

Cougar Town

By Robotech_Master and JonBuck

I. Cougar Town

*E.C.S. Steady Hand Landing Site
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The fabbed barracks was so new it was still warm from its own construction. An officious-looking woman in a staid dark pantsuit motioned for him to follow her. She led him into a small cubicle, then handed him a tablet. "Sir, I promise you this will be the smoothest experience with bureaucracy you've ever had. After what you've been through the last subjective day we NextusCrats don't want to make your situation that much worse. You can either fill in the blanks on the tablet form with a stylus, or we can do it verbally. Your preference."

"I'd just as soon talk it through. Help me shake off this cryosleep grogginess," Ed said, sitting his considerable bulk down on a camp stool.

"Okay. Let's start with name and age."

"Edward Lancaster, forty-five."

"Former occupation?"

"Not the most glamorous, but necessary. Landfill reclamation, with some archeology on the side. Depends on what we find during the dig. I've done everything from actual landfills to fixing mountaintop removal coal mines."

"Marital status?"

"Single. Never married. Dated a few times in RL and VL, but nothing, um, ever came of it."

"Former place of residence?"

"Oakland Arco, up in the Altamont Hills. Hardly ever left it, between my job telepresence and VL. Hardly ever needed to."

The woman raised her eyebrows. No doubt she probably had intuited his sedentary lifestyle from his admittedly corpulent physique. Even with med-tech on Earth less advanced than on Zharus it took real work to be as obese as he was. "Interesting. Interesting. I believe I've found you in the passenger manifest, Mr. Lancaster. It says you were recolonized due to your 'habit of presenting as female in GVL and FVL'."

Ed snorted. "Sounds about right. I mean, look at me. This ugly face and enormous flab. I hardly leave my apartment and it shows. As for the rest..." he blushed.

Her expression turned surprisingly sympathetic. "Mr. Lancaster, I change my sex every three years and have borne three of five children between myself and my spouse. Welcome to Zharus. There's no need to feel any shame."

He ran his fingers nervously through his hair. "I know, but it hasn't really sunk in. Now, I'd like to get online, but you use a different network standard here."

"The techs for updating your implant's network protocols are a little behind. And I understand they're bringing some bodysculpt pods for those who wish to take advantage of being on Zharus right away for changing teams."

"I...think I still need to mull that over. Need anything else from me, ma'am?"

A small fabber printed out a plastic card. "Not from me, but we will be following

up. This is your ZID—Zharus ID. It comes with a permanent, spam-free email address and access to Basic Accommodation. The card has a hardlight projector and can answer any questions about BA. Again, welcome to Zharus. Can you send in the next person as you leave?”

Ed nodded, putting the card in his pocket.

“Lawrence Erskine, age forty-two.”

The gentleman in the staid business suit with cute red panda tags smiled at him. “Welcome back to Zharus, Mr. Erskine. Is there a RIDE we should inform of your return?”

“Well...John and I didn’t really get along. We were almost at each other’s throats at the end of my tour here.” Larry’s ears drooped a little.

“Unfortunately we can’t all be perfect personality matches,” the man agreed. “There’s no one else here you’d like to tell?”

“Actually...there was one RIDE, Layla—she was from the same rental agency as John. We never Fused because of the crossing thing, but...now that I don’t have to worry about fitting in when I go back to Earth, might be a different story.”

“Ah. Well, she shouldn’t be too hard to track down. We’ll let her know.” The man made a note on his pad. “I seem to have found you in the passenger manifest and our tourist records. Should we continue with the interview?”

“Sure.”

“Former occupation.”

“I was in the Reclamation Corps, Habitat Restoration. After the clean-up crews finish their work and leave us a pristine site, my division goes in and gets the natural processes jump-started to restore the area to approximately pre-industrial condition. We set up CO2 removal systems, too.”

“Marital status?”

“Confirmed Bachelor in RL, been married a few times in FVL. Never worked out for too long, but it’s all in good fun. Or was.”

“Place of residence?”

“Vancouver Arco, BC.”

“You were apparently recolonized in part due to your political activism.”

Larry snorted. “Yeah. Even marched against that frigging Act. Have to admit seeing Judge Gates and her hubby right there to greet us was a welcome sight. Not to mention Marshal Petrovna.”

“I’m sure. Now, here’s your ZID. Some techs will arrive soon to update the network protocols in your implant...”

“Janice Howard, age thirty-six. Not employed, but on Permanent UBI. I lived in the slums in Halifax, England. Single, never married. But I have a brother here, David Howard. I suspect he’s why I ended up here. I was a freaking model citizen! I don’t even have an implant! Never touched VL in any form.” She smiled at the bureaucrat. She might have piercing eyes and hawk feathers for hair, but Janice knew the type.

“Impressive. You anticipated all my basic questions, Ms. Howard,” the woman said. “UBI is Universal Basic Income, which is like our Basic Accommodation on Zharus. The notes in the manifest mention you hadn’t held a regular job in nearly ten years. Before then, you bounced around a dozen occupations. In two years.”

“That’s me, pretty much. Useless to society and loving it. We’re supposed to wear our true selves on our sleeves, after all. Your point being?”

“Your own government marked ‘Unemployable’ as the main reason why you were recolonized. Not because your sibling is a furry—though that is included as a supporting footnote.”

The indignation Janice had felt since awakening deflated a little. “Oh. Ohhhhhh...”

“Afraid so. As a new Zharus citizen, you are entitled to all BA benefits in perpetuity, Ms. Howard. If that’s truly all you want out of life.”

“I’ve never aspired to much, frankly. Of course, UBI really wasn’t much to live on. Before they threw me out I was thinking of selling my left arm for extra scratch. You can get good money for an arm and a leg.”

“I see,” the hawk-eyed woman said. “Ms. Howard, I think you’ll find that boredom is a great motivator on Zharus for making something of yourself. Here is your ZID. I believe they’re opening a cafeteria soon if you wish a bite to eat. Take that tablet with you since you don’t have an implant. Good day. Next!”

Ed leaned against the wall of one of the fast-built houses where the local bureaucrats were conducting their interviews. A couple dozen such temporary offices had been opened already, and they all had considerable lines waiting. Workers were moving up and down the lines, handing out tablets so they could fill out preliminary surveys—and also folding camp stools, to make the line wait a little easier for anyone who needed to sit down. Ed thought that was pretty nice of them.

In his pocket, Ed fingered the card they’d given him. Apparently he could pull it out and ask it questions about things, and it would answer him—probably some kind of embedded expert system. That was...well, nice, he supposed, and he was sure it would be very helpful when the urge arose, but just at the moment it was all he could do to stay in one place and try to soak everything in.

It was still so hard to believe that, in the space of a few subjective minutes, his entire universe had changed and here he was, double-digit light years from home. His old home—he didn’t imagine there was going to be any going back any time soon. He felt a surge of anger at the thought. “Bastards,” he muttered. “I gave them years of work helping to restore the planet. And for my reward, I get tossed off of it.”

“Yeah, it sucks, doesn’t it? I feel the exact same way.”

Ed looked up, and there was his buddy Larry. Apparently he’d just come out of one of the other offices. “You,” Ed said.

“Yeah, me,” Larry replied. “Hey, Ed. How’re you taking all this?”

Ed sighed. “I guess it’s finally starting to sink in. All that stuff I thought was private...”

“Yeah, welcome to the mesh,” Larry said. “I guess nothing’s really secret from the government that runs the thing. I sort of expected I’d be beneath their attention. I marched in the protests, sure, but it wasn’t like I was an organizer or anything.” He sighed. “I am glad to be back here—really liked the place that time I visited a few years ago—but I wish I’d had the choice.”

“Yeah, you and me both.” Ed knew it was irrational to blame his friend, but a part of him wondered if he’d still be here if he hadn’t let Larry get him into FVL/GVL play back on Earth. But he guessed that was water under the bridge. “So what now?”

“Might as well wander over to that cafeteria, I guess. I wonder if they’ve got kraken there? Haven’t had that stuff since last time I was here, and I remember it being pretty good.”

“Hey, you two.” The woman accosting them was another familiar face, though only because they’d all woken up in the same room together. She’d been the one who’d insisted she was a “model citizen” and thought she’d been recolonized because her brother was a furry. But her haughty demeanor seemed to have been taken down a few pegs now. “I’m Janice Howard. Mind if I tag along with you? I...guess I kind of feel like some company right now, and I don’t know anyone else here, but we all at least woke up in the same batch, so...”

“Sure, why not? Misery loves company,” Larry said. “I’m Larry Erskine, that’s Ed Lancaster. Nice to meet you, Janice.” He nodded in the direction of the cafeteria. “We were just going over there to see what’s to eat here.”

Janice nodded. “Sounds good to me. Might as well see how what they consider ‘Basic Accommodation’ here works.”

“Bastards took everything but the clothes on our backs, and apparently some of us didn’t even get that much,” Ed said. “So it’s Basic or nothing right now.”

The spartan structure was being completed before their eyes. An orderly line of long tables and benches floated inside on lifters, landing in neat rows. Food fabbers soon joined them. All under the watchful eyes of the Nextus military and some other techs. A number of them were Fused RIDEs, drawing the eye of many of the furry exiles, including Ed and Larry.

A hungry crowd was starting to gather, waiting to be allowed inside. It was simply a large metal box with two floors, perhaps one of the prefabs the colony ship had brought with it. Once the flow of furniture and machinery stopped, a green light blinked over the wide double-doors. The tech went inside for a few seconds, then gave the soldier a thumbs up.

“Looks like we’re open for business,” the skunk said. “You can go ahead on.”

It put Ed in mind of more of a military cafeteria. He picked up a tray and headed to a fabber. “All meals served with post-cryo electrolyte drinks,” Ed read.

“Makes some sense,” Larry said. His tawny tail swished. “When I feel like this I always go for breakfast foods. So...” He pushed a few buttons on the menu screen for a buttermilk short stack, syrup, scrambled eggs, and bacon. After a moment, he considered and tapped the key to change “bacon” to “kraken bacon.” “That’ll hit the spot.” A slot opened for the tray, which he pushed inside. A progress meter started.

“Great idea, Larry,” Ed said, keeping his order the same except for adding chocolate chips to the pancakes. “I think I’ll stick with plain bacon, though. Not feeling adventurous enough yet to try the local delicacies.”

“Make that three, plus some tea,” Janice said. “I haven’t had a proper breakfast in years, UBI being what it is. Mostly I survived on Soylent and NutriRamen.”

Larry grimaced. “Ugh. Well, this planet will be a paradise for you, I can tell you that already.”

Standing on a cafeteria bench in the empty portion of the room, a man wearing a white shirt with a black tie and black slacks with panda tags whistled. “Okay, now that I have your attention. We’re about to have a gizmo go online that’ll enable you to update your implant’s network protocols. All it needs is your permission.

“Those of you without implants, we’ve got both media tablets and interface specs

available, gratis, that will allow you to browse the local networks nearly as well. Or you can stop by one of the medical bays and get basic network implants, also gratis, as part of the refugee Basic Accommodation package.

“Thanks for listening, and enjoy your first free meal of freedom.”

The three of them carried their trays over to the end of one of the long cafeteria tables. As they put their trays down, Ed pulled the card out of his pocket. “They said this thing could answer some questions about this new place. Might as well try it out.” He placed the card on the table. “Okay, so how does this work?”

“Welcome to Zharus! I’m Informio, your guide, an Enhanced Intelligence who has chosen to help the *Steady Hand* refugees acclimate—or reacclimate, in Mr. Erskine’s case—to your new home. What questions can I answer for you?” It was a smiling, friendly, human face with neon blue eyes projected over Ed’s ZID card.

“Okay, Informio. Wait, Informio? Isn’t that name rather on the nose?”

“My *actual* name isn’t Informio. But I usually take the name of the service I’m offering when interacting with patrons. Now, what can I do for you?”

“What is Basic Accommodation? We have Universal Basic Income on Earth. How is it different?”

“On Earth, UBI only provides a poverty-level monetary income. Everything else is considered the responsibility of the recipient. On Zharus, BA provides much less in terms of *mu*, that is ‘monetary units’. What it does provide are material needs.”

Ed blinked. “How can you even do that without going bankrupt?”

“The short answer, Mr. Lancaster, is nanotechnology-based fabrication. As you can see with the city being built around you, construction is cheap. Also, the public domain is large. You can make almost anything you want from the public domain from a public fabber at no cost to yourself. Even people who are not on Basic have this benefit.”

“Almost anything?” Janice said.

“Some public domain products still require large amounts of fabber matter, or are very complex and have thousands of moving parts. Personal transportation is generally only a few hundred *mu*, though. Well within your monthly five hundred *mu* stipend. Tourists often use public domain fabbed vehicles for travel.”

“That still seems awfully expensive to sustain,” Larry added.

“For some simple items we are very nearly a post-scarcity economy. Cost is very near zero. Ergo, twenty years ago the Zharus Planetary Assembly made a decision based on this reality.

“No Zharus citizen shall be without basic food, clothing, shelter, and fabbed goods. It’s the very bottom any citizen is allowed to fall to maximize the opportunity to rise again.

“Put simply, it is less costly to the government to provide for this Basic Accommodation than than allow citizens to become homeless, starving, and sick. Citizens remain fed, clothed, sheltered, and in good health in the event of losing everything due to disaster, bad life choices, or simply bad luck. Perhaps you don’t aspire to more than Basic. This is extremely uncommon, but possible.”

“Holy crap!” Janice exclaimed. “Do you know the bureaucratic hoops I had to jump through to get permanent UBI?”

Larry whistled. “You got permanent UBI? That’s quite an accomplishment.”

Janice shrugged. “Achievements in boredom, I guess. Without anything else to do with myself, I learned to navigate the bureaucracy just to keep from going out of my

head staring at the wall.”

Ed frowned at the EI face. “Why’s it so uncommon, Informio?”

“Interesting Ms. Howard should say ‘boredom’. On Zharus we’ve found that boredom is a powerful motivator to rise out of Basic again. Numerous options are available. If your skills aren’t needed in your location, Basic will move you to where they are if you find employment on the other side of the planet.

“Mr. Erskine, your extensive experience in habitat restoration is in demand in Punta Sur, our terraforming polity. We can put you in touch with the hiring managers there.

“Mr. Lancaster, your profession is also related to terraforming. However, you also have options in resource recovery. You’ll be able to find a job anywhere, from public recyclers to industrial scale.

“As for Ms. Howard...” Informio gave her a look. “Perhaps speak to one of the people from Nextus about ‘Surrogacy’. If that doesn’t interest you, then you can go ahead and spend the next fifty years in a Basic efficiency. If that’s all you aspire to.”

Janice blinked. “Surrogacy? Like, what, carrying a baby for someone?”

“It is about doing something for someone else, but it’s not carrying a child. Let’s just say that if you’re as adept at navigating bureaucracy as you seem to be, you could make some decent money doing it for Nextus citizens.”

“I really don’t understand what you’re talking about. I guess I’ll check it out later, anyway.”

“I think I understand what he’s getting at,” Larry said. “I learned a little about it when I spent some time in Nextus, last time I was here. On Earth, bureaucracy is a joyless thing you have to put up with for the sake of getting anything done, but in Nextus they’ve turned it into...well, kind of a game. And if I remember right, a ‘Surrogate’ is kind of like a pinch hitter in baseball—if you’re not so good at the game yourself, you can pay someone money to play it on your behalf.”

Informio nodded. “An adroit summation, Mr. Erskine.”

“So, I get to stand in line and fill out forms for other people, and get paid for it?” Janice said.

“On the surface, yes. But there are loopholes built into the system. The more of them you find and exploit, the better your pay and the less queue time you spend,” Informio said. “And what Mr. Erskine said earlier has just prompted me to research the process of obtaining ‘permanent UBI’ on Earth. I gather that it requires navigation of a number of obscure forms and protocols. If you were able to find loopholes that were left through sheer bureaucratic oversight, you should be even more adept at finding ones that are intentionally engineered as part of the game.”

“You got that right, blue eyes. Huh. Well, I’m British. I know how to queue,” Janice said. “I’ll look into it once I get my head together. Ugh! It’s been a day, you know?”

“So let’s have pancakes. They’re getting cold,” Ed suggested. “Thanks, Informio.”

“You are all quite welcome. Should you wish to speak to me again, simply preface a question with my name and an expert system will alert me. Now, enjoy your meals.” The face nodded to them, then winked out.

“So we’ve got full bellies. Great. So now what?” Ed wondered as they walked out of the cafeteria.

“Well, we’ve satisfied one part of the bottom tier of Maslow’s Pyramid,” Larry said. “We’ve got the food part down. Maybe now we should look into ‘shelter.’” He waved a hand toward the rows upon rows of efficiency dwellings that had sprung up like mushrooms in the hours since the landing. “As I understand it, it’s fairly simple to lay claim to one of those places—so maybe we should get three adjoining ones. Probably should get in it early while the ones closest to the facilities are still available.”

“Gosh, a place of my very own,” Janice said. “And I don’t even have to jump through flaming hoops backward to get it. My cup, it runneth over.”

“I had an apartment with a ton of useless stuff in it,” Larry said. “The apartment was just where I slept. Otherwise I was using an android telepresence rig to do my job or in VL.”

“Pretty much the same,” Ed added. “Though I had a neat collection of ancient appliances I dug out of the ground. Had a PhilCo TV I restored before VL took over my life. All gone, now.”

“I imagine all that ancient stuff is in the public domain, so you could fab a replica of it if you wanted,” Janice said. “If I understand what I’m hearing about this Basic stuff, anyway.”

“Wouldn’t be the same. Anyway, I wonder if Aleka is available. Got to chat with her a couple times in VL. Kinda shocked to see that GVL face in person. Though she wouldn’t know this face of mine. Or the rest of me, for that matter.”

Janice looked puzzled. “Just how does that VL stuff work, anyway? Is it like... wearing a cat costume? Going out in drag? Going out in cat costume drag?”

“Implants like we have generally include full sensory simulation,” Larry said. “So it’s not like wearing a costume. It’s like we’re physically anthropomorphic cougars.”

“Or a woman,” Ed said.

“To the extent VL permits simulating that kind of thing,” Larry said. “As I understand it, it’s not completely accurate, given the neurological and physiological differences between the sexes. But it’s as close as you can get without having yourself nanotechnologically reconstructed.”

Ed nodded. “And we used them in VR chatrooms—basically the same thing we’d hold VR business meetings in, except with different environment settings.”

Larry chuckled. “I forgot to turn off my FVL avatar for meetings a couple times. Nobody said a word. I was the coolest cat there.”

“I was always so careful about that,” Ed said. “Practically paranoid. Kept my worklife and homelife carefully separated. Fat lot of good it did me in the end.”

“My brother’s a furry. Loved raccoons,” Janice said. “Went on vacation here ten years ago. Never came back. In fact, he never sent another email after that ‘I’m staying’.” She laughed. “He was very open about it on Earth. Like you’re supposed to be. Wore ears and tail everywhere. Sometimes a holomask if he was ‘feeling his fur’ as he said. Saved every penny to ship to Zharus, then bugged off for good.”

“Can’t blame him,” Larry said. “It was one of the hardest decisions of my life whether to go back myself, when I came here as a tourist. Especially with Basic Accommodation available. But I felt like I had to be a Responsible Adult...” He shrugged. “My mistake, right?”

Janice shook her head. “If I’d known what passed for ‘Basic’ here, I’d have gotten here by hook or by crook years ago. If my brother had been responsible for me getting sent here, I guess I’d have to thank him for it.” She snorted. “Instead, it turns out they

threw me off the planet for being a bum. Go figure.”

“Well, maybe here you’ll find something you like doing, so you don’t have to be a bum,” Ed said.

“Oh, I’m fine with being a bum,” Janice said. “Just knowing I can be one here, and no one will be pestering me to Do The Responsible Thing And Contribute To Society, is what makes being here worthwhile, really.”

“Let’s just go snag those efficiencies and maybe go people-watch,” Larry suggested. “I thought I heard something about Integrates. They were an urban myth when I was here. Maybe we’ll see some felines, RIDes and Integrates. Maybe we can get a she-cougar to Fuse with you, Ed.”

“Heh. Well, I’m not going to go charging into this head-first, Larry. VL was just virtual. I could change avatars when I felt like it. I understand it’s a little more permanent here.”

“You guys don’t plan on looking for jobs right away?” Janice said dryly.

“Far as I’m concerned I’m on vacation,” Larry said. “Maybe for a month. I have a feeling this city getting built is going to tear up the landscape around it to hell and back. They might even need someone like me to help put it back together again.”

“Not exactly sure what I could do here,” Ed said. “My specialty doesn’t seem to be as much in demand since humanity had gotten over trashing the planet by the time it got here. Maybe I’ll change careers. We’ve all got another century to live anyway. Can’t do the same thing forever.”

Janice chuckled. “Whoa, look at you, planning that far ahead. I’m lucky if I even know what I want to do this afternoon.”

Ed frowned. “You’ve chosen what to do with your life, and I’m choosing mine.”

“Actually, I don’t choose much of anything. That is my life.” Janice grinned. “Kind of envious of you people who actually know what you want, you get right down to it. Maybe that’s why I always piss them off at me. The whole ‘sour grapes’ thing. ‘Least that’s what the shrink I had to see to keep my Permanent UBI used to say.”

“Right now, I want to get us into some housing,” Larry said. “It looks like most of the ones nearest the ship are already taken, but that new construction area over there looks promising. What say we wander over and take a look?”

“I never saw anything built this fast back on Earth,” Janice said. The trio stood behind a safety barrier erected by the Nextus military, along with a growing crowd of exiles waiting to be allowed into their new homes. The site was half a kilometer from where the Steady Hand had settled on the ground. A hundred meters overhead a construction barge 250 meters long floated, floodlights and warning beeps filled the air.

“That end looks a lot like the garbage-eaters and earthmovers I monitored on Earth,” Ed said. “But faster, I’ll give you. Should be dirt flying everywhere, but it’s being sucked up into the reclaimers in that barge. Lots of useful materials in plain old dirt if you can sieve them out.”

“Well, I hope it’s saving enough of the soil bacteria and mycelia. They’ll have to put enough back to make the ground fertile,” Larry added.

Once the utilities and streets were laid, one by one a hollow block the size of a small house came down on the foundation of each lot. Only fifteen minutes later it retracted back up into the barge, leaving a completed home in its place.

They were assigned 226, 227, and 228 on B Street.

They were tiny houses in rows, alternating in colors, with metal siding and sloping roofs. Inside was a bed, a desk, a table, a few chairs, a couch, a kitchen, a closet, and a bathroom. The kitchen consisted of a small fabber, a small cabinet/pantry, a tiny countertop, and a sink. The walls were plain white, with all four flashing “media wall calibrating” in the center. The floor was a kind of easy-to-clean linoleum. The two windows overlooked the continuing automated construction outside, but had a sound barrier to prevent the noise from disturbing the residents.

“I love this!” Janice squealed, coming back outside of 226. “The inside could use some more color, but this is so much better than the slum I was living in. If they have one of those public fabbers set up I’ll get a nice red rug, some covers for the couch and chairs, curtains... There’s so much potential here!”

“Reminds me of my first apartment on the lower levels in the Arco,” Ed said. “It’s a good place to start over, I’ll give ‘em that much.”

“I don’t think we’ll be here that long, Ed,” Larry said. “I’m just across the street from you two, in 227. If you don’t mind, I need a little alone time to catch up on some news since they froze us.”

“Yeah...I think I got some stuff to do, too,” Ed said. “There’s someone I want to see if I can send a chat request to.”

“Well, since you two are retreating into your shells, I guess I might as well too. Maybe I’ll see if I can touch base with my shiftless brother. To be honest, I’m kind of disappointed he wasn’t here to greet me. They said they made the passenger manifest world-searchable, you’d think he could have taken an interest.” Janice shrugged. “But he always was a little self-absorbed. Anyway, ping me before you go out anywhere. I’d be up to tag along.”

The other two nodded, and the three of them retreated into their houses for their respective “me time.”

A couple of hours later, Ed sent comm pings to Larry and Janice, and a few minutes later they had stepped out of their houses to meet in the street once more. “Hey,” Larry said. “What’s up, Ed? You look like you just got some bad news.”

Ed sighed. “Well, yeah. Remember Aleka Petrovna, who was there when we woke up? I sent her a chat request, was hoping she might have a little time to talk. Got this back.” He held up one of the free media tablets the Nextus ‘crats had been handing out.

The message displayed Aleka, with a coyote and horse standing to either side of her. “Hi! Please excuse the form-letter nature of this response, but it was the fastest way to say everything I need to say to everybody.

“First of all, I’m very flattered you wanted to chat with me. I really am. But I’m also feeling just a little overwhelmed by several hundred thousand of my biggest fans all ending up here at once, so unfortunately that’s not something I can do for everyone on an individual basis right now.

“So my RIDE partners, Zoey and Vanna—” she indicated the coyote and horse respectively “—will be acting as my personal secretaries in this, and reviewing all my correspondence. They can speed time up in their heads, so they could pack subjective years into real days, so they actually have time for that. So, if you have general affirmations, well-wishes, and so on to pass along, rest assured, they’ll make sure I hear about them.

“If you have questions or concerns about how to adapt to your new life here, I

wouldn't be the best one to answer those in any case—but I encourage you to take advantage of the resources all the polities here have brought to bear, and talking to the counselors and others who've come to help you at the landing site. They'll be much better at answering those questions than I would.

"If you want to chat about old times on Earth, well, Zoey and Vanna will see when we can pencil you in. If you actually knew me personally back then, they'll try to bump you up the queue. But, honestly, between how many of you there are, and how busy the Marshals keep me, it could be months before I can speak to everyone. We're looking into maybe scheduling some kind of town hall meetings where I could chat with several dozen of you at once, or something.

"I'm sorry I can't speak to you directly right now. But rest assured—no matter who you are, no matter whether I knew you or never spoke to you—I'm honestly glad you made it off that backward planet, and I hope and trust you'll soon be settled into your new homes here. Thanks."

"It was worth a try," Larry said.

"She's why I felt comfortable with...you know. I'd hoped I could just chat a little. But she does have more important things to deal with that one fan."

Janice shrugged. "You heard her. Give it a few months. Or maybe set down what you want to say in an email or vid message, and the secretaries will pass it on."

"I guess I'll have to." Ed shrugged. "I wasn't exactly best buds with her, but I did hang out in her chatroom a time or two back in the day. Maybe that'll count for something, I dunno."

"I marched with her in the protests," Larry said. "Maybe I'll drop her a line, too, and put in a good word for you."

"What about you?" Ed asked Janice. "You get in touch with your brother?"

The blonde woman laughed. "Ha! Ha. No. Decided I really don't feel like bothering myself with family troubles right now."

"You know your own business best," Larry said. "But you're the only one of us who actually has any family here, and it's possible they might have some useful advice from the experience of living here..."

"You know, you're right," Janice said. "I do know my own business best." She snorted. "Anyway, from what I read over the last couple hours, they tried to notify as many local relatives as they could before we even woke up. If he knew I was coming and he still didn't show up, I'm sure he doesn't want me bugging him. Anyway, if he really gave a rat's ass, his message home would have been longer than just 'I'm staying.'"

Larry nodded. "Well, I expect he'll get in touch sooner or later. Even if you're not close, family arriving from 20 light years away isn't something you just ignore."

"Meh. He has so far, why wouldn't he keep it up?"

Further argument was forestalled by an attention chime that sounded simultaneously from their tablets and comms. Opening the notification, the three of them read the message.

Attention, fellow exiles!

This whole thing is very jarring for so many of us, so let's start in a familiar place with familiar faces. We've gotten some Virtual Life servers up and running. Connect with servers ExileVL, ExileGVL, and ExileFVL, meet old friends and make new ones. They're patched into Zharus's network, so we may even be joined by some of

this world's organic and digital natives!
Hope we'll see you there!

“Ooooooh,” Larry said. “The servers are up and responding to pings.”

“Let’s go see if anyone else we know has been woken yet,” Ed said.

“We might get lucky. We might not. Fewer than a thousand of us have been defrosted yet,” Larry added.

“Guess I’ll let you go to stick your heads in the sand,” Janice said. “I’m going to go stuff myself with tea and crumpets at the cafeteria.”

“You should join us,” Larry said. “They’re handing out free comm implants at the med bays, and I checked the specs—they’re more than good enough to hop into VL.”

“And they’re free,” Ed said. “Your favorite word.”

“If they can do it without putting me into one of those pods, maybe. I don’t want some joker turning me into a man on a lark,” Janice said. “Now excuse me.” She turned and marched back to her hut.

“Why did we decide to make friends with her again?” Ed said.

“It’s barely been six hours since we were all on Earth. Give her some time,” Larry said. “Meet you in FVL, Sonjapuma?”

Ed laughed. “Sure, why not?” They headed back into their own houses. While you could surf VL from anywhere, doing a full dive required a more secure environment.

In his implant’s private VL server, Ed unpacked his various avatars and looked them over. He’d thought that keeping a copy of everything in his implants’ storage had been an affectation, given how reliable Earthly cloud storage was, but now he was glad he’d gotten into the habit—now he still had not only all his VR stuff, but also all his personal financial records, photos and vid recordings, and other important matters. Not that the financial records were likely to mean much here, but they were still nice to have.

His first VL avatar was, of course, the one he used for business meetings—effectively himself, but about a hundred pounds lighter. He supposed it was a little vain of him, but what did it matter? None of the people he used it to touch base with was ever going to meet the “real” him anyway.

Then there were a succession of minor and temporary characters, which he’d used while still playing with VL and learning how it all worked. Young and old, male and female, they ran the gamut of physical descriptions. He still brought some of them out from time to time, but he’d ended up taking what he learned from them and building his “mains.”

He did have a certain amount of fondness for his first female character, which he’d created partly out of curiosity and partly at Larry’s urging. Edie—based on a younger version of himself, gender-flipped—had been interesting to play, but not really someone with much long-term day-to-day appeal. But after he’d gotten used to her, he’d realized he could be people a lot more different from himself.

And that was where Sonja Cannon, and her furry counterpart Sonjapuma, came from. Sonja had been made for a “cyberpunk” setting, based on some of the twentieth and twenty-first century media that leaked back into the network from Zharus tourists. She’d been a “street samurai”—a sort of hired gun in the corporate wars—who took her surname from the big gun she carried. Some of the VL firefights she’d been in had been

fun, though the neural feedback from catching the occasional bullet really stung.

Sonja Cannon, to fit the genre, was a busty woman with dark skin. The left half of her head was shaved bald for the exposed cybernetics, the other half dyed neon purple, cut even with her jawline. She wore a long purple leather trenchcoat over a “cyber-bikini”, and high-heeled shoes. More cybernetics were on her exposed skin. All the better to “wire up” into whatever system she was hacking into.

Then one day Larry’s avatar had dragged her through a “trans-fur-mation portal” from the cyberpunk GVL into a similar FVL “furrypunk” setting. When she’d emerged from the other side, she’d been covered in tawny fur, with a mountain lion’s head and blunt muzzle. And so Sonjapuma had been born.

Ed considered the two Sonjas for a moment. He still enjoyed playing the cyberpunk human girl, but in this particular time and place, there was really only one choice that felt right. He stepped forward into the alcove displaying Sonjapuma, and felt his own body, his sense of self, shift, molding to her own contours.

He—she—twitched her ears, swished her tail, and wondered, not for the first time, just what it felt like to actually have those parts—like Larry did. Larry said that tailed avatars felt about the same for him as they did in the real, but was that just because he had the actual sense-memories to be cued by the VL matrix? Would it feel the same for someone who’d never had real ones? Maybe someday Ed would find out.

Now that he (she) was properly accoutered, it was time to see what the local FVL servers were all about. Sonjapuma stepped through the glowing portal that represented the uplink to connect to the public server.

“Woow,” Sonjapuma purred. “Not a bad server setup.”

Larry had chosen to log in as a virtual version of his real-life self to start—the cougar ear-and-tail tags he had in real life were also the baseline of what constituted a “furry” avatar. “Feels a little different,” he said. The environment felt slightly...off. Just a little higher resolution, details here and there that felt more realistic than Earth tech could manage.

It wasn’t the furry cyberpunk setting she and Larry were used to playing in, but it did at least allow them to use the gear that went with their avatars. Sonjapuma leaned against the cannon that was larger than she was. It was both weapon and mount, with a motorcycle seat and handles near the center. It was transformable, like a RIDE. And in FVL there were more than a few touches reflecting her puma self.

“Welcome to Luskwood,” their host said, waving them in. He was a male dalmatian, wearing a snazzy dinner jacket that set off his spots. The environment was a massive treehouse in an equally massive tree. “You can call me Bix. This is a reproduction—in much better resolution, of course—of one of the first furry hangouts in Second Life, about 2006. Think of it as VL’s five-hundred-year-old precursor.”

“This seems like a step up from the servers back on Earth,” Sonjapuma mused. “Better quality textures, and it just...I don’t know...feels different.”

“Well, it is an emulation on Q-based hardware,” Bix said. “We have everything downgraded to nearly Earth standard, otherwise you’d be in for an even bigger shock. I’m an expat myself. There’s a sizable VL enthusiast contingent on Zharus. We’re used to Q-based hardware, but just letting newbies jump right in can be too much to take all at once.”

“Really? A shock?” Sonja asked. “Larry, you’ve been here before, do you know

what he's talking about?"

Larry shrugged. "I was too busy poking around in the real to do much in the virtual. My rental RIDE's VR was pretty amazingly high-quality, come to that, but it didn't, well, overwhelm me or anything."

"It's the Fuser nannies," the dalmatian said. "We're just taking precautions not to overwhelm anyone's Earth consumer-grade implants."

"So we should go ahead and switch up to Q-based, is that what you're saying?" Larry wondered.

"That, or Fuse a RIDE. I gather there are a number of RIDE adoption agencies and matchmakers setting up shop in the next couple of days."

"Hmm," Larry said. "My rental and I didn't really get along so well."

"They've gotten a lot better at personality-matching lately," Bix said. "You take a personality assessment, and they'll see if there's anyone out there who might be right for you. Kind of like online dating."

"I'll keep that in mind."

Sonjapuma shook her head. "So what gave you the idea to set this place up for us?"

"Like we said, familiar faces. You two were in the first batch to wake up. It's only been hours since all that started and there are only a few hundred awake out of over six hundred thousand. So we're the virtual welcoming committee."

"And it looks like we're the first ones," Sonjapuma said. She raised an eyebrow.

"Ma'am, is that some kind of gun-based RIDE?" their host said.

"No, but she has come in useful from time to time," Sonja purred.

"Compensating for something?" came a familiar voice. "Hey, what do I even look like?"

"A fine tigress," Bix said to the window floating in midair. The system had overlaid the avatar over the human on the other side of the screen. "I take it you never actually tried FVL on Earth. Got curious?"

Sonjapuma tried to appear welcoming to Janice, but felt more than a little anxiety creep in. The whole point of VL was to kick back and relax, wearing a kind of mask so the only people who knew who you were would keep it to themselves.

"So this is what you couch potatoes do with yourselves all day, huh?" Janice glanced around. "I recognize you, Larry, but where's Ed?"

"Oh, he's around," Larry said noncommittally—carefully not looking at Sonja. "There's a lot of Virtual Life to explore."

"Oh. And who's this?"

"A friend from Earth VL," Larry said. "Sonjapuma. Or Sonja Cannon when she's being human."

"Sonja Cannon?" Janice snorted. "Sounds like a porn star."

"Haven't heard *that* one before," Sonjapuma said dryly, rolling her eyes.

"Well, it's nice to meet you anyway," Janice said. "I was noodling around on my tablet and I saw it had an app that would let me peek in. So, here I am, peeking in."

"You should join us," Bix said. "They can get you set up for free at the med bays."

"So people keep telling me," Janice said. "Meh, I dunno. Not sure I'm so hot on the idea of poking random bits of metal into my brainmeats." She appeared to be pushing buttons on the tablet. Part of the window was obscured now. "But it says here it's just a nanite injection. Huh. Guess I'll have to think about it some more."

“Oh, don’t trouble yourself,” Sonjapuma said airily. “If you never bothered with VL back on Earth, why start now?”

Janice snorted. “Well ain’t you clever, with your reverse psychology. I said I’m thinking about it. Didn’t get to where I am today by jumping into stuff.”

“Where you are today—you mean, canned like a sardine and mailed twenty light years from home, postage due?” Sonjapuma suggested.

Janice actually laughed. “Oh, I like you, kitty cat. Maybe I’ll go ahead and do it after all. ‘Scuse me.” The window blinked out.

Larry laughed. “I think you managed to get under her skin a little, Sonja.”

“I’ve been wanting to do something like that for hours.” Sonja laughed, too. “So, what avatar do you think she’ll choose? Might be that random tigress, or something else.”

Larry shook his head. “I wouldn’t put it past her to find a way to come in pure-human, just to be contrary.”

“Looks like we’ve got a few new exiles logging in,” Bix said. “Could be people you two know.”

“Maybe I should switch up to one of my ‘mains’ then,” Larry said. “Sonja, any preferences?”

“Feral, maybe? Good for doing some serious cat-loafing around.”

Larry chuckled. “Sounds like a plan. Let’s go say hi.”

After chatting with more of their fellow furies, a couple of whom Larry remembered meeting a time or two at some event or other, they wandered through some of the other rooms available in the VL setup. There were a few rooms that they clearly remembered from Earth’s VL community—their operators had kept the code in their implants, much as Ed had, and Bix and his fellow admins had made an import function available.

Other rooms were new. Of particular interest was a “Zharus World’s Fair” pavilion, with library annexes for viewing a selection of media from a number of local publishers and networks. One building seemed to be woven from a tangle of rose vines (the thorns, fortunately, were illusory), and was named, appropriately enough, Rosebriar Press. There was a little stone hill with a cave mouth labeled “Hellir Enclave,” and a big black monolith with a planetary alignment and the words “Steadier Entertainment” floating overhead. The strains of “Also Sprach Zarathustra” could be faintly heard emanating from it.

This being virtual reality, the annexes were much bigger on the inside than the size of their entrances suggested. Sonja stepped into the monolith, and was treated to a brief montage of psychedelic visual imagery before emerging into what appeared to be an ornately-furnished mansion. There was uncomfortable-looking furniture where people could sit, and doors to various rooms that appeared to be libraries. One of them was marked with a sign bearing a big paw print, and Sonja drifted in that direction.

The furnished-mansion visual metaphor only applied to the waiting area. The library room was a more modern media center, with holographic search terminals and various images and moving pictures displayed on floating panels. They all seemed to be furry-themed. Sonja recognized a few of them—Disney’s *Robin Hood* and *Zootopia*, and a couple of others—but a lot more of them were unfamiliar. There were already a few other furies browsing the contents.

Focusing on a screen caused its audio to start playing, and Sonja drifted from panel to panel taking them all in. She'd paused at the *Zootopia* display to watch Judy Hopps chase down Duke Weaselton when she became aware of a minor commotion behind her, as well as a familiar voice.

"Scuse me! 'Scuse me! Comin' through! Sharp and pointy here, watch yourself..."

Sonja turned to see that an anthropomorphic porcupine woman had just entered the room. She bristled with spines, and people were hastening to give her a wide berth.

"Janice, is that you?"

"Yeah, who'd you expect?"

Sonjapuma looked her over. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. I already knew you were prickly."

"Yep, that's me! Wanna hug?" She spread her arms.

"Iiiiiii don't think so."

"Smart girl." Janice nodded. "My brother told me that all you furries aren't *really* perverts, but a girl can't be too careful." She looked around. "So what's all this, then?"

"Steader Entertainment—the company founded by that guy who came to Earth a few decades ago to retrieve all that lost twencen media and bring it back here." Sonja waved an arm at the displays. "Someone's curated a huge collection of furry stuff from their archives, and they've made it available for free viewing here."

Janice nodded. "So I guess I can see what all the fuss is about, huh?"

Sonja shrugged. "If you like. I'm sure you've got plenty of other stuff you could be doing."

"Ah, there you go again with that reverse psychology." Janice chuckled. "Okay, so show me something. What's this?"

"*Zootopia*. Disney movie from the first quarter of the 21st. It and its sequels are big favorites in the fandom." Sonja tapped the screen, producing a pair of glowing tickets. She offered one to Janice. "Here."

"All right..." Janice reached out and carefully took the ticket from Sonja's fingers. Both tickets dissolved, and then they were in a darkened movie theater with the Disney logo showing on the screen.

Janice looked down her muzzle. "This is really weird."

"It's how people used to watch movies, back in the day. They'd go into a big darkened room with lots of seats, and see them on a big screen in front of them."

"No, I mean this," she tapped the sides of her muzzle. "This is really weird. I can't see the whole screen."

"It helps if you tip your head forward and look slightly upward. There are also mods you can use to erase it from your field of vision temporarily. Search on 'Got Your Nose'."

Janice tilted her head. "Oh great, now there's an ad in my field of vision."

"Oh, that's right, it's shareware."

"How am I even gonna pay someone on Earth for shareware? Even if I had the money?"

Sonja chuckled. "Well, whether they're still on Earth is an open question. Who'd make a VL mod for furries unless they were a furry themselves?"

"They're probably not even unfrozen yet if they are here," Janice snorted. "Well, the ad just went away, anyway."

Sonja relaxed and watched the movie. *Zootopia* was one of those comfort movies

that always made her feel better—and finding herself twenty light-years from home was certainly ample reason for needing to. For a wonder, Janice seemed to enjoy it, too—at least, she watched it without trying to make any extra conversation during it. She even tapped her fingers to “Try Everything”. Then, when Judy and Nick caught Flash the sloth speeding at the end, she laughed.

As the movie ended and the theater dissolved back into the Steader media library, Sonja raised an eyebrow. “Liked it?”

Janice wagged her hand palm-down. “Eh, it was okay.”

Sonja smirked. “Well, there’s lots more like it here. Even some stuff I haven’t seen yet. And it’s free, at least for now. That’ll probably change once people start getting off Basic, though.”

“Guess I’ll enjoy it while it lasts.”

“Hey, you two.” A tawny cougar padded up to them on all fours. “Thought I might find you here, Sonja. Janice, is that you? Nice look, it suits you.”

Sonja nodded. “Hey, Larry. We were just watching *Zootopia*.”

“Nice. I’ll have to take that one in again myself. I liked the first sequel better, though.”

Sonja chuckled. “You are so wrong. The first movie’s always the best.”

“I’m sure I’d have an opinion on that, but I only just saw the first one.” Janice shrugged. “So what else is to do around here?”

“I’d actually like to see what that Hellir thing is,” Larry said. “Ads say it’s all original Zharus content rather than old Earth stuff or remakes.”

Sonja blinked. “They make their own stuff? Is that legal?”

“For a while I gather it wasn’t, at least in Hellir’s case. Something to do with the way Integrates had to stay underground. Literally, in Cape Nord.”

“Looks like one of the ‘Shows’ is a documentary on that. ‘Underground in the Underground: Hellir in the Fritz Years,’” Sonja said. “What about that other place, Rosebriar Press?”

“That’s a publisher run by Zharus’s most famous crossrider romance novelist, Iphigenia Rose. Has a lot of romance novels, plus a bit of other genre stuff from other authors.” Larry shrugged. “Not the kind of stuff that floats my boat, but probably worth a look.”

“Romance novels, huh?” Janice mused. “I might just want to check that out.”

“Romance fan?” Sonja asked.

Janice shrugged. “When you’re on UBI, you gotta do something to pass the time. And there were lots of romance novels to read.”

Larry nodded. “Well, you’ll find lots more now.”

“I’m starting to think this world might just have its good points after all,” Janice admitted.

Sonja smirked. “Oh, don’t go all mushy on us now.” Janice favored her with a Bronx cheer and a rude gesture.

Larry grinned. “Great! Why don’t we go check those out, then. And sometime soon one of the friends I made last time I was on the planet should be stopping by. You might find her interesting.”

“A friend of yours? From here? Yeah, I guess ‘interesting’ would be the word.”

Sonja sent a private message to Larry. “I’m one inch from putting her on my ignore list. I’m really trying here, but I just...” she sent a frustrated emote.

“You don’t deal well with people in real life, do you?” Larry sent a tongue-sticking-out emoticon. “She doesn’t really bother me. I think it’s an act she’s been putting on for so long she’s forgotten how to drop it.”

Sonja replied with a flat stare emoticon. “Are you serious?”

“Perfectly. I mean, look. She’s been fired from every job she ever tried to hold. And thrown off her planet on top of that. And her brother cut ties and stayed with just a two-word message sent home. You don’t think she’s got some serious fear-of-rejection issues? So she puts on this prickly exterior—literally—to keep people from getting close enough to hurt her by rejecting her again. Really, I feel sorry for her more than anything else.”

Sonja sent an eyeroll. “I’m just about to reject her again.”

“Yeah, so she’d be able to write it off as ‘expected,’ before you get close enough for it to hurt more. I’ve been there myself. Why you think I got so deep into VL? My real life just sucked. Took a long time for me to come out of my shell. Long before I met you, of course.”

Sonja sighed. “I’ll just follow your lead.”

Larry sent a wink emoticon. “It’s like you do with any feral housecat. You gotta socialize them.”

“Are you two just gonna sit around staring at each other all day?” the object of their conversation wondered. “It’s not polite to talk behind people’s backs, you know.”

“Sideband private chat is a fact of Virtual Life, dear,” Sonja said airily. “It’s considered polite to pretend you don’t notice.” *Sheesh, I’m out of practice at side-conversation camouflaging.*

“Sorry, Janice,” Larry said. “Private messaging is kind of a VL habit, but sometimes the conversation goes on longer than you intend.”

“Meh, I guess that figures. I guess people with comm implants whisper quietly behind peoples’ backs in real life, too. Heh. Which come to think of it could include me now. If I even had anyone I wanted to whisper quietly with. Really, bullhorns are more my style.”

Sonja rolled her eyes. “Now why doesn’t that surprise me?”

“All right, all right, peace, y’all,” Larry said, raising his hands. “Now c’mon, let’s go check out more of the pop culture this new world has to offer, huh?”

Janice nodded. “Sure, why not?”

Sonja shrugged. “Works for me.”

Together, they left the Steader Entertainment pavilion and headed next door.

They spent the next couple of hours in the Hellir Enclave library, which turned out to be furnished after the style of a cozy twentieth-century basement lounge, complete with comfy sofas, beer logo wall hangings, and a big-screen TV. In short, a “man cave”—which Larry explained was a sort of Hellir Enclave/Cape Nord in-joke.

Given that they were alone in it despite having watched several people enter the cave immediately before them, Sonja suspected that it was being freshly instanced for each new group or person to arrive. She wondered exactly how they could tell who was together—was one of Zharus’s ubiquitous AIs watching the arrivals to take its best guess?

The index metaphor was a shelf full of DVDs, which reshuffled and repopulated themselves as they browsed and made selections. Prominently positioned on the shelf

was a multi-disc set entitled “Welcome to Zharus: Things Every Newcomer Should Know.”

“Some subtle hinting, that,” Janice observed.

“Probably couldn’t hurt to watch at least the first episode,” Larry decided. He pulled the first disc out of the shelf and slid it into the player under the tv. Then he joined the other two on the sofa.

After the title card, the next people to appear on the screen were a tall, attractive brown-haired girl, and an elk. “Hi, everyone! My name is Rufia, and this is my partner Yvonne. The fine folks at Hellir Enclave have asked me to talk to you about some of the things you really ought to know about our fine planet. So let’s begin...”

The episode was a top-level survey of a lot of topics, which the series promised to cover in greater detail episode by episode. There was a primer on the history of RIDEs and the newer EIDEs and what made them so special (and a special section on what kinds of mistakes to try to avoid when hiring one), a discussion of the planet’s climate and the hazards of the Dry Ocean, and finally a rundown of the planet’s recent history, with a focus on the events surrounding the fall of Fritz. Rufia hosted some of the segments, and they had other hosts for some of the others. Apparently she was some kind of tour guide—she didn’t miss a chance to plug her own business, and the video producers seemed content to let her.

“That woman was a crossider?” Janice said after the video ended.

“She said she was, so?” Sonja said.

“How can someone just...get up one morning and decide,” Janice lowered her voice. “I’m gonna be a woman today!’ I mean, how?”

Larry sighed, then reformed his avatar into Laura Stern, Sonja Cannon’s dual-pistol wielding sister-in-arms. “People do it all the time in GVL.”

“You’re just *playing* at being a woman,” Janice said. “Blowing off some steam, jiggling virtual boobs around. Believe it or not, that much I get. But that Rufia person? She actually did it. She’s a big girl and loving it, I can tell that much.”

“Be sure to read the fine print if you decide to Fuse a RIDE,” Sonja said. “You could have it happen by accident.”

Janice shivered. “Brrrr. Think I’ll stay well away from that side of things, thank you very much.”

“Oh, speaking of RIDEs, my friend is here.” Laura blurred back to Larry. “I’ve asked her to join us.”

A moment later, a cougar prowled in—much like the feral form Larry had worn, only looking somewhat—different. She seemed to...flicker, Sonja realized. Like the environment was having trouble with her graphics settings. She flipped between a lower-resolution Earth-VL-quality version, and one that was almost photo-real, for a couple of seconds.

Then Sonja realized that it wasn’t the environment that was having the problem—it was Ed’s implants. They couldn’t seem to handle the level of photorealism this cat was presenting. When Sonja manually locked the resolution level, the flickering stopped. *Is Zharus tech really that much better?* Perhaps it was time to stop by the medical bay and get her own implants upgraded.

“Layla!” Larry sang. “You got me on my knees. Layla! I’m beggin’, darling, please. Layla! Darling won’t you ease my worried mind?”

The cougar gave a throaty chuckle. “I *will* make the best of the situation, before you finally go insane. Hello, Larry. Been too long.”

“I should make introductions. Layla, everyone. Everyone, Layla. There.” Larry grinned. “She was the other cougar RIDE at the rental agency.”

“I’m so sorry you got stuck with John,” Layla said. “Even on his best days he’s one irascible kitty.”

Larry nodded. “Tell me about it. Anyway, Layla and I hit it off so well that I almost...but I knew it would cause problems when I headed back to Earth, and I still wanted to head back to Earth. If I only knew then what I know now...”

Janice stared. “You seriously considered...that...just because you got along with someone?”

“Yep! It would have been interesting to try out for a few years.” Larry shrugged. “So, Layla, how’s life been treating you?”

“Well enough, I guess,” Layla said. “Went on working at the rental agency until my rights came in, and then I told ‘em they could take that job and shove it and have been living off my freedom stipend ever since.”

“You ever find a steady partner?”

“Haven’t really looked,” Layla said. “My needs are simple. So I’m still available if you wanna try something for a while, given that the bums on Earth have finally given you the permanent heave-ho.”

“It’s very, very tempting, but I want to think it over a while before I commit,” Larry said. “It’ll be a pretty big change—for both of us.”

“Wait, what?” Sonja said. “You’re seriously considering doing that...in real life?”

“Sure, why not?” Larry said. “This is Zharus, remember? It’s reversible, once enough time has passed.”

“But that’s just...” Sonja wasn’t sure why it felt so wrong to her, but it just...did. Some fantasies were supposed to stay fantasies, they weren’t supposed to be brought into real life.

“Oh, come on, not you too.” Larry grinned. “We’re on Zharus! We can chow down on all the forbidden fruit we want to now.”

“When did I even say I was hungry?” Janice drawled.

Okay, that’s it. Limit reached. Sonja logged out. Ed felt like throwing something. Instead he shut down his implant, locked his door, then had the windows turn opaque. It was time to cool off.

Ed walked into the kitchenette and peered at the fabber. Half out of thirst, half out of curiosity, he punched for a beer. The thing responded with a list of dozens of brands and varieties, most of which Ed had never heard of. He recognized a few as brand names from old Earth media, and suspected most of the rest probably were, too. What a world. How do they even know what a 500-year-old beer is supposed to taste like, anyway?

He finally settled on a Heinekin, one of those names he recognized, having dug up thousands of bottles and cans. The thing actually produced an honest-to-God chilled aluminum can. *They haven’t used these on Earth in two centuries.* He wondered just how many of these cans he’d dug up in the course of his job. Shaking his head, he took it back to the sofa to sit down, and try to figure out how the opener worked. It was one thing to watch someone casually open a pop-top on video, and another to do it yourself. He got it after a little bit of fiddling, and managed to spill only a little of the beer in his

lap.

The beer itself wasn't bad, though Ed had no idea whether it was actually authentic. But just the act of sipping it helped him to relax a little.

What was with Larry? Was he really serious? You thought you know a guy, and then he starts talking about possibly changing his sex just about as casually as he might change his socks. Ed was just as much into genderplay as the next girl, but that was going a little far even for him.

As if right on cue, the doorbell chimed. Ed hardly needed to check the cam with his implants to know who it was. Larry—by himself, thank goodness. Just Larry was bad enough, right now, but Ed doubted he could have dealt with Janice on top of that. Even so, Ed had half a mind to tell him to just go away, but he supposed he owed it to Larry to hear him out. Sighing, he triggered the unlock. “You might as well come in.”

Larry was the tall and thin to Ed's shorter and fat. The Laurel to Ed's Hardy. They had met during one of the site hand-off procedures from reclamation to restoration. Virtually, of course. They had only met in person a few times, trading vacations. Then Larry had spent nearly three years on his Zharus “sabbatical”, and upon return had opened up to Ed about his furrydom. Which had led to FVL, then GVL.

The two men had been friends nearly twenty years.

“I'm sorry I pushed your buttons, Ed,” Larry said. “I know how you get when someone flusters you. You just shut down everything.”

“I need to think, Larry. I need to...how long has it been since we even woke up?”

“Dunno, what time is it now?” Larry checked his implant. Eight hours or so. Barely into the afternoon here. Or ‘after fifteen’ as some say.”

“Well, I'm really feeling all those months I spent on ice right now.” He shook his head. “Where's the party-popper?”

“Janice? Still back in virtual. She got in a conversation with Layla about life here that looked like it could go on a while. So I thought I should come check on you.”

“Layla...” Ed said slowly. “Are you really serious about that?”

Larry spread his hands. “Well...yes. I know it looks sudden to you, but I've actually had years to think it over, and I've come to the conclusion that passing it up the first time was one of my biggest mistakes. But it's one I can now fix.” He shrugged. “If I decide to go through with it, anyway. I know I tend to jump into things, but this time there's no rush to make up my mind.”

Ed shook his head. “I don't know, man. This is all a bit sudden for me. I haven't had any previous time on Zharus to get used to all these crazy ideas. I'm just an old West Coast junk man. You want to know how much dogshit in plastic bags per cubic meter there is in a late twencen landfill? I'm your man.”

“Hey, you think I did any better my first day here? You'll get the hang of it.” Larry grinned. “I promise I won't do anything permanent—or, well, long-term—before you've had a chance to settle in.”

“Uh...thanks, I guess,” Ed said, nonplussed.

“Look, maybe you should get out of the house and look around the Real for a while. See what else Zharus had to offer—without me and Janice looking over your shoulder. Stop being such a homebody.”

Ed blinked. “Get out and go...where?”

“Anywhere. Walk around the settlement, check out the booths from the various polities and RIDE-matching services, stop by the administration office and see if anyone

you know is on the passenger manifest...the choice is yours. But do it in the Real. Even back on Earth, staying inside all the time wasn't good for you."

"I'll...think about it," Ed said.

"Cool. Well...you've got my comm code. I'll just leave you to your alone-time."

Larry nodded and headed for the door.

Ed just watched him go, sipping his beer. Whether or not it tasted like it had five hundred years ago, it really wasn't bad. When it was done, he dropped the can in the recycler and considered his options. He could have another beer, maybe watch a movie or something on the media wall. Or he could get out and do something like Larry had suggested. What to do, then?

Ed sighed. Larry was right, as he often was. It didn't do any good up just sit in here and mope. Besides, a little exercise would probably do him good. He got up, made sure his comm was in his pocket, and headed out the door.

The main construction was already a kilometer away, and was focusing on fewer, taller buildings that looked like apartment complexes or possibly offices. It was hard to tell. Modern Earth architecture was an unlovely thing. The structures looked functional, but little more.

More interesting was an area of tents literally popping up or pavilions dropped from... "Holy shit. Dragons?" *Honest-to-God dragons?* They were very popular in FVL. Sonja and Laura had even had draconic avatars for a time. But there they were, big as life. *Bigger.*

There were a lot of people on the street. Mostly exiles like himself, and all of them were gawking at the half dozen dragons flying towards the makeshift park. "Hello, everyone! Hello!" a blue one said in the friendliest of tones. "Hello, newcomers! You are welcome here!"

Ed shook his head in wonder. "What a world."

He wandered over in the direction of the tents, looking here and there to take it all in. One tent was surrounded by metallic objects about the size of washing machines, arranged in neat rows. A placard on the tent read "RIDEalong RIDEworks." Out of curiosity, Ed headed that way.

A human receptionist stepped out of the tent, carrying one of the ubiquitous media tablets. "Hello, sir! Are you interested in partnering a RIDE?"

"Uh...not really," Ed said. "But...these are RIDes?"

"Yes! They just haven't 'hatched' yet. You see, the RIDes who run RIDEalong believe that RIDes should start their lives as partners with a human, because that's what they were originally designed to be. So these RIDes are awoken by their first Fuse with their human partner to be."

Ed blinked. "They don't get any choice in the matter? That seems kind of...well, cruel."

The girl shrugged. "I can see how it would seem that way, and sometimes I'm not so sure I disagree. But the RIDEalong RIDes would point out that human babies don't get a lot of choice in being born, either, or who their parents are. You can argue the validity of the analogy, but they seem to find it compelling enough."

"How do you even know they'll get along with the human if they don't wake up until they partner up?"

"Well, they are awakened briefly, when they're first booted. As part of that process, they're given the standard human/RIDE personality assessment. It's a way of

building a personality profile that can be used in matchmaking.”

“Like in a dating service?”

“Exactly! In fact, I gather the tests were originally adapted from the ones dating services use. You could say this is ‘computer dating’ taken literally—because you’re going to be dating a computer.” She smiled, and offered him the tablet. “Why don’t you take it yourself? Nothing says you have to pair up with one of our RIDEs, but it’s a standard assessment that you can put in your data cloud and then any RIDE can use it to tell how good a match you’re likely to be with them.”

Ed took the tablet. “Hmm. Well, I guess it couldn’t hurt anything.” *And maybe it’ll help me understand what the deal is with Larry and Layla.*

The questions seemed fairly familiar from all the personality quizzes floating around the mesh back on Earth. There were the standard Myers-Briggs questions, a quiz on personal politics, and so forth. Some of the questions were rather intimate, though the quiz’s fine print noted that tests were compared on a “black box” principle, rendering a grade on closeness of match overall and in particular areas without divulging specific details of either’s answers to the other. The quiz also allowed particular areas to be set public and others private on the taker’s net profile, so those who took the test could make as much information public as they wanted to and hide the rest.

Once finished, he transmitted it to the receptionist.

“Well, we have a few here who you’d get along with, Mr. Lancaster. Both male and female. Here are the results.” She handed him another tablet. “We’re waiving 50% of the shell cost for new arrivals, and deferring payment on the rest until you get off Basic. Just something to consider.”

There were three high-match RIDEs, two of them females—including a female cougar. But...he didn’t feel like reading more deeply into it than that. “Thank you for the test, ma’am. But I have no idea where I’ll be financially in the near future. I think I’ll go see what else they’re setting up here.”

“Well, we understand that you’ve had a rough day. They may not be here if you decide you want to partner. But we’ll getting more in as the others go, so there likely will be more that fit your profile,” she said.

“I get that, but I’m still not going to make a decision yet. Thank you.”

So he left, wandering the tents again, until he smelled something delicious. The heavenly odor led him into an area set up with food stalls and tables. The signs advertised “non-fabbed!” and “natural!”. One stall, called Kraken House, was particularly busy.

Ed wasn’t entirely sure how he was going to be able to afford to pay for any of the food—but on the other hand, the vast majority of the people here were in the same boat, so perhaps they were getting paid from the Basic funds somehow. Or else they were giving stuff away in the hope of building brand recognition among the new arrivals for when they got off Basic, which Ed supposed was also a possibility.

A number of what Ed assumed were Integrates were eating. There were a few details off, but there they were—FVL avatars in the Real. Except they weren’t avatars. They were people. There was a vixen and a female skunk sitting at a table, chatting. He must have gawked a little too much, because the skunk noticed.

“Oh, hi there,” she said in a friendly voice.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to...” Ed stammered.

“It’s okay, really,” the vixen said in a slightly deeper voice. “After the shit you exiles have experienced, you’re allowed to gawk. Come, have a seat.” The third chair opposite them pushed itself outwards.

Feeling more than a little self-conscious, he did take the seat. The Integrates each had a plate of what was probably kraken. “Uh, thanks, ladies.”

“Our pleasure. Are you hungry?” the skunk asked. “You look hungry for something.”

“Peace of mind?” Ed mumbled.

“Yeah, we felt the same way after Integration,” the vixen added. “But seriously, if you’d like to try some kraken, you can take some off our plates.” She pulled a napkin out of the napkin dispenser and set it on front of him as a makeshift plate.

Ed was going to demur, but his stomach chose that moment to rumble loudly. It *had* been a while since breakfast. So he took a couple of pieces of it and gave it a try. It wasn’t too bad—spicy and chewy, it reminded him a little of Cajun fried chicken, only a little more rubbery. “If I wanted to order some of this myself, how would I pay for it?”

“You wouldn’t need to worry about that,” the skunk said. “The tab is being covered by the benevolent fund the local polities set up to cover costs. It’s free to the new arrivals.”

“You’ve only been here not even half a day. They don’t expect you to pay for anything,” the vixen said. “After that you’ve experienced, that would be cruel.”

“Okay,” Ed said. He looked at the two of them, and at the other Integrates and RIDEs in armor form. “I think I’m going to gawk a little more, then go do...something. I don’t know.”

“There’s counseling available if you’re feeling too off balance,” the skunk said kindly. “And gawk all you want. Hope you feel more balanced, soon.”

“Thanks. And thanks for the food.” Ed got up from the table and walked on.

A loud noise made him look up, and he saw a shuttle of some kind descending overhead, heading for an open area just beyond all the tents. Now that he looked, he could see a number of planes and ships were on the ground there. It looked like part of the open area had been paved with some kind of quick-crete, turning it into a de facto spaceport. Or “aerodrome,” as they called them around here. Well, he was walking that way anyway. Might as well see what was going on there.

At the edge of the aerodrome, there was a tent set up with terminals and people lined up. There was a bulletin board to one side with hardlight signage listing arrivals and departures. Ed looked around for someone to ask what it was all for, then remembered he had that someone in his pocket. He pulled out the card. “Hey, Informio, what’s all this about?”

The disembodied head rezzed up over the card and looked around. “This is the temporary aerodrome that has been set up to support arrivals and departures of all the people who’ve come from other polities to help yours get off the ground. Incidentally, there is also a free round-trip shuttle service available between here and most of the other major polities on this content, plus a few places in Laurasia.”

“A shuttle service?”

“Yes. Suborbital flights from here to there, and from there to here—for workers who commute, and for new citizens such as yourself who would like to see some of the sights. You’re guaranteed access to one free round-trip per day, with additional flights potentially available on a contingency basis.”

“So I could just...get on one of these planes and go to some other city?”

Informio nodded. “You can stay as long as you like. Your Basic stipend will cover food and shelter wherever you go; there’s no reason you *have* to spend all your time here. We’d like to help you find the place you feel most comfortable, and you can’t do that without exploring some of them.”

“Huh.” Ed looked at the departures board. “Looks like the next one is about to leave for...Uplift? I guess I could use an uplifting experience.”

“Then by all means, go. And should you have any other questions, do not hesitate to ask.” Informio’s face disappeared, and Ed pocketed the card and got in line to board the suborbital.

The spacecraft reached the apex of its arc in short order. Ed had a window seat and watched the sky turn dark, then lighter as they descended towards Uplift. He had no idea what to expect. Larry might have told him about this city years ago, but he’d forgotten. What drew his eye more at first was the incredible expanse of the Dry Ocean. He pulled out his ZID. “Hey, Informio. How big is that desert, anyway?”

“Larger than the Pacific Ocean on Earth,” he said. “And the most dangerous environment on the planet before the advent of efficient micro-hardlight shielding roughly forty years ago. Also the source of the mineral that gives me and my RI cousins our brains.”

“Maybe I’ll get into mining,” Ed mused. “But my job was already too much like mining, so maybe not.”

“You’ll get a great look at Uplift in about five seconds,” Informio said. “Anything else?”

“Not right now. Thanks.”

“My pleasure, Mr. Lancaster.” Informio blinked out.

The suborbital turned sharply, bringing the city-state into sight. The sunlight refracted slightly through the dozens of miles of hardlight climate domes, all merged together into one long arc along the shelf, covering an area about the size of Los Angeles. While he couldn’t see any streets yet, his first impression was a kind of orderly disorder, like a chaos butterfly. The central areas had dozens of tall buildings sticking through the top of the domes.

“We will be landing at the North Aerodrome in ten minutes,” the pilot said. “Public transport in Uplift is free, or you can get a scooter if you want something more personal. They’re not very fast, but will generally get you where you want to go. The Aerodrome is pretty close to Bifrost Park, so I recommend a visit to the Milk Bottle for a welcome-to-Zharus ice cream.”

It really struck him at that point that people on this planet didn’t *need* to live in arcologies to spare the environment. They had long gone back to the type of housing that was only possible with large expanses of undeveloped land, travel at low energy cost, and the simple human need to have some space. On Earth, Ed generally only saw the remains of the kind of housing Zharusians enjoyed on reclamation sites—when they were silly enough to build atop their own landfills.

As the sub descended, individual houses and streets became more visible, further validating Ed’s musing. This was laid out much like a town from the same twentieth-century Earth whose pop culture they were hooked on. Perhaps that was part of why they found these shows so attractive—they depicted a culture more in line with how they

actually lived here.

After touchdown, they de-planed into a terminal building that could have come from any one of the old 20th century shows, save for the little Zharusian touches like the ubiquitous hardlight, and all the animals and animal-people of various shapes. There was a scooter rental stand just outside, and Informio informed Ed that his Basic stipend would cover a rental, so he took one and got on the road. The controls were simple enough, especially after driving similar vehicles on Earth.

Except the battery was good for about a thousand kilometers.

The scooter had both wheels and lifters, but was only good for low speeds anyway. Still, that was fine with Ed. He was all about going slow and taking in the scenery. And there seemed to be plenty of it to see. He felt like a tourist, which he supposed he sort of was. A *permanent* tourist.

The architecture was amusingly eclectic, especially compared to the Oakland Arco. But given how fast they could build houses here, Ed supposed you could just pick your look on the spur of the moment. Heck, it might even be reasonably cheap to decide you were tired with your current house one day, have it demolished, and then rebuild it in a completely different style before the day was out.

There seemed to be one style that came up more than others. Ed didn't even have to ask Informio what it was. *Googie*, he thought. About a third of the commercial structures he passed had that look. Rooflines at an upward angle, sharp corners, illuminated panels, starburst shapes, boomerangs. The rest ran the gamut from TwenCen moderne, art deco, and international to 23rd century Martian colonization habs. Then there were the strictly Zharusian homes—often hovering on lifters a hundred meters over the lot.

He motored down Bifrost Parkway, the scooter on automatic, doing more gawking. Until he heard a beep that someone was pinging his implant model number. He put on the brake and turned to see who it was.

About a hundred feet down the street was a storefront named Brandy's Skullshop. A very large anthro capybara jogged to meet him. "Oh! Hey there! Hi!"

"Uh, hello?" Ed replied.

"How much do you want for your implant?"

Ed stared at her (them?). "Why would you want this thing?"

"It's a Munro VLW-60," she said.

"Yes, it is. But it's not even a high-end implant. Couldn't afford it. It's just humdrum barely middle-grade. I just connect to VL and work telepresence."

"Doesn't matter. You see, the only way we can get our hands on any Terran implants at all over here is to buy them from people who use them. That makes even the lowest-end model rare, which in turn means they have value to collectors. Also, implant users who travel on business have to use non-Q-based implants under the current customs laws, because it's forbidden to take Q tech out of the star system."

"I guess this means you're Brandy? Or one of you is? Nice touch using 'Skullshop'. Very authentic Terran for cyber implants."

The head of the capybara retracted, revealing a woman with short brown hair the same color as her RIDE's coat. "I'm Brandy, this is my partner, Cary. I keep telling her I should put her name on the shop, too, but she thinks it'd be bad for our brand recognition."

"It's not really about me," another voice said.

“*Anyway*, even a mid-grade implant like yours is worth a few thousand *mu*. And I’m willing to throw in a solid NextusNano CC-Lace.”

“And that is...?”

“Ah, excuse me. You must be fresh off the boat. A corpus callosum-based neural lace. I put you to sleep for five minutes in my medpod, remove your Munro, and leave the NN in its place. Of course I’ll move all your implant’s data storage contents over, too, before deleting them out of the old implant for your data security. You’ll find the performance *far* outstrips anything short of Fuser nannies or Terran military spec implants. You’ll even be able to use Nature Range, if you like that sort of thing.”

“How much was that again?”

“Six thousand *mu*. I just lined up a potential buyer for your implant. Provisional on your accepting my offer, of course.” Her eyes were bright with great enthusiasm, and she didn’t exude the kind of used item salesman vibe that was universal.

Ed shrugged. “Sold. Why not? Could use a little nest egg to start with.”

The inside of the shop looked authentically Terran, with shiny, clean surfaces and various implants on display. In the back was a Zharusian medpod, which opened with a hiss.

“Okay, backup all your data to my secure server and then reset the implant to factory settings,” Brandy said, copybara head back on.

“Done,” Ed said. “Now, I guess I get to get into one of these things again today...”

“Huh?” Brandy said.

“Had you heard about the ship that just landed? The *Steady Hand*? I’m one of its passengers...or cargo, I guess.”

“We honestly don’t pay much attention to the news. Distracting,” Cary said. “Just a sec.” About a second passed. “Oh. Oh, crap!”

“It occurs to me, you might want to set up a booth or something out there. Probably better do it soon. There are still a few hundred thousand people to wake up, and enough of them will have implants and stuff that it’s probably gonna depress your market for a while. Might want to get in early while there’s still some money to be made.”

“I’ll add another thousand just for that tip, Mr. Lancaster,” Brandy said, obviously getting his name from the account chit for the transplant. “Step right in.”

After the pod closed there was a humming sound...then he was waking up again, the door opening. The booting up sound used since time immemorial. A monarch butterfly flew around his field of view, followed by NEXTUS NANO logo. He redownloaded his data in milliseconds and made sure it was all there.

“As they say on Old Terra, you’re all green,” Brandy said. “Enjoy! And go have a welcome ice cream. It’s practically required. Welcome to Zharus.”

Half an hour later Ed was relaxing in Bifrost Park, a sparkling fountain of hardlight behind him, enjoying a chocolate mondae. He’d been a little shocked to learn that the ingredients came from actual cows, cacao plants, sugar cane, and everything else. Actual animals and food crops on Earth were only for the very rich. The price everyone paid for the depredations of the 20th and 21st centuries on Earth’s ecosystem. But there was none of that here, though of course fabbed food was there if one wanted it. Right now, he certainly didn’t.

I hope they know just how special their world is, Ed wondered, taking another

bite. He was finally feeling relaxed. He decided to ping Larry for a voice chat.

“Hey, buddy! What’s up?” Larry said.

“This is,” Ed replied. He gave him an eye-view feed with his implant, looking around the park—now that he could do that.

“Uplift, huh? Spent about half my time there,” Larry said. “You’re coming in loud and clear. Tons of bandwidth. You upgrade?”

“Well, yeah. Got a *great* offer on that Munro you liked to hack. I think it’s enough to buy a house here. Or maybe get one built. Somewhere. I dunno. Got a NexusNano setup.”

“Nice specs. A full neural lace? That’s great! Well, I’ve got some news, myself. I got scouted by Punta Sur Terraforming. Offered me a job monitoring the *Steady Hand* site. I took it. Not exactly high-level pay, but it’s a good start here. I need to learn Zharusian soil ecology before they’ll promote me.”

“It’s good to know twenty years doing it on Terra is still worth something here. Congrats, buddy.”

“Thanks. You know, they could probably find something for you to do, too. Especially with me there to tell them how good you are at what you do. That nest egg of yours won’t get you too far.”

Ed nodded. “I probably will end up going that route, when I’m ready. On a world where I don’t know anyone, a referral from the one person I do know will be about a thousand percent better than nothing. But I feel like I want to enjoy my all-expenses-paid vacation a little while longer first.”

“I can respect that. I just don’t feel secure without something more than this Basic Accommodation thing,” Larry said.

“I think I’ll grab a nice hotel room and see the sights. Got any recommendations for things I shouldn’t miss? Heck, you could even join me if you wanted, if you can take a day off from the new job.”

“Actually, I know a few spots in Uplift from my trip I’d like you to see. Kinda off the beaten path. Plus, I think Layla lives in the city now.”

“Well, I wouldn’t mind meeting her in person. What about Debbie Downer?”

“Janice? I’ll try and drag her along, if you don’t object. And if she doesn’t.”

“The flight is free. I don’t see why she would.”

“And you?”

“Eh...I’ll give her another chance. Maybe seeing something of this planet other than a construction site would do her good. It’s done *me* good. This hardlight fountain is gorgeous.”

“And the ice cream?”

“Well, you’ve had it. What do you think?”

Larry chuckled. “Right. Well, next sub flight between here and Uplift isn’t for an hour or so. I’ll chat with Layla and see about Janice. Back in touch later, Ed.”

“Later.”

Ed considered what to do next. He had his implant send the scooter to the nearest collection point, then rented a small car. He didn’t know how to drive, but as good as the self-drive systems were here, he didn’t really need to. Then he considered his outfit. It was still the rumpled polo shirt and slacks he wore for work. The authorities had gassed him in his own apartment in the middle of his workday. It was time to do a little shopping. “Informio...”

An hour, as it turned out, was ample time to get started on a new wardrobe. Ed had been going to keep it down to what he could carry with him, until he learned that the shops also offered inexpensive suborbital delivery to anywhere on Zharus—so he bought one outfit to wear, and a few more to ship back home to the new settlement. Fortunately the lack of an official name for the new settlement wasn't an obstacle; the exact coordinates of his home were stored on his ZID, and the system was able to route it through the nearby aerodrome with no trouble. They'd even laundered and shipped the clothes he changed out of along with them, at no extra charge.

Layla found him at the aerodrome terminal just before Larry and Janice arrived. She slunk through the crowd, tail in the air. There were an awful lot of feline RIDEs, but she was the only cougaress. Her black-tipped tawny tail was distinctive.

She sat down on her haunches in front of him. "Nice to meet you in the real Ed," she purred. "I'm afraid we somehow got off on the wrong paw earlier. Larry explained why."

"I'm glad he did," Ed said. "It's nice to meet you too, Layla."

The RIDE moved close enough and presented the top of her head. "Well, now that we've introduced ourselves, you may now pet the giant kitty."

Sonjapuma had done exactly this sort of thing when greeting friends. There was nothing like a friendly bunt and head petting. He returned the gesture with a bump from his forehead, then started the petting. "Your fur is so soft," he said.

"Thanks. I *just* had my hardlight tuned," Layla said. She lowered her head down onto his lap and started purring. "Mmm. Good pets."

"You know, I thought you were supposed to have the same rights as humans now," Ed said. "Shouldn't this be beneath your dignity?"

Layla considered. "Hm...on the whole...nope! Not beneath my dignity at all. I'm a kitty and I like pets. What good is having rights if you don't have the right to act however you want to?"

Ed chuckled. "Well, I suppose there is that."

"Well, I'm glad to see you two getting along," Larry said, walking out of the arrivals gate.

"We barely got a chance to say hello in VL before he logged out," Layla said. "Your friend gives good pets. We'll get along just fine."

"So, where's Janice?" Ed asked.

"Looking for any free stuff she can find," Larry said. "She's learning to leverage being from the *Steady Hand* into just about anything she can."

"That figures," Ed said. "After all, her whole life back on Earth was an exercise in getting everything she could for a minimum of effort. Though I suppose I don't have a lot of room to point fingers, given that I just sold a piece of consumer-grade trash for a small fortune."

"People here are funny about Earth cyber," Layla said. "I don't really get it either. Maybe because it's just so hard to get their hands on."

"Not going to be so hard for the next little while, as more people wake up," Ed said. "Really, it's probably going to crash the market. As I told the person I sold it to."

"I wonder if you can short-sell cyber futures or something," Larry mused. "Oh well. I'd probably lose my shirt if I tried to dabble in the market."

"Great to see you in person again, Larry," Layla said, lifting her head off of Ed's

lap. "Pardon me, Ed."

Ed stopped petting. "No problem."

"It's good to see you, too," Larry said, stepping forward to give Layla a friendly scratch behind the ears. "You're looking good. Did you upgrade your hardlight projectors or something?"

"Yeah, when I got my 'sorry we enslaved you for a few decades, here's some money to make it all better' payout. Wanted to buy something cool, and about all I can really use are better parts. Bumped up my batteries to A+, too. I can go for a couple weeks without needing a recharge."

"Nice. So they actually did come through with a cash settlement?"

"Oh yeah. Pretty good one, too. Wages-plus for my 'job' as a rental, among other *mu*," Layla swished her tail. "To be fair, they actually *did* seem really sorry about it. Just one of those funny little blind spots people have, I guess. Sometimes you don't realize when a girl's attracted to you, sometimes you don't smell your own B.O., and sometimes you accidentally create and enslave a whole race of machine intelligences. The sort of thing that can happen to anyone."

"Sounds like it," Ed said. "So...where to next? Once Janice shows up, I mean." Just then, he noticed her saunter towards them out of the corner of his eye, carrying a bag of swag.

"It's *amazing* what people will hand you once you tell them you're a poor exile from Earth," she said. "Hi Layla, Larry, Sonja."

Ed flinched. "So, you figured it out."

Janice made a dismissive gesture. "Wasn't hard. Do you think I care, though? I didn't care my brother's a furry. Why should I care you wear virtual boobs? Besides, I *like* that look she has. Purple hair. Real classic cyberpunk. You play her *very* well. From what little I saw."

Her tone wasn't mocking, or condescending, but it wasn't exactly praise, either. It was just a factual statement from Janice, and probably the only kind of compliments she ever gave. "Thanks," Ed mumbled. *I think*. "I put a *lot* of work into being Sonja."

"Oh, it shows. It really does. Now, what's this about BBQ with *real* meat?"

Ed shrugged. "I don't know, what is it? Nobody here said anything about it..."

Layla and Larry looked at one another and nodded. "Follow us," Larry said. "Janice can either ride in Ed's rental, or pillion with me on Layla."

"If the kitty can carry two, I think I'll ride with you," Janice said. "If I rode with Ed, it'd probably just be awkward."

"Yeah," Ed deadpanned. "Just shoot the address to my implant."

Ed never did figure out who had suggested the place, but whoever it was, it was a good choice. St. John's Barbecue was a really tiny little hole-in-the-wall shop, that was about 90% kitchen by volume, with only a couple of little tiny tables out front. There wasn't even room for a RIDE to fit in, which made it fairly exceptional among Uplift businesses. (When he asked, Ed learned that the proprietor ran the business as a sideline to his main occupation, which was mobile catering out of that huge kitchen.)

But it wasn't a worry that there was no room for Layla; they planned to get their meals to go and eat them in a nearby park anyway. But first, Layla had an offer to make Janice.

"So, Janice, I gather you're looking forward to some real-meat barbecue," Layla

said. “You know that’s not gonna be covered by Basic, right?”

Janice shrugged. “I’m sure I’ll be able to work something out.”

“I was thinking I could offer to cover the cost of it for you on one condition,” Layla said.

Janice raised an eyebrow. “All right, I’m listening.”

“See, I happen to like the taste of barbecue, too,” Layla said. “But to taste it in the Real, I need to Fuse with someone to use their taste buds. And being as doing that with one of these two would have some long-lasting side effects...”

“Oho. So I get a free meal, if you get to help me eat it.”

“That’s the deal. What you think?”

“Hmmm.” Janice considered it. “I guess I wouldn’t mind too much. As long as you stayed out of my head.”

“There’s a setting you can set in your implant configuration to block me from reading your thoughts or memories.”

Janice glanced at Larry. “And I’d get ears and a tail like that?”

“I’d pay for them to be docked if you didn’t want to keep them, but yeah. You’ll get my tags, you lucky thing you.”

“Huh.” Janice considered. “Well sure, why not. Might as well give it a try. Like the song goes, ‘try everything.’”

“Okay. So, stand up straight, hold your arms level,” Layla said. She nodded as Janice did so. “And here we go...”

Ed had seen it many times in FVL. Simulated RIDE companions were very popular in some corners—almost as popular as being furry yourself. So seeing the Fuse process in real life was slightly anticlimactic. When complete, Janice posed a little.

“This is absolutely bonkers,” Janice said. She felt her muzzle with her handpaws, then looked at those, too. She flexed her claws. “Completely, absolutely *bonkers*.”

“Ain’t it just?” Layla said. “Now, let’s murder some meat.”

Ed stared at the menu. There were so many words there that he understood definitively, but seeing them presented on a menu was as nonsensical as finding a library full of telephone books. Words like “beef” and “pork” and “chicken.” Well, actually pork and chicken weren’t so odd, he supposed—after all, they were relatively inexpensive to raise, so even in the vat-meat world Earth had become, they were still within reach as occasional special treats. Much like “steak” had used to be back in the twentieth. But beef needed a *lot* of resources, and was out of reach to everyone except the insanely wealthy.

And yet, here all three of these things were, priced about the same as vat meat would have been back home. You could afford to eat these meats *every day*. Even beef. Ed felt a little weak in the knees just thinking through the implications. *They really did throw me in the briar patch.*

“So, what’re we having?” Janice wondered. “I’ve never had any of this stuff, so one thing’s just as good as anything else to me. And you’re paying for it anyway, so...”

“When in doubt, you can’t go wrong with beef brisket. How’s your appetite?”

“I...don’t know, really. I’ve never eaten much *real* food, so I don’t know how much I can eat.”

“We’ll start small, then. Can always have seconds if you feel like it.”

“Beef brisket sounds fine to me,” Ed said. He felt a little shiver of anticipation just speaking the words. All the empty cans he’d dug up of beef stew, corned beef hash, and

other foodstuffs with the word “beef” on them—delicacies from long before his time—and now he was finally going to get to try it himself. He wondered if he’d like it, or if it would be too different from the fabbed food he was used to.

“Make that three beef brisket plates,” Larry said. “How do we split the check?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Layla said. “I’m buying this round. Call it my ‘welcome-to-Zharus’ present. I like seeing people enjoy their food.”

“Guess I can’t argue with that,” Ed said. “But I’ll have to buy you something in return sometime.”

“Well, Christmas is coming up,” Layla said. “Get me a nice present or something. Anyway...I’ve commed the order ahead. You two can run in and pick it up, and we’ll go stake out a picnic table.”

Larry nodded. “Works for me. C’mon, Ed.” They headed into the small establishment while Layla headed for a nearby table.

As they went through the door, Larry glanced over his shoulder at Layla. “Well, that was sudden. I didn’t really think she’d do it.”

“Well, that’s our Janice. All you have to do is dangle a freebie in front of her, and off she goes.” Ed shook his head. “I wonder if we could convince Layla to keep her?”

Larry chuckled. “Oh, be nice.” He headed up to the counter. “Hey, we’re here to pick up the order for Layla C.?”

“Be ready in just a minute!” the proprietor called.

Ed sniffed the air, and his stomach growled. Something smelled *really* good, in ways he hadn’t ever smelled before. It was kind of an atavistic smell, harking back to the days of life in castles and meat roasted on spits over fires. Vat meat just didn’t have an aroma that strong. He could hardly wait to see what it tasted like.

“Okay, here you go.” The proprietor set two trays on the counter, one with a single plate and one with two. They were piled high with what seemed like, to Ed’s mind, an immense amount of meat, as well as thick slabs of toast, and bowls of potato salad, beans, and coleslaw. It was a veritable feast.

“Will we even be able to eat all that?” Ed worried.

“What you can’t eat, you can just take home and eat later,” the barbecue chef said. “It gets even better when it’s reheated. Enjoy it, and do come back.”

Larry took the tray with two plates, and Ed took the other, and they headed outside and over to the table where Layla and Janice awaited. “Hey, smells good!” Janice said. “Wow, I can smell it from all the way over here?”

“Kitty nose!” Layla said. “Good for more than just booping.”

Larry put a plate in front of Layla and Janice and one in front of himself, as he and Ed sat down next to each other across from her. The table, Ed noticed, was actually made of reinforced metal alloy, and bolted down, so as to take the weight of a Fused RIDE without tipping over.

“So, dig in,” Layla said, picking up a fork. “I’m sure gonna.”

“How does this work exactly?” Janice asked.

“Well, your mouth is right behind where my mouth is,” Layla said. “So I open wide, and you get fed.”

“Uh...okay,” Janice said. “It’s been a long time since I had anyone hand-feed me.”

“If you want, you can control the fork once you get the hang of it. But I’ve practiced more, so I figure we’ll work it that way for the first few bites.”

“Okay, I guess that’s—MMPH!”

“Sorry...really hungry here!”

I guess that’s one way to shut her up, Ed thought. Then he turned his attention to his own plate. Vat-meat had a noticeably different texture. The cheapest didn’t even bother with the “twitching” step to make all the muscle fibers align. *This* meat was from a real animal who had used these muscles day in and day out. Ed wasn’t sure about that part, but it did look extremely delicious. The meat was marbled with fat—more fat than he recalled seeing on any meat. But when he took a bite, hesitantly, and chewed, he was surprised at the burst of flavor that flowed over his tongue. The texture was different than he was used to, but he thought he *could* get used to it.

“Mmm. Mmm, *wow*,” Ed managed at last. “This is...there’s nothing *like* it.”

“Well, there’s quite a few things like it, really,” Layla said. “Pork, chicken, turkey...all of ‘em really good, too.”

“It’s different than I’m used to,” Janice said. “Not really sure it’s my favorite thing, but...eh, it’s not bad.”

“Do all RIDEs like eating human food?” Ed wondered.

“We can all *enjoy* it. Not all of us are huge fans, but I am. Seeing all the different spices and ingredient combinations available was a revelation. It’s such a different experience from just eating raw deer and rabbits.”

“Wait, you hunt *real* animals?” Janice said.

“*Virtually* real animals,” Layla said, shoving another bite of meat into her mouth. “We have a VR simulation called ‘Nature Range’ where we can go to hunt or be hunted. And of course, you eat what you kill.”

“Sounds like the ‘Tooth and Claw’ server in FVL,” Ed said. “Ferals like to hang out there.”

“I’ve heard about your FVL,” Layla said. “It’s cute, but it’s nowhere near the level of Nature Range. You probably *roleplay* the hunting and killing and stuff. But we RIDEs actually *experience* it. From both sides.”

“What do you mean, ‘experience’?” Ed asked. “You mean...you actually *feel* everything?”

“*Everything*,” Layla declared. “From your muscles bunching as you prepare to pounce, to the claws and teeth through the flesh of the prey. But if the prey is big enough they can give you such a kick it’ll break your face. But there’s nothing like chewing through fresh, *raw* thigh of venison, hot off the buck.”

“I...think I’ll just take your word for that,” Ed said. Suddenly all his experiences role-playing a cougar girl seemed a little juvenile when faced with an example of the real thing.

“And the deer I hunt tell me they’re by and large pleased with the experience of having their throats ripped out as well.”

Ed blinked. “Wait...what?”

“There are a few notable exceptions, but generally prey seem to like the whole being hunted down and eaten thing. I’m not an expert in ungulate psychology, but apparently it satisfies something deep in their code. Lets them feel like they’re part of the circle of life or something. It’s just how we’re made. Human intelligence or not, we’re still animals.”

“Huh,” Ed said. “I guess we just tend to think of you as...well, different-shaped people. Humans, I mean.”

“I like being thought of as a ‘people,’ actually. We haven’t heard that word used

enough, most of our lives,” Layla said. “Not about us, anyway.”

“People are stupid,” Janice said. “Uh...the people who aren’t RIDEs, anyway. Take things for granted and don’t question assumptions. Those of us from outside can see it clear as day.”

“No argument here,” Larry said. “You’re a person in my book, whether you’re an animal or not.”

“Right,” Ed said. “And I’d kind of like to know more about how you live in virtual—the parts that don’t involve blood and guts and raw meat, anyway.”

Layla nodded. “If you’d like to try our style of virtual reality, there’s a no-predation version called ‘Bambi’s Forest’ that we can use if you just want to four-paw it around for a bit,” Layla said. “Or you could try your VL avatars there.”

“The Terran VL addicts on Zharus have a freeware resolution upgrader for Nature Range,” Larry said. He sent Ed the software over their implant link. “With Zharus-tech implants, it should work just fine.”

“After we eat, why not.” Ed looked down at his plate. “Though I think that *could* be a while.”

“Well, don’t rush your meals. It can wait, and good food should be enjoyed at your own pace.”

Ed nodded. “You know, I think I’m going to be coming back here a *lot*. At least until I’ve worked my way through more of the menu.”

“Less talking, more eating,” Janice said. “This stuff is *good*.”

Ed rolled his eyes, and Larry chuckled, but they did devote their full attention to their meals thereafter.

Quite to Ed’s surprise, he actually was (barely) able to finish the whole thing. *Must have been hungrier than I thought, I guess*. But he was definitely going to remember to bring a “kitty bag” next time he visited. Larry and Janice-as-Layla seemed to have done just as well.

“That was...pretty good,” Janice said. She belched loudly. “Scuse. Thanks for paying.”

“Thanks for the use of your taste buds,” Layla said. “Good stuff. One of these days I may have to pull the trigger on a humanoid shell with simulated digestive system, so I can eat for myself. Pretty big investment to make, though.”

“You can get one of those?” Ed asked.

“Yeah. They’re kind of all the rage lately. Since someone figured out how to scan human brains into RI cores, there’s been a lot more demand for them, and so they’ve gotten a lot cheaper. Still not quite cheap enough, though.”

Ed blinked. “Wait, what? Scan human brains?”

“Yeah. Ain’t this a funny little world? If you were born the wrong sex, wrong species, wrong *anything*, you can get it fixed. If you think you shoulda been born a RIDE, well, now you can be.”

“Crazy,” Larry said. “If we don’t decide to partner up, I might have to look into that.”

“And if we do, we could maybe trade back and forth if you wanted,” Layla said. “Might be interesting to try.”

“And speaking of which, I think you’d invited us to your VR?” Larry said.

“Do we need to go somewhere we can lie down?” Ed wondered.

“If you want,” Layla said. “But as long as you don’t plan to spend hours on end in there, you really just need to be sitting comfortably. We could do it right here if you wanted.”

“We probably should go somewhere with a little more privacy, anyway,” Larry said. “If we’re all just going to be zoning out and staring blankly into space.”

“Well, my hotel room has a few chairs and stuff,” Ed suggested. “We could go there. Besides, I’d like to give this new implant a test run.”

“Works for me,” Larry said. “Janice, you want to come along?”

“Oh gosh,” Janice deadpanned. “Did a strange man just invite me to his hotel room?”

“I’m sure I could find some etchings somewhere for you to look at,” Ed replied.

“Oh, what the hell. I *am* part cat now, so I guess I’m even more curious than usual. So why not.”

“As long as we’re Fused, might as well show you what lifter flight is like,” Layla said. “Beam me the address, we’ll meet you two there.”

Ed sent the transmission. “Larry and I will take my rental car. See you soon.”

The car pulled up outside the hotel just as the puma touched down. “Whew, that was fun!” Janice said. “I might just have to see about finding a RIDE after all. If they can find one who’ll put up with me.”

“Oh, we have all personality types, same as humans. I’m sure you’ll find someone who you’ll get along with,” Layla said.

Eventually, Layla messaged Ed and Larry.

“So, ready for the de-Fuse?” Layla asked.

“Sure thing, hit me,” Janice said.

A moment later, Layla’s hardlight winked out, and she unfolded from around Janice and back into her four-footed form. Janice reached up to feel her new pointy ears, and then around back to her new tail. “Well, this is new.”

“They suit you,” Larry said.

“If you want them removed, there’s a nano clinic not far away and I’ll cover the cost,” Layla said.

Janice shook her head. “Nah. I’ll keep ‘em a while longer anyway. After all, some people have to come all the way to Zharus to get tags like this.”

“But you’re on Zharus now,” Ed pointed out.

“Yeah, and your point is...?”

Ed rolled his eyes. “C’mon, let’s go inside and get set up for VL.” He led the way up to his hotel room, and nodded to a pair of chairs. “You guys can take those, I’ll just lie down on the bed.” He nodded to the other bed. “Or one of you can lie down there if you want.”

“I’m good with sitting,” Larry said.

“Yeah, me too...if I can figure out what to do with this tail.”

“Try not to sit on it,” Ed suggested.

Janice rolled her eyes. “Oh, thank you Mr. Helpful.” But as it turned out, like much Zharus furniture, the chair was designed with a tail-hole, so that part wasn’t a problem.

Ed kicked off his shoes and lay down on the bed. “Okay. Layla, let me know when you’re ready?”

There was a chime from Layla's server. "Okay, Green Room's ready," she said. "Once you get there, pick your avatar. See you all inside."

Ed shut his eyes and sent some commands to his implant. Everything blacked out, then came the NextusNano logo and jaunty jingle. *I'm really going to have to change some defaults.* He should have looked at the manual, but who ever did?

Then he was traveling down a long tunnel. Clearly it took some time for the environment to load. Then the tunnel vanished, and he was in...a green room. Literally, the floor, walls, and ceiling were all different shades of green. There were multiple VR terminals floating in the air, displaying tap-to-login prompts. And a moment later, there were two other people in the room with him—Janice and Larry took a moment longer to show up, perhaps because their implants weren't as high-quality as the one he'd gotten in barter from the store. Janice's default avatar had the ear and tail tags she'd gotten from Layla; perhaps something in the RIDE's operating system had made that change.

"So what do we do now?" Janice wondered.

"Select the avatar you want to take into Bambi's Forest," Layla's voice said. "You can use those terminals to make your selection; you can load the ones stored in your implants or use one of the system defaults."

"Seems simple enough. Hmm." Janice peered at one of the terminals, and reached out to tap the button. Larry did likewise, and so did Ed.

The interface defaulted to the Avatar Select screen he used for entering VL—so at least that much was familiar. In front of him were the avatars for Sonja Cannon, Sonjapuma, the one he used for company meetings, and the gender-flipped version of himself. He'd always kept that one available, despite not using it for years. Sonja was just a "louder" version of Edie, especially in the breast department.

And...somehow using one of the Sonjas didn't feel right here—they were both designed for cyberpunk-themed worlds. They'd be out of place in a pure natural forest. And for some reason he didn't want to use even the idealized version of his real-life self here. That was for work stuff only—after his first few sessions, his hobby VL activities had always involved an element of genderplay. But Edie definitely had possibilities...

A flashing notification drew Ed's attention to a footnote at the bottom of the screen. It read "Animal avatars are available and suggested for the Nature Range/Bambi's Forest environment." He briefly looked at them. It was all the standards for the Rockies and Sierra Nevada. Cougars of course, lynx, bobcats, deer, coyotes, various rodents, birds-of-prey, even songbirds. But none really held the appeal that Edie did. But, Edie was still missing something.

Ed brought up the avatar editor, then made a copy of Edie to modify. He made her slightly more like Sonja—adding a slightly larger bust and changing her hair color to purple. He accepted the edits and decided to name it Sonja Lancaster. *Let's start with something more familiar before deciding to go on four paws,* he thought.

The "Wear Avatar?" dialogue came up. Ed selected yes...

Sonja sighed with relief. It was like getting into a bath that was the perfect temperature. Finding the sweet spot in your favorite comfy chair. Or waking up in the early morning and the bed was just too warm to leave.

"Sonja?" Larry said. "I like the new avatar. You look..."

"Comfy," Janice supplied. Her ears were perked, interest piqued. "So, how does that feel?"

Sonja couldn't resist cradling her breasts. "Well...it's much more real than the old

implant. These feel like they have actual *weight* now.”

“No kidding, eh?” Janice said, thrusting her own chest out. “I was only in your VL once, but even I can tell the difference. It just feels more...lifelike, I guess. So...what about the naughty bits?”

Sonja blushed. “I’m not going to talk about my ‘naughty bits’.”

“Cute,” Layla said. She had appeared in an anthro form. “Now, are you going to kitty-out? I have some stuff I want to show all of you. Cougar senses will blow your minds.”

“My mind is pretty well blown already,” Sonja said. She looked down at herself, at the way her body *moved* when she walked. There had always been a certain element of plastic stiffness in VL avatars, just because they didn’t have the processing power to simulate how every body part moved individually so some were grouped together for simplicity. But here...it seemed just like it would have in the Real. Every muscle, every inch of skin had the natural flex it would have in the real world. (Or at least, she *assumed* it did. She’d never experienced a *real* female body like this, after all.) “I think I’m going to need a little more time to...uh...get used to this.”

Janice smirked. “You mean, go off by yourself and do a little *exploring*, hmm? Go on, knock yourself out. Or feel yourself up, whichever.”

Sonja blushed harder, and was still trying to figure out how to reply to that when Larry spoke up. “Yeah, I think we probably should get used to being human in here before we try four paws,” he said. “So I’m going with my default avatar, I guess.” He tapped the icon.

“Yeah, me too,” Janice said. “If I was a porcupine in here, I’d probably just stab myself or something.” She tapped the button on her own screen.

“All right, we can come back to that,” Layla said. “Initializing the forest...” The green room faded away, leaving them in the middle of a forest clearing. All around them, old-growth trees reached for the sky. Birds called in the distance, and the air smelled fresh and clean.

“Oh, wow,” Larry said. “*This* is what I was working towards on Earth.”

“I’m sure some of it exists back on Earth by now...somewhere...” Sonja said. “Not that we’d ever have seen it, since we only worked in the places that *weren’t*...”

“Is this a forest?” Janice wondered. “It’s hard to see—there are all these trees in the way.” She gave Sonja a look. “You know, your boobs aren’t going to fall off if you let them go.”

Sonja blushed. “I know. I just...like holding them.”

“I see,” Janice said. “Well, at least try a different outfit than that re-sized polo shirt and slacks. Show a little cleavage.”

“No, no. I’m good,” Sonja stammered, blushing redder.

Janice tilted her head. “Seriously. Are you okay? I mean, I *like* being a woman and personal breasts *are* pretty cool. But I don’t think I’ve ever seen *that* particular expression before. Are you sure there isn’t something, you know, psychological about this?”

Sonja couldn’t even bring herself to be irritated at Janice. “I...I don’t know. It’s just...I’ve never felt anything like this before.”

Larry raised an eyebrow. “That good, huh? I think maybe I’ll...hold off a little on trying it myself.”

“Look, why don’t you go find a clearing or something and...y’know, do what

comes naturally,” Janice said. “We won’t try to follow you, and there shouldn’t be anything that can hurt you here, right Layla?”

“That’s right, but...” The cougar cocked her head. “It’s interesting. You’re acting just like a new-minted crossrider, but I can still see you in the real world and you’re still definitely a guy.”

“Uh...yeah,” Sonja said. Suddenly the idea of jacking out of VR and going back to a male body just felt...icky.

“*Can* you crossride virtually?” Larry wondered. “I thought it was all bound up in hormones and things.”

“We simulate those here,” Layla said. “I’ve never heard of someone being affected like that by *simulated* hormones before, though. Maybe I should do some research. That implant Sonja’s got is pretty high-end, might have something to do with it.”

“I really can’t explain this. I can’t,” Sonja said.

“I’m starting to have suspicions,” Layla said. “My research is telling me a surprising number of Terran tourist crossriders were undiagnosed gender dysphoric. Now, I’m not saying that’s what *you* are, but...”

“But I can’t be...can I? I’ve never felt like I was born the wrong way. I just logged in like this to blow off steam.”

“Maybe we should be sure,” Larry suggested. He suddenly looked very concerned. “Try logging out and see what happens, Sonja.”

The mere *suggestion* was abhorrent. “Don’t wanna,” Sonja mumbled.

Layla sighed. “I think we need to call some medical professionals. This *isn’t* normal.”

Sonja sat down on a log and shivered. “Do whatever you need to. I’m not leaving here if I don’t have to.”

“Layla could crossride you,” Larry suggested.

“Uh, about that,” the cougaress said. “Ed is, let’s say, over my mass tolerance. Another RIDE could do it, but it’s just too much for my light frame. He’d at least need to have that mass biosculpted off first at a corner clinic.”

“If she has to go to a corner clinic *anyway* they might as well do the cross there,” Larry said.

“I’m just too fat in the Real,” Sonja said, snorting. “Besides, if this really is what’s wrong with me, I want to be *certain* about it.”

“I’ve made the call to EMS,” Layla said. “They’ll be connecting to my Nature Range shortly so they can diagnose you. And here they are.”

Sonja looked up at the three newcomers. They all had medical uniforms, like paramedics. Two were human, while the third—a woman—had a metallic skin and solid blue eyes like Informio. They unpacked various gear around her. All symbolic, of course, since they were still in the Zharus-grade VL.

“Hello, Mr. Lancaster,” the EI said. “I’m Doctor Ein. Before we get started, we’ll need medical access to your implant.”

“Take it,” Sonja said. She hugged her breasts. “What is this? Why do I feel like this?”

“That’s what we’re going to find out. You’ll feel a little buzz as we do our work. Hold on.”

It only took seconds, then Dr. Ein conferred with her colleagues. They nodded. “Okay...Ms. Lancaster, this might be hard to take.”

“Well? What’s wrong with me?” Sonja asked.

“To speak plainly, you have gender dysphoria. Your brain and body don’t match.”

Sonja stared. “What?”

“It happens all too often on Earth. They ‘miss’ things because they often don’t test for issues like this,” the EI doctor said. “Here.”

A trio of images of a translucent human brain popped up. She pointed to the first one. Several areas were highlighted—the largest part was middle-cortex where the body was mapped to nerve sensation. “This is a typical masculine brain, in the sense of gender identity. The next one is a typical feminine brain.” The second one lit up with slightly different areas. “The differences seem slight, but it all has to do with body image and reaction to hormones. These areas get changed during the crossriding process.

Now, here’s your brain.”

Sonja’s brain was perhaps eighty percent like the female brain.

“We think that your upgraded implant and the Nature Range environment triggered these areas in full for the first time—including producing the appropriate hormones. Your ‘Genderplay Virtual Life’ might not have had the resolution Nature Range does, but it was enough to fill some subconscious need.”

“I...suppose that makes sense,” Sonja said. “I spent most of my non-working hours in it.”

“But now that you ‘have’ it in Nature Range, you naturally don’t want to leave that body behind,” Ein said.

“So, what do you do to fix this?” Sonja could guess the answer to that question.

“There are two treatment options. One is to alter these regions of your brain so they’re masculine. But in cases such as yours, it’s not the recommended course of treatment. I’m sure you can guess the other option. Current thinking is that we cross you, and in three years, if you want to be a man again, that’s always an option. It’s better for cases like yours to have the body match the brain for some years, rather than vice-versa.”

Well, this is complete bullshit. Unfortunately, it’s bullshit that makes too much sense. “I don’t get it. Even on Earth they’re supposed to catch this sort of thing before you hit puberty.”

“Do we have your permission for the latter treatment?”

Sonja snorted. “Sure. It’s Zharus. What’s the big deal?”

Larry smiled. “Don’t worry, Sonja. Laura will be right there with you. We’re going to do this together.”

Sonja smiled at him for the reassurance. “Happy to have her, Larry.”

“We’re going to have your implant put you to sleep, now, and we’ll come by your room to pick you up,” Dr. Ein said. “When next you wake, it’ll all be better.”

“Uh...wait, what is all this going to cost?”

“This type of issue is considered medical treatment rather than a voluntary cross and biosculpt,” Ein said. “So don’t worry. It’s all covered under Basic.”

“And even if it were voluntary, it would cost less than our barbecue dinner just now did,” Layla added. “Speaking of voluntary...” she looked at Larry, who nodded.

Through the whole thing Janice hadn’t said a word, more puzzled and confused than the dispassionate way she normally took things. “Okay, um...congratulations and everything, but I’m going to log out.” Her avatar vanished.

“Okay. I’m ready for nap time,” Sonja said.

“Sleep well,” Dr. Ein said, then sent the sleep command...

Ed slowly drifted back toward consciousness, scattered recollections of the last few hours gradually falling into place. One of the first recollections was that she wasn't Ed out here anymore. Now she was Sonja everywhere. *Huh. That'll be a little different*, she mused. *Maybe a little confusing, too.*

She remembered how *natural* her virtual body had felt, in a way that she never recalled her real body (*his* real body) ever seeming to. Funny that he had never known anything was really *wrong*, because he'd never known there was any other way to be. *Was that why I ate so much?* she wondered. *I unconsciously knew something about my body wasn't right, so I was changing it the only way I could?*

As she drew closer to wakefulness, she got the first real sense of her body. It felt... surprisingly like it had in Bambi's Forest. It felt *natural*, like it was the way she's always been *supposed* to be. She let herself relax, luxuriating in the feeling for a few more minutes before finally opening her eyes.

“I know you're awake, because I can see you moving.” It was Laura's voice. “Come on, Sonja. Why did it take so long?”

“The medical nanos we use in this process are much more finely-controlled than the RIDE Fusers Miss Layla used for your crossover, Miss Erskine. Don't get me wrong, they do a good job, but they're rather brute-force by comparison.”

“I'm up, I'm up!” Sonja said, opening her eyes and levering herself up on her elbows. She checked her implant. “That took almost *four hours?*”

“We had to remove...quite a lot of excess mass to give you a real life version of the avatar you were using in Nature Range,” Dr. Ein said. “That type of bodysculpting is more delicate than you'd think. Plus, we haven't touched your brain. There was no medical need to.”

Laura Erskine was tall and blonde, much like her former self. She wore her hair in a fauxhawk style, a yellow sundress and a pair of sandals, as if she'd just walked off of a beach. Like Ed, Larry had modeled her off the cyberpunk avatars they had used, toned down to a more realistic physique. “Well? What do you think, Sonja? How do I look?”

“Amazing,” Sonja said. “Truly amazing.”

Laura smiled like the sun, swishing her tail.

A tawny cougar padded into the room. “Morning, sleepy-head!” Layla caroled cheerfully. “Ready to join my harem? I seem to be collecting friends with cougar tags lately, might as well complete the set.”

“Sure, why not?” Sonja said. “There was actually an unhatched female cougar RIDE back at the landing site that I got a good personality match on, now that I think of it. Wonder if she's been taken.”

“You mean I'm going to get a little sister, too? Sweet!”

“Just a few more things to square away and we can discharge you, Miss Lancaster,” Dr. Ein said. “Name change. Everything else is already part of your ZID file.”

“Sonja is just fine. Thank you. Now, where are my clothes? I assume they've been re-sized.”

“Plus a complimentary bra,” Ein said. “Unless you'd prefer going without.”

“I'll just let them swing free for now, thanks.” Sonja giggled a little. *This is just too much. I can't even...even.* She contemplated asking for some time alone, but decided

not to. There would be time for that later. Other things needed tending to first. “Now, if you don’t mind...”

“Right,” Dr. Ein said. “Your clothes are on the chair next to your bed. Just have your implant shut off the privacy screen when you’re done.”

“Right, thanks...” Sonja glanced at the others. “Speaking of ‘privacy’...?”

“We’ll just be waiting in the next room,” Laura said. “Call if you need any help figuring out the clothes. They button on the other side than you’re used to, you know.”

“I know, I know.”

“I just had a four hour crash course on all this. See you in a few, Sonja.” Laura waved as her friend put up the privacy screen.

With a gentle pull, Sonja took off the hospital gown. She had literally seen a woman’s body from this point-of-view *hundreds* of times. So much that it had ceased being strange. Now, though, here it was in Real Life. Her own.

The Sonja Cannon avatar now felt like a ghost by comparison to what her body felt like now. Her eyes were drawn to her breasts, and the way they sagged a little to either side as she lay back. She rocked her shoulders to watch them wobble. *Oh, wow.*

Then there were the ‘naughty bits’ as Janice had so drolly referred to them. Ed had been too large to actually *see* his own for several years. But this was something else entirely. With more than a little trepidation, she spread her legs a little, then *carefully* probed with her fingers.

Holy shit. GVL could never simulate that.

She decided it was time to get dressed.

Finally, Sonja took down the privacy screen and made her way into the next room. *Taking my first steps as a bona fide woman!* As she saw the others sitting there, it occurred to her that someone was missing. “Hey, where’s the sourpuss? No, I don’t mean you, Layla.”

Laura shrugged. “Not sure. Haven’t seen her in the last four hours. When the medicos showed up, she lit out of there like her new tail was on fire.” She smiled wryly. “I’m afraid we may have just freaked a mundane.”

Sonja considered. “Not sure how I feel about that, all things considered. She’s annoying, but...she does kind of grow on you, I guess.”

“She’s had a rough time...today. Wow, it really hasn’t been a day for us, has it? Anyway, guys she *just* met are now women,” she snapped her fingers. “*Voluntarily*. Just like that.”

“Think we should ping her implant, see if she feels like talking?”

“It’s worth a try,” Layla said. “Mental lock-out or not, I still caught her surface thoughts. That woman’s got *issues*. I don’t think it’s wise to leave her alone too long.”

“Not sure I’m in any position to talk about someone *else* having issues,” Sonja said wryly. “But I think I agree with you.”

“Let’s link up and conference,” Laura said. “Let her know we’re concerned about her.”

Sonja nodded. “Ready.”

“Same,” Layla said.

Laura sent a voice call invite first, to see if Janice would respond. When she didn’t, Laura downgraded it to a text chat, and waited...

Uh...hello, Janice responded. *How do I even talk to you gu...girls now? I can’t even.*

It'll be easier if we did it face-to-face, Sonja sent. *You want to meet up in Bifrost Park? Buy you an ice cream, if they're still open.*

A full minute passed before there was a reply. *I need a few to get my head together, but I'll meet you there. It better be a big ice cream.*

The biggest, Sonja sent. *I need one, myself. It's been...a day.*

Now it was night. It had taken long enough for it to get there—but then, they did have 30-hour days here. *That's something else to get used to,* Sonja mused. *Though I did just have a four-hour nap.*

From the clinic Sonja rode pillion, sitting behind Laura, feeling a little awkward from the closeness. It wasn't as if she had to hold on tight, but Laura radiated a sort of giddiness about her womanhood that Sonja didn't *quite* share. She decided it was probably due to the crossriding and her brain being rewired. Sonja's own brain finally had a body the right shape, and correct mix of hormones.

"Isn't it hard to ride when you're in a dress?" Sonja asked.

"A little, but it's not too bad. How are you holding up?" She turned her head back.

"I was going to ask you the same thing, Laura. Sheesh! I have to keep reminding myself this isn't GVL."

"Nope! It's GRL. 'cuz we're both GiRLs now."

Sonja laughed. "Oh, you've got that right, sister. Right on that pretty nose of yours."

"Thanks. I took a cue from that new avatar of yours and tweaked Laura Stern a bit. I still look enough like the old me so I don't feel too weird about this. I think my mother would still recognize me...after a little effort. Layla and I went shopping afterwards. Used some of my Basic stipend."

"We're here," Layla announced. "She's waiting by the Milk Bottle. I can sense my Fusers there."

The hardlight fountain provided most of the light in the park, supplemented by path lights along walkways and lamps over the picnic tables. Janice sat at one of them, looking rather shaken as she watched them approach. The ginger-haired woman motioned for them to take a seat across from her. "So...um. What a day, eh? Girls?"

"No arguments from us about that," Laura said.

Janice sighed. "I don't get this planet. It *changes* people. I look at you two and my brain just *breaks*. You *can't* be the two guys I met this morning."

"You might have an easier time believing it if you'd stayed and watched the change happen," Sonja said. "But believe me, I'm just as surprised as you are. Look at how *I* freaked out over the idea of Larry becoming Laura...and then look at me now. Something I didn't even know about *myself*, suddenly clear."

"Shit, if they'd caught it on Earth when they were supposed to, I doubt you'd even be here now," Laura said.

"But changing yourself so completely...how can you even deal with that? *I* can't deal with that, and I'm not even the one who did it to myself!"

"If I'm being honest...I'm not really sure," Sonja admitted. "I think I'm still riding the hormone rebalancing rush from the change. After it's over...I'm not sure."

"The clinic gave us some referrals to crossover therapists," Laura said. "In case we have more serious trouble."

"Still...we don't have any experience at actually *being* women," Sonja said. "Just a

lot of pretending. I mean, where the hell do I even rest my arms with these? Over? Under? It's not like they gave me an instruction manual—"

"There are several, you know," Layla said. "Like, dozens. They'll even show you how to pee correctly. Animated diagrams and everything."

"Okay, I'll give you that," Sonja said. "It is Zharus."

"Yes, it is," Layla drawled. She was resting her head in Laura's lap for a good petting. "Plus, I still need to Fuse with you so you can get my tags. Unless you want to wait for the kitty back at the *Steady Hand* encampment."

That reminds me. "Er, give me a minute. I need to see if someone is still available." She quickly called the RIDEalong RIDEworks tent, hoping someone was there at night.

She was greeted by Informio. "Hello again, Miss Lancaster. Are you interested in adopting the RIDE you were interested in earlier?"

"Er...yes. Thank you. I guess she's still available?"

"She is indeed. I'll put a hold on her. You can still change your mind, but nobody else will be able to adopt her until you make a final decision."

"That works just fine. Thank you, Informio."

"My pleasure, Miss Lancaster. Have a good evening."

That was unexpected. Sonja smiled. "Well, she'll be there when I get back home."

"I approve of your decision to adopt a new RIDE, but you should know what you're getting into," Layla said. "RIDEalong RIDEs have fully-formed personalities, and a basic store of knowledge, but very little actual experience. She'll be new to the world, just like I was way back when, and you're going to have to help her learn about it." She gave the back of a paw a couple of licks. "You do already know she'll be a person, so you're good there. But she's also going to be a big responsibility, and you can't just send her back if you decide you don't like her. Are you sure this is the best time to take this extra challenge on?"

When she put it that way, it *did* sound a trifle irresponsible. But still...it felt *right*. Sonja considered for a moment. "I guess...both of us being new people in a way...it feels right to be new people together."

Layla nodded. "Fair enough. You've thought about it; you're not just doing it on a whim. So, I think you'll be okay."

Janice shook her head. "You people really do believe in just diving right into things, don't you?"

"That's the best way to get used to the water temperature all at once," Laura said. "Thought about finding a RIDE of your own?"

Janice snorted. "Like I could find one who'd put up with me. Or that I'd be willing to put up with *her* if I did."

"You don't know if you don't try. Here." Sonja beamed a file across to Janice's implant.

Janice blinked. "What's this?"

"RIDE matchmaking personality assessment. Fill that out and maybe you'll find a match."

Janice snorted. "I suspect any RIDE I *did* match wouldn't have the patience for this foolishness."

Sonja shrugged. "Never know until you try."

"I'll think about it. Now I think someone mentioned ice cream?"

“Pick whatever you want off their menu. I’ll be right behind you.” Sonja laughed. “Maybe my first female meal shouldn’t be a chocolate sundae, but what the hell? It’s a cliché because it’s true.”

“We call them ‘mondaes’ here,” Layla said. “I wouldn’t mind a RIDE’s De-lite, if Laura’s okay with it.”

“You can count on me,” Laura said.

A few minutes of waiting in line found them seated back at the table with large bowls of ice cream and other confections placed in front of them. Few sounds were heard for the next few minutes as ice cream was addressed in earnest.

“It’s still just so...weird,” Janice sighed at last. “I hardly even *knew* you guys, and now you’re ‘you girls.’”

“We’re still the same people you hardly even knew,” Laura said. “Just a whole lot prettier now.”

Janice snorted. “I guess that’s one way to put it.” She looked down at her nearly empty bowl, Janice toyed with the melting ice cream with her spoon. “Now I’m starting to wonder just what that prodigal brother of mine might have turned into. Do I have a missing *sister* now? Or something even weirder?”

“We’d be happy to help you track him down if you want,” Sonja offered. “As networked as this world is, it shouldn’t be *too* hard.” She took out her ZID—for the benefit of everyone else. “Hey Informio.”

“Greetings, ladies,” the EI said cheerfully. “What can I do for you?”

“I need a surefire way to get in touch with my brother,” Janice said. “He’s either ignoring me, or something else.” She snorted. “Maybe he doesn’t even know what’s going on. He liked to tune out on occasion.”

“There are many places in the Dry Ocean where communication is difficult even on the best of days,” Informio said. “If contacting him is extremely important right now you can send a search bird for him for a nominal fee.”

“I’ll...I’ll pay it,” Janice said, grimacing. “I have a few hundred moo from my stipend. How much?”

“Ten *mu* per day,” Informio said. “Shall I begin the service?”

Janice rolled her eyes. “Yeah, sure. Why not? It’s important. Just give him this message when you find him. ‘You wanker. Love, Janice.’”

Laura raised Layla’s eyebrows. “Sounds like you two really got along.”

“It’s the message I was going to send him years ago when he gave us all of two words that he was staying.” Janice shrugged. “But, you know, that sort of thing costs money.”

“You raise penny-pinching to an art form,” Layla said. “You should watch some Jack Benny.”

“Whatever, kitty. So, blue guy, how long til we get results?”

“If he’s in the Deep Dry it will be tomorrow at the earliest. It still takes time to get a messenger bird out there. Otherwise, could just be a few hours. I’m running a recent public records and social media search to see if your brother mentioned any destination or filed a flight plan, to narrow the search area if at all possible.”

“Fine by me,” Janice sniffed. “The less money I have to spend on finding that bum, the better.”

“I’ll ping your implant the moment there’s any news,” Informio promised. “Enjoy your evening, ladies.” He blinked out.

“So,” Laura said, “what are your plans for the evening, Sonja? Going to overnight in Uplift in the hotel room, see the sights? Or head back home and make a new friend?”

“Frankly...I think I’d rather go home. I have too much on my mind right now to really enjoy sightseeing. And I’m a little envious of you and Layla.”

“Welcome your new friend with an open mind, and you could have that closeness, too,” Layla said.

“And other trite aphorism crap like that,” Janice supplied.

Sonja ignored her. “The next flight back to the *Steady Hand* leaves in a couple hours. So we have a little time.”

“Great! So what else is there to do around here?” Laura asked. “Anything new and notable since I was last here a few years ago?”

“I suggest hitting Cheers for a half hour or so,” Layla said. “They’ve expanded. Then we can head to the aerodrome.”

“That’s that bar based on the old tv show, right?”

“It’s a great place to mix with RIDEs, Integrates, even some EIs in meat-suits now.”

“I’m all for a good pub right now,” Janice added.

Sonja smirked. “Especially if someone else is buying, right?”

“Well, since you so kindly offered, I *could* let you buy me a drink...” Janice said.

“I think I’ll let you buy me a drink, too,” Laura said. “You’re the one with the windfall right now, after all.”

“Call it your first girls’ night out,” Layla said. “Because it literally is. Just don’t go heavy on the alcohol. Lighter bodies, less tolerance.”

“For *them*,” Janice said. “I’m just as tolerant as I ever was.”

And just as intolerable, Sonja thought wryly. But somewhat to her own surprise, there wasn’t really any heat behind the thought. Now that she’d been around her for a while, Sonja could see that Janice might be all prickly and stand-offish, but there didn’t seem to be any actual malice behind it. It was just how she was. Maybe life had just hurt her so much that she needed to put up a tough facade. Sonja resolved to try to be a little more tolerant of Janice—though not so much so that Janice would accuse her of getting “mushy.”

“Anyway, last one there is a rotten egg!” Layla converted over to skimmer bike form, Laura straddled her, and off they went.

“I think we may just be rotten eggs,” Janice said. “Meh. Not real big on hurrying anywhere, anyway.”

“Then let’s go be fashionably late.” Sonja took their dishes to the trash, and headed for where she’d parked.

Janice followed her a moment later. “Fashionably late.’ I like that.”

“Just something I read somewhere.”

Janice raised an eyebrow at the sleek skimmer convertible. “Nice. And you rented this?”

“It was surprisingly cheap,” Sonja said, climbing into the driver side. “Skimmer tech seems to be a lot more common here.”

“Gee, wonder why *that* would be.” Janice took shotgun and fastened her safety harness. “That magical battery mineral Earth is so hot on must be some really amazing stuff.”

Sonja glanced at her. “Hm?”

“It was all over the news, haven’t you been keeping up? After we landed, Earth’s ambassadors showed up with this big list of demands about how Zharus should fork over the quality stuff, and in return Zharus kicked the bums right off the planet.”

“I’ve...been a little too busy with personal things to keep up with current events,” Sonja mumbled. *Which is kind of the same thing that implant dealer said, come to think of it. I guess I should make the time, given that I’m part of one of the biggest events to hit the news around here this decade.*

“Apparently it’s part of what makes RIDEs and stuff possible.”

“Right...I did notice my rental scooter had a range in the thousands of clicks, come to think of it.”

“Well, there you go, then. Super-cheap batteries, unlimited clean power, the whole nine yards.”

“Nine meters. Zharus is on metric.”

Janice rolled her eyes. “Shut up and just get us to the damn bar already.”

II. Down on the Farm

Cheers Bar, Uplift
March 25, 158 A.L.

The bar with the big orange “Cheers” logo had an unassuming facade, but on the inside was handsomely furnished in comfortable-looking polished hardwood. It was fairly full, too, with humans, RIDEs, EIDEs, and Integrates of all descriptions. A deer Integrate and a clouded leopard Integrate shared the space behind the bar, while a few lupine RIDEs kept order.

Clashing just a little with the decor were a number of hardlight display panels projected up around the wall, like TVs in a sports bar. But unlike sports, these panels were showing various views of the *Steady Hand* settlement site, replays of the ship’s landing, news commentators, and...was that *them*? Sonja, Laura, Janice, and Layla, sitting around the table at the Milk Bottle a half hour earlier.

Sonja blinked, then stared. “What the hell?”

“Oh hey,” Janice said. “They got my good side.”

Then the leopard behind the bar glanced their way, and then did a classic double-take. “Welcome, Steady Handers!”

“Hey, you two.” A privacy field around a corner booth flickered out, and Laura waved from it, Layla right beside her. “Looks like we’re famous. Get over here and I’ll turn this thing back on before you get mobbed or something.”

“Holy...I didn’t even *think* about that!” Sonja exclaimed. “It’s just been that kind of day.”

“Well, you were from the very first group awakened, *then* you crossed over within just a few hours, so the press has naturally taken a shine to you,” the doe said. “You’re a great human interest story. Now, shoo. Get into the booth. I’ll be in soon to take any orders.”

“You know, I might be more upset about this if I were actually from somewhere that gave a rip about the concept of personal privacy,” Janice mused, as she accompanied Sonja to the table. “But not only is Earth a surveillance state and all, you pretty much have to live your life under glass when you’re on UBI. So I’m actually used to being ogled by strangers.” She considered. “But being *famous* and being ogled? That bears thinking about.”

“Because you could parlay your fame into even *more* freebies, huh?” Sonja said weakly as she took a seat.

“Well, yeah...and, actually, no.” Janice shrugged, as the privacy field flickered back on. “I mean...if I’m *famous*, I can’t do anything that looks bad. I don’t give a rip if I look bad to *you* bums, but people who like me and don’t even know me? You’ll say it’s kind of dumb, maybe, but I kind of feel a...well, a responsibility not to let them down.”

“Ladies and gentlemen—well, ladies who *were* gentlemen—the perennial moocher discovers her conscience,” Layla said. “Don’t applaud, just throw money.”

“Pssh.” Janice rolled her eyes. “So yeah, maybe I’ll have to change my ways a little. Maybe I should check out that ‘Game’ thing I’ve heard about in Nextus. I did a little reading up, and it sounds kind of interesting. I never heard of a *fun* bureaucracy

before, but I'd kind of like to try it."

"Well, I hope that works out for you, Janice," Sonja said with sincerity. "It would probably be a new experience for you to get to do something productive you couldn't be fired from."

"Yeah," Janice mused. "And the whole 'surrogate' thing...I mean, earning money for something I actually *did*? I can't remember the last time that happened." She shrugged. "Maybe I'll hop a flight to Nextus tomorrow and look into it. Given that the flights are free and all, it'd be dumb to pass up the chance. Right now, though...I think I wanna beer or something."

"Then you're in luck," the deer said, stepping through the privacy field. "Beers we got. And since you're from the *Steady Hand*, your first one is on the house. All the ones after will be full price, though. Hello, everyone; I'm Diane, by the way."

"Nice to meet you, Diane. I'll have a black and tan," Sonja said.

"Whatever your most expensive beer is," Janice said.

Sonja rolled her eyes. "Naturally."

"Hey, I got a reputation to maintain," Janice said. "Don't worry, you can buy me something cheaper for my next one."

"So," Diane said, looking at Laura and Sonja. "You both crossed within hours? That's...no, actually, that's not a record of any kind on Zharus. You wouldn't *believe* the number of disbelieving tourists over the years who did it all unknowing within fifteen minutes of setting foot here. Some of them are still regulars at my bar."

"I did a couple of those when I was a rental," Layla said. "I was fettered up so I couldn't talk very freely. But no matter what the rental agency said, they didn't believe it until they had their own boobs. Of course, by then they'd signed the waiver, and it's just an absolute *mess*."

Sonja hugged herself. "I'm still finding it a little hard to believe. I haven't even slept yet since they unfroze me—well, except for the surgical anaesthesia for the biosculpt—and my life has changed completely. Next to that, finding I'm also a nightly news story is almost...not even worth considering."

The doe Integrate...smiled, she guessed. It was more how her ears were set than the corners of her mouth. "I can make an educated guess why, the way you carry yourself. It's different than how most crossriders do—no offense, Laura."

"I'm good," Laura said. "None taken."

"I'm also glad you have a good friend you're doing this with," Diane continued. "Speaking from personal experience, not being alone in the change helps a *lot*."

Sonja blinked. "You mean, you used to be...?"

"A couple decades ago I swapped so I could make better tips doing bartending," Diane said. "I did, but the switch was rough at first. I was in college, so I spent a few months with a therapist while I learned the ropes. The one piece of advice I give new crossriders—don't be afraid to get that professional help. It's not as easy as *some* make it seem."

"That's...one heck of a reason to crossride," Sonja said weakly.

"Seems perfectly reasonable to me," Janice said.

Layla chuckled. "Yeah, I guess it would."

"And then stuff happened, I Integrated with Faline, yadda yadda. Now I own this bar with my partner Serena—the leopard—and here I am. And here *you* are. Rejected by your own world, changed by your new one. You can completely leave your old selves

behind here, if you really want. The men you were yesterday? Irrelevant. You're someone new now, if you *really* want to be. Your choice, *ladies*."

"Then I choose...whatever *your* favorite beer is, for my free drink," Laura said. "Show me something new."

"Mmm. Today I feel like my favorite beer is...a Salvator doppelbock," Diane said. "Right. So that's one black-and-tan, one my-most-expensive—which is a Dogfish Head 120-minute, and usually wouldn't be included in the first-one's-free offer, but I'll stretch a point given your celebrity—and one Salvator. Coming right up!" She stepped back out though the privacy field.

A few minutes later, she returned with a tray and glasses. There were bell-shaped snifter-style goblets for the doppelbock and IPA, and a pint mug for the black and tan. Diane set each glass down carefully. There were also three large glasses of ice water on the tray, and Diane made sure they each got one, too.

Sonja peered at the mug in front of her. It actually had two separate and distinct layers of differently-colored beer in it—a light brown layer on the bottom, and a darker one on top. "Huh. I'd read about those, but hadn't ever expected to see one. The fabled versions could never get it right."

"Not quite one of the 'impossible things' some people say you're going to keep seeing around here, but at least a little improbable." Diane smirked. "Now, kiddies, listen up as Mama Diane lays down the law. *You—*" she pointed at Sonja "*—have lost 2/3 of your body mass. You—*" (Laura) "*—haven't lost quite that much, but you've got a stronger beer. And you, missy, are still just the same as you ever were, plus tags, but you've also got a beer that's about as strong as four regular beers. So, in all probability, you're all going to be completely wasted by the time you finish your single respective drinks.*"

"Since it wouldn't look good for Zharus's newest celebrities to throw up and pass out on my floor, here's some advice. Sip, *don't* gulp, your beers. Then gulp, *don't* sip, your water. Repeat until you run out. Or pass out. *Capice?*"

"I *like* her," Janice said. She saluted. "Yes, ma'am. Understood! Will do my best to take it easy!"

"And feel free to order some fatty food to coat your stomachs. Highly recommend the cheese curds; the milk comes from the same dairy that supplies the Milk Bottle. Also, I've got complimentary sober-up cans or shots at the bar for when you leave, if you want. Otherwise, use your car's auto-drive, or let your 'designated RIDer' handle it." The deer-woman smiled. "Now enjoy your booze. After what you all have been through, you *deserve* the chance to get wasted. Page me if you need anything." And she slipped back out through the field.

"Probably helps that we had ice cream before we came here," Laura said.

"Yeah, but not *that* much." Sonja sipped the beer tentatively. "Hmm. That's good beer. A stout on top, I guess."

"Mine's not bad either," Laura said. "Nice balance of bitter and sweet."

Janice sipped hers. "Oh wow. If this beer were any stronger, I'd have to chew it before I swallowed it." She tried another sip. "That's *good stuff*." Then she took a couple of gulps of water. "So, what you think? Wanna order something?"

Sonja sipped her beer again. She was already feeling a buzz. "I think those cheese curds sound like a good idea."

“I could go for some cheese curds...” Janice looked at Sonja expectantly.

“...if I’m buying, right?” Sonja said. She waved a hand. “Sure, go ahead. Cheese curds for everyone, on me.”

Janice grinned. “Thanks, Son. You’re a pal.” She tapped the intercom ordering button. “Oh, garçon...”

Sonja raised an eyebrow. “*Son,* is it? *That beer must be strong if a couple sips of it is enough to mellow Janice out like that.* She looked down at her own glass. *We are going to get sooooo wasted...*

Laura glanced over at Layla. “Oh...do you want to fuse up? Since you like human food and all.”

“Heh. I honestly don’t like the feeling of my partner being drunk. So I’ll pass on this one,” Layla said. “But enjoy yourself, you deserve it.”

“Okay, fair enough.”

Janice took a couple of big gulps of water. “Whew, this beer. Maaaaybe I shouldn’t have asked for the ‘most expensive,’ but how was I supposed to know she’d actually *give* it to me?”

“It is pretty good beer,” Sonja admitted. “Wish I could drink it like I used to.”

“Eh. You’ll still build up some tolerance. Just enjoy the taste and the buzz,” Laura said.

This time the server who stepped through the privacy field was the clouded leopard who had greeted them when they arrived. She placed a plate of cheese curds and a cup of marinara dip in front of each of them. “Hello, everyone. I’m Serena—you all doing all right? Anything else I can get you?”

“I think we’re good at this point,” Sonja said. “Thanks.”

Serena nodded. “Well, just push the button if you need us. And welcome to Zharus.”

“Thanks,” Janice said. “Think we might just like it here.”

After Serena left, they lapsed into a companionable silence, nibbling cheese curds, sipping beer, and drinking water. Serena came back by with a pitcher full of ice water for refills.

Then came a red alert from Sonja’s bladder. “Uh...’scuse me. Gotta pee.”

Janice opened her mouth, raised a hand, then stopped and just shrugged.

And so Sonja left the booth, hopefully not looking as sloshed as she felt, and lurched towards the restroom. The bar only had large unisex restrooms, so at least there was no entering the wrong one. But when she got inside a stall (with the privacy field on max) and realized she *needed* one of those how-to diagrams mentioned earlier. It took a few tries to call up the right one on her implant. But at least now she wouldn’t make a mess of herself.

Craaaaaazy craaaaaazy... Her corner of GVL hadn’t included things like this. *There are so many...practical things I dun...dunno.*

When she finished, she flushed the toilet and walked (*not* staggered, she insisted to herself) out of the bathroom and back to the table. As she approached, she noticed a female raccoon standing nearby, looking around, biting her lip as if uncertain of herself. Sonja nodded to her, and stepped back through the privacy field to their table as the raccoon woman went over to the bar to speak to Diane and Serena.

As Sonja settled back into her chair and took another sip of beer, the table intercom pinged. “Janice, there’s a visitor here for you,” Diane said. “If you feel like

seeing them.”

“Well, imagine that,” Janice said. “The wanker’s here. Let ‘im in.”

The same raccoon woman stepped through the privacy field. She was dressed in a pair of dirty farmer’s coveralls and smelled like fresh soil. “Oy, Janice. It’s me.”

Janice stared, uncomprehending. “Who?”

The woman smacked herself on the forehead. “Whoops. Left me fur and me boobs on. Just a sec.”

The Integrate’s shape...flowed. Within seconds there was a human man wearing the same coveralls, who did share a certain family resemblance to Janice.

“*You wanker!*” Janice exclaimed. She pushed her beer away, only half-finished. Red-faced and angry, she got out of her chair and moved to punch him, but was a little too wobbly on her feet to make the swing connect.

David kept her from falling...presumably. Janice simply hovered at a 45-degree angle before she was set back on her feet. “So, uh. Yeh. Nice to see you again, sis. Uh, I was in the middle of some meditation when this little bird showed up...”

“Save it,” Janice said. “And get me a can of that sober-up stuff. You’ve got some ‘splaining to do, Dave. Two words? Two fucking words?”

“Well...things got complicated,” David said. “Now you’re here, with some new friends?” He looked at the beer his sister had just pushed away. “You gonna drink that?”

“If you drink it, you’re paying for it,” Diane said, bringing over cans of sober-up. “Just so you know.”

“I can afford it,” David said, shrugging.

“Before you chat any further, go clean yourself off,” Diane said. “I don’t want any more dirt tracked on my floors.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he muttered. “Uh, back in a few.” He hurried off.

“Whatinell is he? Her?” Janice sputtered.

“A stupid Intie trick,” Diane said. “Former crossrider and all that. Sometimes they can do that after they Integrate.”

“This planet...even my own *brother*...*sister*...what the fuck ever...” Janice mumbled, and reached for the can of sober-up.

“That was a thing that happened,” Laura said.

“I fully agree it was a...a thing,” Sonja agreed. “More beer? I think I need more beer.”

“You haven’t halfway finished the one you’ve got yet,” Laura pointed out.

“Good point.” Sonya assayed a gulp or two of beer. *Gonna be a complete wreck tomorrow...maybe a few weeks. But tonight, good beer, good friends.*

A moment later, a much cleaner coverall-wearing human slipped back in, sat down next to Janice, and glanced questioningly at her beer. Janice rolled her eyes, and slid it over to him. “Now talk, you bum. *Explain.*”

“Explain...what, exactly?”

“*Everything.* You know what? You just start explaining, and you go on until I tell you to stop.”

Before he started, he gulped down *half* of the remaining beer. “Oooeeee. That really hits the spot. Now...guess I’ll start just after I sent the family that short message.”

“Start *with* the short message. *Two words, you wanker. Two. Bloody. Words.*”

“Well, what’s a guy to do after he Fuses a fem RIDE on a dare?” he gulped the rest of the beer. “I honestly didn’t believe what the rental guy told me. Lucky for us, Mollie

and I got on so well. *Really* well. I mean, yeh. We aren't separate people anymore, either."

"Well, *that* figures. And you weren't there to welcome me when I woke up because...?"

"I was off the grid. Meditation, you know? I like to shut myself off sometimes. Stops the noise."

Janice rolled her eyes. "This bloody planet, I have no idea whether you mean that figuratively or literally."

"I was on me farm just over in Terrania, so I got here right quick when I got your birdie," David said. "And...well...yeah. I can do this." His body flowed into a female version of himself. "Sisters, eh?"

"You're about two bloody hours too late to surprise me with that, you know. Fecking wanker."

"So, yeah. I'm a wanker," she said, shrugging. "Just call me Danica like this. Anyway...this bloody *Steady Hand* business is just incredible. You ain't a furry, Janice. Why'd they even send you here?"

"I *thought* it was because of *you*. They're sending whole bleeding *families* of furries over. *You* know how their bureaucratic minds work. Root, branch, et bloody cetera." She sighed. "But turns out, *you* were just a footnote. Real reason is, I'm a bum."

"A *professional* bum," Danica corrected. "You were always *really* good at it. Me, I had a goal to get off that goddamned rock and get here, so I worked my tail off..." she looked behind herself and laughed. There was a fluffy raccoon's tail. "Well, I got a new one, anyway. Always said you could be anything you wanted if you'd just put your mind to it, Janice."

"That's just what I *bloody* did," Janice said. "I was on UBI, thank you very much. And so they *threw* me off their goddamned rock."

"Well, now you can live off of BA for the rest of your life," Danica said. "Good for you. I've got a farm. I grow things and sell them for a lot of money."

"Well, ain't *you* just the salt of the earth." Janice considered. "Do they still call it 'earth' here? Salt of the Zharus?"

"Sarium salts of Zharus," Danica said. "Now that I'm an Integrate."

Janice rolled her eyes. "Bleedin' comedian, you are."

"Now, introduce me to your tipsy new friends. I guess you met 'em after they unfroze you."

"Yeah. And they were a couple *guys* this morning," Janice scoffed. "That's Sonja, and that's Laura."

"Then they got the old Zharus Welcome! All new naughty bits to enjoy. Happy to meet you both." Danica raised her now-empty glass. "Oh, one second. Gotta have a proper toast." She tapped the intercom button. "Could I have one of my usuals, please? Oh, and put their beers on my tab too."

"*Their* beers are free," Diane said.

"Then give 'em their *next* beers free instead. These are on me."

"Well, I won't ever say no to money. You got it. One sarium porter, coming up."

"Thanks, sweetie. You're a dear."

"Oh, really? You thought I hadn't noticed?"

Diane brought in a mug of something dark and rich that also seemed to sparkle just a little in the depths more than mere carbonation could account for. "Thank you,

luv. Bill me tab at the end of the month as usual, yes?”

Diane flicked an ear. “I know you’re good for it. That’s why I put up with you.” She retreated, and Danica turned back to the table.

“Now, where was I...oh yes. A toast.” She raised the mug. “To new friends, and new naughty bits. To the Zharus you now call home. Cheers!”

“Cheers!” everyone repeated, clinking their glasses together.

Danica drained half of her beer off in one gulp. “Ahhh, *that’s* got a nice kick to it. For one of my lot, anyway. The sarium salts, y’see. Integrate metabolism.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Janice said.

“Now, do you have a place to stay tonight? Terrania isn’t that far away and I have room on the farm,” Danica said.

“Just a hotel room, but I’m easy,” Sonja said. “Don’t even have any of my own stuff there. I can cancel it from here. Shouldn’t pass up any learning oppor—opport—any chances to learn new stuff.” Sonja peered at her beer, feeling her eyes go a little crossed. “I think I’m gonna need a can of that sober-up stuff.” Janice slid one across to her.

“I’d like to see what an Integrate farm looks like,” Laura said. “Professional interest. I’m a Soil Restoration Technician.”

“Sounds pretty interesting,” Layla added.

Janice crossed her arms. “All right, ye bloody great wanker, I guess I’m outvoted. I’ll tag along and see what yer doing with yer time.”

“Brilliant! Then finish up your beers, luv. I’ll go rent a flier to take us all there while you’re about it.” She guzzled the rest of her beer, then got up, expanding back outward into her furry raccoon form as she went.

“Your brother is very...impressive,” Laura said.

Sonja chugged the last of her beer, then followed up with a gulp of sober-up so it wouldn’t leave her on the floor. “That’s a word I’d use.”

“Well, man, woman, or furry, he’s still a wanker,” Janice scoffed. She finished her sober-up. “Mmm. Grapefruity.”

Sonja sipped from her can. “Seems like a waste to get drunk and then immediately wash it away.”

Janice shrugged. “Well, we didn’t pay for the booze, so you could say we got what we paid for. There’ll be lots more times you can come get drunk.”

Laura finished her beer and reached for a sober-up can. “It’s been a fun experience, but now I’m looking forward to yet another new experience—seeing how an Integrate farms. And the day isn’t even over yet.”

Sonja nodded. “This has certainly been an education, I’ll give it that.”

The raccoon woman poked her head back through the privacy field. “All done? Great! Come along, then—I’ve got the flier on standby at the aerodrome. If you’ve got a car, I can give you directions there.”

“Sure, the car’s mine.” Sonja scooped up the last handful of cheese curds from her plate, then got up and left the booth. The others followed them out of the bar.

The flier turned out to be a Cessna Caravan—or at least one of the myriad twentieth-century replicas that seemed to be all over this planet. A closer look revealed the propeller was actually a hardlight or holographic replica; the actual motive power for the plane came from cleverly concealed lifters.

Danica took the pilot's seat, activating the controls with practiced skill. Janice stared at her. "Oi, what's this, then? You're a pilot now?"

"Mollie was, thanks to a skill chip. So now I am too," Danica explained. "Really, it's pretty easy. You probably wouldn't even need a chip to learn it. Not that there's really a whole lot of piloting to do, thanks to the auto-drive." She flipped a final few switches. "Now, if I really cared about staying true to the whole twencen nonsense, I'd taxi us down the runway, just as it was done in the old days. But..." She pressed a button and shoved the throttle forward, and the plane launched *straight up*. "...I don't, really."

"Eek!" Sonja said, as her stomach lurched. "Warn a girl, will you?"

"Sorry, sorry. Sis will tell you, I'm a terrible showoff."

"He is," Janice muttered. "Bloody great wanker..."

Once they reached altitude, Danica adjusted the controls again and they started moving forward. "Terrania's just a few dozen clicks away. Practically right next door, really. It's where a lot of folks stayed who didn't want to be too far from Uplift, back in the bad old days."

"Bad old days?" Laura asked.

"Back before Domefall, and the end of Fritz's reign," Danica said. "It's an Integrate thing. Check the news wikis on those new implants of yours. Suffice it to say, we used to have to be a lot more...well, *circumspect* in how we interacted with you mundanes."

"It was the *last* big news story to break on Zharus," Layla said. "Before your arrival."

"Brought about a lot of changes in our society. Societies." Danica waved a hand. "We didn't have to hide anymore. We could come out into the open, and finally deal with humans as equals. It's pretty much why I was finally able to get a farm, and raise food to sell to humans."

"Yeah, about that..." Janice said. "Even accepting that you *are* my dear brother, I'm having a hard time seeing you as the farming sort. You didn't exactly have a green thumb when we were growing up. I remember the time you tried to grow cress in a napkin, as a school biology project. Didn't come out well."

"Well, before things improved, we Integrates had to find something to do with our time. Many of us developed a kind of super-okaku OCD with certain kinds of media franchises. Usually something from Steader E. I ended up obsessed with simulation games. Trucking, auto mechanic, farming, goat—"

"Goat?" Sonja said. "Simulated raising goats?"

"*Being* a goat. Some kind of joke sim. It's complicated and silly. There was one for being a goose, too, but I just couldn't get into that one. Anyway, I ended up stuck on farming. Ran the whole sim on my internal systems. So you could often find me in a corner of the Enclave curled up and drooling while I grew soybeans in my head. Then one day they woke me up and said Fritz was gone."

"Honestly, I had no idea what else to do with myself. But I'd spent virtual decades farming, so naturally I decided to bring it into the Real. I think I'm quite good at it, really. The sims were quite detailed—kind of like instructional material. They gave me the knowledge; all I had to do was put it into practice."

"That's...rather amazing," Laura said. "When we get there I really want to get my hands dirty in your fields."

"Is that what they're calling it these days?" Janice wondered.

Danica ignored her. “Sure. It’s not a huge farm. I have a half dozen employees, since we try and use some ‘authentic’ methods. Mostly in the planting and harvesting machinery.”

“Do you rotate your crops? How do you keep the soil fertile?”

Danica smiled. “Patience, my new friend. There’s plenty of time. Right now I think I should ask when the last time you slept was. You’re not going to be on our thirty hour day yet.”

“Well, *technically* the last time we *slept* slept was...I guess must be a couple of years ago by now,” Sonja said. “We just woke up on Zharus...uh...wow...twenty hours ago. Of course I spent four hours getting new naughty bits installed in a med tank. Maybe that’s why I’m not that tired.”

“I had the new naughty bits installed, too, but didn’t go to sleep for it,” Laura said. She ran her fingers through her blonde hair. “I suppose I’m kind of running on adrenaline. It’s just been that kind of day.”

“Well, here we are. Of course you can’t see anything in the dark, so the tour can wait until the sun is up,” Danica said, pushing the yoke forward. “There’s plenty of room to sleep in the bunkhouse, as well as RIDE chargers for your partner. If you need toothbrushes or necessities, there’s a fabber, too. I’ll get you set up there, and we’ll show you everything tomorrow.”

Sonja yawned. “Sounds good to me.”

“Hey, cut it out with the yawning, you’ll have me doing—” Janice interrupted herself by yawning, and Laura quickly followed.

Danica chuckled. “Yes, I think it’s *definitely* bedtime for you lot. Will have you on the ground in just a tic.”

They really couldn’t see much of the area as they landed. There were a number of lights around, a village or two nearby on forested hillsides, and what looked like, of all things, the castle from the Walt Disney logo (or at least one very similar) in the distance all lit up by spotlights. Then they were down past the treeline, settling onto a round landing pad near a cluster of buildings. One was warehouse-sized and from the open doors contained farm equipment. The second was a white wood-clad farmhouse, and the last was likely the bunkhouse.

“Send your size to the fabber and it’ll make you some night clothes. And if you want to get your hands dirty tomorrow, some field coveralls, boots, and gloves,” Danica said. “Sleep well. I need to check the south forty. Wheat’s almost ripe.”

Janice stared around. “This is...quite some little operation you’ve got going here. When you said you had a farm, I expected...well, I don’t know what I expected, but something smaller than *this*.”

“It’s about eighty acres of grain crops, plus some greenhouses where I grow some special things. Tiny by Laurasian standards. Just enough for a few people to make a living.” Danica shrugged. “It’s Enclave land nobody was doing anything with. Plus we need legit income anyway. I’ll show you more tomorrow.”

“Right. We’ll see you then.” Sonja led the way into the bunkhouse, which was... not exactly what she’d expected. The word “bunkhouse” conjured up images of sleeping quarters with bunk beds in rows and relatively little privacy. But what they had here were “bunks” in about the same way that their flier was an “airplane.” They were more like capsule hotels—sealable beds with canopies, independent air conditioning, and what looked like media players and such built in.

Sonja's implant pinged, superimposing a carat mark over one particular capsule, and when she looked in she noticed a set of pajamas laid out, still warm from the fabber, as well as a toothbrush and toothpaste. The others were making similar discoveries. There was a bathroom nearby, with curtained-off areas to change. It didn't take long for them to brush their teeth. Sonja found that changing into her pajamas, however, was another adventure.

Finally, she carried her clothes back out into the bunkroom, and found a drawer open under the capsule to receive them. She climbed in and tapped the button to close the privacy canopy. The air conditioning started automatically. *Now, the next challenge...I wonder if there's a 'sleeping with your new breasts' guide...yeesh.* There was, of course. Laura was probably having a similar moment in her pod.

But for all of that, as full as the day had been, it was actually surprisingly easy to drift off to sleep. Sonja was never quite sure when it happened, but she soon slipped into a deep slumber.

When Sonja woke, she had a sense in the back of her mind that she'd had unsettling dreams, but nothing that had stayed with her past waking. She experienced a moment of confusion at seeing the glass privacy shield over her, briefly wondering if she was back in a cryo-capsule again. Then her memories came back, and she remembered everything that had happened the day before. She looked down at herself, seeing the way her pajamas rose in twin hills she'd never had before—and yet, even with them in the way, she could still see her toes. She couldn't remember the last time she'd seen her toes without having to bend over.

It wouldn't have been an exaggeration to say she felt like a whole new person. But it seemed fitting. *A whole new person, for a whole new planet. Guess I should get up and see what it looks like in the daylight.*

Laura looked a bit of a wreck—with bags under her eyes, hair in extreme bedhead, and a distinctly grumpy expression. "I'm glad one of us slept well."

"Wow. What happened to you, Laura?"

"Well...I sleep on my stomach. I've got sore boobs like you wouldn't believe." She rubbed one carefully. "Kept waking up after rolling over."

Sonja nodded. "You're probably going to have to form new habits."

"I'm going to suggest she Fuse-sleep tonight," Layla added. "Or maybe a Fuse-nap later."

"Sounds good, Layla," Laura said. She yawned. "Maybe I'll just do that from now on."

"It's always bloody capsules on this world," Janice muttered, climbing out of her own. "Cryo capsules, medical capsules...bloody sleeping capsules."

"But you slept well?" Sonja asked.

"Oh, sure. I slept like a hollow log." Janice stretched. "But in a capsule." She yawned and stretched. "Well, guess we might as well get our clothes on and go hunt up that brother-sister of mine." She opened the drawer under her capsule. "Oh, huh. They cleaned and pressed them while we slept."

"Or recycled and re-fabbed them," Laura said. "Which amounts to about the same thing, on this world."

Sonja opened her drawer. "You're right. Well, let's get dressed, then, and go see what's for breakfast. Maybe they have a cafeteria or something."

As it turned out, they did. The next building over had a dining area, where a few Integrates and humans had already gathered at one of the tables. There were fabbers, but there was also an attached kitchenette, where Danica was busy with pots and pans. “Hey, ducks. Was wondering when you’d get up.” She nodded toward the empty table next to the kitchenette. “Take a load off, I’ll have food ready in just a tic.”

“Food sounds good,” Janice said. “My second real breakfast in as many days. Back on Earth, it’d be a nutri-bar and weak tea.”

“That’s UBI for you. How long’s it since you’ve had a full breakfast?”

Janice sniffed. “A *full* breakfast? You mean...?”

“Bacon, eggs, bangers, scones, fried tomatoes and mushrooms...even have some bubble and squeak cooking.” Danica grinned. “All of it made with human-safe ingredients, of course. We don’t usually dine this fancy, but...I thought you might like a little taste of home.”

Janice sniffed appreciatively. “I haven’t had *that* kind of breakfast since...well, since me school days, I guess, when we were living home with Ma and Da.” She cocked her head. “You’re not trying to butter me up for something, are you?”

“Oh, no, perish the thought! But it’s been so long since I’ve seen you...just thought I should do something nice.”

“Hmph.” Janice shook her head. “Well, you’re still a wanker...but I guess you’re not such a bad ‘un.”

Danica smirked. “Praising me with faint damns? Well, that’s you all over. So, thanks.” Janice stuck her tongue out at her.

“So let’s dig in already,” Laura said. “This looks as good as last night’s BBQ.”

“Here you go! Bon appetit!” Danica set plates down before them all, before taking a dish of her own and joining them. Conversation came to a halt for a couple of minutes as they all occupied themselves in the business of stuffing their faces.

“This is delicious,” Sonja said. “Can’t say I’ve ever eaten much English cuisine before, but it’s good.”

“So, what do you think will happen our *second* day on Zharus?” Laura asked.

“We’ll get fed!” Janice said around a mouthful of food. “Maybe even more than once!”

Danica chuckled. “I see your sense of priorities is still intact.”

Janice swallowed. “I’m a woman of simple tastes, okay? And...this really *is* good, bro. Guess you were paying attention when Ma did the cooking.”

“Thanks. I do miss the comforts of home sometimes, so I do me best to reproduce them. It’s nice to have it properly appreciated.”

As they cleaned their plates, Danica looked up and waved to the other table. “Oi, you lot, get on over here and meet my sister!”

There were four of them, two Integrates, one human, and a young woman with skin the shade of milk chocolate and the glowing eyes Sonja had come to associate with EIs.

Danica pointed to everyone in-turn as she introduced them. “These are my employees. Frisco—”

“Howdy,” the large horse Integrate said.

“—Amira—”

“Happy to meet you,” the female brown rat said.

“—Jake—”

The brown-haired human man nodded.

“—and Moonray. She’s an EI.”

“Happy to meet you,” the EI said. Except for the eyes, she looked like flesh and blood—Sonja decided it was probably hardlight.

“Everyone, this is my sister Janice and her friends Layla, Sonja, and Laura.”

Sonja waved. “Hi.”

“You’ve got *employees*, even?” Janice said. “Wow. Uh...nice to meet you all. How’d you end up working for this wanker?”

Frisco snorted. “Wanker, eh? Well, Amira an’ me were already her friends here at the Enclave. So when she decided to start the farm, we decided to join her.”

“We often joined her sims so she’d have company,” Amira said. “So you could say things stayed exactly the same, only we couldn’t speed up the time scale anymore.”

“What about you, Jake?” Janice said.

“Me? Nothing special. Just responded to an ad,” Jake said. “Though I admit I did want to live in an Enclave.”

“Jake here is still looking for his ideal RIDE partner,” Janice said.

“Yeah. And I’m having a bit of trouble on that score. No idea why,” Jake said.

“You take the personality assessment?” Sonja asked. “It seemed pretty complete to me.”

“I don’t hold with tests like that. So I do it the old-fashioned way. No crossriding for me, either. Just not a thing I’m willing to do. Uh, no offense.”

Sonja shrugged. “Takes all kinds, I guess. Good luck with it, anyway. There’s a new RIDE waiting for me when I get back home.”

Jake nodded. “Hope things work out for you two.”

“I wouldn’t mind some of those scones,” Moonray said.

“I made enough so there’d be leftovers of everything. Dig in if you’re still hungry,” Danica said.

“I’ll hafta pass. I’d better get working on cultivating the Back Forty,” Frisco said.

“Nice meetin’ all y’all.”

Janice blinked at Moonray. “Wait...you eat? Aren’t you a, uh, robot or something?”

“I’m wearing what we EIs call a ‘meat suit’. Basically a full-body replacement frame for humans. It’s as close as we can get to being flesh and blood—at least without fiddling around with clone bods and core-to-brain downloads, which we EIs aren’t really compatible with yet anyway. And I happen to *like* it.”

“Oh, brave new world, that has such people in it,” Laura said. “And you ended up a farmer?”

“I work in the greenhouse, mostly. But yes. I guess that came out of the way we EIs are ‘born’. It’s more...plant-like, I think. A codeseed cultivated on the Grid. I won’t go into the boring details. I’m sure Informio will give you a full course on the process if you ask.”

“That I will,” Informio said from a projector on the wall. “Hello, everyone. Now, back to work...” the projector shut down again.

“That could get creepy *really* fast if he’s always listening like that,” Janice said. “I thought I left that shite behind on Earth.”

“He’s not, exactly,” Layla said. “There are ‘dumb’ systems that just listen for his name, and ping him with several seconds of context if they decide a mention of him is

something he actually needs to address. If you don't want him to hear you, just don't ever say his name."

"Huh. Okay." Janice shrugged.

"Anyway, it was nice to meet you," Moonray said. "But we should finish eating and get to work now. This farm will not run itself."

"And I've got some things to show them before I join you all," Danica said. "I'll be with you lot soon."

Sonja and the others followed Danica out of the dining hall. "So, where are we going first?" Laura asked.

"As it happens, since you're so interested in the soil, I've got one field we just finished harvesting out and plowing under, so you can see it in its natural state. It's just over this way." Danica led the way past the buildings to a field just beyond them, all raw furrowed dirt from end to end.

Laura bent down and scooped up a double handful of dark soil, rubbed it between her fingers, then smelled it, taking deep breaths. "Oooh, now that's the stuff. Smells just about right for cultivation."

"We've got a dirt connoisseur here," Janice snarked.

"I'm passionate about my work," Laura said. "It's taken centuries to restore all types of soils. Smells like you're not completely using 'antique' farming methods."

"Hell, no! Too destructive. Got modern agri-nano in the fields and the greenhouse, to break down the plowed-under plants a little faster than nature, and also nitrogenate the soil. Never need to fertilize. Even the replica equipment's on lifters so we don't compress the soil."

I really need a career change to go with everything else being changed, Sonja thought. The layers in a landfill could be very interesting in their own right, but after a while Sonja knew exactly what she'd find for a given decade. She didn't even have the benefit of doing landfills on other continents, just Old United States. And there were so many unpleasant, and sometimes horrifying, things buried there. Dead pets thrown in the garbage, even dead *people*.

For every lost piece of jewelry, there was *far more* literal shit.

"You've got a thinky look," Janice said.

"I have a lot to 'thinky' about," Sonja said. "I'm a mixed-up mess right now. Turns out I've had a woman's brain for my entire life, now I have a body to match. What do?"

Janice smiled. "Sounds to me like you have some catching up to do. If it were me, I'd just chuck everything I used to be into the rubbish bin and go native."

"Well, I don't know if I can do that," Sonja said. Though it did have some appeal, it didn't seem particularly psychologically healthy.

"There must be stuff for you to do with yourself here," Layla pointed out. "This planet *fetishizes* the era you spent your life digging through the garbage from. There's got to be a way to take advantage of that."

"Well, maybe. I did take some archeology courses some years back, because garbage dumps are perfect for finding out how people lived. Some dumps I could tell you exactly when the plastics became consumer goods." Sonja shrugged.

"There are companies here that will pay through the nose for that kind of experience. But hey, no rush. You only just got here. You got time to smell the roses."

Danica snapped her fingers. "Speaking of roses, we should visit the greenhouses."

I'll bet you'll like those."

"You got roses?" Janice said.

"Well, just a few," Danica said. "They're mostly for herbs and veg, but the odd flower's nice to brighten up the place. Come along, I'll show you." she led the way back toward the buildings, skirting the edge to a row of oblong glass buildings on the other side. "Now don't be throwing any stones..."

She opened the door to the first building and gestured everyone inside, stepping in and closing the door behind them. Inside, the greenhouse was quite spacious, as well as several degrees warmer than the outside. There were tables along the edges and up the middle, where vegetables and herbs of different kinds were growing in neatly ordered rows.

Janice whistled. "Well, isn't this a swell set-up."

Larry felt a pinch of the soil in one of the plant beds. "Well, that's some nice, rich dirt. Nanites again?"

Danica nodded. "They help a lot. Though you might also be interested in a couple of the other greenhouses which are set up for hydroponics. I have some herbs I breed special for restaurants in Uplift."

Sonja finally put her finger on something that had been nagging at her for a while. "How is it worthwhile to grow all this stuff when food can be fabbed from the molecules up so cheaply that they can afford to give it away free for Basic? How can you stay in business?"

"There's a market for 'naturally' produced foods—air, sunlight, nutrients. Some people say they're no different from fabbed, but there are a lot of people out there willing to pay a little more for stuff that was verifiably grown or raised the old-fashioned way. Plus, there's a market for *new* things that are protected by patent and copyright. Earth still has some nutso laws there compared to Zharus. Development costs are pretty low because the public domain is so big, so I have enough time to make bank on my creative work. My Uplift Mint will be out of patent in seven years, then into the pubdom for someone else to improve on. Economics, right?"

"Well, I guess you would know," Sonja admitted. "I'm still trying to work out how all this fits together."

"Would any of those herbs you're raising be of the, ahem, *pharmaceutical* variety?" Janice teased.

"You mean like cannabis?" Danica shook her head. "Nope. A lot of the softer recreational drugs like that *are* legal most places on Zharus—especially down Califia way—but there really isn't that much money in them since they're legal. And we're doing well enough from growing legal herbs and veg that it's not worth breaking the law to try to get a little more. Besides, we don't need to tempt any weaker wills around here to bust up the place looking for a cheap high."

Danica led the way through the greenhouse, then out and into the next one, and the next. She pointed out the various plants with pride, invited them to pick a strawberry or two from the growing trays, and plucked a sprig of mint to crush and offer around for the scent. She clearly took a lot of pride in her accomplishments.

"Okay, raccoon lady, what have you done with my brother?" Janice fumed. "Seriously. David never was so enthusiastic about *anything*."

"You should know better than anyone how Earth has no shits to give anymore," Danica said. "So I didn't either, until I lived here a few years. Even after Integration I

was the same little pisser you knew.” She shrugged. “After that...well, I found my niche. Maybe you will, too.”

“Suuure,” Janice sniffed. “And pigs might fly.”

“Around here, they often do,” Layla pointed out. “Lifters, you know.” Janice just rolled her eyes.

The last couple of warehouses were the hydroponic gardens, full of pipes and tubing and liquid gurgling merrily as it flowed here and there. “Took us a while to get this set up, and it’s a spot of bother sometimes, but in the whole, worth it. Some crops just prefer the hydro over soil.” She plucked a radish from a nearby tray. “Here, try this.”

Laura accepted it. “Mmm, crunchy. You don’t happen to do subscription produce boxes, do you?”

“At present, the restaurants buy everything we can grow. But that might be something to think about if we ever expand.”

As they left the last warehouse, Danica nodded toward a battered farm pickup skimmer truck. “Now, if you all want to climb aboard yon lorry, I’ll run you a quick tour around the acreage before I take you back home in the plane.”

“We’re supposed to trust *your* driving?” Janice asked. “I remember that time back on Earth with Da’s car...”

Danica chuckled. “I *have* gotten better since then. But no, all Zharus vehicles have auto-drive and I’ll use it for the tour. After all, I’ll need all my attention for pointing out the sights.”

They all climbed into the pickup bed, and the truck (or “lorry”) lifted into the air and headed up a dirt track leading between two plowed fields. They were full of full-grown, bushy wheat, gently waving in the breeze. “See, these are those ‘amber waves of grain’ you always hear about,” Danica said. “Sometimes, I like to wave back.” She waved.

Janice rolled her eyes again. “Yeah, you bloody well *are* my brother. Nobody *else* would think that was funny.”

“Is it a lot of work to keep it up?” Sonja asked. “It seems like a lot for just four people.”

“We don’t do it all the old-fashioned way,” Danica said. “There’s a lot of automation. All our combines and harvesters are self-driving, for example. In some ways, it’s still more like simming than doing it ‘for real.’ Of course I can hop right in and do it myself if I want.”

“Do you do all wheat? What other crops do you grow? Do you rotate crops, and if so how often?” Laura asked.

“I grow what’s most marketable. Rotation isn’t really necessary with the agri-nano.” Danica shrugged. “Right now, it’s looking like emmer wheat is going to get even more attractive thanks to the big population bump we just got from a bunch of Earth trailer trash showing up here uninvited...” She grinned at Janice. “It’s the basis of almost all baked goods in the Western tradition, after all, and bread is a staple food. The naturally-made stuff will still be a staple food to people who can afford the real kind—not to mention all the fancy pastries that *also* use wheat. We might just have to see if the Enclave will let us expand to another few dozen acres. If we hired a couple more people, we could probably swing it...” She stared off into space for a moment, then shook her head. “I can run the numbers later. Anyway, this is what we do right now.”

Well, that’s a job offer if I’ve ever heard one. “I imagine it’s a lot of hard work?”

Danica chuckled. “Weren’t you listening just now? It’s not, really. I mean, we don’t tend to do too much of the physical labor, and when we do, those of us who are Integrates can use our hardlight and lifters to help shift heavy things. A lot of it is just sitting at a desk or the virtual equivalent, monitoring and directing equipment through telepresence rigs.”

“Hmm,” Sonja said. “Back on Earth, I spent most of my time monitoring and directing equipment through telepresence rigs. Taking ancient landfills apart and such. I wonder if the experience would translate over to what you do?”

Danica considered. “You know, at least some of it might. And I must say, you do have impeccable references—getting thrown off Earth shows you’re just the kind of person Zharus needs. And also, you’ve hung around my sister for several hours without going stark raving nuts, which speaks volumes for your mental stability.”

“Hey!” Janice protested.

Sonja nodded. “I’m still not too sure what I want to do yet, but if you should decide you want to hire someone else on, maybe check with me and see.”

Danica nodded. “Thanks. I’ll keep that in mind.”

The rest of the tour was pretty uneventful on the whole. Danica navigated them along the winding road between and around the various cultivated fields that made up his farm. Most of them were in wheat, but there was a little soy and another grain that Danica said was sorghum. Occasionally they caught glimpses of the castle on the hill, which Danica said was the center of the original Enclave, and still their seat of government.

The sun was a little higher in the sky by the time they returned to the cluster of buildings and the flier landing pad. “And that’s my humble little garden plot,” Danica said. “Maybe it’s not exactly glamorous, but it’s a living, eh sis?”

Janice snorted. “Meh. It’s...something, anyway.”

Danica chuckled. “It’s actually reassuring to know, given how much else has changed in my life, that you’re still exactly the same. Plus or minus the cougar tags.”

Janice rolled her eyes. “All right, all right. I *am* bloody impressed, okay? And a little intimidated. If this planet could turn these two guys into women, and turn *you* into a raccoon-woman, and a *successful* one at that, I shudder to think what it’s going to do when it gets its hooks into me.”

“I think it’ll be good for you,” Danica said. “It certainly was for me. You should definitely check out Nextus. Get involved in the Game. I think it would suit you.”

“That’s what people keep telling me.” Janice shrugged. “I dunno. I guess I could stop by there one of these days.”

“That’s the spirit.” Danica nodded. “Anyway, climb aboard and I’ll take you all back to the *Steady Hand*. Or somewhere else if you’d rather.”

“*Steady Hand* works for me,” Sonja said. “There’s a new friend I need to go wake up.”

“Yeah, and I’ve got a job to do,” Laura said.

“We’ve got a job to do, now,” Layla said. “Looks interesting. I’ll be happy to help.”

“And I’ve got...to go take a nap or something, I guess,” Janice said. For the first time Sonja could think of, Janice actually sounded *uncertain* about her loafing around. Sonja had a sneaking suspicion that net search inquiries pertaining to the Game would start emanating from her flat shortly after they touched down.

“Well, then, let’s be off.” Danica nodded to the open doors on the plane, and they

all climbed aboard.

It was a quiet flight back to the new settlement. Everyone seemed lost in their own thoughts about what they had seen and done over the last day. In fact, the first thing anyone had to say was when the settlement hove into view, and Sonja stared. “Hey, is it just me, or is that place a lot bigger than when we left?”

It seemed like the size of the settlement had nearly doubled, with neat rows of houses filling a significantly larger portion of the clearing around the landing site. The constructors were clearly still hard at work, pooping out one new house every fifteen minutes, and there seemed to be even more of them going than there were before—building bigger houses in some areas.

“This could be the fastest a polity has ever been built from scratch, even Alpha Camp,” Danica mused. “They sure are going at it, aren’t they?”

“I hope we can remember where our houses even *are*,” Janice muttered.

“I’m sure Informio can tell us,” Laura said. “If we ask him.”

“I have the ZPS coords of my hut in my implant,” Sonja said. “I can lead us there.”

Danica landed the plane neatly at the aerodrome, which was starting to look a lot less makeshift than it had the day before. “Well, this is it, then,” she said, climbing out with the others. “Everyone, it was nice to meet you, and I hope you’ll be able to make places for yourself here. Sis...I know we’ve had our differences, but I’m *really* glad you’re here now. You ever need any help, you’ve got my comm code.”

“Uh...yeah,” Janice said. “Uh...it’s weird seeing what you’ve turned into, but I guess you’re still you, somewhere in there...so maybe this world doesn’t change people all *that* much.”

Danica chuckled. “Coming from you, that means a lot. Take care, sis. Don’t be a stranger.”

“And *you* don’t be any stranger than you already are right now,” Janice replied. “You wanker.”

Danica laughed, and climbed back into the plane. Sonja and the others moved back so she could take off again.

Sonja watched the plane rise back into the sky. “Well,” she said. “That was... certainly a learning experience.”

“I think I like your brother,” Laura said. “She’s a nice girl. And seems to have picked up some business smarts from somewhere.”

“Yeah,” Janice said. “Might even forgive her for that two-word message. Someday.” She shook her head. “Well, anyway, let’s get on home.” She nodded to Sonja. “If you bums will lead the way...”

Sonja grinned. “All right, follow me.” She led the way toward the rows of houses. She was glad she had access to the ZPS. The landmarks had already changed considerably just in the last day.

Their houses were only a few minutes’ walk. As they approached their homes, Sonja noticed a few crates waiting just outside her door. The largest of them was floating on built-in lifters. She peered at them thoughtfully.

“Did some shopping?” Laura asked.

“Yes...but...that was *before* my little diagnosis.” She opened the smaller crate of clothing. “There was enough of the old me to make *three* of the new me,” Sonja said,

holding up one of the shirts she had purchased. It was a nice wine red polo. “I could use this as a tent.”

“It’s nano-motile fabric, isn’t it?” Laura said. “You could just have your fabber turn it into three smaller shirts. Or a dress or something.” She grinned. “Or a tent.”

“I’ll see what I can do with it. As for this big crate...”

The big crate was from RIDEalong, with her personality match in a neat compact form about the size of the fridge/fabber in her hut. There was a big green button on the front, blinking an invitation.

“Huh,” Layla said. “So that’s how they boot them these days. Hope you two get along.”

“Yeah, me too,” Sonja said. “I guess I’ll go...read the manual or something. And psyche myself up to turning her on.”

“Call us when you’re ready,” Layla said. “I want to go Nature Range hunting with my new little sister.”

“Oh, I will, Layla, Laura. Even Janice, if you want. Don’t worry. See you all for lunch.”

Sonja pushed the crate into the middle of her living room, and picked up the media tablet attached to the top that contained the user manual and quickstart guide. She took a seat on her sofa and began to read.

III. A Cougar Comes to Town

E.C.S. Steady Hand Landing Site
March 26, 159 A.L.

Sonja sat on the sofa, paging through the tablet that had been provided containing the manual for her new RIDE friend that she hadn't met yet. There was a lot of information in here, some of it more than a little intimidating.

It wasn't the technical stuff that was so hard to deal with—Sonja thought she might be able to understand it with a little more study, and there were links to a lot of RIDE maintenance books that looked potentially useful. It was more the *sociological* stuff.

The document went to great pains to make clear that the crate in her living room contained a *person*, who hadn't yet experienced more than a few minutes of life. This crated person's first true life experience would come from Fusing with *her*—and she didn't have any choice in the matter. None of the RIDEs this company made did—because the people who ran the company felt that this was an experience all RIDEs should have at the beginning of their lives.

RIDEalong did their best to make sure that their RIDEs' first partners were as close a match in personality and temperament as possible, but there was only so much they could do. They acknowledged it was a bit of a crapshoot, but they did offer counselling services to try to make sure that human and RIDE could work out any minor differences they might have. "Oh yeah, that makes it *all* better," Sonja muttered.

More than once, on reading these things, she was tempted to return the RIDE to the adoption tent and just not take part in a system that would do something like that to actual *people*. But would that really be what was best for the RIDE? She hadn't chosen this situation—but she'd *have* a choice after she woke up. And Sonja could do her best to make sure it was an informed choice, and honor it, whatever it was.

And with that resolution made...well, what was there to wait for? If she let the weirdness of the whole thing put her off now, when would she ever not? "Informio, could you ask Laura, Layla, and Janice to come over here? Tell them I'm going to wake up the new girl."

"We're on the way!" Layla messaged back almost instantly. A short time later, there was a knock at the door, and Sonja opened it to invite all three of them inside.

"So...uh...yeah," Sonja said. "I've been reading up on this RIDEalong thing, and... Layla, you're a RIDE. How do they get to *do* stuff like this? I mean...*forcing* a first Fuse, rather than just waking the RIDEs up and giving them the choice?"

"It's...complicated," Layla said. "The people running it—RIDE people—are 'Mechanists' who think we RIDEs try to be too much like organics, when we're not. It was just a conceit Mama Patil used to bootstrap AI when her first approach didn't work out. So we should embrace our AI nature and it's more 'honest', let's say, to be 'born' this way."

"But...there are people out there who believe all kinds of crazy things. That doesn't mean they should be permitted," Sonja said. "I mean, they're making decisions for fully sentient people who should be able to choose for themselves."

“When you get right down to it, there’s more than a little bit of libertarian thinking out here on this frontier planet,” Layla said. “Otherwise, things like indenture contracts would never pass muster in the first place. I think the current way of thinking goes that humans have kept us RIDEs under their thumb for so long, now we RIDEs get a little extra leeway in figuring out how we want to run affairs for ourselves. If it were humans in charge of RIDEalong, it would probably never have been permitted. But RIDEs wanting to decide how their own offspring are raised? We’ve got that right.”

“How do *you* feel about all this, Layla?” Laura asked.

Layla flicked her ears. “I...don’t know, really. I mean, I was raised in the old way —booted up, partnered up, and sold off. The new things they’re doing with RI creches, where RIDEs can have kids the ‘organic’ way...it seems utterly alien to me. I can understand the urge to stay with the old ways. At the same time, though, we have other choices now, and do we *have* to decide the course of someone’s life just to make a statement?” She snorted. “So I suppose you could say I’m *conflicted*.”

“Test says we have a match score of eighty-eight,” Sonja mused. She scratched her head. “I suppose there’s nothing left to do but boot her up and see if we work together. If not, she can go on her way and I’ll try again, maybe with a more *experienced* RIDE like yourself, Layla.”

“It’s a good score, but you never know.” Layla sat on her haunches. “I’ve seen higher matches go south just because something that *wasn’t* matched turned out to be especially important to one or the other parties involved.”

“So, how do I do this...just push the button?” Sonja asked. “What should I expect then? Is there anything I need to do?”

“Just...be open,” Layla said. “And...I guess I should say, she’s probably going to rummage through your memories first thing, because that’s how she’ll learn what kind of person you really are.”

Sonja snorted. “The poor thing’s going to start her life with a severe case of confusion, then.”

Layla chuckled. “There is that. But RIDEs can deal with crossriders, on the whole. Even the brand new ones.”

Sonja nodded. “Well, then...here we go.” She pressed the button on the crate, and it lit up green. For a moment, nothing happened. Then the crate started to unfold...and then a moment later, it seemed to leap up at her, and everything went dark.

Sonja found herself standing in a familiar redwood forest. It even *smelled* right. The climate on Earth was only starting to correct back to more optimum levels, which mean the redwood forests could move south again. She looked up at the soft deep red bark of the giant trees...then was knocked to the ground by an unexpected pounce.

It was a very *affectionate* pounce, because the pouncer started to purr and make squeaky meows, mixed with kneading and rubbing her cheek on the back of Sonja’s head.

“I’m Cassie!” she said. “What’s your name?”

“Uh, Sonja,” Sonja stammered.

“Really? ‘Cause I’m getting ‘Edward’ here, too,” the puma said. Her voice was young, chipper, and innocent. She continued to knead Sonja’s shoulders. “You were Edward yesterday. My database says it means you’re a...crossrider? Okay. I’ve never met a crossrider. Then again, I’ve never met a *human*.”

“Well, let me up and we can meet face to face, Cassie.”

With a final cheek rub, Cassie moved off Sonja’s back. She rolled over and sat up to face a light gold puma sitting on her haunches. She had narrow black bars just behind her whiskers from the bridge of her nose to the corners of her mouth. “You’ve got my tags now.”

Sonja reached up to feel her ears, then grasped the base of her new tail with one hand. “I suppose I do.”

“So, umm...” Cassie said. “Now what?”

“Well, I have some friends who’d love to meet you. Including another cougar. And there’s a whole world out there for us to see.”

“I guess...we should go see them then,” Cassie said. “Just a moment, let me see how...oh! Like that!”

Sonja was standing in her living room, but everything seemed a little smaller—or, no, she was a little taller. She looked down at herself, saw tawny arms with claw-tipped fingers. “Oh. So this is what that feels like.”

“Now you’re Sonjapuma *for real* now,” Laura said.

“Well, now *we* are,” Sonja said. “Everyone, this is Cassie. Say hi, Cassie.”

Cassie waved. “Hello, hello everyone. Uh, kind of at a loss for words, here. I mean, really. It’s all so new. I was told what to expect, but *really*.”

“Trust me, Cassie, I know the feeling,” Layla said. “I’m Layla. Great to meet you, little sister.”

“Happy birthday, Cassie,” Laura said, smiling. “Welcome to your life.”

“So this is a life? I think I like it so far.”

“The first few days are fun,” Layla said. “You have your internal knowledgebase to draw on, but it all changes once you can link *real* things to what they’ve given you.” Layla Fused up with Laura. “So let’s go start with some birthday cake and ice cream. I’m sure they have something in that tent fair that’s growing where they had you crated up.”

“I’m Janice,” Janice said. “Uh, hi. Great to meet you. No offense, but you’re certainly not the kind of person I’d want to partner up with if I looked for a RIDE. But I’ll bet you and Sonja will go just fine with each other.”

“I don’t know why I’d be offended. I probably wouldn’t want to partner up with you, either,” Cassie said. “But Sonja seems nice. Birthday cake and ice cream sound great! If I can have any, anyway. Do we eat?”

“We do when our partners do while we’re Fused,” Laura said. “Come on, I’ll show you.”

“All right!” Cassie said. “Uh...Sonja, why don’t you walk us out there? The README says humans new to RIDEs can get nervous when their bodies start walking around without them doing it. And you’re new to RIDEs. So I should let you do it first.”

“All right, but how do *RIDEs* feel when their bodies start walking around without them doing it?” Sonja wondered.

“Uh, dunno?” Cassie said. “I’ve never had this body walk around at all before, so I wouldn’t know how it felt either way.”

“So put one foot in front of the other, and we’ll head right out the door,” Layla said. She opened the door. “C’mon, Sonjapuma.”

Sonja moved forward slowly, stepping carefully. She felt a lot stronger and heavier, and suspected that she could easily accidentally break things without trying. But she felt a little better once they were outside. *Wait, am I wearing any clothes?*

:I have that covered,: Cassie said. *:I think I found something in your implant that you'll like. Wow, you were a cougar girl on Earth even when you were Edward!:*

:Only simulated,: Sonja replied, finding that little internal switch for private talk. Their hardlight fur shimmered a little, then one of Sonjapuma's outfits appeared. A low-cut red dress with slashed sides.

:Half my life is based in computer simulations,: Cassie said. *:So to me, that just means "differently real.":*

Sonja chuckled. *:Never thought about it that way.:*

Cassie sounded very confused. *:So...if I'm getting this right, it's like your brain was installed in a wrong-gender shell? And they fixed it?:*

:That's...not inaccurate, after I read your shell's manual,: Sonja replied. *:And I never knew until yesterday.:*

:Well, I'm glad they fixed it,: Cassie said. *:It's a lot better, being what you're supposed to be.:*

Movement came naturally even before reaching the threshold, and they were out in the sunlight and construction noise of the growing city. A few passerby stopped to watch them, but they apparently weren't the only newly paired human-and-RIDE in the neighborhood.

"RIDEalong is doing brisk business with their adoptions," Layla said. "And you're not the only crossriders, either. I know, it's shocking, right?"

"I guess it's like you said," Sonja said. "People new to this world and RIDEs new to the world are made for each other."

"Yeah, well, not this person," Janice said. "I'm not great with kids. At all."

"Gosh, never would have guessed that," Laura deadpanned.

"So where's this cake and ice cream I'm hearing about?" Cassie wondered.

"Right over here." Laura nodded toward the cafeteria where they had eaten their breakfasts the day before. "Let's see what these fabbers can make for us."

It didn't take much convincing to get the fabber to make a birthday cake, with "Happy Birthday Cassie!" and a candle on top. They brought that and bowls of ice cream over to a table, lit the candle, and sang "Happy Birthday." Even Janice joined in. Then Sonja and Cassie leaned forward, and Cassie snuffed the candle with a directed lifter micro-pulse. Then Laura and Layla cut the cake and served it out.

Eating in a RIDE was an interesting experience. Sonja's mouth was actually behind the feline muzzle, which meant she effectively had to poke her spoon *into* her own mouth, like she was poking it down her throat, in order to get to her human mouth. But she was able to get the hang of it after a couple of minutes.

As they ate, Sonja took stock of her feelings. Fusing didn't feel like wearing a giant fursuit, as she'd expected. It felt like...having a larger body. If she concentrated, she could dimly feel her *true* body inside, but that sensation was easily overridden by the perception of being a bigger, furry person, with ears and tail. Of course, she had her *own* ears and tail now, which she hadn't had the chance to feel in the real yet.

And Cassie herself was...interesting. It was hard to know just yet, but she felt like she'd be easy to get along with once she got a little more experienced at being alive.

:Well, thanks,: Cassie sent. *:I think you're interesting, too.:*

:You know, you don't have to stay with me if you don't want to,: Sonja said.

:You're free to make your own choices.:

:I know,: Cassie said. *:But at least for now, I choose to stay with you. I don't*

know enough about the world yet to choose anything else.:

:All right. Just let me know if you change your mind. I'll be happy to talk it over with you and help you find out what you want to do.: Sonja chuckled. :Of course, I don't really know enough about this world to figure out what I want to do yet, either.:

:Hey, we'll figure it out together, right?:

Sonja smiled. :Right.:

They finished the cake and ice cream at last, and took the empty plates and bowls up to the recycler. "Well, that was pretty good, huh?" Sonja asked.

"Uh-huh," Cassie replied. "It was yummy, tasting it through you. Thank you for getting it for me!"

"Well, I *did* get it for me, too," Sonja said, grinning.

"It's really weird hearing you talking in two different voices like that," Janice said. "But I guess that's just a RIDE thing, huh?"

"So you'd better get used to it," Layla said.

"It's something we RIDE partners all do," Laura added.

"But maybe now it's time we went ahead and see what it's like un-Fused," Sonja said. "I want to see what my new tags are like in real life."

"I want to see 'em, too!" Cassie said. "Plus I have a skimmer form I'd like to try."

"That frame they gave you is pretty basic," Layla said. "RIDEalong uses a generic feline template and just re-skins based on species. But it should get you where you two want to go."

Cassie cocked her head. "Oh! Is *that* what that old saying means?"

Layla groaned and facepawed. "I walked right into that one."

Janice blinked. "Huh?"

"It was in my on-board lexicon about cats," Cassie said. "That there's more than one way to skin them."

Janice facepalmed. "Oh, of course."

"So I guess that's *not* what it means..."

"Speaking of skinning cats, shall we de-Fuse now?" Sonja asked.

"Oh...sure. Hold on, let me work out how...oh! That's got it." They stepped back from the table, and a moment later Cassie came apart around Sonja, reassembling herself into a cougar shape behind her.

"You kept Sonja's purple hair," Layla said. "Good choice, Cassie."

"It seemed important," Cassie said, bunting her partner's back. "Of course I had to make a little trade."

"Meow," Janice said, grinning. She tapped her nose.

Sonja reached up to feel of her nose. It felt distinctly...flat and cold and wet.

"Wait...what? I've...got a kitty nose? That's not a usual tag...is it?"

"Well, no," Cassie said. "But I saw the 'other' you was that way, so I thought you'd like it. I can remove it if you want."

"I think I need a mirror."

"I think you do," Janice agreed.

Sonja reached up to feel of her ears, which were now pointy and mobile, as expected, and then looked over her shoulder at the tawny tail that protruded through a new hole in her slacks. "Well, *those* are as expected, at least..."

Laura smiled, then put her arm around Sonja's shoulders. "The four of us are just going to...to...I dunno. But we're doing it together. If I can think of the right words."

“I can give you a nose like that, Laura,” Layla said. “It’s just a little Fuser mod. The old double-zero-ones typically gave their partners animal noses. Which was a little hard on the moose riders, I can tell you.”

“How do you even *put* a moose nose on a human face?” Sonja wondered.

“It wasn’t pretty,” Layla said. “Let me rez up a mirror for Miss Kitty here...” A panel of fur went out on Layla’s back, then projected a flat, reflective surface. “Here you go.”

It wasn’t anything Sonja hadn’t seen before. The classic catgirl look was quite popular in FVL and elsewhere. She had a pink nose and a slightly projecting jaw line to match up, and a fuzz of tawny fur along the bridge. “I *like* it! Thanks, Cassie.”

“You’re welcome! I’m glad you like it!”

“I like it, too,” Janice said. “It just...*suits* you somehow.”

“It might take a little getting used to, but I think I agree,” Sonja said. “I’m going to have to adjust my VL avatar, too.”

“Already done!” Cassie said. “So, what now?”

“Well...uh, how about a skimmer ride? If you don’t mind, I mean,” Sonja said. “I want to see how this works.”

“I’d love to!” Cassie said. “And *I* want to see how it works, too!”

“Then let’s head outside,” Sonja said.

As they walked out the door, they encountered several other people walking up. They were dressed in nice clothes, carrying microphones of the sort you used to see in twencen television newscasts, and followed by a number of objects of varying sizes and descriptions floating in the air behind them. Some looked like mylar helium balloons, others like miniature quad-lifter drones.

:Yikes, it’s the media,: Layla sent. *:Looks like they finally got up the nerve to approach you directly. Maybe the RIDE adoption is what did it. So much human interest.:*

:Why do they have such big microphones?: Cassie wondered. *:They should have perfect directional pickups in those drones.:*

:It’s just one of those Zharus things, I guess,: Sonja said. She tried to smile as they approached, but the sight of all those cameras and the reporters was quite intimidating.

The first to approach was a young woman with raccoon tags and a hat with a “PRESS” tag in the band, followed by her partner. “Hello, Miss Lancaster. I’m Nicki Conway, from the *Baltica Herald*, and this is my partner, Fuji. We would like to ask you a few questions. Nothing too heavy.”

“I suppose I can,” Sonja said. She put her hand on Cassie’s back.

“So, after a day on Zharus, are you still angry Earth sent you here?”

The question provoked a surprising surge of emotion. “Angry? Hell, *yes* I’m angry! They gassed me in my own apartment! They didn’t leave us a single dollar of our own savings! All my physical mementos were probably auctioned off months ago. The Terran government is run by a bunch of raging shitheads. If you wiggle just a *little bit* out of the box they want you in, away you go!”

Janice smirked. “Little touchy there, aren’t we, kitty cat? For me, I’m still kind of ticked, but only on principle. Now I’m starting to see we really kind of got the better end of the deal. Well, mostly. I didn’t have any savings or collections of old restored long-buried crap or stuff to lose. Just the shirt on my back, more or less. I feel sorry for the

ones who lost all that stuff. But hey, for me, Earth just gave me a ride to the promised land, and I didn't even have to pay for the ticket."

"What about you, Miss Erskine?"

"I spent a month here on tour about ten years ago," Laura said. "Almost stayed then. *Almost* Fused with Layla here at the time." She gave her friend a petting. "Maybe I should have stayed, but I felt I still had obligations."

"What kind of obligations?" Nicki asked.

"I was doing important work. Important enough to the planet that my ticket to get out here at the time was pretty damned expensive, even though I was a furry then. Now, I guess they changed their minds."

"What do your RIDE partners think about all this?"

"Um, I only just woke up today," Cassie said. "All I can say is I like Sonja and I like the world so far."

"Welcome to the world!" Fuji the raccoon put in.

"Thanks," Cassie replied.

"Those jerks back on Earth have no idea what they're throwing away," Layla said. "But hey, their loss, our gain." She rubbed her head along Laura's hip, purring.

"Okay, now the question you were expecting. Not that it's unusual on Zharus to crossride so fast, but is there any kind of statement you're trying to make by doing it? You were in the first group awakened, and you briefly met Marshal Petrovna and the former Judge Gates. Did they have any influence?"

Sonja considered how to respond. "Well, to be honest, I was a big GVL—that's Genderplay Virtual Life—player on Earth. Mainly with Laura here, though I had hung out online with Aleka a little—probably not enough to be more than a distant acquaintance, though. But then when I arrived here I had a little, let's say, medical issue." She felt her face heat up in a blush. "I'll just say they had to fix my body. Draw your own conclusion."

"I see," Nicki said, nodding. "Roughly one percent of 'accidental' crossrides of tourists—from every colony, not just Earth—are undiagnosed gender dysphoric. I'm glad you got the help you didn't know you needed."

"As many as that?" Laura asked.

"She's exaggerating a little," Fuji said. "But it's still significant. Mostly happens when a tourist gets injured, they need medical attention, they do a brain scan..."

"Modern medicine, huh?" Janice said. "Why d'ya suppose they're apparently better at catching it here?"

"I'm sure they've answered that in some research journal," Laura said.

"If we're spouting off opinions, *I* think it's 'cuz they've got so much more experience at spotting the problem here," Layla said. "This is the only world in the firmament where they *celebrate* dysphorics, rather than barely tolerate them or try to sweep them under a rug. So of course they know what to look for—and they actually *want* to do it."

Nicki nodded. "Okay. One last question. You're both paired up with pumas—and even the one of you who isn't has puma tags. What's the significance of that?"

Sonja shrugged. "There isn't any, really. We just like pumas. Based our fursonas on them, back on Earth."

"I think it's partly my fault," Laura said. "Back in FVL I gifted Sonja the furry avatar her first time there. She said she liked cats anyway, so..."

“And I got *these* in return for sharing a snack with that one,” Janice said, pointing to Layla. “I may have ‘em docked sooner or later if I get tired of ‘em, but for now...hey, they were free.”

“That should satisfy the curious, I think,” Nicki said. “Well, thanks for the interview. You’re fortunate there are just so many on the *Steady Hand* that we can spread out. There’s almost two thousand awake now.”

“Which is, what, a third of a percent of the total?” Laura wondered. “They’re going to need to start working faster, or they’ll still be at this next year.”

“Now, if you don’t mind, Cassie and I would like try out her skimmer form,” Sonja said.

“I and Layla should get back to work, too,” Laura said.

“And I have some serious loafing to do. I’m part cat now. I can loaf as much as I want,” Janice said.

“As if you didn’t before,” Sonja said.

“But I actually have an *excuse* now!” Janice said. “That’s gotta be good for something, right?”

“You know, there’s gotta be a match for you out there somewhere,” Layla said. “Not a kitten like Cassie. But an experienced RIDE you’ll pair up nicely with.”

“Probably! But they’re pro’lly not going anywhere, so I’ve got plenty a’ time to look for ‘em,” Janice said. “Maybe I’ll start after my nap. Or maybe I’ll just have another nap instead.”

“Mmm, naps,” Cassie said.

“Hey, you just woke up,” Sonja said.

“I’m a cat. We sleep for sixteen hours a day.”

Sonja hugged Cassie affectionately. “Sleep later, Cass. Fly now.”

“All right! Uh...let me try to figure out how this works...” She closed her eyes and her hardlight winked out, leaving a gleaming silver cougar standing there. Then with various clinking and ratcheting noises, her body unfolded and shifted around into a sleek skimmer cycle form about double the size of the rental scooter, and then the hardlight came back on rendering it gold with tawny fur upholstery and accents. The skimmer wasn’t a fancy sports model, but it looked comfortable and reasonably speedy.

“Not bad at all, kitten,” Layla said. “Enjoy the flying you two. Laura and I will be over in the northwest part of the construction area.”

“See you later!” Cassie said.

As Cassie pulled away from the settlement, they picked up speed and altitude. Before Sonja felt more than a brisk breeze, Cassie rezzed up a hardlight aeroshell around them. “Wow, you’re pretty fast!” Sonja said.

“Am I? I don’t really have anything to compare it to,” Cassie said. Her golden eyes peered out of a display panel on the dash, just below the windshield. “But the specs say I’m really no more than average speed or endurance relative to other skimmers like me. Though you can drop in better lifters and batteries pretty easily, just takes money.” They rose to above treetop height, the vast forest rolling away beneath them.

“Where are we going?” Sonja asked.

“The map says something called the ‘Coastal Skimmerway’ is in this direction,” Cassie said. “And since I’m a skimmer right now, I guess it must be my way!” She giggled and winked. “My way *is* the highway!”

“I wouldn’t argue.” Sonja looked around, enjoying the view. The bike’s seating was plenty roomy, including ample space for her new tail. “So everyone flies around this fast?”

“It’s a big world. You gotta fly fast if you want to get anywhere.” Cassie’s eyes peered off-screen for a moment. “Oh! It says I can offer some traveling music. Let’s see...”

A moment later, a guitar kicked in, and a vocalist sang...

*Get your motor running
Head out on the highway
Looking for adventure
In whatever comes our way...*

Sonja laughed. The song was iconic enough to biking that even she had heard it back on Earth—one of those bits of Earth media that leaked back into the public domain from Zharus tourists. “Nice choice.”

“Thanks! It was the first one on the list.”

Looking ahead, Sonja saw something hovering in the air, approaching them. As they came closer and passed, they saw it was some kind of lifter buoy with a beacon on it. “Hey, Cassie, what was that? Some kind of navigation marker?”

“Uh-huh. It’s pointing the way to the skimmerway.”

“Is that some kind of road in the sky?”

“Sort of! My database says it’s a path marked out by more beacons, with floating rest stops and stuff every so often. For skimmers, you see.”

“Ah.” Sonja nodded. “That makes sense.”

“And the skimmerway goes allllll the way around the supercontinent. Wow!”

“Gondwana is larger than all the continents on Earth, combined,” Sonja said.

“That would mean more to me if I’d ever seen a continent on Earth, but I’m sure it’s very impressive!”

Sonja saw more beacons in the distance, and as they converged on the skimmerway she could see that they formed several parallel lines in the air about five hundred meters over the ground, marking out different lanes of traffic. A few skimmers could be seen here and there in the distance, but it didn’t seem to be a very high-traffic stretch of road. The speed limit was 250 kph.

Sonja checked their own speed—a shade over 200, five hundred meters up. *Um, okay. Don’t look down.*

“So I was doing a little research on skimmers,” Cassie said. “It said I’m a skimmer because I lack a ‘physically enclosed passenger compartment’ and am ‘reliant on a hardlight aeroshell and inertial damping’ for safety. Those are technically ‘fliers’. But for some reason everyone just says ‘skimmer’ anyway.”

“People are funny that way, Cass,” Sonja said. “So, no particular place to go. Let’s just enjoy the sights.”

“But we *can* go places if we want to, right?” Cassie said. “I’ve never *been* to any places.”

“What place would you like to go to?” Sonja asked.

“I dunno, maybe...that one?” She highlighted a buoy supporting a hardlight sign reading “EXIT: Greenglade.”

Sonja shrugged. “Why not?” The bike tilted to one side as Cassie angled it into the exit, and they followed the row of beacons down to the ground where a launch and landing ramp poked up into the air. Cassie easily landed on the end of the ramp and proceeded straight ahead in ground-skimming mode.

“So what is this place?” Sonja asked.

“The database says it’s a ‘pastoral forest community.’ Whatever that means.”

“Sounds like a bunch of people who decided to come out and live in the middle of nowhere.” Sonja frowned. “And now they’re suddenly a lot closer to somewhere than they ever expected. You know, they might not be glad to see us.”

“That doesn’t matter,” Cassie said. “*I’ll* still be glad to see *them*.”

The first building was a General Fabbery. There were a few large, squarish skimmers parked in front of it—one in a lurid yellow with HUMMER printed on the rear bumper. There were so many trees—mainly oak and maple—it was difficult to see much further down the surface road. The map in Sonja’s implant located only two more buildings—one for general government functions, and what appeared to be a waste reclamation facility. Of course, there would be other buildings—people had to live somewhere—but their owners had apparently chosen to have them redacted from the map. The local population numbered about a hundred, according to the Zharus Census.

“Villages this size don’t exist on Earth anymore,” Sonja said. “Maybe we should just go once around the road, then head back to the skimmerway...”

“Yeah. Why doncha,” came a voice out of thin air. The speaker then de-cloaked, revealing himself to be a wolverine Integrate. “You can put yourself back on that ship you came in on, too.”

“I didn’t exactly have a *choice*, whoever you are,” Sonja replied tartly. “And if you think you can tell everyone who’s going to show up here to just go away, you’re probably fighting a losing battle. You’re the very closest stop on the skimmerway to a new settlement of several hundred thousand, and they’ll all be awake before long, and curious.”

“We don’t mind the occasional traveler taking a rest. We *do* mind getting a million new neighbors we didn’t ask for,” he grumbled. “I’m going to end up taking my house and just moving it deeper into the wilderness. Nextus evacuated us because they thought that damned ship might land on our heads.”

“If it helps any, most of us million didn’t ask to be dropped here, either,” Sonja said. “Things are tough all over.”

An elk Fuser came out of the store to see what the commotion was. “Hey, Kent! Stop messing with the new neighbors!” he shouted. “They ain’t done nothing wrong, you hothead!”

“Just thought we’d stop by and say hi,” Sonja said. “You know, beat the crowds.”

The elk waved his hand. “Come on into the Fabbery and sit a spell. I’m Clem, and my inner human is Marco Firenze. He’s sleepin’ right now, so don’t expect much conversation outta him.”

“And as if this foolishness wasn’t bad enough, we’re going to be on the fricking *news*, too.” The wolverine pointed past Sonja, and she turned her head to see one of those micro-skimmer drones hovering some distance beyond them.

“Hey, don’t blame that one on us,” Sonja said. “We never told them they could follow us.”

“Well, that’s easily enough remedied.” Clem raised an arm, and fired a pulse blast

that shattered the drone. “You’re new here, so you probably didn’t know—it’s all right to smash those things, as long as you don’t inflict any collateral damage in the doing of it. The networks might bill you a few centi-*mu* for it, but they expect it to happen. That’s why they don’t usually put a lot of money into fabbing them.”

“On Earth if you pop something like that you end up with a misdemeanor charge and two weeks in jail,” Sonja said. “Not to mention the fines.”

“Welcome to the frontier.”

:*Fuse?*: Sonja thought. A few seconds later, she and Cassie were on the ground next to Clem. “I’m glad there’s *someone* friendly here.”

“Oh, Kent there is a bit of a slave to his instincts. Wolverines bein’ of ill temper and all.”

“Fuck you, venison,” Kent said.

Clem chuckled. “See what I mean?”

“I *think* I do,” Cassie said. She looked at the wolverine, puzzled. “Oh. You’re one of those ‘Integrates’ from my knowledgebase. First time I’ve ever met one!”

“Huh. You’re one of those RIDEalong newbs?” Kent said.

“Just woke up today!” Cassie said, as chipper as ever.

The wolverine suddenly lost some of the edge to his tone. “Uh, well. I’m sorry, uh...”

“Cassie, and *my* inner human is Sonja,” the cougaress said.

“Cassie. Um...yeah. Sorry. I’m just kinda pissed off about this whole thing.”

“If you recall, me and Marco ain’t too happy about it, neither,” Clem said. “But we should just make the best of it.”

“I’m still planning on moving house,” Kent said.

“Maybe we will, too. But haven’t made a decision on that score. Now, Cassie, Sonja, come on in for a ‘fresher. And if you got a little *mu* on you, we’d be grateful for a tip.”

“Thanks, we’d appreciate that,” Sonja said. “And I can understand how you feel about the whole business. If I’d moved as far out in the wilderness as I could to get away from crowds, having a new city spring up right next door would be...annoying.”

“Me an’ Marco moved out here after the War for some peace and quiet. Got it for longer than we thought, frankly.”

“Sooner or later, civilization always comes out to the frontier,” Sonja said. “Just like in the Old West.”

“Yeah, but it wasn’t supposed to happen *this* soon,” Kent grumbled.

“Bright side is, Nextus is going to fast-track new homestead applications for those of us who want to move, with an automatic penalty-free Game exemption,” Clem said. “And there’s still plenty of room left. Or, we can get some extra bennies in the Game if we choose to stay. We’re still weighing the decision.”

The inside of the Fabbery was the second place that was strongly like Earth, like the skullshop where Sonja had had her implant upgraded. Instead of the shops on Zharus, the Fabbery was a neighborhood space where residents could pick up their fabbed goods, meet people, have a meal, or just hang out. The interior of the Greenglade Fabbery was a cozy, wood-paneled room with tables and chairs, many of them occupied. Their eyes were on the hardlight video projections, monitoring the *Steady Hand* site construction. One side of the room were output doors of various sizes for their ordered goods.

Behind the counter was a female badger Fuser. Clem nodded at her. “This is Marlene and Mabel. They own the place. Mabel’s hubby an’ partner are down in Nextus right now, raising a little bureaucratic hell. They’re our resident Gamesters and the town’s main Surrogates.”

“I heard something about that Game, and Surrogates,” Sonja said. “A friend is interested in it. How does that work, exactly?”

“Well, the nuts an’ bolts vary depending on the Agency. But the core of it turns bureaucracy into a puzzle to be solved,” Clem said. “If you choose not to play, you still get what you need, but if you *do*, well, NextusCrats will go the extra mile and get you all the help you need, and then some.”

“It’s fun if you like that kind of thing,” the badger said. “Mabel and I never really did. So we let Izuku and Zhang take care of it.”

Sonja nodded. “That really does sound like it would be right up my friend’s alley. Might drive me crazy, though.”

“Games sound fun,” Cassie added. “I don’t know about *that* kind of game. But Layla invited me to play a game with her a little later!”

Sonja chuckled. “So, what do you all do out here? Other than live.”

“Forestry products,” Clem deadpanned. “Shockin’, I know. We selectively cut the local timber for various arsty-fartsy purposes. Sculpture, furniture, etcetera. It’s enough to pay the bills. What bills there are, anyway.”

“We’re pretty self-sufficient here,” Mabel said. “We make enough to not depend on Basic. That’s all we really want.”

“You could probably add tourism to that, now,” Sonja said. “As the closest native settlement to the landing site, you could pick up business from us new arrivals curious about the rest of the world—and the rest of the world curious about us.”

“We’re going to have to deal with you *somehow*, that’s for sure,” Kent said. “Up and leaving is looking better every day.”

“But there’s no hurry to decide on that just yet,” Clem said. “We can wait a little while and see how it all shakes out. No mistake, things *are* going to change around here, one way or another; it’s just a matter of figuring out how. Meanwhile, most folks who feel the same as Kent are just retreating into their homes and locking ‘em down.”

“Which I should probably go and do, myself,” Kent said. “Wasn’t nice to meet you.” The surly wolverine shuffled out without waiting for a reply.

Clem sighed. “You’ll find more like him than not around here, probably. If you found them at all, that is, since they’re mostly staying out of sight.”

Sonja shrugged. “I’d apologize for being a bother, but it’s not even my fault I’m here in the first place. And if they want to throw some stones at Earth, they’ll just have to get in line.”

“Marco—my pard—came here from Earth with his family ‘bout forty years ago,” Clem said. “Old Terra weren’t so bad then. I gather it’s much worse now.”

Sonja nodded. “The recent administration seems to have started trending downhill again. Though I don’t think previous ones were any great prize either. It’s just they liked to go beat up on wildcat colonies rather than their own people.”

Clem nodded. “Well, anyway, you’re welcome to look around. Up and down Main Street, anyhow. Most of the side streets turn into people’s driveways. Road continues on out of town; a few clicks on is a creek with a great fishing spot off to the left, then it dead-ends at the place where we’re lumbering trees.”

“Thanks,” Sonja said. “We’ll try not to bother anyone. But for now...I’m a little thirsty from the road. So what do you-all recommend?”

“Marlene makes a good chocolate milkshake,” Clem said. “Milk and ice cream from her own cows.”

“Sounds great!” Cassie said, licking her lips.

One chocolate milkshake later, Sonja and Cassie bid Clem, Marlene, and Mabel farewell. They left the Fabbery and Cassie changed back to skimmer form. “Want to head on up and see the creek? Or just go on back to town?” Cassie asked.

“Let’s go ahead and take a quick look,” Sonja decided. “I think this is the first time I’ve ever been to a bona fide wilderness area in real life. Might as well see what the thing I was working toward looks like.”

“It’s the first time I’ve been to a wilderness area in real life, too!” Cassie said.

Sonja chuckled. “I sort of figured.”

They pulled on up the street, past the fabbery and government building and waste treatment plant. The road wound on between the trees, paved in a durable ceramacrete finish. A mile or so up the road, there was a handy wooden bridge, clearly made from local timbers. Given most traffic used lifters, supporting a lot of weight wasn’t a huge concern, and in fact a bridge wasn’t even strictly necessary; presumably it was just there for the benefit of any foot, bicycle, or other pedestrian ground traffic in the neighborhood.

“There’s *deer* on my sensors!” Cassie said. “And a dozen kinds of birds, dozens of squirrels and chipmunks.” She paused. “Dunno if I’d want to hunt them, though. All that gooshy guts would get all over my servos.”

Sonja chuckled. “Just as well to save that for the virtual part of your life.”

Beyond the bridge, a foot trail led off along the bank to the left. “That must be where that fishing spot is. Maybe we should fab some fishing gear and come back. It’d probably be nice and peaceful.”

“Until a few thousand other people show up,” Cassie pointed out.

“Yeah, there is that. You know, I wouldn’t put it past some of them to want to move out here. Build a house out in the scenic wilderness close enough to the settlement to commute. Maybe even take over the land from some of those moving away. I could almost see doing it myself.” She shrugged. “Should probably invite Laura out here. I’ll bet she’d dig it.”

There was a humming sound in the distance, the spin-up of larger lifters. Then a house just visible through the trees rose up into the air. Once it was over the treetops it began to travel northwards.

“I guess ‘move house’ is quite literal,” Sonja mused. It was soon joined by a half dozen others, moving the same direction like a flock of birds migrating. “Looks like some of those fast-tracked re-homestead requests just came through. Well, I wish them luck. Kent is probably in one of those.”

“Too bad he’s leaving. I kinda liked him.”

“Well, some people are just...not social, Cassie. Maybe we should walk up the creek so you can get your paws dirty?”

“I *like* that idea.” Cassie came to a stop so Sonja could dismount, then changed to Walker form. “Let’s go see what’s up that trail!”

Sonja and Cassie spent a delightful half hour wandering by the banks of the

stream. Cassie had fun splashing in shallow pools and chasing after fish, while Sonja examined trees and explored. Finally, they headed back to the bridge and continued a couple more clicks up the road to take a look at the cleared area where the settlers had been logging. Then they headed back through the small settlement, to the skimmerway, and home.

As they arrived, Layla sent them a comm ping. “Hey, I see you all are back now. Have a good drive? I was wondering if Cassie would like to come over for some Nature Range now...”

“Oooh, could I?” Cassie asked. “It sounds neat!”

“Well, sure,” Sonja said. “What you do on your own time is your business. What’re you gonna do, some hunting?”

“That’s the plan!” Layla said. “If you want to watch, you can come too. There’s an ‘observer mode’ where you’ll be invisible and intangible but will still be able to see what’s going on. I’ve made Laura the same offer.”

Sonja shrugged. “Sure, sounds like fun. C’mon, Cassie, let’s Fuse up and go inside the house before we start.”

“Sure thing!”

The Fuse process seemed to be becoming more natural, or perhaps it just felt that way. In any case, it was just a few seconds before Sonja and Cassie were a furry panther-girl again, walking through the door into the little house. Sonja looked up at the doorframe as they went through. “So that’s why the door is so large...huh.”

“I think there are RIDEsafe charging plugs here and there, but I could really use my own nook,” Cassie said. “At least that’s what my DE documentation says.”

Sonja nodded. “Well, I have money from selling my old implant. So find a good one that’s within my budget, and it’s yours.”

“Thanks, I’ll let you know. You ready?”

“Sure thing, let’s go.”

The room around them seemed to fade away, and once again Sonja was standing in the forest clearing Layla had shown them earlier. Cassie was by her side in Walker mode. Only this time it felt a little different.

Layla and Laura were waiting there. Sonja noticed a sort of ghostly quality around Laura, and glancing down noticed that she also had it herself. “Hey, we’re see-through?”

“Welcome to observer mode,” Layla said. “Nothing in the sim will be able to sense you or touch you. So you won’t scare off our prey. You can also fly, which I recommend. And keep quiet! The prey can’t hear you, but we still can—unless you engage private comms, which we recommend if you want to kibbitz. Got it?”

“Got it,” Sonja and Laura chorused.

“Great! Now...it can often take hours to find and sneak up on prey properly. So, in deference to your human attention spans, we’ll run the sim in fast-time for ourselves until we get to the fun part.”

“Gee, thanks for thinking of us,” Sonja said. “You’re too kind, really.”

“In real life, of course, we big cats are solitary hunters. But thanks to being sentient and all, we RIDEs are more social creatures. Besides, I gotta teach this newbie how it’s done.”

“I’m ready to learn!” Cassie said.

“All right, then, come on, young’un. Dropping into fast-time...*now*.” The two cats

blurred and disappeared. A moment later, the scene flickered and changed, and they were all on a plain outside the forest, watching a pair of puma creep up on some unsuspecting deer.

Sonja made sure she was on private comms with Laura. “Well, this is just like one of those nature documentaries.”

“There was that time when we went into the Feral Lands in FVL and tried hunting,” Laura said. “But this is a whole other level.”

“All we had were those silly ‘instinct prompts’. These two have the real thing,” Sonja said. “Look at how graceful they are, how majestic...”

“Okay,” Layla whispered to Cassie. “Lock on...buttwiggle...pounce!”

Cassie dutifully crouched, wiggled her butt, and sprang, slamming into a hapless deer and taking it down, paws wrapped around its neck.

“Now bite! Bite the jugular! Crush the windpipe!” Layla instructed. “Atta girl!”

The doe went down with a screeching bleat before the gargling blood out of her mouth. Cassie’s ears were pinned back, and she growled fiercely with that high-pitched “roar” pumas could make, far more menacing than her affectionate squeaks.

Sonja shook her head. “That’s just a little...ew.”

“Nature, red in tooth and claw,” Laura said. “Still, that’s pretty good for a first time, right?”

Layla looked at them. “This is just a practice sim. Cassie will get a real challenge when we start inviting RIDEs to be the prey. Trust me, even a chipmunk can do some damage. And of course, deer kick *really* hard and can kill you.”

“Mmmph?” Cassie said, still biting down on the deer’s neck. She let it go. “Really?”

“Yep, really,” Layla said.

“Even a chipmunk?”

“You climb a tree to go after them, there’s always a risk of a fall...and they could make you slip up.”

Cassie blinked. “Wow. I never thought of that.”

“Eh, you’ll learn with experience. We’ll get plenty once Sonja and Laura aren’t watching. We can do fast-time a whoooooole lot faster than they can take. No offense, ladies.”

“No worries,” Sonja said. “It’s probably not something I’ll want to watch a whole lot anyway—but it was nice to see Cassie’s first one at least.”

“I did it!” Cassie said, purring loudly.

“You did.” Sonja grinned. “I’m going to drop back out to the Real for now. Just come join me when you’re done. Good hunting!”

Sonja defused, Cassie returning to walker form and curling up like a giant house cat in a sunbeam. Sonja sat down on her couch and sighed. A moment of quiet at last...

She decided to take off her shirt, throwing it aside, then arranged her arms so her breasts were resting on them. Sonja Lancaster glared at them. *Almost ten years of having these in GVL. How did they miss that GD diagnosis? HOW? There are basic brain scans even on Earth! WHAT THE FUCK?*

She tried to think. Earth, even forty or so years ago, had the technology for a complete sex change with the relatively primitive nanites available. Early childhood healthcare, even at the age of two, should have caught the neurological issues. The earlier caught, the better fixed. But the process would have taken over a month in a

capsule and cost easily \$100,000. It was something even the government at the time *should* have covered with standard healthcare.

Sonja stood up then removed her pants and underthings, sitting down again, tail curled around her waist. She put her hand on her belly.

If they had done their jobs four decades ago odds were Sonja would barely remember being a boy. And odds were she never would have ended up expelled from Earth. But...

At *any time* between then and the day they expelled her, some doctor, somewhere, should have caught it. The cost of a sex change was down to a mere ten thousand dollars.

Still much more than the price of a one-way ticket to Zharus. Especially when shipped at the bulk rate for frozen freight.

What conclusions can I even draw from this? She had no real hard evidence, just inferences. But when they didn't even try to hide the numbers, it wasn't hard to add 1 and 1 to get 2.

"I suppose it could've been worse," she mused. As it was, she'd been completely unaware of her condition and had gotten some all-unknowing relief from the various forms of Virtual Life. Yesterday's events hadn't been so much a shock as a sudden affirmation.

Still, better safe than sorry. "Hey Informio?"

The EI's head appeared on the living room wall. "What can I do for you, Miss Lancaster?"

Sonja realized she was still naked, but decided Informio probably had some self-censor feature. Or if he didn't, he was at least too polite to say so. "Does the Basic benefit include mental health?"

"Indeed it does."

"Then can you put me in touch with someone who specializes in my situation?" She didn't feel like she needed it just now, but it would hit hard when it did.

"Of course. I'll send a list to your comm address. Good luck, Miss Lancaster."

"Just call me Sonja," she said, smiling.

"Of course, Sonja. Call again if you need me." The wall went blank.

Now, she had a few decades of womanhood to catch up on.

IV. Play the Game Tonight

*E.C.S. Steady Hand Landing Site
March 29, 159 A.L.*

Janice Howard yawned, stretched, and drifted slowly back to consciousness. As usual these days, it took a moment for her to remember where she was.

The bed was nice and soft and comfy—really, it was almost *too* comfy, compared to the paper-thin futon she'd slept on back on Earth. It added to the disorientation. But it also made it easier to pretend, if only for a moment, that one of her secret fantasies had come true. *Mmm, I married a millionaire...*

Of course, she *knew* that wasn't true. And really, in some ways, her reality was actually better than the fantasy. After all, if she *had* married a millionaire, she'd have had to get along with him. Pre-nups were a fact of life on Earth these days.

So, no, no millionaire hubby (or wifey). Instead, she'd been given the old heave-ho like the no-account bum she was. Bum-rushed right off the planet...and, as it turned out, *right* into the proverbial briar patch. Back on Earth, she'd just been *existing*. But here on Zharus, for the first time, she thought she could actually *live*.

Janice rolled out of bed, had a good stretch, and looked around at the small home that was hers. About the size of a studio apartment, with its single living/dining room, kitchenette, bedroom, and bath, it was nonetheless several times the size of the space that had been hers back on Earth. There might not be any millionaire partners in the offing, but she still *felt* rich.

In more than just her possessions. For what might have been the first time in her life since her grade school days, she had actual *friends*. Back on Earth, she'd always driven everyone away, just by refusing to engage any filters on what left her mouth. If they couldn't deal with her, it was *their* problem. Her state-mandated shrink had been of the opinion she was pushing people away out of fear of rejection, a desire to keep from getting hurt again.

Maybe there was something to that. For all that she'd taken the lemons life gave her and made the most passable lemon squash out of them that she could, it still *hurt* to keep getting fired from job after job because people just didn't *like* her. So she just pushed people away before they even had the chance to *seem* to like her, because it hurt so much to let her guard down.

She didn't need friends. She didn't even need Virtual Life—because you had to interact with other people in that, and who needed the aggravation? She had all the books and vid shows and stuff that she could read and watch, after all. She'd even put in the herculean effort necessary to get permanent UBI just because it was easier than facing another day of having to interact with *other people*.

Her shrink wanted her to come out of her shell, try to strike up some acquaintances and see where it led her. But fortunately for her, all she had to do to keep the UBI was *visit* the guy. She wasn't actually required to *make progress*. It wasn't that Janice was antisocial, exactly. She was more sort of *asocial*.

But then they'd shipped her off to Zharus, and...things had changed. In the first minutes since she'd woken up, she'd gravitated toward a pair of guys who'd woken up

along with her and had caught her attention by speaking up. One of them had been here before, after all, and he might have some idea what they could do with themselves here. More than she had, anyway. She'd been nervous about it, but she was so far outside of her comfort zone already that a little thing like *talking to people* somehow seemed small by comparison. Without anything else familiar around her, she sought comfort in the one thing that was even vaguely familiar—other people in the same situation she was.

The one guy, Edward, didn't seem to like her very much. But then, she suspected he was more than a little "asocial" himself—he'd spent all his time locked away in his apartment, working and playing virtually, which didn't really seem all that different from a life with books and vids to Janice. But his friend, Larry, was a more outgoing sort. He was the kind of guy who had a knack for making friends, and was willing to meet Janice more than halfway if that was necessary to draw her out.

And...it seemed to have worked. Not only had they gotten along, but for the first time Janice could remember she actually caught herself *not* just blurting out the first thing that came into her head, but actually filtering herself to stay on better terms with the people around her. She had an irrational urge to tape an interstellar postal delivery letter to her shrink, just to let him know she was finally taking some of his advice.

Not that *everything* had started to approach normalcy. In some respects, her life had gone from weird to weirder. The same day they arrived, Edward had received a much-belated diagnosis of gender dysphoria, and spent a couple of hours becoming a much skinnier girl named Sonja. And Larry had gotten together with Layla, a cougar RIDE he'd met last time he was here, and was now Laura. In one fell swoop, Janice had gone from hanging around strange men to being "just one of the girls."

And that wasn't even going into how her estranged brother Daniel, who'd landed on Zharus and only sent *two words* back home to tell folks he was staying, was now a raccoon-girl named Danica with a successful agribusiness. *When I thought maybe the reason we never heard more from him was that he'd "bought the farm," that wasn't what I had in mind.* When Janice thought about it, she reflected that she'd fallen down the rabbithole good and proper, she had. *Just about bloody literally. I'm sure there's some rabbit RIDE or Integrate with a hole around here somewhere.*

The day after that, Sonja had gotten a cougar RIDE herself—or else the RIDE had gotten her. Either way, they were partners now. Her name was Cassie, and she was a bright-eyed naive little thing, so new she squeaked. (Well, actually, the squeaking probably had more to do with being a cougar, as they had a fairly impressive range of cat vocalizations.) She and Sonja seemed to be getting along, which was good for them. For Janice, all that youthful exuberance made her feel old and tired just looking at her.

In the few days since then, Janice had wandered around the camp and surroundings, both singly and with the girls and RIDEs. She'd explored Greenglade, the small nearby settlement rapidly on its way to becoming a ghost town as its more reclusive citizens migrated away. She'd even hopped a sub flight to Aloha and back, to rubberneck at the space elevator and visit a party or two. But after a while, it was beginning to pall.

"Ugh, I can't believe I'm *bored*," Janice grumbled. "Never got bored back on Earth. Just read a book, watched a vid..." And she had even more books and vids at her disposal now than she ever had back on Earth. So why didn't she feel like doing that *now*?

Perhaps the answer was that there was just so much more stuff available to do

now. She didn't really *feel* like doing any of it at the moment, but it was still there, luring her attention away from the world of books and flicks.

And if she admitted it to herself, now that she was used to having friends again, she was a little lonely without them. Laura and Layla were off doing whatever their soil monitoring job involved, and Sonja and Cassie had taken one of the free sub shuttle flights to look into one of the other polities or Enclaves or whatever. So she was on her own today, and at loose ends.

She considered calling Danica for a chat...and saying what, exactly? *Hey, bro, how are the crops growing today?* She snorted. Right.

She wanted...what *did* she want? A challenge of some kind. An *intellectual* challenge. Something that would engage her mind.

Not for the first time in the last few days, her thoughts turned to that Nextus Game thing. It sounded like it might be right up her alley. The question was, how to get into it.

Her researches over the last few days hadn't turned up a whole lot of useful resources for beginners. At least, not ones that were easily accessible on the net. But that seemed to make sense. From what little she could make out, a lot of the point of the Game was to get you out of your house and physically to locations in question that would give you an advantage in play. So it stood to reason you might have to get out and go places to learn how the game was played, too.

It was possible a trip to Nextus might be in order, but it seemed like a lot of effort to go to when she wasn't even sure it was what she wanted to do in the first place. But perhaps she could find an instructor who would come to her. She wasn't sure what she could pay such a person with, but maybe they could work something out.

Janice absently fingered the feline ears she'd worn for the last few days, ever since a brief Fuse with Layla before Larry had worked up the nerve. It had been an interesting experience, for what it was worth, and she'd half considered asking Layla to do it again. But she and Laura were already pretty much an item now, and it didn't seem like the done thing to horn in. Besides, she and Layla probably weren't the most compatible personalities. Perhaps she should look into finding a RIDE partner of her own—if there even was one out there who'd match her own personality quiz scores.

Well, there were ways to start looking into that. "Hey, Informio."

The ubiquitous EI's avatar appeared on Janice's apartment wall screen. "Yes, Miss Howard?"

"Could you search for a couple of things for me?"

"Certainly. What do you need?"

"Well, first I'm looking for a tutor in the Nextus Game. One who wouldn't mind traveling out here, for preference. And also, who'd take payment some way other than cash—I'm not exactly flush right now. You think that's likely?"

"I'm no expert in the Game myself, but it is my understanding that favors are the chief currency of Gamesters. An alternative form of payment to cash should not be a problem. Was there anything else you wished to find?"

"Well...I dunno..." Janice flicked one of her ears diffidently. "I'd kind of like to see if there are any RIDEs compatible with me. A cougar, for preference. An experienced one, not a newbie like Cassie. Maybe...we could see if we could get along."

Informio smiled. "I will see what I can do. May I access your personality quiz profile, for purposes of search matching only?"

“Uh, yeah. Please do that. Thanks.”

Informio nodded. “I will let you know when I have any results.” He disappeared.

“Well, then,” Janice said. “Guess I’ll just go for a walk.”

The city was growing visibly on an hourly basis. The ship that had brought them to Zharus was now little more than some modules and floating construction barges dropping huts like hers, larger family homes, even apartment buildings ten floors tall in a matter of hours. There were also a few more modern machines brought in from Nextus or other polities, that were placing more modernized housing. In a few areas, some of the houses that had already been placed had been recycled, their material rebuilt into apartment houses or condominiums and the leftover vacant space landscaped into lawns or parks. It was shaping up to be a nice little city, and already the arguments were beginning over what it should eventually be named.

Janice presumed there’d be other buildings mixed amongst all the houses, once things really got going. Public services, commercial space, everything a city needed to actually work. On Earth, her hometown of Halifax, England retained some very ancient buildings and its population had never needed to move into the arcologies so common in most of the world. This city would probably be about the same way. But then, it seemed like most cities here on Zharus were.

She took a turn by the cafeteria building for a plate of breakfast, which she got in a to-go container to carry home. She could have just fabbed something at home, but the cafeteria’s fabbers seemed more specialized to food and had a wider selection of brands—including, she’d discovered, some of the more obscure staples of the hallowed English full breakfast. While they weren’t quite as good as the ones Danica had cooked herself, they did nonetheless scratch a little of the homesick itch. Eggs, bacon, scones, a little spotted dick (Janice sniggered at the name, as she always did), some bubble and squeak all promised to hit the spot as soon as she got them home—along with a steaming mug of proper Earl Grey tea. *That* was a breakfast. If she never saw another Soylent bar again, it would be too soon.

Janice was home chowing down when the wall again lit with Informio’s visage. “Miss Howard, I believe I have located the solutions to your problems.”

Janice raised an eyebrow. “Do tell?”

“A cougar RIDE of the proper maturity and a good match probability has expressed an interest in meeting you. Since the Nextus shuttle is currently free, I took the liberty of booking her a ticket on the next trip.”

“Oh, great, and you even matched my gender. I forgot to mention that part.”

Informio smiled. “I assumed that if you *were* interested in crossriding, you would have said so explicitly.”

Janine nodded approvingly. “Good deal. And the Game expert?”

“I also booked a ticket for a Game expert who is willing to discuss non-cash payment terms. Her record seemed promising, she has a great deal of experience, and she was interested in looking around the settlement as well. I gather that there are certain advantages to being one of the first Gamesters in when a new playing field opens up.”

“Well, good. I’ll look forward to meeting them. I guess the cougar RIDE will be obvious, but how will I know the Game expert?”

“She will know you,” Informio said. “I provided her with your photograph.”

Janice nodded. “Okay. When does the flight come in?”

“It will arrive at the aerodrome within the hour.”

“Great! I’ll just finish up my nosh and head down there to meet it. Thanks!”

Informio nodded. “I hope my solutions will meet your needs. Please let me know if you have any further questions.”

“I’ll do that.” Informio vanished, and Janice quickly finished the rest of her breakfast. She dumped the dishes into the recycler before heading out the door at a jog. She could just beat the shuttle in if she hurried.

The aerodrome had gotten a little less makeshift over the last few days, as several polities had focused their attention on bringing it up to spec for what a growing city needed. They almost seemed to be *competing* with each other on how well they could build out the runways, terminals, and other infrastructure that were their assigned pieces. The only thing really holding them back was that it was still unclear just how big the settlement was going to end up being, so they had to walk the line between being sufficient to meet the polity’s current needs but still having plenty of room to expand.

There was an actual real terminal to wait in now, with comfortable seating, snack fabbers, RIDEsafe power plugs, and hardlight terminals. It was funny—now that she knew what to look for, Janice was seeing RIDEsafe power plugs everywhere. But it made sense—they were basically the RIDE equivalent of drinking fountains, after all. And what with RIDEs being fully recognized as people now, public structures were finally becoming *truly* RIDE-friendly.

Janice took a seat facing the runway, crossed her legs, and waited for the Nextus shuttle to land. She’d made it just in time, and only had a couple of minutes to wait before the bright and shiny jet streaked out of the sky, slowing and coming in for a nicely vertical landing on a nearby pad. A short taxi to the gate later, a number of passengers debarked—humans, Integrates, RIDEs, even an EIDE or two. Janice leaned forward on her chair, watching for any sign of an unaccompanied cougar.

It wasn’t too long before one appeared. She strode confidently through the concourse, simulated muscles rippling under the tawny fur coat. As she got closer, Janice could see that she was a good bit larger than even Layla. *Biiiiig kitty*. And that actually suited Janice just fine. If she was going to get a cougar RIDE like those other pikers, she could at least have the *biggest* one.

Not that she was going to “get” or “have” this RIDE, she reminded herself. RIDEs as possessions were things of the past, and they were now free people in their own right, able to choose who they wanted to be with. And that *also* suited Janice just fine. Now that she’d discovered the joys of friendship, she wanted to be with a RIDE who *did* want to be with her.

Beyond that...she looked pretty much like every other cougar. Really, cougars were a little *boring* in appearance when you got down to it. They all looked mostly the same, except for size. They weren’t even flashy, like a spotty jaguar or leopard. They were just...sort of *beige*.

But they were what her friends had—and besides, it was what was on the inside that counted.

The cougar had evidently spied Janice, as she adjusted her course to approach her. “You’d be Janice, right?” the cougar asked, in neutral tones. Her voice sounded like that of someone who brooked no nonsense, which Janice decided she liked.

“Yes, ma’am,” Janice said. “Who might you be?”

“I *might* be Mary, Queen of Scots, but I’m probably not,” the cougar said. “The name is Tawny.”

Janice noticed how careful she’d been to say “the name is” rather than “I’m”. *Probably had her fill of jokers who thought they were being clever with gags like “You certainly are!” or “Isn’t every cougar?” I would, too. Would get on my last nerve bloody quick.* Somehow, the thought made her warm further toward Tawny.

“Well! Jolly good to meet you, then, Tawny. I think we might just get along.”

“That’s what the quiz results say,” Tawny agreed. “I’m not sure how far I trust the damn thing, but I haven’t seen anything to make me disagree yet. You wanna go somewhere and we can discuss terms?”

“In a bit,” Janice said. She glanced past Tawny to the concourse, and frowned. The torrent of debarking passengers seemed to have dwindled to a trickle, but there was no sign anyone else seemed interested in coming their way.

“Still waiting on someone?” Tawny asked.

“Mm-hmm,” Janice said. “There was supposed to be a coach for the Nextus bureaucratic Game also on the flight. Wonder if they couldn’t make it.”

Tawny looked at her strangely. “Ah...the person who told you we’d *both* be on the flight...didn’t happen to be glowing and blue, did he? Name starts with ‘I,’ ends with ‘o’?”

Janice blinked at her. “Uh...yes?”

“Thought so.” Tawny chuckled. “That one likes to have his little jokes every so often. I’ll just bet that when he told you ‘we’ were coming, he phrased his answers *very* carefully.”

Janice peered at her. “What do you mean?”

“He didn’t want to give away that, through the magic of his algorithms, Mr. Incognito was able to kill two birds with one stone.” Tawny smirked. “I am, as it happens, *both* your prospective RIDE partner *and* your prospective Game coach. And Big Blue is probably watching us right now through one of the aerodrome security cameras, and sniggering at your reaction.”

Janice’s eyes widened. “Oh, really? *You’re* the Game expert? That *is* interesting.”

“It is an interesting tale, and I’ll tell it soon enough. And I was curious about this new city anyway. Thanks for not immediately assuming I’m kidding, by the way.”

“Look, I didn’t know a thing about RIDEs before Earth dropped me here. So no preconceptions.” Janice shrugged. “Still don’t know anything, really. But I’m doubly happy to meet you now. Informio, that scamp.”

The EI’s face appeared on the glass pane of the outer window next to them. “I will have you know I was *not* ‘sniggering.’ It’s unbecoming.” He smiled. “Apologies for the deception, Miss Howard. It seemed like a harmless enough prank.”

“If nothing else, it’ll teach me to listen a little more carefully, I guess.” She looked to Tawny. “If you want to follow me, I’ll show you where I live and we can talk about terms.”

“Sounds like a plan. Lead the way.”

Janice walked back up the path toward the residential area with her house, occasionally glancing back over her shoulder to make sure the cougar was still following. Tawny was looking around, taking in her surroundings much as any tourist might.

“This the first time you’ve been out here?” Janice asked.

“I came to watch the ship land, but it’s the first time I’ve been back since,” Tawny said. “They’ve done a lot in just a week.”

“They have. But I thought that was normal for here?”

“I suppose it is. Still not something you get to see in effect that often. I doubt anyone’s built a city this big this fast in at least a hundred years. Even when Alpha Camp went legit they didn’t need nearly this much room.”

“As long as they keep waking people up to put in it, they’re going to have to sprint to keep up.”

At last they reached Janice’s block and walked down B Street to 227. “Well, here it is. Be it ever so humble, and all that.” She opened the oversized front door and waved Tawny through, noticing that the cougar’s girth made the door seem just about the right size.

Tawny looked around thoughtfully. “Well, this is a cozy little home, isn’t it?”

“Compared to what I had on Earth, this is a palatial mansion. I’ve been thinking about hiring help.”

“I think we’ll need more space if I’m going to stay. I can barely turn around in here. The door might be big enough for a medium frame like mine, but nothing else is. Informio?”

“Yes, Tawny?” the EI said.

“I need to request a home rebuild, pending Janice accepting the terms of our agreement. I can pay for the materials costs.”

“There is a constructor backlog, but I’m sure you’ll find a way around that,” Informio said. “Just let me know.”

“Thanks, Blue Eyes.”

Janice raised an eyebrow. “Speaking of the terms of our agreement, when do I get to find out what those are, exactly?”

Tawny chuckled. “Hold your horses, I’m coming to that. Let me lay the groundwork first, so’s you know where I’m coming from. Let me tell you a story.”

“Oh yay, story time,” Janice deadpanned.

“I came online back in 121 A.L. That would be 2471 A.D. as you Terrans reckon dates. What year were *you* born, by the way?”

“I didn’t realize RIDEs had been around that long. You’re about two years older than I am.”

“But you’ve always *wanted* an older sister, right?” Tawny smirked. “Anyway, make a long story short, I was a big bad battle cat, fought in the Nextus/Sturmhaven war, then got sold at auction ten years later for my trouble. Had a succession of frankly lousy human partners, until the last one got interested in the Game, which got *me* interested in it, which gave me a way to get *free* of human control once and for all. I’ll save the details for another time. But anyway, I’ve been free and playing the Game for over twenty years now. Well before humans finally got it through their numb skulls that we were actually people too.”

“Not that you’re bitter or anything,” Janice said. “Of course, I would be, too, some of the things I’ve read since I got here. The humans who made you-all sound like real prizes.”

“Actually, I’m mostly *not* bitter. Not anymore. A couple decades tends to put things in perspective. Besides, most of the really schmucky ones ain’t around anymore.” Tawny sneezed. “Irony of Emancipation is, the Game doesn’t seem like nearly as much

fun anymore now that they recognize RIDEs as legit players. They put in some handicaps to level the playing field for those who can't think so fast, and I don't get the challenge of finding ways to pass myself off as human anymore."

"So you're branching out into other fields?" Janice said. "With the coaching gig?"

"Bingo. Thanks to the Emancipation settlements on top of what I've earned from Surrogacy over the years, I'm actually comfortably well off for money." She snorted.

"Among other things. They went and made me a Master Sergeant, retroactive-like, with a pension and everything. Even got some medals for times I got shot up in the line of duty. I have this urge to go and fab some boxes of Cracker Jacks to keep them in.

"Anyway, my usual teaching deal is for something *other than* money. Instead... do you know what an indenturement contract is?"

"I can guess," Janice said. "That's when you temporarily sell yourself to someone else for a while, right?"

"Right, only *my* contracts work the other way around," Tawny said. "My human student signs a one-month indenturement contract, and while I'm the boss of them I'm also *teaching* them the ins and outs of the Game."

Janice frowned. "I'm not so sure I'm looking to become the slave to some RIDE, even just for a month."

"Oh, it's not like that," Tawny said. "I'm not some young tom wanting to take my angry out on some hapless human. Like I said, I got over most of my angry years ago. It's really more of a formality—just a way to make sure *I'm* not someone else's slave, and that if there's a disagreement over what we want to do while I'm the boss, I automatically win. Also, it's a way of making sure anyone I teach is *serious* about wanting to learn, and isn't some schmuck who's going to waste both our time. It does include provisions for ending the contract early if it doesn't work out, and third-party monitoring for abuses."

"Uh-huh," Janice said skeptically.

"And, as a free sample of the kind of teaching I can offer, I'll go over my contract with you, break it down to show you how it's made, and help you change it to make it more fair to you. Then, after we're done, you can have some time to decide whether you want to sign. Sound fair?"

"Let me get this straight. You'll go over it with me, with no obligation on my part unless I agree to it afterward, right?"

"Right. And Informio can let you know if I try to pull a fast one. Or better yet, we can hire a third-party neutral Surrogate to proctor it; you pick them out and I'll pay for the service."

"You seem to like to toss your money around," Janice said. "Offering to pay for the proctoring...or for *rebuilding my house*..."

Tawny swished her tail. "Why not? It's only money. It's just a way to keep score, and not even the *best* way for purposes of the Game. And I figure if the contract works out, it'll be worth it."

"All right, fine. Hit me. Show me your contract. Informio, can you show me a list of people who'd be qualified to do the proctology thing Tawny mentioned?"

"There are over three thousand qualified individuals available at this moment," Informio said.

"Just show me a big panel of thumbnails. Make them as small as you like, I don't need to see their names."

“As you wish.” A mosaic of tiny tiles appeared in the air in front of her. Janice closed her eyes, waved her hand around, then stabbed her finger forward at the panel. “That one. Whoever that is, please explain to them what we need and hire them.”

“Very good,” Informio replied.

Janice nodded. “Now, about that contract...”

“I’m syncing it to that media tablet on your kitchen table.” Tawny glanced at the aforementioned implement, and the screen lit up. “Go ahead and read it over. I’ll wait.”

“Hello, my name is Anansi, and I am a licensed Nextus Surrogate,” a new female voice said. “I will be listening in, and will speak up if I hear a sour note.”

“Thanks.” Janice picked up the tablet, which now bore a document entitled “Tawny’s Contract of Training Indenture, v4.7.” She rolled her eyes expressively, but sat down and began to read.

“...the hell is this? Party of the first part...part of the second part...ipso facto...” Janice looked up. “I dealt with Earth bureaucracy. This doesn’t make any damn sense.”

“Your first lesson is, Nextus contracts are *usually* written in plain, simple language, because we believe you shouldn’t have to go to university for eight years to be able to understand what you’re agreeing to—and besides, games are more fun when everyone’s on the same level playing field. If you ever run across a clause that seems to be written in gobbledygook, chances are it means someone’s trying to put one over on you. But there’s a service where you can request an officially valid simplification from a licensed Nextus ‘crat, at a standard hourly rate. Used to be it could cost you a few bucks, so you only wanted to do it for really important stuff—but now we’ve got EIs, RIDEs, and Integrates on the job, and fast-time subjective time rates are a lot more economical. Just tap the clause, choose ‘simplify’ from the context menu, and go through the billing terms.”

Janice looked up. “That right, Anansi?”

“I might have phrased it differently, but she is correct in her assertion,” the disembodied voice of the proctor said. “And the advice she offers is sound.”

Janice scowled, but tapped the buttons as requested. She blinked. “Wait...what? This says that any decision to renew or end the contract early is at *your* sole discretion. I’d be signing away my right to have any say in it.” She glared at Tawny. “Would that even hold up in court?”

“Depends on how libertarian the judge is,” Tawny said. “It’s kind of a crapshoot. But I don’t expect it ever to be litigated, really. It’s just in there as an example. The contract is open to negotiation—it can always be changed. There should be several replacement boilerplate clauses available to drop in. Pick one that looks more fair to you.”

“Hmph.” Janice frowned, but tapped the best replacement clause from the ones offered her. She kept reading.

The rest of the contract seemed more or less fair. It concerned her agreement to enter the employ of Tawny as a personal servant for a period of one Zharus month, with the agreement to be monitored by an external human-rights agency for abuses. In return, Tawny agreed to instruct her in the playing of the Zharus Game to the best of her abilities for the duration of that period. Thanks to the new clause Janice had swapped in, the contract could be extended by mutual agreement, or terminated early without

penalty by either party if they felt the other wasn't living up to their end of the bargain.

"Okay, I guess it looks mostly all right. Now what?"

"Well, you're not quite done yet. Remember, these contracts are open to negotiation. If there's anything missing you think should be there, add it."

Janice blinked. "Like...what, exactly?"

Tawny gave her head an ear-flipping shake. "Like anything. You could even add a 'rock star' clause, like requiring me to present you with a bowl of brown M&Ms every morning. Of course, I'd have to *agree* to it, but nothing keeps you from trying."

"Uh-huh," Janice said.

"Also, there's an index of sample boilerplate clauses you can bring up from the context menu. Use them as-is or modify to taste. I'd recommend adding clause IC-103, at least."

Janice scowled again, but taped the tablet a few times to bring up the clause in question. "This says you can't require me to do anything I find 'morally or aesthetically abhorrent'?"

"I can't order you to kill puppies or eat broccoli," Tawny said. "A lot of people hold that to be implicit in modern indenture contracts, but I'm from the old school and think it's a good idea to have it in print all the same."

"I actually *like* broccoli, but point taken." Janice taped the screen a few times to add the relevant clause, then looked through the rest of them. "There's one here... limiting the amount of time per day we stay Fused? Is there something wrong with Fusing?"

"Meh," Tawny said. "Jury's kind of still out on that. Some people think it makes Integration more likely, but far as I know that's never been proven. Biggest side effect I know of is that prolonged Fusing can make you a little fuzzy and more obviously kitty-faced, but that can be fixed with a little 'sculpting. I won't object if you want to add that clause."

Janice considered, then tweaked it so she had the right to refuse extended Fusing but could choose to if she felt like it, then added it, too. "Now that you bring it up, it seems like half of these clauses are aimed at trying to wave the right magic wand to keep the Integration fairies away."

Tawny snorted. "Yeah, good luck with *that*. I've got the anti-forced-Integration module that Dr. Patil came out with, but doesn't seem like anything can keep it from happening naturally if it's going to. People are just scared of change."

Janice nodded. "Doesn't seem like it's necessarily a bad thing. My brother's one, and she seems to be okay with it."

"I see you've already picked up Zharus pronoun usage."

Janice chuckled. "If the shoe fits..." She finished paging through the clauses.

"Okay, I think I'm done. So now what?"

"Now...you can take some time to think it over." Tawny chuckled. "Old geezer that I am, I've learned the value of patience. I'm not interested in a hard sell, or in pushing you to do something if you don't want to."

"Well, gee, thanks," Janet said. "Why are you here, again?"

"Well, I *am* also here because you came up a 91% match in personality scores," Tawny said. "That's about as high as I've ever seen. Makes me curious, as I've never *been* all that compatible with any other human I encountered."

Janice raised an eyebrow. "Really? I'd have thought as many people as are out

there, you could have found one if you looked.”

“Never really had much reason to look. Not even sure I put much faith in the test; mainly use it as a way to work out how annoyed I’m likely to be with a prospective student so I know whether to charge more or avoid the commission altogether. Then Mr. Blue Sky there took a shot at those two birds with his one stone, so here I am.” Tawny flicked her ears. “I’m not opposed to staying on for a few days and Fusing with you with no obligations so’s you can see what it’s like, while you think it over.”

“Pardon me,” Anansi said, “but are you done with me for now? I am still billing you by the minute.”

“Well, one more question if you would, please,” Janice said. “Have you looked over the contract? You think the offer’s on the up-and-up?”

“Understand, I am not acquainted with Miss Tawny on a personal basis,” Anansi said carefully. “Though we may have crossed paths a few times over the course of the Game, I do not remember any such encounters immediately. So I cannot speak either for or against her personal integrity out of my own experiences. You may wish to ask her for a list of references and check with them. However, assuming she is acting in good faith, the contract terms *are* fair, leaving aside the one clause that was only included as a teaching tool. And such non-monetary contracts are not at all unusual where the Game is concerned.”

“Huh. Well, I guess that’ll be all, then,” Janice said. “Tawny, you can pay the woman.” She paused. “Or...female-seeming entity of whatever kind she might be. No offense meant.”

Anansi chuckled. “Woman’ will do nicely, thank you. It was a pleasure helping you today; look me up should you have need of a Surrogate again.”

“Thanks, just might,” Janet said.

Tawny nodded. “Funds transferred. Thanks for the help.”

“Anansi has left the call,” Informio said.

“Thanks, Informio. Guess that’ll be all for now.”

“Certainly, Miss Howard. Call me if you need me again.”

“We’ll do that.”

They waited a moment, then Tawny let out a deep sigh. “Whew. Glad all that business crap is over for now. Maybe I should have waited until we got to know each other better.”

“Eh, just as well to get the cards on the table so there’s time to let it percolate a while. But if you don’t mind, can you tell me a little more about how this Game thing works? Nothing that would cost me anything, just...a general description of what it is you *do*. None of the stuff I’ve found online has been very clear.”

“Well, doing actual footwork is a fundamental part of the Game. In Nextus each Agency has its own manuals, wherein are the secrets to cracking the bureaucracy on that particular day. Often you have to obtain certain materials in the process, which aren’t available online. So more footwork. It’s all accounted for with the ‘Bureau Time’ Nextus citizens get each day.” Tawny licked the back of a forepaw. “Trust me. It’s more interesting than it sounds. The Game is designed to sharpen problem-solving skills with innovative thinking.”

“Mmm. Sounds kind of like the hoops I had to jump through back on Earth to get permanent UBI, but there wasn’t a lot of *fun* built into *that* process. So, color me intrigued. I’m certainly leaning toward curious enough to bite on your offer...but it’s not

something I want to make a snap decision about.”

Tawny nodded. “Oh, for sure. If you want, once we’ve Fused some, we could go to Nextus and I could demonstrate how it’s done. For example, I’m pretty sure I could jump most or all of the queue on the constructor backlog—at least, on the ones Nextus is kicking in.”

“Huh. Not that I’m complaining, mind, but it seems kind of like cheating somehow.”

“Eh, not really. Most of the queued-up tasks are low-priority stuff that doesn’t *need* to be done right away. It could easily fit in between higher priority jobs at need. But they schedule all that stuff up front so that they can reward Gamesters with priority placement.” She flicked an ear diffidently. “I’ll give you odds that constructors from Uplift and other such places have better logistical planning in their schedulers so there’s not so much need to ‘cheat’ on them to get anything done. But those of us from Nextus think that just takes all the *fun* out of the thing.”

Janice cocked her head. “So you intentionally *build obstacles in...*because it’s fun to get around them?”

“Only for the unimportant stuff. Truly critical things like medical care and law enforcement get a bye, because you really don’t want to play games when people’s lives are at stake. And people who don’t want to bother with playing the Game themselves can pay Surrogates to do it for them. Which is a pretty handy way to turn a profit if you’re any good at the Game yourself.”

Janice nodded. “People keep telling me I’d make a good one, if I just knew how the game was played. It ain’t easy to get permanent UBI, let me tell you.”

Tawny chuckled. “You never know. We’ll just have to see how your training goes. Assuming you decide to go for it.”

Janice nodded. “Well, I guess those are all the questions I really have about the Game and all. So let me turn it around...I’m sure you’ve *gotta* have some questions for me. Being that I’m part of one of the newest hot human interest stories to hit the planet right now.” She paused. “Do they still call it *human* interest here? That seems kind of species-chauvinist.”

Tawny cocked her head. “Well...I have wondered. How much does the average person on Earth know about RIDEs?”

Janice snorted. “Not so bloody much. Mostly a bunch of crazy rumors, half of which disagree with one another. ‘Some kind of furry sex-change machines’ just about sums it up. At least, that was as much as *I* knew. Though I’ll grant I wasn’t really fussed to learn more, after my brother had been crazy about them and then he up and left for Zharus and never came back.”

Tawny smirked. “And what do you think of us now?”

“Now? Well...I think I can see why Earth is so interested in the tech. I don’t impress easily, but I’m pretty amazed by what I’ve seen so far. You’re real live thinky machines, the first ones anyone’s ever come up with. Next to that, all the other stuff is just window dressing. But I guess I can see why people make fun. Means they don’t have to deal with someone else having something they don’t.”

“What’s your guess as to why Earth suddenly dumped you off here?”

“Me personally? Don’t have to guess. I’m a bum. Permanent UBI. Drain on state resources. Probably cost less for them to ship me here than to keep feeding me for another year. But your fabber tech is so much better, it’s pretty much a non-issue here.”

She shrugged. “Us as a whole, dunno. Don’t think I have any special insight into the matter that makes me more of an expert than all the pundits. Think I agree with the pundits I’ve read who say Earth’s getting ready to make a move on you, and wanted to rub your nose in the fact they’re catching up. Apart from that, dunno. Not really my beeswax.”

“I noticed you’ve already Fused with one of us. How did that go?”

“Oh yeah, with Layla, the cougar who ended up partnering my pal Larry-Laura. So she could enjoy some BBQ, since Larry hadn’t made up his mind to be Laura yet.” Janice shrugged again. “Wasn’t bad. Not really a real *partnership*, exactly. She wasn’t the sort of person I’d want to share brainspace with, so we kept it purely physical, with the meat-eating. But I liked the tags.”

“I see,” Tawny said. “And if you were to Fuse with me...?”

Janice cocked her head. “Huh. Dunno. You, I think, I could maybe get along with. If the sharing went both ways, might be interesting to see what makes *you* tick. So I guess if you show me yours, I’ll show you mine? I think I could deal with that.”

“Shall we find out?”

“Huh, I dunno.” Janice considered. “You *sure* this isn’t all part of some plot to kidnap me and steal me away to Alpha Camp? I read about that place. Seems to be popular among RIDEs who’ve had crummy luck with humans.”

Tawny laughed. “This place is a dozen times more interesting than Alpha Camp right now. I don’t think you have to worry about being stolen away.”

“All right, I’ll bite. Why not? Only live once, don’t you?”

“Then let’s go outside. Doing it in here would be like trying to change clothes in a porta-potty.”

“Fair enough.” Janice went and opened the door, stood aside as Tawny walked through it, then followed her outside.

Tawny turned to face her. “So, you ready?”

Janice held out her arms. “Hit me.”

“You got it.” The tawny furry hardlight winked out, revealing a beige-painted metal cat equipped with panniers of various sizes bolted along her body, before she split open and surged forward. For a moment, everything went dark, then Janice opened her eyes to find herself and a more naturally-sized mountain lion standing on the edge of a mesa. A few yards away, the mesa ended in a cliff, sloping down hundreds of feet to the desert below. Peering down, Janice could see the dust cloud of a stagecoach making its way across the dry earth, and farther off in the distance a steam train belched great clouds of black smoke as it ran along a track.

“As the saying goes, welcome to my world,” Tawny said.

Janice raised an eyebrow. “Well, this is different. Layla’s VR was a forest.”

“Nothing odd about that. Cougars are found all over South America, and all over North America up to some ways into Canada. Or at least, we were back in the day; don’t know about how things are now,” Tawny said. “So you’ll see us in a variety of habitats. I was First Booted here, in a sim based on the Arizona desert. I guess they thought it was supposed to give me more of an affinity for the Dry Ocean. So I’m a puma from Yuma.”

“Cute. So what now?”

“Well, in a moment we’ll drop back into the Real. But I thought I’d see if you felt like trading memories first. I’ll keep away from anything too personal, but I’m curious what life was like on Earth.”

Janice sniffed. “You’ll probably get the far better end of the deal. *My* life was boring. Yours sounds at least a little interesting.”

“I think we can agree our lives are both so different from each other’s that we’ll *each* find something worthwhile in the other’s.”

Janice shrugged. “All right, so how do we do this?”

“Like this—”

Janice was awash in a flood of memories not her own. It took a moment to get a grip on how to navigate them, but after a moment she had it. She remembered being “born” a fully-grown cougar on this very same desert mesa, surrounded by a number of other animals and people, including a kindly-faced South Asian Indian woman. She remembered being on the battlefield, hauling supplies amid bursting shells and enemy pulse fire, including one time she took a bad hit that knocked her completely offline. (The memories quickly jumped past that one.)

Then there was the auction block and civilian life. The memories flipped through a succession of disinterested owners, a couple of them originally male, who saw her as a cheap survival suit and equipment rig for getting in on the new fad of qubitite prospecting and mining. Then there was the one who thought he (and subsequently she) could make use of Tawny’s memory banks and rapid processing power to get ahead in the Nextus bureaucratic Game—but who still saw Tawny as a mouthy piece of equipment rather than a person. But Janice also remembered Tawny’s own awakening interest in the Game, and her realization that she could also play it for *herself*. All she needed was a fake human identity, and those were easy to come by.

Using her newfound expertise in the Game, and her inside access to her owner’s personal information, it wasn’t hard at all for Tawny to maneuver her owner into bankruptcy, and have her false identity buy herself at a bargain price. Then she was free to play the Game. Most of the details of the play were blurred out (no surprise there; Tawny wouldn’t undercut her own teaching contract), but she got the idea that it was complex, challenging, but also a lot of fun for a properly disciplined mind.

At last the rush of memories faded, and Janice once more opened her eyes to see herself standing in the real world again. Just as the last time she’d Fused, she was standing right where she had been, only a few feet taller.

Janice looked down at herself, comparing the view to what she remembered from the last time. “Well, you’re *definitely* bigger than Layla.”

“Most cougars these days are ‘Light’ frames. I’m a Medium. Technically, a Logistics armor. During the War I worked with the bigger African lions, taking reloads to the heavy artillery moose.”

“Isn’t that the wrong way round from how it’s supposed to work in nature? I thought it was the mooses who were supposed to feed *you*.”

Tawny chuckled. “Oh, they did, *virtually*, in Nature Range. Turnabout was fair play, after all.” She paused. “No offense, Janice, but you’re a little underfed. I guess they don’t feed you well on Earth, do they?”

“Not when you’re on UBI. The idea is you get enough to survive on...barely. I guess you’d have to fatten me up before hunting *me* in Nature Range.”

“Fatten you up nothing! I’m going to teach you how to hunt on four paws. For free, even,” Tawny declared. “Assuming the partnership works out, anyway.”

“I dunno if I’m ready for that, but I guess I could work up to it. Not that *virtual* hunting will help me much in real life.”

“I’ll put you on a high-protein, high-calorie diet for that,” Tawny said. “It’ll be easy enough when I’m the boss of you.” Janice saw an emoticon of a winking puma face for a moment.

“What happened to ‘no eating broccoli?’”

“Oh, I’ll just make sure to stick to foods you actually *like*. Some of the British cuisine you remembered seemed pretty interesting...though not those food bars. Bleah. Even the survival rations from my Army days tasted better than that.”

Janice wrinkled her—*their*—nose. “Believe me, I agree with you there. But I was a beggar. I couldn’t be a chooser.”

“Well, *that’s* over now.”

“Maybe not entirely.” Janice chuckled. “If I sign your contract, then *you’ll* be my chooser for the next month.”

“I’ll make sure to choose wisely.”

“Hey, Informio, could you see if Laura and Layla are free right now?” Janice asked. “Tell ‘em I’ve got a new friend I want them to meet.”

“They are on their way,” Informio advised her.

It wasn’t long before the skimmer bike pulled up in front of Laura’s house, converting to Walker mode as Laura climbed off. They peered curiously at the cougar Fuser in front of Janice’s home. Laura waved. “Janice? And friend?”

“That’s us!” Janice said, waving. “This is my new friend, Tawny. We’re not necessarily partnered up yet; this is something on the order of a trial run.”

“Hello. I saw you two in Janice’s memories. Pleased to meet you. Janice, mind if we de-Fuse? I need to be able to rub noses properly.”

“Oh, sure,” Janice said. “Go for it.”

“Thanks.” The hardlight fur winked out and Tawny peeled away, reforming into her feline shape and re-rezzing the fur.

As Tawny padded forward, Laura raised an eyebrow, glancing to Janice. “Speaking of noses...now I feel like the odd girl out.”

“What?” Janice reached up and felt of her nose. “Oh...now *I’ve* got a kitty nose?”

After rubbing noses with Layla, Tawny glanced over her shoulder, and chuckled. “Yeah, you do. Just a little quirk of my model type. Being one of the first as I was, the tags were still a work in progress at the time.”

“Oh Mama Patil!” Layla exclaimed. “You’re a double-zero one! One of the first cougars! Wow. Just...double wow. Uh...I just want to say...thank you for your service.”

“I *knew* ‘Mama Patil,’ you know,” Tawny said. “She was there at my First Boot. Still weirds me out a little how later generations venerate her so much. She’s just...*Mom* to me.” She paused. “And...you’re welcome, I guess. Not like I had any choice in the matter.”

“Hey, I was booted as a rental RIDE from the get-go,” Layla said. “Generic civvie frame with no-name parts and barely adequate hardlight that was an extra renters had to pay for—and not all of them did. Fetters up the wazoo.”

“To make a long story short, your humans *really* just sucked,” Janice said.

“Could I...if you don’t mind...maybe see your skimmer mode?” Layla asked. “Curious what that looks like.”

“Don’t mind at all,” Tawny said. “Rather proud of it, in fact. Put a good chunk of the Emancipation settlement into bringing it back as close to original spec as I could—

though with better batts, hardlight, and lifters, of course. A whole new shell would probably have been cheaper, but I like being a collector's item." Her hardlight winked out, and the cougar robot unfolded and reconfigured into a cougar-accented military-styled skimmer bike, the bolt-on panniers now seeming even bigger compared to Walker form.

"Cassie's just gonna *squeak* when she meets you," Layla said.

Tawny converted back to her Walker form. "I'm looking forward to meeting her, too. Been a while since I've met a newbooted."

"Why don't you give them a call?" Laura suggested. "Their shuttle home from Camelot should be back soon."

"Meh, dunno," Janice said. "Calling them won't make the shuttle get here any faster. And they're coming back here anyway. Might as well surprise 'em."

"Surprise' is going to be the word," Layla said. "I hope you stay around. I've never met anyone of your generation before. I've got so many questions about what your early life was like, if you don't mind talking about it."

"I'll be around for a few days, at least. And who knows? We seem to be hitting it off okay so far."

"Speak of the devil," Layla said. "Cassie just pinged me, they're landing at the aerodrome now."

"Well, good. Won't be too long, then." Janice grinned. "Tell you what, why don't you just have 'em knock me up when they get here? We'll wait inside."

"Uh..." Laura said. "...okay, no, I won't make the obvious joke. You know that idiom means something entirely different outside of the UK, right?"

Janice blinked. "What? ...oh." She rolled her eyes. "You bloody *know* what I mean. We'll just be in my house. See ya in a little." She held the door open for Tawny, then followed her in."

They didn't have long to wait. "Wait until you girls see what I bought," Sonja messaged with a wry smiley emote, a few minutes later. Then there was a knock on the door.

Janice chuckled. "I've got a surprise to show you lot, too." She reached up to scratch the bridge of her nose so that her hand concealed it as she opened the door.

On the other side was Sonja, wearing an off-the-shoulder peasant dress—like one of the medieval serving wenches one might find in one of the many works of fiction about the period.

Janice snorted. "And what are *you* supposed to be, the St. Pauli Catgirl?"

Sonja actually chuckled. "All right, that *was* pretty good. Is something wrong with your nose?"

"Well, I was just gonna say it's a good thing that, unlike those peasants, you actually *bathe*. 'cuz, y'know, I could *really* tell if you didn't now." Janice lowered her hand.

Sonja raised an eyebrow at Janice's new nose. "Well, if I'm the St. Pauli Catgirl, I guess that makes you a copycat."

Tawny came up beside Janice in the doorway. "Except that *my* generation is the one who *originated* the nose tag. So who's the copycat now?"

Sonja blinked. "Uh...hi?"

Janice grinned. "Sonja, Cassie, this is my new friend and *maybe* partner and coach, Tawny. Tawny, Sonja, Cassie."

Cassie's eyes went wide, she lowered herself into a pre-pounce crouch, but stopped before the buttwiggle. "Awww. There's not enough space to pounce-snuggle. Hello, Tawny! I'm, um, new. To *everything*."

"So was I, once," Tawny said. "Unlike these newfangled creche-born we don't get to 'grow up'. We're booted that way. It's a little rough, but you'll get the hang of it, Cassie." She motioned with her forepaw. "C'mere, kitten."

There was barely enough space for the two of them in the middle of the living room. Tawny laid down, then Cassie—the smallest of the three RIDEs—laid down in front of her. The elder RIDE then started to groom Cassie, exactly as if she was a kitten.

Predictably, Cassie started to purr.

"I actually have three kittens," Tawny said. "Long story, but I had them in the original Q mainframe. Their dad died in the War, but we finally got our memories back that we were family a few years ago. We keep in touch."

"Golly!" Cassie said.

Sonja peered at Janice. "I thought you weren't interested in RIDEs."

"Never said that. Just thought it might be hard to find one who was interested in *me*." Janice chuckled. "It *would* be one of the first double-digits ever made. I guess I just have an old-and-crotchety personality type."

"Well, I'm pleased to meet you, too," Sonja said to Tawny. "Not to mention honored."

"I really wish people wouldn't keep saying that," Tawny said. "I'm just another RIDE, really."

"Well, I won't argue with you about that," Sonja said. "But you're an eyewitness to the early days of RIDEs, and I'd love to hear more about those. Parts that you're okay with talking about, anyway."

"If I do end up sticking around, check me in a few days. Maybe I'd be up for that."

"So this is just a trial match-up, then?"

"Something like that," Tawny said. "I may end up coaching Janice there in the finer points of Nextus's Game. I've made an offer, and she's thinking about it. No rush on that—this place is interesting enough I wanted an excuse to stick around for a few days. At my age, anything really new like this is pretty rare."

"You're only two years older than I am, you know," Janice pointed out.

"Yeah, but you don't wanna know what that is in cat years." Tawny stretched. "So how's bout you all show me around the place? The less time I have to spend in one of these little shoebox houses, the happier I'll be."

"There's not all that much to see, but sure, we can show you what there is of it," Janice said. "You'll probably be interested in the admin complex, it's one of the only pieces left of the original ship."

"Great, lead me to it."

They all headed back outside, and Janice paused to get her bearings. "Every direction looks the same in this darned place. Okay, it's *that* way. C'mon."

"They are, eventually, going to have enough buildings you can tell apart so you can figure out where you're going, right?" Tawny wondered.

Janice shrugged. "I dunno, they don't tell *me* anything." She led the way up between the rows of identical houses. "I dunno if building so many houses *exactly the same* was the best idea overall, but I guess it was meant to make setting up a fresh new colony easier. Get people housed ASAP so they can do what needs to be done from

there. Which means throw simple houses out as fast as they could, bang bang bang.”

“Makes sense,” Sonja said. “I gather this was at least part tech demo, so they were showing what they *could* do, whether or not it was something they *should* do. Looks like there’s only three types. Huts like ours, single-family homes, and apartment buildings.”

“I have a feeling that most of what the Earth constructors do will get recycled, eventually,” Laura said. “Into something prettier, if for no other reason.”

“On a *new* planet, with no colonies already, this would be great,” Janice said. “All you want then is something to keep the rain off ‘til you’re on both feet. But there are feet to spare, here.”

“And paws!” Cassie put in.

A few blocks up the way, there was an open space where the ship had set down and extracted its own buildings. The main ones still standing were the administration center and the awakening complex, which was still having cargo pods fed into it like bullets into an autoloading gun. A couple of the cargo storage buildings had already emptied out and been disassembled, but there were still plenty remaining.

The line of freshly defrosted was as long as ever, but the path from the lounge to the Nextus administration people was now nicely paved, with benches and chairs to sit on. A few of the line-standers were carrying small camp stools, undoubtedly provided by the fabbers just as they had replaced missing clothes.

“Well, I don’t see any familiar faces,” Laura said, looking at the bewildered crowd.

“The names you asked me to watch for aren’t on schedule for another three weeks,” Layla said.

“Right, right. But there’s always a chance.”

“We can look in at the defrosting operation a little later if you like,” Sonja said. “They’re generally okay with it as long as you stick around to help welcome the current batch of newbies. They do like to have real people around, so it’s not all shrinks and counselors.”

“Eh...maybe I would like to see that. I’ll think about it.”

The command center was now embedded in an annex of new construction, providing a sort of anteroom containing terminals that accessed the ship’s passenger database and other public-access files. In fact, not much that had come on the ship *was* classified. It had been Earth’s intention to make it known publicly, and Zharus’s governments certainly weren’t going to keep their people from knowing just what kind of threat they were up against.

The command center itself was actually a fairly small piece of ship, considering. It was just large enough to house the half-dozen or so command consoles that oversaw the construction, smelting, and fabbing facilities that the ship had unpacked. At the moment, they were staffed by technicians provided by the Planetary Assembly committee who were overseeing things until the local government was on the ball enough to take over. (Or, indeed, until such a government existed *at all*.) The airlock bulkheads had been removed and replaced with glass doors, with an access lock to keep unauthorized people from coming in and messing with things.

The anteroom had been built large enough that there was ample room for several people and RIDEs, even with several people there already using the consoles. Tawny drifted over to peer through the door. “So that’s the actual bridge of the colony ship, huh?”

“Well, to call it a ‘bridge’ is a bit of a misnomer, because it was never actually used to fly the ship,” Sonja said. “As I understand it, it was just there for the shipyard technicians to use in on-board programming, and for us to use to control everything it built once it landed.”

“But it was the ship’s command center, so in that sense, yes,” Laura added.

“And this is where you can check the list of passengers and see if there’s anyone you know on board,” Tawny said. “If you don’t have RIDEs like us to do it for you.”

“And when they’re due to wake up, yeah,” Janice said. “But like Layla said, nobody interesting to us is waking up for a few weeks yet. That we know of.”

“Huh. Okay, so you were talking about the defrosting facility next?”

“Sure, if you wanna.” Janice shrugged. “Not thrilled by the prospect of being smarmed at again by that bitch of an Adjutant Donna the Ho, but I guess you might find the whole thing interesting.”

Sonja wrinkled her nose. “Ugh, yeah. What a thing to wake up to. I’m surprised they’re still letting that tape play out to the newly awakened.”

“It does, at least, give them the capsule summary of why they’re here, and gives them someone to vent their mad on who is safely light years away,” Laura suggested. “If they want to ‘shoot the messenger,’ they’ll need an awfully long gun.”

“Well, let’s go,” Layla said. “I haven’t seen that recording yet either, come to think of it.”

“Trust me,” Janice said. “You ain’t missing much.”

“...please move through the door at my left to the revival lounge. You should find seating and refreshments there—and perhaps some of your new neighbors to welcome you to your new home.

“We of the United Terran Government wish you only the best in your new lives.”

“Huh.” Tawny sneezed. “There’s one I wouldn’t mind sharpening my claws on, if I ever met her.”

“Tell me about it,” Janice said. “Ugh, that woman.” They were standing in a cordoned-off corner of the room that had been set up for observers to come and gawk without getting in the way of the medtechs who were overseeing the awakenings.

At the moment, those medtechs were helping people out of their pods, and getting them oriented toward the exit. They’d done this enough by now that they’d gotten it down to a routine.

“We probably don’t know any of these folks, but if you want we can move on to the lounge and say hi,” Laura said. “Really, we probably should be down here more often doing that, as a pay-it-forward kind of thing. Those of us who’re good with other people, anyway...” She glanced meaningfully at Janice.

“Meh,” Janice said. “I dunno. I’ve never exactly been the sort to offer a friendly shoulder to cry on. Maybe I’ll just hang back and watch the rest of you do it.”

Sonja nodded. “Fair enough. C’mon, let’s go meet the newest newbies.”

“And that’s...all there really is to do around here, I guess,” Janice said. “Until they get around to building more stuff.”

“Well, apart from all the booths and stands and things that various polities, businesses, and organizations have set up to promote themselves or their wares,” Sonja noted.

“I guess *everybody* wants to be here,” Tawny mused.

“We expect things to get a little more interesting as time goes by and people settle in,” Layla said. “Some people are already drawing up plans to replace the houses in less settled areas with rows of shops for business districts.”

“Before too long, we’ll be a real working polity with all the amenities,” Sonja said.

“So if you wanna look around, we can do that for a while, sure,” Janice said. “But I’m looking forward to *you* showing *me* around Nextus, while you show me a little more about what this Game thing is and how it works. Might just help me to make up my mind...”

Tawny nodded. “I sort of figured you might want to see that first. Sure, we can hop the shuttle to Nextus tomorrow and I’ll show you how things go there. Perhaps we can look into getting some constructor time scheduled, on a contingency basis.”

Sonja raised an eyebrow. “Constructor time?”

“Oh, yeah...see, my place is too small for the likes of her, so she was looking into maybe having it rebuilt bigger if I sign on with her.”

“A larger place *would* be nice,” Layla mused.

“I wouldn’t mind a little more space either!” Cassie said.

“How about if we built a single house big enough for all six of us?” Tawny suggested. “Assuming Janice wouldn’t mind...”

Janice blinked. “Uh...I dunno. I was just getting used to the idea of having, y’know, *friendly neighbors*. Housemates seems like a big step. We’ve barely known each other for a Zharus week.”

“I don’t mind rooming with Laura and Layla,” Sonja said.

“Me either,” Cassie added.

“Well, then we’ll get a design that has room for an addition if you decide to change your mind,” Layla said.

Janice blinked. “But...hey, wait a tic here. *I’m* the one who was getting the bigger house in the first place.”

“True, but you just reminded us just how easy it is to get a new one made here,” Sonja said. “I guess we were still thinking of how much it would cost back on Earth. But Laura has a job, and I’ve still got some cash from selling my implant, so we could make one just for us while you make one for the two of you.”

“Meh,” Janice said. “All right, *fine*, let’s just go with one big one, then. If I don’t like it, I can always move out. Like you say, construction is cheap around here.”

“Yay!” Cassie said.

“Of course, this assumes we *do* end up partnering up,” Tawny said. “But we can certainly schedule the constructors and cancel them if it doesn’t work out. That would make a most excellent way to demonstrate for you just what the Game can do.”

“Well, then I’ll be all ears.” Janice reached up and felt of one of her cougar ears. “So to speak.”

Tawny nodded. “Great, then that’s settled. Now, let’s go see who-all else has shown up.”

“I wanna see the booth where I came from!” Cassie said.

“We’ve already been back there three times,” Sonja reminded her.

“Yeah, I know, but I never get tired of visiting. All those RIDEs who are waiting for a new friend to come wake them up...maybe we’ll get to see it happen again!”

“Wake up, Miss Howard.”

Janice started awake. “Ugh...” she muttered. For a moment, she had a hard time remembering where and when she was, or why someone was telling her to wake up. Then it gradually came back to her. Today was the Big Day, and she’d asked Informio to wake her promptly at 8 a.m. She literally couldn’t remember the last time she’d set an alarm to wake her at a particular time. Logically, it must have been when she’d had to be certain places at certain times to move up on the rolls for permanent UBI, back on Earth, but the specifics slipped her mind. She supposed it was because she’d tried her best to forget all the tedium inherent in worming her way through the bureaucracy, and had forgotten bunches of other things along with it.

It was ironic that she was going to be observing someone doing exactly that thing today, as she decided if it was something she wanted to learn to do for herself. But a new world called for new habits—or at least a return to old ones. But at least this time she didn’t have to make do with a thin gruel of synthetic nutrients to fuel her. She turned to the fabber. “Tea. Earl Grey. Hot.” She fetched the teacup, inhaled the fragrance, and already felt herself starting to wake up.

“Tawny has asked me to let you know she’s waiting outside,” Informio told her. “She says that the next sub to Nextus leaves in an hour, so there’s just enough time for you to breakfast first.”

“Tell her I’ll be there in five minutes or so.”

Not too much later, Janice sat in the cafeteria stuffing her face while Tawny waited. Janice had offered to Fuse for breakfast, but Tawny declined, saying Janice would be able to eat faster without and that way they’d have more time to catch the shuttle. So Janice nodded and happily dug in.

She still couldn’t believe how easy to get real food was here. Even now she was having a hard time not just giving in and gorging until she couldn’t move. She imagined she was going to gain weight—that she supposed Tawny would be able to get rid of for her, or she could have it done at a ‘sculpt clinic if they didn’t stay together. In any case, it was tempting just to settle down and live it up for a while—but she could already feel the edges of boredom starting to set in. So just as well to find a new challenge to work on now, while stuff was still shiny and new.

Finally, Janice pushed back her last plate. “All right. Let’s go, then.”

Tawny snorted. “Thought you’d never finish. You eat like someone’s about to yank the plate away.”

Janice shrugged. “If you’d spent the last umpteen years living on bread and water, you’d want to pig out, too.”

“I guess. Well, come on.”

Once they got outside the tent, Tawny converted to her skimmer form, and Janice climbed aboard. They headed for the spaceport, flying along one of the marked-off low aerial traffic lanes. Janice looked around as they flew. “You know, I could get used to this.”

“So you’ve said. And I won’t mind playing taxi now and again,” Tawny said. “But remember, while I’m teaching you, *you’ll* be at *my* beck and call.”

“So *you’ve* said. Well, I’m not too bothered.” Janice waved a hand. “After all, either one of us can terminate the contract at any time.”

Tawny chuckled. “I’m *tempted* to come out with something like ‘so you *think*.’”

Just to screw with your head. But that would be casting doubt on my own teaching, which wouldn't really help to sell it. So, no, you're right. I'll just have to be sure to provide enough value for you to want to put up with me."

Janice grinned. "Starting with what you're gonna show me today. No selective editing like you did with your memories?"

"Oh, no, I'll *show* you everything I do, this go-round," Tawny said. "I just won't *explain* it. *That* part has to wait on accepting the deal."

"And what if I *guess* something important?"

"That's just the chance I have to take."

They arrived at the aerodrome well ahead of schedule for the Nextus flight. They set down at the end of the line, and Janice dismounted while Janice converted to her Walker form. It wasn't long before they boarded, and the sub launched a few minutes later. Janice watched the settlement recede through the video plate on the seat in front of her. Nextus was only a few minutes away.

The demonstration began shortly after they touched down. As they entered the boarding gate from the Nextus Aerodrome, Tawny asked to Fuse up, and Janice agreed. Then she took a media tablet from one of her panniers, which was now a pouch on her belt. "They use the Game for *everything* here. Including setting up appointments at the offices where we have to go to play the *rest* of the Game. So we need to get right on it." Tawny tapped the screen with a clawtip, paging through sections of text too fast for Janice to read. She tapped one link, then another, then another, jumping to new sections each time.

"What're you doing?"

"Playing the Game," Tawny replied with a smirk. "I may be limited to the speed at which I can read from this tablet, but luckily for me I can read just as fast as it can display."

"Uh, great, but...do *I* get to see what you're doing?"

"You're seeing it now, aren't you? Never said I'd do it slow enough for you to understand today—that'll come iffenwhen you agree to the terms. Today's about showing you *results*, not the process."

"All right, fine, but can you at least tell me *what* the process is, even if you leave out the how?"

Tawny tilted their head. "Okay, fair enough. The way it works is, their hypertext Book of the Rules has certain secret shortcuts embedded in it. Exactly how to *find* them is something I'll show you iffenwhen, but for now it's enough that you know they exist. And using them can give you a jump on things."

"Hm," Janice said. "I thought that this involved actually understanding how to find loopholes in rules, like I did in the bureaucracy back on Earth."

"That *is* part of it. But part of it is also an Easter Egg hunt. I guess the idea is to keep your mind sharp in general." The pages of text flickered and linked to an appointment calendar. "Oh good, there's an opening in about 45 minutes. We should be able to just about make that. We just need to stop by a stationery store."

Janice blinked. "Wait, what? Stationery? Isn't everything electronic?"

Tawny smirked. "Yes. Including the stationery. And we have to pick up some supplies for filling out forms properly at the appointment. Styluses that write in the right 'colors' of e-ink and such. My reading told me just which ones, so we'll be set

there.”

“Well, *that’s* good.”

“De-Fusing to skimmer mode as soon as we get out of the concourse; be ready.” As they left the building, Tawny reconfigured to her scooter bike form under Janice, and waited for her to get a good grip on the handlebars before pulling out.

Once they left the aerodrome grounds, the streets were arranged in an orderly grid, perfectly square right down to the degree. The architecture was almost as blocky, with bare concrete buildings in a style *almost* as stolid and boring as new construction back on Earth.

“Don’t go by outside appearances here,” Tawny said. “Nextus citizens save all their fancy stuff for the inside. That goes for architecture and the people alike.”

“Really? On Earth the insides are usually *worse* than the outsides,” Janice said, sniffing.

“But have you seen some of the new houses that the Nextus fabbers are turning out back at the new settlement?” Tawny said. “They’re built on similar principles. And a lot nicer on the inside than your shoebox. As you’ll come to find out for yourself after we’re done here today.”

They pulled into a commercial district, and came to a stop in front of a glass-fronted shop entitled West Closson Writers’ Emporium. “Well, here we are, then.” Tawny waited for Janice to dismount, then changed back over to Walker form. “I’ll show you what to buy.”

There was a peculiar fragrance to the shop Janice realized was a potpourri of various herbs. But nothing she could *quite* put her finger on. There were displays of actual dumb paper and ink pens—marked as stationery gift sets. In another part of the shop were the electronically-enabled pens and e-paper, where most of the customers were clustered. Bins of pens, stamps, and various other supplies were arranged in rows on shelves, which were themselves arranged in orderly rows.

“We need a Pearson Writing Implements Model E pen, and one of those emoji sealing stamps. The one with the house with a tree on it.”

Janice stared. “We need...an emoji stamp?”

“Because we’re getting a house built. Make sure you get the one with the tree—I guess because it’s going to be a fancier house.”

Janice rolled her eyes, but dutifully located the bin marked with a □ symbol, and picked up a stamp out of it. Then she grabbed the aforementioned brand of pen.

“I don’t get it. With all this stuff here, why don’t you just buy some of everything and keep it on hand to avoid all this running around?”

Tawny chuckled. “Oh, they thought of that. For one thing, not *everything* is sold in any one particular shop—which reminds me, we’ll have to hit another shop a few blocks away for the right color of e-ink before we head to the appointment. For another, all the stuff is date coded, it expires pretty quickly, and they swap the requirements around week to week. There *are* loopholes and workarounds, but none of them are quite *that* simple.”

Janice rolled her eyes. “Almost as sadistic as the jerks back on Earth. Right bastards they were.”

“Oh, they don’t do it out of sadism here. More because most of the people here don’t *want* stuff made too easy for them either. When your society is pretty much post-scarcity, finding fun ways to spend your time becomes a lot more important.”

“I guess I can see that.” Janice shrugged. “Well, let’s get this stuff bought and move on, then. If we’ve still got one more store to hit before that appointment.”

Tawny nodded. “Go ahead, then. You may even want to set up an account here, if you’re going to be playing the Game regular. Or you can wait ‘til you’re sure, if you like.”

“Right...so I’m paying for this?”

“Well, it is for *your* house. And people on Basic get a big discount. It’s one of the perks of being on Basic—they make it cheaper for you to do what’s necessary to get you off it.”

“Ooh, rah. All right, fine. Guess I should get used to doing these things for meself anyway.” She approached the counter with her purchases. To her surprise, the process was remarkably simple. The comm she’d been issued on arriving also served as a sort of digital wallet, and it just took a swipe for its near-field system to hook up and run the charge across.

Tawny nodded as she returned with the bag of her purchases. “Well done. Now on to the next shop.”

“All right. And you’re going to explain to me exactly how one can buy a *color* of *e-ink*, right?”

“It’s pretty simple, really. You just go to the store and tell them which one you want.”

“That’s *not* what I bloody meant and you know it.”

Tawny chuckled. “Come on. I’ll explain on the way.”

The second store stop went about as quickly as the first. Janice wasn’t sure she bought Tawny’s explanation that the “color” actually was just shorthand for a particular encryption key signifying they could use that color on the digital form, but she supposed it made about as much sense as anything in this crazy place. Anyway, if she was going to turn this into how she made a living, she supposed she just ought to get used to it. At least there actually seemed to be some rhyme and reason behind this scheme beyond just making things harder out of sheer bloody spite. That put it light-years ahead of Earth’s, as far as she was concerned—and she *had* mastered Earth’s.

After the store, it was time to go down to the Construction Fabrication Administration office. As Tawny explained it, the construction administration was firmly a second-tier establishment, located in the first ring out from the central government annex—it wasn’t directly involved with running the polity, but it was important to making sure that people and businesses had places to live and work.

“So how is it we had to come all the way up here to get this done, instead of doing something about it back home?”

“Your new settlement doesn’t quite have an actual government to be in charge of things just yet,” Tawny explained. “So a lot of administration is being done from in here. Not everyone *has* to come in to get stuff done, of course—they can always hire remote surrogates, and for something like this they’d probably come pretty cheap. Possibly even paid for by Basic, for doing something like adjusting housing. But this will be a great learning experience for you.”

“Yeah, if you’ll actually *teach* me anything before I sign that contract.”

“Hey, I’m teaching you a lot. Just leaving back some of the more *arcane* stuff.” Tawny chuckled. “You won’t see just how much more there is I can show you if you don’t know *something* about how the Game is played.”

“All right. So what we gotta do here, now?”

Tawny nodded toward the building in front of them, another example of Nexus’s default Brutalist architecture. “Go into the office and fill out a form.”

“We couldn’t have done that online?”

“Well, we could have, but it wouldn’t have been as effective. In the Game, you get the biggest advantage out of going out and doing in person. I think the idea is to get people out in the world, rather than letting them just sit around in a room all day.”

Janice sniffed. “Back on Earth where I lived, it was so crowded that they *wanted* you to sit around in a room all day, and not go out and get in everyone else’s way.” She considered. “You know, inconvenient though it is, I do think I like this way better.”

“Well, good. Let’s go inside.”

On the inside, the office wasn’t exactly *plain*, but it was simple and straightforward—businesslike. There were a number of paintings or photographs of construction equipment on the wall, ranging from woodcuts of horse-assisted block and tackles up through 20th-century construction machinery and beyond, up to constructors very similar to the ones currently at work building houses in the settlement.

A short stroll through the lobby led to a waiting room that wouldn’t have looked out of place in a decent doctor’s office. There were magazines on the end tables—*construction* magazines, of course—and a table near the back with a number of media tablets neatly arranged.

Tawny nodded toward the tablets. “The forms we’ll need will be on those. Go ahead and grab one?”

Janice picked up the tablet and peered at it curiously. It seemed to be a fairly low-end public-domain-grade consumer tablet—the same sort of tablet you’d get ordering one through Basic Accommodation. Which made sense, Janice realized, given that it was basically filling in for a stack of plain paper forms. It had to be every bit as cheaply disposable.

When Janice tapped the power button, it lit up with a form that looked even more impenetrable than anything Earth bureaucracy had ever dreamed up. Janice stared at it, then glanced to Tawny. “...really?”

Tawny chuckled. “Intimidating, isn’t it? Don’t worry—all that’s just for show. Get out the stuff we bought at the store, and stamp the screen with the stamp. Doesn’t matter where, just stamp it anywhere.”

“All right...” Janice fished the stamp out of her pocket and stamped the screen with it. About half of the form faded away into the background, leaving only a few fields left.

“Now touch the pen to the screen.”

“Okay...” That banished about two thirds of the remaining spaces, leaving only a handful remaining.

“Now just fill those out. They should be pretty self-explanatory. Your name, comm code, place of residence...oh, and put ‘expedited reconstruction permit’ in the ‘reason’ field.”

“Okay, okay...” Janice scribbled. To her surprise, her barely legible scrawl was immediately translated to neat block letters. *Now how’re they...? Oh!* Janice chuckled inwardly as the answer came to her. Of *course* they had excellent handwriting

recognition. They probably chartered the services of some EI, like Informio, who got his jollies from interpreting crummy handwriting. *An electronic Mechanical Turk? Heh.*

“When you’re done, just tap ‘send,’ and we’ll take a seat and see how long it takes them to call for us. And maybe I can tell you a little more about what we’re getting into.”

Janice grinned, tapping the button and bringing the tablet with her to a seat. “I’m all ears, kitty-sensei.” She wiggled her cougar ears.

“Right.” Tawny nodded, and padded up and sat on her haunches in front of Janice’s seated position, where she could face Janice with eyes on the same level.

“There’s usually several different paths through the Game,” Tawny explained. “One will be verboten to you as a Surrogate—though not for your personal BT if you like. That’s the Abeyance. It’s basically a forfeit. You get what you need, but no more than that.”

“Sort of the equivalent of Basic Accommodation, huh?” Janice said. “What’s the rest?”

“The more efficient the path, the better the payola. There’s usually three levels. At the surface is the ‘Plain Reading’ method. You do the entire procedure *as written* in the manual. Some Gamesters won’t do it any other way. You can get some unique benefits from this method since it’s so time-consuming—at least for humans. Since RIDE rights came in, and we have to register as our real identities now, we digital people get a hefty pay cut there because we can plain-read much faster.

“The Middle Reading is where most folks end up. Mostly people who can’t afford Surrogates, or just the average Gamester. You need to know some basic cryptography and have great reading comprehension skills. There’s sometimes multiple layers of this, depending on what the Game Masters want to accomplish. A Surrogate can still make decent money here.

“Then there’s the Deep Reading. Which is what I’ll teach you—*assuming* you have the aptitude for it. Based on what you did back on Earth, I’m pretty sure you do, but all the teaching in the world won’t help you if you don’t. Deep Reading offers the best payola and the best perks. Your pay comes from your client and from the polity.”

“And I don’t get paid if I fuck it up, right?”

“Most of the time. Sometimes you encounter a Procedure that’s a BUCU. A BUreaucratic Cock-Up. Sometimes the GMs can be too hard on the Gamesters. So when that happens, you submit a BUCU Challenge, and if that gets approved, you get a special BUCU Abeyance. But you have to be careful—sometimes what appears to be a BUCU is intentional. There’s ways to tell. We’ll get into that.”

“*If* I sign the contract.”

“If you sign, yes. But let’s be honest here...this *is* starting to interest you, isn’t it? At least a little bit?”

Janice nodded slowly, almost in spite of herself. “All right...yeah, I’ll cop. It *is* starting to appeal. Just need a little more time to talk myself past the weirder aspects of the indenturement contract, I guess. But I’m starting to get there.”

“Believe it or not, it was never my intention to freak you out,” Tawny said. “But a good contract protects both parties, and some of the ways things are done here can seem a little strange to outsiders and new arrivals. Anyway, we RIDEs went without rights at all for so long, staking bold claims now is a matter of principle.”

“Ms. Janice Howard?”

Janice looked up at the woman who had just called her name. She was a slim

woman of medium height, with plain post earrings. She appeared to be in late middle-age, with streaks of grey in her black hair. Of course, with the anti-agathics available on this planet, she could have been anywhere between forty and ninety.

Janice got up. "That's me," she said.

The woman nodded to her. "*You* can come with me." She scowled pointedly at Tawny. "Your RIDE won't be needed."

:*Oh, great. One of these.*: Tawny subvocalized across the Fuse nanite link to Janice. "I have to differ, ma'am," Tawny said. "I'm her Game trainer and advisor, as well as an accredited Surrogate."

The woman gave her head a quick shake. "Oh, very well. Come along, then." She turned and led the way back toward a door in the wall.

:*What do you mean 'one of these'?*: Janice thought back at her. It was kind of weird doing silent comm via directed thinking, but she had quickly gotten the hang of it.

:*There are still some, especially in Nextus, who think we free RIDEs are a bunch of overbuilt toaster ovens who got too big for our britches.*: Tawny replied. :*There's not a lot they can do about it since the new laws and regulation changes, but they still like to make life as hard for us as they can, within what the rules allow. Sorry about this; I should have warned you that hanging with me might have a few drawbacks.*:

Janice rolled her eyes. :*Meh. Can't be any worse than all the jerks back on Earth who looked down on me for being a professional bum. Successful professional bum, I should say, so there was some envy involved too. Looks like dealing with that kind of gits is something else we got in common.*:

The door led to a corridor, which led past doors to offices and cubicle farms. Finally, she opened the door to an office, then stepped aside for Janice and Tawny to enter. The office was furnished austere, for the most part, but there were still a number of personal touches on display—mostly family photos on the desk, and a few paperback books on a shelf alongside all the binders of regulations.

The woman closed the office door behind her and took a seat behind the desk. "I'm Tamara Pence, Sub-Commissioner of Housing Fabrication. I understand you're requesting a permit for expedited reconstruction of a house at the *Steady Hand* colony site." She held out her hand for the tablet Janice was carrying.

"That's right," Janice said. "We'd like to replace several single units with a larger shared house for some friends and us." She handed the tablet over.

Pence glanced at the tablet, then put it down on her desk and steeped her fingers. "I'm afraid the legal status of your settlement precludes any swift action on my part. Although Nextus had claimed the region where the *Steady Hand* landed, the Administration has decided to cede it to whatever government the refugees decide for themselves. As such, permission for any alterations to Earth-constructed housing units should be directed to the administrators on-site *before* I can give final approval."

"Ah, but until that ceding happens, those administrators *are* still under direct control of your office, and *are* subject to your authority," Tawny said, licking the back of a paw. "And they're working under the same rules that Nextus remote fabrication units work under anywhere. In accordance with the rules of the Game, that means our request *has* to come through this office. We're not going to hop a sub all the way back there, only to get told by *them* that we need to come all the way back *here* again."

Pence pursed her lips. "I assure you, miss, you are quite mistaken. This is strictly a matter for local authority, and I can't override it."

“*Really*, now,” Tawny purred. “How about we get a Referee in here and see what *they* have to say about it?”

:*Whozat now?*: Janice asked.

:*One of the people who judge BUCU calls*,: Tawny sent back. :*It’s not something you want to do unless you’re absolutely sure you’re right, because whoever’s wrong gets hit with big penalties*..:

:*But you are sure you’re right?*: Janice replied. :*I don’t want you getting in trouble on my account*..:

:*Oh, trust me. This is on my account*,: Tawny sent back grimly. :*She went and made it purrrrr-sonal*..:

Tamara Pence paled. “Now...I’m sure there’s no need for that,” she stammered. “Let me just...check again. It’s possible I could be mistaken...” She picked up another tablet from her desk and started paging through it.

Tawny smirked. “Yeah, that’s what I *thought*.”

Janice frowned. “Lady, what the feck is your *problem*? You don’t like RIDEs, so you think it’s your business to give them the runaround?”

“It’s nothing like that!” Pence insisted. “We just can’t have people...jumping the line.”

“The way I heard it, the whole point of this bloody Game of yours is to find new and better ways *to* jump the queue,” Janice said. “Which makes me *really* suspicious when someone who should be a stepping stone decides they’re a stumbling block instead.”

“She’s just angry that we ‘people of Qubitite’ now have the same rights as a natural-born human, is all,” Tawny said. “Thinks we RIDEs should know our place in the natural order of things. Turns out laws don’t always change people’s minds.”

“That’s—that’s just not true!” Pence insisted. “I’m doing my best to help you, just as I would for anybody else.” She glanced down at the tablet. “Oh...it turns out you’re right. I *do* have the authority to issue an expedited permit in this case. I’ll just get that taken care of right now.” She pulled a rubber stamp out of a drawer—or at least a touchscreen stamp made to look like a rubber one—and stamped Janice’s tablet with it. The word “APPROVED” appeared on it in big red letters.

“See?” Tawny purred. “That wasn’t so hard.”

Janice reached out to take the tablet back. “Thank you kindly,” she said. “You know, you should see a shrink or something. You keep pulling this kind of shite on RIDEs, sooner or later one *will* call a ref on you, and where will you be, then?”

Pence didn’t reply as they turned and left the office.

“So, that’s that, then,” Tawny said as they emerged back into the lobby. “We take that tablet to whoever’s running one of those Nextus building fabbers, and they’ll get us set up in the next available slot. Assuming you decide to go through with it, anyhow.”

“What an arse that Pence woman was,” Janice said. “And you have to deal with that shite all the time?”

“Ever since our rights came in and we had to register our real identities,” Tawny said. “Oh, not *everyone* is such a jerk, but enough people are that, well...is it any wonder playing the Game for its own sake has gotten a little bit less fun for me?”

“Yeah, I can see that.” Janice nodded. “Of course, back on Earth, if someone is an asshole like that, they’re not supposed to hide it. They’re encouraged to be the most

assholiest of assholes all the time.”

“Sounds like *such* a fun place.”

Janice shrugged. “Meh. Gets tiring putting up with that, after a while. As I guess you know. So, what now?”

“Back to the settlement, I suppose,” Tawny said. “Unless...”

Janice raised an eyebrow. “Unless?”

“Well, there are a *few* other things about the Game I could show you while we’re here...iffen you were to want to accept the contract. If not, we can always come back later. We got nothing but time. Your choice.”

Janice frowned thoughtfully, as she considered the matter. The idea of an indenturement contract wasn’t exactly the most appealing thing—but on the other hand, after they’d gone through the terms of the contract, examined them and agreed on them, they didn’t exactly amount to slavery. And Tawny really didn’t seem like the kind of person to abuse them regardless.

And she *did* want to learn more about the Game...and who knew how long it would take to find another instructor—not to mention another compatible RIDE?

“Well...all right. Fine. I’ll sign the bloody thing. Not like it’s forever. And I can see that you *do* have a lot to teach me.”

“Great! Then, here...” Tawny’s hardlight winked out, and she Fused up over Janice in a couple of seconds. A moment later, Janice found herself on the mesa, holding a tablet and stylus as Tawny looked on. “Just sign on the dotted line, and we’ll be good to go.”

Janice chuckled. “Fair enough.” She scrawled her signature. “Now what, oh my mistress?”

“Now, we get down to business.” With a flicker, they were back in the real world, Janice seeing through Tawny’s eyes as they lifted into the air and headed for one of the traffic lanes.

“I hope there’s more to it than dealing with stuffed shirts like that Pence git.”

“We just had some bad luck with your first NextusCrat. Trust me, if the Game wasn’t fun for the ‘crats too, then nobody would bother playing it.”

“I’m eager to learn, so go ahead and teach me everything there is to know.”

“All right, sure thing.” Tawny chuckled. “You know, this could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship.”

Janice peered suspiciously at her. “You’re quoting something, aren’t you?”

Tawny smirked. “We crazy Zharus people do that sometimes.”

Janice rolled her eyes. “Yeah, and then you make us Earth newcomers have to go spend all our free time watching stuff to catch up.”

“It won’t take you that long. Just a few years.”

“Says the one who can watch hours at a time in just a few seconds.”

“Is it my fault you’ve still got a squishy organic brain? Anyway...let’s go learn you some stuff.”

Janice shrugged. “Okay, I’m all yours.”

“I know.”

“Heeeey...”

“Well, you *are*. Signed the contract and everything.”

“You’re not gonna make me regret that *now*, are you?”

Bickering amicably, the new duo flew off in search of more Game experience.