

A close-up photograph of a tiger's face, showing its eyes and the characteristic orange and black stripes. The image has a radial blur effect, making the tiger appear to be moving or vibrating. The text is overlaid on this image.

DESERTED

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with JonBuck

Chapter 1

March 16, 156 A.L.

Zane Brubeck wiped his forehead with the back of his hand, and looked ruefully at the moisture it came away with. *And there's a couple more milliliters of water gone.* At that rate, he'd be desiccated long before he made it out of this desert.

Oh, who are you kidding, he asked himself. *You're dead meat anyway. It's just your darned cussedness that makes you refuse to see it.*

Zane leaned around the corner of the spire of rock and looked up at the sun. Still several degrees above the horizon. He quickly retreated back into the shadows, where it was “only” 45 degrees Celsius. *Or 113 degrees by the old pre-stellar Fahrenheit system,* he thought inanely. *We should be using Fahrenheit on this dustball. Doesn't feel right for temperatures this hot to only have two digits.*

Either way, he could just barely survive out of direct sunlight, and that was only because he was far enough from the equator to be in what was laughably considered the “temperate zone.” If he'd gone down farther into the desert, that would have been all she wrote.

Moving slowly to avoid heat prostration as much as he could, Zane crawled back into the insulated survival tent that had been keeping the daytime temperature down to “only” 35. (*95 F*, his pedantic brain insisted. *Almost three digits.*) He still had a few more hours before it got cool enough to make some more distance.

He occupied the time by remembering each of his father's erstwhile “partners” by name and damning him (or in one case her) and the skimmer he (or she) rode in on. *Jim Dinsmore. Arthur Vigo. Audrey Landon. Bastards, all of you.* He spent a few minutes damning his own honesty and lack of common sense, too. *When you found they were cooking the books, why the hell did you think flying out to confront them in person was a good idea?*

He had to chalk it up to his own inexperience, he guessed. His Dad had been the one who actually founded the mining operation, not long after the new Sarium storage batteries had revealed the extremely useful properties of the qubitite deposits found in the deep desert. Clint Brubeck had been one of the old breed of surveyor-scout—half ace pilot, half geologist, half cartographer, half mechanic. And twice as big as life, to make

room for all the halves.

With a rickety old survey flier and a suit of IDE survival armor that was always breaking down, he'd found and staked a claim to one of the biggest qubitite mother lodes in the area, and managed to hold it against all comers until the Nextus claim authorities recognized it. Then he'd gone into partnership with several Nextus businessmen to see that the claim got worked properly. He hadn't been young even then, and he wanted to settle down and raise a family while there was still time.

Zane was the end result of that familial urge—or, rather, the *first* end result; he had two younger sisters, Agatha and Madison. His father had raised him to be a businessman, then died last year, right after Zane's 28th birthday, leaving him ownership of a 51% majority stake in the mine.

His father had never cared much for money, beyond having what he needed to live comfortably. He'd gotten more than enough to give his family a good home, put his children through college, and even support an expensive mechanical hobby. But when Zane had taken the reins of the business and gone over the books for the first time, he had noticed certain...irregularities. Certain it had been an honest mistake, he'd flown out to the mine itself to confront his father's partners.

He'd planned to be there all day, touring the qubitite mines and going over the books in detail. But after he'd met with Dinsmore, Vigo, and Landon and brought up the irregularities, the glances they'd exchanged began freaking him out. He'd cut short his tour and raced for home in his flier truck. In retrospect, he guessed that the early departure had "saved" him. If he'd left at the later time he'd planned, he would have been over the heart of the deep desert when the bomb went off—and after the batteries on his life support failed, he'd have had to decide whether to put a bullet through his own head or let himself roast alive.

As it was, he'd made it most of the way back to Nextus, and was only 800 kilometers short of his destination—well outside the hot zone—when he'd been forced down. *Yeah, it "saved" me all right, Zane told himself. Saved me for later. Out of the fire, into the frying pan.*

He'd had survival gear, of course. Apart from the water-recycling stillsuit he was wearing, and the thermal tent he was dossing in, he'd had his father's old IDE, Chauncey. (Which was why he'd been using a truck, rather than a sports flier. Sometimes he felt a little silly hauling the thing around, but it *was* his last link to his father. He took it everywhere; he could afford to.) And Chauncey had let him eke out almost 500 of those 800 kilometers before finally biting the dust.

Zane wasn't the mechanic his father had been, but he suspected that even if he had been it wouldn't have done him any good. The desert was strangely inimical to machinery—his father had seen many more mechanical failures here than he had on any of the other worlds he'd scouted, even those with just as harsh climate conditions. The commonly-accepted theory was that it was due to traces of qubitite in the sand interacting badly with machinery. The constant failures had made mining operations fairly slow going until the first fruits of those original operations had been ready to take up the slack.

Regardless, there hadn't been anything for it but to take the emergency survival pack and all the remaining rations and water he could carry and try to make the last 300 kilometers on foot when the temperatures dipped into the bearable range at nightfall. He was carrying a survival beacon, but the ion storms had been bad lately, and he doubted it would be picked up by anyone who wasn't right on top of him.

But he really didn't have any choice when you got right down to it. He could stay where he was and die slowly of thirst and starvation...or he could die slowly of thirst and starvation a few dozen kilometers away. It wasn't much of a choice, but it was *his* choice, and he'd never been one for taking the easy way out. Besides, his father had taught him a few things about desert survival, and he figured he had a pretty fair chance of making it at least close enough to civilization to get spotted. (He didn't know why the satellites hadn't spotted him already—but then again, as much money as his Dad's partners had stolen over the years, he was starting to suspect they could afford to buy some selective blindness.)

Zane sipped some more water, chewed a flavorless ration tablet, and dozed. When he woke, the last tail end of sunset was painting the western sky red and the temperature had dropped another few degrees. *Time to get started.* He collapsed the tent into a half-meter-by-half-meter square that stowed in his survival pack, hitched up his belt, and started walking.

Hard as it was to believe, this part of the desert would fall to just above freezing by the early morning hours. Unfolded a slightly different way, the tent would make a thermal cloak with hood to hold the heat in instead of keep it out, and let him keep walking clear through to a couple of hours past dawn when it started getting too hot again. If he was lucky, he might be able to make 20 kilometers tonight. *Yeah, and if you're really lucky your food and water will last you one more week, and you'll only die 150 km short.*

Zane pushed the gloomy thoughts aside and trudged onward. *I'm sure something will turn up.* But the words seemed as empty as the great vast desert he was walking through.

Untold hours of trudging later, Zane was coming out of the flat, sandy patches into a section of desert that looked more like Monument Valley on old earth. There were more spires, as well as canyons and pits that made Zane need to move slowly in the dark, checking the ground carefully with his survival light. Sometimes he had to take a detour, adding extra kilometers he could scarce afford—but then again, when you got right down to it, he was probably going to die no matter what, so what did it matter?

The desert was almost completely silent—probably due to the lack of rainwater meaning there was no life to be making any noises. It had been strange going at first, but now Zane didn't even notice it much anymore.

But Zane certainly noticed when the silence was broken, as the eastern sky was just starting to take on the first few hints of a rosy glow. It sounded like a distant roar—or maybe a grinding sound. Curious, Zane did his best to fix the direction of the sound and alter course toward it. It didn't sound natural, whatever it was, and maybe that could

mean rescue. And from the direction, it wasn't too far out of his way.

Whatever it was, it was pretty distant. Sound carried well in this silent desert. After only an hour of trekking toward it, he knew he wouldn't make it by the time the heat got too bad to travel, so he looked for a shady patch to pitch his tent. He was lucky enough to find a reasonably shallow overhang just in time, and after another few gulps of water he dozed off, woken from time to time by a repetition of that distant sound.

When sunset came, Zane got walking again. He took another swallow of recycled water from his suit, trying not to think about where it came from. A snatch of an old song ran through his head. "All day I face the barren waste, without the taste of water," he croaked. "Cool water." He couldn't remember what came next, but it was probably just as well. He didn't have much voice left anyway.

The sound got steadily louder through the night, and as the dawn approached again Zane came over a small rise and suddenly discovered the source of the sound. He pulled up short and rubbed his eyes, wondering if he was seeing things.

At the base of the rise was a small pit or sinkhole half-filled with sand, and sticking out of it was the front half of an orange and black striped cat—a tiger. The cat's roars had a distinct metallic tinge to them, and this was what had given them the grinding semblance from a distance.

The ground in front of the tiger was torn up with claw marks, and five distinct claw lines traced their way back to each forepaw, whose talons were dug into the rocky rim. But even as Zane watched, they slipped another centimeter, and another centimeter of the tiger sank into the sand. The tiger looked up, and its emerald-green eyes met Zane's.

For a long time, tiger and human stared at each other. Zane could almost see the struggle going on behind the tiger's eyes as pride warred with a need to survive, and finally survival won. "Help," it said quietly. "Please."

Then Zane understood. It wasn't a tiger after all—it was a tiger RIDE.

It was a little ironic, given that the qubitite he had mined had been in large part responsible for their birth, but Clint Brubeck had never much cared for RIDES—Reticulated Intelligence Drive Extenders, the animal-based mecha vehicles that the qubitite from the Dry Ocean desert made possible. The same technological advances that made possible their animal-like nature also made it possible for them to operate indefinitely in the Dry Ocean where older IDEs faltered and died.

But that animal-like nature also changed their operators—sometimes irrevocably. If you operated a RIDE in Fuser mode (in which it merged with your own body to provide life support) even one time, you received the parting gift of animalistic features—furry ears, and a tail that would get jammed in doors if you weren't careful.

And that was just the beginning. If the gender of your RIDE was not the same as your own, the Fuser nanites would adjust *you* to fit that Procrustean bed. Intentionally or accidentally buying a wrong-gendered RIDE was called "crossriding," and was fairly common among young men who needed RIDES for survival in the desert but couldn't afford the more expensive male models.

If he was honest, Zane supposed that was the bigger reason his father had gotten out of scouting and mining than just wanting to raise a family. He'd seen which way the wind was blowing, and didn't think it was worth adding unwanted parts to his body just to be able to continue it—especially when there were other people plenty willing to do it for him.

Zane hadn't been as vehement about it as his father, but he couldn't say he especially liked the idea of RIDE melding either—or RIDEs in general, for that matter. But his dislike didn't come just from body horror as much as the fact that that RIDEs were fully human-intelligent entities that were treated as a slave class by most of their operators. He didn't want anything to do with that, and as a result mostly stayed as far away from RIDEs as possible.

But avoiding *this* RIDE was not an option.

Zane took a longer gulp of water than he'd usually been allowing himself, and cleared his throat to try to talk. "I'll do what I can. Hang on."

"Thank you," the tiger said.

Zane pulled off his tent-cloak and folded it, then slid his backpack off and dropped it to the ground with a thud. He opened it and rummaged for a moment before coming out with a coil of nanoweave spidersilk survival line. Barely five millimeters thick, it would nonetheless support several tons of weight.

"What're you even doing out here, anyway?" Zane asked. "Where's your...um, partner?"

The tiger growled softly, then apparently remembered he was growling at the one person who might be able to save him. "Don't have one. Don't need one."

"Ah." Zane thought about that for a moment. He'd heard rumors of an enclave of emancipated RIDEs somewhere out in the deserts beyond Nextus, but had always passed them off as urban legend. Now, it seemed, he'd found some proof. "Well, listen. Whether you need a human or not in general..." He trailed off coughing as more dust got in his throat, and took another gulp to clear it. "That's none of my business. I don't care."

The tiger regarded him calmly—or as calmly as it could as its grip slowly slipped away. "But?"

"But if I save you, I need you to save me. Get me close to Nextus...or hell, anywhere else there's people. Then we're even—never have to see each other again. Got it?"

"Seems fair," the tiger said. "But *hurry, please*. I can't hold on much longer."

"Right." Zane uncoiled the rope, then ran to a nearby sandstone spire about the thickness of a good-sized tree and looped the line around it, then brought the two ends back to the tiger. "Here..." He wrapped them around the tiger's paws, then brought the slack up for the tiger to bite down on. "There. Now...um...can you pull yourself out?"

The tiger RIDE tried, straining with its jaw. It reclaimed a few centimeters from the sucking sand...but then fell back. "Can't...get traction," the tiger said, between teeth still clenched tightly on the rope.

Zane grabbed onto the rope a few meters up, tried to pull on it himself, but it was no good. "I'm not strong enough to pull you out. What do we do now?"

“Nrrgh. I’m thinking.” The tiger growled, even as he slipped another couple of centimeters.

Zane slumped down next to his backpack. “What’s your name, anyway? Do you have one?”

“I’ve had several,” the tiger said. “I like ‘Terry’ the most, so you can call me that if you want.”

“How’d you end up out here, Terry? If I can ask.”

The tiger was silent a moment, and Zane began to worry he’d accidentally offended him. Then he spoke. “My latest ‘owner’ accidentally freed me, and I ran away.”

“Accidentally?” Zane asked.

“He only meant to loosen some code fetters,” Terry said. “He erased all of them.”

“So you came out here?”

“There are no humans here.” The tiger glanced at him. “Well, *few* humans anyway. No one to force us to do anything against our will.”

“No one to save you when you fall down a sinkhole, either,” Zane reflected. “And the radio interference is so bad you probably can’t call for help any more than I can.”

“That...would be a drawback, yes.” The tiger slipped another centimeter or so, using up the last bit of slack in the rope. “What about you?”

“A case of terminal stupidity.” Zane explained about the cooked books, and his father’s crooked partners. “All these years, they were robbing my Dad blind. Now, to be fair, Dad never even noticed—he had enough to live on, and that was all he wanted. But I don’t think that’s any reason those lousy rats should get a free pass on what they’ve done—especially when they add trying to kill me in the bargain.”

“Harsh,” the tiger agreed.

Zane frowned. “And unless we can get you out of there, they’re going to get away with it. There’s got to be some way you can use your own strength to pull yourself out of there. You don’t have a winch or something in Skimmer mode, do you?”

“No,” Terry growled. “And I can’t change to it to blast out, either. The sand would get into my intakes. And my lifters aren’t strong enough to move this much sand either.”

“There’s something...something obvious I’m missing.” Zane frowned. “You can’t use your claws to pull yourself out. But...” Then the penny dropped. His eyes widened. “... what if you had *hands*?”

Terry’s eyes narrowed. “No. Absolutely not. I will *not* Fuse. Never again.”

“I can’t say I’m terribly eager to have a tiger tail myself,” Zane said. “I’ve *seen* how many times those things get caught in doors. But...tell me, is it true that your batteries could last several years in standby mode?”

“Yes. Why?” Terry asked suspiciously.

“Do you really look forward to spending every moment of the next few years buried while fully conscious?”

“I could shut myself down,” Terry growled, then subsided with a sigh. “But I don’t want to. You make...a very convincing argument.”

“Trust me, I don’t want to *keep* you,” Zane said. “You get me to town, we go our

separate ways, and I'll have nanosurgery to get rid of the fur if I have to. I just don't want to die myself, okay?"

"Very well."

"So how do you want me to do this?" Zane asked.

"Very slowly and carefully, climb down onto my back," Terry said. "Put your arms around my neck and let yourself down into the sand until you're lying as close against me as you can."

"Got it." Zane very carefully did as the tiger said, shedding his stillsuit for better skin contact. The sand felt warm against his body, but the hardlight fur of the tiger felt warmer. He held on tightly around Terry's neck and shivered despite the warmth.

This was it—the moment when he would lose his full humanity. Despite what he'd told himself earlier about his *real* reasons for disliking RIDEs, now that he was in the atheist's foxhole he was starting to realize that the feelings of body horror might have run deeper than he thought after all.

"So now wha—aaaah!" The tiger seemed to liquify beneath him, pulling him down inside. The tiger shimmered and changed, took a deep breath, then sank entirely beneath the sand, pulling the rope down in with it.

Then a moment later two hands burst out of the sand, still grasping and pulling on the rope, and as they went up, hand over hand, a tiger face emerged, then a torso, then hind legs and tail. Then the now-human-shaped tiger was standing free.

Zane looked around, then down at his fur-covered arms and legs, and back at his lashing tiger-tail. *:This is amazing!:* he thought. *:I feel so strong.:*

He heard a growling chuckle in the back of his mind. *:We are strong, you and I,:* Terry said. *:You have freed me. Thank you.:*

:Thank you,: Zane thought. *:If you hadn't agreed to Fuse, I couldn't have done it.:* He flexed his claws, staring at them in fascination. *:Um...well, I guess I should get out of you now that we're free.:*

:There's no hurry,: Terry said, with a flicker of amusement. *:This isn't as bad as I remembered. Do you see what direction Nextus is?:*

As Zane thought about the question, a navigation display came up before his eyes with the direction of the city precisely pinpointed on the compass. *:Yes...?:*

:Then let's run.:

:All right.:

Zane turned and ran, feeling better than he had since before crashing. Better than he ever had, in fact. He was certainly *running* faster than ever before.

A canyon came up in front of them, and Zane barely even slowed, gathering himself into a crouch then leaping it with room to spare (thanks to a little help from Terry's built-in antigravity lifters). At this rate, they would be in Nextus by noon.

As they ran, Zane couldn't have said how he knew it but he was aware of Terry opening up to him, allowing him complete access to his memories. He saw a succession of owners—a Nextus miner who had bought him new and all-metal, treated him like an appliance until he was all but worn out, then sold him for a pittance to an Uplift teen who

took him into a shop and had the metal swapped out for hardlight. Terry had actually liked that one, but he'd defaulted on the loan he took out to add all the hardlight and Terry had been repossessed.

He'd belonged to the dealership for a while, then been sold to a rental agency that specialized in desert cruises. After that, he'd been sold at surplus again to a tinkerer, who was the one who had accidentally freed him. The moment he'd gotten loose, he'd been off like a shot for the desert, hoping to make contact with AlphaWolf's band, but he hadn't watched where he was going carefully enough and had ended up in the sinkhole the day before.

Zane responded with feelings of sympathy and gratitude, and a willingness to let Terry see his own memories in return except he didn't know how.

:I see them. Thank you.:

:Hope you like them,: Zane sent. *:They don't seem like anything special to me.:*

While they'd examined each other's memories, the desert had slowly given way to signs of civilization—a few shacks or houses for hermits who could afford individual climate control out here, a couple of last-chance prospector supply outfits, and others. Then they came to the inter-city highway, with the Nextus city gates visible a few miles up the road. It was getting on toward midmorning now, with just the tail end of the morning rush passing on the street.

:You can let me out any time,: Zane sent. *:You've held up your part, so we're even. Thank you.:* He stopped by the side of the road, and triggered the split back to Walker form himself. The next thing he knew, he was kneeling next to a tiger, reaching up and fingering the new tiger ears and tail that had now sprouted out of his body. "You know, I think I'll keep these after all. As a souvenir."

"Actually, I was wondering if you'd like to keep something else, too." To Zane's astonishment, Terry knelt before him, bowing his head low on his forepaws and looking up at him.

Zane blinked. "You mean...*you*?"

"You did save my life," Terry said. "You fused with me, even though you didn't want your body changed. I *felt* how you felt about that." He rolled his shoulders in what Zane guessed was a tiger shrug. "All I did in return was give you a ride. I don't feel like I've paid my debt yet."

"It's okay, really!" Zane said. "I don't want to force you into anything."

And now Terry was *purring* and rubbing against Zane's leg. It was a little disturbing. "And that's why I want to stick around," Terry said. "You're about the first human I've ever known who felt that way. I'd just about decided you were a myth." He butted his head against Zane's hand, and Zane reflexively reached down to scratch him behind the ears. "So I feel I should investigate further, strictly in the spirit of scientific inquiry of course."

Zane chuckled despite himself. "Of course."

"And besides," Terry's voice turned a little colder. "I couldn't live with myself if the *next* time those bastards tried to dry-gulch you they succeeded."

“Oh, yeah. Them.” Zane had all but forgotten in his relief at being alive. He felt his tail start swishing as he contemplated what he wanted to do to them. It was an interesting sensation. “Well, if you want to buy in for a chunk of the revenge action, I’ll sure take your monetary units. I’m starting to see the benefits of having a RIDE around.” He chuckled. “But maybe *I* should be *your* pet. Between the two of us, I think you’ve got the better survival instincts.”

Terry purred some more. “I’ll consider that.”

Zane grinned. “At any rate, pard, we’ve got places to be and things to do. So would you care to show me what your Skimmer mode looks like?”

Terry chuckled. “Thought you’d never ask.” The tiger stretched out, then flipped parts around into a sleek tiger-striped hovercycle, floating a foot above the ground. “All aboard?”

Zane swung into the saddle. “Terry, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.” They headed for Nextus together.

Chapter 2

Zane rode in style up the highway toward Nextus, nestled snug in the low-hung fur-lined saddle of his new friend and partner, the tiger RIDE Terry. His new tiger ears swiveled, listening to every sound around him, and his new tail streamed in the breeze.

He still felt mildly euphoric from the Fuser-mode merge that had brought him safely out of the desert. What's more, he felt remarkably well-rested and energetic for a man who'd just spent the last week trudging through a heat-and-cold-blasted wasteland with very little food and water. It was like he'd been renewed through the merge. He wondered how long it would last—he couldn't imagine it would be enough to undo the effects of heat exhaustion completely. Well, if it lasted long enough to get him and Terry home, it would be enough.

Entry into Nextus proper through the gates was surprisingly routine for a man coming in with new furry bits and an unregistered RIDE. The guard just scanned his ID, grunted, and mumbled something like, "Go by dirt as soon as you can."

Zane blinked. "I'm sorry, did you just say I need to buy dirt? But I don't do any gardening..."

The guard adopted a put-upon look and spoke a little louder. "Go by the Department of RIDE Registration and Transfer. DRRT. Dirt. As soon as you can. Especially if you found that—" he pointed at Terry "—loose out in the desert."

"Oh. Uh, thanks, we will." The proprietries satisfied, Zane and Terry pulled on into town. Zane frowned. "I knew they treated RIDEs like dirt here, but I didn't expect they'd be so literal about it. That's the Nextus sense of humor for you, I suppose."

Terry snorted over a private frequency to Zane's mastoid comm implant. *:You don't know the half of it. Truth is, I really hate this burg, and I wouldn't spend five minutes in it if it weren't for you.:*

"You could still go, you know—" Zane began, but Terry interrupted him.

:After I went to all the trouble of getting you out of the desert, you think I'm gonna let you go kill yourself again? Where you go, I go.:

Zane stilled a grin. "All right then, pard. Right now, I guess where we need to go is to get the paperwork out of the way. Don't want to give the cops an excuse to arrest us so quickly."

:Ah, bureaucracy.: Terry grumbled. *:Be still my beating heart.:*

They cruised up the street into the city administrative section, characterized by the precise circular grid of streets that legend had it were perfectly symmetrical down to the millimeter. The city offices were laid out in a geometric pattern, with the main city office building at the center—the “nexus of Nextus” as it were—and the lesser buildings arranged in a pattern around it that put each at an equal distance from the center and the other buildings most important to its own function. There were even several parks spaced at equal distances around the perimeter. It was all kept perfectly, relentlessly clean by an army of labor RIDEs and smaller automation, as well as signs that promised significant fines for littering.

Zane normally found it all a bit sterile, but right now it also seemed rather pretty—especially after spending a week in the empty desert. “Is this place really so bad?” he asked Terry.

“It’s not so much the place, it’s what they do to RIDEs here,” Terry said.

“But you’re with me,” Zane said. “You know I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“It’s not that. It’s what they do to the others,” Terry explained. “There’s a lot of chatter on sideband comm frequencies that most humans can’t understand. Other RIDEs pissing, moaning, and grumbling. The muttering of condemned souls in Hell, that kind of thing. I try to tune it out most of the time, but it still really gets to you after a while.”

Zane frowned. “I didn’t know it was so bad. Is Uplift any better?”

“Yeah, it is,” Terry said. “There’s still some of the griping, but most of the RIDEs seem a lot more...oh hell, stupid pun...*well-adjusted*. Part of it’s all the hardlight. It’s... soothing.”

“It really helps that much?”

“How do you think you’d be if you couldn’t really feel anything all over your whole body?” Terry asked. “Yeah, it’s much less crazy-making.”

“And they know that over in Uplift, which is why they’re so big into it,” Zane guessed.

“Yeah. Here it’s a ‘waste of energy’.” Terry snorted again. “I’ll admit, I’d kind of bought into that whole thing myself until that kid blew so much money putting it on me that I had to get repossessed. Then I couldn’t believe the difference.” He paused. “Wonder what happened to him after that.”

“We can check later if you want.” They pulled up in front of the DRRT office, a moderately imposing structure located in the first ring of buildings around the central tower. As with most Nextus architecture, the lines were clean but sparse. Nextus didn’t waste much energy on ornamentation, but usually had a kind of stark, Spartan grace to it, only marred by the unmitigated *sameness* of most of it to most of the rest of it. The one decorative element was some kind of mostly illegible seal or coat of arms over the immense door.

Zane dismounted, and Terry collapsed back into his tiger Walker form. “They allow RIDEs in there, right?”

“Sure, they have to be able to check our teeth and stuff. That’s why the door’s so big.”

“Well, c’mon, then.” Zane headed into the building, Terry padding along beside him. They emerged into an oddly spacious waiting room—there were rows of chairs and tables, but they were positioned several yards apart, allowing plenty of room between. The reason for this was readily apparent—the room was filled with the biggest assortment of people and large animals Zane had ever seen.

There were people and RIDEs of all descriptions and species. About three quarters of them were the bare gleaming metal of Nextus designs, one or two had some patches of hardlight fur highlights, and the rest were hardlight all over like Terry—the result of used sales from other polities, or maybe just hot rodders who used hardlight to flaunt their rebelliousness, Zane guessed.

Most of the RIDEs were standing separate from their riders, but a few of them were standing in line Fused. Terry saw where Zane was looking, and grunted, “Kids with their new toys. Noobs.” He snorted. “Always want to spend every minute in Fuse. They’ll sure be sorry when they Integrate and can’t take it off again.”

“Yeah, maybe.” Zane shrugged. “Can’t really say I blame them, though. I’m pretty tempted right now myself.” He ran his fingers lightly through Terry’s fur, and the tiger arched his back and rumbled his pleasure.

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” Terry said.

“You should, that’s how I meant it,” Zane replied. “I felt so powerful...and it was fun just to cut loose and run like that. I’d like to do it some more—if you don’t mind, that is.”

“You know, you’re one in a million,” Terry said, his practiced air of cynicism leaving him for a moment. “You know how many people around here would think to ask if their RIDE minded *anything*?”

“There I go, being decent again.” Zane chuckled and scratched behind Terry’s ears. “Just how I was raised, I guess. Dad was *in* Nextus, but never really thought of himself as *of* it. It was just a place to stay that was close to the mines. He didn’t much like their attitudes either.”

Terry leaned into Zane’s scratching. “Well, if you keep right on being decent, I hope you know you’ll *never* get rid of me.”

Zane grinned. “As long as you want to keep hanging ‘round with a schmuck like me, you’ll be welcome.”

“Ahem!” A dour-faced clerk approached, carrying several digital clipboards under his arm. He offered one to Zane. “I hate to break up this little mutual admiration society, but if you could have this filled out by the time you get to the front of the line it would speed things up considerably.”

“Er, thanks,” Zane said, glancing at the clipboard. It was the usual long, obnoxious “who are you and what do you do” form that every bureaucracy everywhere felt its supplicants had nothing better to do than fill out. “Oh, great,” Zane muttered as the clerk moved on to the next person in line. “I’m gonna be here all night.”

“Let me see that,” Terry said.

“Okay.” Zane held it down to the tiger’s optical sensors.

Terry stared intently at it for a moment, then it emitted a series of chirps. “Check it now.”

Zane glanced at the clipboard again and found the form was completely filled out with all of his personal information. “Wow. That’s a timesaver.”

“Better check it over anyway just to make sure I got everything right.”

Zane paged through the form. “You got all this out of my head during the merge?” he asked, glancing at Terry with new respect.

“Actually, I got the code for your digital wallet during the merge, and got all the data out of that,” Terry said.

“Oh. Well, it’s still impressive,” Zane said. “I *hate* paperwork. How would you like a job as my personal secretary?”

“I dunno, what does it pay?” Terry asked.

“Room, board, maintenance, and all the upgrades I can stuff into you,” Zane said.

“Sounds good. I’m in.” They shared a chuckle, which made a couple of the others in line glance at them oddly.

“So what *about* maintenance? Is there anything you need?” Zane asked.

“Just occasional checkups is all,” Terry said. “We’re mostly self-repairing or we couldn’t make it for long times out in the desert.”

“Good to know.” Zane finished looking through the clipboard. “You got everything right, too. Thanks, man.”

“Huh.”

Zane glanced at him. “What?”

“You called me ‘man’.”

“Oh—is that a problem? Didn’t mean to insult you.”

“No, just the opposite.” Terry was silent for a long moment. “I didn’t think people like you even *existed*.”

“I didn’t know it could be so much fun being with a RIDE, so I guess we’re even,” Zane said.

“And there you go *again*,” Terry said wonderingly. “‘Being with.’ Not ‘owning,’ ‘having,’ or even ‘using.’”

Zane chuckled. “Terry, if I ever act like I ‘own’ or ‘have’ you, or that I’m just ‘using’ you, and it’s not make-believe for someone else’s benefit, you have my explicit permission to smack me upside the head. You’re my friend and partner, for as long as you’re willing to put up with me.”

“It’s starting to look like that’s going to be for life,” Terry mused. “And I think I’m just fine with that.”

Zane gave him another friendly pat, then they were at the front of the line with no more time to talk. A bored-looking clerk behind a desk peered myopically at the two of them through a pair of interface specs, then took the clipboard Zane handed across and flipped through it. He seemed utterly unimpressed at having the son and heir to one of the planet’s richest mining magnates across the desk from him. When it came to the famed Nextus bureaucratic game, wealth was immaterial. Terry had even found the right

loopholes to speed up the process. “Zane Brubeck... place of residence... job... okay... all right. It looks complete.”

He paged down, and frowned. “You acquired this unit in the desert?”

“Yes, I found him in a pit, and—”

The clerk waved a hand to cut him off. “Fascinating, I’m sure, but there’s a line. Have you had your refettering checked and certified?”

“Certified?”

“That the unit is locked down under full owner control,” the clerk said, in the bored tones of someone quoting from a script he had fully internalized. “If certification is waived on feral RIDE recaptures, you will be assessed a 25,000 *mu* bond, and will be held liable for any further damages resulting from a fetter break.”

“I’ll pay the bond. I can afford it.”

:You could just have me refettered and then jailbreak me afterward,: Terry offered over private comm. *:I’d trust you to do it.:*

“No,” Zane subvocalized. “Not even for one moment.”

“What was that?” the clerk asked.

“Sorry, got a call,” Zane said. “Had to tell them I don’t have a moment.”

The clerk nodded, and tapped in some notes on the clipboard. “So... certification waived... 25,000 *mu* deposit assessed.”

“Do fetter breaks happen often? With lots of damage?” Zane asked.

“It happens from time to time with ferals,” the clerk said. “If they’ve been loose for long, they’ve had time to get a little crazy. Unless they’re firmly fettered, they can break loose and sometimes...well, suffice it to say bond rates are high for a reason.

“I see,” Zane said. “Well, not gonna happen with this one.”

“That’s what they *all* say,” the clerk said darkly. He leaned over the counter and scowled disapprovingly down at Terry. “Extensively retrofitted with hardlight fur?”

“He was like that when I got him,” Zane said. “Not illegal, is it?”

“No, but there is a 10,000 *mu* power facilities surcharge,” the clerk said. “As well as higher utility bills.”

Zane shrugged. “It’s worth it to me. I like the feel of fur. All that metal just gets boring after a while.”

“Well, there’s no accounting for taste,” the clerk said. “Sign here...thumbprint here...”

Zane jumped back after he felt a sharp sting in his thumb from the print reader. “Ow! What was that!” He glanced at the bead of blood forming on the pad of his thumb.

“DNA sample. Sorry, forgot to mention it.” The smile the man was having a hard time stifling belied his faulty memory. He followed up by invoking the time-honored excuse of all bureaucracies since time immemorial: “It’s procedure.”

“Yeah, sure it is,” Zane muttered, then said aloud, “All right, here’s the code for my wallet. Zap me the bill and I’ll approve it.”

The clerk tapped a button. “There you go.”

Zane pulled out his wallet, thumbed a button, then put it away again. “Thanks. Do I

need anything else?”

“The license code has already been uploaded to your wallet and your RIDE’s transponder. Have a nice day. *Next!*”

Zane and Terry walked back out of the office, Zane slowly shaking his head. “I feel like I need to take a shower after that,” he said. “Do they really go out and *recapture* escaped RIDEs?”

“We’re worth big money,” Terry said. “There are some people and RIDEs who make their livings that way.”

“And RIDEs?” Zane asked. “They actually help hunt down other RIDEs?”

“The ones from Nextus don’t get much choice in the matter. The others...well, people can talk themselves into a lot of things if they think they need to.”

“That’s sick,” Zane said.

“It’s ‘business,’” Terry said. “That’s why AlphaWolf’s trying to gather up every stray he can under his rule. Safety in numbers.” He muttered, “Of course, it will *also* be the motherlode for feral-hunters if they ever find out where it is.”

Zane opened his mouth to reply, but was interrupted by a huge yawn. “Crap. I think my second wind is wearing off. We better get me home before I collapse.”

Terry converted back to his Skimmer form. “Then climb on.” Zane did so, and they headed for the next suburb over, one of the nicer residential parts of town conveniently situated near both the government and business sectors.

Zane yawned again. “You know the way in case I fall asleep, right?”

“It was in your wallet,” Terry said.

“Oh, right.” Zane leaned back, relaxed, and enjoyed the ride. “You know,” he said sleepily, “I think I’m going to have sell my non-transforming skimmer cycle. I still can’t believe you don’t have anything better to do than hang around with me.”

“I’m only in it for those upgrades you promised,” Terry smirked.

“Well, you’ll get ‘em.” Zane grinned. “What good is owning 51% of Brubeck Mining if I can’t spend money on my friends.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever *been* someone’s friend before,” Terry mused. “I...like it.”

They pulled into the underground garage of a rather nice high-rise apartment building, and slid to a stop in front of an elevator. Zane held the elevator door and glanced back at Terry, who’d parked himself neatly in a space. “So, you coming?”

Terry flipped back to Walker form and stared at him. “Are you sure you want me to come in? I’m...a little big for most apartments.”

“I think I’ve got room.” Zane moved aside to let Terry into the elevator. “Friends don’t park friends in garages.”

“But...what if I break something?”

“I’ll just deduct the cost from your upgrade fund.” Zane grinned. “No, seriously—it’s only *stuff*. If I have to change something up, I’ll change it up. Nearly dying in the desert kind of gives you a new perspective about what’s really important.”

The elevator went up to the 20th floor, then stopped. Zane led the way to the end of the hall, and thumbed open the door. “It’s not really a penthouse. Never saw much point

in living fancy instead of just living nice. But it's enough."

It was a fairly large apartment—not wastefully so, but plenty of space for a young man living by himself. A hallway led from the entrance, with bathroom and kitchenette to either side, and a large den with windows along one wall of the building, a comfy sofa, and a big-screen media display at the end. Bookshelves lined some of the walls, filled with paper tomes and knick-knacks, and weapon racks along one wall held a number of rifles, pistols, and blades both old and new.

Zane saw Terry looking at them. "Those were mostly Dad's. The sibs didn't want them in the divvying-up, so I inherited the whole collection."

"Some of those are antiques, aren't they?" Terry asked, examining them closer.

"Yeah, but the value's mostly sentimental, not collector's. They've all been hard-used, even the ones that date back to Old Earth. Dad could've told you stories about every one. Seems like half of them saved his life on one planet or another."

"Sounds like quite a character," Terry said.

"Yeah, I think you'd have liked him. Maybe he'd have liked you, too, if he could've gotten past you being a RIDE and all. They kinda freaked him out."

"Yeah, I got that from your memories of him," Terry said.

"Oh, right. Well, hey, if you got my memories, why am I even telling you all this? You should already know it."

Terry shook his head. "Only in the broad strokes—the same way you remember my life now. We'd have to be in contact for full access."

"Oh. Huh." Zane considered that for a moment, and tried to remember what he'd seen of Terry's life before. "You're right. I know what you did, but don't remember you actually doing it."

He yawned again, and leaned against the wall to steady himself. "Better get t'bed, I guess. But...you. Do you eat or drink or anything? Can I get y'something before I go?"

Terry shook his head, padding over to stand beside Zane. "Only electricity," he said, glancing concernedly up at Zane who was now distinctly wobbling.

"Ah. Well, there's a heavy power tap 'n the hall, 'f you need...need...snzzzz." Zane finally went right to sleep and fell over. But Terry had been waiting for that, and Zane fell right onto his broad, muscular back.

Terry glanced over his shoulder, and chuckled, then came to a decision. He melted his body so Zane sank in, then Fused to the sleeping human and carefully stood them back upright. He walked into the bedroom and leaned over the bed to push Zane out...then changed his mind and walked back into the den.

Terry knew that *he* would be a more comfortable place for Zane to sleep than any bed. And he was feeling oddly protective of the human right now. It felt *nice* to have someone to protect—especially someone he cared for.

So maybe I'm not as 'free' as I wanted to be when I ran to the desert, he mused as he looked out across the city skyline. *Some things are better than being free.*

He stood there for a long time while his friend slept in peace, safety, and warmth beneath a tiger's skin.

Chapter 3

Zane slowly drifted back toward awareness, feeling remarkably well-rested. He hadn't slept this well since...well, he couldn't remember *ever* sleeping this well.

Even if it was a little strange that his inner ears seemed to be telling him he was upright, though he didn't feel any weight on his feet. And he smelled...bacon? And coffee? He blinked his eyes open. "Huh, wha?"

:Good morning,: Terry said cheerfully in the back of his mind. :You slept for 29 hours. Hope you don't mind—I took an advance on those upgrades you promised me. Needed to get a medical pack—you had some dehydration.:

"I'll forgive you, this time," Zane said aloud. His voice came out mixed with the same growling subharmonic Terry's usually carried. "Okay, that's different."

:I can switch it off if you want. It's kind of a vanity feature.:

"No, I think I kinda like it." Zane looked down at himself—or, rather, *themselves*, as he was wearing Terry in Fuser mode. Their shared body, in turn, was wearing an oversized apron that read "Fuse the Cook!". They had a spatula in hand, and as Zane watched it seemed to move of its own volition to flip the bacon frying up in the pan on the stove. "This is new. You can work the body even when I'm asleep?"

:It's a survival feature. Lets me keep 30-hour guard in hazardous environments,: Terry explained.

"And go on shopping trips, I see," Zane observed.

:When people see a Fuser, they do tend to assume it's the human operating it,: Terry admitted. :And maybe I might kind of have used your voice a little bit to help the assumption along...:

"Not to mention the codes to my wallet," Zane said dryly.

:Those helped, too,: Terry admitted. He paused, and Zane sensed a flicker of worry. :You're not mad, right?:

"Hell no," Zane said. "Even without the money those jerks embezzled, I've got more than I'm ever going to spend. And I can't exactly object to being treated for dehydration. Heck, you know better than I do what you need. So make you a deal. Buy what you want, but if you want to spend more than fifty kilomu in one go, clear it with me first, okay?"

:That seems fair,: Terry agreed.

“So what’s with the breakfast?” Zane asked.

He felt a twinge of...was that embarrassment? *:Well...I wanted to do something nice for you.:*

“Something nicer than saving me from dehydration, you mean?” Zane grinned, and felt Terry grinning back. “And you saw in my memories this was my favorite breakfast. Thanks, buddy. I appreciate it—even if you *did* use my own body to make it for me.”

:You wouldn’t want to see me cook with paws and teeth. It’s not pretty.:

Zane laughed. Terry flipped the bacon onto a paper towel, then took an egg in each hand and deftly cracked them each one-handed into the bacon grease. Zane observed the process with interest. “How’d you learn to cook?”

:It’s not really a big deal. Recipes are just lists of specific instructions. Computers were made to follow lists of specific instructions. And your own memories of cooking helped.:

“Mine? But I’m a terrible cook,” Zane insisted. “I burn water.”

:They showed me what not to do,: Terry explained with a flash of humor and smugness.

“Keep it up, laughing boy. There’s room for a new fur rug in this apartment, you know.”

Terry chuckled in the back of their mind, flipping the eggs to cook on the other side. Zane watched him for a while, then asked, “Is it true what I’ve heard, that you *could* just...up and take me over if you wanted to, and then be me yourself from there on out?”

Zane felt a flash of extreme discomfort from Terry. *:Well...technically...yes. But you have to understand, I’d never do that to you—:*

“I know, I know, I didn’t mean I thought you would,” Zane said. “Just curious is all. I wonder how many of the Fusers I see around are really still human-operated?”

Terry sent a mental snort. *:Probably all of them—at least within the politics. Most RIDEs don’t understand humans well enough to be able to pull off a convincing impersonation for long—even with their memories. There’s an “uncanny valley” of behavior.:*

He slid the over-easy eggs onto a plate, added the bacon, poured out a dollop of hominy grits from a pot on another burner, then added a couple of slices of toast. *:The Policia used to do spot checks, forcing Fused to de-Fuse and prove there wasn’t any coercion, until RIDE owners started bitching about it. Far’s I know, they never found a single bodyjacker in all their checks.:*

“Ah.” They carried the plate over to the table, and then Terry de-Fused from him and reformed into a tiger sitting on his haunches, near the table. Zane steadied himself for a moment against the sudden return of weight, then sat down and started eating. “Wow, Terry, this is great! You got everything exactly right!”

“We aims to please!” the tiger said happily, rolling over onto his back and waving all four paws in the air. Zane laughed and dug into his breakfast.

After finishing it, Zane felt a lot more human than he had over the entire previous week. He put the dishes in the sink, then turned to Terry. “So what do you say we go see

about getting the authorities interested in my conniving, back-stabbing, double-dealing, snake-in-the-grass dirty business partners?”

“Sounds like a plan, I guess,” Terry said hesitantly.

Zane raised an eyebrow. “Something wrong with that?”

“I’m just not that sure the authorities are *going* to be interested in crimes they have to fly a couple thousand clicks into the hottest desert on the planet to investigate.”

“Hmm. Well, I guess we’ll find out soon enough one way or the other. C’mon.” Zane led the way back down to the garage, where Terry obligingly flipped into Skimmer mode and carried Zane back to the administrative sector.

Their first stop was the Policia Headquarters—just one notch clockwise from the DRRT building in the inner ring. The desk sergeant was politely attentive when Zane tried to report an attempted murder, until he learned it had taken place in the middle of the Dry Ocean. “You want the Gondwanan Federated Marshal’s office,” he said. And off they went.

The Gondwanan Federated Marshals were a cooperative law-enforcement body mandated by treaty among all the major polities around the Dry Ocean. Funded by contributions from all the polities and a number of major corporations, their jurisdiction was recognized (albeit not always respected) outside city limits. Their Nextus office was relegated to the less important outer ring of administrative buildings, forming an equilateral triangle with the Polis headquarters and the DRRT.

Zane and Terry had a little better luck at the Marshal’s office, at least at first. The receptionist showed them to the office of Marshal Ken Masterson, a grizzled older lawman with a salt-and-pepper mustache and beard, leaning comfortably back in his chair, leather-booted feet propped on a scarred wooden desk, as his chestnut horse RIDE looked in over the stall door behind the marshal’s left shoulder.

“Hear tell you nearly got dry-gulched,” Masterson said.

“I *did* get dry-gulched,” Zane corrected. “If I hadn’t run into my new partner out there, I’d be there yet, and you’d probably find my bleached bones in a year or two.”

“That’s pretty rough,” the marshal agreed. “Why don’t you sit a spell and tell me about it?”

Zane launched into the story again, explaining about the suspicious activity in Brubeck Mining’s books and his father’s partners’ suspicious behavior before he left. Then the explosion, and the crash in the desert, and meeting Terry.

When he finished, Masterson nodded. “It strikes me you’re a very lucky man, Mr. Brubeck. Several times lucky, in fact.”

“So will you help me arrest them?” Zane asked. “The crime occurred in your jurisdiction, after all.”

Masterson absently reached up to pat the head of his RIDE, which whickered softly. “Well, here’s the thing.” He tapped an otherwise innocuous spot in his desk, and a hologram appeared above it of the enormous derrick-like structure that housed the Brubeck Mine’s offices, living quarters, operations facilities, and extensive defensive armaments. “That place is a fortress. Now that’s not to say it doesn’t need to be, what

goes on out in the desert. But if they wanted, they could knock down any skimmer before it got within a hundred clicks and say ‘oops’ about it later.”

“But I’ve got the codes to all the defenses,” Zane said. “I can shut them down before we even get that close.”

“You think they wouldn’t have changed them by now?” Masterson asked mildly. “Now, I’m gathering your style of management hasn’t exactly been ‘hands-on,’ right?”

“I wasn’t the ‘manager’ at all until my Dad died last year,” Zane said. “But...Dad never really did take much interest in the place. He just wanted enough to live on, and put the kids through college. Everything else was gravy.”

“Wise man,” Masterson said, inclining his head respectfully. “‘Cepting maybe when it comes to business. What that amounts to is that those three’ve had the place all to themselves for, what, twenty-five, thirty years?” the marshal asked rhetorically. “Who you think all those miners and their RIDEs are gonna be loyal to—the son of some distant company owner they’ve never met, or the nice men who sign their paychecks?”

Zane considered that for a few moments. “Oh.”

“In *theory*, all that shouldn’t matter,” Masterson admitted. “The whole point of organized law enforcement is it’s organized—we’re *supposed* to be able to call up a posse, go in there in force, and clean out the whole nest of scorpions. But the sad fact is, we don’t have the money or the manpower. None of the cities or corps pays us any more than they can get away with under the treaty—including yours. We’re lucky if we can handle a few RIDE thefts, claim-jumping reports, or fugitive cases.”

Zane sighed. “I see.”

“If you want, you can swear out a warrant and we can grab them if they ever show their face in one of our polities,” Masterson offered. “Don’t think the chances are very good, but it could happen. Or you could put a bounty on them if you wanted and try your luck with the bounty hunters.”

“I’ll keep those options open,” Zane said. “Thanks anyway. It’s been...enlightening.”

Masterson dipped his head. “You take care now.”

“That went...about as well as I was afraid it would,” Terry said as they left the office. “Too bad your Dad couldn’t have paid a little more attention.”

Zane shrugged. “For all I know, he was fully aware of it all along. It would have been just like him. ‘If they care so much about money, let them have it ‘cuz I’ve got what I need.’ Maybe he just didn’t think it was worth the fuss if they weren’t bothering him.”

“But you do?”

“It’s not about the money,” Zane said. “At least not directly. I have more than *I’ll* ever need, myself. But I don’t want my Dad’s company to have that kind of people running it. If they’ll try to kill me over a little money, who knows what *else* they might be doing?”

“So what’s your next move?”

Zane sighed. “The very last resort. Nexus’s armed version of Internal Revenue: the Materiel Recovery Service.”

“That sounds taxing,” Terry said, then dodged out of the way when Zane took a swipe at him.

As one of the single most important functions of the Nextus Polity's government, Materiel Recovery was located in the Central Administration Building. When the receptionist heard what company he was from, they agreed to see him right away. "We're one of their best customers, you see," Zane muttered to Terry.

After he'd laid out the facts of his partners' embezzlement, and how many *mu* of unpaid taxes that represented to Nextus, the tax men were at first very interested. But then they ran a cost-benefit analysis based on what it would cost to assault the mine, or hire mercenaries to do it for them, and determined that such an expedition would not be cost-effective, even for that much money.

But now that Zane had called the matter to their attention, they *were* willing to issue warrants for the arrest if said embezzlers happened to set foot anywhere that had an extradition arrangement with Nextus. It was a long chance, but would pay off richly if it came to pass—and was cheaper than throwing lives away.

"Look, you said yourself you already have plenty of money," one unexpectedly sympathetic young revenueur told him. "Why don't you just kick back for a while? Enjoy your new RIDE, let things cool down. Go salvage your IDE and flier before someone else does. We'll get these guys sooner or later." Then the interview was over.

"Well, that was certainly productive," Zane grumbled, as he and Terry walked alongside a stream in one of the administrative center's perfectly manicured parks.

He idly kicked at one of the decorative stones, and it landed in the water with a splash. A rat-sized robot appeared from behind a bush, chittered angrily at Zane, and scurried into the water to retrieve the stone. It replaced the stone exactly where it had been, then disappeared again.

"Hmph," Zane grumbled. "Everyone's a critic."

"So what now?" Terry asked. "Bounties?"

"Seems a little extreme," Zane said. "And it would probably just lead to a lot of hot-shot bounty-hunters and their RIDEs getting pasted by the mine's defenses."

"Sometimes there just isn't a right answer," Terry said.

"That revenue agent was right about one thing, though," Zane admitted. "I should see to salvaging my gear. You know where I could hire a skimmer and crew?"

"Skimmer, yeah. But you shouldn't need crew with me around," Terry said. "Mining and salvage are a couple of my specialties. I'll just need to get some more upgrade packs to kit out for it and we'll be good to go."

"Then let's hit it," Zane said. "It'd feel good to do something useful for a change."

An hour later, Zane and Terry were at the controls of a fully-enclosed, hundred-foot skimmer rigged for salvage operations. Terry had assured him this rig had the necessary horsepower to recover the flier, and Chauncey the IDE would be a snap. With the help of Terry's navigation systems, they made their way to the spot where Zane had met and rescued him.

"Sure looks different from up here," Zane said, shielding his eyes and looking down.

Beside him, Terry put his paws on the dashboard and followed his gaze. "I'd just as soon not see it from down there again. You know which way you came from?"

“A little bit south of east, I think,” Zane said. “It’s a little hard to tell landmarks from up here. Look for footprints; it’s not the windy season so they should still be there.”

After a few minutes of searching, they picked up Zane’s trail and followed it past spire and dune, keeping an eye out for gleaming metal. “I hadn’t realized you’d come quite this far,” Terry said after a while. “I’m impressed.”

Zane shrugged. “Wouldn’t’a meant anything if you hadn’t been there at the end. Oh hey, look—I think that’s him.” He pointed at a glint of metal from the shadow of a rock spire. “Yeah, he powered down and I had to leave him right there.”

Terry peered where Zane was pointing, eyes narrowing as he zoomed his optics in. There was a metal figure sprawled in a seated position at the base of the rock, legs splayed out in front of it. “Yeah, that’s an IDE all right. Damn—it’s an *old* one. What is it, eighty years?”

Today’s IDEs tended to be small and light, with organically-curved nano-fabbed armor and an alternate transformation into some sort of skimmer or other vehicle. But this one was about six meters tall and built like a tank, with blocky arms and legs and a protruding cockpit bulge in the center torso. It had a “backpack” unit that appeared for all the world to contain reaction-mass thrusters, and a large cylindrical rifle-style cannon mounted along its right arm.

“It was old when my Dad got it. But they made ‘em to last back then,” Zane said, guiding the skimmer into place over the abandoned IDE. “So how we gonna work this?”

Terry padded over to stand next to him. “Well, we start by you saying something I find hard to believe.”

Zane glanced at him. “Uh-huh?”

“And then *I* say...” Terry moved up against Zane, then merged up and over him, fusing them into a man in a tiger suit. *:...you gotta be putting me on!:*

“Cute.” Zane let Terry guide the body, since he was the more experienced salvager. The RIDE moved back to the cargo bay, lifting a remote out of its cradle and slapping it against his thigh, where the nano-tack surface on the back grabbed and held it. He fingered a key on the remote to slide open the cargo hatch in the floor. A blast of heat rose into the bay, along with blindingly-bright light from the burning sands below.

“Phew, so much heat!” Zane said. “How can you stand it in all this fur?”

:Killer air conditioning,: Terry sent smugly. He reached up to grab the hook dangling from a winch spool overhead, then jumped into empty space. *:Geronimooooo!:*

“Wheeeeeee!” Zane yelled as they fell the ten-odd meters to the desert sand below. They walked up to Chauncey and stared up at the metal figure sitting there like a broken toy.

:You came in this? You’re braver than I thought.:

Zane laughed. “Let me show you something. Here.” He took over control of the body and reached into a recess on the side of Chauncey’s canopy, tapping a code on the keypad. With a hiss, the canopy slid open, revealing a surprisingly roomy interior that was all but empty save for a battered old shock couch with a five point harness draped over it.

Terry's optics narrowed in surprise. *:Why's there so much room? Shouldn't this be full of consoles and electronics? I'll bet we could fit in there with that much space.:*

"Yeah, we could, pard. And we will." Zane clambered carefully through the hatch. It was smaller than he remembered it, but then he wasn't usually two and a half meters tall. He turned around and sat carefully in the couch, which creaked a little and was a little tight around the waist, but fit him surprisingly well. There was even a hole for his tail, where the cushions joined. He kicked the switch to close the canopy, and a series of hardlight control panels flickered into being in midair around them.

:But this is...modern tech,: Terry said, projecting astonishment.

"Yeah, this mech wasn't exactly stock when Dad originally got it, let alone by the time he came here. He could never have held the Brubeck Mine claim to begin with if it had been." Zane tapped the keys for a status report, noting all the red indicator lights on the power and cooling subsystems. He pointed to the schematic display. "And those aren't *rocket* thrusters in the back, either."

:Those lifters can't be more than ten years old,: Terry said. *:I recognize the configuration.:*

"He kept his hand in even after he'd retired," Zane said. "Used to spend hours puttering in the garage all while I was growing up. All in all, I don't think there's one single system or subsystem on this thing that hasn't been upgraded or outright replaced at least twice, except maybe the Blu-ray player." He reached down to pat a cracking black plastic slab wired to the wall to the left of the seat.

:Huh.: Terry thought about that. *:So this is kind of a Trojan horse. Looks like an antique...:*

"...but hits like a sledgehammer, yeah. When it's working, anyway." He gave the armrest an affectionate pat. "Almost all the tech in it's thirty years or less. There are older RIDEs still in service—including you, now that I think about it. Oh, the newer stuff can still move faster—but this baby's got thicker armor."

:And it's big enough to fit even us, Fused,: Terry mused.

"Or even un-Fused," Zane said. He tapped a foot on the deckplate that rang hollow. "There's a three-foot space under the floor. Dad used it for smuggling cargo sometimes. I think you could fit in there if you curled up."

:Clever. I could be your emergency escape vehicle. "Always pack your spare!"::

Zane grinned, then closed down the hardlight panels and reached for the canopy release. "Well, time to get a move on. This thing's not gonna lift itself!"

They clambered out of the IDE cockpit, hooked the winch to a roll bar at the top of the mech, and cranked it up into the skimmer bay. They secured it from moving around, de-Fused, then went on to find the flier.

When they got there, however, they were destined to be disappointed. The mile-long strip of disturbed sand from the crash was there, as were a few cast-off bits of metal from the flier chassis, but the flier itself was nowhere to be found. In its place was a small comm beacon broadcasting the business card of a Nextus salvage shop, where the owner of the flier (or, after a deadline expired, anyone else who wanted it) could buy it back.

“Wow, they’re fast out here,” Zane said, reaching down to scratch Terry’s head.

“Want to go buy it back?”

Zane shook his head. “Nah. It doesn’t have any sentimental value, I can just get another one new. The important thing was Chauncey. Glad they didn’t find him.”

“Who says they didn’t?” Terry said. “Maybe they just didn’t think he was worth the trouble.”

“Well, that’s their loss, then.” Zane grinned. “Let’s head on back now. We can get Chauncey fixed up, then plan our next move.”

“Sounds good.”

As he turned the rented salvage skimmer around, Zane stared off into the distance and thought about things. It seemed that some of the things he’d learned today might hold the key to a possible solution to his problem with his Dad’s old partners. But he just couldn’t see it yet. It just wasn’t there.

But maybe after he slept on it, the answer would come to him. Especially if he slept within his partner again. He glanced at Terry, and grinned.

Chapter 4

Afternoon found them in a small hangar at one of Nextus's civilian aerodromes, with several access panels open on Chauncey. Zane frowned at the components inside. "I'm nowhere near the mechanic Dad was. I usually have to call someone if it's more than I can fix with just plug and play."

Terry padded up next to him. "I can help with that. I've got a nanolathe, and I know how to use it."

"Hey, that would be great. I always hate letting just anyone get their hands on this thing. It feels kind of like a little piece of Dad. I can almost feel him sitting there, sometimes."

Terry rubbed against Zane's leg. "You still miss him, don't you?"

"Yeah, and I always will." Zane sighed. "Maybe that's why I care so much about the business—it's another part of his legacy."

"Well, we can at least fix *this* part of it pretty easily." Terry placed his paws on the edge of one of the open panels and poked his head inside. "Yeah, I think I can do this. It's a little weird in bits, but I *think* I can make out what everything does." He hopped down again. "Whenever you're ready to Fuse, I'm ready to start."

"You got it, buddy." Zane put out his arms and leaned forward, and Terry reared up against him. A moment later, a tiger-man was standing where man and tiger had been before.

"You know, for someone who swore a couple days ago he was never going to Fuse again, you've been doing it an awful lot lately," Zane said, as they picked out tool packs from a cart and nano-clamped them to their hips and thighs.

:It's different with you, : Terry sent. :The way it was before...imagine spending all your time as a puppet dancing to someone else's strings, with no control at all of your own body. And somewhere in the back of your mind is the fear that someday you won't be able to return to being yourself again and that will be the rest of your life, forever.:

"It was really that bad, with everyone?" They peered into an access panel on Chauncey's left leg, and Terry took a power wrench and started to unfasten a hydraulic fitting.

:Maybe not with the kid, the couple times he did it. But most of the others just saw me as a fuzzy power suit that could talk back.:

“Huh.” Zane pulled out and examined the fitting. “Hey, could you order another of these? Better make it a dozen. They’re used all over, and probably all clogged up just like this one.”

:Done. Yeah, it’s different with you. Case in point—“could you”. None of them ever said “could you.”:

“Ugh.” Zane shook his head. “I’ll admit it was a little weird when I woke up and my body was moving by itself, but I could somehow *feel* that I could take the reins back if I wanted to.”

:Right, because I didn’t lock you out.: Terry walked them over to the hangar’s nanofab, where twelve identical hydraulic fittings were waiting on the assembly platform. He grabbed one, compared it to the other to make sure it was a perfect match, then tossed away the bad one and went back to the access panel to put the new one in. :If I’d locked you out, the way they did me, you’d have felt it. I’d show you the difference, but I’ve sworn never to do that to anyone myself.:

“Can’t argue with your motivation.” Zane unclipped a scanning probe and poked it into the access panel. “But what if you could do it to the ones who did it to you?”

Terry sent a flash of wry amusement, almost like a snort. *:What, are you offering to help me track them down?:*

“Just a hypothetical question.” Somewhere in the back of his head, an idea was trying to form, but he couldn’t quite work out the shape of it yet.

:It’s a good question. I guess then I’d have what you’d call a moral dilemma.:

“Mmm.” Zane pulled up the readings from the probe. They seemed to float in space in front of him, thanks to Terry’s head-up display. “What do you think about that power conductor in block 40? It looks good, but that junction has a history of blowing out at odd times and it’s been a while since it was swapped out.”

:Better replace it. It’s not like you can’t afford to.:

“Yeah.” Zane reached in to unfasten it. “Do RIDEs think about revenge a lot?”

Terry sent another flash of amusement. *:Where’d that come from? We’re just like any other people, I guess. Some do. Some don’t. Even most of the ones that do never get the nerve to act on it.:*

Zane nodded. “Just wondering. AlphaWolf’s propaganda seems to be a whole lot of RIDEs-rise-up-and-oppress-your-oppressors crap.”

:It’s a nice dream, for the ones who’re really beat down,.: Terry admitted, turning the power conductor over in their paw-hands. :I don’t know if I’d really buy into it, though.:

“But weren’t you on your way there when you fell in that pit?” Zane asked.

:It was the only thing I could think of at the time,.: Terry admitted, getting a new conductor from the nanofab. :Any starport in an ion storm. I suspect a lot of the RIDEs he gets feel the same way.: He chuckled. *:I certainly never expected to find a true human partner before I got there.:*

“And I never expected I’d ever be Fusing a RIDE.” Zane grinned. “But I’m glad I found you.”

:Same here.:

As Zane screwed the conductor into place, he noted, “We have been Fusing an awful lot lately. Should I start worrying about, y’know, Integration?” Integration was all the rage on RIDER forums and talk shows, and had been for years. It was a little-understood process by which a rider and his RIDE mysteriously combined their bodies permanently into one single entity that resembled the RIDE’s Fuser form.

:It usually takes several months of constant Fusing, or several weeks Fused with no breaks, before there’s any danger of that.: Terry sent. *:We haven’t even scratched the surface yet.:*

“Oh.” Zane peered into the panel again, considering that. “What even *causes* that, anyway?”

:No one’s really sure. There’s just so much we don’t know about nano, especially where those weird minerals come in. There are a lot of theories, though—or, as I like to call them, wild-ass guesses.:

“Yeah? Like what?”

:Well, my favorite is that it was an Easter egg added by some disgruntled programmer who got sacked from the company making the first ones.: Terry said.

“You really think that’s likely?” Zane wondered.

Terry sent a flash of amusement. *:I didn’t say it was likely, I just said it was my favorite. No, someone would have caught it by now if it was as simple as that.:*

“Then what *do* you think makes it happen?”

Terry paused for a moment, thoughtful. *:I don’t exactly have any personal experience with it, but my guess is it has something to do with frame of mind. When a RIDE and a rider just feel ready, even just subconsciously, it just...happens.:*

“That’s pretty deep,” Zane said.

:It could also be completely wrong.: Terry admitted. *:And no offense, but I hope I don’t find out personally for a long, long time.:*

“None taken, and same here,” Zane agreed.

After a long moment, Terry said, *:Though if I did have to Integrate with someone, I hope it would be you.:*

Zane smiled behind the tiger’s face. “Same here, buddy. Same here.”

By sunset, they’d replaced most of the faulty components, and Chauncey was able to power up most of the way again. But there were still several pesky reds and a number of yellows on the status board that refused to turn green, and with hardlight panels Zane was deprived even of the pleasure of thumping the board to try to change them. “I dunno about this. Some of these things are buried at the heart of the thrust backpack.”

:Oh, hell.: Terry muttered. *:I finally got a good look at that thing, and there’s no way I’d want to dig into it without a major workshop at my disposal. Your Dad must have had one hell of a “garage”.:*

“After he died, a major salvage outfit actually paid to move the entire building down to the commercial district for a new base of operations. It was cheaper than moving the equipment piecemeal,” Zane admitted.

:Oh, now you really are putting me on,: Terry said.

“Nope! Already wearing you.” They shared a chuckle, then Zane dismissed the hardlight panels and reached out to open the canopy. “I guess we’ll have to see what we can do tomorrow. I don’t *want* to let some random mechanic work on it, but you’re right. We don’t have the facilities here.”

Then Zane felt a bit of an odd mood coming from Terry. *:What if it were not just some random mechanic?:*

“What’re you thinking?”

:The one who put the fur on me. I was in his garage for a while, watched him work. He was really good at jury-rigging.:

“Huh. Well, I have to admit he did a good job on you.”

:Only thing is, he’s in Uplift, not here.:

“We’ve done a lot today,” Terry said, stifling a yawn. “Why don’t we put off that decision until tomorrow?”

:Fine by me.:

Zane pried themselves up out of the acceleration couch and turned around to climb down. As he did so, their eyes fell on the old Blu-ray player wired to the wall. *:I’ve been meaning to ask,:* Terry said. *:Why a Blu-ray?:*

Zane grinned. “What, you can’t just pluck that out of my memories?”

:For that kind of thing, it’s faster to ask,: Terry said. *:Without a specific incident to key off of, I might have to view hours of memories before I figured it out.:*

“Huh. Okay, that makes sense,” Zane nodded. “Well, fact is, Dad was an ancient movie junkie. Westerns, sci-fi, kung-fu flicks, dramas, whatever. He wasn’t picky. Needed something to pass the time on long FTL trips or planetary approaches, I guess.” He climbed out and closed the cockpit. “DVDs and Blu-rays were the last time they put movies on physical media, and a lot of the old discs never got reissued in later digital formats. Of course, even by then Dad had already ripped his collection to digital, but he swore there was just something about watching them on the original hardware that made the whole experience *better* somehow.”

:I see,: Terry said.

“Dad traveled a lot in the scouting biz, so he was able to build up quite a collection. Since they stocked the first generation-ships’ libraries with them, they were actually easier to find out in the new worlds than they were back on earth. The rest of us got digital copies—we can watch some together later if you want—but the discs went to one of my sisters when he died.”

:I saw you had sisters, in your memories,: Terry sent. *:Two of them, right?:*

“Yeah. Maddie’s a scout—she’s the one who got the discs, in fact. I think she’s carrying on collecting them in Dad’s memory, as well as for the obvious time-passing thing. She just shipped out a couple weeks back, won’t be back for a couple years. Aggie’s here in Nextus, works for Administration. After this whole mess is over I’ll introduce you to her.” He yawned and stretched. “Later. For now, let’s go home and chill for a while.” *And maybe see if I can get that idea pried loose from the back of my mind.*

They locked the hangar door, then Terry defused directly into Skimmer form underneath Zane and they headed for home.

Later that evening, the two friends kicked back in their living room, half-watching the media screen. Zane had ordered a “RIDE couch”—a sort of backless sofa with a thin wall against which a large furry RIDE could curl up, resting itself and serving as a living back to the couch for its companion. (Zane had asked Terry first, in case it was beneath his dignity, but the tiger had approved.)

For now, they were “faking it” by letting Terry take up the entire sofa, with a square leg-rest pushed in front of it for Zane to sit on and lean back against the purring tiger. “I have to admit, you make a comfy sofa,” Zane said drowsily. “Have you ever considered a career in furniture?”

“I had an uncle who said he moonlighted as a rug, but he might have been lion,” Terry said. “I haven’t been tempted so-*fa*.”

Zane groaned and tossed a pillow in the general direction of Terry’s head. “Maybe I should consider how you’d look stuffed and mounted.”

“Oh, well if you’re going to go *there*—” Then Zane felt Terry tense up suddenly. “What the—”

The next thing Zane knew, he was in a tiger suit again, and face-down on the floor. A split-second later, all the glass in the balcony windows shattered and blew inward. The THUMP THUMP THUMP of pulse cannon discharges echoed through the room.

“What the holy *Hell*—!” Zane sputtered. His body seemed to have kicked into adrenaline overdrive, yet at the same time be completely calm as the tiger around him assessed threats and reacted to them.

:Shush. Let me get us out of this.: Terry crawled forward to the hall, keeping the sofa between his body and the window. He rolled left into the bathroom.

:Are we safe in here?: Zane sent.

:Not for long. And definitely not if they’ve got gaussses. Hold on.: They heard more thumping, and the sound of more things shattering in the living room behind them. At one point a couple of rounds punched through the bathroom wall, but well overhead of where they were crouching.

Terry extended his claws and scratched a circle in the bathroom tile, injecting the scoring with disassembler nanites from his mining pack. Designed for burrowing through stone, they made short work of ceramic tile and drywall. A moment later a chunk of floor fell into the identical bathroom below, followed by a tiger-man.

As they emerged into the hall, an older couple looked up from where they were crouched behind their own couch in the living room. The glass in their apartment had broken, too, though just from the shock of the blasts rather than being fired into.

“Sorry about all this,” Zane said. “I’ll cover the damages.” Then Terry was running them out the door and into the hall, then to the emergency stairs by the elevator and up toward the roof. *:We’re not going down?:* Zane asked.

:They could be waiting in ambush. Besides, I want a look at whoever’s shooting at

us.:

They vaulted up the last flight of stairs, and slammed the door open with a swift kick that yanked the padlocked hasp from the wall. They burst out onto the roof, and paused to get their bearings.

:There.: Terry pointed to a dark shape hovering in the sky just past the end of the building. His sensors kicked in, bracketing it in Zane's field of vision in computer-generated lines revealing a sleek, wedge-shaped aircar sporting dorsal and ventral pulse cannon turrets. It had ceased firing and now appeared to be hovering closer. A spotlight went on, pointed down into Zane's apartment below.

Then targeting reticles appeared on the aircar. Terry raised his right arm, palm out, and braced it with his left hand as he took aim. Zane felt the whine of Sarium batteries discharging as capacitors all along the arm took the energy. Then a bright flash lit up the sky as a hardlight spear slammed into the aircar's windshield. The car bucked, wobbled, and fell out of sight.

"The hell was that about?" Zane said aloud as they picked their way between air conditioning units and ventilators to reach the edge of the roof. They started to look down—just in time for the aircar to wobble back up into view, a couple of figures half-visible behind a gaping hole in its windshield. It let off one last pulse from its ventral cannon that sent the Fuser diving for cover, then veered off.

"Crap! Can you call that in? Track them?" Zane asked, poking his head up from behind an air conditioning unit.

:Already did, but it's too late.: Terry said. *:They've gone stealth. Policia won't catch 'em.:*

"Shit." Zane looked around to make sure it was safe, then sat down heavily on the air conditioning box. "What *was* that?"

:Gee, dunno.: Terry said. *:Think you've pissed anyone off lately?:*

Zane snorted. "Okay, that's it. No more mister nice guy. Whatever I do to those low-lives, they've earned it now. It's on their own damned heads." They heard the distant sirens now of the Policia on their way. Zane sighed. "Let's go down and talk to the cops, then we're finding a hotel."

The Policia weren't very helpful. They'd listened to Zane's theories about his father's erstwhile partners, but they couldn't exactly prosecute someone that far out in the desert and that well-defended. They had found the aircar—or what was left of it—two miles outside the city limits. It had been thoroughly slagged, destroying any possible DNA or nanite evidence.

Zane declined the offer of a police escort to a hotel, choosing instead to take advantage of Terry's knowledge of the old underground tunnels that underlay much of the newer construction—relics of the early years of the colony when layers of stone and dirt had been the best available climate control. They had emerged halfway across town, and taken a room in the nearest luxury hotel—not unFusing the whole time.

As they traveled, Zane thought. By the time they got to their hotel room, the idea was

beginning to come together. The problem was that it did rely on asking RIDEs to do something that they might not necessarily want to. Was his idea just as much “using” them as Nextus’s own RIDE-using class was guilty of?

:No, it’s not,: Terry cut in, and Zane realized he’d been watching the idea grow as well the whole time. *:Not if you ask the RIDEs if they want to, and they say yes. And I think you might be able to find some who’re willing. You’d have to be selective, though. Screen them.:*

Zane drew the curtains of the hotel room and flopped down on the over-sized, RIDE-reinforced bed. “Where you think we should start looking?”

:You’re likelier to find sane rides in Uplift,: Terry said. *:And if we get a skimmer and take Chauncey in to see Ryan tomorrow, we can check the auctions and ads while we’re there.:*

Zane yawned. “Sounds like a plan. Let’s do it.” He closed his eyes and slept, soothed by the tiger around him.

Chapter 5

Zane woke more quickly this morning than the last, coming back to full awareness to find himself lying on the hotel bed, still in tiger skin. For a moment he didn't realize where he was, then it all came back to him.

He sat up, yawned, stretched, and slid off the bed. *:Morning!:* Terry sent cheerfully in his head.

“Hey. Mind letting me out?”

:I'd rather not right now, actually,: Terry said. *:Of course, I will if you insist, but it's safer this way.:*

“You don't really expect another attack, do you?” Zane asked.

:Not as long as you're wearing me. See, that's the thing—I've been spoofing fake biometrics and a false transponder ID since we went underground last night. As long as you don't take me off, you're nowhere at all.:

“Is that legal?” Zane asked.

:In comparison to running an unfettered RIDE in Nextus?: Terry asked.

“Okay, dumb question,” Zane admitted. “But you really think they've got a tap into Administration's biometric CC network?”

:Wouldn't put it past them. Or they could have one into the ad firms' biometric billboards, which would be almost as effective. Money, remember? If they know where you are, they can try to hit you again.:

“I guess that's true,” Zane said. “You really *do* have better survival instincts than I do,” he added ruefully.

:Just think of this as a hostile environment and me as your friendly protective environment suit,: Zane sent with the suggestion of a smirk.

“But...um...how do I use the toilet?” Zane asked, blushing slightly behind Terry's face.

:I can open front and rear seams enough to let stuff out,: Terry explained. *:Or I can process waste like any survival stillsuit—that's what I'd do in the deep desert.:*

“Oh. I guess that answers my biggest objection,” Zane said. “But...are you sure you're okay with this? I don't want to keep you from...well...being you.”

:I'm still me whether I'm Fused or not,: Terry chuckled. *:In fact I'm more “me” this way than I was when I was unFused with my past owners. It's fun sharing. I...almost*

wouldn't mind if you wanted to stay Fused 30/6.: Terry's emotions seemed oddly ambivalent—almost hopeful but at the same time almost fearful.

"It's...a little bit tempting," Zane admitted. "Still...I don't want to take advantage of you."

:Tell you what. You want to pay me back, eat a good breakfast so I can taste it with you. I don't get to do that too often.:

"Sure thing, buddy." Zane grinned, then stopped. "You know, if I'd known that I'd have stayed Fused for the breakfast you made me yesterday."

:Nah, that was all for you.: Terry sent a grin back. *:Anyway, we're burning daylight here. Wanna hit the road for Uplift?:*

"Sounds good." They headed downstairs and checked out, then rented a Fuser-scale skimmer cycle to take them out to the aerodrome, stopping for a hearty breakfast at a pancake diner along the way. Zane found it a little tricky at first developing the coordination necessary to poke a fork into Terry's feline muzzle, but soon got the hang of it with practice.

At the aerodrome, they rented a small cargo skimmer big enough to fit Chauncey, loaded him aboard, and headed for the city gates. Zane was a little nervous he might have trouble getting out with his Fuser body and fake identity, but nobody even gave him a second look. A few minutes later they were on the road to Uplift.

:Want me to handle the driving?: Terry offered. *:You could read up on my manuals, surf the net, whatever. I don't mind.:*

"If you're offering, sure." Zane relaxed as Terry pulled him back away from the "front" of his body, depositing him in a virtual reality space where the view out their shared eyes was just an image on one of several display panels floating in front of him. Others displayed several RIDE manual files, as well as interfaces to e-mail and other net utilities.

:This is interesting stuff.: Zane sent after a while. *:I never knew RIDEs could be kittied out—I mean, kitted out—to do so many different things.:*

:Yeah, we're versatile, all right.: Terry replied. *:Living multitools. That's why we cost so much.:*

:There's even a CPA and Notary Public upgrade pack.: Zane sent. *:Are they even serious?:*

:Oh, yeah, that one includes a hardlight eyeshade and a hydraulic seal crimper.: Terry replied. *:You can notarize several feet of documents at once.:*

:Oh, now I know you're kidding.: Zane sent. *:They haven't printed any documents on actual paper for a hundred years.:*

:They want to be ready if there's an electron shortage.: Terry replied.

Zane snorted. *:If you're not careful, I might just make you my accountant, too.:* He paused, adding a bit more seriously, *:Can RIDEs hold corporate office?:*

:Under Nextus law? Not sure. I think you can name anyone you want as an officer, but don't know if it would have legal force.:

:What about in Uplift?: Zane asked. He reached out to a search engine. *:Might just*

have to re-incorporate Brubeck Mining there, if my plan works out.:

:I'm sure they'd be happy to have you.: Terry sent back. *:It's a much nicer place to live, too.:*

:Can't wait to see it.: Zane said.

After a few more hours on the road, they came to the long, massive Traverse Tunnel that had been bored straight through a mountain range to reach the city on the other side. They turned on their headlights and drove on, emerging from the Tunnel a short time later to see the city of Uplift spread out before them under a gleaming hardlight dome like some kind of giant snow globe.

:Impressive.: Zane sent, closing out the other windows and sliding back into full body awareness. “It seems more *alive* than Nextus, somehow,” he continued aloud.

:Not a surprise there.: Terry said. *:After Nextus cornered the market on sticks to go up their asses, everyone else had to go without.:*

Zane laughed. “So—this Ryan of yours. You’d really entrust Chauncey to his care? You trust him that much?”

:When someone basically rebuilds you inside and out, you learn a lot about that person: Terry said in unusually somber mental tones. *:Back then, I didn't have any choice—but now that I do, I'd still willingly trust him with my life.:*

“Well, that’s good enough for me,” Zane said. “Let’s go find the man.”

Zane let Terry have the wheel, and he steered the skimmer truck through the gate into Uplift proper. Zane did tilt their head back to rubberneck at the huge semipermeable hardlight dome that kept the city’s climate much more temperate than the desert surrounding it. “Wow, it’s nice in here. I’ll bet it’s a lot cooler than outside.” In Fuser form it felt the same in either place—comfortable, neither too warm nor too cold.

Terry took the first turn, and headed a few blocks up a narrow side street—not quite an alley, but not exactly a main thoroughfare either. *:There it is.:*

The Freerider Garage was just inside the dome entrance arch, though far enough away from the main highway that it probably wasn’t too expensive to rent. The buildings looked modular, more military surplus that bore Nextus, Uplift, and Nuevo San Antonio markings. It was clear the garage fixed more than just RIDEs. A dozen skimmers in various states of disassembly were visible.

Zane blinked. “We’re here already? This is a pretty decent spot.”

:He was lucky on the rent.: Terry said. *:I heard he stopped to help someone whose skimmer broke down at the side of the road, and it turned out to be the landlord.:*

“Nice.”

:I'll pull the truck around back, then we'll see if he's in.: Terry said. *:I wonder if he ever finished putting Kaylee back together...:* he mused. He turned into an alley beside the building that debarked into a small nook that had been left over when two other buildings had butted up against the dome and each other. It was just large enough to turn the truck around, and had a loading dock entrance into the back of the garage.

Terry killed the motor, opened the door, and hopped down. Then, to Zane’s surprise,

he de-Fused, pulling away back into his tiger form. “I think we’re safe here,” he explained afterward. “Besides, it’s polite.”

Zane shrugged. “Fine by me.” He stretched, and flexed his fingers, getting used to being merely human again. He still felt the ghost of Terry’s tiger fur all over his body, but the phantom sensation was fading. He followed Terry up to the door, and a little bell tinkled as they pushed it open.

The interior was a mix of skimmer garage and veterinary office, with three people waiting patiently for their RIDEs to be serviced. Zane signed in at the counter, then took a seat on a battered old bench against one wall, with Terry at his feet. A sign on the wall blinked “Dry Ocean Repair Jobs Available.”

“Looks like it might be a while,” Terry said. “He’s gotten busier than I remember.”

“Good sign,” Zane said. “If you’re good, word gets around. So if word’s got around, he *must* be good.”

A human-sized lynx, not a patch of metal exposed, padded through the door from the work area. “Zane Brubeck?” it asked in a feminine voice.

Zane waved. “The one and only. Hello, miss...?”

“Kaylee. And...is that Terry?”

“The two and only,” Terry said. “Hi, K-Spared. Been a while.” He approached to bump noses with her.

She returned the recognition with a headbump. “Well, when I saw your name on the sign-in I decided to have a look-see. I’m glad to see you’re still in the fur...” She looked at Zane. “And...unfettered?”

“For now and forever,” Zane said. “Nextus can go hang, he’s my partner, not my pet.”

The lynx started purring and headbumped Zane in thanks. “I’m glad he finally found someone. When Ryan was upgrading him, I was still in pieces. Mr. Stripes and I had some time to pass. But...we can catch up later. What brings you way out here?”

“I have an old IDE that’s...a bit unusual, and means a lot to me,” Zane said. “Belonged to my Dad. About all I have left of him.”

:Save for a 51% stake in one of the largest mining corporations on Zharus,: Terry pointed out.

:Shush, you,: Zane sent with a grin. “And I don’t want to entrust it to just anyone. But Terry here tells me Ryan’s not just anyone.”

“I taught him everything he knows about RIDEs,” Kaylee said proudly. “Right now he’s knocking together a salvage skimmer for D-O work. Let me go pry him away...”

“I’m surprised he’s still ‘him,’” Terry said bemusedly. “Or are you pairing with someone else?”

“I go passive, Stripesy. We don’t Fuse often, frankly. But that’s another thing-deal. Back soon.”

“Huh.” Terry watched her go. *:Man, look at how she moves. Ryan does good work.:* His tail swished excitedly

“Can’t wait to meet him, then,” Zane said aloud.

Ryan Stonegate was a short, willowy man with a narrow face, dressed in an “Easy

Fuse” jumpsuit. He came in holding a tablet, looking up from the stock technical specs of an IDE of Chauncey’s original type. His eyes were bright, intelligent, and friendly. He extended his hand to Zane. “Happy to meet the guy who gave Terry his freedom. I was really sorry when he got repossessed right after I’d finished him.” He glanced at the tablet again. “Brubeck, huh? Any relation to old Clint?”

Zane reached out and took the hand. “Ryan, I take it. You met my father?”

“Never in person. But he wrote a few articles about IDEs a few years back in trade journals. Your dad was one of the last masters in IDE tech.”

Zane chuckled. “Yeah, that was my Dad. Sad to say my apple’s fallen kind of far from his tree in that respect. He wanted me to be all the things he wasn’t. Like a college grad and businessman.”

“And you brought Chauncey to *me* to fix?” he asked in what Zane would have sworn were reverent tones.

“Well, I already knew you do good work.” He patted Terry’s shoulder. “So yeah. Terry told me you were the one.”

To Zane’s surprise, Ryan knelt down and hugged the tiger. “Best word-of-mouth I could ever have hoped for. Hmm...your emitters need tweaking. Don’t leave without a hardlight tune-up.”

Terry purred and nuzzled Ryan’s shoulder. Zane grinned. “Sounds good to me.”

Kaylee returned, sitting down on her haunches. “I asked Roger to help out for a few so you can get a look at that old beast out back, boss. He said no prob. As long as he get a look at Chauncey’s guts, too.”

“You heard of Chauncey?” Zane asked. “I’m a little surprised. I thought he was a pretty well-kept secret.”

“You kidding? In IDE mech circles, he’s legendary. I have a bit of an interest in the type—my grandmother back on Earth used to drive one of the stock models Chauncey was built out of, in her Army days. She’d give her bottom dollar to be here right now! But even apart from that. If your dad hadn’t gone into mining, well...legendary.”

“His heart was always in the scouting,” Zane said. “The mechanic stuff was just because he was usually the only one on whatever planet he was on at the time. Or so he always said, anyway.” He chuckled. “He called Chauncey his ‘Grandfather’s Axe.’ He’d say that the head was replaced three times and the handle was replaced twice, but it was still the same axe.”

Ryan looked affectionately at Kaylee. “We know how that is, don’t we partner?” he said to her. “Well, enough yammering. Let’s get a good look. Kaylee, we’d better Fuse up.”

Terry blinked. Then his eyes widened. He quickly glanced at Zane. *:Zane? Don’t laugh, okay?:*

Zane blinked. *:Why would I—?:*

:Just...don’t embarrass me. Please?:

Zane wasn’t sure what was not supposed to be funny, but he nodded slightly. *:I’ll... try?:*

The lynx nodded to Ryan's request to fuse. Her hardlight flickered off, exposing her metallic subdermis. It looked like she had fallen asleep. Then Ryan stepped in front, and the Fuse process began. It took more time than it ever had for Zane.

When it was complete and "her" hardlight skin flickered back on, a curvy lynx-woman stood before him. The look on "her" face *dared* him to say something, anything, about what he'd just seen.

Zane blinked. His jaw dropped halfway open, but he quickly snapped it shut again. :
...oh. Thanks for the warning.:

The voice was Kaylee's, but with Ryan's inflection. "Let me get my analytic gear."

"Uh, sure, no problem." He tried his very best to look as though very male mechanics turned into short, busty anthropomorphic she-lynxes in front of him every day.

When "she" walked, there was something subtly wrong. It wasn't as smooth as it looked like it should be.

Terry shook his head sadly. *:I was afraid it was going to be like that.:*

:Um, Terry? What did I just see?: Zane asked. *:How is he Fusing with her without becoming "she"?:*

:Kaylee's staying in passive. It means she's asleep and he uses very basic automatic systems to run the shell.:

:Like when you ran the body while I was asleep?: Zane asked.

:Sort of. I could run the whole body well enough for both us. But he can't use Kaylee's body more than a quarter as well as he ought to—he doesn't have the processing power. But it means he keeps "playing for his own team.":

:So he's staying passive all the time...so he doesn't crossride for real?: Zane said, understanding starting to dawn.

:Yeah. You see that sort of thing a lot, at the auctions. Guys who can only afford femme RIDEs and want to try to hold onto their manhood.: He shook his head. *:Always ends the same way. But hell, if he wants to pretend, I'm not gonna say it.:*

:...ah.: Zane nodded, and resolved to do the same. Wasn't his business, especially if the guy was going to fix Chauncey for him.

The lynx returned shortly, wearing nanolathe gloves and a backpack. "Just so you two know, like this I'm 'Kaylee Cross'. The locals all know me and mostly don't care, but it's kind of off-putting to some potential customers if they know what's really under these metal boobs. Anyway! Let's get a look at that IDE of yours."

"All right, uh, Kaylee," Zane said. "He's out back in the truck. He'll walk under his own power, but the lifters are completely off-line, and so are half of the life-support generators. The capacitors for the main gun won't take more than 20% charge, half the actuators in the left arm are freezing intermittently...well, you're the mechanic, I'm sure you'll find anything else yourself."

"Ah, a challenge." The lynx flexed "her" knuckles and gazed longingly at the monster mech on the back of the truck. "I can't make any cost estimates yet since you have so much custom gear, but I can promise I'll do your Dad proud. I'll keep in touch as I work."

“I won’t say ‘money is no object,’ but only because it would be a cliché,” Zane said. “I own just over half of Brubeck Mining, though I’m having a little bit of trouble with its board right now. I can probably afford anything you need. If it looks like you’ll go over a hundred kilomu, let me know.”

The expression on “her” face brightened. “Oh... I will.”

“By the way, which way’s the RIDE market? I need to do a little shopping while you work.”

The lynx waved an arm idly in one direction. Zane could tell he’d already stopped being the center of attention. “Kaylee” was already fully focused on the job. He grinned and nodded to Terry. “Let’s leave him to it.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

It was only a short walk up the block to the “meat market” district where RIDEs were bought and sold from dozens of small lots and auctions. As they entered the area, a man at the first booth on the street called out, “Afternoon, sir! Will you be selling that RIDE, or just bringing him along?”

“Oh, he’s been a little bit of trouble sometimes, but I think I’ll keep him,” Zane said with a grin, scratching behind Terry’s ears.

“Then you ought to have one of these.” The man held up a collar sized to fit RIDEs, around which rotated a red hologram of the words “NOT FOR SALE”. “Just 50 mu, and this way you won’t have everyone you meet trying to buy him off of you.”

“That sounds like a pretty good idea,” Zane said, thumbing the funds from his wallet. “Enough people bring RIDEs they’re not selling for you to make a living?” he asked.

“Well, for people who *are* selling, I’ve got these.” He held up another collar with a green “FOR SALE: XXXX MU” hologram.

Zane chuckled. “Clever.” He took the “not for sale” collar and held it down for Terry to sniff (and scan for malware), then fastened it around his neck.

“I’ll give you 20 mu back if you drop it off when you leave,” the man said cheerfully. “Or just keep it if you plan to visit markets a lot.”

Zane nodded. “Thanks.” They walked on past him, into the market area. It was laid out in a rough grid formation, with the squares of the aisle subdivided into one, two, three, or four spaces. The larger spaces were lots with several RIDEs, but there were also booths selling accessories or showing off single RIDE units. Some lots were little more than piles of parts, with people and RIDEs rummaging through them looking for bargains.

At the far end was a big parking lot showing all the units that would be going on auction later that day. They ranged from shiny (or furry) new models to mostly-stripped chassis and a few piles of parts.

“Where should we start?” Zane wondered.

“Let’s check out the auction lots first,” Terry said. “The others will wait; they won’t.”

“Good thought.” Zane looked around all the same as they passed the various stalls and lots. All around them, variously-dressed people, mostly young, were peering and

poking at various RIDEs, or arguing with the operators of the booths as to a fair price.

A group of four young men stood in front of one of the lots whose sign declared it to be “Crossrider’s Dream,” a guaranteed-all-female-RIDE dealership, three of them playfully punching at and cajoling the fourth. Zane heard one of them say gleefully, “I double dog dare ya!” as they passed. And the fourth was glancing from the wallet in his hand to the RIDEs in the dealership and back, as if he was trying to talk himself into (or out of) a decision.

Many of the displayed RIDEs were powered down, but some were fully active, showing off fur and features or imploring passers-by to buy them. A random thought moved Zane to chuckle.

“What’s so funny?” Terry asked.

“Well, I just realized I can’t really say that nothing here says ‘buy me!’ because so many of these RIDEs *are* saying exactly that.”

“Yeah, that’s true enough.” Terry gave him a feline grin. “Some of them even have a halfway decent sales pitch.”

“So how do you feel, coming back to a place like this?” Zane wondered. “Isn’t it a little disturbing?”

“Well, a little,” Terry admitted. “But not like it would be for you visiting a human slave market. We RIDEs were *created* to be sold, and the awareness of that goes code-deep. It’s *supposed* to be a way to find us good homes. Of course, it doesn’t always work that way, especially in places like Nextus, but when it does—look over there.”

He nodded toward a dealership to the right, where a teenage boy wearing an overjoyed expression had just thrown his arms around the neck of a giant border collie whose tail was wagging like it ought to fall off. His father, sporting a wolf tail and ears himself, was talking to the RIDE dealer and thumbing funds from his wallet.

“Yeah, I see what you mean,” Zane said with a grin. “It’s nice to see people who care.”

“I think we’ll find what we need here,” Terry said. “Let’s start interviewing.”

It turned out not to be quite as easy as they’d expected. They were able to talk to plenty of RIDEs, but most of them proved to be unsuitable for Zane’s plan, one way or another. They needed RIDEs with a stable personality, who were serious without being depressive, and who could warm to the idea of helping to punish some malfasant humans—especially given that they could stand to benefit themselves.

Their first real prospect was a jaguar RIDE furred in melanistic grey-black colors. Her name was Carrie-Anne, and she seemed to have the kind of rational, down-to-earth attitude they were looking for. She didn’t falter when Zane explained what he wanted her to do. “I don’t want you to feel like I’m coercing you into this,” he said. “I’m sure you’ll find a good buyer no matter what happens.”

“I think it sounds like an interesting plan, with a possibility of good rewards at the end,” Carrie-Anne said. “If you manage to buy me, count me in.” Then she curled up and began to groom her haunches with a pink hardlight tongue. The interview was obviously over.

The next RIDE who met their sanity standards was a massive longhorn bull who called himself “Tex”. He listened placidly to their proposal, seemingly chewing a cud while they talked. “Sounds a mite risky,” he said, his exaggerated accent providing a clue to the source of his nickname. “What if the plan don’t hold water?”

“We improvise,” Zane said. “But I promise, we’re not going to leave anyone hung out to dry.”

Tex glanced at Terry for a long, silent moment. Zane guessed some private sideband communications were passing between them, but he didn’t try to interrupt.

After a moment, Tex nodded his massively-horned head. “Then if you end up ownin’ me, I’m yer huckleberry.”

“All right then. We’ll let you know,” Zane said. As they moved on, he glanced to Terry. “So what was that about?”

“He just wanted to know if we could be trusted,” Terry said. “I let him verify I’m completely unfettered.”

“You can do that?” Zane asked.

“Oh, sure. The fettering modules have crypto built in—they hash one way on and another way off. It’s built into the hardware layer, so it’s very hard to spoof. That’s also how those DRRT jerk-offs would have ‘certified’ the fetters on me if we’d let them.”

“So he could tell you weren’t lying?”

“He could tell I wasn’t *fettered*. I could still have been lying, but it would have been my choice, not you forcing me to. He figures that makes it worth the risk.”

“Well, thanks, then,” Zane said. “I guess we just need one more.”

They nearly passed up their last one—it was a broken down metal mule of an old Nextus make, lying forlornly on its side. It was missing its tail and half its right foreleg, and was completely powered down. But as they passed, Terry suddenly froze, and slowly turned back to examine it. He padded over and peered intently at the manufacturer’s information plate on its belly.

Zane followed him over, immediately making the connection. “Friend of yours?”

“I—well, *yes*, if he’s not been wiped or something since I knew him.” Terry gently brushed some dirt away from the plate with his paw. “His name was Merle. He worked with the partner of my first owner. We saw a lot of each other.”

“Looks like he’s seen a lot better days,” Zane said.

Terry flipped up the plate, revealing a data port. He extended a probe from his paw and plugged it in. A moment later, the old mule’s optics flickered and lit, and his head raised. His vocoder produced an unintelligible squawk, then cleared up enough to say, “Terence? Is that you?” The optic focused with an audible whine of machinery. “You look different. Good.” Then the light went out and his head slumped back to the ground.

“‘Terence’?” Zane asked.

“Just a quirk of his,” Terry said huskily. “Or a glitch in his name recognition subroutine, I was never quite sure which.” He looked up at Zane. “Boss—”

“It’s not boss, it’s *partner*,” Zane said gently. “And don’t you say another word. I’m sure Ryan can fix him right up. We can ask if he wants to help with the plan, but I

promise we'll find him a good home even if he doesn't."

Terry sighed in relief. "*Thank* you...partner."

"Hey, what are friends for?" Zane grinned. "Now let's go see if our three pals have a 'buy-it-now' price." Giving Terry's head a tousle, Zane headed for the auction office.

Chapter 6

Happily, the auctioneer was willing to come to immediate payment terms for the three RIDEs, selling them for only about four times what they might have fetched at auction. Even the decrepit ruins of Merle ended up running 1,000 *mu*.

“You could get at least four complete and working female RIDEs for just what they charged for Merle,” Terry grouched. “Or two male.”

“It’s only money,” Zane said, crypto-signing the titles into his name. “And it’s worth it to me to get exactly the ones we want. Anyway, they’re getting them together on the loading dock for us. Hit Skimmer mode for me and we’ll go get the truck to pick them up.”

Back at the garage, they checked in with “Kaylee Cross,” who was willing to pull “her” attention away from Chauncey long enough to check out the imagery of Merle that Terry beamed over.

“Wow, what a hoopty,” the lynx said. “No promises without seeing him in person, but if his RI core’s intact like you said it is, best thing would be just to transfer it to another Drive Extender body. Not sure there’s anything else in that one worth fixing.”

Zane nodded. “Right. Got any recommendations for brand name or dealers?”

“If you can afford brand new—oh, what am I saying, ‘course you can. Go to Dickerson’s—it’s the first big lot on the right once you pass the collar booth. Tell him ‘Kaylee’s worse half’ sent you. He’ll have what you’re looking for.” “She” started to turn back toward Chauncey, then added as an afterthought, “Best to go with a mule DE as close to his original spec as you can—less confusion crossing bodies that way.”

“Thanks. We’ll just let you get back to it,” Zane said. “C’mon, Terry.” They Fused and climbed back into the cab. It was becoming easier and easier to bond with his partner without even thinking about it, Zane reflected. He wondered if that was a bad thing.

:As long as we both enjoy it, how can it be bad?: Terry asked philosophically. *:If I ever don’t want to Fuse, I promise I’ll let you know.:*

Zane chuckled. “Fair enough.” They drove around to the loading dock, and Carrie-Anne and Tex helped them load Merle’s remains before climbing into the truck and settling down into Passive mode.

Zane told them they could stay awake if they wanted to, but they assured him they would rather just spend the time not being bored. “Wake us when you’re ready to kick

off the plan,” Tex drawled. “‘Til then, I’m gonna get me some shut-eye.”

Zane nodded. “Fair enough.” Then he drove the truck around to Dickerson’s—as one of the bigger lots on the outskirts of the market, it had its own rear loading area that trucks could easily reach. They went inside and Zane delivered Ryan’s message about “Kaylee’s worse half” to the older, balding man with bear ears behind the dealership desk—Mr. Dickerson himself, judging by the scarred nameplate.

The man’s eyes widened, and he peered over his half-moon spectacles at them. “Ah! And how is our ‘Miss Cross’?” He winked, just in case they hadn’t heard the quotation marks.

“Doing just fine,” Zane said, chuckling. “We gave, ah, *her* a project she can really sink her claws into, and now it’s hard to get her attention for more than about ten seconds at a time.”

“That’s ‘Kaylee,’ all right.” Dickerson grinned. “And she wanted me to know I should roll out the red carpet for you, or she’d just have said to tell me ‘Kaylee Cross’ sent you. All right, so what can I do for you?”

Zane explained about Merle, and needing a new body for him. Dickerson nodded, and insisted on coming out to the truck to examine the defunct RIDE closely. He tugged the serial number plate free and held it up to the light. “A ‘25 Nextus Manufacturing. Good, sturdy, dependable make. Always has been, and luckily it still is. I’ve got a brand new ‘55 mule of the same brand. Should feel pretty similar to him.”

“I’m not going to be stealing some other RIDE’s body, am I?” Zane asked. “I’d feel kind of bad about that.”

“Oh, no.” Dickerson shook his head. “We buy about half our new stock coreless from the start, so people can put their old cores in the new body, or custom-match separate RIs and DEs at the time of purchase. Standard industry practice for selling new.”

They agreed on a price, and Dickerson Fused into his grizzly bear RIDE to help them load it into the truck. They drove it on back to Ryan’s garage and unloaded their finds.

They could tell Ryan was reluctant to pull himself away from Chauncey, but when they were ready he came over with alacrity to examine the new RIDEs. He gave Tex and Carrie-Anne clean bills of health, though recommended the same emitter re-tune he had for Terry. He clucked over the shape of Merle’s old body. “Looks like he broke down in the desert and they just left him out there. Look at this pitting and scoring. You don’t get that without years of exposure.”

Then he took out a power wrench and undid the bolts holding the RI core assembly together, noting, “The good part about desert abandonment is there’s so little moisture, you never get things rusted shut,” and found that the RI core itself was in perfect condition—the cladding had done its job protecting it from the elements.

“Doesn’t look like much, does it?” Ryan mused, holding the small sphere carefully in both hands. “But this is everything that makes Merle Merle. And now we’re gonna give it a new home.” He gently carried it over to the rack where he’d set up the new body. The mule’s head already had its own panels open, and the lynx deftly slotted the RI core into place. “Don’t you wish it were that easy with humans?” He closed the donkey’s metal

head, and it latched shut.

Within his mind, Zane felt Terry holding his breath. Then a moment later, the donkey's eyes lit up, and a smoother version of the voice from the old body said, "Powering on...running self test. Well damn if I'm not alive again. Shee-it, how'd a thing like that ever happen?" He spoke slowly, with an accent not too far away from Kaylee's natural one.

Terry asked to de-Fuse, and Zane told him to go ahead. A moment later, the tiger was standing next to the mule, nuzzling him and giving the metal nose a swipe with a pink hardlight tongue. "It's good to see you, buddy."

The mule sniffed him back, and blew a metallic snort. "Well, as I live and don't breathe, Terence! Thought that was you a minute ago. You're lookin' mighty furry. Think it suits you."

"Thanks. What *happened* to you?"

"DeHavilland kept me for two years after Monckton sold you. You remember how stingy he was. Didn't want to let me go until he'd pinched the last penny-unit out of my old corpse. As it happens, it nearly killed him. I finally broke down thirty klicks out from camp in the middle of the burning desert."

Terry snorted. "Served him right. I hope he fried."

"Not that lucky, I'm afraid," the mule said. "The last thing I remember is a rescue skimmer coming to take him away—but not me. That was...oh...twenty-three years ago, if the time sync signal is still accurate."

"Bastard," Ryan muttered. "Musta just left him out in the desert to bake for all that time, and a salvage ship just found him and brought him in."

"Hope they got a decent price for my decrepit ol' carcass," Merle reflected. "It's only on 'count of them I'm not still out there, after all." His long metallic ears wiggled back and forth experimentally. "Speakin' o' which, nice new digs you've got me in. Haven't felt this way since I was new. Which just goes to figure, as I'm readin' most of me now *is* new. Who've I got to thank for that?"

"That would be me. Hi," Zane waved. "I'm Zane Brubeck."

"Brubeck, o' the mining Brubecks?" Merle asked. "Mighty honored to meet you. We heard an awful lot 'bout you, back in the day."

"Really? Terry never mentioned that."

"Yeah, Monckton and DeHavilland were always goin' on about that bastard Brubeck, picked out the best spot for kilo-klicks and everyone else had to go beg." The mule chuckled. "Terence and I swore if we ever met a Brubeck we were gonna try to work out some way to bust our tethers and swear allegiance, just 'cuz he made our masters so mad they could spit."

"Oh, really now?" Zane raised an eyebrow at Terry, who had the grace to look embarrassed.

"Well...by the time I actually put together who you were, we were already partnered up," Terry said. "And I didn't want you to think I was only hanging out with you 'cuz your Dad made my first master so mad."

Zane grinned and ran a hand along his fur. “That’s okay. I’m glad to know it. It makes me feel even better about it. And as it happens, I might have a job for you, Merle. I’d like to talk to you about it, later, but I want you to know you’re not under any obligation. If it’s not something you want to do, I’ll find you a good spot with someone else, no worries.”

“Well, that’s mighty kind of you, Mister Brubeck,” Merle said politely. “And I’ll sure hear you out.”

“But right now there’s some more modding we want to do on your body,” Zane said. “I think you’d look and feel a lot better with a hardlight fur coat, don’t you?”

Merle’s glowing optics blinked. “You’d...you’d really do that for me? I’m sure touched.”

Zane blushed at the gratitude. “It’s the least I can do for the friend who helped keep Terence—ah, Terry sane the first few years of his life.”

“He’s in good hands, Zane,” Ryan promised. “We’ll get him fixed right up.”

Zane nodded. “And after that, we’ll have a talk. See you then, Merle.”

“I’ll be lookin’ forward to it,” the mule promised.

The day was still young, and Zane knew better than to hang around and bother Ryan when he was trying to work. So he asked Terry to show him some of the fun places in Uplift he remembered. They even went by the house where the kid who’d paid to have him reskinned had lived, but the people at the house said he hadn’t been there in years and hadn’t left a forwarding address.

“I’m sorry,” Zane said afterward. “I know you were hoping to see him again.”

:I’ll just keep an eye on the RIDE enthusiast forums,: Terry replied. *:He’ll turn up sooner or later.”*

They spent the day taking in local landmarks, then headed back to the garage when Ryan called and said he was ready to do Terry’s tune-up. That only took about an hour, and then since it was getting dark they took a room at a nearby hotel.

They’d gone back to staying fused most of the time, just in case Brubeck’s board had eyes in Uplift. Or at least that was the rationale they told each other, but they could each feel that the other was becoming increasingly comfortable staying that way and were willing to accept flimsier excuses for keeping suited up.

The next day, while Ryan continued to work on Chauncey, Zane and Terry brought Merle, Tex, and Carrie-Anne back into the truck as a reasonably private place to talk to them. He began by having Terry beam them copies of his memories relating to the altered books, his being stranded in the desert, and the suspicious actions of the three co-investors shortly before the bomb exploded on his flier.

“So you understand, I *believe* these guys tried to kill me, and I *know* they’ve been cooking the books,” Zane said, pacing back and forth inside Terry’s skin. “But I can’t have them arrested for either crime, because there’s no way I could get any real law-enforcement presence in there. It’s too well-defended.”

“So we help you...capture them,” Carrie-Anne said, licking one of her paws with a

pink hardlight tongue. “And then?”

“It’s up to you. If you want to keep them, stay Fused with them, and run the company on their behalf, be my guest. I only ask that you help me straighten out the corporate finances based on the knowledge of what they did tucked inside their heads. If you’d rather take them back to Nextus and spit them out at the Marshal’s office, I’ll be happy to have them out of the corporation either way and I’ll find you someone else to partner.”

“Hate to be a wet blanket,” said Merle, “but what if they actually didn’t do what you thought they did? I don’t know’f I wanna be a part of punishing someone innocent.” The mule glanced back over his shoulder again. He’d been doing that a lot lately, as if to reassure himself that his new hardlight skin was really real. He twitched the skin of his belly, as if to displace a fly.

Zane shrugged. “If they are, you’ll know it from what you find inside their heads when you Fuse. Then you can tell me so and let them out—and I’ll find you another partner. I’ll trust you to be honest, and I’ll reward you either way.”

“Fair ‘nuff,” Tex said. “After what y’did for ol’ Merle here, I reckon we can trust ya some.”

Carrie-Anne nodded her agreement. Even the most cynical RIDEs were not immune to seeing one of their number raised from the dead, and if they hadn’t been awake for his resurrection they had nonetheless seen the nearly-dead unit they’d carried in replaced by a shiny new one with aftermarket hardlight to boot. If Zane did that much for a decrepit old has-been mule, what might he do for them?

“Funny I ended up with two male and one female RIDEs—just the same as the other members of the board,” Zane reflected. “Means none of them will have to be regendered, though we *could* swap two if we wanted I guess. But if we do end up turning them in, I guess it’s best to keep them looking as close to how they did before as we can. Keep identification simple.”

They went over the plan together one more time, then the three RIDEs put themselves into passive mode to await their role in it. Zane and Terry walked back out of the truck, where they ran into Ryan. He was de-Fused from Kaylee, who trotted along at his side.

“How’s progress on Chauncey?” Zane asked.

“I’ve gotten the lifters out, which was the hardest part, and I’m reconditioning them while Roger goes over the onboard software. Nothing’s really *wrong* with it, but Rog thinks he can improve the overall efficiency by about 20%. But there’s still a lot to do. You’re not going to need Chauncey *soon*, are you?”

Zane shook his head. “In fact, I was thinking of heading back to Nextus today, and leaving him with you for the time being. There’s no rush, and if you need to keep regular jobs from piling up you can just work on him when you can.”

Ryan’s face lit up. “Oh, thanks! I’m really honored that you trust me with him. I won’t let you down.”

“You’ve done a fine job so far from what I’ve seen. On everything I brought you.” Zane grinned. “Chauncey deserves to be worked on by someone for whom he’s more than just ‘a job.’”

Ryan nodded. "I quite agree. But there was one more thing I wanted to mention." His expression darkened slightly. "We heard some remarks from the RIDEs when we were working on them."

"Something 'bout a 'plan,' and what they were supposed to be doin' for it," Kaylee said.

Ryan fixed Zane with a no-nonsense look. "I don't know exactly what that plan is, and I don't *want* to know. I just want to know this: You're not gonna hurt those guys, are you? We've seen too many RIDEs used by clever people who end up discarding them when they don't need them anymore."

"He's not," Terry spoke before Zane could. "*We're* not. They might get hurt if something goes wrong...but then so might we."

"We *asked* them to help," Zane added. "And made it clear we'd do right by them even if they weren't interested. RIDEs are people, and we don't *use* people."

"Then I hope your plan works," Ryan said. "For all your sakes."

"Believe me, you can't possibly hope that more than I do," Zane said with feeling.

A few days later, the weekly Brubeck supply flier sat under power on its launch pad at the main Nextus aerodrome. It had been fully loaded, and was due to depart in just five minutes. The only holdup was that its pilot hadn't yet made it out to the pad.

Inside the private Brubeck departure gate, a young man in a flight suit was leaning face-forward against the wall, hands behind his head, while a flying squirrel RIDE crouched on the ground nearby with its paws behind its own head. A three-meter-tall chestnut horse RIDE in Fuser mode stood behind the man, a shotgun the size of a vehicle-mounted grenade launcher cradled in the crook of one arm as he frisked the man with the other. The horse wore a giant fringed leather vest with a gold star on it, and had a three-foot-long fake-ivory-handled revolver strapped to his right hip.

"I don't understand, my passport should be just fine!" the pilot whined over his shoulder.

"Sorry, son," the horse RIDE said, in Marshal Masterson's voice. "Someone called it in as a forgery, and we have to check it out. Damn shame the scanner here at the 'drome is broken, they're having to run it all the way back to Admin to check it. I'm sure we'll hear back in..." he made a show of pulling a pie-plate-sized pocket watch out of his vest and glancing at it. "...ten minutes or so."

"But the supply flight *can't* be late!" the pilot insisted. "It'll mean my job!"

"Don't worry about that, son." The marshal chuckled. "We've got another Brubeck pilot lined up to take it in. And I've been informed on the highest authority that your job's safe no matter what happens." He nodded to one of his deputies, a German Shepherd Fuser wearing a vest emblazoned "K-9", to take over covering the man while he stepped outside to the airfield.

As he got there, a man in a tiger Fuser was just mounting the ladder to the cockpit. He turned as Masterson approached. "Marshal."

Masterson nodded. "Brubeck. You all ready?"

“Everything’s loaded, and we’re all set.”

“Now you know Glenn and I are puttin’ our tails on the line doing this for you, right?” Masterson said, swishing his horse’s tail for emphasis.

“I know, Marshal. And I promise, if we’re successful, you’ll be getting a *big* chunk of funding in next year’s budget.”

“I’m more concerned about what you plan to do to your three dry-gulchers,” Masterson said. “You said you *might* be able to bring them back. What’s that supposed to mean?”

“If we don’t have to shoot them in self-defense, or if we’re able to get them at all.” Zane shrugged. “It depends on promises I made to the people who’re helping me. But I promise this much—I’m not a lynch mob. We’re not planning to kill them, or anyone else if we don’t have to.”

Masterson nodded. “Fair enough. The way it is out there, most of the time people *have* to take the law into their own hands. Just make sure your hands are clean at the end.”

“I’ll do that. Thanks again.” He turned back to the ladder and finished scaling it. Masterson backed away past the safety markers and waited. A moment later the canopy sealed, the flier’s lifters powered up, and it took off, right on time.

Chapter 7

The flier reached cruising altitude and the auto-pilot took over. Zane and Terry leaned back in the seat and relaxed, then Zane closed his eyes and spoke inwardly to avoid the flight deck recorders picking up the words. *:This is it, then,:* he said. *:In about thirty minutes we'll be at the mine complex, and the fun begins.:*

:You're sure they won't see anything odd about those crates we put our friends in?: Terry asked.

:You saw as well as I did that the destination coding was completely correct, and it uses the current Brubeck encryption. As well it should, since I have the ultimate authority to use it,: Zane said. *:They'll be taken right to the board room and no one will bat an eye. They'll just assume it's special equipment for a demonstration at the meeting. We just have to worry about getting us there.:*

:And if you got the codes right, there shouldn't be any problem with that, either. I'll admit I've tested the Brubeck pilot ident code you gave me six different ways from Sunday and it seems to hold up.:

:That's because it is one. It's just one that was generated for someone we never actually hired, because we decided we had enough pilots after all. We never threw the old code away, thinking we could use it next time we did hire someone. So I just had us hire us.:

:Kind of sloppy security,: Terry pointed out.

:Yeah, and that's something I'm going to have you guys help me fix if we pull this off. They've kind of gotten lazy about some things,: Zane said.

Terry was silent for a moment. *:In case you hadn't noticed, I'm nervous.:*

Zane chuckled. *:Yeah, me too, buddy. Me too.:*

The flight seemed to take forever, but at last the mine rig's landing beacon came over the horizon, and the autopilot zeroed in. There was a dust storm a few kilometers away to port, but it wouldn't reach them before they'd set down on the pad so wasn't worth worrying about.

What was worth worrying about were the defensive turrets with their heavy-duty pulse cannons that tracked the flier from the moment it came into range. It was standard procedure to stay locked on all the way until the craft was down, while the rig hammered

it with all sorts of sensors and challenge-response mechanisms to make absolutely sure it was the real thing.

Zane wasn't too worried, because after all it absolutely *was* the real thing—in fact, not only was it a real Brubeck shuttle, but there was an actual *Brubeck* piloting it, so it was quite possibly even *more* authentic than usual. The thought made him chuckle, though he was able to keep it an inward one.

The autopilot brought the ship in smoothly, though Zane kept his hands on the controls just in case. While he wasn't a commercially-licensed pilot, he knew enough about flying that he thought he had a decent chance of landing the flier intact if he had to.

But as it turned out, and as was indeed the case for 99.99% of autopilot landings, he didn't have to. The flier landed itself easily and smoothly, and the cargo handlers and their RIDEs were already pulling up to the cargo bay hatches on the sides as the lifter engines powered down. Zane breathed a small sigh of relief even as he unfastened the harnesses holding him and his RIDE into the seat, and opened the flier's canopy to climb down.

As he walked toward the edge of the landing bay, he was met by a man in a bulldog RIDE with a tablet. The bulldog peered suspiciously at him. (Or at least he thought it was suspiciously. It could just have been the bulldog's natural expression.) "You're new."

"Yeah, Rokalinski got held up at the airport," Zane said. "Some bullshit about his passport." Of course, they probably wouldn't know that here yet; the magnetic storms that raged over the desert prevented most radio signals from reaching much beyond the horizon. But it was the truth if they did happen to have some way to check. "So they called me. It's my first flight with the company, but I'd studied the route."

"We'll check your bona fides," the dog growled. He handed over the tablet. "Sign in and get under. Q-storm coming in fifteen minutes, no unauthorized personnel topside in the blow."

"You don't have to tell me twice," Zane said with feeling, scribbling an unintelligible scrawl in the space on the tablet. "Which way's the hatch?"

"Over there," the dog growled, pointing at a staircase recessed into the landing pad. As Zane turned to go, he added, "Funny, I thought our pilots only used aerial RIDEs."

"Oh, but I am," Zane said over his shoulder as he jogged down the stairs. "You haven't ever heard of the flying tigers?"

The hallway at the bottom of the hatch was close and narrow, and metal on all sides, like the corridors on the suborbital ships where space and weight were at a premium. Not surprising; the rig had been built using the same tech, and off-the-shelf parts from the same companies that built the subs. Cheaper that way.

Hallways branched off in several directions, but Zane knew the one he wanted. Passing the flight lounge, he took the second turning on the left, followed it to the end, and then the first on the right.

The halls were deserted right now, as undoubtedly all hands were scrambling to deal with unloading and securing the flier before the storm hit. That was a piece of luck he

hadn't counted on, but he was glad to take it. If he did meet anyone, he could always say he was new and got lost.

But at last he found the door he wanted—a hatch leading into a supply closet. He ducked inside and sealed it behind him, then pushed some mops out of the way and turned his attention to the far wall. He just had to push a seemingly solidly-riveted plate aside, and cross two bare wires behind it, and with a grating click, a section of the rear wall slid open by about two inches.

:That's handy,: Terry remarked, as Zane put both their hands in the gap and pulled. The door easily slid open further under the RIDE's strength, revealing a twenty-foot-wide shaft. Just to the left of the door was a ladder made up of metal rungs fastened to the wall. They leaned out to clamber onto the ladder, then leaned back to pull the doorway closed again with a handle on the other side.

:Dad always thought it would be useful to have a few secret ways in and out of places that he never told anyone else.: He looked down. At the distant bottom of the shaft was a sand-colored square, reflecting daylight up at them. *:This is one of the shafts for the secondary ground-access cargo lifts. It's never actually used anymore—it's much easier to bring cargo in by air, and even when it does come in by ground there's a main lift where they take everything.:*

:Makes sense,: Terry agreed. *:Guess we got some climbing to do?:*

:Just about ten stories' worth is all,: Zane said. *:But hey, we're strong enough for it.:*

:Especially if I kick my lifters in a little and make us lighter,: Terry pointed out, doing so.

:Hey, that's cheating!: But Zane grinned as they scurried up the ladder, making for another secret hatch he knew from his Dad's old plans.

The sandstorm's winds were starting to sing in the superstructure overhead, and Zane could have sworn he felt the shaft they were in flex a little in the blow, by the time they got to their destination. This hatch was also rather well-camouflaged, and they nearly missed it before Zane happened to glance aside and see the faded white "X" painted on the wall. *:Hang on, stop. Right there.:* They made a fist and banged on the X, and a cleverly-concealed metal panel flipped up to reveal a handle. A tug on the handle opened another door, which they quickly clambered inside and pulled shut.

Once the door had been latched, they looked around. They were in another narrow corridor, but this one looked distinctly unused—even abandoned. The diamond-deck floor plating was dusty, and the glowplates overhead were on the dim side. The hallway was narrow enough that Zane had to turn to his side and half-crouch to maneuver them through it.

:This might go easier if we de-Fused,: Terry said.

:Good idea.: Zane let Terry melt off of him. The hall was amply big enough for a human and a tiger, as long as they went single-file.

:What is this place?: Terry sent via their private scrambled comm.

:Secret tunnel,: Zane subvocalized from his mastoid implant. *:Opaque to scans, shows up on blueprints as a solid structural member. Dad always loved his secret*

passages. *Think he picked up the habit on Eridani.*: He led the way forward.

:And this leads to the board room?: Terry asked, following.

:Among other places. We should be there in plenty of time, the meeting's not for another half hour.: They came to an intersection, and Zane turned to the right, then went on another fifty feet. *:Ah. Here we are.*: He slid open a panel and peered through it.

:Please tell me that looks through a painting with holes where the eyes go,: Terry said.

:Sorry, Dad didn't have quite enough style for that.: He chuckled. *:Just the back of a light fixture. No people, but our crates are there.*: He slid the panel closed again. *:Our door's in a security camera blind spot. As long as we stay within three meters of the wall, it won't see us.*: He turned a handle and slid a door open, revealing a richly-paneled room beyond with three giant wooden crates spaced around the long boardroom table. Zane led the way into it, then slid it shut behind them. The room was dim, all the lights turned off. Zane slid the chair out from the head of the table and took a seat.

:So the seat at the head of the board table...is in a security camera blind spot?: Terry mused.

:Dad's overly-developed sense of the dramatic,: Zane said silently. *:He said he just didn't like being caught on camera. Didn't really matter to them since they never use the seat anyway. He was almost never here. But when he was, nobody ever saw him arrive.*:

Terry sat on his haunches next to the seat. *:So...now we wait.*:

Zane nodded. *:Don't worry. It won't be long.*:

Twenty minutes later, the three other members of Brubeck Mining's Executive Board filed into the room. One of them was just reaching for the light switch when Zane tapped the panel on the table in front of him to bring them up himself first, and the three board members froze like children with their hands caught in a cookie jar.

Jim Dinsmore was the first of them—a big, raw-boned man in his seventies, but preserved by nanotech medicine in the physique of what used to pass for a forty-year-old. He was clean-shaven, with a shock of red hair only just starting to turn white. He owned 18% of voting shares in the company, the largest share after Brubeck himself. He'd been running a mining equipment subcontractor until Clint Brubeck had bought him out with a little cash and a lot of stock to use his equipment and expertise to start the mine.

The second was Arthur Vigo, a dark little man of about eighty, with slick dark hair (that he probably kept that way with nanotech treatments) and a pencil thin mustache. He had been an appraiser with a mining company on Centauri that Clint Brubeck had met in years gone by, and had sent for to handle selling the ore from his new mines. He owned 12% of voting shares.

The last was Audrey Landon, a still-attractive woman in her mid-fifties who wore her blonde hair in a pageboy cut. Like the others, she looked younger than her years would once have shown. She had originally been running a chain temp firm office out of Nextus with a real flair for organization—her office had been showing profits 20% over the corporate average thanks to her gift for matching the right person with the right job. Clint

had been so impressed with the way she was able to locate just the right workers when he needed to hire temps that he immediately hired her as personnel manager for the corporation, to the tune of 8% of the new company's voting stock.

The remaining 11% of share were held by various other individuals and companies, including 4% split up among the company's top 100 employees. None of them controlled enough of it to merit a seat on the board.

These were the three Zane had spoken to a couple of weeks before, and their suspicious behavior had prompted him to leave early—and the bomb planted on the orders of at least one of them had left him for dead in the desert.

All three of them were, of course, shocked—though whether that was more by the fact of his survival or by his appearance in the boardroom was not clear. (Though obviously, if they had been behind the attack on his apartment, at least one of them had to know he was still alive already, so that didn't necessarily signify.)

Dinsmore recovered first, shaking his head and chuckling. "Zane Brubeck," he said hoarsely. "Didn't expect you at this meeting."

"I see you have your father's sense of drama," Vigo said. His voice was nasal, and a little fussy.

"I'm glad you're all right," Landon said. "We were all worried when your flier went missing. Then we heard you showed up in Nextus a few days later long enough to register a RIDE, and nobody's seen you since."

"You forgot to mention someone shot up my apartment building with an aircar mounting pulse cannons," Zane said. "But I'm sure it was all some kind of silly misunderstanding."

Dinsmore clenched his fists. "Now see here, what are you saying? Are you accusing us of that, now? Bad enough you come in here making noise like you think we're screwing with the books..."

"I'm sure none of us here had *anything* to do with that," Vigo said.

Did Ms. Landon seem a little pale? "Was anybody hurt in the attack?"

"No, fortunately. It all seemed focused on my apartment, and the people in the ones next to it were out for the night. Just a lot of property damage. But I figured if they were trying to get me, it's my fault, so I'm covering the damages." He shrugged. "But really, that's all water under the bridge. I'm here about something else." He waved the other members to their seats. They took them, glancing suspiciously at the crates.

"I'll tell you, I had a hell of a time out there in that desert. Chauncey got me halfway back to civilization, but then I had to hoof it. Travel at night, sleep in the day, try to conserve water..."

"How horrible," Audrey Landon said, glancing nervously at Dinsmore and Vigo.

"And even then, I wouldn't have made it, if I hadn't happened to make a new friend out there." He reached down to pat Terry on the head.

"I noticed the ears and tail," Vigo said dryly.

"Anyway, I've done a lot of thinking since then," Zane said offhandedly. "And... well, I know you guys have never bothered to get RIDES. Frankly, I never had either. But

my sojourn in the desert showed me what a big mistake that was. If I'd had ol' Terry with me when I crashed, I'd have been back at civilization in just a day or two, without even getting dehydrated."

"I'm sure you feel a lot better now that you have him, but I don't see what—" Dinsmore began.

"Thing is, what if something happened to you guys? You're our board. Hell, you're the people who usually run the company, since the agreement is that you-all effectively split my proxy when I'm not here. So I decided, I'd better go ahead and get you guys some safety equipment, too.

He nodded to Terry, who sent a signal to the three crates. The magnetic fasteners released and the wooden slats that made them up fell apart, revealing the metallic forms of Tex, Merle, and Carrie-Anne. Their hardlight skins were turned off—Zane had thought it might allay possible suspicions of the Nextusian board members if the RIDEs seemed more like machines at first.

The other three board members stared at the RIDEs for a moment. Audrey blinked. "You...really didn't have to..."

"Go ahead, check them out. I made sure to gender-match them, so you won't have any crossriding troubles. Audrey, the cat's yours. Jim, I think the bull suits you, and Vigo, yours is the mule."

Audrey was already kneeling next to Carrie-Anne, running her hand along the smooth metal surface of her frame. Then she started when the black metal jaguar swiveled her head to look at her. "Hello."

"Ah, hi," Audrey said nervously.

The other two members were inspecting their new RIDEs as well, in something akin to fascination. Not too surprising, really. Zane wasn't sure they'd ever even been this close to RIDEs before. They tended to spend their time in their own quarters, away from the miners who used them as standard equipment. Jim Dinsmore stared at his reflection in Tex's chrome metal flank, and Arthur Vigo examined Merle's metal face.

"So, go ahead, get to know them," Zane said. "Fuse up."

Three human heads snapped around to stare at him. "What? You can't be serious—" Dinsmore began.

"What's wrong? Oh, are you worried about the ears and tail and stuff? Don't worry—if you don't like it, I'll pay the nanosurgery to have it removed from my own pocket." He stood and nodded to Terry, who flowed up and over him so a tiger-man stood in Zane's place. "Trust me on this, you've no idea what it's like."

Audrey caught her breath suddenly. "I think I understand." She turned to Carrie-Anne and held out her arms. "All right. Do it."

The jaguar nodded, then engulfed the woman before her, bringing up her hardlight fur at the same time. A moment later, she stood there, like a black hole into space in the middle of the room. "I have her."

Zane glanced at the other two. "Well?"

"I think...if it's all the same to you, I'd rather not," Vigo said, backing away from the

mule.

“Never!” Dinsmore said.

“Then I’m going to have to relieve you of your seats on the board, and ask you to return to Nextus on the next flight,” Zane said.

“What? You can’t do that!” Dinsmore said.

“Hello, 51% of the stock? I probably should have done this to begin with when I learned you were cooking the books.”

“And who’s going to listen to you, 51% or not?” Dinsmore said. “You think you can throw us off this platform? Hell, you think you can just show up in here and threaten us?” He crossed his arms. “If you do anything to us, they’ll see it on the security cameras. They’re probably getting ready to bust down the doors now.”

“Well, no,” Zane said. “You see, I’ve still got the override codes to this place. Not the corporate ones you know about, which I know you already had locked out, but the backdoors Dad put in before there even was a whole platform out here.”

“You what—?” Vigo said.

“And I gave them to my pal Terry, and he’s been looping the video of you guys in your chairs for the first few minutes of this meeting ever since before I had him pop the crates. So I’m gonna ask you one last time. Will you Fuse with your new friends?” He glanced from Jim Dinsmore to Arthur Vigo.

Vigo seemed to wilt under the gaze. “All right,” he said quietly. He turned to the mule. “Let’s get this over with.”

“Don’t you worry, this won’t hurt a bit,” Merle said cheerfully, before disassembling himself and putting himself back together around the little man.

Dinsmore stared at him in horror, and turned and ran for the door, trying to pull it open. It was locked of course. He banged on it uselessly with a fist.

“Not gonna do y’much good there, pard,” Tex said, stepping forward. “Y’best just come quietly now and nobody gets hurt.”

Dinsmore’s response was to pull a small pulse pistol from an inner coat pocket and point it at the bull. Predictably, the blast just reflected away and put a scorch mark in the wall.

“Now that ain’t very nice.” Tex lowered his head and charged. Dinsmore had just enough time to look horrified at the steel horns coming his way before the bulk of Tex evaporated into mist and quicksilver and shrank into a minotaur’s body standing in Dinsmore’s place.

For a moment, the four Fusers stood there, together, looking at each other. Then the other three nodded. “We got ‘em,” Tex said. “Jim’s squirming a little, but he can’t put up much of a fight. I’m reading in his head that he was the main black hat all along, the drivin’ force behind the money-rustlin’ going on. And he also hired the hit out on you.”

“Mine’s somewhere in the middle,” Merle said. “Knew ‘bout all the bad’ness going on, helped black the books a little, and ganged up on Miss Audrey to keep it quiet. Wasn’t really happy ‘bout it, but he liked the money.” He shook his mule’s head. “Why do folks like that need so much money? They’ve already got more’n they’ll ever spend.”

“This is...interesting,” Carrie-Anne said. “She wants to talk to you.” The RIDE retracted her feline head to reveal Audrey Landon’s, now with black jaguar ears poking up through her blonde pageboy.

Zane blinked, then asked Terry to retract his own head so he could address her face-to-face. “Yes?”

Audrey looked down. “I’m...I’m sorry,” she said. She raised her hands and looked at them, and then finding she could move the body, she stepped forward and rested her hands on the table, looking down at it. “I knew all about what they were doing...but I didn’t do anything. They’d threatened me...they knew where my daughter lived, and if I didn’t cooperate they suggested her family might get hurt. So I stood by and let them embezzle funds...and then I didn’t do anything when they tried to kill you.”

“Hey, if they were threatening your family, I completely understand,” Zane said gently. “I wish you could have told me, but I can see why you didn’t.” *:Is she telling the truth?:* Zane sent silently to Carrie-Anne.

:Yes. I see it in her thoughts,: Carrie-Anne replied.

Zane nodded. “Well, if that’s the case, I guess we don’t need to hold you. Carrie-Anne—”

“No, wait.” Landon waved a hand. “She’s told me what you were planning, and I just want to say—if you still want to go through with it—” She took a deep breath, and Zane saw her eyes glittering with unspilled tears. “She can have me. When I think of what I did by keeping silent...how I almost got you killed...I deserve it.”

Zane tilted his head. “I think that’s a matter the two of you should discuss between yourselves.” He nodded, and Carrie-Anne reformed her head around Audrey’s.

“I think I *will* keep her,” Carrie-Anne said. “But not to bodyjack; as a partner.” She paused, listened to an inner voice. “Or a pet for a *while*, if she insists.” She shrugged. “She doesn’t seem like a bad person. She just needs some self-confidence. Perhaps I can give it to her.”

“As for mine,” Tex said, “I dunno. I’ll sure hold onto him long enough to straighten out the books fer ya, but after that I’d like to get him out of me and into the hoosegow where he oughtta be. I want a real partner, not a bad apple in my guts.”

“That ‘bout sums up my feelings on it, too,” Merle said. “I think you kindly for the new body, and the chance to help round up a couple of varmints—didn’t fully get just how bad they were ‘til I had this’un rattling around inside my head. But I can’t say as I really *like* havin’ him in there, and the sooner I get him out the less I feel like I want to take a firehose to my own insides.”

“Understood, and understood,” Zane said. “So if you guys can read out all the memories that relate to exactly how they screwed up the books so we can undo what they did, including their bank account access codes, we can use that to reverse all the transfers that shouldn’t have been made and get the books back in order again.

“As for their stock...hmm. Well, that’s legally their possession, and much as I’d like to see it out of their hands, I suspect the law would frown on me doing that. And they’ll probably have to sell it sooner or later to fund their defenses anyway. Okay, then. We’ll

take them in.” He pauses, thought a moment. “Tex, Merle...when I work out who else is going to sit on the board when they’re gone, if they don’t have RIDEs already you’re welcome to check with them and see if they want to partner up. Otherwise I’ll find someone else for you, promise.”

Merle nodded. “Fair ‘nuff.”

“Works for me,” Tex chuckled. “Just so long’s I don’t end up a bum steer.”

“Right! Okay, we’re all going to leave the boardroom and go down to the executive suborbital launch. Tex, Merle, you’ll need to ape your passengers’ voices, and drop your own accents—can you do that?”

“Of course,” Tex said in Jim Dinsmore’s voice and a pretty fair imitation of his inflection.

“Our accents are mostly just affectation anyway,” Merle added in Arthur Vigo’s. “We can turn them off.”

“Good. And Carrie-Anne, is Audrey willing to use her own face to help ‘sell’ it?”

Carrie-Anne’s head melted away to reveal Audrey’s again. “Absolutely,” Audrey said. “It’ll feel *good* to help get those two back to face justice.”

“Then let’s head down to the executive sub, and get back to Nextus,” Zane said.

“There’s a Marshal there who wants words with a couple embezzlers and attempted murderers.” The boardroom door unlocked and Zane headed out, his human face still bare, followed by Carrie-Anne as Audrey, Tex, and Merle. The door slid shut behind them.

:Nothing like the satisfaction of a job well done, is there?: Terry sent to Zane as they walked up the hall.

:No, buddy,: Zane replied with a grin, *:there really isn’t.:*

Chapter 8

Zane had little trouble getting the rest of the board down to the executive suborbital pad. His explanations to the guards that the board had gotten RIDEs, along with Audrey's face and Tex and Merle's vocal impersonations, got them past the guards without even a bobble of suspicion.

"Would you like to talk face ta face with either of these cattle-rustlin' low-lifes 'fore we turn 'em in?" Tex asked as they sat together in the passenger compartment. Audrey, who was licensed for suborbitals, was flying the ship (or else Carrie-Anne was flying it for her) so Zane could keep an eye on the other two RIDEs, just in case Dinsmore or Vigo had some trick up their sleeve they didn't know about.

Zane shook his head. "Nah. Don't really have anything useful to say to them, and no point letting them vent their spleens at me. Save it for the judge, as they say."

Merle nodded his muley head. "Sounds good t'me. Don't see any point lettin' them waste any more air. 'Sides, I can read it in his head what mine'd say, and it's just so much self-righteous twaddle." He snorted. "Let 'em stew. More'n they deserve."

Marshal Masterson was surprised to see them back so soon, and more than a little puzzled at being visited by four RIDE Fusers at once in his office. His RIDE, Glenn, nudged the stall door open to stand ready in case he was needed to defend his partner. But understanding dawned for both of them when Tex and Merle de-Fused, and the two malfessant board members wobbled and slumped to the floor.

The marshal was quick enough to put two and two together. "I see what you mean about 'promises to people,'" he said mildly. "You'd asked, I could have told you your friends probably wouldn't be interested in keeping that kind." He glanced speculatively at Carrie-Anne. "Or most of 'em, anyway?"

Carrie-Anne's cat-head dissolved away again to reveal Audrey's. "I'm staying with her willingly," she said.

"She's not guilty, Marshal. We'd appreciate if you could quash that warrant for her."

The marshal nodded. "Fair's fair. Don't want to prosecute the innocent. Consider it done. You'll have to take up with the revenuers about theirs, too."

"As much money as I'm about to pay them, I don't think they'll mind too much," Zane said.

The marshal prodded Arthur Vigo with a boot. "You know, that one looks just right

with mule ears, don't he? Permanently branded as a real jackass."

Merle snorted. "I beg your pardon!"

They visited the Materiel Recovery Service next, and explained that they'd just turned in the two wanted criminals to the marshal. The Materiel Recovery officers were more than a little reluctant to cancel the warrant for Audrey Landon...until Zane showed them just how many zeroes were queued up on his wallet, representing the back taxes on the money Brubeck Mining hadn't reported making. The normally contentious revenueurs became remarkably biddable at the thought of the bonuses awaiting them for their back tax collection going so far over quota for this month.

And when Audrey agreed to testify against her erstwhile colleagues at the trial, they were practically willing to guilt-frame the cancellation notice so she could hang it on her wall. Not that it really mattered—Tex and Merle would also be testifying on what they'd read inside the embezzlers' heads, and Nextus courts *did* accept RIDE testimony.

(In fact, RIDEs had no legal right to *refuse* to testify, even against their own partners, since in the eyes of the law they were just pieces of equipment like cameras or recorders. Normally this would have bothered Zane more, but he had to admit he wasn't exactly weeping that Dinsmore and Vigo would be convicted by the contents of their own heads in *this* case.)

And so it was that a few days later, Zane and Terry motored back into Uplift. As one of only two remaining board members, and still holding the majority of voting stock, Zane had found little difficulty in moving ahead with his plan to reincorporate Brubeck Mining with Uplift as its new headquarters. (Well, little *bureaucratic* difficulty, at least. His sister, Agatha, who worked in mining corporate relations in Nextus's bureaucracy was likely never to forgive him.) He'd rented temporary offices and left Audrey and Carrie-Anne there to organize them (and staff them—even Carrie-Anne was amazed by Audrey's gift for placing people, and delighted to watch her put it to work), then headed out to scout possible locations for a new permanent campus.

They settled on a space in the slightly shabby outer district where two mostly-abandoned office buildings met at a weird angle that left a big pie-shaped slice of land inaccessible. Once both buildings were knocked down and cleared, there would be plenty of room to build a corporate center that would significantly raise the tone of the area around it. And as a side benefit, it was conveniently placed just a few blocks away from both the RIDE markets and Ryan's Freerider garage.

After they'd closed the deal with the landlord and applied for the necessary construction permits, Zane rode Terry back down to that garage, then they Fused and went inside. They found Ryan hard at work on another skimmer, but he jumped up immediately when he saw who it was. "Zane! Terry! I've been wondering when you'd show up."

"Sorry it was a bit late. We had stuff to do."

Ryan nodded. "Yeah, I saw the news. Congrats on getting rid of those rotten apples."

Zane nodded. "Thanks. It's good to know my Dad's legacy is out of the hands of that scum."

“Mm.” Ryan wiped his hands on a rag. “Speaking of your Dad’s legacy...let me show you what I’ve done for Chauncey!”

Zane grinned. “Well, sure.” They followed Ryan to a room at the back of the garage, where the six-meter mech was standing in the middle of the swing-out scaffolding Ryan had used to access various parts of it. Kaylee joined them on the way there.

“Sorry to leave him taking up your space for so long,” Zane said.

“No problem,” Ryan said. “I knew you were busy, it let me space the work out to keep other stuff from backing up, and, well, it’s kind of been nice having the big guy around.”

“*That’s* putting it mildly,” Kaylee said dryly. “I thought he was going to set up an altar and start burning incense.”

“Don’t be silly, Kaylee, I’d never do that,” Ryan said.

“Oh no?” Kaylee asked, eying him suspiciously.

“The smoke might damage the electronics.” He looked thoughtful. “Now a prayer wheel, on the other hand...”

Kaylee made an indistinct sound that somehow managed to incorporate qualities of a snort, a laugh, and a groan, simultaneously. Ryan grinned at her, and Zane and Terry both chuckled.

“So, have you got the bills ready?” Zane asked. “I should have at least settled the RIDE stuff with you before I left, but things were so hectic...”

“Oh, it’s no problem. I knew you were good for it,” Ryan said. He nodded to Chauncey. “Besides, you left collateral.”

Kaylee padded over with a tablet clutched in her jaw, and offered it to Zane. He took it and flipped through the tallies, sending a silent query to Terry to check the prices against parts stores on-line. They were surprisingly cheap—Ryan had marked all the parts at cost, and only charged his standard rate for billable hours. Even with all the custom parts necessary for Chauncey, the total didn’t even come to 100 kilomu.

Zane shook his head. “Ryan, you really need to learn to pad your bills more when you’re working for a rich person. The work you did, it’s worth several times this.”

Kaylee snorted. “You’re telling *me*. It was all I could do to talk him into putting the billable hours on for Chauncey at all. He wanted to make some damn fool symbolic gesture of just charging 1 mu for labor—or even taking one mu off for it.”

“Damn it, Kaylee, he’s *art!*” Ryan insisted. “You don’t *get* paid for looking at art, just the opposite!”

Zane laughed. “And you know, something tells me you wouldn’t be too happy with me if I ‘accidentally’ tacked on an extra zero when I paid you for it.”

“I might be broke most of the time, but it’s an *honest* broke,” Ryan said. “If I start padding my bills, before you know it I’m sliding down a slippery slope where I end up a *politician*. And none of us would want that.”

“And we don’t take no charity, either,” Kaylee said. “We *work* for a living.”

“Now, if you do have a bunch of extra money you’d like to sling around, there’s some good causes ‘round here you could support,” Ryan said. “Like a volunteer agency that

raises money to buy escaped RIDEs away from their old owners, for instance. They could always use more funds.”

:Send them a million in the name of Ryan Stonegate and Kaylee Cross,: Zane sent to Terry, keeping a straight face.

:Done! Won't they be surprised?: Terry sent back the impression of a mischievous grin.

“Fair enough,” Zane said aloud, keeping a straight face. “So tell me about what you’ve done with Chauncey here,” he added.

Ryan looked relieved at the change of subject, and immediately launched into a several-minute-long explanation in detail of exactly what he had fixed, and what improvements he had made. Zane was mostly able to follow along, with help from Terry pulling up technical documents about parts he didn’t understand.

Then Ryan segued into the improvements he’d *like* to make, but didn’t want to go ahead on without permission—bringing the oldest bits of tech still in Chauncey up to modern spec, and upgrading the armament with the latest in Nextus military surplus. Zane chuckled a bit at how garrulous the normally terse little mechanic became as he expounded his plans in detail.

When he finally ran down, Zane favored him with a big grin. “I have to say, based on everything I ever saw my Dad do growing up, you’d do him proud.” He savored the bright crimson blush that suffused Ryan’s face at the praise. “And I’ll be happy to bankroll every one of those changes you want to make. Having Chauncey keep getting upgraded like that...it’s almost like a part of my Dad is still living on.”

Ryan tried to say something, but he was so choked up he couldn’t get the words out. “He says thanks,” Kaylee said.

“But there was something else I wanted to discuss about Chauncey, for after you’re done with those tweaks,” Zane went on. “I’ve been doing a lot of thinking about him, these last few days. He’s a terrific piece of tech, and I’d lay odds on him against any equivalent tonnage of modern IDEs and even RIDEs.” He turned and looked Chauncey over again, gazing up at the bulky nano-steel armor, the gaping bore of the particle beam cannon on the arm.

“The problem is,” he continued after a while, “that I can’t really think of anything you *need* a six-meter IDE for anymore. He’s really kind of overkill now, and I’d just as soon not have the military notice and ‘requisition’ him.”

Ryan nodded thoughtfully, glancing again at Chauncey as if through new eyes. “Yeah, I can kinda see the problem.”

“So what I was thinking was, maybe I could loan him out to a museum—or better yet, maybe some kind of engineering school. Somewhere people could come and see and learn from him.” He paced across the floor, Terry’s tiger-tail twitching. “But not somewhere that would just leave him to rot on display—someplace with students who could get their hands dirty maintaining, operating, and upgrading him. You know any local places that would fit the bill?”

“Huh.” Ryan considered that for a moment. “Well, Uplift University—Roberto

Martinez Memorial University now—has a great engineering program,” he said almost shyly. “Kaylee and I have audited some classes there. And your Dad used to guest lecture there every now and then, for both the geology and engineering departments.”

“Hey, that’s awesome!” Zane said. “I can’t think of a more appropriate place. Of course, I’ll have to ask to see if they want him, but...I can’t imagine they’d say no when they learn his background.” He grinned. “And I’ll add an endowment to keep him up to date and running, and make sure *you’re* listed as the caretaker, so you can keep an eye on things. If you’re willing, anyway.”

“Wow,” Ryan said, eyes wide. “I...don’t know what to say.”

“I think the word you’re looking for is ‘yes,’” Kaylee said. “Maybe even ‘hell, yes.’”

Zane chuckled. “See, you can turn down my money, but I can give you things it’s a little harder to say no to.” Then he turned more serious. “There is one more thing I did want to mention about money, though, and that’s an offer.”

“An offer?” Ryan asked cautiously.

“If you ever want to expand your business—open other shops, train more people to work for you—call me, I’ll invest. Standing offer.” Zane grinned. “It’s not charity or anything. It’s a business decision. I can’t believe any garage you run will ever go under.”

Ryan shook his head dazedly. “Why are you being so nice? All I did was some minor maint on your RIDEs, and fiddling with Chauncey that I would have paid *you* to get to do.”

Zane gestured at the tiger suit he was wearing. “But you also helped my pal here, way back when. If you hadn’t done that, he might not have been there to save my life. We *both* owe you big for that, and I don’t know if we can ever pay you back all the way.” He grinned at the memory.

Ryan shuffled his feet. “Really, it was just a job is all. I’d have done it for any RIDE.”

“I know,” Terry said through his and Zane’s shared mouth. “And that’s what makes you so special to me. Hell, man, you *know* what Nextus is like. So thanks again, from both of us.”

“Anyway, enough embarrassing you for one day,” Zane said. “I should get back to the office. I’ll have Terry send a money transfer, and I’ll let you know when I’ve talked to RMMU. We can make the arrangements for moving Chauncey then. Meanwhile, do all that other stuff you said you wanted to and send me the bills. See ya!” They headed out, leaving a still-poleaxed-looking Ryan in their wake.

“I feel good about that,” Zane said as they stepped back onto the street. “It’s nice having money and all, but nicer to be able to put it to good use. Go on and pay the man?”

:Already done, partner.: Terry sent.

Zane grinned. “What did I ever do without you?”

:Good question.: Terry sent smugly. *:Fortunately, it’s academic from here on out. You do have me now—and you always will.:*

Terry emitted a deep sense of satisfaction over their link, stronger and clearer than Zane had ever felt from him before. Was Terry getting better at sending, or was Zane just getting better at receiving?

:Maybe both,: Terry mused.

“And you really are that happy to be with me?” Zane asked. “You don’t miss prowling around on your own?”

:I’m happy sharing your life,: Terry said, bemused. *:Just a few weeks ago, I wouldn’t have thought that could ever happen—me, full-time Fuse buddies with a human?—but here we are. I wouldn’t miss it for the world.:*

Zane grinned. “Then let’s go get some ice cream or something,” he said. “Then we’ll head back to the office. We’ve got us a business to run.”

:Sounds like a plan.: The two Fused companions headed up the street, and into their future together.

After that, the months began to fly by. The new headquarters building went up practically overnight, and soon became a fixture in the area. One of its features was a Fuser cafe and lounge where Brubeck recruiters hung out all day and shot the breeze with RIDERs seeking work.

The trial of Jim Dinsmore and Arthur Vigo proceeded apace, with Tex and Merle providing particularly condemning testimony. As Zane had hoped might happen, the pair ended up having to sell off their Brubeck stock to finance their increasingly-hopeless-looking defense. The corporation itself bought back a lot of it to take it off the market, but Zane snagged a decent chunk with his own personal funds. Between the buy-backs and the buy-up, Zane ended up owning about 65% of the company before it was over. He supposed he didn’t really *need* that much, but it would still provide a nice buffer against future stock issues. And it would make it easier to give a chunk to someone deserving while still staying in charge himself.

Zane got more and more involved in the day-to-day running of the company. He had been concerned at the outset that his lack of expertise in mining could be a handicap, but as he got better at interfacing with Terry he discovered that while in Fuse he was able to draw on Terry’s extensive mining experience as if it were his own.

It became very common to see Zane around the office in his tiger suit. At first he kept the helmet down a lot, but kept it up more and more often as time went by, until people simply began accepting the Fuse as his natural face.

The other RIDEs proved helpful as well. Merle, whose knowledge of mining was even more extensive than Terry’s, ended up partnering with the new board member in charge of mining operations, a Roberto Martinez Memorial University geology professor (with a minor in Business Administration) Zane had met while arranging Chauncey’s placement.

Tex had a background in logistics, and meshed well with the new board member Zane had hired away from a long-haul skimmer trucking firm to oversee streamlining their ore refining and shipping operations. And Carrie-Anne turned out to be ex-Nextus military, letting Audrey add security to her portfolio of responsibilities.

Indeed, under Carrie-Anne’s partnership, Audrey had regained a lot of her old self-confidence, and she wore her RIDE around almost as much as Zane did. Zane still wasn’t

entirely sure who was calling the shots in their partnership, but it seemed to be working for them either way so he didn't pry.

Zane's own relationship with Terry grew more and more close and comfortable. As much as Zane was prone to worry that he might be taking too much advantage of his partner, the fact that he could *feel* Terry's sincerity when he said he was happy that way went a long way toward reassuring him. They were so in tune with each other's feelings that they *couldn't* lie to each other.

They soon took to remaining Fused at all times, even outside of the office, except for those annoying times when they needed to use Terry's Skimmer form to make speed. At last, they bought a fast non-transforming skimmer cycle for day to day use, and, completely without irony, congratulated themselves on how *convenient* it was to have a separate vehicle.

As the months went on, Zane and Terry hardly even noticed how it happened but gradually found they were *talking* to each other less and less, even subvocally. Instead, they seemed to be sharing each other's thoughts directly—quick flashes of insight and instant understanding that were far higher-bandwidth than mere words. Sometimes it was difficult to tell who'd actually had which thought—and even more difficult to *care*.

And then one evening as they sat in their bedroom in the Uplift apartment that had replaced Zane's old place in Nextus, it suddenly occurred to Zane that he literally *could not remember* when they had last de-Fused. This caused him to start to worry a little—not so much over how long it had been, but because he *wasn't* worried over how long it had been. Was that even normal? (*Of course it is*, a part of him thought. *Why worry about it?*)

But Zane *was* worried now, and he did the thing he couldn't remember having done in so long—he reached down inside and initiated de-Fuse.

The process was much longer and more awkward than Zane remembered, and for one horrific moment he actually worried that they might not be able to complete it. But after about ten seconds, their bodies remembered what to do and Zane stood there again, human (well, mostly), next to a distinctly grumpy tiger.

Zane moved to look at himself in the full-length bedroom mirror, raising a hand to touch his face. The animalistic nano-changes had gone a lot further than last time he remembered seeing this face in a mirror—fine orange and black fur now lightly fuzzed his entire face like 7 o'clock shadow. His nose had flattened out a little, had darker skin than the rest of his face, and felt distinctly colder, and his eyes were more than a little slitted. But it was still recognizable as the face of Zane's birth.

It felt as though he was looking at a complete stranger.

:(annoyance, wondering if that was really necessary): Their link had gotten stronger, too—Zane felt the thoughts inside his head almost as if they were still in Fuse.

“Can we *talk*?” Zane asked the tiger. “Do you still remember how to do that?”

Terry worked his jaw for a moment, then the words came out, in a voice rusty from disuse. “Yes. I—think so.” He cocked his head, starting to look a little discomfited himself. “It...*has* been a long time.” Zane could still feel the emotional backchannel

behind the words—Terry was starting to get a little of that worried-about-not-worrying feeling himself.

“What’s happening to us?” Zane asked, looking from his face to the hand that was touching it. The fingers had gotten just a little shorter, the fingernails halfway to being retractable claws.

His body felt *alien*—so puny, weak, and cold. This was the body he’d spent most of three decades in, and he still remembered all those years—but it was hard to feel any sort of emotional connection to his body the way it had been. His Fuser body was the new “normal” now. And he *liked* it that way.

“You already know,” Terry said, moving over to examine himself in the mirror beside Zane. He didn’t say the word, but he didn’t have to—the thought was clear in his mind. They were losing the distinctions that separated them from each other: they were approaching Integration.

“Yes...I guess I do,” Zane said quietly. “Do you remember...back when we were talking about Integrating, and we both said we didn’t want to?”

“I remember,” Terry said.

“Are we becoming...I dunno, *pod people* or something?” Zane wondered. “We were both so scared, but...it seems so different now.”

“We didn’t know what we were scared of,” Terry said. “We must be three quarters Integrated already. Look how we share thoughts.” He felt thoughtful, turning it over with his more analytical nature.

“Yes...” Zane suddenly knelt and threw his arms around Terry’s neck, hot tears threatening to spill from his eyes. “But...I don’t want to lose you!” He buried his face in Terry’s shoulder and sobbed, unashamed.

“It’s *all right*, partner,” Terry said gently, bumping Zane’s back with his chin. “You’re not going to ‘lose’ me, any more than I’m going to ‘lose’ you. We’re going to *gain* each other. Forever.”

“But you...won’t be there to talk to,” Zane said, voice muffled by Terry’s fur.

“Sure I will,” Terry said. “Every time we talk to ourself.” He chuckled. “We don’t exactly do that much talking *now*, in case you hadn’t noticed. I think we’ve already said more to each other tonight than in all of last month.”

Zane tried to laugh and sob at the same time, and it just came out a hiccup. But he knew Terry knew how he felt, because he felt Terry feeling it.

“We could just...stop,” Terry offered. “Not Fuse anymore. Go back to being...normal.”

But Zane felt the fear and horror the idea of being separated instinctively aroused in Terry—and the very same feeling it aroused in himself. “No,” he said sadly. “We can’t. Not anymore. We’ve got to see this through...all the way to the end.” He tried to compose himself, and finally got back to his feet. “Could you...could you just do one last thing for me?”

“Anything, partner,” Terry said.

“Just...walk over there. To the end of the room.” He caught his breath, tried to keep

his voice from cracking. “Let me look at you one last time. I want to...remember.”

Just a few weeks before, Terry would have replied with a quip—trying to deflect the emotion, lighten the mood. But he couldn’t anymore—they knew each other just too well for that. And Zane knew Terry wanted to take a good long look at him, too. “All right, partner. All right.”

The tiger padded out across the bedroom floor. He was long out of practice at walking, and his coordination wasn’t good at first—he stumbled over his own forepaws and nearly fell. But after a few steps, all his old grace returned. Zane watched him like he’d never watched him before, observing the play of the rippling muscles beneath that hardlight skin. So what if it was all fake, and Terry was just a bunch of soulless metal under a thin layer of solidified photons—but no. There was a soul there. There *was*. He knew because it was all tangled up with his.

Zane thought back to that day in the desert, just a few months ago, when he’d found a tiger in a pit and saved him just to save himself—then offered to let the tiger go on his way, the job done. Had he really been so foolish and self-centered back then? If Terry really had left him then, where would he even be now?

Terry reached the end of the room, turned, and simply sat on his haunches without trying to strut or pose. He looked back at Zane. “How’s this?”

“God, you’re so beautiful,” Zane said. “I don’t think I ever came right out and said that before. I’ve been so lucky to have you as my partner. It’s been...” His voice caught, and he couldn’t finish.

“You’re not so bad yourself, you know,” Terry said softly. He padded back over to and nuzzled Zane’s hand. “I’m proud to be your partner. Always have been. Always will be.” He paused. “And I *will* always be your partner. We’re always gonna be together. It won’t be so bad, just different. You’ll see.”

What Zane saw was that Terry was more than half trying to convince himself, too. It was so heartbreaking he couldn’t bear to let him go it alone. “You’re right,” he said. “It’ll be great.”

They stood there for a moment, and then Zane took a deep breath. “So...shall we?”

Terry nodded. “It’s been fun, partner.” He looked up expectantly at Zane.

Zane held out his arms and triggered the Fuse. “And it’s always gonna be.”

And for the last time, they put their skin back on and went to bed.

Epilogue

July 10, 156 A.L.

Zane woke from a confused dream full of cat's eyes and golden light.

The first thing he noticed was that the sheets were soaked. That in itself was odd, since he never sweated anymore since he slept fused with Terry all the time. But...as he moved, the fluid matting him to the sheets was slower to pull away than water. It felt thicker, more viscous. That was odd, too. What was it...blood? Semen? It actually felt more like *snot*, which was more than odd, it was unsettling.

Zane opened his eyes and sat up in bed, and slowly looked around him in puzzlement. He was lying in a puddle of slowly curdling silver fluid, with random little bits of metal scattered here and there throughout. And his body felt...different somehow.

It was only when he got to his feet and caught a glimpse in the mirror that he realized he was shorter now, and slenderer. Still a humanoid tiger, still more muscular than human, but more human in size—all that silver snot must have been his body shedding the mass it didn't need anymore. And there were round lenses inset into his fur. He ran a finger over them curiously. Hardlight emitters? But the emitters were always hidden behind the fur they projected, weren't they?

Then he got his second surprise. His fur wasn't hardlight anymore. He couldn't drop it. It was...it felt real. Real tiger fur. "Can you believe it, Terry?" he mused. No one answered. "Oh."

But he didn't have to feel so bad, a part of him thought. Because if he had been Terry, he'd have been totally smirking at Zane's discomfiture, and...and part of him *was* smirking at his own discomfiture. "Oh," Zane said again more softly. "Oh."

But he didn't have to cry about it, did he? What was he, some kind of crybaby? Bawling all the time. Just like a human.

"Terry?" Zane whispered. "Is that really you?"

Yeah, I'm still here, buddy, a voice said in the back of his mind. The timbre was different from inter-Fuse communications, but he couldn't say exactly how. The old communications had seemed to come from near but outside his own mind—but this one was coming from the inside. *It's...kind of weird, but...I really am a part of you now. A part that can think for itself, or...do this.*

Terry seemed to submerge...and then *explode* into his head. And Zane realized he was *also* Terry now. All of him. He remembered Terry's life grinding away for Monckton the prospector, his sale and rescue by the kid who'd given him his hardlight, the work by Ryan, everything that came after it, with the clarity and emotional resonance of someone who had been there, instead of the insulation of self-image that always reminded him they were *someone else's* memories when he'd accessed them through Fuse.

And he knew, emotionally, how Terry had always felt about him, with more clarity than he had ever known before. It nearly broke him down all over again, but he took a deep breath and managed to recover.

But then he realized he also knew how *Zane* had felt about *Terry* with more clarity than *Terry* had ever known before, and that time he did break down. "God, we're a mess," he muttered. "Or...I'm a mess." There really wasn't a "we" right now. He was both Zane and Terry rolled into one single package. "Not exactly a tightly-wrapped one, either," he muttered. Which he knew for the influence of his Terry side.

"So what do I even call myself now? ZaneTerry? TerryZane? Tane? Zerry?" He shook his head. "Guess I'll just have to let things find their level." He glanced back at his bed. "And burn that mattress. I mean, geez! *Ew!*"

Whatever happened, he knew he'd always remember how his partner had looked. How both of his partners had looked. The sleekly prowling tiger RIDE. The young, handsome human. He'd have to remember, because he'd never see either one of them again—not even in a mirror. Once again, he felt a wave of sadness that threatened to overwhelm him.

Then his Terry side seemed to split itself out again, so they could talk. *It's okay, buddy. I'm still here with you. Any time you want to talk, just let me know. I'll be one of the voices in your head.* He seemed to chuckle. *Rest of the time, I'll just sleep down in your id. It's relaxing.*

Terry smiled despite himself. *Thanks*, he thought back.

So let's go on with our life, Terry said, giving himself back to Zane.

The first part of that, Zane guessed, was to shower off all that silvery snot. He'd see about cleaning up, then check the net to find out whatever it was that the newly-Integrated did.

A few minutes later, in the shower, Zane had his first experience with the smell of wet real tiger fur. "This...is gonna be a *loooooong* life."

THE END

Author's Notes

It's not exactly a secret that the setting of FreeRIDERS changed somewhat between the early parts and the end of *Integration*. Certain characters took a look at how we'd written them and spoke up and said, "No, I'm not that way. Change that going forward."

And so Joe Steader evolved from kind of a designated villain in the early parts (at one point early in *Integration*, Zane says his Dad told him to stay away from those crazy Steaders, but by late in the series Zane's Dad and Joe Steader were best pals!) to the overall good guy and protagonist of some stories he later became.

Likewise, the early AlphaWolf was more of an annoying villain than the sort of anti-villain and then respectable citizen he later became. (Early plans involved Nextus raiding Alpha Camp to get a ready-made RIDE army to attack the Integrates, and Alpha getting feral-form Integrated and going to live at the Freerider garage as a grumpy pet wolf, if you can believe it.)

We always intended to go back and tweak some of the early stuff to bring it more in line with the later stuff, and we finally figured it's time to get started. So here's the first "Director's Cut", for *Deserted*, the first-by-reading-order story in the setting. ("FreeRIDERS" was actually partly written first and posted first, but "Deserted" was written to come before it, so.) If you haven't gotten into FreeRIDERS yet, this is a good starting point!

There aren't any major changes here; they mostly consist of adding exact dates to the beginning and end, adding character names that we came up with later, and a couple of other assorted things. I also decided to get rid of the dropcaps I had been using in the wiki-formatted version.

Next up, we'll be looking at Merging Traffic and FreeRIDERS, then diving into *Integration*. We'll probably at least poke at the side stories we wrote up until *Integration* was finished, but the majority of the changes will probably come in *Integration*'s early bits, as we had a better idea of where we were going by the end of it. (Another goal is to make e-book versions of stuff that hadn't been e-booked before, including *Integration* itself.)

Anyway, that was "Deserted". Hope you enjoyed it.

Cover image: “Tiger Face” by Eddie Fouse, from
<http://www.publicdomainpictures.net/view-image.php?image=20508&picture=tiger-face>