

Cold and Wet Nose for News

By Robotech_Master

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In a small ground floor flat in one of the older dome districts of Uplift, Trevor Morris leaned forward, resting his chin in his hands with both elbows on his desk, and peered at the multimedia display screen in front of him. He was a young man in his twenties with a thin mustache that matched his unkempt brown hair and intense brown eyes. He wore a pair of interface specs made up to look like prescription glasses, though he didn't have them turned on at the moment. The information the display showed was worrying enough.

Trevor was a reporter for several of the local media streams. His beat was generally crime and investigative reporting, and over the last couple of months he'd started to notice something disturbing. A lot of his contacts and no few of his friends ran or worked for the myriad small rent-a-cop security or mercenary firms you could find in certain corners of any of the Gondwana polities. They were the people you hired when you were going prospecting or mining on a large scale and wanted pros to keep the pirates and claim-jumpers at bay, or if you wanted to mount a rescue op on someone who'd been nabbed by said nasties.

And lately, they'd been dropping out of touch. Trevor hadn't thought anything of it at first; in their line of work you took long-term contracts all the time, and you couldn't always get a comm birdie from the heart of the Dry. But as the weeks went by without any word from the first ones gone, then more and more dropping out of sight or even closing up shop outright, Trevor started to get suspicious. Even the lowest of the low-rent shops like "AAA Aaron's 30-Hour Security" (which Trevor happened to know was actually run by a guy named Fred, but comm directory yellow pages placement was everything) were mysteriously going dark.

When Trevor had approached those few of his contacts who worked for the security firms and hadn't vanished yet, it was like he hit a brick wall. No one would say one word about it. Which wasn't unusual if they were working a high-security contract, but he got the same answer again and again at every shop that still had people to answer the comms. You *never* got that many high-security contracts all at once. Something was definitely going on.

He'd finally managed to get one lead, through social engineering. He'd struck up a conversation over a beer with Calvin Northrupp, one of his few security company buddies who was still around, and offhandedly made a remark about so many of their rent-a-cops being "unavailable...if you know what I mean," and been rewarded with, "Yeah. I'll be glad when this whole Totalia thing is over." Then Northrupp had paled as he'd realized just what he said, and clammed up tighter than a wounded kraken.

So now it was time to chase down that lead...if he dared. Trevor glanced to the side and down, at the fawn-colored Pembroke Welsh corgi playing with a rubber squeaky toy on the floor next to his chair. "Well, what you think, buddy?"

The dog looked up. "Ready if you are, mate," he said. "I've got the anonymizing proxies all lined up. They're all on DINsec, so even Intie interference shouldn't be a problem. We'll bounce all the way out to high orbit and back, and the trail will look like it leads to the house at the end of the block. So if anyone does crack it and show up, we should be able to get a look at them without them seeing us."

"All right, then. Let's see what we can find on 'Totalia' in the search engines." Trevor tapped the side of his glasses to boot them up, while the dog hopped into a small

interface cradle by the side of the desk. Sections of his hardlight pelt blinked out as arms slid into place to plug in. It felt a little silly to use anonymizing proxies to run a google, but since Integrates had come into the light, so too had their incredible prowess in monitoring data network search terms to find the newest Integrates as soon as they Integrated. Since then, Trevor had developed a healthy dose of paranoia concerning when someone might be watching. If the disappearances were this widespread, and this secretive, who knew who might be behind it?

Trevor watched the time counter tick down for his search query to bounce out to a satellite, the top of the Aloha elevator, the top of the Omphalos elevator, and who knew where else. A few seconds later, it came back: nothing. The word "Totalia" produced not one single search hit. "Okay, that's kind of creepy," Trevor said.

"Are you sure you spelled it right?" the corgi asked.

"I spelled it the way it sounds like," Trevor said. "Okay, Plan B. Let's try to break into Cal Northrup's email account."

"What, again? You know how mad he got at us after the last time."

"Yeah, and I know he doesn't trust biometrics and never picks very good passwords either. They're always something from whatever his latest favorite Steader Entertainment show is. What was he watching last time we talked to him, *Fantasy Island*?"

A few seconds later, the dog nodded. "Got it. 'de.plane.de.plane'. For a 'security' professional he really doesn't have a very good grasp of it, does he?"

"So what have we got there?" Trevor asked, looking at the list of messages.

"Can't really tell," the dog said. "The emails are all under quantum encryption. Looks like it's Intie-grade. Even the subject lines are scrambled. But they're *from...huh.*"

"Yeah? Who?" Trevor asked.

"Looks like...the office of Zane Brubeck."

Trevor pushed his glasses back on his nose. "Huh. The plot thickens."

"Anyone show up at the house down the street yet?"

Trevor leaned over to peer through the curtain. "Nope, not seeing anyone..."

"Hey, what?" the dog said. "Our net uplink just went down. And comms aren't working either."

Then the apartment's doorbell rang.

"...the *fuck*?" Trevor said. He opened the desk drawer and pulled out the battered heavy gauss pistol he carried in the field before going to get the door. He thumbed the door cam.

A friendly voice came from the speaker below the display port. "Hey, guys. Mind if I come in?"

Trevor stared. "Shit. Well, that's interesting."

"What is it?"

"Unless I'm very much mistaken, it's Zane Brubeck himself. Cane and all," Trevor said.

"Busted," the dog sighed. "I *swear*, I took every precaution..."

"No worries, buddy," Trevor said. "If they could take down *Fritz*, I expect there's not much *we* could have done that would give his crew any trouble working out. Guess I might as well let him in."

The dog nodded. "On the bright side, if he *was* going to do anything dirty, he wouldn't have come to do it himself."

“Yeah, and his rep *is* squeaky clean,” Trevor said.

“*And*, he can hear you guys through the door, even without the intercom engaged,” Zane said cheerfully, twitching his tiger ears. “Listen—Trevor, is it? I promise I’m not here to hurt you. In fact, I might just have the biggest scoop you’ve ever heard in your entire life.”

“Well, *he* sure knows the way to a reporter’s heart,” the corgi said.

“All right, guess I might as well. You’ve probably got the place surrounded anyway,” Trevor said, opening the door.

A tiger Integrate in scout khakis walked in, and paused to lean on his cane. “Hey, do me a favor and put the gun away? You couldn’t hit me with it anyway, and I’d prefer nobody get hurt by accident.”

Trevor glanced down at the pistol he’d forgotten he was still holding. “Oh, right, sure.” He safed it and slid it back into the drawer, then turned his chair to face Zane.

“Better.” Zane took a seat on the battered sofa that was the only other furniture in the room. “So, yeah, you guys kinda stumbled on something I’ve been trying to keep on the down-low. Which is fair. You’re a reporter, it’s your job, and the more you try to hide something, the more you end up calling attention to it sometimes.”

“So how did you catch us?” Trevor asked. “I thought we were secure even against Intie hackers.”

“A couple of nodes on your proxy network don’t have the latest DINsec protocols yet,” Zane said. “A chain is only as strong as its weakest link.” He shrugged. “Anyway, your reward for doing your job well is...like I said, the biggest scoop of your entire life.”

“We’re certainly listening,” Trevor said.

“Unfortunately, this scoop comes with one *hell* of an embargo,” Zane said. “And you won’t get the full details ‘til you and Ein here—”

“My name isn’t Ein,” the dog said.

Zane raised an eyebrow. “Oh? I thought every corgi LRIDE was an ‘Ein,’ like every rat is a ‘Rattigan.’”

The dog sniffed. “*My* name is Llanfair.” He pronounced it in the Welsh way, “Shanvair.” “And if you must know, that’s short for Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwlllantysiliogogoch.”

Zane stared for a good ten seconds. “Uh...wow. That’s...one hell of a big name for such a little dog.”

“It’s a fine old Welsh name,” Llanfair said proudly. “As Welsh as I am!”

“Never mind that the closest he’s been to Wales was the Sea World show at Aloha,” Trevor said, rolling his eyes.

“Uh...I completely lost my train of thought,” Zane said. “Oh, right. As I was saying, you and Llanfair can’t be briefed here. We’re going to need to move you to a remote location before we tell you everything. And I’m afraid we won’t be able to let you comm anyone about it. You’re going to be away for a while on an all-expenses paid trip. Don’t worry about your job, we’ll smooth that over with your employer when the time comes.”

“How long ‘a while’ are we talking about, here?” Trevor asked.

“Hard to say at this point,” Zane said. “Maybe a year, maybe more. It’s a *long* trip. And you’ll have some company—you’re not the only reporter who’s gotten a little too close.”

“We don’t exactly have a *choice*, do we?” Llanfair said acerbically.

“Afraid not,” Zane said. “I’m sorry about that, but you’ll have to trust me when I say millions, possibly *billions* of lives are at stake here, and that’s not an exaggeration. You have my word you’ll be treated well, you’ll be *paid* well as a salaried worker on my team, and when you get back you’ll be free to write whatever you want about me, the expedition, everything. Or sue me for kidnapping you if you want, I suppose.”

“Well, I guess if I don’t have any choice, the decision is an easy one,” Trevor said dryly. “But you’ve at least gotten me curious. Will I be able to talk to all the security and merc guys you’ve vanished away?”

“You’ll have full access to everyone in the fleet, as long as you don’t interfere with their jobs,” Zane said.

Llanfair cocked his head. “Fleet?”

“Whoops, I’ve said too much,” Zane said, making a zipping motion across his lips. “But yeah. I *want* you to tell the whole story of what I’m doing, from start to finish. I just want you to wait to tell it until after we get *back*.”

“Do I have time to pack?” Trevor asked.

“If there’s anything small you want for sentimental reasons, or special gear you need for your job, grab it,” Zane said. “We’ll give you everything else you need when you get there.”

Trevor nodded, and picked up the shoulder bag he kept packed and handy next to the desk as his “bug-out bag.” He opened the drawer, pulled the gun out, and dropped it in the bag. “Then I guess I’m good.”

Llanfair disconnected himself from the cradle and waddled over to stand next to Trevor. “Same.”

“Great!” Zane said. “C’mon, if we hurry we should just be able to get you on the next shuttle.”

Trevor took one last look back at the room, wondering when he’d see it again. Then he closed the door behind them.

They took Llanfair’s plug-in Mini Cooper replica skimmer to the airport, escorted by a couple of RIDEs and a black panther Integrate on a skimmer bike. Zane promised he would see to it that the Mini was warehoused safely at no charge until they got back.

Then, before Trevor had any real idea what was going on, he and Llanfair found themselves aboard one of the big Starmaster suborbitals Brubeck Mining used for moving people and equipment around. Only in this case Trevor had the feeling that the ship was leaving the “sub” part of its name behind.

Trevor had barely been settled into one of the passenger seats, with Llanfair strapped into a framework in the seat between him and the window, when someone else sat down next to him. “Well, look who’s here,” Cal Northrup growled. “The rat fink.” A big, raw-boned man with a florid face and the moose ears, antler stubs, and slightly-muzzled face of a first-generation RIDE partner, he looked capable of smashing Trevor into a pulp with one ham-like fist, and sometimes Trevor wondered if he was going to. Now was one of those times.

“Aw, c’mon, Cal, does anyone even talk like that for real?” Llanfair said.

“I’ll talk however I damn well want to!” Cal growled. “Here I was, gonna get to stay on Zharus, be in charge of the whole damn *company* while everyone else was gone...and then you come along and I get yonked in here.”

“Well, you know what they say about loose lips...” Trevor said feebly.

“I oughtta loosen *your* lips,” Cal muttered. He crossed his arms, glared at the seat back in front of him, and subsided into silence. Cal was like that...he got angry fast, but lost his mad just as quickly. Which was, all things considered, probably lucky for those around him, Trevor reflected.

“Uh...if it makes you feel any better, I’m kind of in the same boat,” Trevor said. “Fifteen minutes ago I was sitting at home, planning out my stories for the day. Now I’m in a shuttle to I-don’t-even-know-where-or-why, which puts you one up on me. What is this ‘Totalia’ thing anyway?”

Cal transferred his glare to him. “Shush. Boss doesn’t want us using that word while we’re still on-planet.”

“Hey, I’ve been told I’m going to be away from Zharus for a year or more, what more can they do to me?” Trevor said. “Come on, give me *something* here, or I’ll see just how loud I can shout it.”

Cal rolled his eyes. “I’ll just bet you would, too. All right, look. I’ll tell you everything I know when we’re in orbit. It ain’t much. *I* was just told enough to explain why I was going to have to stay at home while everyone else was going somewhere else.”

“Okay, fair enough,” Trevor said. He leaned back in his seat. “Wherever we’re going, I get the feeling this is going to be pretty interesting.”

Cal sniffed. “Boy, you got *that* right.”

After a few more minutes, the Starmaster started to taxi. “Looks like the plane’s taking off,” Trevor observed.

“De plane! De plane!” Llanfair barked, wagging his tail.

Cal glanced sidelong at them. “Remind me to change my password, if I ever get access to my email account back.”

Llanfair gave him an innocent look. “What?”

The Starmaster took off, passed through the dome, and shot skyward at a rapid pace. As the sky darkened outside, the mellow strains of the Blue Danube began to play over the intercom speakers. “Funny, I didn’t think we were flying Steader Airlines,” Trevor said.

“From what I googled up on him before our net access blanked, I’m gathering Zane has something of the same sense of humor,” Llanfair observed.

“Oh, great,” Trevor said. “I expect the sheets will be pre-shorted on our bunks, and we’ll need to watch for buckets propped over doorways.”

“I don’t think he’s *that* bad,” Llanfair said. “Though you have to admit, popping up out of nowhere to whisk us off to deep space is one hell of a practical joke all by its lonesome.”

“Yeah. Real funny,” Cal grumbled. “My girl’s gonna be with someone else by the time I get back.”

“Just tell Zane you mentioned Totalia to her, too, why don’t you?” Llanfair suggested. “Then she’d have to come along.”

“Oh, ha ha,” Cal said. “...though, you know, that *is* almost tempting.”

“So, we’re in orbit now,” Trevor said. “No going back. So what the hell is ‘Totalia,’ anyway?”

“Okay, okay, here’s what I know,” Cal said. “You heard ‘bout Zane’s sister getting back from her scout trip?”

“How could I not?” Trevor said. “It was on all the media. Sister of the Integrate golden boy, Integrated herself on the trip, carrying on in heroic father’s footsteps, yadda

yadda blah blah blah. Pushed everything *I* wrote down to page 3 at best.”

“Well, seems like among the other crap she found, there was this wildcat colony what’s named Totalia,” Cal said. “I didn’t get all the details, but there’s something going on there what needs a whole fleet to go back there. Including something as close to an army as Zane can raise on short notice. Which is where we-all come in.”

Trevor whistled. “So it looks like Llanfair and I are going to be ‘embedded.’”

“Like a cheap cubic zirconium,” Sal agreed. “And I guess they’ll find something for me to do, too. Dammit, I was really looking forward to running the whole company back on Zharus.”

Privately, Trevor suspected that Cal getting picked for that job was an indication of just how far down the barrel they’d scraped for troops to take with them, but figured it was probably best all around not to say so. “So where is this fleet, then?”

“Where do you think? Outskirts of the system where people aren’t as likely to notice it. Way out beyond where even the rockhoppers go.”

“Sounds like we’ve got a bit of a trip ahead of us,” Trevor said.

“A few days, anyway,” Cal said. “They won’t want to draw attention by barn-burning all the way out at max sublight. We’ll probably transfer to a longer-range freight shuttle at Omphalos.”

“Terrific,” Trevor said. “Wow, a wildcat colony. Seriously? That’s got to be the first one in decades. I remember reading in Mikel Steader’s memoirs about all the ones the Circus discovered the remains of, that Earth had just scooped right out of the ground.”

“Yeah, and this one’s gotta be pretty old, too,” Cal said, forgetting his former animosity in the enthusiasm of the conversation. (This was one of the reasons he’d always been such a good source for news, Trevor reflected.) “I mean, you don’t send a scout *toward* Earth. If they were so far out it took one to find ‘em, they had to have gone a long, long ways back in the day.”

“Yeah...” Trevor said thoughtfully. “You know, there really *could* be a hell of a story here. This might just make Llanfair’s and my whole career when we get back.”

“Yeah. As my pal Teddy would say, bully for you,” Cal said. “It’s gonna be a whole year of KP for me.”

“Hey, maybe I could get you two assigned as my bodyguards or something,” Trevor said. “Least I could do after getting you into this mess.”

Cal rolled his eyes. “Oh, be still my beating heart.”

“Hey, it’s an offer,” Llanfair said. “Probably best one you’re gonna get.”

“Hmph.” Cal subsided into staring at the seat back in front of him. Trevor gazed past Llanfair out the window, alone with his own thoughts. A wildcat colony would, of necessity, have been totally isolated—especially if it were located out that far away. And there was no way they could have started it *recently*—the kind of ships you’d need were too rare and too well-controlled. Which pushed it back into the era of early FTL or possibly even late STL. *Good Lord, how long did they have to fly before they got all the way out there? Why did they do it? What must their culture be like?* He harbored some hope that the answers would be forthcoming when he got to the fleet. After all, Madison Brubeck had *been there*. She must have brought back a lot of information.

Trevor pulled up the notepad app on his I-specs with a couple of practiced flicks, and jotted down a few lines of questioning for putting to whomever appropriate he could find to interview. He itched to start on an actual story, but there really wasn’t

enough there to go on yet. But there would be. He was sure of that.

Not at all to Trevor's surprise, they transferred directly from the Starmaster to a ship at the Omphalos upper docks. Trevor was mildly startled that the plane didn't actually dock with the elevator directly—a pretty clear violation of the usual regs regarding passenger transfer around the elevator. Instead, it latched into place on the back of a freight shuttle and extended an umbilical, and the passengers went down a ladder one by one. The larger RIDEs the plane was also carrying went down a separate connection from the cargo bay. Llanfair and a couple of other LRIDEs got lowered down the passenger ladder on harnesses.

Once they were all together in the shuttle's main cargo bay in separate groups of humans and RIDEs, some of the RIDEs drifted over toward the human group while their humans went to join them. One of them was Cal, whose partner was a huge old bull moose heavy assault RIDE who had helped trounce Sturmhaven all the way back in the war. The RIDE's name was Theodore, presumably because some of the RIDE designers back then had annoyingly cute senses of humor. Apparently the RIDE had caught it, too, as he often affected hardlight pince-nez spectacles and a big mustache. He already had the necessary teeth all on his own. The only thing that stopped him from walking softly but carrying a big stick was his frequent lack of opposable thumbs.

Trevor chuckled a little as Cal hugged his partner around the neck. You wouldn't think a guy like Cal could have that kind of sensitive side, but he was more of a complex personality than he seemed.

"Hey, Teddy," Trevor said. "You mad at us, too?" Llanfair trotted over and sniffed at one of the moose's dinner-plate-sized hooves, tail wagging.

The moose snorted. "Perhaps a trifle. But I would prefer charging up a remote hill to remaining tied to a desk. I was made for battle!"

"Yeah, there is that," Trevor said.

"It'll be fun!" Llanfair said. "I don't know exactly what it is yet, but I'm sure whatever it is, it will be!"

"At least they'll be able to give us big-enough quarters on this tub that we can stay together," Cal reflected. "That's something."

"I'll thank you not to call the *Tess* a tub," said a newcomer. A young orange-haired woman in a white steward's uniform, she had a media pad in one hand and a stylus in the other. "I'm Lieutenant Holly Yewwood, Brubeck Space Cargo division, and I'm going to be assigning you to your quarters. I'll have you know ol' *Tess* has been in service for thirty-five years and is even faster now than when she was made."

"No offense, Lieutenant," Cal said. "I'd just rather be back on Zharus."

"Unfortunately for both of us, this is one of those cases where that just can't be arranged," Lieutenant Yewwood said crisply. "Don't worry, we'll get you where you're going just as soon as we can. In the mean time, since we're not carrying much in the way of important cargo this run, we've replaced one of our pods with a housing module so there's plenty of room for you all to bunk. We'll be assigning you lot to staterooms built for two people and their RIDEs, if any." She nodded to Cal and Trevor. "You two look friendly, so we'll put you two in the first one."

"Aw, come on!" Cal protested, but she'd already moved on to the next passengers.

"Well, looks like we'll have plenty of time to get reacquainted," Trevor said. "We can see if you've gotten any better at five-card. Do you still have that one tell?"

“How should I know? You never would tell me what it was!” Cal grumbled.

“Oh, hey, that’s right!” Trevor said, grinning. “This trip is starting to look better already!”

Over the next several days, there wasn’t much to do. Trevor, Cal, and their RIDEs found various ways to amuse themselves as they might. Trevor spent part of the time writing letters to people back on Zharus. Lieutenant Yewwood had informed him that they would allow some limited contact, though the letters would have to pass by a censor to make sure no embargoed information leaked out. So Trevor dashed off some innocuous letters to colleagues, friends, and family explaining that unforeseen circumstances had led to a need to spend some time off-planet.

He spent a lot of the rest of the time in company with other passengers on the flight, most of whom had a similar need to find things to do with their time. Some of them were guards or mercs like Cal, including a couple of entire units traveling together. But there were a number of other professions mixed in as well, including a number of technicians, scientists, mechanics, and pilots. Trevor idly wondered how many reporters covering other beats might be developing similar suspicions to his based on disappearances of acquaintances from other fields.

For Trevor, the mercs were fun to hang out with. But then, he’d always gotten on well with that type; it was one of the reasons he’d done so well in his beat. He and Cal sat in on poker games with them, and he won about as often as he lost. Along the way, he learned a few more things about Totalia from some of the better-informed of them. It seemed the trip was at least in part a rescue mission, as there were other scouts still remaining on the planet. Details were kind of confused, and there was something about a possible war on. The people who knew the most were the ones who were least inclined to talk, citing “opsec” from force of habit. “Come on, guys, I’m part of this operation, too!” Trevor pointed out, but it didn’t bring them to budge.

Llanfair spent a lot of his time with his stumpy paws resting on the rim of whatever viewports he could find, staring out at the crystal-clear stars and the planets as they passed. “This is amazing!” he said happily, tail a wagging blur. “I never thought I’d get to see *space!*”

“Something tells me you’re going to get to see a whole lot more of it before we’re through,” Trevor said wryly.

Cal seemed to grow more morose the farther they got from Zharus. It was just as well, Trevor supposed, that the shuttle was too small to have a bar. “I can’t believe they’re sending me to a whole other *star system*,” he groaned more than once. “I just want my feet planted in good ol’ Zharus sand. Is that too much to ask?”

“Survey says...yes,” Trevor said, and then fled before Cal could find something handy to throw at him.

As the days wore on, finally the passengers received a notice over their comms that it would soon be ending, and it was suggested they might want to find a viewport on the port side or else access the ship’s external port camera. At first there wasn’t much to see—there wasn’t all that much reflected light this far out from the sun. But as they got closer, a glint resolved itself into a sort of long, spindle shape, with a wider base at one end—a giant triangular candlestick in space.

“Under normal circumstances, we’d have been dropping you off at Cerberus

Station to wait 'til you could be loaded with the rest of the forces, but there've been some...management snafus there so we were ordered to bring you straight out to the ship itself," Yewwood said. "So...welcome to the *SS Great Western*, gentlemen. The Star Circus's newest ship, fresh from the Eridani Shipyards. Well, it's closer to about three quarters of the ship, actually. She was due for full fitting out at Colossus-Rhodes, but..."

"Oh, wow!" Llanfair said, paws on the viewport, tail wagging happily. "I can't wait to get on board!"

"What're you getting so excited about?" Trevor said, grinning. "I don't think it has any tires you can lift your leg against."

Llanfair rolled his eyes. "You're never gonna let me forget that *one* time, are you?"

"To be honest, I'm looking forward to it, too," Trevor said. "I've seen videos of the *Great Eastern*, the ship that's brought the circus by Zharus a few times, but never exactly had the chance to go aboard." *And there's also that briefing waiting for us...*

The closer they got, the more obvious just how unfinished the vessel was, and that it was smaller than it looked. "It's a half-scale version of their big ship," Yewwood explained. "I'm told that it's intended for splitting the circus's route into two loops, with this one taking on all the smaller colonies like Zheng He where half the *Great Eastern*'s showboats didn't have anything to do, while the *Eastern* could bring the full-sized show to the bigger ones more often without having to make so many stops. But they're still working on building the smaller ships to attach to it...while it happens we already have a lot of smaller ships here that need to hitch a ride somewhere. So they figured, why keep it sitting in dry dock when it could be off on a shakedown cruise? She's basically just the Bridge, Engineering, hull and drive systems right now. Everything we need is getting docked."

"We really *are* going to another star system, aren't we?" Cal said, staring out the window. "I think it finally just sank in."

For once, Trevor didn't have the heart to poke fun. "Looks like. This is going to be something to tell our grandkids, to be sure."

"Bully!" Theodore the bull moose said happily. "Plenty of opportunities for adventure, to be sure!"

"And we didn't even have to pay for a cruise ticket!" Llanfair said.

The ship grew larger, then moved out of view as the shuttle turned to approach it head-on. Trevor looked around out the viewport and scratched his head. "I don't get it," he said to Lieutenant Yewwood. "I'd heard there was a 'fleet' but this is only one ship. Even with a bunch of smaller ships attached to it, that's not what I'd call a 'fleet.'"

"Oh, there is one," Yewwood replied. "It's just spread out, so it doesn't make one big lump someone with a 24-cm telescope in their backyard could make out from Zharus. There's plenty of space for individual ships to get lost in when you're this far out, and no reason to keep 'em close together when sublight drive could move any one of 'em right next to any other in a matter of minutes if we needed to."

"Makes sense, I guess," Trevor said. "How many ships are in it?"

Yewwood grinned and shook her head. "I've been told about you, Mr. Big Time News Reporter. You'll get filled in along with everyone else at the briefing on the ship."

"Aw, darn," Trevor said. "Well, can't blame a guy for trying."

Since there was no longer anything to see, most of the passengers returned to their cabins to pack their stuff while the *Tess*—actually *Tess Trueheart* was her full

name, for a character from one of the works of twencen pop culture Zharus was so besotted with—made her final approach.

Boarding the ship, when it happened, was almost anticlimactic. The shuttle had docked to one of the hardpoints on the *Great Western's* hull, and all they had to do was climb down another ladder (or levitate down another cargo shaft, in the case of the RIDEs) and there they were. A number of other stewards in similar uniforms to Yewood's came forward to guide the various passengers to various separate ships docked to the *Great Western's* hull. Trevor noticed with more than a little satisfaction that he and Cal were directed to the same one.

As they arrived at their ship, the [name], the RIDEs were asked to separate from their partners again to stop by the maintenance bay for a checkup. This included Llanfair. "Now wait a second—" Trevor began.

"Hey, it's okay," Llanfair said. "They wouldn't haul us this far out in space first if they were going to pull anything sneaky. You get set up in our quarters and I'll see you later, okay?"

"If you say so," Trevor said doubtfully. But Llanfair was right—there was too much to do right now to worry about sticking together. Besides, they were on comms. Trevor carried his minimal luggage to the suite he'd been assigned. He was almost sad that it was a single occupancy instead of getting to inflict himself further on Cal, but it really wasn't bad overall. There was a hardlight theme set up that made it look like a small apartment from the early to middle twencen, complete with wood parquet floors and antique-style fixtures. Trevor shrugged and settled in. He could always change it later if he wanted.

Trevor unpacked his bag, and programmed the room's fabber to start work on his favorite outfits for use later. He sat down at the comm terminal, and was unsurprised to find the complete Steader catalog available, as well as an excellent selection of Zharus's own native-produced programming. But when he searched for information on Totalia, all he got was a boilerplate explaining he would have full access after his first briefing. "Yeah, that figures."

A few minutes later, Llanfair commed. "Hey, Trevor? I'm coming back now..."

"Okay...you need me to come pick you up or anything? I can do that."

"Nah, it's okay. I've got the maps of the ship. I'll be fine. There's just one little... oh, well, I'll tell you when I get there."

"See you soon, buddy." Trevor signed off the comm, and flipped through the catalog of shows again. It had been a while since he'd watched any of *Starcrossed*—a Sturmhaven soap opera about a woman who was forced to crossride by and trade places with her male gladiator to find out how the other half lived. It looked like the whole run so far was available. And it looked like they also had the complete run of *The Goldman & Catanno Mysteries*, which he'd never gotten around to watching since they'd gone public. Given that he was probably going to have plenty of free time while the ship got where it was going, he made a note to pencil in a few movie nights. Llanfair was pretty keen on the shows, too.

The door slid open, and Trevor turned to greet his friend—then stopped and stared. "Uh..." The corgi in the doorway was recognizably Llanfair—his hardlight fur pattern was identical, and he wore the same happy expression on his panting muzzle. However, he was also the size of a large pony. "...okay, that's it. You're going on the *low-fat* food from here on out."

“Hi,” Llanfair said. His voice was still pitched the same, but louder and more resonant from the larger vocoder built into this full-sized shell. “Um...what do you think?”

“Where on Zharus did they ever dig up a corgi G-RIDE shell?” Trevor said. “I didn’t think they even *made* them.”

“Well, there’s actually an adjustable small-canid shell that can be used for anything from a chihuahua to a yorkie,” Llanfair said. “They just change the leg length and program the hardlight differently. Uh...do you like it? I, um, know we never exactly talked much about Fusing or anything...I wasn’t sure if you had something against it and just never said.”

“I...honestly never thought about it,” Trevor said. “When I started out, and I had the choice of a G-RIDE or an L-RIDE and car, I figured that it might be handy as a reporter to have a teeny-tiny partner who could get into tight spaces and open the door for me to get in. That was exactly all the thought I put into it.”

“Right. Well, you see, the reason they gave me this was, this is the vacuum of space, and we RIDES are better emergency survival suits than the ordinary vac-suit kind,” Llanfair said. “Being as we put *ourselves* on, and all. So pretty much everyone who’s bringing a Laurie along and doesn’t have a philosophical problem with it is getting one of these larger shells for the duration. They may even let us keep them when we get back to Zharus; how cool is *that*?”

“What happened to your old one?” Trevor asked.

“Oh, it’s still here,” Llanfair said. “Watch!” He froze, his hardlight flickering out... and a panel on his back opened and a smaller corgi emerged. “Ta-dah! It actually operates just like the Mini back home. They came up with some gee-whiz new gadget to give us the bandwidth we need to control a whole ‘nother body this way instead of just a ground car.”

“Wow. That’s...honestly rather impressive,” Trevor said.

The mini-corgi dropped back inside, and the larger dog came back to life again. “So...uh...I hope *you* don’t have a problem with it. We don’t have to Fuse right away or anything, but...they do have emergency drills and stuff, so we’ll have to sooner or later. If you don’t want to, I can take it back and you can use a vac-suit instead.”

Trevor grinned. “Hey, no worries. It may take me a little bit to get used to the idea, but I’m sure I will be by the time they call the first emergency drill. Come on in and show me that thing. It has a skimmer form, right?”

“Sure does,” Llanfair said happily, padding into the room. “In fact, the ship’s long enough that there are some high-speed trafficways that actually take skimmer traffic from one end to the other, for people who don’t want to use the tram cars.”

“Huh. We could actually have brought the Mini?” Trevor said.

“Well, I think they’d kinda frown on that,” Llanfair said. “Not a lot of room for single-purpose vehicles here, but every RIDE’s a skimmer. Every full-sized one, anyway.”

“So what are you?” Trevor asked.

The corgi’s hardlight flickered out, and his metallic body rearranged itself into a sleek hovercycle with the stylings of a 2003 Honda Goldwing motorcycle. “Ta-dah! Vroom vroom!”

Trevor whistled. “Not bad. That’ll be handy for getting around.”

Llanfair converted back into his giant dog shape. “Glad you like it!”

“So did they tell you anything about when we’d be briefed?” Trevor wondered.

“Nope. Pretty sure it’ll be soon, though. After all, we’re out here in the first place because we were too curious to sit on our hands. They’re not gonna give us enough time to get into more trouble.”

When Trevor woke the next morning, he found an email waiting in his account summoning him and Llanfair to a briefing room at 0800. They gulped down a quick breakfast from the nearest mess, and were there fifteen minutes before the meeting was due to start. Cal and Theodore were there as well, as were a number of the military and security types who’d come out on the shuttle with them and a scattering of civilians.

At the front of the room was a young man with coyote tags, wearing a cowboy hat and a colorful *serape* with a copper Marshals badge pinned to it. His youthful face had a patina of carefully-maintained stubble, and a rifle with all sorts of gauges and valves was leaned up in the corner behind him. A coyote the size of a small pony sat on its haunches nearby. “Hello, everyone. Marshal Rusty Seaford, and this is Trips. Glad to see you all could make it.”

“Like you gave us any choice!” Trevor said.

Rusty grinned. “I’d say I’m sorry about that, but from what I hear you’ve mostly got yourself to blame there, and after you learn what we’ve got to tell you, you won’t want to be anywhere else.”

“All right, so hit me,” Trevor said, leaning back in his seat and pulling on his interface specs to take notes.

“All right.” Rusty grinned. “It started when Zane’s sister Madison Brubeck launched on her first scout run last year...well, actually it started a couple hundred years before that, but Maddie’s the one who brought back the word. It happened that after she visited her first few planets, she saw something a bit odd about a nearby nebula...”

Rusty filled them in with a rough outline of Madison and her unexpected RIDE stowaway Samantha’s adventures on the lost wildcat colony world of Totalia—rescuing the other scouts, starting a nonviolent revolution which turned into a coup, and finally making their way back out to space. He also explained about the not one but *two* new metamaterials Madison had found, and the implications if Earth should happen to find out.

“So we’re getting this fleet together. If everything goes to schedule, we should be leaving the system in about a month or so to go to the rescue,” Rusty concluded. “I’ve provided access to supplemental materials about the planet, the fleet, and so on. We’re sorry for all the secrecy, but if Earth gets wind of this we don’t think the Totalians will stand a chance.”

“That’s fair,” Trevor said, still a bit poleaxed. “Is there...is Madison Brubeck around? Can we interview her?”

Rusty chuckled. “Not yet, I’m afraid. She’s still back on Zharus, helping Zane with prep there. But she’ll be out here in a couple of weeks, and we’ll make sure you and any other reporters get a press conference and some one-on-one time.”

“Great. Thanks,” Trevor said. *:I guess in the meantime we can start interviewing any officers and such we can find.:*

:I’m already sending the requests out,: Llanfair said. *:I tell ya, mate, when we get back we are gonna be set for life!:*

:Zane was right,: Trevor said. *:This is the biggest scoop I’ve ever gotten in my*

life.: He groaned over the comlink. *:And it'll be years before I can report it!:*

:Maybe you should just plan on writing a book,: Llanfair said. *:Or shooting a documentary. Or both.:*

:Yeah. Well, one thing's for sure. We'll have plenty of time to figure it out.:

They filed out of the briefing room. A couple of people stayed behind to ask Rusty some questions, but Trevor figured he could probably comm the Marshal later on. It wasn't as if there was any great rush. Besides, he wanted some time alone to think it all over. He pulled up the map of the ship on his specs and looked for a nearby observation lounge. A few moments later, he was staring out into space, gazing at the stars and the distant slightly brighter one that was Pharos. The lounge was empty, which was fine with Trevor. He wanted to think some more about what he'd just heard.

It wasn't long before an unwelcome voice intruded into his thoughts. "Thought I'd find you two here." It was Cal, a broad smirk on his face. Theodore the moose was right behind him.

"Well, *you're* certainly in a good mood," Trevor said.

"Yeah, I guess I am," Cal said. "Can you believe all that? I had no *idea* how important this whole thing really was. And to think they almost left the two of us behind while everyone else went off to save the galaxy!"

Wonder why they would have wanted to do a thing like that, Trevor wondered, a bit uncharitably. "Well, I'm glad you're happy about it," Trevor said.

"I guess I really ought to thank you for getting us dragged into this after all," Cal said, stepping up next to Trevor to peer out the observation port.

"Yeah, well, you're welcome," Trevor said. "Thought about what you're going to do yet?"

Cal shrugged. "I expect I'll get my assignment closer to time to move out. Meanwhile, I guess Teddy and I will just read everything we can and try to get ready."

"I've already been through everything twice," Theodore said enthusiastically. "We'll give those Totalian ruffians a good sound thrashing! It'll be bully!"

Despite himself, Trevor chuckled. "Glad you two came around. It was going to be a long trip if you were still mad at me all the way to Totalia."

Cal shrugged. "I'll probably still be mad at you now and then. Especially if you keep beating me at poker."

Trevor grinned. "I'll try to keep that to a minimum."

The two humans and two RIDEs stared out the window in silence for a while. "Sure is far away, isn't it?" Llanfair said at last.

"Not nearly as far as it *will* be," Trevor reflected. "And nowhere near as far as the old homeworld."

"The farther away *those* people stay, the better," Cal said judiciously.

"That is rather the point of this entire exercise, I believe," Theodore mused.

"Can you imagine what we could do with that nullifite stuff? Or Totalium?" Trevor said. "Maybe they'd be enough to give us an edge if it comes down to a fight. More of an edge than just Q, that is."

"Let's hope it doesn't," Cal said. "I don't think any one of us is ready for that."

After a while, Trevor shrugged. "Well, I guess we've got our jobs to do. Guess I'll see you around."

Cal nodded. "Comm me sometime, we'll get together."

"For poker?"

Cal snorted. "Don't push your luck."

Trevor and Llanfair left the man and moose there, and headed back to the skimmerway back to their quarters. The whole thing was still a lot to swallow, but Trevor supposed it would get easier over time. But either way, they had a long stay in space ahead of them, and plenty to occupy their minds along the way.

"So what do you think, buddy?" Trevor said. "Sure beats writing up another session of the pantsless Agora, doesn't it?"

"I think this is going to ruin us for that kind of work ever again," Llanfair said. "Not that this is a *bad* thing, mind you."

Trevor chuckled, then climbed on as Llanfair converted to his skimmer bike form. He revved the motor, and they sped away.

THE END...for now