said. "Are you hungry,

Scratch? Please, sit down. We can discuss the day ahead over a proper breakfast.”

“As long as you don’t make the ‘made from Scratch’ pun, that sounds fine with me,” Scratch purred. “Everyone who comes up with it thinks they’re being so original.” She looked around the suite. “We’re still missing three, aren’t we? Ferris, Franklin, and your grandmother?”

“We’re waiting for my oldest brother to make his entrance with Franklin,” Olivia said. “And Grandma Socah spent the night on the *Queen of Thorns*, talking shop with Janet and Sam Munn. Let me send her a ping and we’ll get her in tele...”

“G’morning from the *Queen!*” Socah’s voice came from a point in the air, around which a hardlight image of her formed. She wore an old floral bathrobe the whole family recognized and held a cup of steaming coffee. “Now, where’s Ferris? I want to see what that boy looks like now.”

“Think he’s still in his room,” Arlene said.

Roy went over to the room that had been assigned to Ferris’s use and knocked. “Ferris?”

“Just a moment!” Ferris called from within the room.

A moment later, Franklin nosed the door open and walked sedately out. “He’s just finishing dressing,” the elk explained. “We were out rather late last night. I do believe we were overcome by the festive atmosphere of the city.”

“Yeah, that’s my brother,” Olivia said, grinning. “Regular party animal. We used to have such a hard time keeping him in his seat when there was a jukebox around.”

“We never should have named him after Ferris Bueller,” Arlene said. “I’m afraid it went right to his head.”

Franklin chuckled. “Quite.”

The door to Ferris’s room opened again, and he emerged, pausing just outside the door for everyone to take in his altered appearance. “Good morning, everyone. How do you find my new physiognomy?”

“We just look at you, and there it is,” Olivia said. “Neat new look, bro!”

Ferris’s hair had changed from its former blonde to a more elky brown, and the addition of elk ears and nose, antler stubs, and a furry beard that extended down his neck served to give him the appearance of a genial, absent-minded satyr. He had dipped into the clothing fabber’s well of public-domain 20th-century fashions, wearing a tweed jacket, pleated linen shirt, brown trousers with suspenders, and an ascot that added a certain

jauntiness. A pocketwatch with a gold chain completed the ensemble.

“Were you all waiting on me?” Ferris asked. “I do apologize. I wanted to make sure I had my new look exactly right.” He nodded to Scratch.

“Hello, miss. You’re to be our tour guide for the day, I take it?”

“Wow. The only thing he’s missing are hooves and furry legs,” Ivor said wonderingly. “Very, very satyr-ical, Ferr.”

“I think he looks like Mr. Tumnus, myself,” Franklin said. “Or perhaps a less rambunctious Pan.”

“Mister who?” Ivor asked. His eyes flicked as his implant chased down the reference. “Oh...more twencen pop culture, right. Narnia.”

“Here’s another one for you, ‘Ivy’. Ahem.” The housecat Integrate took a breath. “A planet where *elk* evolved from *men*?” Scratch exclaimed in a raspy male voice.

“I despair of *ever* having the time to take in enough media to know what half the people on this planet are talking about without consulting my implant,” Arlene said dryly.

“Well, don’t worry, Mrs. Gates, you’ll have plenty of time,” Scratch reassured, voice back in female pitch. “Now, at the end of the day, the Munns and I have something big planned for everyone. I’m not telling what it is, exactly, but it’s a proper Alohan sendoff. So, where to first?”

Arlene looked over the various packages with her family in Virtual. She tried to reach Rhianna and Rochelle, but they were still sleeping off whatever they had done the night before. She received a response from Kaylee, which she shared by implant to the rest of the family. “Don’t worry about us,” the RIDE said. “We’ll be along with whatever you plan on doing, but don’t feel like you have to do it all in one day. We can come back to Aloha any time you want. It’s only a short sub hop away, and the Dreamchaser is at your disposal.”

“Hmm,” Arlene said, flicking through the brochures Scratch had made available. “It all looks very interesting.”

Roy nodded. “So how about we start with...”

With so many fascinating things to see and do, even Zharus’s 30-hour day passed amazingly quickly. As it wore on toward evening, Scratch led the fall back to the sea.

A giant bonfire lured the visitors to a sandy island located in a sheltered area of the Bay of Tranquility. A gazebo and numerous picnic tables were set up around the island, with one area near the water set aside

for cooking.

“This can’t possibly all be for us,” Arlene said, seeing the crowd already gathered on the island, RIDEs, Integrates, humans and Fused all mingling together.

“Not completely. But any excuse for a party. Between both families you had more than enough for an official luau. Toss in the friends and it works out,” Scratch explained, landing the skimmer out of the main gathering area and popping the doors open.

As they clambered out of the skimmer, a shadow fell overhead. They looked up to see a girl straddling a giant dolphin swimming lazily through the air overhead. Her blue-grey rubbery skin and lack of body hair made her strongly resemble a dolphin herself. “Aloha!” she called down cheerfully. “Enjoy the luau! We don’t put on a feed like this every day!” She paused. “Every week or so, maybe, but not every day!”

Olivia waved and yelled back, “Thanks, we will!” The dolphin-girl waved back, and she and her companion swam on. She even had a stubby dorsal fin on her back.

“I think I’ll avail myself of some liquid refreshment,” Ferris said. “This new nose of mine has opened a world of possibilities. Taste is also strongly influenced by what one smells.”

“You took long enough to finish breakfast and lunch, son,” Roy Stone said, amused. “How did I ever raise such a sesquipedalian?”

“You never listened to yourself in court, dear?” Arlene said dryly.

“You used to practice some of your defense arguments in front of me when I was young, Dad,” Ferris said. “So, I had a good teacher.”

Roy rolled his eyes. “How was I supposed to know you were *listening?*”

“I think I’m gonna try surfing,” Olivia said. “I’ve always wanted to learn, and it looks like there’s some people willing to teach.”

“Including that guy with otter ears who was waving at you earlier?” Ivor said.

“He *was* kinda cute, wasn’t he?” Olivia mused. “But it looks like we’re gonna eat soon, so maybe a while after that. Hey, isn’t that Ash over there?” She nodded to their parents. “See you later, ‘kay?”

“Sure, you kids go have your fun,” Roy said. “We’ll just wander

around some ourselves. Meet back at the dinner table?”

“Sounds good!” Olivia took Ivor’s hand and led him into the crowd.

“Why don’t we see if we can’t find our wayward daughter?” Arlene said.

“We could just comm her,” Roy pointed out.

Arlene grinned. “Yes, but where’s the fun in that?”

“You go that way, I’ll go this?” Roy said.

“Sure, we’ll meet back at the dinner table when the food’s up.” The Stonegate parents headed opposite directions to explore.

Ashley’s green mohawk was hard to miss in the crowd. Olivia and Ivor followed it like a shark fin as it approached them. She soon stepped around a cluster of people, and they saw she was leading someone, a woman with grey wolf ears and tail.

“Isn’t that the Valk she was fighting at the bar last night?” Olivia asked quietly as the pair approached.

“Hey guys! Glad you could make it,” Ash called out, waving with a free hand. “Did Scratch show you a good time? Best guide in Aloha in my opinion.”

“We had fun today, and Ivor had a blast last night,” Olivia said, nudging her brother. “Who’s your friend?”

“This is Ivanka, a classmate of mine. We’re both doing Intie-Medical at AU. Ivanka, this is Olivia and Ivor Stonegate, fresh out of the icebox from Earth. Ivor’s gonna be Ivy soon.”

Ivanka bowed her head to Olivia then looked Ivor over. She nodded and smiled. “I can recommend several excellent Sturmhaven crossriding finishing schools to complete your social transformation properly. You would make a fine Woman of Sturmhaven, Ivy Stonegate. I have it on good authority that all the *best* Sturmhaven women have names that begin with ‘Iv’.”

“Thanks...I think,” Ivor said, uncertain how to take that. “I’m sorry, but weren’t you two fighting last night? Ash got thrown out the window!”

“All part of Banks’ old west saloon ambiance. The bouncers will randomly throw patrons out the window themselves if they think things are getting too quiet. *That’s* rarely an issue when Ash is in town.” Ivanka smiled

and nodded. “For us, it was just a friendly fight over musical preferences,” the Sturmhaven woman said.

“We have our differences, but never over anything important. Helps keep things exciting,” Ashley added.

“But I still disagree with your plan to swap again. We will be losing a fine woman.”

“That’s true, but since Aaron will be swapping at the same time, you’ll also be *gaining* one,” Ashley pointed out.

Ivanka nodded, and sighed softly, giving up their old argument. “It is your choice and I can’t stop it. I will have a proper gift waiting for you and Chimo after you swap.”

Ashley nuzzled the Valk and grinned. “Looking forward to it.” She refocused on the bigger group and waved towards the beach. “Come on, I think they’re about to dig the pig out!”

“It’s not a real pig, is it?” Olivia asked as they started towards the trench being dug in the sand.

Arlene spotted a familiar humanoid lynx form chatting with Charlene, and went over to speak to her. “Oh, Rhianna, there you--” She paused as the lynx turned to face her, and she realized it wasn’t Kaylee after all—the fur pattern was different.

“Evening,” the lynx said. “I’m Kandace, and my partner’s Jenni. You must be Rhianna’s mother. Nice to meet you. If you’re looking for my sister and your daughter, I think they’re over there on the beach.”

“Oh, you’re more of Kaylee’s family,” Arlene said. “It’s good to meet you, too. I met some of the others at the museum.”

“I hope Liam wasn’t too much of a pain,” Kandace said. “Though that’s a false hope if ever I saw one. I know Kaylee and them try to make allowances, but I personally think he needs a few good swift kicks in his stubby little tail.”

“I gather he’s been through a lot,” Arlene said cautiously.

Kandace sniffed. “He’s not the only one who spent a few years dead in the desert. *Some* of us got over it and moved on.”

“Kandi, you’re doing it again,” a much younger voice chided from the lynx’s mouth. “Sorry ‘bout that. She’s a little grumpy on days that end in ‘Y’.

Except Mondays, for some reason. She's always cheerful on those."

It took Arlene just a moment to get it, and she snorted. "Wonder why that is. You must be Jenni."

"Yeah." Kandace's head-helmet retracted revealing a young girl's face, which bore the same ears-and-nose lynx tags as Rhianna along with blonde hair, blue eyes, and a sprinkling of freckles. She smiled amiably at Arlene. "It's nice to meet you, Mrs. Gates. I'm glad we were in the neighborhood."

"So am I." She raised an eyebrow. "So, you...spent a few years dead, you say?"

"Not exactly by choice," Kandace's helmet slid back into place. "Got some heavy Q-dust contamination when I escaped to Alpha Camp, and they didn't have the means to revive me for some little while."

Arlene winced. "Ouch."

"But she got better!" Jenni put in.

"And then I met Jenni, here, and we sort of hit it off." Kandace chuckled. "Jenni's from these parts. I'm looking after her while her family's away. It's kind of a full-time job."

"Not that it stops her from working a couple of *other* jobs, to pay the rent," Jenni added.

"I'm glad to hear you're getting by."

Kandace glanced toward the tables where the food was being set out. "Anyway, it looks like they're just about ready to serve dinner, and Jenni here's a growing girl."

"We have an arrangement going," Jenni said. "*I* eat as much as I want, and *she* doesn't gain any weight."

Arlene grinned. "I'm going to go round up the rest of my bunch and drift that way myself. See you around."

"See ya!" Jenni said cheerfully, and they went their separate ways.

"I can't believe you guys put this all together so quickly. It must have cost a fortune," Rhianna said, looking around the island.

"Not as much as you might think," Ryan said. "For a crowd this big, it actually comes out cheaper than renting a restaurant. And this provides a much nicer way to shake out the last of the ice box chills than some restaurant, wouldn't you agree?"

“For this many, no doubt. Where’d all these people come from? Who are they all?” Rochelle was also looking around.

Ryan laughed, “My family, your family. Your friends, some of our friends, the press, local dignitaries who caught wind of a big shindig with famous people, and the standard professional party crashers.”

Rochelle nodded and stopped, staring at a metal-man standing in the water at the luau as it was finally winding down. The sun had long since sunk below the western horizon, and now the moons were up and the stars were out. The pig had long since been skeletonized, and even Olivia had been convinced to try a little of it. The rest of the food and drink had also been handily tucked away, and most of the partygoers had either gone home or were enjoying an evening swim now that the safety margin for digestion had passed. The Stonegates, Rochelle, and Uncia had said their fond farewells to the Munns and other new friends they’d made, and now gathered along an empty flat stretch of sand to await their ride home. Rufia and Yvonne were notably absent; they had opted to spend more time with Tom and Larry and would catch a commercial sub flight back later.

“So where’s the limo?” Ivor asked. “We’re still clicks away from where we parked the ship...”

Rhianna chuckled. “Oh, ye of little faith. If you’d cast your eyes to the southeast, you’ll see our transportation is on its way.”

Ivor looked up. “What do you...*ohhh!*” He stared up as the Dreamchaser hovered majestically into view on lifter power. “You can control it remotely that well?”

“Yeah. We put in a fresh DINcomm link before we left, so we can fly it just like we were in the cockpit, for short stretches,” Rhianna said.

The Dreamchaser soft-landed on the sand in front of them, hardlight landing pads growing larger to take on a sort of sandshoe aspect. Its navigation lights blinked hypnotically to the exhausted (and somewhat intoxicated) family.

"Lord Almighty, I'm actually drunk!" Socah said, holding a half-empty bottle of beer. "An' I think this bottle's actually *glass*."

“And why shouldn’t it be?” Ferris mused, picking up a handful of sand and letting it trickle through his fingers. “They do have plenty of silicon here, after all.”

"I'm impressed you're holding it without breaking it, Mom," Arlene said. "Especially if you *are* actually drunk."

"Motor control's a lot better with the new updates," Socah said, taking another pull at the bottle. "Even, it seems, when drunk."

"Well, all aboard the Uplift Express!" Rochelle called. "We'll just be making a quick up-and-down hop this time, have you home in no time."

"I'm still amazed you can do this," Roy said as they filed aboard. "You could catch suborbital flights on on Earth, but they were airline only. You couldn't own a suborbital shuttle yourself."

"It's a frontier world, Dad," Rhianna said. "You can own lots of things out here they'd frown on back on Earth. Suborbitals, guns, your own personal power armor..."

"Or *they* can own *you*," Rochelle added, chuckling.

"Oh, and if any of you get your sub license, we'll be glad to let you borrow this bird if we're not using it at the time," Rhianna said as she sealed the hatch behind them all. "There's a handy shortcut you can use, too--if you partner up with a RIDE, they can download a skill chip and get licensed themselves, if they want. So they could fly it for you in Fuser, while you relax. I'd still recommend learning how yourself in case of emergencies, but in the short term, could come in handy if you have to make a lot of long business trips."

"Such as to Laurasia to work on Miss McClaren's case," Roy said. "The added flexibility over commercial flights *would* be helpful. Well, we'll see."

"Anyway, I hope you've all enjoyed your one-day mini-vacation," Rhianna said, pausing on the threshold of the flight deck hatch. "Seen a few more of those 'impossible things.'"

"Oh, we have," Olivia said. "I know I'll be going back soon. There's so much more to see! We didn't even get to visit the Beanstalk!"

"It's best to save that for a full weekend--or even full week," Rochelle said. "If you take the elevator, it takes most of a day just to get up there."

"So Jamie told me," Olivia said.

"Anyway, buckle yourselves in," Rochelle said. "We're going to pull some Gs on takeoff again." She considered the family's semi-inebriated state. "On second thought, I think we'll keep the inertial dampers on 'high'

for this run. No sense in making Jinkies *too* happy."

She followed Rhianna through the flight deck hatchway. A moment later, the spacecraft lifted off the ground, tilting back as it rose. Then the family were very gently pressed back in their seats as the main thrusters kicked in.

"That felt like a warm welcome all round," Arlene said, patting her full stomach. "Good food, good people, a whole new world of possibilities."

"And it's less than an hour away," Olivia said. "We could return any time even without Rhianna's help. Now that we've got a little money, sub tickets are actually pretty cheap."

"That's due to the Vegas effect. They want people to show up, so between the volume and discounts-" Ferris fell silent, sensing they weren't interested.

"And I found a good deal on my very first RIDE part," Ivor said.

Ferris looked at the RIDE fox head in his brother's lap. "That's...very pretty, Ivor. Very...uh...feminine."

"I like it!" Cira said enthusiastically. "It's kinda macabre right now, but with the right ears and eyes..."

"Not to mention the right body?" Ivor said. "That's gonna be the first thing I start looking for when we get home. Going to look for deals on a Sturmhaven RIDEworks chassis to match the head. Seems like a decent enough company--one of the oldest in the business."

"And, of course, nobody finds it the slightest bit...*weird* that I'm soon going to have *three* granddaughters," Socah said dryly.

"I think our capacity for finding *anything* weird topped out shortly after we got to Uplift," Olivia said. "I've reached the point where I just shrug and say 'yeah, sure, whatever.' 'Weird' is now officially the new 'normal'." Olivia smiled at her oldest brother. "Isn't it, Ferris the Satyr?"

"Indubitably," Ferris agreed.

"It's only a matter of time 'til the rest of us get RIDEs too, I suppose," Olivia said. "I wonder what we'll all be?"

"I don't see any need to rush into any further changes, myself," Socah said, dropping her empty bottle into the recycler and sighing contentedly. "I've gotten enough of my life back to be going on with right now." She chuckled. "And you know? That's just what I'll be doing. *Going on*. Instead

of staying stuck in the half-life holding pattern I have been for the last I don't know how long."

"Happy to have you back in the game, mother," Arlene said. She looked out the window next to her seat. Her implant, connected to the sub's systems, told her they were already thirty kilometers up. At this late hour and heading northeastwards they were coming up on dawn fast. The sun rose over the horizon just as they reached the top of the suborbital arc. "Now, isn't *that* just perfect timing?"

"Thank you verra much," Uncia said over the intercom. "We'll be on the ground in front of your door in twenty minutes, everyone."

"And we'll have to adjust our sleep schedules all over again," Olivia said, chuckling. "But it was worth it."

"It's *all* worth it," Roy said. "It'll be good to be home."

"It's good to *have* a home," Arlene agreed.

On the flight deck, Rochelle turned to Rhianna and grinned through Uncia's feline face. "I'm glad they're taking so well to the place. Some Earth families would really have freaked out over all the surprises they got."

Rhianna chuckled. "I was a little worried about that myself. But my folks are nothing if not adaptable."

"So what did *you* think of Aloha, and the Munns?" Rochelle asked.

"Well, working with Wanda and Astranikki last night was some of the most fun I've had in a long time. Educational, too, for all of us. I've got some ideas about improving our DIN-making process I need to play around with when we've got the time. I'll bet they do now, too." Rhianna grinned. "We have to go back there sometime without the family, or maybe lure them to Uplift for a visit."

"Yeah, and we should take in the Beanstalk too," Rochelle said. "We could shortcut past the elevator and just dock the 'chaser at Toptown."

"We can talk about that later," Rhianna said. "Right now, I just want to get the folks home, *us* home, and catch another catnap."

Rochelle yawned. "I hear that. The one thing about suborbital travel is it plays havoc with your sleep schedule."

"Ready for final approach," Uncia reported.

"Let's take her in," Kaylee agreed.

The Dreamchaser reached the apex of its arc and began to descend.

The glittering jewel that was the domes of Uplift nestled in the desert below winked at them.

Home.beach, keeping an eye on the kids paddling in the surf. “Who’s that? *What* is that?”

“That’s Sparky, my partner. Gary’s on the towel...” Ryan trailed off as the women were already in motion.

Sparky noticed the women when they reached the shore. He looked at each of them for a moment, before his animated eyes widened. He chirped, crouched down, and raised his hands defensively.

“It’s an Emergent IDE. Why didn’t you *say* you knew an EIDE?” Rochelle asked stopping at the edge of the water.

The man Ryan had started to point out stood up and joined them. “Evening, ladies. Can we help you with something?”

“We’d like to examine your partner... Sparky was it?” Rhianna asked. “Just looking, no touching,” she added as an afterthought.

“Dinner’s being served now-” Ryan started to say before giving up. He shrugged and looked helplessly at Gary.

Gary chuckled and waved Sparky in closer. The EIDE moved in warily. “At least it’s not as bad as when Astranikki met him.”

“That’s debatable,” Ryan countered as Sparky was surrounded by the pride of Geeks.

Sparky tolerated their examinations for a few minutes, showing off his skimmer-cycle mode and fusing with Gary when requested. But finally the fused pair pointed to the tables. “I’m not going anywhere ladies, but the food is getting cold and they are waiting for us.”

“Sorry. It’s just so easy to get distracted. I haven’t had a chance to see an EIDE up close before. Sparky and his fellows...” Rochelle elbowed her friend. Rhianna coughed. “Right. Uh, *anyway*, after you two.”

The luau was final winding down. The sun had long since sunk below the western horizon, and now the moons were up and the stars were out. The pig had long since been skeletonized, and even Olivia had been convinced to try a little of it. The rest of the food and drink had also been handily tucked away, and most of the partygoers had either gone home or were enjoying an evening swim now that the safety margin for digestion

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Rhianna chuckled. “I was a little worried about that myself. But my folks are nothing if not adaptable.”

“So what did *you* think of Aloha, and the Munns?” Rochelle asked.

“Well, working with Wanda and Astranikki last night was some of the most fun I’ve had in a long time. Educational, too, for all of us. I’ve got some ideas about improving our DIN-making process I need to play around with when we’ve got the time. I’ll bet they do now, too.” Rhianna grinned. “We have to go back there sometime without the family, or maybe lure them to Uplift for a visit.”

“Yeah, and we should take in the Beanstalk too,” Rochelle said. “We could shortcut past the elevator and just dock the ‘chaser at Toptown.”

“We can talk about that later,” Rhianna said. “Right now, I just want to get the folks home, *us* home, and catch another catnap.”

Rochelle yawned. “I hear that. The one thing about suborbital travel is it plays havoc with your sleep schedule.”

“Ready for final approach,” Uncia reported.

“Let’s take her in,” Kaylee agreed.

The Dreamchaser reached the apex of its arc and began to descend. The glittering jewel that was the domes of Uplift nestled in the desert below winked at them.

Home.

# THE END